

# Managing the Year-Round Social Structure of Bulls



**Bulls interacting safely largely affects cow-calf producers' profits.**

by **Bruce Derksen**

**P**ens of breeding females often boast consistently aged, maternal animals a cattlemaster is proud to own, and corresponding pens of bulls are likely nearby. Whether the bull pen consists of one, 30 or somewhere between, all animals should be offered the same high regard as their female counterparts.

Far too often, once the breeding season ends, bulls are pushed into the background and even ignored unless something unforeseen brings them back in focus. With the critical job they are tasked, bulls deserve attention to ensure a smooth transition from rest cycle through to the next breeding season.

“The bulls are probably the most important part of the herd,” says Ken Olson, animal science department professor and Extension beef cattle specialist at South Dakota State University. “It doesn’t matter how many there are, or how large the cow herd is, the bulls are there to do a job and deliver a result. You can’t afford to come up with zeros because of them.”

#### **Supporting bulls in nonbreeding times**

Numerous elements are required to support a herd sire through nonbreeding times and ensure he’s ready for action when called upon. They include nutrition, quality feed

and water, adequate shelter, timely vaccinations, parasite control, a breeding soundness exam and body condition scoring. An aspect sometimes forgotten or ignored is the handling of social structure.

Mismanaging interactions between males can lead to forfeiture of the large investments made in them. One key to realizing affordability is ensuring they maintain top condition for more than one or two years. When depreciated over additional years of productive service, they add much more to the balance sheet than those often replaced.

It’s not easy to keep these large, aggressive animals in a good state of mind and body. A simple mistake of mixing them at the wrong time can lead to serious injuries and investment loss.

Olson believes it’s helpful to understand how breeding males operate and interact with one another. “Seniority is the major factor influencing his ranking in the group. Usually, older bulls are dominant in the pen. Further factors include size and weight.”

To get them settled into a quiet routine after removal from the females, they should be sorted by age and weight and given plenty of space. If possible, separate younger bulls from older sires to help prevent injuries and to assist in meeting the additional nutritional requirements

of growing yearlings. Adding lone bulls to a group is never recommended, as the probability of injuries will rise due to increased fighting. Although it’s not always easy or practical, new animals should be isolated from a biosecurity and nutritional standpoint.

#### **Managing the breeding season challenges**

It’s beneficial if bulls combined in multi-sire breeding pastures are penned together for at least a few weeks before turnout to allow time for hierarchy establishment. This provides a time cushion if an injury occurs and a replacement is needed. It is inevitable that a pecking order is determined, but taking a few precautions can make the difference between fit and ready animals or damaged goods.

“They should never be saying hello when dropped at the breeding pasture,” Olson says. “Each animal is equipped with a unique personality. The major fighting for position should be out of their system before the breeding season begins.”

Olson points out that bulls must be athletic and consistently able to travel long distances. “Because of their weight and all the pressure on their legs, structure is an issue. They’ve got to travel well to breed cows. Their physical prowess will be tested.”

He encourages producers to keep their guard up even after



transitioning from the off-season paddocks to the breeding pasture, especially when grouping multiple sires. He explains even though they might have spent the winter together, breeding season brings out an aggressive attitude and the social structure can still fluctuate when mixed with the cows.

Several studies have shown the more dominant bulls in multi-sire pastures will breed most of the females. To spread the work, it's better to group males of similar stature and hierarchy if possible. Those clearly dominant will fight to keep submissive animals from breeding, and if they have low semen quality or capacity, or are infertile, it's a major problem.

"A dominant bull with poor semen quality or low libido could reduce pregnancy rates for an entire herd, even when more fertile subordinate ones are present," Olson says. "And dominant sires spending all their time fighting will leave too many cows open."

Being overly focused on gaining a higher position in the herd will lead to injured legs, lameness and bruised ribs, shoulders and hips. Injured bulls may not breed at all depending on the amount of pain present. If there is too much discomfort, they will avoid mounting altogether.

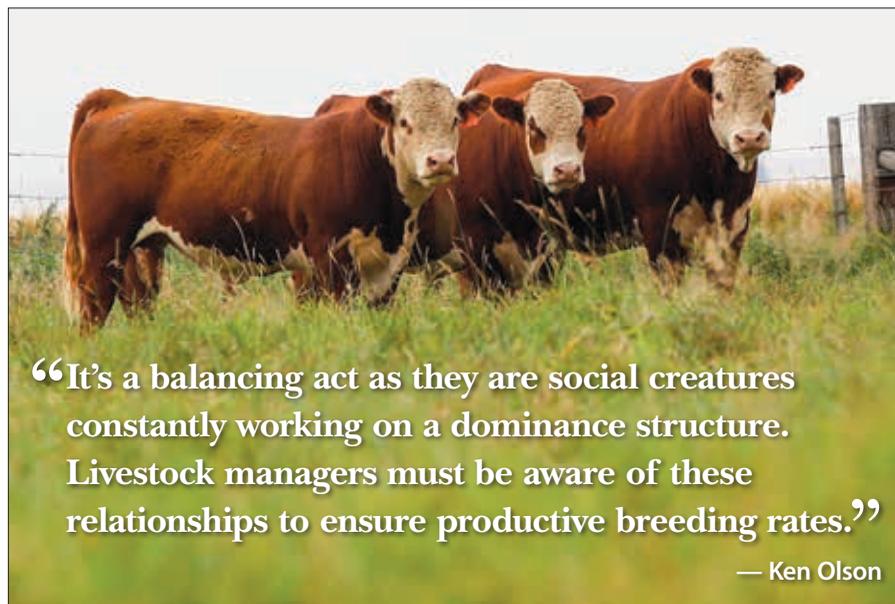
Some operations use the tactic of introducing a minimum number of

bulls at the beginning of the season to service the initial cycling females. They claim success in reducing fighting and injury by working the sires hard early. Instead of combining five bulls with 100 cows, they use two or three for the first two to three weeks when much of the cycling occurs. The hope is that they will be too busy and tired from breeding to worry about fighting for dominance. After this first period, they are replaced with the remaining fresh bulls. The system works well but requires more handling facilities.

#### **Calculating and dealing with the potential losses**

Much can be gained or lost by how bulls interact during the breeding season. The goal is for healthy, fertile males to share the workload and settle all the females as a team. Missing the estrus cycle of a single cow is a significant financial loss in calf weight gain down the road. The extra 21 days until the next ovulation translates into a younger calf coming off pasture 40 pounds to 50 pounds lighter. Spread over multiple animals, this loss grows quickly.

Herd docility is a connected negative, especially if replacement heifers are retained. Olson says fighting and disposition go hand in hand, and these undesirable traits will transfer into the core of the cow herd. "Once



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you’ve got cattle and bulls with bad dispositions, it’s going to translate into males that fight a lot and are a danger to be around. Plus, this will negatively affect the personality of the females.”

Even with the best of intentions, it’s essential to have a plan B. “I don’t think many operators think about this probability, but they should. If only using yearlings and the facilities are in place, a rotation is a good idea. Yearlings draw down their sperm reserves quickly, as well.”

Most seedstock breeders guarantee sales and may have a suitable

replacement animal to finish the season. The quality may not be optimal, but it is an option to consider.

The bulls are the lynchpins of a cow-calf operation and handling them to interact safely with each other and with the females is critical to the producer’s bottom line.

“It’s a balancing act as they are social creatures constantly working on a dominance structure,” Olson says. “Livestock managers must be aware of these relationships to ensure productive breeding rates.” **HW**