

by Allison May

After reading this article, I hope your wheels are turning on the importance of maternal strength — real cow power — in your breeding program. I'm not talking about the "cow power" Google defines as turning manure into energy. I'm talking about ranchers' cow power — donor females, foundation mommas, and your cow that never misses. I'm talking about females you want to build your program around and see in your front pasture.

One of my favorite genetics classes was about the impact of males versus females. Much of the discussion was based around numbers, which makes sense. If a bull can breed 20-30 cows per year naturally or more through artificial insemination (AI), that is perceived to be a greater impact than a cow that, in theory, will only produce one calf per year. This is why so many of us spend



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Successful operations hinge on more than just high quality bulls; foundation females are a rancher's ultimate version of "girl power."

painstaking hours combing through sire catalogs, watching bull sales and researching next year's sires.

But, what calf would you expect by breeding a superstar, high-caliber bull to an inefficient, poor-milking, low-fertility cow? Unless you receive a miracle from the infamous genetic bell curve, this calf will likely not be your best performing animal. An improvement, sure — but, maybe not as much as you need. Now, you shouldn't lower the bar on sire selection, especially when he is likely to produce more calves per year in most situations than one single cow will produce. But, in addition to the time spent searching out the next super sire for your program, take a good hard look at your cow base as well.

#### Maternal measurements

This time of year, many of us are looking at lots of happy red and white babies in the fields. While it's nice to soak in those moments, we can't lose sight of planning for the next steps. Have you been making observations, recording data and taking notes on which cows are pulling their weight?

Before we put all our emphasis on upcoming bulls, we must remember to take stock in which cows we are continuing to propagate. Even if certain recordable traits are within an acceptable range, does she match your program goals or is it time to move on?

Easier said than done, right? It sounds a little overwhelming even as I write it on paper, but if your goal is genetic progress, then it's a crucial conversation to have with your family and business partners. Luckily, we all have a variety of tools available to us that help us advance our genetic pool. From data analysis to advanced reproductive technologies, there are lots of ways to put your dollar to work in the smartest way possible. Knowing how expensive our inputs are and how scarce resources can be in comparison to the plentiful challenges we face, let's work at putting emphasis on both bull and cow power in our herds. I bet you'll be happy with the results! **HW**

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