

CHAPTER 3: Guidelines for the purchase of beef bulls

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To justify its existence, the stud cattle industry has a responsibility towards the country's commercial beef producers to ensure that bulls supplied to the cattle industry should contribute economically important characteristics. Features that are of cosmetic value only, with little or zero impact on economic beef production, should be avoided.

The cattle breeder has to decide which factors are important in the beef industry and then adapt his breeding policy accordingly. In his decision he should be guided by experts, commercial beef producers, as well as the needs of the consumer. The future of any breed eventually depends on the commercial farmer, and not on the trade of stud animals. Ideally the conditions on the stud farm and stud management practices should match those on commercial farms as closely as possible.

The fact that the bull determines the phenotype and genotype of the herd (i.e. how the herd will look and perform in future) is still often overlooked. Within three generations (12-15 years) bulls are responsible for 90% of the herd's genetic composition.



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The modern beef industry requires animals that are adapted to their total environment and that are able to produce in a diverse range of different circumstances. Animals need to be able to produce on natural veld and this means that, for optimal production, a bull has to be in balance with his environment. Selection for adaptability therefore implies the identification of animals that produce best in their total environment. As bulls only work for short periods of time and only produce semen, it is fairly easy for them to adapt to and thrive in their environment.

A better measure of adaptability is found in the reproductive ability of the cow herd. Practically, this implies that bulls should be selected from a cow that calves annually and weans heavy calves. These cows are certainly best suited to their environment. The younger a cow is when she comes into production, the better, provided she does not skip a year. Older cows, with a long productive life, are also well adapted and bulls from such cows should be preferred over bulls from junior cows, that have not yet proved their ability. Bulls whose mothers have skipped a year or who have lost their calves prior to weaning for any reason, should be avoided, no matter what excuse the breeder may supply.

Remember that the bull not only carries the growth characteristics, but also the mothering characteristics of the future cow herd. The importance of the bull's mother can not be overstated. Wherever possible, the bull's half-sisters should also be considered, especially with regards to udder development and feminine characteristics.

General principles in purchasing beef bulls:

- Try to purchase bulls from a region that matches the conditions on your own farm.
- Buy bulls from herds that are superior to your own. Evaluate the entire herd, not only examples presented at auctions or shows. Spend time on the seller's farm to see all the animals – it is definitely worth your while to spend a day, or even days, in choosing a bull that will have an impact on your herd for years to come.
- Only buy bulls from herds with complete and reliable records. Credibility is essential. Beware of a breeder who does not want to show all his records or cattle, as he may have something to hide.
- Be objective in using performance test records. Remember that although performance testing is an important tool in the selection of bulls, it must be balanced with all the other aspects. Usually only the top 5-10% bulls of any herd have the ability to quickly improve their progeny.
- Use BLUP (best linear unbiased prediction) breeding values when you choose a bull. This modern tool is already available in most breeds and is currently regarded as the most important adjunct in the selection of bulls. Remember that by using breeding values in the selection of bulls, deficiencies in your own herd can be rectified much sooner. If you do not know or understand the use of breeding values, it is imperative that you familiarise yourself with it, otherwise you will definitely fall behind your fellow beef cattle farmers. The ARC and various breeders' associations regularly present courses on the use of breeding values.

- After a bull has been used in a herd, his progeny should be evaluated objectively as soon as possible. A bull that does not meet the expectations should be removed immediately. The fact that a bull may have been expensive should not hinder your decision to remove him.
- Buy strategically. Try to correct weak points in your own herd by selecting bulls that are positive for those qualities.
- There is no such thing as a perfect bull. There are no super bulls – only better or poorer quality bulls. For functional efficiency, firstly look at the entire bull to get a general idea; thus, he should look like a bull. He must have a masculine appearance – this is a property that appears strongly in the colour differences of his coat. He should have darker colouring on the neck, upper shin and thighs, such as the bull to the hereunder. Musculature that gives the impression of a round muscular form is also a sign of masculinity. However, pony types are sexually mature sooner and thus also appear very masculine. They should, however, be avoided, as should lean, ox-like bulls. The bull must be alert and interested in his surroundings. He must be well-balanced, with good capacity and spring of rib. His posture and gait should be proper. Upright hocks, knock-knees, weak pasterns that sag, abnormal hoof growth, and anything that may hamper his mobility are undesirable. For the warmer parts of the country a smooth hair coat, good pigmentation and a loose, moveable skin is desired. A strong, broad muzzle is also important.



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- Spend time during the winter visiting stud herds and thoroughly studying them before finally selecting a bull. Remember, the right bull is never too expensive. As a guideline, the price of a good bull is equivalent to the price of five commercial cows.
- Despite all the above-mentioned factors, it is still very important that the bull of your choice should appear attractive to you.