

A guide to practical bull management

The importance of bulls in a cattle operation goes way beyond their numbers. Good management of these valuable animals in your herd can significantly increase productivity and profit.



While bulls make up only 3% to 4% of a typical cattle herd, each bull can produce 40 or more calves a year. This makes them a vital component of a cattle operation.

At some point, most farmers buy in bulls from other herds. Here are some tips on how to introduce a new bull onto your farm:

- If the animal is transported with foreign bulls, it is best to keep it in a separate compartment on the truck, particularly if the animals are free-standing.
- Off-load the bull in a safe camp with one or two other cattle to keep it company for the first

few days. Clean water and good grazing will immediately calm it.

- Incorporate the bull into your normal dipping, dosing and vaccination programme immediately, regardless of what the previous owner did.
- If the bull is very fat, wean it off concentrated feed systematically. In the first week, give it 8kg/day; in the second week 4kg/day; in the third week 1kg/day, plus a lick *ad lib*; and in the fourth week only the lick.
- If possible, keep the new bull away from other bulls until it is put to the cows.
- Remember that a bull cuts its teeth between two and two-and-a-half years old. It might possibly

ABOVE: Have your bulls tested for fertility three to six weeks before the beginning of the mating season. In addition, perform a sheath wash to test for trichomoniasis and campylobacter (vibriosis).
PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

lose weight if it has to adjust to its new environment, eat average grazing and service cows.

- If you can, keep the bull on your farm for two months or longer before the start of the breeding season to enable it to adjust to its new environment and feed conditions.

BEFORE MATING

- Test bulls for fertility three to six weeks before the onset of the mating season and perform a sheath wash for trichomoniasis and campylobacter (vibriosis).
- Perform a semen evaluation even if you are using multiple-sire mating, as dominant bulls with poor semen can keep

younger bulls with good-quality semen away from cows.

- Examine your bulls for general health before the season. Make sure they are structurally normal and their gait is in no way awkward or abnormal.
- Inject bulls about two months before the breeding season with vitamin A and minerals (Multimin + SE + Cu).
- A bull's condition should always be 2,5 to 3,5 out of 5. Overfeeding causes heavy, unfit, clumsy bulls whose semen is usually substandard.

A BULL'S CONDITION SHOULD BE 2,5 TO 3,5 OUT OF 5

- Underfeeding may also be a problem, but libido normally decreases before semen quality is affected. If the bulls are somewhat lean, start providing supplementary feed two months before the breeding season.

DURING MATING

- Carefully observe the bulls, particularly the young ones. Make sure they are adept at mating and that libido is present.
- In multiple-sire herds, put older and younger bulls together, not bulls of equal strength. Ensure a ratio of no fewer than three or four bulls to 100 cows. In single-sire herds, allocate 30 to 40 cows to a bull for three months.
- Keep a record of the cows serviced. Usually, about 60% of cows are fertilised in their first cycle. If more cows return to oestrus, there is a problem; this should be identified and solved as soon as possible.
- Mating herds should not be kept alongside each other, as bulls fight through fences to get to a cow on heat.

AFTER MATING

- Starve the bulls in separate, sturdy kraals for three to four days. Then take them out one



ABOVE: One bull can produce 40 or more calves a year.

RIGHT: Bonsmara bulls are ready for mating from around 14 months of age, as long as they weigh 420kg, their scrotal circumference is at least 340mm, and their semen has been tested. They can be used for breeding up to 10 years or older.



by one to the bull camp, where good grazing and clean water should be freely available.

- This camp should be safe, without too many stones, ditches or holes, and with enough space for the animals to make way for one another.
- Ideally, pair bulls off (one older and one younger) and don't put them all together in one camp. Valuable bulls in particular should be kept separately.
 - Because bulls fight frequently and need plenty of 'personal space', ensure that there is plenty of space at lick troughs or when limited supplements are fed.
 - Ideally, keep one reserve bull for every 10 bulls you are using.

Bonsmara bulls can be used as early as 14 months of age, provided they weigh 420kg, their scrotal circumference is at least 340mm, and their semen has been tested. These young bulls ought to be able to service 10 to 20 cows each in three months.

- Bonsmara bulls can be used up to about 10 years of age. Older bulls can also be used, but under special observation to ensure they are still breeding well. Because an adult Bonsmara bull weighs between 800kg and 1 000kg, keep a stocking rate of between 1,5 MLU/ha to 2 MLU/ha.
- Phone the Bonsmara Cattle Breeders' Society of South Africa on 051 448 6084.