

VETERINARY ADVICE

What to look out for when buying a top-quality bull

BUYING a bull is always a gamble but you can shorten your odds through careful scrutiny and selection. **What makes a good bull?**

A good bull has the ability to breed efficiently (in other words fertility) and the ability to transfer desirable traits to his offspring (in other words a good genotype). He should also be disease-free and of good temperament.

How do you define fertility?

Fertility is a spectrum. Fertility in the case of a bull is defined as "the ability to impregnate (pregnant beyond day 42 of gestation) by natural service, at least 60 per cent of 50, normally cycling, disease-free females within three weeks and at least 90 per cent of them within nine weeks".

Sub-fertile bulls may achieve some pregnancies by natural

BUYING A BULL

Rod Welford, of Millcroft Veterinary Group, offers advice on how to choose a good breeding bull

service but not at the above rates (or bulls that produce viable semen for AI but cannot achieve natural service). Truly infertile bulls cannot achieve pregnancies. It is better to think of a bull in terms of his potential to be an "efficient breeder".

Can fertility be tested?

The proof of fertility is evident only by the bull's ability to breed according to the definition above. However, there is a standardised assessment that will help determine a bull's current breeding potential known as the BCVA Bull Breeding Examination Certificate.

The bull is checked for physical criteria including the

appearance of his external genitalia, scrotal circumference and internal accessory sex glands. Semen collection allows the semen to be evaluated and graded. It will only be deemed suitable if it passes standards for "motility" (ability of the sperm to swim) and morphology (sperm shape).

The final assessment is that of mating ability and requires a bulling female to evaluate the bull's libido (sex drive) and ability to achieve intromission.

Why is scrotal circumference often measured at breed society sales?

Scrotal circumference is a direct reflection of the semen



ADVICE: Rod Welford checking out a bull

producing capability of a bull. Breed societies have their own minimum standards for sales.

When breed standards are not available, the guide below from the Society of Theriogenology suggests the minimum scrotal circumference measurements: 12-15 months, 30cms; from 15 to 18 months, 31cms; from 18 to 21 months, 32cms; from 21 to 24 months, 33cms; 24 months and up, 34cms.

Can you predict the offspring characteristics?

An animal's breeding value is its "genetic merit", half of which will be passed on to its progeny. Genomics is a forecast of the genetic potential of a bull taken from his genetic makeup.

EBVs (Estimated Breeding

Values) are the performance of the individual animal calibrated within a contemporary group. For example, a bull required for breeding heifer replacements should have a favourable EBV for calving ease, whereas a bull for producing finishing stock should have favourable EBVs for growth rate and carcass quality. Specific genetic markers can indicate the likelihood of certain things such as genetic diseases eg protoporphyria.

What risks do bulls pose to herd health?

Introducing even a single animal means the herd is not closed. It is wise to ascertain the disease status of the herd of origin and of the individual bull, conducting pre-movement tests to ensure clarity for TB history, BVD, Johnes',

Leptospirosis and IBR. All bulls should be evaluated for Campylobacter risk – a sexually-transmitted disease of cattle and sheath washed/treated. **When is a bull fit to work?**

Young bulls post-puberty (12-15 months) are capable of breeding but still need to learn their trade, so will be capable of covering fewer females in their formative days. An efficient breeder needs to be in prime physical health in order to pursue and serve cows.

Newly-purchased bulls are often fed for sale condition and it is wise to allow some time for them to lose weight and acclimatise to their fresh surroundings, including to establish their "working clothes from their Sunday best".

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