Beyond Good Genetics: Is Your Bull Ready for Breeding Season?

Written by Carissa Gentry, DVM

An operation's herd bull is more than half of its genetic equation—and 100% responsible for getting cows bred during a tight breeding window. Investing in top-tier genetics means very little if a bull is physically unable or biologically incapable of getting cows pregnant.

Maximizing profitability in a beef operation requires evaluating the true return on investment of a Breeding Soundness Exam (BSE), understanding why semen quality is critical, and matching targeted bull genetics to specific groups of females.

1. The Economics of a Breeding Soundness Exam (BSE)

A Breeding Soundness Exam is not an expense; it is cheap insurance. Costing around $60-75 per bull, a BSE routinely yields a 7:1 to 20:1 return on investment by identifying sub-fertile or infertile bulls before they cost a producer a calf crop.

Economic Impact of an Open cow	
Cost to carry an open cow	$400-$800 per season
Weight lost per delayed cycle (21 days)	30-50lbs less at weaning
Revenue lost per delayed cycle	$90-$150 per calf

When a bull fails to settle a cow during her first 21-day heat cycle, she must wait for the next.

- **Every 21-day delay** means the calf is born 3 weeks later in the calving season.
- A calf born 21 days late weighs **30 to 50 pounds less** at weaning.
- If a bull is completely infertile, that cow remains **open**, costing $400 to $800+ just to feed her for a year without producing a single dollar of income.

- Running an untested bull risks turning a tight 60-day calving season into a drawn-out, unprofitable disaster.

2. The Physical & Semen Check: Beyond Structural Soundness

A bull can look visually impressive, walk structural lines cleanly, and aggressively chase cows in heat, but still be completely sub-fertile. A complete BSE covers two non-negotiable halves: physical soundness and microscopic evaluation.

Complete breeding soundness exam	
PhysicalExam	*ReproductiveExam*
Eye health	Scrotal circumference
Feet/Legs/Joint Structure	Sperm Motility
Body Condition Scores	Sperm Morphology

Why the Semen Evaluation Matters

Microscopic semen evaluation checks two main factors:

- **Motility (Movement):** At least **30%** of the sperm must be moving forward progressively. Poor motility means sperm cannot successfully travel up the reproductive tract to fertilize the egg.
- **Morphology (Structure):** At least **70%** of the sperm must be anatomically normal. Abnormalities—such as misshapen heads, coiled tails, or retained protoplasmic droplets—prevent the sperm from fertilizing the egg or cause early embryonic loss.

Note:Sperm takes roughly 60 days to develop. Extreme winter stress, illness, fever, or localized injurycan damage sperm development weeks before the breeding season starts. Testing bulls 30 to 60 days prior to turn-out ensures there is time to replace a bull that fails.

3. Targeted Breeding: Right Bull for the Right Females

Using a "one-size-fits-all" bull across an entire herd limits genetic progress and risks losing calves. Strategic operations utilize multi-tier bull batteries tailored to the distinct needs of heifers, replacement-producing cows, and terminal feeder-calf producers.

Targeted Bull Selection Strategy		
Heifers	Mature Cows	Terminal Herd
Calving Ease & Low BW	*Maternal Genetics & Stayability*	*Terminal Growth & Carcass*
High calving ease direct (CED) EPD	Moderate Calving ease direct (CED) EPD	High Yearly Weight (YW) EPD
Low Birth Weight (BW) EPD	High milk & heifer pregnancy EPD's	High Marbling (IMF) & Ribeye Area (REA)
Smooth, refined frame	Pregnancy EPDs	High $ Beef Value
	Structural Longevity	Heavy Pay Weight

Tier 1: The Heifer Bull (Focus: Calving Ease & Low Birth Weight)

First-calf heifers have not reached full pelvic maturity. Dystocia (calving difficulty) is the leading cause of calf loss at birth and delays a heifer's ability to rebreed.

- **Key Traits:** High **Calving Ease Direct (CED)** EPD, low **Birth Weight (BW)** EPD.
- **Goal:** A live calf on the ground without assistance, ensuring the young female recovers quickly and stays on schedule to rebreed for her second calf.

Tier 2: The Maternal Cow Bull (Focus: Building the Future Herd)

Breeding mature cows destined to produce replacement heifers requires prioritizing female longevity and reproductive efficiency over maximum growth. Extreme calving ease is not required for mature cows, which allows for broader genetic selection.

- **Key Traits:** Moderate CED, strong **Heifer Pregnancy (HP)**, **Docility (DOC)**, **Stayability (STAY)**, and balanced **Maternal Milk** EPDs.
- **Goal:** High-performing, structurally sound daughters with good udders that will stay in the herd for 8–10+ years.

Tier 3: The Terminal/Feeder Bull (Focus: Growth & Carcass Value)

When targeting the feeder calf market—selling weaning weight or retaining ownership through the feedlot to sell on a grid—maternal traits become irrelevant because all calves are sold.

- **Key Traits:** High **Weaning Weight (WW)**, **Yearling Weight (YW)**, **Marbling (IMF)**, **Ribeye Area (REA)** EPDs, and strong **Terminal Index Values**
- **Goal:** Maximizing pay weight at the auction block or earning grid premiums for prime, high-yielding carcasses.

The Bottom Line

A herd's genetic plan is only as strong as its weakest bull. Matching specific bull genetics to the right group of females maximizes growth, herd quality, and calf value. Paired with annual Breeding Soundness Exams, this strategy ensures that every bull turned out into the pasture delivers a high return on investment.