

Producing Your Own Bulls

*"It's not the strongest of the species that survives.
It's not the most intelligent. It's the one most responsive to change."
Charles Darwin*

It has been some time since I spoke to you about selecting your herd bulls from your own cow herd. I feel the need to discuss this issue with you again and attempt to shed more light on the subject.

To put it bluntly right from the start, if you desire to produce a quality product every time then it requires using your own bulls produced from your very best cows. Consistent quality will not happen any other way.

A typical response to that statement is, "What about breeding a father to his daughters? You can't do that."

I realize there is a great stigma against breeding close (along a male line) in the cattle industry. Those that have perpetuated that mindset have been tremendously successful at spreading wrong information. The idea that close line breeding and any inbreeding will create genetic misfits and destroy a cow herd is simply not true. It seemed to have started back in 1948 when dwarfism started to appear in a couple of Hereford herds. It was blamed on breeding too close and from then on it was believed that any physical deformities were caused by line breeding.

The facts are that undesirable traits may begin to appear in line bred offspring, but only if those genetic traits were there in the parents in the first place. They weren't expressed in the parents because of heterosis. **Line breeding and inbreeding for that matter does not create new genes** and is actually a common practice in other animal industries (horses, dogs, cats, sheep). It is a perfectly acceptable way to breed for specific desirable traits. Selection is crucial and no undesirable traits are to be tolerated. Any animal that exhibits unwanted characteristics should never be used for breeding. If and when they may appear in a line bred herd, that is the time and opportunity to eliminate them.

There are a number of reasons why a producer needs to create his/her herd sires from his/her own cows.

1. Doing so will give the producer greater control of the genetic traits needed for gourmet beef and high quality milk. Out crossing and crossbreeding may appear to do great things in some animals, but there will also always be animals that are mediocre and some that are simply inferior. When this type of production is happening, quality is all over the scale. Individuals, restaurants, and food stores aren't willing to pay a price that makes our operations sustainable when we can't guarantee consistency. Those are the animals and products that will continue to be commodities and return commodity prices.

2. The cow herd represents a gene pool and needs to retain its pure genetic properties. If your cows are like mine, generally speaking, they are all related. Each female is a grandmother, mother, daughter or granddaughter, etc. to another female in the group. And even though there may be several bulls represented in those females, the maternal DNA is clean and traceable back

through many generations. That gene pool can be improved but should always be preserved.

3. In order to get superior livestock that will utilize your pastures or rangeland, you need to create animals that possess the best genetics on both the top side and bottom side. Through the natural phenomena of the mitochondrial DNA in the gametes (sperm and egg), females (X chromosome) already have the upper hand on genetic influence over all of their offspring. It takes a concentration of DNA in the nucleus of the sperm cell (Y chromosome) to offset or balance her natural dominance. I recommend you do a search on the internet for mitochondrial DNA to further your own understanding.

So we have the best on the bottom side by creating a family of great females. The task is now getting that concentration in the genetic material on the top side. That can be accomplished in four ways.

1. Breeding fathers to daughters
2. Breeding grandfathers to granddaughters
3. Breeding brothers to half-sisters
4. Breeding uncles to nieces

Breeding father to daughter or grandfather to granddaughter will give you the highest concentration of the Y chromosome in the offspring. The resulting bull calves taken from your best cows have a greater chance of rubber stamping themselves in their sons. The resulting heifers from this type of breeding will be some of the best maternal females you can produce.

When daughters are bred back to their father who is also their grandfather the results can be amazing as they now have 75% of the sire's blood. By this time you will begin to see a very uniform generation of calves.

The third generation of females would then be bred to a half brother from that same sire line from the same great females and at this point the offspring would be 82.5% of that sire line. The sons from those great females spread her strength and quality through the proceeding generations.

Uncle to niece breeding is the next best method for concentrating the Y chromosome. The brother to sister/half sister mating can work well but should only be used after you have established your paternal herd sire line.

You must remember that females naturally possess a higher percentage of fine textured, tender meat and fat than their typical male counter parts. These carcass traits can and must be incorporated into the herd bulls if we expect to be successful at producing gourmet grass finished beef and superior milk and then be able to demand a higher price for it.

The key is to reach and maintain a higher concentration of genetic influence from the top side in all of your males and females. You don't want to breed a son to his mother or sister because you would be going back to concentrating the dam's genetic material and the offspring would be 75% of the mother's blood. Sure you could produce great females, but once again, the sons would be weak and soon consistency would be lost in the entire herd.

Keep in mind when you introduce an outcross bull (different breed or bloodline) to your cows - that bull, with his genetic traits, will take your breeding

program in a different direction and you have just lost control of what traits will get passed on to the next generation. It turns into a “poke and hope” situation.

Every person who owns cattle should study genetics and breeding so he/she can know the traits and characteristics needed for using their animals to the highest degree for quality beef and milk production. It is our responsibility to maintain a gene pool that is dominated paternally for consistency of all traits and characteristics. Out-crossing simply cannot produce and maintain that level of consistency.

Whether you currently have registered cattle or a commercial herd, you can start now with what you have and build a herd that will produce gourmet meat, or if you're dairy - high butterfat gourmet milk. You must start thinking of yourself as a seed stock producer. Select, breed, and manage your animals as if you were to create the best genetics on your side of the Mississippi. Keep only the cattle that have the type, style, and production that you are breeding for. They will come from the best cows in your herd - always have and always will. (Keeping anything just to build numbers is not worth it) Grass finish for the table those animals that don't measure up. Your best weapon is your knowledge of selection for the cows and especially the bull. Without knowing what to select for the objectives become more difficult to reach and you could be stabilizing some defective body parts that do not support the qualities and production you need to efficiently utilize your grass and convert it into a quality product.

You need to realize that we are where we are in the cattle industry today because of our breeding practices. Even the processors are voicing their complaints. They are saying: “the cattle are too big”, “quality is too inconsistent”, and “what happened to beef with flavor?” among other things.

Remember that God created females as help mates, so with the correct bull those fine females you own will respond to those great bulls and we will breed ourselves out of the dilemma we have fallen into.

Finding a great bull to start with can be a difficult task. Fifty years of breeding for the feedlot market has all but wiped them out. When I do come across a herd that is producing good bulls it is almost always a closed herd that is line bred. What I have come to know is supported by what I see, time and time again.

Because there are very few good bulls out there and they simply are not for sale, your next best alternative starting out is to obtain semen from a superior bull and artificially breed your cows. Save the best heifers from that breeding and mate them to their daddy. In the next generation or two you will see some bull calves that will be good enough be your “seed stock”. Next is to just follow the management program I have been describing in this article. Be aware that you will get much opposition when you start line breeding. Don't let that sway you. You have got to be diligent about knowing what is suitable to stay in the breeding herd. You have got to cull. You have got to see how it does work for yourself. You have nothing to lose and so much to gain.

Our country continues to have a cheap food policy. Government and the industry aren't about to change or alter that policy. And frankly, there will always be a large segment of the population that will only buy cheap, convenient food.

There will continue to be infrastructure that supports and meets the demand for fast, easy, processed food.

The food industry will gladly incorporate gourmet beef into their product line if we were willing to produce it for the commodity price they are willing to pay. Why should I or anyone sell at or below production costs so that someone else can put a 40% mark up on it? We must stop being price takers and start being price makers. All industry and businesses set their prices at a level that makes them a profit, which keeps them in business. We must do the same.

So how is your operation doing? What is to become of us as milk and beef producers? Answer: We band together - then - we market together. We set our prices to make a profit, to be sustainable, just as the grocery store does. We bring the old standards back - quality product for a fair price. Those standards and integrity made America great.

If you or I (we) are going to be successful at producing grass finished beef and gourmet milk that will satisfy the consumers and bring them back for more then there are two basic principles we must adhere to.

1. Get to the point where you create your own bulls using your best cows and build a paternal (not maternal) dominated herd.
2. We must get organized and work and market our products as one force. We must come together, share needs and ideas, communicate with wise people and ask for Gods wisdom about this and we will create the market that demands our superior products

Competition is not always a bad thing, but those of us who are willing to strive and sacrifice in order to produce gourmet quality products won't be competing against anyone. We do not have to diminish other producers we just have to stop thinking like them which should not be difficult because they are trying to supply a different (commodity) market. The products they produce come from breeding and management practices that are geared around the industrial (commodity) model.

Change can happen. Seek knowledge and counsel, breed and manage wisely, look to your genetics and nurture your grass, and you can have a start to gourmet food production in the first generation of calves you produce. If you save your best heifers and breed them back to the same male/paternal line, the second generation will be even finer animals and produce a quality of milk and meat better than the generation they came from.

Together as a united force we can build markets. The consumer is ready to listen to truth and reality. We can all produce top quality products from our herds regardless of the breed and come together at the market place. If you can direct market I encourage you to do so, however we all need to support one another.

So what does the future hold? What is the knowledge and wisdom that has come before you, before me? Are you ready to produce what many consumers are asking for and become sustainable or do you continue down the road that dictates what your efforts and products are worth? How do we make

agriculture viable and attractive to the family or young person once again? To me the answer is simple. I repeat:

- ⇒ We create paternal herd bulls from the best cows on our farm to produce gourmet meat and milk. Remember nature dictates that paternal sires are how wild animals perpetuate.
- ⇒ We band together with our gourmet products and market them together. With numbers we possess power and have bargaining leverage. We become price setters and not price takers.

The breeding program I describe does not cost a producer any more money than what he or she already spends to raise cattle. We simply change the type of bull we use and how often we use him.