



Biography:

Dr. Colin Palmer is an Associate Professor of Theriogenology (Animal Reproduction) at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. Originally from Nova Scotia, Dr. Palmer worked in mixed practices in Ontario and British Columbia and has owned/operated a practice in Saskatchewan. Dr. Palmer along with his wife Kim and children Lauren, Emily and Carter run a herd of purebred Red Angus cattle under the KC Cattle Co. name.

If you don't know what you are looking for there's a good chance you won't buy what your herd needs! Let's face it ... there are a lot of really good bulls out there and a lot of really good seedstock producers. Before heading out to shop for bulls I think every commercial cattlemaster has to decide what kind of herd he or she wants to have. Since we are all breeding cows to generate calves it really comes down to what we intend to do with those calves. Seedstock producers will generally want to produce bulls first and replacement females second with all other marketing structures falling in line behind the primary goal. Commercial cattle producers market weaned calves, produce replacement females or retain ownership of calves to feed through to slaughter. I have not included backgrounding here as that will eventually lead to a live calf sold or a finished animal being sold on the rail. You need to decide what it is you are doing, or what you want to do with your calves and ultimately your herd.

Marketing of weaned calves is the most significant source of revenue on most commercial cow-calf operations followed by the sale of cull females. Culling animals, in turn, requires that replacements be purchased or retained, and if expansion is in your plans more will be needed than are sold. When selling weaned calves your income will largely be determined by pounds of calf offered up on market day. If this is the case, then the best bulls for you should be the ones with the greatest potential to produce heavier calves at weaning. Since you are not retaining ownership for slaughter you shouldn't really concern yourself with carcass trait data. Milking ability, stayability, and even show ribbons really are not that important for you either.

Growth traits including birth weight, weaning weight and yearling weight are all highly correlated - a fact that must be considered carefully as you rank your sale picks. The highest weaning weights are likely to be associated with the highest birth weights, but not always. Shorter gestations may be one reason high growth animals have lower than expected birth weights. When you see numbers that appear to be inconsistent don't be shy about asking questions and doing a little investigating. Trade-offs will have to be made. Producers selling weaned calves must also be concerned about calving ease. Dystocia is the number 1 killer of very young calves and we all know that big calves are not worth much when they die! Put in a different context, if you expect to gain 50 pounds per calf with your new bull then each and every oversized dead calf will be worth 12, 6-weight calves. I'd take a smaller live calf over a big dead one any day. Having said that, little teeny weeny calves often turn out to be underachievers so I think it is a good idea to know what your calves typically weigh at birth and what cows like yours are capable of calving. The same holds true for your breeding heifers.

If you are looking for a bull to produce replacement females then you have a different set of priorities. Again calving ease is very important and can't be ignored. Managing birth weight in your herd can be one of those gifts that keeps on giving. Or not; you decide! When bred to the same bull, big birthweight

heifers will produce bigger calves than their lighter birth weight herd mates. Birth weight is the biggest single predictor of dystocia and at some point a threshold will be reached and those big heifers could start having trouble. Milk production, fertility, and longevity balanced with growth performance are all things that should be on your list when shopping for a herd builder.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs) are very useful for comparing bulls and are more reliable than the bull's own performance because they take into account the performance of his relatives. Using weaning weight for example, if pasture conditions were excellent and every imaginable supplement was provided your pick of the pen could have a tremendous actual weaning weight; however, his weaning weight EPD would be much more modest, and of course, realistic. Likewise, Calving Ease Direct and Birth Weight EPDs are more reliable than looking at the bull's own birth weight. These data should be available for every purebred bull (representing a breed that calculates EPDs) that you might be considering. If you are not comfortable with EPDs then do what you can to change that. Most of the time you will see that the bull's own performance is in line with the EPDs or vice versa. Use all of these numbers to help make up your short list of bulls.

No less important are what I call the "soft" traits. These are the ones that don't often have EPDs associated with them and usually require more time to investigate. Structural soundness - feet and legs are very important. First, the bull needs to get around to breed and should be a viable breeder for at least the next few years. Secondly, any replacements kept from this bull will hopefully remain in the herd for at least a decade. When buying a herd builder check out the teats and udder on the dam and other female relatives. Temperament is very important regardless of your herd goals. There are enough good cattle nowadays why should anyone put up with the bad ones! High strung bulls pass on their crazy to the next generation amazingly well. Fertility and frame score should definitely be on your list, especially, when keeping replacements. Females sired by bulls with larger scrotal circumferences have greater lifetime fertility and heifers from these bulls tend to reach puberty sooner. Is your new bull likely to increase, decrease or maintain your current cow size. If you don't pay attention to mature size who knows what your herd is going to look like. If frame score is not available assessing the bull's parents and other family members will also provide this information.

One tool I like to use is the breed association websites to gather more information. Through these sites I can find out how a bull ranked amongst his contemporary herd mates and how many progeny his mother has produced, when they were born and their current status. I can also conduct a detailed examination of the pedigree. For most commercial producers this might be too time consuming, but it sure is helpful when searching for your next purebred herd sire.

Good luck on your bull buying adventures.

A Breeder's... Veterinary Perspective

Tips for Putting Together Your Bull Buying Check List