

March 19, 2021

The Bull Trimmers

With a propane torch in one hand and a scotch comb in the other, the hair stylists are at work. Working away in freezing weather, the three men have 100 bulls to groom for an upcoming sale. In a few days, generations of ranchers who bred and cared for this herd of black angus cattle will culminate with the annual sale of yearling bulls. They will become the foundation animals of the future for other ranchers. Hundreds of years from now, their genes will be still working to produce quality beef potentially throughout the nation.

These animals come from the calves born in late winter and spring of 2020, half are bulls and half heifers. They are the results from a breeding nine months prior. Mom was the product of 70 years of genetic improvement occurring on the ranch that included the use of artificial insemination. Utilizing this technique, the top bulls in the country can have their superior genetics pass into larger numbers of quality cows.

In May of 2020, the decision was made as to which ones of those young bulls would stay intact and eventually become bull sale participants. Those not destined for breeding stock became steers.

The decision to have an animal included in the bull sale involves how they look, this will include width, height, thickness through the muscles, depth of body, a fertility exam and very importantly, structural correctness. If they do not walk well, then chasing cows around a big pasture will not be a life for them. Even more importantly is how they look on paper. Who's their daddy? Is he one of the current bulls that are "in style." In the past year and nine months since his conception some bulls have gained in status and other have fallen out of favor.

Papers also tell us his genetic potential. Using information based on his genetic past we can determine how fast his progeny will grow, produce muscle and its potential profitability. One of the popular numbers is the score for calving ease. This predicts how easy his calves will be born. Nobody likes having to assist a cow in birth or even worse, calling the veterinarian for a Caesarean section at 2 AM. Studies have shown that their papers' numbers are seven times better as an indicator of an animal's potential than just looking at the animal.

After weaning in October, a quarter of the calves born on this ranch, selected as bulls are then placed in a feedlot where they are raised and systematically weighed to see how well they are growing. That data is reported at the bull sale as "average daily gain" with many gaining well over 4 pounds.

As the February sale date edges closer, it is time to take these animals from the outside lot and clean them. This is where the Bull Trimmers step in, a hired crew whose goal is to quickly make these animals look better. Their arsenal includes a chute with head gate, trimmers, combs and a blow torch. While delicate areas such as the scrotum and face are clipped, larger areas such as the sides and back have the torch run over them to gently singe long hairs followed by a combing. For \$27 an animal, those trimmers spend three days readying them for the sale.

With bulls trimmed and genetic and production information to back up their appearance each individual bull is run through a ring at the local livestock market on this special sale day. This scenario is repeated all over the upper plains' states in many locations with a variety of livestock breeds and ranches.

On my wife's South Dakota ranch this has been going on for most of the past 49 years. One of those years, the bull trimmers worked inside an old barn, flaming away. That night the barn burnt. Coincidence, or did one of those singed hairs drift to a spot where it smoldered away until it flamed and burnt the building to the ground? We will never know. But if it did, that years trimming price was a lot higher than \$27 a head.

Mark Kepler

Extension Educator- Agriculture and Natural Resources

Purdue Cooperative Extension Service-Fulton County

1009 West Third Street

Rochester IN 46975 574 223 3397 <http://www.ag.purdue.edu/counties/fulton/pages/default.aspx>

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