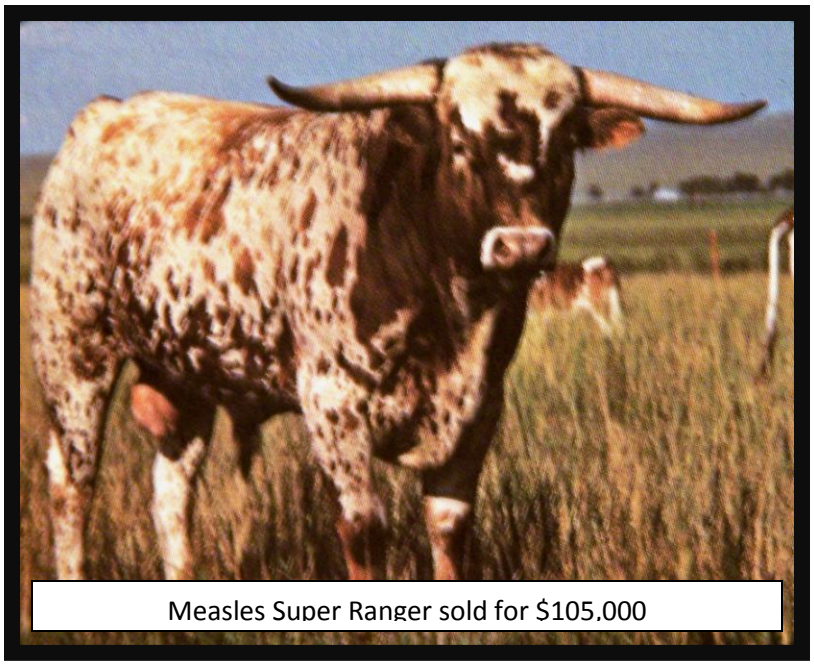
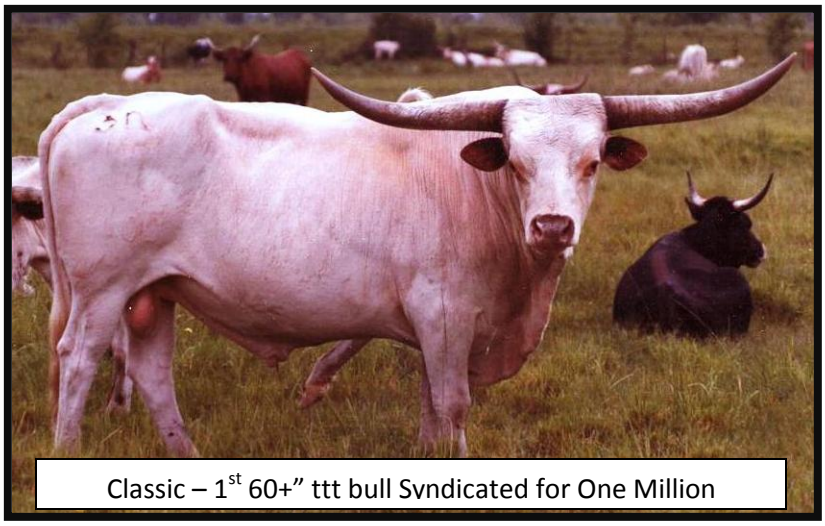
Selecting Sires for Horns and More

By Russell Hooks



Measles Super Ranger sold for $105,000

In an earlier article we discussed selecting for more than just horn in Longhorn females. Now let's talk about Longhorn bulls. Some breeders think the tape measure is the answer to selecting the best bull. Once again that is not the case. There are numerous bulls in the industry that are in the 70" horn club; they are the "hot sires" of the day. These young bulls have tons of horn and you cannot open up a Longhorn magazine without seeing an ad about one of these "great sires". But what *actually* makes a great sire? PRODUCTION! CONSISTENCY! PREDICTABLE GENETICS! Most of these hot ticket sires are so young that their only offspring are still babies. Before I load my program (and the programs I consult for) down with these "popular and highly promoted genetics" I want to see some mature offspring. Will some of these "hot sires" of today make a lasting positive mark on the industry? Yes they will, but history has shown us that the percentage is very small. I have seen too many "fad bulls" come and go in this industry during my thirty years in Longhorns. As breeders, we need to develop a breeding plan that utilizes proven genetics instead of chasing fads. If you chase the fads you will more than likely always find yourself one step behind. Think about it, bull X is the bull of the moment – the one everyone is talking about. You AI your cows to him, it takes about 1-2 months to AI the cows, then nine months for the calves to hit the ground and they turn out pretty nice. Now six to seven months

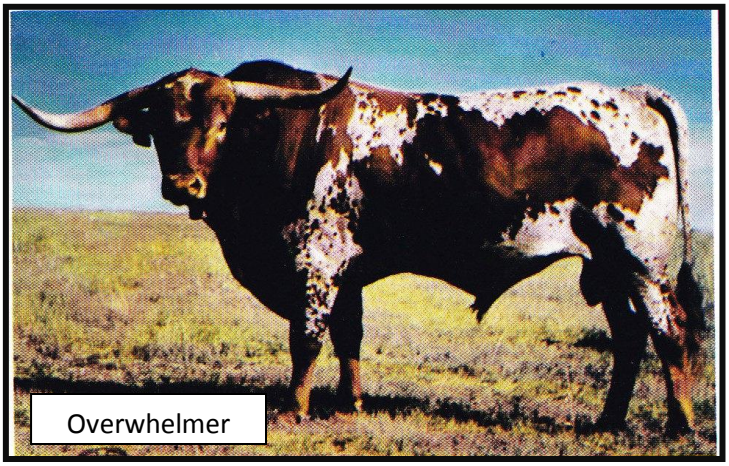


Classic – 1st 60+" ttt bull Syndicated for One Million

later the calves are weaning age; you could sell some of them now but we all know that weanlings do not sell as well as two year olds. So you hold these calves until they are twenty four months old. The time frame is a total of approximately 35 months and the chances are good that by then there is another "hot ticket" bull. You have missed that small window of market opportunity. I have observed that most of the "fad" bulls are only able to ride that popularity trailer for about 3-4 years and then they start to lose traction. This is usually about the time their offspring are reaching maturity and they can now be fully evaluated on traits such as long term horn growth, fertility and milking ability. I have seen "super sires" that have put offspring on the ground that show rapid early horn growth, but when they reach three to four years of age it slows dramatically and other sires' calves that where showing less horn growth at a young age have caught up with the "super" sires' calves. In some cases the "super" sire is inconsistent in his offspring, some have great horn and some are average or even below average. Now the "super" sire's offspring are no different than any other good sire. When you are searching for a sire always ask yourself "how will his genetics benefit my herd, is it just his popularity I am interested in or can he help improve the overall quality of my herd in the long term".

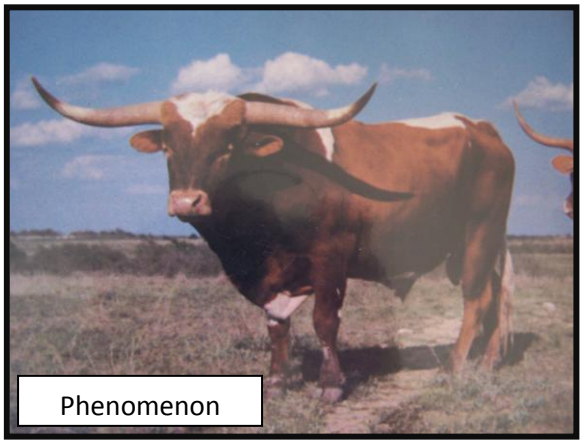
When you are selecting a sire for AI or natural service there are several things to keep in mind. The first thing I look at is a sire's overall conformation, frame size and breed characteristics. Then I want to see what his dam and maternal grand dam look like. Years ago legendary Longhorn breeder J.W. Isaacs told me that "you better like the dam and grand dam of your herd sire because more than likely that is what his heifers are going to look like". I have found this to be the case more often than not. Not only are his daughters going to look similar to the females in his pedigree, but they will inherit a lot of their traits such as udder and teat size, fertility and femininity. While checking these female lines of a sire's pedigree, I will study the pedigree several generations back looking for as many great females as possible in the sire's pedigree. Next I look at what other good animals, both males and females have come from these genetics or similar genetics. After I have studied the prospective sire's pedigree I will then compare it with the pedigrees of the females that he will be mated to in order to check to see if there will be too much line breeding or inbreeding in the resulting offspring. I also look to see if the genetics of the prospective sire have been used with the female genetics that I am planning to mate him with. In other words, have these genetics worked together successfully or unsuccessfully in past matings for other breeders. It is more productive and less costly to learn from what has or has not worked in the past. One last important step is to visually inspect the females and note their faults…poor frame score, poor conformation, poor horn growth, etc. This is done so that you can select a sire that will help improve these weaknesses in your cow herd.

The selection of a herd sire is a very important part of a seed stock breeding program. It is correctly said that the sire has a genetic impact on 50% of every calf he sires. So basically, he is 50% of your herd. However, if you think a little more about it, the impact of a sire is even greater than 50%. He only has a 50% effect on your herd through each calf crop. If you don't retain any of his offspring then his effect ends there. If you retain his heifers he is 50% of them


Overwhelmer

and 25% of their offspring; so if you retain these calves he is now 75% of your herd. The effect goes on and on if you are keeping heifers and bulls from your own herd as replacements. As you can see, the selection of a herd sire can have a major long term impact, good or bad, on your herd. Take the time and effort to study all prospective sires before adding their genetics to your herd. It will save you time and money in the long run.

I have often wondered why breeders in our industry will purchase a cow for a large sum of money, but when it comes to purchasing a bull the philosophy seems to be the cheaper the better. This is the opposite of what it should be and of what happens in other cattle breeds. As I stated earlier the females are important and especially the dams of your herd sires, but it is the sires that have a larger impact on your herd and at a faster rate. A breeder should consider spending the largest portion of his purchasing budget on his herd sire. It takes only a short time for that investment to payoff. The late Gene Day used this example when I was looking at purchasing a top notch two year old herd sire prospect from him that he had priced at $10,000. He said "you are going to take this young bull and breed him to 30-40 head this first year. If he produces only ropers and you sell 40 ropers for $250 to $300 each…that's $10,000 to $12,000…the bull is paid for. Now let's say he turns out to be as good of a herd sire as you thought so you only have 20 ropers to sell ($6,000) and you're going to have 20 heifers that should be worth $800 to $1,200 at weaning. Some of these you're not going to want to sell, but keep as replacements. Now he is not only paying for himself, he's making you money." I have never forgotten these words of wisdom and I think about them every time I look at purchasing a bull regardless of whether the price is $1,000 or $100,000. The money invested in a good herd sire is money well spent and will pay off in the long term.


Phenomenon

A lot of the 65-80" horn cattle in our industry are sired by bulls with 50-60" horns and most of these bulls have done this more than once or twice. Phenomenon measured a little over 60" and is one of the leading sires and grandsires of 65-80" horn animals. His sire Superior measured 50" and shows up as sire or grandsire of numerous animals that are in that 70-80" Club. Proven genetics are one of the keys to long term success in this industry. There have been sires in our industry that consistently out produce themselves in horn and

conformation. However there are just as many or more that are very much hit and miss in their offspring quality. There are some sires that never produce an offspring better than they are and in some cases even equal to that sire.

Superior – a bull know for out producing himself in horn and conformation

The point behind all this is, it is best to stick with proven genetics from bloodlines that have passed the test of time and invest wisely in your herd sires. If you are going to use an unproven bull make sure he comes from predictable and proven genetics. Do your homework and do not take sire selection lightly. Work towards producing offspring that are a total package of proven genetics: good horns (55-70") with shape and style, correct and functional conformation, milking ability, adequate body size and eye appeal. It will make you more money in the long run.