

Picking a bull for your system

Last week, we spoke about the importance of knowing what type of stock you want to produce in your herd before purchasing a stock bull or using an AI bull. There are many different production systems on Irish suckler farms, requiring a number of different types of stock.

The “silver bullet” bull, a bull that satisfies every system’s requirements, can be very difficult to find. This is principally down to the fact that certain traits have negative relationships. As you improve in one, you tend to decrease in the other. The following are examples of the most common production systems on Irish suckler farms and what to look for in a bull’s Euro-Star index to suit each system.

I breed all of my own replacements and aim to have surplus to sell.

In this system, a farmer will be breeding most, if not all, of his cows to a maternal bull. A suitable bull here should have a high Replacement Index (>€98 is 5 stars – top 20% across breed). The across-breed stars will tell you where the bull ranks against all other bulls. If you are looking to specifically improve on a certain trait, eg milk, then you will have to look at that trait figure and its star rating. Again, the across-breed stars will tell you where the bull ranks on each trait.

I take all of my animals to slaughter and purchase in all replacements.

In this system, a high Terminal Index bull is most suitable (>€121 is 5 stars – top 20% across breed). Just like the last example, you may be looking

to improve on a specific trait such as carcase weight. It is important to look at the traits that are most important to your system.

I am producing weanlings for the export market and purchase in all replacements.

Like the last system, a high Terminal Index bull is what is required. As the export weanling market generally requires heavily muscled animals, particular emphasis should be placed on the carcase conformation trait. It is important to keep a close eye on the calving difficulty figures of these bulls as some can be quite high.

I need an easy-calving bull for maiden heifers to calve at 24 months.

Calving ease is the priority here. Using proven easy-calving AI bulls (less than 5% calving difficulty at over 90% reliability) is ideal, as these bulls have a high number of calving records from many different herds. Where this is not possible, a proven easy-calving stock bull is best. Using test AI bulls or young unproven stock bulls on maiden heifers is not advised.

Important traits regardless of the production system.

There are certain traits which are important to every production system. Regardless of the type of stock a farmer is looking to produce, they will always aim for as little calving difficulty as possible and docile stock. These two traits should be taken into account when assessing the Euro-Star indexes of all bulls. You must also look at the reliability figures to see how well proven a bull is on a given index or trait.



Andrew’s Simmental stock bull Celtic Celt. He has a Replacement Index of €128 (5 stars within and across breed). He is also 5 stars within and across breed for both daughter milk and daughter calving interval (fertility). Andrew intends to keep daughters of this bull as replacement heifers.

Q&A

Q. Will a bull with a high Replacement Index be strong on milk?

While most high Replacement Index bulls have a good milk figure, this may not always be the case. The overall index is made up of the combined economic values of a number of traits. A bull could have a high Replacement Index on the back of being easy calving, having good fertility and good carcase traits, but may be only average for milk. This is why it is important to look at the sub-traits in a bull’s index to see where the overall index figure is coming from. This is especially true where you are looking to improve a specific trait, such as milk. You need to look at that trait in its own right.

Q. Is it possible to find a bull with a high Replacement and Terminal Index?

A. Yes, it is possible but they can be hard to find. This is because some traits have a negative relationship. An example of this is muscle and fertility. As you increase genetic merit for muscle development, you tend to decrease genetic merit for fertility. Also, a lot of pedigree breeders will tend to focus on one of either the Replacement or Terminal index when breeding bulls.

FARMER FOCUS: ANDREW MOLONEY

If a bull’s genetics aren’t good enough, then I won’t buy him

Name: Andrew Moloney, Edenderry, Co. Offaly

Farming System: Suckler to beef.

4 and 5 Star Females: Cows: 56; Heifers: 86.

Stock Bull or AI: Stock Bull

Replacement Strategy: Breed my own and buy in.

Why did you join the BDGP?

The programme will help me to improve the breeding in my herd and this will hopefully increase my output and in turn improve profitability. The fact that I am receiving financial support to do this makes it a “win win” situation.

What is your replacement strategy?

I use a combination of breeding my own and buying in some crosses from the dairy herd. I’ve been buying in Limousin heifers from dairy herds and crossing these with a high Replacement Index bull to breed my own replacements. I haven’t been indiscriminately buying heifers. They have to be functional, docile and have good Replacement Indexes. I try to get them from more traditional British Friesian herds if possible. It’s a system that has been working well for me.

When purchasing a new bull what criteria do you apply?

Firstly, I decide what type of stock I want the bull to produce. I then either work off of the Replacement or Terminal index depending on my requirements. I look at the Euro-Star figures first and if I am happy with these I will do a visual assessment on the bull to ensure that he is docile and functionally correct. A bull could look the part, but if his genetics aren’t good enough then I



Andrew Moloney

don’t see the point in buying him.

Tell me a bit about your own stock bulls.

I have two stock bulls. I have a few pedigree Limousins and I bred my Limousin stock bull myself. Arrow Improver is sired by Fieldson Alfie (S511) and is a very strong terminal sire with an index of €140 (5 stars within and across). His carcase traits are exceptional, being 5 stars, both within and across breed on carcase weight and carcase conformation. I also have a Simmental bull which I bought from Ger and Angela Brickley. Celtic Celt is sired by Celtic Rock (RKZ) and has a Replacement Index of €128 (5 stars within and across breed). He is 5 stars within and across breed for both daughter milk, with a figure of +14 kg, and for daughter calving interval (fertility) with a figure of -2.37 days. I specifically bought this bull to breed replacement heifers.

DATA RECORDING

- All calves born from January to May are now old enough (five months) to record calf quality and docility.
- Cows can be scored for milk and docility as soon as they calve.
- This information can be recorded online through www.icbf.com, www.agfood.ie, a farm software package or by postal forms.
- New updated animal events pocket notebooks will be posted to all BDGP herds in the coming months.

DATES FOR THE DIARY

Thursday 19 November: Dingle Mart Suckler/BDGP Information Event, Benner’s Hotel, Dingle at 8pm.