

Why do dairy farmers select Hereford bulls?

Some experiences of a farm vet by Rob Drysdale MRCVS



It is said that the bull is half the herd – for beef farms that statement is true, and in more ways than can be discussed in this article. However, when buying bulls for a beef herd there are only a few reasons that a farmer would give as to why they made their decision to purchase that particular animal: genetics, Pedigree, stature, confirmation or price would be a few of these.

In the dairy industry often the classic beef farmer reasons behind bull selection are rarely in the mind of the purchaser. A dairy farmer is looking for a bull that in his, or her, eyes still must be well bred but calving ease, resilience, stature, temperament and price are more important. How many dairy farmers do you know that would pay more than £2,000 for a stock bull?

Over the last 10 years the emergence of dairy bred calves as a source of prime beef has created a new industry in many areas of the UK. Beef from the dairy herd may account for more than 50% of all the beef eaten in the country now with dairy bred beef calves now accounting for a significant income for many dairy farmers. Several supermarkets even offer beef farmers a premium if the dairy cross calves they are fattening come from a particular bull or breed.

As the UK becomes less self sufficient for beef year on year this source of beef has led to a market where the AI industry offers high grade bulls both as Continental and Native breed sires. When selecting a stock bull however most dairy farmers are less willing to purchase a Continental breed, this is where many of the “native breeds” seem to come to the fore.

I would like to think that when looking at beef bulls, either by artificial or natural means, the Hereford should be paramount in any dairy farmer’s eyes. Why? In the dairy industry the target is a healthy, live dam making milk – it is that simple. So calving ease is vital: the dairy animal producing the beef cross calf is targeted solely to produce milk and to do this she needs to be bred to calve down at 24 months old and then rebreed over several years with minimal difficulty.

Size and resilience seem to work together. Many bulls that I see as a vet are lame or unfit for work. Stature may have an important part to play here as large breed bulls standing on concrete for prolonged periods often eating dairy ration do not seem to last well. Injuries to hind limbs and lower backs often

affect sweeper bulls where the pressure from working indoors can be great.

Temperament – now this is not an article extolling the virtues of a quiet and well mannered breed as the main reason to select a Hereford bull. I have seen my fair share of ill tempered Hereford bulls, but compared to other breeds in terms of a percentage these have been minimal. A quiet bull is often overlooked by commercial beef farmers where the concern is EBV and progeny whilst on a dairy farm the animal must be readily handled, easily segregated and be willing to stay separated from females for prolonged periods often in pens near the staff.

When selecting bulls for a dairy farmer I always look at the:

- Disease profile – what could this animal introduce to the dairy farm and what threat is the dairy farm to the incoming bull? Consider not just the classic diseases like IBR and BVD but also Johnes and STD such as Campylobacter.
- Scrotum and testicles – at least 30cm in circumference at 18 months (32cm at 24 months) with even sized, smooth shaped testicles that are neither hard nor soft. As these





An example of a dairy farmer with several years of Hereford bulls.

Bill Westledge is a self made dairy farmer based south of Reigate in Surrey. With two farms and over 550 cows in milk his target is simple milk from a low cost system. The farms produce their own replacements each year and block calve all 550+ animals in 10 weeks. Within the main herd AI is undertaken on all breeding cows for replacements and beef cross calves to be sold on to the beef industry before the stock bulls work as sweepers.

Around 150 heifers are bred each year – with the aim to calve down between August and October. AI is used for herd replacements before a switch to beef after 4 weeks. Hereford and Angus AI is then used on this group, as the aim is for all these animals to calve down at 24 months old and probably 85% of their final adult size. This means an easy calving is vital to avoid injury to what has, ostensibly, cost around £1,200 to reach this stage.

animals work indoors the scrotum should not hang too low at an early age!

- Hind legs – should not be post legged nor too angular from hip to fetlock. Straight legged bulls are prone to injury and arthritis when working indoors.
- Good rump with strong looking hip set.
- Front legs and feet – I like to see straight, solid front legs.
- Feet – straight toes, evenly balanced inner and outer claws, no sign of interdigital fibromas and that have a depth of heel. Avoid young bulls that have lots of ring formation on the claw wall as these represent growth spurts where sudden dietary change could suggest a bull that has been pushed for growth – these often have soft soles and can be more prone to lameness.
- Depth of chest against the size of the bull – can suggest calving ease.
- Length of back – unlike for beef producers this should not be too long for a dairy bull as he is often required to work hard in short bursts but sometimes all year around.

The Hereford breed produces long lived bulls. The bulls last well on dairy farms, indeed I have some bulls that have reached double figures in years whilst working on dairy units before they have left often for old age rather than physical problems. Being often smaller in stature even through to maturity the Hereford also seems to be less “wearing” on the dairy heifers and cows making it a breed that for a relatively small investment can return well beyond its running costs and purchase price.



Two Hereford stock bulls are carried on one of the farms where there are bull penning facilities for handling and keeping them year to year. These bulls are selected from a local Hereford breeder at 18-20 months old. Stature is probably the main reason for selection alongside calving ease. The bulls will work twice each year, one with heifers and the second with a small herd only containing empty cows from the two farms: running initially in late January/early February (sweeping up any late breeding animals) and again from April for 6-8 weeks.

Taking a younger bull to run with the replacement heifers helps minimise bulling injury to this group whilst they are still housed. Later when out grazing this risk is reduced, but quick working and fertile bulls are vital to produce pregnant animals that will be sold to spring calving dairy farmers mostly in the south west.

In the past 10 years the farms have seen 12 Hereford bulls purchased – with the two current incumbents having been on the unit for 6 months and 18 months respectively. Looking at the returns against costs the two stock bulls will breed around 80 animals between them over the year, it is all about pregnancies. AI and synchronisation was used previously, with 50% the best results. The cost was around £25/head for semen and vet inputs to total about £1,500 to achieve 30 pregnant cows. Using the sweeper bulls this has moved to around 90% pregnant at the cost of buying and running these two bulls less the return of any beef money made from their sale.

“The difference between a pregnant cow to sell and a barren animal for beef is around £200/head so the more pregnancies the better,” says Bill, “In my eyes the Herefords are easy to keep, quiet tempered and work well. They produce easy calving offspring that fetch a good price from the calf buyer. As bulls go they do a great job for little cost and the twenty extra pregnant animals each year is testimony to their worth to my dairy farm.”

Take home messages for bulls in the dairy herd:

- Select a bull on calving ease and not potential value of calves.
- Select a bull on resilience – this is an expensive purchase but if he is lame or off work then he will not be covering his costs.
- Have the bulls fertility checked at least annually – and at least 3-4 weeks prior to the expected start of work date to allow for any faults to be worked through.
- Have the bull's feet checked and balanced at least annually.

