



Preventing Injuries

Cattlemen can take steps to minimize risks this breeding season.

by Heather Smith Thomas

Bulls are tough by nature but, though durable, they are not above an occasional injury. Managing bulls during pre-breeding and breeding seasons can help avoid injuries to bulls.

Injuries during breeding season

Bulls that get along reasonably well during winter become more competitive when there are cows to breed. When they fight, there are sometimes freak injuries like broken legs. A rancher who runs a lot of cattle on the range in northern Washington raises horned Herefords to supply the 130 bulls he turns out with his cows. He's seen a number of injuries due to bulls fighting, some severe, but most of the injuries are things like a broken or bruised penis or a stifle

Bull Management



injury. He prefers to use younger, lighter bulls on heifers and feels it this practice reduces these risks, which tend to occur more readily in bigger, heavier bulls breeding heifers.

Injuries due to fighting can be minimized if bulls can be wintered together before the breeding season. They have their social order already established

and may not fight as hard when first turned out with cows. If bulls are separated during their off-season, they spend more time fighting when placed together. If an older bull gets whipped, he may go into solitude and sulk — not breed cows.

If a person doesn't have to breed cows in large pastures with all the cattle running together, there are more management options. If a producer can have small breeding groups with only one to three bulls in a group, there is less chance for injuries due to fighting. Additionally, it helps to select bulls for a smaller breeding group that are compatible, with pecking order already established — such as two or three bulls of different ages. Young bulls rarely challenge the older ones.

By contrast, evenly matched bulls may spend more time fighting or trying to keep one another from breeding, resulting in injury. Serious injury can occur if one bull hits another while he's in the act of mounting a cow. One rancher recommended using one or three bulls instead of two. If there are two bulls, they often try to keep one another from breeding, but if there are three, there's more chance of the third one breeding the cow while the other two are busy fighting.

A Hereford breeder in Idaho who has very few bull injuries suggests, "When turning out bulls for breeding, make sure they are in proper condition, physically fit and not overweight. When possible, take the bulls out

of the cows when they are done breeding. Have a short breeding season and don't leave them with the cows all summer."

Once the breeding activity slows down, bulls have nothing better to do than spar around and look for trouble; fighting tends to increase when bulls are unemployed.

Off-season injuries

The first factor for reducing risk of injury is to select bulls that are structurally sound. Strong, well-formed legs and joints, proper leg angles and adequate bone can be as important in a bull as muscling and feed efficiency. A large investment in a fast-gaining young bull will be wasted if he becomes injured and cannot breed cows or must be butchered for salvage.

One fall our neighbor had the misfortune of having two 3-year-old bulls each break a hind leg in separate accidents. This occurred after breeding season was over, with bulls locked away from the cows.

"We had 14 bulls in that pasture including six big 3-year-olds that were always sparring," he said. "I didn't witness the accidents, but I suspect that two bulls were head to head with hind legs braced, and a third bull rammed into one of them. I've never seen a broken leg occur just from normal fighting, but if a third bull hit full force while that leg was braced, it could snap."

He also mentioned a group of bulls may have their differences settled and be calm until they are moved. Then they may fight, using the disruption as a way to take advantage of one another.

To avoid injuries while fighting, bulls should be as physically fit as possible. If they are pampered and fat, they are more apt to injury. Young bulls should be kept in a large area where they can walk. Fitness and experience are crucial. It's important for young bulls to live together, learn how to fight and to protect themselves. A bull that hasn't experienced sparring for pecking order is a prime candidate for injury when put with other bulls.

Never put one new bull with an established group, or that bull will get picked on. It's better to add several newcomers at once to spread the fighting, so no one individual has to bear the brunt of it. Putting horned bulls together in small areas can be risky. If a bull gets cornered, he can get hurt. Bulls need room to get away from one another.

One way to help prevent trouble with horned bulls is to saw off half the horn when bulls are yearlings. They are not as apt to break a horn later. Broken horns can be serious as it may take a while for the bull to recover from the pain and bleeding due to a broken horn. There is also danger of a bull losing a large amount of blood when a horn is broken off while fighting.

Keep hazards and obstacles like old fences and fallen trees to a minimum in

bull lots. Footing can also be a factor in bull injuries. Dirt is always better than concrete. Concrete gives poor footing, does not provide enough traction and contributes to injuries. Deep mud can be a problem but can also be beneficial when bulls are fighting; they wear out quicker and quit fighting sooner. Some older bulls that are evenly matched in strength never settle their arguments and should not be put together.

The worst injury one old-time stockman ever saw was an older bull trying to fight a younger, stronger one. It's important to have good nutrition for bulls and adequate minerals to build and keep bones strong.

Avoid being hurt

Humans and horses can be injured when working with bulls. One bull in a group of cows is generally not a problem unless he's an aggressive individual with a bad temperament. Two or more bulls can be dangerous if they start fighting. They are focused on battle and won't pay attention to a person on foot or a horseman who tries to break up the fight and move them. One bull may push the other bull into the stockman or the horse. Even if the duo is some distance away, if one bull suddenly turns to run away from the other, he may run over the horse and rider.

Keep in mind that it's a bull's nature to try to dominate his peers and work his way up through the social order to become top bull.

don't have to use it because a bull that respects you knows you are dominant. Bulls are accustomed to pecking order, so dominance and submission are key to how they think and behave. No one who is afraid of a bull should ever handle one because the bull will consider them subordinate in the pecking order. You must not be afraid, yet you must have respect for what a bull might do and never take any bull, even a gentle one, for granted.

Keep in mind that it's a bull's nature to try to dominate his peers and work his way up through the social order and become top bull. Younger bulls are more easily handled and easier to teach respect than older ones. If a bull respects you as boss he will be less apt to defy you. However, remember young bulls will always challenge their peers and elders as they grow up. There may come a time when a bull will also challenge you. By the time they are 4 or 5 years old, many bulls that were easy to handle in earlier years become more difficult. With some bulls this change happens as early as their 3-year-old year. If a bull turns the corner and no longer respects people, it's time to cull him before he hurts someone. **HW**

When processing bulls, such as putting them through the chute for vaccination, never mix groups. Even if it takes longer, work them in their familiar groups, one at a time. If older bulls are kept by themselves, process those bulls one at a time. Every time cattle are worked — especially bulls — think ahead to what might happen so a safe routine can be developed. Have a plan and follow it.

Also have an escape route in the back of your mind. If working on foot, for instance be prepared in case one bull suddenly shoves another one or whirls to get away from a herdmate. Even bulls that respect a person may unintentionally injure you if you get in the way because they are focused only on their adversary.

Use cattle psychology when handling bulls and carry a weapon. A rigid stock stick is better than a whip. You