

# What I look for and why when I assess cattle

I would like to give you now an idea of what I look for in an animal starting from the ground up.

**Feet:** Well shaped hooves, that are ideally straight in between the claws- i.e. no pinch and that have a good depth of heel to promote natural wear in the toe. In saying that, I don't like them with no space as they may become prone to footrot or other fungal issues in damp climates due to the lack of air in the hoof/ between the claws.

**Legs:** I look for a round boned animal with the correct angles in the joints, probably more noticeable in the hind quarter. They need to have strength through the pasterns and fetlocks while having an ideal angle through the hocks, thurls and up to the hips. Too straight, and there is jarring pressure on each joint while moving around, while too much angle, there tends to be stretching and weakness on the ligaments and joints. In the front end, the forearm is a good indicator of how much meat an animal is carrying, as there is very little fat in this area.

**Head and neck:** Firstly, a bull must look like a bull and have some width between the eyes and across the forehead and some "hooding" over the eyes, a female should be feminine. Both sexes should be alert and not have ears that droop.

All cattle need a good broad muzzle is an indicator of width that can flow through the body. An animal must have clean bite (i.e. not under or overshot in the jaw), as they can consume grass and fodder more effectively which contribute to the ability to convert energy into growth, beef and reproduction ability.

While the neck should have a reasonable length and blend back into the shoulder. A short neck tends to lead into "block" shoulders which are generally heavier than genetically could lead to calving issues.

A quick look at the brisket as well as over the ribs will give you an idea of how much condition an animal has, as these are areas that will deposit fat.

**Shoulders:** I find this quite an important part of the animal, especially the bulls. Once again as with the back legs, too straight and we see jarring through their

movement and when they come down off their cows at serving. Something else I look at is the height of the chine (the area over the shoulder blades where the spine passes in between).

If the shoulders are too high in comparison to the spine there is not much room for compression when the bull hits the ground after serving. The chine also needs to be open, as this sets the width for the eye muscle area to develop and travel along the spine.

**Ribs and body:** While looking from the front, we need to see some width in the chest. This is where the workings (heart, lungs etc.) of the animals live. When I look to see how the shoulder comes back into the body, I want to see the start of a “wedge”, narrow at the front that widens as the body goes back into the hind quarters.

While we need some capacity to the chest, the shoulders should be laid-in. Genetically the parents can pass on smooth shouldered calves to their progeny and this assists in the calves being born easier and not getting the calves shoulders hooked up in the cow’s pelvis at calving.

When we look behind the shoulder the ribs should “spring” behind the shoulders and the spine. “Spring of rib” from the spine allows a “shelf” for the eye muscle to sit. The best cuts of the animal come from the top third, so the deeper the top third equals more of the good meat.

The rib cage should also be open allowing room for the stomachs to ruminate and digest fodder and covert into energy and grow a calf in the case of our females.

I like to see good depth though the ribs that follows along to the flank, creating a visual of a “box of meat on legs”.

**Loins:** I like to see again, a good deep “shelf” in this area this is where your tenderloin/ porterhouse/ t bone steaks come from and you like to see this cut round and juicy, not flat and boring. Likewise, animals that are high in the hips detract from the strength through this area.

**Rump:** When I assess this area, I look at the butt shape and depth of the animal’s twist. Also looking at the pins either side of the tail. On breeding stock, I don’t like to see fatty deposits. These will be any size from a small golf ball to large softball size and even larger. This impacts the reproductive organs,

leaving fatty deposits around the uterus and ovaries in females and around the testicles in bulls which can lead to fertility problem

I am also very interested in the width through the hips, thurls and the pins and the angles and heights between each of these.

Over my years of being an A.I. technician, I pretty much can tell where a cow's reproductive organs are going to sit and the complications that come along with this if, it is not right. If the pins are too high, the angle of the anus and vulva is jeopardised and there is a risk of manure falling into the vulva and causing infection in the uterus. The hip, pins and thurls are also the birth passage for the calf. The tighter this area, the more problems potentially could arise during calving.

**Testicles and Udders:** Both these organs should not be "hairy" and are directly related. I take notice of the way scrotum hang as it is an indicator on the strength of the suspensory ligaments of the udders in the female. When a scrotum swings forward, the female equivalent problem is an udder that droops in the back quarters.

Testicles that are small tend to be reproductively immature and the female's version of this problem is that the ovaries are often underdeveloped and inconsistent in follicle release. A mature bull's testicles should be "2 stubbies around (38-42 cm circumference). The epididymis should be clearly visible at the bottom of the testicles

When assessing the sheath and pizzle, I want to see a sheath that is close to the underbelly of the bull. A sheath that is too "loose" could see the bull prone to injury whilst serving and coming off a cow as there is a lack of support and a lot of movement. In saying that, there does need to be a little movement. If the bull is too "tight" in the sheath and a cow moves while the bull is serving, he lacks the ability to move with the cow and could have an injury because of been too ridged.

The penis should not droop from the pizzle, keeping it clean from environmental contamination, thus reducing the risk of infections. When the penis is extended from the bull through ejaculation, it should be straight and smooth, free of any lesions and warts. (N.B. This is something that isn't normally seen in a show ring).

A cow's udder should have four even quarters with teats that hang straight down and should be about the width of an adult's thumb. "Bottle teats" cause issues to a young calf while trying to attach as they are too big for the calf's mouth. This can lead to the calf not suckling properly and not taking in the food/ energy to grow and develop properly, the flow on effect for the cow is that that quarter may stop producing milk or worse still develop mastitis or other infections and losing the quarter completely.

**Temperament:** Lets face it, who wants to be chased out of the yard by a 500 kg beast- male or female. Problems with aggressive and nervous temperament is that meat animals will kill out dark as they have a high pH level which directly influences the colour, appeal and tenderness of the meat. These traits are also inherited, maybe not in the first generation, but can pop up in later generations long after the original problem animal is long gone.

**Type:** I like to see an animal that has a moderate maturity pattern. This make the animal a little more diverse and has the ability to breed a change of type if necessary. Usually these animals are saleable if time fall hard and don't fall away as quickly as a later maturing/ harder doing cattle, or don't carry too much excess if there is a flush of grass as earlier maturing/ easier doing cattle.

In all, this is only my educated opinion, at the end of the day, you must like what you see when you look out the kitchen window or work with your stock in the yards and around your farm.

Fiona Glover

Wattlewood Angus