

GULF COAST

September 2021 ★ Voice of the Southern Livestock Industry

Cattlemen

Seeking the Advantage

Deciding to buy or raise replacements is a major decision



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Choose Wisely

Reproductive Tract Scores and other tools help improve selection decisions

by Becky Mills

Not to put any pressure on you, but choosing the right replacement heifers is a big deal. University of Florida animal scientist Mario Binelli says the late bloomers, those that are slow to reach puberty and conceive, cost around \$198 a head in the short term. That doesn't take into account the ones that bring a 100 lb. lighter calf to the corral at weaning.

To up your odds, and keep the \$198 in the bank, Binelli recommends getting Reproductive Tract Scores (RTS) on your yearling heifers. He says, "An RTS is a powerful and accurate indicator of the reproductive potential of individual

heifers."

If you haven't seen it done, a reproductive physiologist or veterinarian does a rectal palpation so he or she can feel the heifer's uterus and ovaries. Then he gives her a 1 to 5 score. A heifer with a 1 score has an immature reproductive tract while a 5 is cycling or about to cycle.

"If it is close to breeding season, it is critical she is a 4 or 5," says Binelli. "That means she has attained puberty and is pretty much ready to breed." He adds, "The probability of her getting pregnant and staying pregnant is high."

While RTS were developed 20

years ago, Binelli has done his own research in Florida the last three years and says, "The heifers with low RTS had a much lower preg rate at the end of the breeding season."

Rather than an RTS, commercial Beefmaster breeder Ernie Ford starts his selection process with pelvic measurements. "We pretty much save all the heifers at weaning, then do pelvic measurements when they are a year old. I can eliminate anything that doesn't have the minimum score. Then I don't have to worry about size and I can concentrate on other things like conformation and udder quality."

The Edison, Ga., cattleman started this practice in the '90s. "I was having to assist 10 percent of my heifers at calving and I thought that was too much. Now I only have to help around 2 percent."

To take a pelvic measurement, the person doing the palpating goes in rectally with a set of calipers and measures the width and height of the pelvic opening. Multiply the height times the width, for example, 15 cm times 12 cm for an opening of 180 cm. Then look on the chart and divide by the number that matches your heifer's weight. If she's around 600 lbs. at 12 or 13 months, that would be 180 cm divided by 2.1, or 87 lbs. That means the heifer should be able to deliver an 87 lb. calf on her own.

For his 600 lb. heifers, Ford puts the minimum at 147 cm, which means they should be able to have a 70 lb. calf on their own. "That's what works for me," he says.

It also means he cuts down on his potential replacement heifers. He starts with 120 to 140 heifers and usually only has 60 percent left after taking out the ones that don't meet his minimum requirements for pelvic diameter. The last couple of years, though, he's turned the remaining 40 percent into an added value product. He says usually it is the

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younger, lighter heifers that have the smaller pelvic measurements and after 90 days of growing and being turned out with a bull, around 90 percent of them become pregnant. Then he sells them as bred heifers. Based on customer feedback, they have calved without problem. However, Ford says that pelvic measurements don't necessarily correlate to the overall size of the heifers. "Sometimes you'll have a pretty nice calf that doesn't measure up."

He also emphasizes he is not selecting for heifers with the largest pelvic measurement, or the largest heifers overall. He tries to stick to moderate-sized females and will cull one if he feels she is too big. He adds, "The little dinks eliminate themselves. We also cull on standard structure, we want a good udder and capacity, as well as disposition."

When Okeechobee, Fla., cattleman Matt Pearce is selecting replacement heifers in his own commercial herd, he starts early, often while they are still nursing their dams. "In South Florida, we lean toward the Brahman influence, whether it comes from the Brangus, Beefmaster, or maternal side. We want 3/8 or better in our herd."

"We want some navel and leather. Structure plays a big part, they have to be good on their feet and legs, and we want capacity. They are going to be in water and out foraging."

He adds, "We try to keep that ear for longevity. People who line breed lose bone, capacity and longevity. There is such a high cost to developing heifers, we want an extra three or four years out of them."

Pearce officially makes the first cut when they go through the chute at marking and branding when he'll sort off pairs that have a heifer destined for replacement duties. At weaning, he'll sort again. "We'll sort out the pairs we're going to ship but don't handle the ones we're going to keep until after we ship the others."

He also tries to select heifers that were born in the first part of the calving season. "They may not be the biggest or heaviest, but oldest. It is a challenge with *Bos indicus* cattle to get them cycling at a certain age, not weight."

He has A.I. bred his heifers for seven years and says their conception rate with A.I. is in the mid-30's. "We're not real happy, our goal is 50 percent and we know it isn't nutritional." Still, he's seen a positive impact. By

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Table 1. The use of reproductive tract scoring in beef heifers.
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Reproductive Tract Score	Uterine Horns (diameter)	Length of Ovaries (mm)	Height of Ovaries (mm)	Width of Ovaries (mm)	Ovarian Structures
1	Immature < 20 mm	15	10	8	No palpable follicles, no tone
2	20–25 mm	18	12	10	8 mm follicle, no tone
3	25–30 mm	22	15	10	8–10 mm follicle, slight tone
4	30 mm	30	16	12	>10 mm follicle, good tone, corpus luteum possible
5	>30 mm	>32	20	15	>10 mm follicle, good tone, corpus luteum present

Source: Anderson et al., 1991.

Table 2. Conversion Factors for Various Heifer Weights and Ages to Calculate an Estimated Deliverable Calf Birth Weight

Heifer Weight	Heifer Age at Time of Measurement 8–9 months	Heifer Age at Time of Measurement 12–13 months	Heifer Age at Time of Measurement 18–19 months	Heifer Age at Time of Measurement 22–23 months
500 pounds	1.7	2	-	-
600 pounds	1.8	2.1	-	-
700 pounds	1.9	2.2	2.6	-
800 pounds	-	2.3	2.7	3.1
900 pounds	-	2.4	2.8	3.2
1,000 pounds	-	2.5	2.9	3.3
1,100 pounds	-	-	-	3.4

Source: Anderson et al., 1991.

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CHOOSE WISELY

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choosing the older heifers, he has tightened up his breeding season from 120 days to 90. “We have more calves born in the first 30 days of the season,” he notes.

Pearce also says he is getting conception rates of 90 percent or better in the 90-day season. “As long as I can hit that target, I consider it a success.” ➤

Know Your Heifer

In the three years University of Florida animal scientist Mario Binelli has been in the state, he has seen the challenges ranchers face developing their replacement heifers, particularly those that are *Bos indicus*-influenced, and getting them bred. The result is an Extension program to help ranchers make cost-effective management decisions based on the evaluation of their heifers.

In the program, Know Your Heifer, Binelli goes to the ranch 30 days before the start of breeding season and records the age, breed composition, weight, (if a scale is available), body condition score and reproductive tract score of enrolled heifers. Ninety days after breeding season begins, the heifers are pregnancy tested and the heifers that got pregnant in the first 60 days are identified.

The rancher also finds out how his heifers compare to others in the state in an anonymous comparison.

There is a per-heifer cost depending on travel expenses and a per-animal fee.

This past year, the first year of the program, Binelli worked with 25 operations ranging from two heifers to 300. “The two heifers were in a middle school teaching herd,” he explains. “It was fun.”

While the Know Your Heifer program is currently limited to ranches in Florida, there is the possibility it will expand to adjoining areas.

For more information, see <https://animal.ifas.ufl.edu/extension/beef/KYH> or contact your local county Extension agent. ➤

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