

# Steering away from bulls

By JULIE KNIGHT, WANAMARA LOWLINES

**T**HE question of whether to castrate a bull is one asked often by Lowline breeders when they find a cute bull calf in the paddock.

But in many cases the answer comes from sentiment rather than practicality.

On Wanamara Farm where we have 50-plus calves per year, I will usually only keep one or two bulls out of that drop of calves. Steers are a reliable product that will add a valuable income for the farm, whether it be from selling weaner steers, finished steers or lawn mowers (pets) to people on a few acres.

Steers don't have to be kept as long as bulls before they can be sold (therefore don't cost as much to feed) and can be sold when weaned, or as finished steers (14 to 16 months old). Unlike bulls, your steers can be run with unjoined cows and heifers without the risk of pregnancy. You also don't have the problem of them getting bored, fighting or trying to find female company in neighbouring paddocks.

The fact that a bull calf may have been sired by a "champion" bull or the dam is a "champion" cow, is no reason for the calf to be kept as a bull. Not all bulls are going to be champions.

You need to be very discerning about the qualities you want in a bull and only keep the very best. The product of good genetics will always make the best steers and will probably



Michael Noel of Serena Downs Lowlines, Windsor Downs, NSW, sashes the grand champion Lowline female, Wanamara Tilly Devine, exhibited by Julie Knight, Wanamara Lowlines, Major Plains, Vic.

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Julie Knight looks over one of her Lowline carcasses in the chillers at Hardwicks Abattoir at Kyneton, Victoria.

produce the best meat for your market or even for your family and friends.

If you are interested in finding out the real eating qualities of the steers you are producing, carcass competitions are a great source for this information where the data provided by the competition will help prove the quality of what you are breeding. This data can also be used in the promotion of your stud.

The choice of castration method for your bull calves may depend on whether you want to do it yourself or get someone else to do it for you. Options may be:

- A cattle vet will castrate your bulls, but at a price.
- If you have a reliable local stock agent you use for selling cattle, they may come out and castrate your bulls for you as part of their business.
- Contact an experienced cattleman in your area and ask them to do it for you.
- Do it yourself using castration equipment that can be purchased online through cattle equipment web sites. There are different types of 'banders' available – talk to other Lowline breeders for preferences.
- Borrow or hire a bander from another Lowline breeder. This is a relatively common practice and they will advise you on how the process works.

Castration of bull calves can be done using a

lamb castrating ring at one to two months of age but after this it is suggested that castration equipment for cattle be used as they have larger rings for the larger testicles (which our Lowlines seem to have). If done about four to five months old, the calf has had the benefit of natural testosterone for growth before being castrated, and this will make a better steer.

Castration should be done in cooler weather so flies don't cause irritation and encourage infection. Calves must be vaccinated with a 5-in-1 or 7-in-1 vaccination before and at the time of castration to help safeguard against infection.

If you only have one or two steers per year, they may feed your family, and with the price of meat through the butchers, that is a big saving for the year.

Other markets for steers include:

- People wanting 'easy to manage cattle' for their small farm, who don't want the problem of cows that come into season, but want the grass kept down.
- Sell as pets (but make sure there are two for company).
- Sell as weaner calves from the farm gate to others.
- Find a butcher who will cut/pack meat to sell to family/friends/clients.
- Sell finished steers to others and do an on-farm kill (perhaps invite purchasers to come to the farm and help pack the meat or have a BBQ).
- Find an outlet/butcher to buy steers direct from the farm.
- Form a group with other Lowline breeders in your area. Work together and develop a market for your steers. This way you should be able to provide a continuous supply of steers for your market, which is what is needed if supplying a food chain.

There are various ways you can market your steers – meat means money. You are only limited by your imagination.