

By Heather Skyler

# Bull Business

An inside peek at ABS Global's multi-million dollar cow sperm bank

Picston Shottle is the superstar bull for ABS Global. A unit of his semen, roughly the size of a cocktail straw, sells for \$125. At the other end of the spectrum is a young sire named Risky Red. A unit of his semen is a comparative \$8 bargain.

The process of gathering this semen is called "collection," and it's a process ABS Global Inc., headquartered in DeForest, has down to a fairly exact science.

ABS Global was founded in Illinois in 1941 and was originally named the American Guernsey Association. The name later changed to American Breeders Association, but – because the company is now owned by Genus PLC in the UK and operates globally, with facilities in Canada, the UK, Brazil and Australia – the name is now simply ABS Global.

The DeForest headquarters is set on over 70 rolling green acres punctuated by a low-slung, 60's-style office building and several barns. The company purchases 300-plus young cattle a year at prices around \$5,000 a piece. These cattle then are raised in groups. They begin breeding at age two and "graduate" at age four and a half.

Whether they graduate to the air-conditioned collection barn called the Holstein Hilton, or become hamburger meat, is determined by the quality of their calves – in particular, the quality of their daughters. If their daughters are high-caliber, these bulls move to the collection barn, where their semen will be gathered and sold, earning the company between \$1 and \$8 million per bull annually.

Sadly for them, only one in ten of these young bulls will make the cut and graduate to collection.

## THE COLLECTION PROCESS

On a warm, windy morning in May, the collection process at the ABS Heritage Hall Barn is wrapping up for the day. Three bulls stand in opposite corners of an enclosed pen about the size of a typical living room. Beside each bull is a steer who acts as a "teaser" – also called a "jumper" or a "mount" – used to entice the bull into providing his three ejaculates of semen, each collected at 15-minute intervals.

A waist-high metal bar, called the "safety," runs around the pen, and each bull has a man standing behind this bar,

holding both him and the teaser by a rope looped through a metal ring in each animal's nose. This keeps each bull's head in check, since the head is the most dangerous part of animal.

"They'll headbutt you and toss you in the air, then crush you if you're not careful," said livestock manager, **Ray Karls**. "It's rare that a bull will kick you. He almost always uses his head."

Two other men move behind the 2,500-pound bulls, encouraging them to mount the teaser so they can collect the semen in a plastic tube-like contraption, called an artificial vagina. The fluid moves through the artificial device down into an attached test tube.

The livestock worker then takes something akin to a pricing gun out of his back pocket and clocks the dose's date and time by holding the gun to a tag on the bull's ear. Soon after, the test tube is sent underground via a pneumatic tube (similar to the kind found at a bank drive-through) to the lab.

Despite the workers' ease with the animals, the men's careful movements and steel-toed boots are a reminder of the





Livestock employees at ABS Global during the collection process.



industry's dangers.

"We've had the occasional broken finger here, but it's rare because we invest huge amounts in safety training," said **Roger Breunig**, global facilities manager. "There have been some deaths in the industry at competitors."

In spite of these dangers, these prize bulls are coddled like Olympic athletes. Their particular personalities and needs are well-known and nourished.

### BULL PERSONALITIES?

Some of the bulls need blinders on and a dimly-lit barn during collection. There's a red angus who likes a crowd of other bulls around him during the process to cheer him on. A lot of bulls like to get worked by a specific teaser or employee and some will only collect outside, on dirt or grass.

Karls, the livestock manager, said one bull had to be walked in a counterclockwise circle for half an hour, then clockwise for half an hour before the collection process began.

A bull named Russ likes to have his teaser stand in a shallow hole outside.

"And of course he loves the tallest

mount we have," laughed Karls.

These preferences are learned by trial and error, but the persistence pays off. The DeForest branch of ABS generates eight million doses of semen a year from the more than 100 bulls that call the branch home.

### BLUE COLLAR VS. HOLLYWOOD

Not all bulls are created alike.

Dundee is a Holstein, a huge black and white bull born in Iowa.

"He's sort of a pretty boy," said Breunig. "His daughters will go to the World Dairy Expo and win first place."

Boliver is also a Holstein, but Breunig said his daughters will likely live on a Wisconsin or California dairy farm. "He's blue collar and Dundee is white collar," explained Breunig.

"He's not just white collar," laughed Karls. "He's Hollywood."

Breunig agreed, adding, "His daughters are awesome."

What does being awesome mean if you're a cow? "It's based on how they look, how they're built, their fat yield, milk yield and overall health," explained Breunig.

Beside these two bulls was another one, a bull from Brazil called a Braham, black with a hump on his back like a camel. His name is Karu Boy. "That bull," said Breunig pointing, "That's a zoo animal."

### THE BEST BULL

ABS's most prized bull, the aforementioned Picston Shottle, lives at the company's branch in the UK. He's a low producer of semen that's in high demand, based on the excellent quality of his daughters and his parents.

"Plus he has an English accent," joked Breunig, "which is why the women love him."

Picston Shottle is the type of bull that can gross the company \$5 to \$8 million a year. A bull like Shottle is worth \$10 million to \$12 million, but will never be put up for sale. His semen is too valuable.

Do the workers form attachments to these star bulls? "I'd say people sometimes fall in love with the bulls. I've seen grown men very sad when a bull dies. But it's a one-way street," said Breunig. "Bulls are man killers, really. They are all impulse and reaction."