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Blake Hortenstine was the first to score in 2010, taking this big non-typical with his bow in October. The 17-pointer scored 176 4/8, sure to place high in Pope and Young records! • Photo courtesy of the Hortenstines.

TWO BROTHERS, TWO RECORD BUCKS

AFTER HUNTING THE SAME TEXAS RANCH FOR 25 YEARS, THE HORTENSTINE BROTHERS KILLED THEIR BEST BUCKS EVER DURING THE 2010 SEASON — ONE OF THEM A BOONE AND CROCKETT WHITETAIL! HERE'S HOW THEY DID IT.

BY BRANDON RAY

jackpot with this extremely
"clean" 10-pointer netting
171 6/8 B&C points! • Photo
courtesy of the Hortenstines.



The 2010 fall deer season was a good one for the Hortenstine family. After 25 years of hunting the same leased ranch in North Texas, brothers Lee and Blake Hortenstine put tags on personal-best bucks. The first a narrow, tall-tined 17-point stud taken with archery tackle in October. The second a near-perfect typical 10-point with a rifle in November.

Taking just one enormous buck during a single season would have been quite an accomplishment for any Texas hunting family. So how did these two brothers succeed in taking *two* such magnificent bucks? Here's their story.

THE TRADITION BEGINS

All traditions have a beginning. This one took root in 1985. Recognizing that his two boys had a love for the outdoors, Raleigh Hortenstine joined the family on a deer lease west of Fort

Worth. The rolling landscape was dotted with mesquites, cactus, small ponds and a creek that cut through the ranch. Game such as whitetails, hogs, turkeys and quail were abundant. While Dad focused on the bird hunting, the two teenage boys thought mostly of deer.

That first year, Lee bagged a mature 7-point buck sporting a 21-inch spread. It was a couple of years later before younger brother Blake bagged a 145-inch 8-point with double drop tines, and he did it at 15 yards with a 12-gauge pump! Blake happened on two bucks in a brawl while he was duck hunting, crawled close with his shotgun, chambered a slug, and bagged the buck when the two fighters pulled apart.

Before long, both brothers were actively involved in erecting tower blinds, building bow blinds, filling feeders, and working around camp. Approximately 15 members shared

in the 14,000-acre leased property. Many members came and went, but the Hortenstine boys stayed through good years and lean, wet years and dry. They fell in love with the rugged landscape in that part of Texas.

Lee has had the best luck at killing big bucks over the years. He's tagged several fine bucks off the ranch that score in the 150s and one in the 160s.

Due to all the hours he puts in with his wildlife management business, younger brother Blake has spent fewer hunting days in the field than Lee. When time allows, Blake hunts mostly with archery tackle, always passing middle-aged bucks with potential, wanting them to grow older and grow their best racks. Blake's best buck before last year was a 150-class 10-point.

Through those early years, there was no doubt the deer bug bit hard. Both brothers came to know that for them, deer

hunting would be a lifelong passion.

BLAKE HORTENSTINE'S OCTOBER GIANT

Today, 38-year-old Blake Hortenstine stays busy with a ranch real estate business. He brokers ranches and offers wildlife management services to hunters and ranchers. He also oversees the wildlife management of the 14,000-acre leased ranch he's hunted for the past 25 years. He's responsible for maintaining 21 corn feeders, 18 quail feeders, 10 protein feeders, planting food plots, and setting harvest objectives. Part of that ongoing management plan is a yearly survey done in September or October to inventory bucks and does.

It was on that yearly survey, in early October 2010, that Blake spotted a tall-tined buck with a narrow spread. The buck was with another good buck. When first spotted, both bucks were along the north boundary fence, but soon they jumped onto a neighboring ranch. Blake recognized the tall-tined buck as the best he'd seen so far in the annual survey.

A short time later, hunting from a ground blind near a corn feeder in that same general area, Blake waited with his bow. It was a calm, cold morning. Several bucks and does approached the feed. Then Blake spied the same tall-tined buck he'd seen on the survey approaching from his right side. Blake studied the buck through binoculars for 10 minutes from within bow range, not wanting to shoot a buck that was too young. He estimated the deer's age at 5 1/2 or 6 1/2; old enough! He prepared to shoot.

The combination of a very calm morning, a bow with a draw weight too heavy, and tight quarters in a wooden box blind, did not ring of success. Blake tried to draw his bow, bumped his elbow on the back of the blind, spooking a doe, and then the big buck was gone.

Blake is not the sort of hunter to ignore details. Over the next two weeks he monitored the wind direction and weather forecast every day from his office in Dallas. He also cranked down the poundage on his Mathews bow and practiced with it often. He needed a north wind to hunt that same blind again. It would be two weeks before the wind would switch back to the north.

On Oct. 27, Blake parked his truck



Blake Hortenstine took this buck with his bow several years ago on the same lease. • Photo courtesy of the Hortenstines.

a mile from his blind and hiked into the wind for an afternoon hunt. That blind sits in relatively open country. Blake saw one buck feeding in the distance, then quietly climbed inside the tight quarters of the wooden box blind, knocked an arrow, and waited.

Half a dozen deer, including some small bucks, approached the feed late in the day. Suddenly, all the deer cranked their heads and looked to the north. Here came the same tall-tined stud from two weeks earlier!

Blake readied himself for the shot, this time armed with a bow of less draw weight, but the big buck just walked past the blind. The minutes dragged on, most of the other deer left, and Blake thought the evening hunt was over. Then, at 7:05, the tall-racked buck stepped out again, all alone. He was at 20 yards, his head down behind tall broom weeds.

Blake drew his 58-pound bow, steadied the top sight pin and punched a 3-bladed broadhead through the buck's chest. The buck ran 80 yards with its tail down, then slowed to a walk and disappeared behind tall brush in the dim light. Always one to be patient, Blake waited an hour, until it was pitch dark, then tiptoed back to his truck for a light. He found the giant buck stone dead right where he'd last seen him, hit through both lungs with a perfectly placed arrow.

Blake's buck is a jaw-dropper if you like tine length. And the rest of the rack

isn't bad either! The typical 11-pointer has G-2s that measure 13 inches, with tines that almost touch. It has kickers off both G-2s and several extra points around the bases. The rack carries 17 scoreable points in all.

Counting all the non-typical points, the rack measures 178 7/8 inches of antler, with an inside spread of less than 15 inches. The buck's rack nets 176 4/8 non-typical according to the Texas Big Game Awards score sheet. Field-dressed weight was 130 pounds on the 5 1/2-year-old buck.

It was not even November yet, and one of the Hortenstine boys already had an exceptionally large buck headed to the taxidermist!

LEE HORTENSTINE'S NOVEMBER BOONER

Lee Hortenstine, 40, has killed some really fine bucks off his North Texas lease over the past 25 years. I was there in 1997 when he bow-killed a 160-class buck in October. That buck was a gorgeous 10-point with matching kickers off the G-2s. I rattled in a chocolate-horned, typical 12-pointer for him in 2005. Lee busted that 151-inch buck at 80 yards with a borrowed .300 WSM rifle on a cold November morning. Lee has killed so many deer like that over the years that these days he either looks for a management buck for his young son Hunter to shoot, or holds out for something extraordinary

Continued on page 52...

A

13

29

BROTHERS... Continued

for himself. Eight-year-old Hunter Hortenstine already has bagged two fine management bucks from the lease. He seems ready to carry on the family hunting tradition for the next generation on the lease.

Considering the above-average moisture in 2010, Lee was optimistic that he'd see a really good buck. So he was determined to wait, all season if needed, before pulling the trigger. Like he does most years, Lee worked hard at his ranching and ranch real estate business so that he could take time off

in sweet November. Once November arrived, Lee was at the lease often.

In early November, Lee sat in blinds over feeders, taking inventory of what sort of bucks were hitting the corn. He saw several 140-class bucks, one closer to 150 inches, but nothing exceptional. He decided to abandon the traditional tower blinds over corn. Instead he would hunt the less-traveled, open spaces of the ranch, the type of places that few hunters ever go to because they look more like ante-lope country than deer habitat. Lee has

had good luck with that tactic in the past, finding bucks on the move looking for does in big country.

The morning of Nov. 13 was cold and foggy as Lee drove to the east section of the ranch. His plan was to sit on a hilltop and glass, try to find a good buck, and then close the distance for a shot.

Because it was so foggy and visibility was zilch, Lee sat in his truck until almost 8, waiting for the fog to lift. Then, not 60 yards behind his truck, he saw a doe. She saw the truck, but wasn't overly spooked. Because it was November, a single doe is rarely alone, so Lee scanned the surrounding brush through the soupy fog for more deer. He could see the outline of another deer in a patch of brush just beyond the doe, but could not tell what it was. Lee quietly slipped out of the truck.

Minutes ticked by and the doe got nervous. Then, the second deer stepped clear of the brush. Lee saw only one side of the buck's rack, but saw enough to know it was one of the tallest racks he'd ever seen.

Lee made a short stalk to set up for the shot. He got a steady rest, lined up the buck's shoulder in the crosshairs, and then touched off the 105-yard shot. The buck dropped immediately from Lee's custom .300 Ultra Mag. When Lee got to the downed deer, he was shocked at the tine length, but still guessed conservatively that the buck's rack was in the 160s.

Here it was still early in November, in a year when Lee vowed to be patient and wait for a really big buck all season if need be, and he was already



Hunter Hortenstine, 8, was hunting with his dad, Lee, when he bagged this mature management buck last season. It was Hunter's second big buck from the lease. • Photo courtesy of the Hortenstines.

SMILE FOR THE CAMERA.

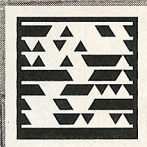
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done. He wondered, had he pulled the trigger too soon?

Lee went for help from one of the other lease members to load the big-bodied buck in the bed of the truck. Back at camp, the buck's worn teeth gave an estimated age of 6 1/2 years old, maybe older. The buck field-dressed 146 pounds.

Several lease members gathered and a conservative tale of the tape showed the following numbers: The symmetrical 10-point rack grossed 177 2/8 and netted 172 4/8. There are no abnormal points, just a perfect 10-point frame. The deer's longest tine is a G-2 that measures 14 inches.

Lee had the buck scored for Boone and Crockett, with the official numbers coming in at 175 4/8 gross and 171 6/8 net, easily making B&C's all-time records.

LESSONS LEARNED?

So what are the lessons to be learned from the Hortenstine brothers' incredible big buck double from last season? Here are a few thoughts.

If you hunt a well-managed ranch with good genetics, and pass up young bucks in hopes of letting them

reach their full potential, eventually it will pay off. Maybe not with a Booner buck, but with a mature buck. Eventually all the management and letting the up-and-comers walk will pay dividends. It takes time, and discipline, to let those bucks reach 5, 6 and 7 1/2 years of age, but that's when their antlers are at their best. That's what it takes to grow a giant.

Hunt prime hunt dates in the pre-rut and peak rut as Lee and Blake did for 20-plus years. Late October through mid to late November is prime time in North Texas, something they've learned after two decades on the ranch. There's no substitute for "doing time" in a blind on prime dates.

And when the buck of your dreams steps out, be patient and make the shot count, just like you've practiced a hundred times at the range in the summer.

You do practice, right?

Playing the wind is very important, especially for bowhunting. Blake Hortenstine exercised extreme patience before taking his best-ever buck. After spooking the big buck on a calm day in mid-October, he waited two weeks for the wind to blow from the north so that

he could hunt that same stand. How many hunters would do that?

One last thing: the Hortenstine's North Texas deer lease is flown every September or October with a helicopter to conduct surveys and set harvest recommendations on bucks and does. Lee's big buck was never seen from a helicopter. And, despite trail cameras at many locations on the ranch, the buck's picture was never caught on a camera.

That's proof that even when you think you know every deer on your hunting grounds, there's always something out there you don't see. And sometimes it's a Boone and Crockett buck! □



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