

“The 4 Point Test”...tracking an industry antler trend

The Good Lord wired me to appreciate patterns. In a tracking situation this has me searching for both consistency and irregularity. The consistent spacing or look of a track, unique from those around it, helps me distinguish the animal I'm after from the many others roaming the woods. In the same way, a break in the regular pattern can give the clues needed to avoid getting thrown off the track. Specks of blood on an otherwise pristine snowy background, or broken twigs where there shouldn't be are some inconsistencies I notice. Anything that breaks the otherwise mosaic pattern of the forest is a nudge towards what I just assume is a desirable destination. However, even within these inconsistencies, there must be a pattern in order to be noteworthy.

It was such patterns that nudged me towards a new destination in desirable antler traits in the deer farming world. They drew a conclusion that I was at first skeptical of, but then I set out to observe if a pattern would emerge. In order to be considered anything other than a passing thought, both the consistencies as well as the inconsistencies had to form a pattern. And so, by observing a myriad of advertisements, feature bucks, auction hype, and producer conversations, I noticed that there was indeed a pattern that few, if anyone, had yet to fully put their finger on. I methodically narrowed my list down into a sort of point form test and then presented my findings to Dad. I handed him an industry catalogue and challenged him to test it out on any buck in there. Many pages later, I wasn't the only one seeing the emerging pattern.

There is a shift in what is deemed the “most desirable” look for a whitetail. That point in and of itself shouldn't surprise anyone. We have seen countless preferences rise and fall; in fact, it would be more shocking if our industry wasn't on the cusp of change. That can either be scary or exciting. I choose to look at it as the latter because the “new” look of the whitetail is a beautiful thing. Now I already know there will be some who accuse me of having a “typical looking” whitetail bias, but this is all based on an overwhelmingly consistent observation of MANY others and opinions other than my own!

I would like to emphatically clarify that bucks not following “The 4 Point Test” are far from being worthless animals. There will always be a demand for a variety of antler types because there will always be a variety of hunter preferences. The factor to consider is the end value of the animal. Those that pass the test are likely the ones that will be more consistently bred with and have semen straws sold. Also, because of their present rarity in this

industry and their increasing demand in the eyes of the high-paying hunter, I'm convinced that they will maintain a strong hunt value or simply make it easier for producers to sell their stock.

#1. Clean beam between base and brow... The days of stacking 250” into base stickers is over. A clean, distinguishable main beam between the burr and the base of the brow tine has become the standard. This helps emphasize the fact that the animal has two separate antlers growing out of its head instead of the “tumour heads that look like the skull cap just exploded” (terminology common among hunters & industry critics).

#2. Clean single brows... Now this point could be adjusted to clean single bases of brows; if it has a split part way up, most still seem impressed with such a look. However, it's really no contest when others were given the choice for “cleaner” split brows or “clean” single brows; the single brows won hands down. So, if we are setting our sights high, aiming to achieve the new cutting-edge look, it will be single brows. An interesting point I discovered with this is that it didn't seem to matter if it was a clean typical or a non-typical, nor personal preference between the two, single brows was always a desirable and highly noteworthy trait.

#3. Clean beam between the brows and G2s... This point isn't just restricting abnormal tines in this area. It includes G2s that come off the beam closer to the brow than they normally should. I believe the issue with this is two-fold. The first is that it creates clutter on the rack. I am not saying the animal needs to be typical, but there is something about the head-on view of an animal, regardless of other antler traits. People seem to be both consciously and subconsciously leaning towards a clean look between burr and G2. This encompasses the elimination of base stickers, the clean single brows, and the clear space up to the part of the beam where the G2 typically grows. The second reason people seem to dislike tines between the brow and G2 (even if the tine actually is the G2, just located closer to the brow than normal) is that these tines are normally shorter. I saw one guy online post a picture of a no-name buck he had, a gorgeous 6x6 (or 7x7, I can't quite remember) mainframe that he refused to breed with – all because he had those short tines (in this case the G2) closer to the brows. He said he really liked the overall rack, but disliked the look of those tines so much that he was just going to hunt that buck. And, shockingly, most people in the comment thread were in agreement. There is just something about tines in that area that is a



"The 4 Point Test"...tracking an industry antler trend (Cont.)

turn-off for many deer breeders.

#4. No Drop-tines... This point was the most surprising for me. The previous three points were rather expected, as I have seen the pattern of "cleaning up the look" for a while now. However, as I observed producers and hunters and advertisements, it seemed the most often commented on and biggest attention getters were bucks without drop-tines. While I continued to observe others in this topic, I put it to the test myself, and then again with Dad. Going through an industry catalogue, the deer that stood out the most were bucks without drop-tines. Beyond that, we started testing by covering up drop-tines on the deer that had them, and it improved the overall look of many animals. Vice versa, on the bucks without drops, we imagined them with drops and they lost their striking appeal. This, I believe, also has a two-fold cause, one being physical and the other psychological. The physical reason why drop-tines are "out" is because they make the rest of the tines look shorter. Without drop-tines you are left comparing the tine length to the mass of the beam, but with drops, suddenly you are comparing the tine length to the mass of the beam in addition to the length of the drops. It creates a shorter, squatty first impression. The second, and more psychological reason, I believe, is because of how well our industry has done at supplying a demand. Drops used to be the thing every hunter wanted, and so we made it happen. But we have super-saturated the market with drop-tines and they have lost their unique, "extraordinary" appeal. There will always be a hunter out there who wants to shoot some crazy drop-tine deer, but in order to capitalize on where this new pattern is taking us, we need to humbly admit that a buck with drop-tines is just another buck in an overwhelming ocean of possibilities for a hunter, or even for a producer to breed with. Recently, it is the buck without drops that has consistently and starkly stood out from the crowd.

Feel free to test this pattern for yourself. Find the bucks that pass and the ones that don't. Imagine the bucks that pass with the characteristics of those that don't and see if they are still as appealing. Observe what others prefer. Patterns change, and that can be an unsettling thing. But if we can quickly spot and follow the new pattern, be it following a deer trail or a deer industry, we can have a lot of fun exploring and may just find ourselves in a new destination enjoying the rewards of a brand new adventure.

-Shane Barks



"Tracking the Industry..." – that was the official name of this magazine when it began 22 years ago. Within 2 years it grew from a black & white photocopy to a glossy, press version with at least some full colour pages... and the name was shortened to just "Tracking." After only 1 year under this banner, the magazine name was permanently changed to its present "Deer Tracking." It had grown substantially in pages and subscribers, was sold in a few stores, now included online marketing for advertisers, and there was a need to be more specific and targeted with its name.

Deer Tracking (or "Tracking the Industry..."), while including some industry news, began as a resource for deer farmers. An enormous range of content has included topics such as animal health, disease, treatment, fawn care, bottle-feeding, fencing and other construction projects, handling systems, breeding and AI, nutrition, farm tours, auction results and analysis, antler competitions, sire highlights, pedigree studies, AND SO MUCH MORE (as every front cover content list ends!). We've told producers over the years, tell us what you'd like to learn and we'll dig into it or have an expert do so (we developed quite a network of industry and science experts). Our family deer-farmed years before Deer Tracking began and we, too, benefitted from the sharing of information. We were also school teachers with an extra degree in English and majors in the sciences, so research and writing were enjoyable tasks. Our 3 sons grew up proof-reading and now write and help run the magazine.

Deer Tracking was always intended to be different than other publications. Quality, unique content, and lots of it, have always been higher priority than ads (although, thankfully, advertisers have made 22 years of content possible!). We began as an independent, unbiased resource (including and supporting, but never tied to provincial, state, or national organizations) and continue as such today. We do not reprint articles from other publications or the internet, so about 100 issues and approximately 1000 articles later, Deer Tracking content can ONLY be found in Deer Tracking. That seems to be appreciated as many readers have collected and saved every issue printed and we still sell collections of back issues as available.

As our name suggests, we "track" the industry...including antler trends...and wouldn't you know it, like with most fashion trends, we've basically come full circle. In the early years, we could grow only typicals. We selected for inches and non-typical until we could grow almost nothing else. "Main-frame" began as a renewed focus on the typical traits with 2 camps emerging – "clean typical" producers and those in the process of "cleaning up" non-typical. As "The 4 Point Test" so clearly analyzes, we're now simply cleaning up from the bases upward. Pointing out industry trends isn't always popular, but it is always intended as a market and economics study for the benefit of all deer farmers. And as often the case in a tracking challenge, young energy and fresh perspective keeps us on track. Thank you, Shane & Dale, for making this magazine issue another success!

-Randy Barks (editor)

