

Then & Now

KENTUCKY > WHITETAIL DEER

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A steady rain fell as James Sanders guided the truck onto an old farm road and headed toward a line of high wooded hills. Low clouds and a dark overcast sky gave no indication of a break in the miserable weather. Hardly ideal hunting conditions, but this was not just another routine hunting trip. The date was November 23, 1957, opening day of Kentucky's second-ever deer season.

The beginning of a regulated whitetail hunting season in Kentucky was not an overnight happening. It was the successful culmination of efforts initiated a decade earlier by Kentucky's Division of Game & Fish, which later became the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR). The main thrust of these efforts involved the organization and implementation of a statewide deer restocking program and the intensification of law enforcement, particularly in and around the restocked areas. The first official deer season in 1956 included 27 counties and was three days in length. The 1957 season regulations encompassed the same 27 counties.

Sanders' destination that rainy morning was a McCreary County farm, owned by a good friend who had mentioned sighting deer from time to time. Located in southeastern Kentucky along the Tennessee border, McCreary is situated at the edge of the Cumberland Plateau. The terrain is rugged and predominantly forested, with deep gorges, rock ridges, and towering cliffs. Most of the county lies within the Daniel Boone National Forest.

Sanders was joined by his brother, Scott, who had driven down from Ohio to hunt with him for the weekend. Because of the bad weather, the men decided to spend the day scouting the area and hopefully, pick out a good stand for the following morning.

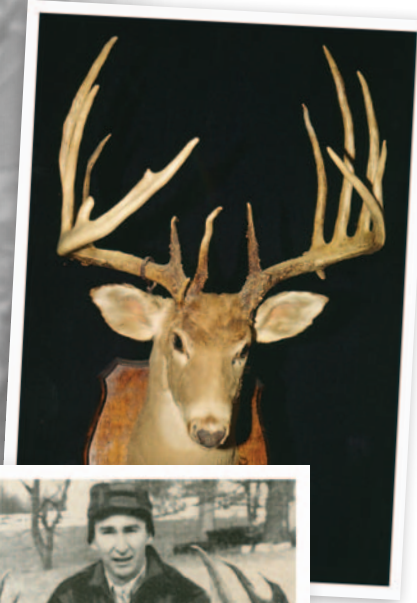
James Sanders, left, and his brother, Scott, with their whitetail bucks taken on opening day of Kentucky's 1957 whitetail deer season.





JOHN ERIKSSON/IMAGES ON THE WILDSIDE

Old trophies from Kentucky continue to surface like W.B. Vincent's 1962 buck shown below, which was entered in 2005. However, C.W. Shelton's extremely wide buck (bottom) was entered soon after he harvested it in 1964.



Then & Now

TEN OLDEST WHITETAIL DEER ENTRIES FROM KENTUCKY Entered in B&C's Records Program

SCORE	LOCATION	HUNTER	OWNER(S)	DATE
223 1/8 NT	McCreary Co., KY	James H. Sanders	James H. Sanders	1957
168 3/8 TP	Lewis Co., KY	Frank B. Smith	Harold Smith	1958
185 3/8 TP	Nelson Co., KY	Joseph R. Wolf	Michael C. Parker	1961
179 7/8 TP	Edmonson Co., KY	W.B. Vincent	W.B. Vincent	1962
174 7/8 TP	Hart Co., KY	Robert Hobbs	Roy J. Hobbs	1962
197 1/8 NT	Edmonson Co., KY	Leroy Wilson	Leroy Wilson	1963
181 2/8 TP	Hardin Co., KY	Thomas L. House	Thomas L. House	1963
187 6/8 TP	Union Co., KY	Charles Meuth	Larry S. Melton	1964
185 2/8 TP	Todd Co., KY	C.W. Shelton	Bass Pro Shops	1964
196 2/8 NT	Henry Co., KY	Picked Up	Michael L. Roberts	1965

After walking about a mile, the rain came down heavier and the brothers crawled under a dense cedar thicket to keep from getting soaked. They briefly considered heading back to the truck, but that thought was quickly dismissed when the rain changed back to a light drizzle. After descending into a deep hollow and crossing a small creek, the hunters began climbing a steep hillside below a high rocky ridge. About halfway up, a flat "bench" extended several yards from the hillside, and the brothers discovered a number of deer tracks scattered along a dim trail.

"At that time, the rain was fairly light and since it was only about 10 o'clock, we decided to hunt a while," Sanders recalled. "After climbing a short distance above the bench, we took stands about 50 yards apart."

Not long after getting settled, the sound of distant shots echoed from the head of the hollow. About 20 minutes later, Sanders heard the sounds of deer on the rocky hillside. Turning toward his brother, he pointed in the direction of the sounds. Scott nodded his head, indicating he had also heard the deer.

Located along the narrow bench, approximately 100 yards from the hunters was a dense thicket of cedars, saplings, and sawbriars that blocked any view of the approaching deer. As the brothers anxiously waited, a doe finally stepped into view and began to slowly move along the bench. Seconds later, a buck with 8 to 10 points emerged from the thicket, following the same path as the doe.

In shooting position, Sanders attempted to track the buck as it walked below him, but trees and limbs kept interfering with his aim. Finally, as the deer entered a small opening, he squeezed the trigger. The shot went low, sending the buck spinning in its tracks. Almost immediately, before the deer had a chance to run, a second shot rang out and the buck dropped. Scott's shot had not missed.

"I was standing there thinking, 'Well there went my deer,'" Sanders recalled. "Then all of a sudden, from the direction of the thicket, a deer snorted loud as a mule. When I turned around, there was a much bigger buck standing there with what looked like a small brushpile on its head."

Remembering what had happened a few minutes earlier, Sanders steadied himself, took careful aim, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened!

The .30-06 rifle Sanders was using had a pump action, and with all the excitement, he had never remembered to pump another round into the chamber.

"Well sir, I pulled and pulled on that trigger until it's a wonder I didn't pull it off,"

Sanders recalled. "Finally, it dawned on me what the problem was and I pumped the rifle."

Unfortunately, the sudden noise of the rifle's action was too much for the buck, as it whirled around and bolted back into the brush. Never hesitating, Sanders quickly ran along the hillside until he could see the backside of the thicket. As the big deer broke into the open, he quickly aimed and fired, and the buck went down.

Walking to where the huge whitetail had fallen, the size of the buck's antlers appeared bigger and more amazing with every step. Neither Sanders nor his brother had ever seen anything like them and they both counted well over 30 points.

It took the men over six hours to carry both bucks the two miles back to their truck and then drive to the checking station—a noteworthy accomplishment considering the largest deer had an official field-dressed weight of 272 pounds.

The Sanders brothers were certainly the talk of the community that fall, not just because of the amazingly big whitetail, but the simple fact that both men had taken deer. Anyone who hunted in those early years can relate to the difficulty of merely sighting a buck in the woods, much less shooting one. Less than 500 bucks were taken during the 1957 season, and while none could match the rack size of Sanders' impressive deer, it would be fair to say that every one of the bucks was a trophy.

The late 1950s and early 1960s was a brief segment of time that few in today's whitetail fraternity could comprehend. While Kentucky hunters welcomed the opportunity to hunt a big game animal in their home state, the reality was that practically no one knew exactly how to go about it. Unlike the traditional small game and waterfowl hunting, there was no previous generation of deer hunters to pass along methods, techniques, or specific areas to hunt. Additionally, the plethora of equipment available to today's hunters, such as portable tree stands, pop-up blinds, calls, scents and attractants, trail cameras, and a variety of camouflage clothing, was nonexistent. In fact, while most small-town hardware stores sold guns and ammunition, very few stocked center-fire rifles.

Not surprisingly, few hunters at that time were familiar with records books, trophy scores, or antler measuring. In the case of Sanders' great buck, 33 years would pass before the antlers were finally measured at a 1990 deer show in Somerset, Kentucky. There, John Phillips, deer project coordinator for KDFWR, now retired, officially determined the rack to have 35 points and a non-typical Boone and Crockett (B&C)



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Then & Now

Beginning in the 1990s, trophy entries from Kentucky tripled from the previous decades and then nearly doubled again as we started the new century.



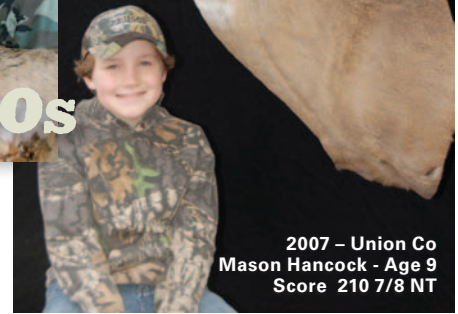
1997 – Christian Co.
Mark C. Morris
Score 173 TP



2003 – Russell Co.
Ricky D. Roy
Score 183 TP



2003 – Hopkins Co.
Matthew E. Jones
Score 177 2/8 TP



2007 – Union Co
Mason Hancock - Age 9
Score 210 7/8 NT

2000s

1990s



1995 – Muhlenberg Co.
Creighton Spurlock
Score 171 7/8 TP

score of 223-1/8 points. Had the antlers been measured after the normal 60-day drying period, the buck would have reigned as the state record non-typical for 23 years.

There is an interesting footnote to the antler measuring in regard to a drop tine on the rack's right antler. This particular tine had prevented the rack from hanging flat against the wall, so Sanders sawed half of it off. Otherwise, the final score would have easily been two to three points higher.

Sanders' buck currently ranks as the state's earliest recorded B&C whitetail; however, old trophy racks still continue to turn up from time to time. Donald Rice, of Lexington, recently entered a double drop-tine buck from the 1970 season with a typical score of 170-3/8 points.

"I always assumed I would kill a bigger deer," Rice said. "But after 41 years, it finally dawned on me that probably wasn't going to happen."

Kentucky's early lag in trophy buck recognition is quite evident in the 7th edition of Boone and Crockett Club's All-time records book, published in 1977, where the recorded entries include only three deer from the Bluegrass State.

ABOVE: Mason's grandfather bought him a .22 rifle the day he was born and he began sitting in deer blinds at the age of 3. He went on to take his first deer at the age of 5. Mason harvested this B&C buck on his family's farm during the special December 2007 youth hunt.

Interestingly, one of those entries, a 25-point non-typical, scoring 208-6/8 points, taken in 1968 by Richard Lohre, came from the same county as Sanders' buck. Lohre received NRA's prestigious Silver Bullet Award in recognition of taking the top whitetail in the nation during the 1968 season.

Kentucky's deer restoration and subsequent herd expansion was a gradual west to east progression across the state, with some restocking efforts in the eastern mountains continuing into the early 1990s. By closely monitoring county populations and adjusting regulations accordingly, KDFWR managed for a number of years the difficult task of meeting harvest guidelines in terms of both quantity and quality.

However, by the late 1980s, annual harvest data indicated an ever-increasing correlation between hunter success and the percent of 1½-year-old bucks in the antlered harvest. In some counties, over 80 percent of the antlered buck harvest was yearlings. Obviously, few bucks moving into the upper trophy producing age classes meant that, proportionally, very few state hunters would ultimately have an opportunity to take a mature buck.

To help correct this problem, KDFWR implemented a statewide one-buck limit beginning with the 1991 deer season. The regulation was all inclusive, covering modern gun, muzzleloader, and archery hunting.

"There's no doubt the one-buck limit was a significant factor in regard to the state's subsequent rise in trophy deer production,"

KENTUCKY BY DECADE

Typical and Non-typical Whitetail Deer Entries

DECADE	TOTAL ENTRIES
1950s	1
1960s	23
1970s	23
1980s	62
1990s	193
2000s	343

said David Yancy, KDFWR deer biologist. "During the years just prior to 1991, yearling bucks were averaging between 70 and 75 percent of the antlered harvest. After 1991, the average dropped to 60 percent.

"Interestingly, the yearling buck harvest began another decline in 2004, and has continued to drop each season since. Currently they comprise about 42 percent of the antlered harvest. We believe this additional decline can be attributed to deer hunters voluntarily passing on young bucks. It certainly wasn't the result of a regulation change."

Yancy goes on to add, "The significant drop in the yearling buck harvest has had a direct impact on the adult component of our deer herd. In 1988, one out of four (25 percent) antlered bucks was 2½ years old or older. By 2008, this had increased to 2.3 out of four (58 percent) were 2½ years or older. This means our hunters have a much better chance of taking a mature buck now than 20 years ago.

"Additionally important is that in 2008, the doe harvest topped 50 percent. Now, the challenge is to maintain enough hunting pressure on the female segment of the herd to keep deer numbers in balance with societal demands and available habitat."

A look at Kentucky's list of records-book deer in regard to the time period in

which they were taken gives a dramatic illustration of exactly how the one-buck limit has affected trophy deer production. These figures represent bucks that have been officially measured, with the final score exceeding B&C's Awards book minimum entry level. Most, but not all of the deer have been entered into the records books.

Beginning with the first limited deer season in 1956 and continuing through the 1960s and 1970s, 50 B&C bucks were recorded. From 1980 to 1989, an additional 85 record-book deer were taken. From 1990 to 1999, B&C numbers jumped significantly to 219. And during the years 2000 to 2009, an amazing total of 399 B&C bucks were recorded.

From a distribution standpoint, it is hardly surprising that the agricultural counties in western Kentucky, particularly those encompassing the Ohio River bottoms, top the list in terms of producing trophy deer. However, the Bluegrass counties of north-central Kentucky and those in the Pennyroyal Region along the Tennessee border are not far behind. In recent years, even the predominantly forested hills and valleys along and



This 25-point non-typical, scoring 208-6/8 points, was taken in 1968 by Richard Lohre. Lohre received NRA's prestigious Silver Bullet Award in recognition of taking the top whitetail in the nation during the 1968 season.

east of the Cumberland Plateau have produced some whopper bucks.

It has been said that a record-class buck could pop-up virtually anywhere in the state. And considering that 115 of Kentucky's 120 counties have recorded at least one B&C deer, it would be hard to argue otherwise. ■



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