INSTITUTE FOR WHITE-TAILED DEER MANAGEMENT AND RESEARCH



FACT SHEET No 1: TWELVE KEYS TO BUYING WHITETAILS

Dr. James C. Kroll

The deer industry has grown way beyond my wildest dreams! We are approaching exponential growth, attracting new breeders and landowners at an impressive rate. But, as with all new industries, especially alternative livestock, newcomers are left knowing very little about what it takes to become a successful operator. The average person coming to me for advice already has talked to dozens of operators, each of whom have "sage" advice about what to do, how to design pens and handling facilities and what kinds of deer to purchase for starter animals. Unfortunately, these suggestions often are contradictory and, sadly self-serving in many instances. So, I decided to put together this fact sheet on the first of many topics, in this case buying your first deer.

First, however, let me explain where I am coming from in preparing this first of several fact sheets.I have found newcomers have absolutely no "institutional memory," when it comes to the deer industry. They may have heard a few names kicked around, but lack an appreciation for how and why we got where we are today. I have been associated with, and been a driving force in the entire deer industry (breeding, hunting, commercial operations, etc.) for 35 years! Our research Institute at Stephen F. Austin State University has been responsible for a great deal of information currently in use. **We were the first to design, construct and use whitetail handling facilities and pens in the US.** Most of the designs being used are modifications of our original layouts. It is interesting, there are folks offering plans, with terms like "Joe Blow Signature Facility" that were taken directly from our original designs. We also invented deer minerals, the first scientifically formulated deer feeds, helped develop infrared-triggered cameras, and the **techniques for semen collection and artificial insemination**. We were AI'ing white-tailed deer 25 years ago! The first study comparing laparoscopic AI versus cervical AI was done here. The list goes on and on. I am not offering this as a brag, rather to bring you to the understand knowledge the industry now takes for granted was gained by long, hard work and a great deal of money. Ken Bailey, owner of 4 Canyon Ranch near Uvalde, funded the majority of original semen collection and AI research, and we all owe him a great deal of thanks. This work led to the production of a buck that in 2006 was the largest buck ever produced in Texas.

That all said, let's move on to the topic of this fact sheet: how do you decide on which deer to start your breeding program. I will present this information in the form of questions to ask, and the answers you should receive. The decisions you make in establishing your herd will stick with you a long, long time. I once saw a sign on a crossroads in Saskatchewan that read: "Chose your rut carefully, you will be in it for the next 200 miles!"

1. What is your CWD monitoring status?

This has become a "burr in my saddle!" When CWD first burst on the scene, critics of deer breeding thought they had a hammer to use against the industry. Since that time, the disease has not panned out as the most critical problem faced by the whitetail. Wisconsin recently abandoned its herd eradication program, opting for a more reasonable disease management approach. The furor about CWD is subsiding monthly. However, never forget CWD is a political not biological disease. It does not matter if the disease is not turning out to be the end of the species, what does matter is agencies and critics will use this disease against breeders every chance they get. CWD has not been found in Texas. Does that mean it will not be? Absolutely not! So, if it ever is found, where will that leave the industry/

Too many breeders have been tempted into dropping complete monitoring of their captive herds. If CWD shows up in Texas, these folks will be completely out of business! Deer that cannot be sold are not worth a whole lot. The "winners" will be those handful of breeders who have stuck with complete herd monitoring and achieved Level C status. Here at SFA, we recently achieved that milestone.

The primary problem I have with all this, is you as a new operator probably do not understand the rules related to CWD monitoring. Notice a lot of breeders just put down that they are in the program, not their status? Put simply, if you have a four year status and buy one deer or borrow one deer from a two year status, you drop back to the lowest status! So, the first question you should ask before you ever consider buying a deer is: What is your CWD status? If you have not yet bought deer for your new operation, I would suggest you purchase only deer that have a high status. The only folks who will be able to operate should CWD show up in Texas will be those with complete monitored Level C status.

2. How long have you been in business?

I am amazed at the number of new operators (2 years or less) who offer deer for sale! I was at a hunting show recently and visited with a fellow at his booth. "We have a state-of-the-art breeding program," he bragged, "and the finest genetics and performance in the industry." When asked how long he had been in business, the reply was, "Two years." How is it possible for someone to be in a position to sell deer, with proven, performance in that short a time span? Now, if you are a new operator and you are offended by what I just said, I fully realize there may be some exceptions; but, very few. I can understand that you may have acquired great genetics, but proven performance? The best exception would be a new operator who is nothing more than a "satellite" operation for a long-standing, successful breeder. These would include some of the northern breeders who operate facilities here in Texas.

You should favor folks who have been in the business long enough to build their own pedigrees and performance data (discussed later).

3. Do you have pedigrees for your deer?

This industry has been around long enough now for a good operator to have complete of near-complete pedigrees for his/her deer. For many years, operators did not appreciate the importance of the dam side of the equation; but, recently I am hearing more talk and seeing more in print about this topic. For years, I was a "voice in the wilderness" about the importance of does.

In developing you foundation herd, you should look very carefully at the does you purchase. They are the true foundation for your operation. Do not be taken in by a big buck bred to mediocre does. That will get you in a hole quickly. I would rather have five pedigreed, performance rated does than one monster sire.

What exactly is a pedigree? It is a flow chart, so to speak, in chronological order that lists the ancestors of your deer. The pedigree should be complete or nearly complete back at least three generations. Our research deer go way beyond this, back to the original founders of the deer breeding industry, but I could hardly expect most breeders to have this type of pedigree. Three generations is a good start.

A pedigree is not a name of a breeder! I often hear about, or worse see a deer sale, where a deer is represented as a "Joe Blow" doe or buck. What does that mean? Does it mean it came from that person's breeding program, complete with pedigree or does it mean the deer once was connected in some way with that person. Also, there is a profound difference between a Joe Blow animal and a Joe Blow line of deer. An operator may have purchased a deer from old Joe five years ago, then bred him or her to who knows what! I guess that makes the progeny down the line a "Joe Blow line," but it does not say a great deal about what your are getting. We have some incredible breeders in this industry- you will recognize the names—and they deserve the credit they receive and the price they get for their deer. Just make sure you are not falling victim to "name-itis."

4. What ages of does do you have for sale/

Let's face it, any operator who sells you his best animals is a fool! No matter what you pay, you probably are not going to end up with an operator's best deer, and that is fair. But, what age of animal should you buy? There are two answers.

First, if the purpose of your program is to make a financial return as quickly as possible, then you probably should purchase older does; those being rotated out of the breeder's program and replaced by younger deer. These are the animals that produced much of the reputation the breeder enjoys, and are worth it. However, there are two caveats. The fact he is rotating them out means he has moved to a higher level. As fast as this industry is moving, you may not be able to keep up with the top breeders. So, if you opt for this approach, I suggest you go with does from the top end of the breeders. The other consideration is cost. Now that I successfully have gotten people to the mind set a doe is the most important part of the equation, they know what such an animal is worth. For the folks I work with, I recommend they rotate their does out at age four or five. So, how does this equate to value?

The longest living does we have had in our research program died at 23 and 24 years. Each had a fawn inside them when they died. So, if you purchase a 5 or 6 year old doe, you can expect to have at least 4 or 5 years of production out of her. That is not a bad deal.

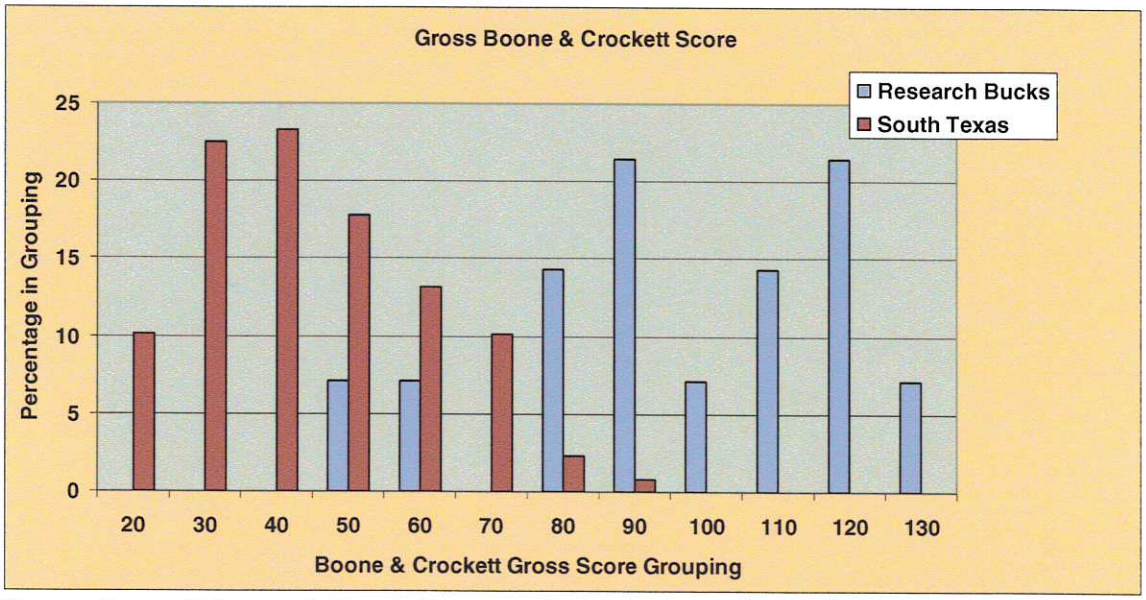
The second consideration on age is, should I buy doe fawns or bred does? You really cannot go wrong in either case, provided you know what you are getting. As to fawns, I prefer to purchase doe fawns, If they have some northern blood, I

want to receive them in time for breeding season. If a fawn reaches 60 pounds or more, the chances are good it will breed as a fawn. And, most of their offspring will be bucks! That will give you an extra year to evaluate these does. Make sure, however, you are buying the best pedigrees, again from proven performers (discussed later).

As to bred does, there is a great big pitfall on this one. Some operators are making a fortune, buying cheap does and breeding them either naturally or by AI to "name" bucks. Again, the top side of the pedigree is only about 40% of the equation, so if the does are not equally great, you may be headed back into that rut I discussed earlier. Check the pedigrees!

5. Can you demonstrate performance for your operation?

I have carefully avoided using names in this fact sheet, but will make one exception: Gene Flees. Can anyone question the performance of Gene's deer? He has put a great deal of effort into his program and has followed all the rules. Since I have no ties, economically or physically, with Gene, I assert this is an objective opinion. Besides that, he is not a Texan, so that gets me out of talking about Texans. I fully realize there are many, many more folks in the same category, many of whom are Texas breeders, but Gene is a very good example. How did Gene get where he is? He did it by paying attention to pedigrees and performance, pure and simple.



Comparison of Boone & Crockett scores for our research yearlings versus South Texas averages. The spread in yearling scores (not really the best year to evaluate) ranged from 50 class to 130 class, with an average of 91.0±22.6 inches.

Always ask any seller if he/she has performance records on their deer. What might that be? Long ago, the Black Angus breeders began a program that



This two year old buck at the Nacogdoches research facility is an exceptional animal, but our breeding program is based on the percentage of buck fawns that ultimately turn into trophy bucks, which is about 80% in the research program.

ultimately led to their superiority in the cattle industry. Their pasture to rail program keeps track of every animal from birth to processing. In the process, the concept of EPDs (Expected Progeny Differences) was born. Unfortunately, we have no such program for deer, but I have been pushing it now for 20 years. If you are a Black Angus breeder and you want to lengthen the loin of your steers, there are bulls from which you can purchase semen that will do exactly that. And, they can do it consistently! In the deer perspective, if we want more mass or spread, why can't we purchase a buck or semen that will do that for us? In order to do so, you have to know what each animal has done.

Too often, we see advertisements for various operations that taunt a monster buck produced by their operation. They certainly deserve credit, but how many buck fawns did it take to produce such an animal? There are some operations with 400 or more deer! If you are producing 200+ fawns per year, it seems pretty logical you will produce some really great bucks. But, what is your average? It is

consistency that matters, not the exception. That goes for the does as well as the bucks. So, a good operator will have performance data on his/her herd.



These two year bucks at our Nacogdoches research facility show remarkable uniformity. That should be the goal of every breeder, as it is the number of trophy bucks at 3.5 years that best identifies a successful operation.

Always remember, this industry is based on hunting. That is the reason we are breeding these animals. If we do not develop a hunting end to deer breeding, we are nothing more than ostrich and emu farmers! The end will come. So, what will it take to have a successful hunting operation? Our economics analyses all point to the most profitable being one with both hunting and breeding. And, the breeding is aimed more at producing quality bucks than selling deer to other breeders. Given this, the proportion of buck fawns produced in such a program will determine the profitability of that operation. Consider the difference between what you can get for a management buck versus a trophy buck. The more trophy bucks you produce at an early age (3.5 years), the more money you are going to make. When Jerry, Gene and I co-founded TDA, we were adamant about being inclusive of hunting operations and landowners, not just breeders.

6. Do you have handling facilities?

This question should be applied both to buyer and seller. Without handling facilities you are going to be t behind. Gone are the days where an operator will have large pens and handle deer with a dart gun! If you have to use a dart gun, you don't own your deer. Handling facilities reduce stress on animals and make treatment for disease much easier. If your person from whom you purchase deer has handling facilities, I guarantee you the animals will arrive in much better

condition and health to adjust to living in your pens. I takes one person to load a number of deer from our facilities; and, knock on wood, we have not injured or killed a deer in 20 years! If you buy from someone who does not have handling facilities and you do, it will take a while to get the deer adjusted to being handled.

7. What about DNA?

We also were the first to research using DNA markers to identify parentage. Since then, companies such as DNA Solutions have come on line and are doing an excellent job. However, there are some cautions about DNA you need to be aware of. First, when DNA testing first became available, I urged everyone in this business to use this valuable tool to prevent, not resolve genetics issues. By this, I mean run DNA before you make claims. And, those who bought deer long ago or before DNA testing became common should leave it that way, at least legally. I have seen too many reputable breeders get into trouble because some buck got into a pen or a buck fawn bred a doe; or even worse, they purchased a deer from someone else that turned out later not to have the right father. So, DNA is a tool that should be used prior to the sale, not after!

I always advise operators to include in writing the conditions of the sale; especially when it comes to DNA. Since there is more trouble and cost involved, I also suggest a higher price for DNA-certified animals. There are record-keeping costs to any practice.

The next problem about DNA testing involves does. In most cases, we do not yet have the number of markers we need to differentiate between very closely related does. In our pens here at Nacogdoches, we have so tightly bred our does there is not a lot of genetic variability; and, believe it or not that is a good thing. The number one problem I see with DNA and dam identification involves tightly related does. Too many operators have so many deer, they cannot mark fawns as they are born, or won't! They then turn to DNA to solve these problems, finding out there are times when the right dam cannot be identified. What is the answer? We need more markers. After all, we still are working with some of the first markers developed. With all the money being made, I see no reason not to add additional markers; and, I believe that is happening now.

Bottom line, use DNA whenever you can!

8. What kind of buck should I buy?

This may be the most common question we are asked. The simple answer is, the best one you can afford! But, this may not be the case. It depends on the definition of "best."

Here's the best way to make a decision. First, it is my firm opinion you almost never should buy yearling bucks. I have been around this business longer than

most, and have seen just as many (or more) very impressive yearlings turn into mediocre mature deer. I prefer to purchase two year olds and three year olds in most cases. You should be able to pick a good individual if you do. However, again you have to consider the pedigree and performance factors discussed above. Young bucks tend to make the transition to a new pen easier than old bucks.

What should you look for in a buck? Again, pedigree is critical; but, outside of that, you need to critically examine the traits he has and ask yourself if those are the ones you need in the herd. You need to set your mind on a goal animal. Write down or draw the animal, or find a photograph in a magazine of what you are trying to produce. Then seek out animals that can help you get to this goal.

The number one criterion for evaluating a buck is its frame. Picture this: you have a hunter in a stand, and two bucks walk up. One scores 190 inches, but has a 17 inch wide set of antlers. The other scores only 160, but is 24 inches wide. Which buck will your hunter shoot? So, frame size is most critical. The ideal buck, in my opinion, is one that is about as tall as he is wide; viz., he has a square frame.

The next criterion is number of main frame points. There are some really impressive bucks out there, but on inspection they really are nothing but 8-pointers with a lot of trash! The typical score of any buck is the second most critical point. It is safe to say, bucks with 6X6 frames are more likely to have high typical scores than 5X5s. The reason the Hansen buck beat the Jordan buck as the new world record was the difference in main frame points.

The next evaluation point really is a question: Are you trying to produce typicals or non-typicals? It may seem flippant to say, but it is easy to grow a 200+ inch non-typical buck. On the other hand, it is very difficult to grow a 200+ net typical buck! It is my opinion the market is saturated with non-typicals. It will be the typical bucks that bring the big prices in the future. [Remember, I am the guy who predicted does someday would sell for very high prices!] Typical or non-typical, you still have to have a great frame to make a buck impressive.

9. Should I buy semen?

Being the guy who developed all this, I have to admit I am prejudiced on this one! It makes total sense to purchase semen for several reasons. Among these are that it gives you access to bucks you cannot afford to buy. However, there is yet another caution. We have to return to the performance factor. Is the buck you are considering a proven producer, or is he just very impressive? Also, make sure the semen is properly tested for 4-hour post-thaw motility, as well as DNA-certified. Make sure the buck is pedigreed, as well.

10. What about using an agent?

I have some very strong feelings about this one. I have purchased millions of dollars in deer over the years for various people. Yet, I do not recommend using an agent. In all of those purchases, I never once accepted any money from either party, other than a consulting fee. Well, I did accept a dove hunt one time, which turned out to be a poor shoot! Why do I feel this way?

An agent is not objective in many cases, unless he totally represents your interests. There is too much temptation, given the money in this business, to take something under the table for a transaction. Even is money does not change hands, consultants tend to develop affinities for one breeder or another, which clouds their judgment. Often, I have purposefully not bought deer from someone I had been dealing with for years, just to assure myself I was not "in his pocket."

So, I have nothing against hiring yourself an experienced consultant, if he will represent your best interests. Ask around about anyone you consider, to see if there is any doubt about his/her judgment or honesty. Whether you use one or not, always follow these questions and ask for answers to them.

[By the way, it just occurred to me this section may come off as a commercial. Rest assured, I do not want any more business. I only pick the most interesting projects and have all I need.]

11. Should I have a contract?

This answer is a "no brainer!" It is definitely "yes." But, what should the contract contain? Here are the basics.

a. **What am I buying?** This part of the contract should carefully list exactly what animals or semen you are buying, including identification numbers, sex, age and pedigree.
b. **Who am I buying these deer from?** This may sound silly, but the ownership of these animals must be clear and free, just as real estate is certified clear of encumbrances.
c. **What is the guarantee about condition and when?** This should be very clear. Some of the top name breeders often sell deer FOB. What leaves the farm is what you get, no other guarantees. Others offer a guarantee the deer will arrive in healthy condition, then after that, there are no guarantees. Still others provide a two week guarantee, with the exception of accidents. These are can be reasonable, but it should be in writing before any deer is moved.
   If a doe is to be bred, you should clearly state if she will be "exposed" or "bred." Exposed means she was confined with a specific buck for the breeding season. There are no guarantees she will be pregnant, although the probability is very high. A bred doe is

certified by the seller to be pregnant at time of delivery. You can ask for a pregnancy check if you wish, but that should cost more for the trouble. This can be done either by ultrasound (some error) or by blood test (better). In such cases, proof of pregnancy is supplied at time of delivery. If this proof is accepted, however, the seller is free from any claims by the buyer. A lot of things can happen from the time of delivery until the expected parturition (birth) date. This will include abortion, absorption and death of the fetuses; and, this does happen. I had a doe one time do exactly that, she had two mummified fetuses in her.

What about a cover buck for AI'd does? You should put it in writing whether or not a cove buck will be used, which one, and whether or not you will accept a doe bred by the cover buck? The only way to know which buck (semen donor or cover) bred her is to run DNA later. But, that creates a problem, since that will not be until 198 days after breeding. Stipulate a refund amount or anything else you work out in regard to this situation before you receive your deer.

The only way to reduce problems is to have the seller AI the doe and not back her up with another buck. This is very difficult to get a breeder to do, since an unbred doe will be worth less, but some operators are doing this and adding in the extra cost to their deer.

d. **Will the deer be picked up by the buyer or delivered by the seller?** This is very important, since problems often arise with scheduling on the part of both parties. The time frame has to be stipulated. I have been involved in deer transfers that were supposed to take place one date, but the buyer did not complete his facilities in time to receive them. In such cases, there need to be provisions and costs to untimely delivery or acceptance.
e. **What if a deer dies before delivery date?** This is a common occurrence. A perfectly great deer is purchased, then dies from an accident before delivery. In such cases, it should be agreed in advance on replacements or adjustments to payment.
f. **What about a deposit?** There definitely should be a deposit of what is customarily 50% up front. This may later be adjusted due to item g.
g. **How will disputes be resolved?** The courts are not good places to solve any problem, so having everything in writing, including how disputes are to be resolved should be included.

12. Should I buy at an auction?

I have saved this one for last, because no matter how I answer it, someone will get angry at me! There is nothing wrong with buying deer at an auction, provided you think about the following points.

First, my grandfather was a successful cattleman. He always told me not to buy cattle at an auction. “There are two reasons why someone sells cattle at an auction,” he cautioned, “and both of them are bad.” Yet, deer auctions have become THE place to sell animals, particularly for small breeders. Often these auctions are advertised as a “select sale,” when they are anything but! Yet, there are indeed select sales, with the best genetics.

Second, I seldom have seen prices at auctions totally fair to the buyer and seller. I have seen awesome deer sold for ridiculously low prices, and junk sold for ridiculously high prices. The atmosphere at an auction often is akin to a shark attack. When you mix alcohol and ego together, you often find bad decisions. So, remain sober and do your homework. Most auctions have the sales catalogs out in enough time to investigate what is being sold. Call up sellers and ask them the above questions, and even have them send you information about their animals. Lastly, always ask the most important question: What is your CWD anniversary date?

Hopefully, you have learned something that will help you make sound decisions. And, hopefully I have not made too many people mad in writing this. But, as I said at the outset, my loyalties are to the industry and to the white-tailed deer. If you have any questions, feel free to email me at: jkroll@sfasu.edu. Good luck!