

Management, planning & luck made this hunter's opening morning one for the books

STORY BY BRIAN BROOM, MISSISSIPPI CLARION LEDGER

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Barrett Van Cleave harvests 150-class buck on opening morning of archery season. (Photo by Barrett Van Cleave)

When a Mississippi man harvested a 150-class buck on the opening morning of archery season in Southwest Mississippi, it wasn't just luck. It was luck, attention to details and years of management trials and errors.

"This place I hunt, my granddad bought in 1970," Barrett Van Cleave of Woodville said. "This tract was 90 percent virgin hardwood timber.

"This property is something I take a lot of pride in. I'm down here doing something most every weekend."

Van Cleave, an accomplished deer hunter, said he's always tried to manage the deer for big bucks. At one point he and his family limited harvests to bucks with eight or more points. Later they changed to eight points or more and a minimum inside spread. In 2011, however, a particular buck began to change that.

Van Cleave said he was hunting a 3-year-old 10-point that scored somewhere in the 120s. On one hunt he missed the 10-point and on another he slightly injured the deer. The game of cat and mouse went on for two years.

"It was frustrating," Van Cleave said. "I went from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows with that deer."

The game ended two years later on Heartbreak Ridge, which is a small story in itself. The ridge is remote and has a steep incline. So steep, Van Cleave said when he hunts that area he stops under a holly tree to rest and pray before continuing to his stand. He now calls it the Praying Tree.

In 2013, his prayers were not only answered with the harvest of

the buck, but with insight. The deer had jumped from the 120-class to the 150s. That changed how he managed the herd.

MAXIMUM POTENTIAL

"That deer really taught me a lot by hunting him as a 3-year-old," Van Cleave said. "That deer made me the hunter I am today.

"That's the year I decided to go to five years old or better. It's hard to pass on a 4-year-old. Mississippi doesn't have the reputation of the Midwest, but all the ingredients are here. In this part of the state, when they get to five they've reached their maximum potential."

Now five years into his 5-year-old program, Van Cleave said he has more older deer on the landscape, but a deer named Footloose piqued his interest more than the rest.

"This particular deer I have a lot of history with," Van Cleave said. "I saw this particular deer several times.

"Last year I saw him at least a dozen times. That deer last year was a huntable deer and a trophy for most people.

"Last year he was in the upper 130s, maybe pushing 140. He had split brow tines and a kicker off his G2. This year he came back with just the one split brow, but he had a triple kicker off his G2. We didn't worry about losing the split brow because he added a bunch of kickers."

Van Cleave said he names deer to keep track of them and the names typically originate with physical characteristics to help family members identify the different bucks. But Footloose got his name one afternoon last year for doing what bucks do —

except he didn't realize Van Cleave was watching.

"He was running all over the place that afternoon," Van Cleave said. "He came under my tree four times that afternoon chasing."

EXECUTING THE PLAN

When opening morning of archery season came this week, Van Cleave had his plan in place. He would hunt a stand over a food plot where cameras had taken the majority of photographs of Footloose. It was also within about 400 yards of the buck's bedding area. Another key feature of the stand location is it's located just off a trail Van Cleave often travels and deer are accustomed to it. So he arranged for some other hunters to drop him off along with friend Slade Priest, who was going to videotape the hunt, and then keep going.

Settled in their stands about 6 a.m., Van Cleave and Priest were ready. Van Cleave chose to stand to make less noise and so he'd be in position at daylight, when he hoped to see the deer.

Just as there was enough light to see, the two saw the first movement in the field, but it was an armadillo. However, the two didn't have to wait long before the game was on.

"About 10 minutes later he (Priest) whispered, 'There's a deer,'" Van Cleave said. "He was about 200 yards out."

Priest and Van Cleave were in separate trees. Priest could see the buck as well as two does that entered the field. Van Cleave couldn't see the buck because an oak tree was blocking his view, but that didn't stop him from getting excited.

"I started shaking pretty good before I even saw the deer because he was telling me about it," Van Cleave said. "He probably videoed him two, two and a half minutes before I ever saw the deer.

"When he came out from behind that tree I knew it was Footloose. He was just curious. He was slowly coming up the ridge and taking it in. He was just doing what a 5-year-old will do."

Van Cleave's sight was set at 28 yards and the buck gave him an opportunity at 29 yards. Van Cleave drew back, but the opportunity fell apart.

"Right as I started to squeeze the release he picked his head up and turned and started walking away from me," Van Cleave said. "I knew better than to take a bad shot. I decided to

stay at full draw."

Van Cleave was at full draw for the next 90 seconds, which he said seemed like an eternity, but he kept telling himself to stay calm. During that time, Footloose had walked in a circle and then stopped.

"He came back in at 27 yards, so I was perfect," Van Cleave said. "I took my time, squeezed the release and heart-shot him.

"It was textbook. He went 60 yards and crashed."

RECORD BOOKS AND THE PRAYING TREE

Van Cleave and Priest recovered the deer about 30 minutes later and he was every bit as large as they thought. He gross-scored 157 5/8 inches with bases over 5 1/2 inches, an 11 5/8-inch G2 and main beams measuring

roughly 24 and 25 inches.

Van Cleave is obviously excited about harvesting such an animal and it potentially will make it into the Pope & Young Club record book, but what made it even more special was the buck's positioning when he was found. Van Cleave said the buck had settled next to a holly tree and looked as if he'd been posed.

"When we found this deer it was almost like someone beat me to him the way he was laid up against that holly tree," Van Cleave said. "It looked like my Praying Tree.

"He was just perfectly against it with his horns resting up against it. That holly tree isn't 400 yards from my Praying Tree. That wasn't a coincidence. That meant a lot to me. That was the cherry on top to see him laying under that holly tree."

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only one task.*

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