

The hunt for this wide-antlered, big-bodied buck taught the author lessons for future hunts, and a better understanding of the hunting experience.

It's worth the punishment

WHEN THE PURSUIT OF A BIG BUCK LEADS TO A CLEARER VISION RATHER THAN VENISON.

Matthew Peterson

When my fall archery hunt ends, I'm struck by how sometimes successes can feel like failures, and by how great the potential in this sport is for disappointment. I use the word "sport" because it's the easiest, although I'm not sure it's accurate.

It can all fall apart and leave you heartbroken and defeated in the moment it should all come together. Maybe this is partly why I hunt — to be defeated, crushed into submission by the weight of the natural world. I know it's not to obtain epic "hero" shots, because I already have one and it does not make me feel any better.

Modern hunting videos might make you believe it's all about the trophy. But I'm most consumed recently with understanding why I hunt, and why the process moves me so much. By reliving my hunts, I try to better understand them. By writing about the process, I hope to continue to deepen the experience and learn, grow and capture this information in writing. I also challenge you to consider your own hunting traditions in these terms and how your experiences may be broadened and the depth of them expanded.

Saturday morning was a picture-perfect hunt for the beginning of the rut, and the beginning of November. It was cold and crisp, with the leaves crunching on our entry to the woods. The morning started as planned with deer

moving early and often. Within the first few hours I had seen three small bucks and a handful of does. Deer were moving through my "four corners" stand as they had during the early season. Its location is a combination of features that provide for a natural funneling of deer within archery range. It's affectionately referred to as the "tilted stand," because of the uncomfortable slant of the tree stand the first year one was hung. This problem had been corrected over the summer, in addition to other improvements, making the stand essentially perfect in my belief.

Around 10 a.m. I noticed a flash of antlers through the trees about 80 yards directly in front of me. I slowly stood, removed my bow from its hook, readied myself and surveyed the situation. A nice eight-point buck was moving in my direction and appeared to be on a path to pass perfectly through my shooting lanes. I quickly assessed whether the deer was a shooter or not. He had decent tine length and width, but without much mass. Probably a 2 1/2-year-old deer, I decided.

About this same time, a glimpse of dark grey and the trademark horizontal line of a deer's back got my attention

about 10 yards to that deer's right. Big body, I said to myself, and wide horns with mass. Not a monster rack, but a big mature deer that would be a shooter. He was in his prime and his neck was absolutely massive at the start of the rut. This buck was a boss.

The deer was 50 yards away and quartering toward me on the edge of the cornfield that would bring him broadside at 25 yards. As he passed behind some trees, I turned my body to my right to prepare for the angle of the shot. He moved through a small shooting lane at 35 yards, still quartering toward me. The next lane would be the one for the shot. As he passed behind another clump of trees, I drew my bow. What happened next surprised me in a way from which I would not recover.

Since I was turned hard to my right to draw my bow, when I did, my right elbow hit the slack in the rope from my safety harness. This did not completely prevent my draw, but it commanded my attention to gently shake my right elbow free. As I turned my attention back to the deer, he was almost completely through my final shooting lane.

Panicked, I grunted to stop him, but released my arrow before attaining a perfect sight picture and ensuring he had completely stopped. At the release, the buck took one more step forward before I saw the arrow pass into his lower flank. He jumped at the hit and ran off before slowing to a walk and moving out of sight.

COURTESY OF MATTHEW PETERSON

I knew it was a bad shot immediately and swore at myself. My heart sank; what had just happened? The deer's movement was exactly as I would have predicted, yet I'd seriously messed up the shot. Radioing my hunting companions I told them what happened and that I'd wait for a few hours in the tree before attempting to find a blood trail and recover the deer.

Getting down around 1 p.m., I found the arrow, which had passed through and was coated with dark blood. The blood trail was slight, with only small spots of blood, and the trail went cold after only a few hundred yards.

By this time, my hunting buddy had come to help me look. We tried to cut the trail in all directions with no luck. We cut up and down and peered into the nearby ravines and draws, following them down to the neighbor's pond. This process was complicated by the fact that we were on the neighbor's land. We had notified him as requested when tracking a deer, but couldn't beat the bush like we may have wished out of deference to his land. After an hour or so of no further luck we retired to our stands for the afternoon.

The hit had been bad and the deer would likely die; however, we'd have no idea where or when. This is the ultimate sin for a bowhunter. I felt awful and inept. The afternoon passed into the evening. Soon, we were celebrating my companion's success in the evening hunt — funny how that works. He had offered to come down out of his tree stand to help me search, and was re-

warded with a successful evening hunt. I felt joy for his success, but brooded all

night about my own failure.

I'd determined to pay attention for crows or howling coyotes the next morning as a sign they had found the deer carcass — nothing. Sunday's hunt turned into Monday's. However, Monday morning something was different.

By 9 a.m. I started to notice a few crows gather by the neighbor's pond making their calls. After another hour I couldn't ignore their cacophony and had to take a look. As I made my way to the pond the body of a dead deer became obvious. I was flabbergasted. Two days later and here my deer lay. He had apparently come down to drink or soak his wound in the night and passed away in the process. The rest is a blur.

First, the deer turned out to have a monster body: 203 pounds field dressed. I had to move him from the pond's edge, through a few small drainages and to the edge of the nearest field 150 yards away. This might not sound so bad, but I could hardly budge him. I dragged him one 12-inch heave at a time. I counted this as punishment deserved for a slight to the natural world. Once this was completed he was field dressed. Again, no picnic especially with a gut-shot deer — more punishment. I still envisioned the venison might be good, but the deer needed to be registered nonetheless.

Next was getting him onto the hitch-hauler of my Jeep. I was by myself — more punishment. Later that evening at our hunting camp the deer was hung and skinned.

The next day we attempted the butchering process; however, it became apparent the meat was rancid. One smell of a good chunk would turn your stomach. It's a smell I won't soon forget. There's not much else to say — the deer was wasted. I removed the horns to be turned into rattling horns and serve as a reminder.

Today, I know that success in the woods is not about inches of antlers or number of deer harvested. It's in completing the full

circle of life with as little error as possible, and being a skillful participant.

While there was no venison to butcher or enjoy from that hunt, I did learn a few things that will be incorporated into my future hunts. Most notably, I now conduct a practice draw in each direction each time I enter my stand. In this case, this would have alerted me to the potential problem with my safety harness — a problem that could have been corrected by raising the tree strap to remove all slack when I was in the seated position. I will carry this buck's horns with me as rattlers and as a reminder of what can go wrong.

So, I know I don't hunt simply to kill; this story bears that out. In fact, I've never received great joy from the actual act of the kill. I want it to be swift and efficient and in delivering that, there is a certain amount of pride and thankfulness; however, there is no joy in it.

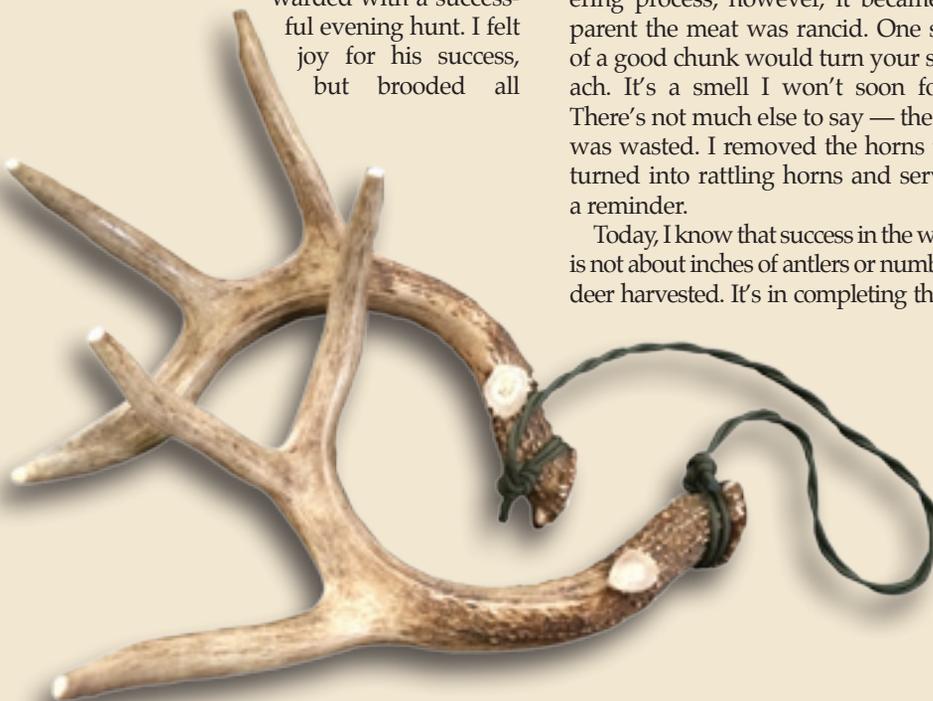
We see TV show hunters jumping up and down after their kills, and I believe this is often misinterpreted. It's not the kill itself they are celebrating, but the culmination of the process. If this is done expertly it's worth celebrating and being excited. This means greater attention to preparation and greater attention to the follow-on activities, greater sacrifice and greater reward. This means I want to plant food deer will eat, hang tree stands where they won't see me, hunt hard and thoughtfully, practice shooting diligently, kill expertly, care for the game post shot, and cook and eat the game I harvest.

If all this is accomplished it should be celebrated, and as an achievement of significance, remembered. In fact, each one of the areas mentioned above can be expanded upon to improve the overall depth of the experience. For example, instead of bringing a deer into the butcher shop to be processed, one could learn to do it him- or herself to participate more fully. I inaccurately refer to hunting as a sport above, but in reality it is a way of life for this reason.

Archery is a sport and I have come away knowing I'll be a better hunter in the future, that I learned something and I will continue to improve from these lessons. This hunt allowed me to better understand why I hunt in the first place and how I can work to get the most out of the experience.

I hope you consider how you may strengthen your own hunting experiences and find success in a deeper way during these pursuits. 

Matthew Peterson writes from West Allis.



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