



First deer TIMES TWO.

Steve Pierce

I never thought I'd say that my favorite year hunting was one when I didn't shoot a trophy buck. But any parent will understand.

I've been hunting in Wisconsin for 40 years, from my youth years as a Wisconsin resident, then every year after college, traveling back home the first weekend of November for our annual archery hunt with my brother, dad and friends. Some hunters travel to exotic trophy hunts and buy plane fare to do it; I go back to Jackson County.

My sons, Alex, 15, and Nick, 12, were both excited for the 2015 hunt, especially because this was Nick's first year at deer camp. Preparations began earlier in the year when Nick got his first bow. He practiced regularly throughout the summer months, and by hunting season had it cranked to a legal 32 pounds.

After our three-hour drive from Min-

neapolis to Jackson County, we arrived at the "Bow Shack," and were anxious to get into the woods. We unpacked our gear, said some quick hellos to family, then prepared to head to the stand.

Knowing this was hunt No. 1 with Nick, I lowered my expectations of how quickly we'd get into the woods. My self-talk was well rehearsed: "Focus on safety. He'll remember this forever. It'll shape his habits for the future. Safety over speed."

Everyone else had left. Nick and I were looking for the release, grabbing a grunt



The author poses proudly with oldest son, Alex, who shot his first deer with the Marlin 30-30 passed down from his Grandpa Preston, to his father, and then to him.

DAVE PIERCE

ten...breathe...bowhunter Zen.

Yes, it would be a short hunt, so I didn't expect much. Hopefully, I thought, we'd see some deer and delay the inevitable "Dad, I'm bored." The conditions were great — 45 degrees, gentle breeze and leaves with a loud crunch. I shared another early lesson for Nick, "We'll definitely hear deer before we see any within archery range." We didn't wait long.

About 20 minutes later I whispered to a sleepy Nick, "There's a deer." He spotted the doe walking a logging trail 35 yards away, slowing, then deciding to turn onto a trail we sat above. She took a couple of steps onto our trail and the excitement grew. Then she stopped, turned back and continued down the logging road away from our trail. I felt a huge relief with the goal of "seeing something" achieved and already a great story for Nick to share back at the shack.

Another 20 minutes later we both heard a noise coming from the black brush 50 yards away. A doe came running out, crossing the logging road, and ambled down the trail we were posted above.

"Stand up, Nick," I whispered.

He did and then we both saw another deer in pursuit.

"The second one is a buck," I whispered.

I was feeling so happy to have such huge action the first afternoon and just knew that Nick would be hooked for sure. I was thrilled!

The doe turned broadside about 20 yards out and kept running. The spiked buck followed, but slowed quickly after turning broadside, his sensors obviously kicking in. He followed the doe at a walk and slowed enough for me to tell Nick to pull back when he got behind the pine tree. Nick somehow pulled back without making any noise and two steps later the buck stood still at 20 yards.

Nick released his very first arrow in the wild. I've never in my life watched an arrow's flight so closely. Only 45 minutes into the hunt, I was watching Nick land a perfect lung shot. The deer kicked and ran at a very healthy jaunt, disappearing 50 yards away into a thicket.

With eyes bigger than I've ever seen and bursting with excitement, Nick turned and said, "I hit him! I can't believe it."

Thrilled, Nick did a jump around. And me? I basked in a surreal moment wondering, did this really just happen?

But then reality set in and I reminded myself that it was a teaching moment

and I'd better not mess it up.

It was 4:50 p.m. and going to be dark in 15 minutes. My weather app forecasted a thunderstorm that would definitely wash all blood sign away. But I was supposed to wait at least 15 minutes and have my ceremonial cup of coffee. What about that important lesson? After five minutes the excitement was overwhelming and we climbed down.

We walked to the site, looked for blood and found a spot — a very small spot. We looked for more. I grabbed two flashlights out of our pack and asked Nick to stay at the site of impact as I started walking in the direction the deer ran. I knew exactly which pine he turned at. After walking 50 yards, I turned back to Nick holding his flashlight. It was getting dark fast. At the "turning point" pine I focused and inspected every leaf and needle below the pine tree.

Nick asked, "What do you see? Any blood?"

I didn't want to answer. I told Nick to walk over to help me look. Disappointment was crashing in, light fading, storm coming. I just couldn't imagine such a wonderful moment having an unsuccessful ending. Nick arrived just in time to see me shine the light in the direction I last recalled the deer running, and we both saw him lying motionless 10 yards away.

"Congrats, Nick," I said. "You got a deer!"

First day. First hour. First deer.

Two weeks later, older brother Alex and I were heading back to the Bow Shack. During those two weeks, Nick took great advantage of every opportunity to remind Alex who shot the first deer. Alex, discouraged, but thankful for many fun times at the shack, was excited to be on the road again the Friday before the opening of rifle season. Alex would be armed with a Marlin 30-30 that was being passed to its third generation. Grandpa Preston bought it years ago and gave it to me, his oldest son. Now I was giving it to Alex, the oldest of my three sons.

Opening morning had arrived. We headed to a new ground blind and got settled. Alex had been bowhunting for three years already and fortunately, he fell in love with the sport. There was no doubt of him being hooked when he'd say to me at a random moment in the summer, "I wonder what's going on at my tree stand right now?"

It was a very quiet and warm November morning on the stand with a forecast

Younger son, Nick, arrowed his first deer, in the first hour, on his first day hunting.



warmed. We've all been there.

However, in a moment, everything can change on the deer stand.

Alex had been watching one side of the stand and I watched the other.

"Alex, don't move. I'll tell you when," I whispered.

A moment later, Alex turned slowly and saw the same movement in the black brush about 50 yards out. It was easy to see the rack.

He rested his gun on the stand. I heard the click of the hammer being pulled back. A very long three seconds later, he pulled the trigger. The deer kicked, then disappeared into the thicket, crashing at a healthy run for as long as sound carried.

That feeling hit me again. Was this really happening? If I've ever felt an inside fist pump, this was it! I was overwhelmingly excited for Alex. The only other time I would see him smile this big was passing his driver's test a few months later.

We did the best we could to restrain ourselves, but couldn't wait and after 15 minutes began the search. The exact spot was easy to recognize at 50 yards, but when we were actually standing there, we didn't see any blood. With all the deer I have shot, there has always been a lot of blood at impact. We couldn't find a thing. We searched for three minutes, nothing. Then five minutes.

"Alex, how confident are you that you hit him?" I asked.

"Dad, I know I did," he answered.

We both started walking in the direction that the deer ran, hoping to see something obvious.

"I've got blood," Alex said and I rushed over to the spot. There it was, bigger than a grain of sand, but small enough to raise a lot of doubt.

Following a blood trail is a hunter's emotional roller coaster. The highs immediately after the "good shot" are sometimes followed by the total despair of a seemingly lost blood trail. We cycled high and low a few times, but the confidence level slowly grew with consistent signs.

What a deer will go through when injured surprised us both. The thicker path was clearly the better choice for this buck. We kept tracking. After making it through another impenetrable thicket, there he was.

"Nice buck, Alex," I said. It was followed by a father-and-son hug that I will never forget. 

Steve Pierce writes from Wayzata, Minnesota.

calling for temperatures in the 50s. Four hours passed with only a few tails spotted, a discouraging start for opening morning. We both stood and stretched. I had not brought a gun this year, wanting instead to focus on being with Alex

for his first rifle hunt. After experiencing it with Nick two weeks earlier, nothing would be better than to have that first deer moment again. Alex nodded off once, both of us tempted to catch up on some sleep as the temperatures