



Ethics or Ego: It's All About Choices

By Dr. James C. Kroll, PhD

I was fortunate to be on the speaking programs this past season for the TTHA Hunter's Extravanzas. As is my habit, I made sure to attend David Blanton's presentation—the Realtree Pro Staffer is a friend and one of the best-known hunting TV personalities in the industry—and, as usual, it was well worth my time. He particularly did a good job of putting the making of television hunting programs into perspective. Among his comments, he related a discussion he'd had with a producer about why fishing programs were on the decline, while hunting shows remain very popular.

"It's all about choices," David asserted. "In hunting shows, you get to see both the hunter and the animal make choices. On fishing shows, you only see a guy throwing a lure at the water." David was right on the money and really made me think. It indeed is about choices, but not just for a TV program. Each of us makes choices each season, sometimes without really realizing, and some of these choices can be quite wrong.

I present dozens of seminars annually to various types of audiences, the lion's share of which are comprised of hunting/fishing shows. The ones I really hate to participate in involve bowhunters—not that I dislike bowhunters. After all, I have hunted with a bow for more than 40 years. Rather, the same thing seems to happen each time I step up to the podium. "You're a bowhunter?" some guy will ask. On the affirmative answer, the inevitable next question is, "What do

you hunt with?" Let me tell you, there is no correct answer, and whatever I say will be wrong to someone in the crowd. If I say it's a compound, the recurve folks will be turned off. If it's a recurve, the traditional hunters will walk away. There's no way to win!

What a hunter chooses to hunt with should not be a matter of concern to other hunters, as long as the chosen instrument is legal for the act of hunting in the given location. Frankly, if claw hammers were made legal I wouldn't care if a hunter chose to use one. What I *do* care about is when hunters make decisions based on ego rather than what is good for the animal being hunted. Further, I really get testy when a particular state or agency requires its hunters to use a weapon that is questionable when it comes to humanely killing an animal.

Too often I see hunters use a small-caliber rifle or small-gauge shotgun just to feed their egos. The result often ends up being wounded and lost game. Likewise, using some monster magnum can affect your ability to shoot accurately. It's not just firearms, of course. A "traditional" bow also can be a bad decision if the person releasing the arrow is not skilled enough to get the job done. Again, it's all about choices.

I certainly am not saying we should outlaw any legal tool for hunting, rather, as hunters, we need to examine our motivation for using a specific implement. The bottom line in these decisions should be whether our selection increases the chances of wounding game or does not provide a quick,

humane kill, and whether we have the skill to use that particular tool.

We owe it to the animal. Gone are the days of my hero, Teddy Roosevelt, who wrote about shooting a big-game animal multiple times only to ultimately lose the specimen. The audience of his day lived in that environment and accepted that type of hunting. But it now is the 21st century, and the mere mention of wounded game is enough to threaten hunting as a recreational endeavor.

It is one thing for someone to make the wrong choice based on personal ego, but quite another when a state game agency makes the choice for you. Here's a case in point. I just got back from Kansas filming one of our TV shows. It was the usual September early season in the Sunflower State. There was a full moon, the average temperature was in the high 80s to mid-90s, and the wind was blowing at least 25 miles per hour. To make things worse, bucks were still in their social groups (pre-rut), and after one of the wettest summers in recent times, food was abundant. This is pretty standard stuff for hunting the early season in Kansas, and I'm not complaining—but this was not my first time to the rodeo.

What got to me on this particular hunt was that Kansas is one of the few states still requiring open sights for blackpowder hunters. Now before I continue, let me assure you I have killed bucks with every legal weapon, including rifle, shotgun, muzzleloader, and bow, and I am quite proficient with each of these weapons. I certainly am not bragging, but being proficient is part of my job. I also know how to get very close to bucks, even under high-pressure conditions. But this hunt was particularly irritating. There were plenty of great deer to be seen, and if I'd been willing to take a long shot I probably could have killed the B&C buck standing in the open some 175 yards away. The wide-open conditions inherent to Kansas' grassland prairies make getting close very difficult during legal shooting light (especially when a TV camera is involved). However, I was not willing to take a long shot on such

a fine animal with an open-sighted firearm, even if it meant not having a show. That was my choice.

We are under constant scrutiny by anti-hunting groups and, more importantly, the general public. Public acceptance of hunting stems from the perception that hunters help to control game numbers. That's good, because the reality is we have runaway deer populations throughout the nation, with density-dependent diseases such

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as epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) felling deer like cordwood from New Jersey to Texas. Yet, it's becoming more difficult to defend hunting as a means to control deer populations, because hunters are *not* killing enough deer to control populations. Compounding that factor is the fact that many wildlife departments and DNRs still act like the whitetail is an endangered species! Fact is, hunter numbers are declining while deer populations are booming. So why would we want to make it *more* difficult to kill deer?

Thankfully, the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department continues to make it easier, not harder, to take more deer. Other states could learn from TPWD. But "Texas-style" deer management is often spoken of in the context of insult in many areas.

Why on earth does Kansas require open sights for the muzzleloader season? When blackpowder first became popular 20 or 30 years ago, a good friend (who happens to be a well-known deer biologist) called me up to brag he'd helped pass an open-sight requirement in a nearby state.

"Why would you want to do that?" I asked.

"If people are going to hunt with primitive weapons," he argued, "there

ought to be a challenge." I might add he also is a person who once said, "Happiness is a good blood trail."

Challenge is one thing, but, historically, blackpowder firearms have produced the highest crippling loss of any weapon. True, recent technological improvements have made these weapons very effective at killing deer, even at distances of 150 or more yards—provided they are equipped with a telescopic sight. I am not picking on muzzleloaders. I love them. But after all, any open-sight firearm restricts the distance and light conditions in which you can shoot accurately.

I love my Thompson/Center Pro Hunter and would put its accuracy against most centerfire rifles. Yet even with the remarkable precision afforded by this gun I refused to take a shot over 75 yards in Kansas. Most of the deer were moving in the last 20 minutes of legal shooting time, so I did not shoot. That was my self-imposed limitation because at 100 yards an open sight almost covers a mature buck's entire body. And under low light it is difficult to pick and see the proper spot at which to aim. The probability of placing a bullet in a location that would provide a quick kill, then, is diminished significantly. Add in the 25-mph wind, and you have the makings for a disaster!

Just striking a deer is not a reasonable or acceptable goal. Look, as noted earlier, I have no problem with someone hunting deer with any legal weapon, but the choice should be made based on whether there is a high probability of a humane kill. That requires both skills by the hunter, and equipment that allows him to perform capably. We owe that to these wonderful animals. Feeding one's ego by using an exotic weapon should not be part of modern deer hunting. There are folks who, given the power, would restrict hunting to flintlock muskets or, worse yet, rocks! Hunting, in spite of what PETA and others may say, is not a

blood sport. The hunt is about outsmarting the animal, then completing the act with a clean kill. But for every hunter who can make a clean kill at 100-plus yards with an open-sight rifle or muzzleloader, there are dozens who, in a pressured moment, will take that low-probability shot (studies show almost a fourth of hunters indeed will take such a shot).

I hear there is consideration in Kansas to allow scoped muzzleloaders next season. I hope this is true. The area I hunted was crawling with deer! I saw more than 200 during a six-day hunt, so I don't think going to scopes will exactly decimate the herd. I talked with many Kansas deer hunters during my week there, and not a single one was against going to scopes. And besides high deer populations and sportsmen opinion, there still is another good, practical reason to do so.

If you examine results from recent hunter demographic surveys, the average hunter's age is increasing. In fact, if you tell me when a study was done, I can almost exactly predict the average age of hunters; you just add the number of years since the last study. A large percentage of hunters are at an age when their arms are not long enough to read the newspaper. I have only one friend my age (60) who does not use reading glasses. It is very difficult to aim at and shoot a deer through bifocals. Take away the eyewear entirely, and you cannot even see the buck and the back sight at the same time. Requiring open sights should go the way of fine print!

Am I saying folks should not hunt with open sights? Not at all. If you have the skill and judgment to do so, be my guest. What I am saying is that hunters should not be forced to use a weapon that promotes wounding simply because someone in a government agency decided it was OK to put ego ahead of ethics. David was right, it is about choices. 