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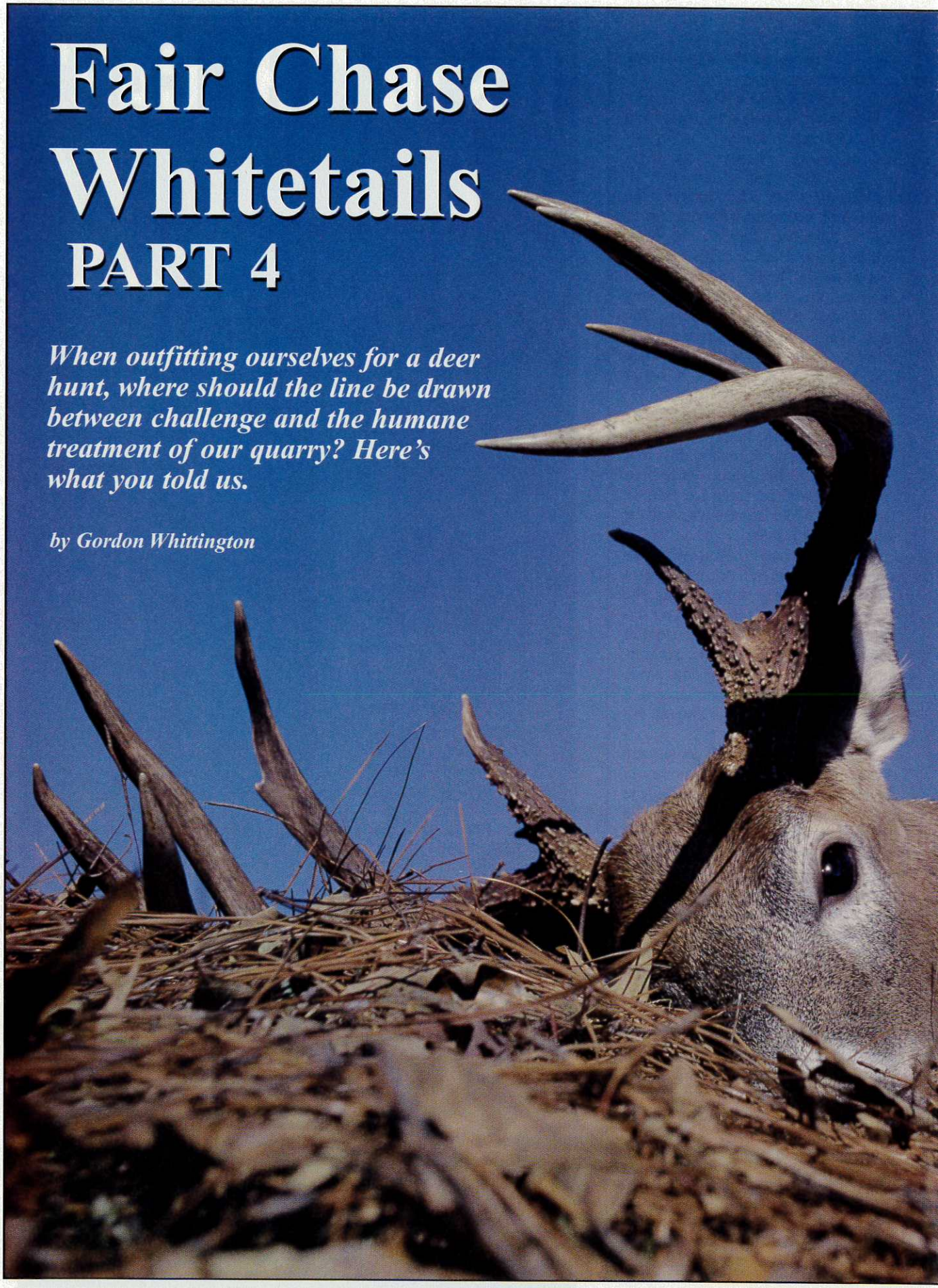
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RDI

Fair Chase Whitetails
PART 4

When outfitting ourselves for a deer hunt, where should the line be drawn between challenge and the humane treatment of our quarry? Here's what you told us.

by Gordon Whittington



doe, he will be on the move again, looking for another.

THE POST-RUT

In most areas, this period runs from early December through the end of hunting season, whenever that might be. You'll know that the majority of the breeding has been done by the reunion of most does with their fawns and a dramatic decrease in buck sightings and deer-car collisions.

But while buck sightings will decrease, this is the time when many of the real bruisers are taken. You most likely won't see a great number of bucks during this period, but when you do spot one, there's a better chance that he'll be a monster.

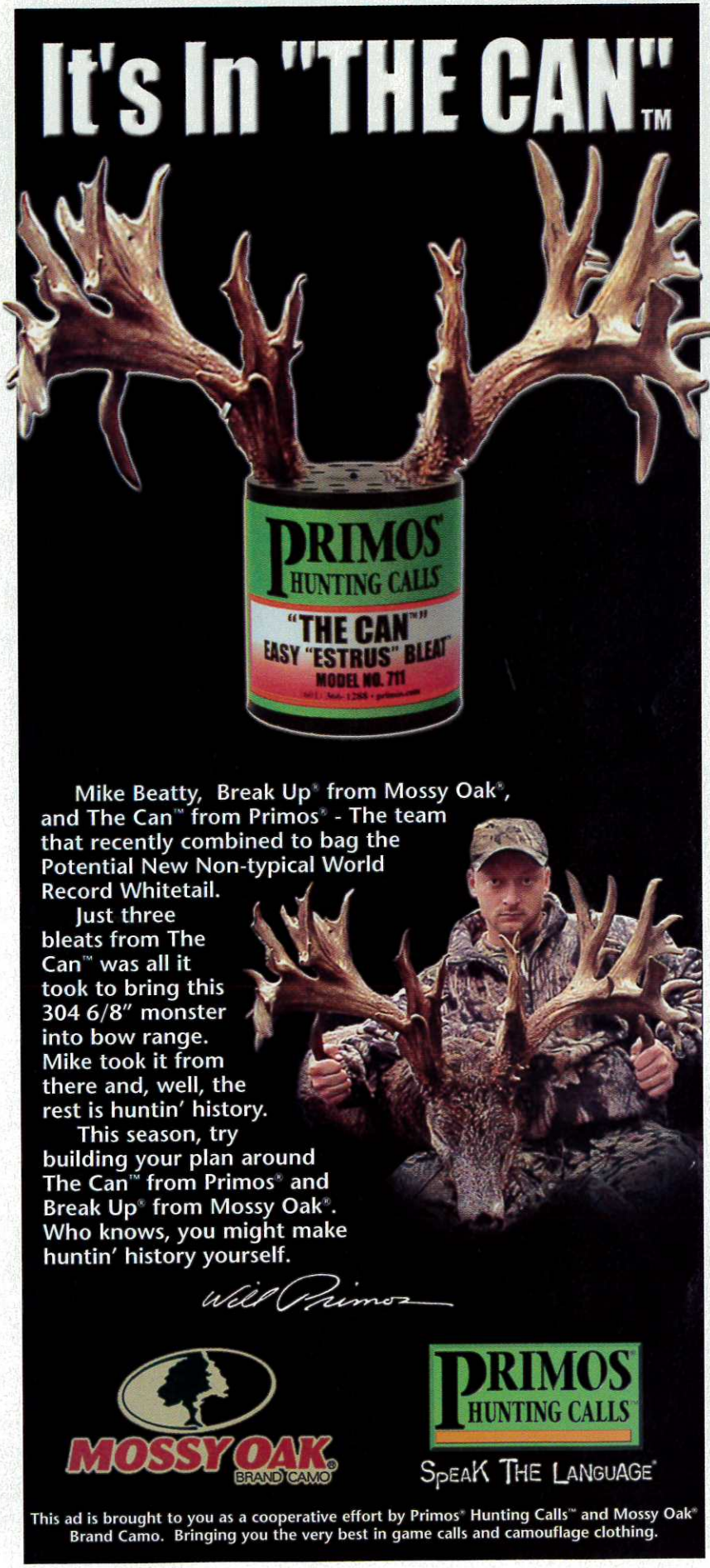
Most of the does have been bred by now, but the few that weren't will come into estrus again roughly four weeks later. Also, some early-born doe fawns will be receptive later in December, and mature bucks will be out looking for them.

I've often been asked why the smaller bucks aren't out cruising at this time, as they were during the early part of the season. I have no scientific data, but I believe the smaller bucks are lying in the weeds, exhausted from weeks of running does. And, let's not forget that by late season, a lot of those young bucks already are in hunters' freezers.

Immature bucks haven't yet learned the game and get overly anxious in their attempts to breed, while the older bucks have expended much less energy during the previous few weeks. I spend a lot of time on stand toward the end of the breeding period, as this is when many true bruisers are taken. Besides, it isn't going to get any better from here on out.

* * *

As noted, once the dates of each phase of the rut have been determined for your hunting area, they will hold true annually. This will allow you to effectively plan your hunting strategy each season without necessarily having to observe the visible signs yourself. You might say that if you do your homework properly and get some good reports from your informants, you'll know to some degree what the bucks are going to do long before even *they* know!

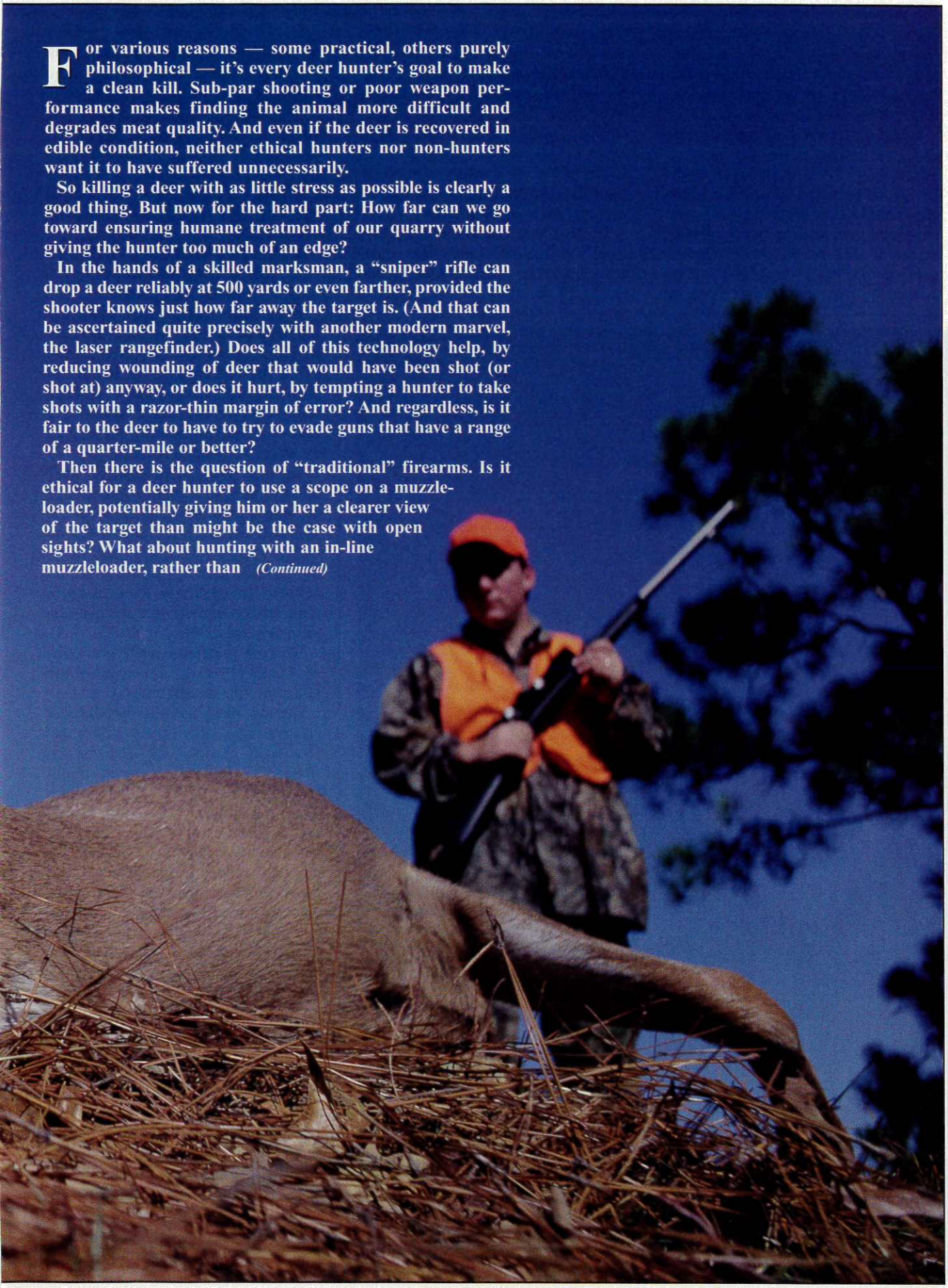


For various reasons — some practical, others purely philosophical — it's every deer hunter's goal to make a clean kill. Sub-par shooting or poor weapon performance makes finding the animal more difficult and degrades meat quality. And even if the deer is recovered in edible condition, neither ethical hunters nor non-hunters want it to have suffered unnecessarily.

So killing a deer with as little stress as possible is clearly a good thing. But now for the hard part: How far can we go toward ensuring humane treatment of our quarry without giving the hunter too much of an edge?

In the hands of a skilled marksman, a "sniper" rifle can drop a deer reliably at 500 yards or even farther, provided the shooter knows just how far away the target is. (And that can be ascertained quite precisely with another modern marvel, the laser rangefinder.) Does all of this technology help, by reducing wounding of deer that would have been shot (or shot at) anyway, or does it hurt, by tempting a hunter to take shots with a razor-thin margin of error? And regardless, is it fair to the deer to have to try to evade guns that have a range of a quarter-mile or better?

Then there is the question of "traditional" firearms. Is it ethical for a deer hunter to use a scope on a muzzleloader, potentially giving him or her a clearer view of the target than might be the case with open sights? What about hunting with an in-line muzzleloader, rather than *(Continued)*



one of more traditional (and perhaps less reliable) design? Do non-"primitive" elements of muzzleloader hunting take things too far, or do they just improve the chances of a clean kill?

By no means are such questions the exclusive domain of firearms hunters. What about the advantages of high-let-off compound bows, which allow an archer to draw before a buck gets close and then hold at full draw until the right shot is presented? Do we consider the use of such bows to be consistent with fair chase, because they presumably allow for better arrow placement, or do we hold to the idea that they reduce hunting to tournament archery? And for that matter, what about using crossbows in bow season? Do they make it too easy to kill deer, leading to overharvest? Or should their use actually be encouraged, in an effort to cull overabundant deer and recruit new hunters?

To give you readers a chance to speak out on these and other questions related to whitetail hunting and management ethics, we published a special "fair chase" survey in our January 2001 issue. Many of you took the survey, and in the September issue we began revealing your responses.

Thus far we've looked at how you voted on such hunting methods and practices as baiting, waterhole hunting, drives, snow tracking and scouting with cameras. Now it's time to examine your responses to questions about actually shooting deer.

ULTRA-LONG-RANGE RIFLES

Fair Chase: 69 Percent
Unfair: 29 Percent

Long shots that hit their mark are the stuff of legends; in fact, in many hunting camps the person who can kill a deer at great range is held in high regard. Consistently making long shots on deer-sized targets is a practiced skill demanding the best of a marksman and his firearm.

Custom and semi-custom deer rifles capable of shooting tight groups at long range have burst onto the whitetail scene. Built and tuned to deliver "sniper" accuracy with hunting loads, these rigs allow a skilled shooter (particularly one using a rangefinder) to drop deer at a quarter-mile or even farther.

Do such guns have a place in ethical hunting? Nearly 70 percent of the voters on this question said yes.

Because many areas of the Midwest and Northeast offer little or no centerfire rifle hunting for deer, sharp regional differences in views might have been expected. Indeed, some were seen. Iowa and Illinois, which don't allow the use of centerfire rifles, had the lowest approval (45 and 49 percent, respectively). Meanwhile, three Southern states in which rifles are legal — Mississippi, Tennessee and South Carolina — came in at 90, 89 and 88 percent, respectively.

But the law apparently wasn't the only factor involved in readers' views on this question. In Kansas, where centerfires have long been legal, only 52 percent of respondents voted in favor of ultra-long-range rifles. In Indiana and Ohio, two states that *don't* allow modern rifles, 61 and 55 percent of voters, respectively, voted that ultra-long-range rifles are consistent with the principles of fair chase.

Wyoming's Bill McLean said he thinks such guns are allowable but noted, "Each hunter needs to know his or her own limits." Texas reader John



Hagier added that he'd approve of deer hunting with one of these rifles "if you can properly shoot it."

On the other end of the spectrum are readers such as John Neider of Ohio, who countered, "It's not really hunting when you are shooting over a quarter-mile." And Minnesota's Tom Boesch asked, "What chance does a deer have at 400 yards?"

LASER RANGEFINDERS
Fair Chase: 80 Percent
Unfair: 20 Percent

Knowing how far a bullet or arrow must travel to hit its target is one of the main factors in accuracy, and nothing equals a laser beam for making such measurements. With the price of laser rangefinders having fallen over the past few years, many have found their way into the hands of avid whitetail hunters.

Four of every five voters told us that using laser rangefinders is ethical. Among states and provinces from which we got at least 20 responses to this question, the highest approval was in West Virginia (97 percent), followed by Louisiana (92), Florida (91) and New Jersey (90). Michigan hunters gave these devices the lowest approval rating, at 75 percent.

A number of you wrote that you approve of laser rangefinders because hunters need to make accurate shots. "Every bowhunter should have one," claimed Indiana's Randall Roark. Ben Powell of Georgia pointed out that even when using a rangefinder, "You still have to make the shot."

A number of you said that you approve of laser rangefinders because hunters need to make accurate shots. "Every bowhunter should have one," wrote Indiana's Randall Roark.

But one in five voters apparently agreed with Kentucky reader Rudy McKinney, who told us that hunters should just "learn to judge distance."

IN-LINE MUZZLELOADERS
Fair Chase: 84 Percent
Unfair: 14 Percent

In-line muzzleloaders designed to be more reliable and accurate than models with exposed firing mechanisms have been largely responsible for the huge recent increase in black-powder interest. The National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association's Long-hunter record book readily accepts trophies shot with in-lines.

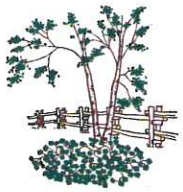
However, many traditionalists argue that in-line rifles violate the spirit of "primitive" weapons hunting and thus shouldn't be legal during special seasons. Colorado even disallowed hunting with in-lines for a short time. However, that rule was dropped. (In Pennsylvania, muzzleloader season still is limited to flintlocks only, so no percussion-cap rifles of any design are allowed then.)

By a 5-to-1 margin, respondents approved of in-lines. Tennessee voters gave them unanimous approval, while 97 percent in Florida were in favor. Pennsylvania had the lowest support, but even there it was 75 percent.

Whether a rifle is of sidelock or in-line design, "you still have to make the shot," wrote Kansan Stan Honas.

Bryan Gasper of South Dakota argued that in-lines are "okay, but they are basically centerfire rifles without a casing. Seasons need to be altered." And Alabama's Tim LeMay argued, "when a primitive weapon can shoot up

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to 225 yards, something is wrong."

SCOPES ON MUZZLELOADERS

Fair Chase: 77 Percent

Unfair: 21 Percent

In many places, you can't use a scope on a muzzleloader during primitive-weapons season. But a strong majority of readers who sent in surveys have no problem with scopes.

Highest approval came from Indiana and North Carolina (96 percent each), with Florida (94), Iowa (92) and Maine (91) also well above average. Meanwhile, just 65 percent of Minnesota voters approved, with those in West Virginia and Pennsylvania (66 each) right behind. (None of these three states allows the use of scopes during primitive-weapons season.)

A scope "doesn't change the range of the rifle," argued North Dakota's Scott Wolff. "It might make for a better-placed shot."

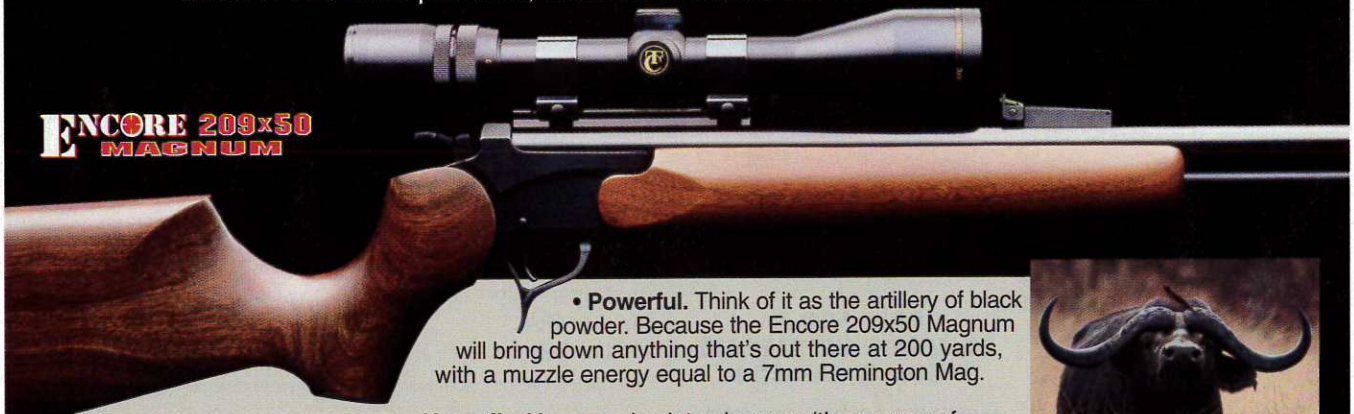
Arkansas reader Jason James told us that scopes "help with identification and accuracy." Fellow Arkansan Edd Ridings, countered, "If you need a scope, he's too far!"



Mike Beatty's 304 6/8-inch Ohio giant has been rejected by the Pope and Young Club because the archer's bow had a let-off exceeding 65 percent. But a strong majority of survey respondents approve of such bows. Photo by Ron Sinfelt.

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BOWS WITH OVER 65 PERCENT LET-OFF
Fair Chase: 79 Percent
Unfair: 18 Percent

Most hunting bows now on the market have higher than 65 percent effective let-off. At odds with this is a Pope and Young Club rule against accepting trophies shot with bows having more than 65 percent effective let-off. Last spring, by a margin of nearly 3 to 1, P&Y members and senior members voted to keep this rule in place, based on their concern that dropping it might remove too much "challenge" from bowhunting.

As a group, our readers came to a far different conclusion. By a margin of 4 to 1, you told us that high-let-off bows *are* consistent with fair chase.

Support for this equipment was 96 percent in Virginia and nearly as high in South Carolina (95) and Indiana (94). Lowest support (71 percent) was in Kansas, with Alabama and Minnesota coming in at 72.

Some readers noted that age and/or ailments (not all of them true "disabilities") can make it hard for an archer to shoot a bow with 65 percent or less let-off. "Without a high-let-off bow, my father could not hunt with me," wrote Florida's Eric Butler.

Other readers claimed that regardless of let-off, bowhunting is still tough. "You still need to get near the deer," wrote Virginia's Sid Johnson. Minnesota's Gary Schaefer added, "You still have to manually hold the bow. Plenty of things still can go wrong." And Oklahoma's Randy Devine pointed out that "let-off has nothing to do with skill."

CROSSBOWS IN BOW SEASON
Fair Chase: 51 Percent
Unfair: 47 Percent

Crossbow opportunities are on the rise, to the satisfaction of some hunters and the consternation of others.

Opinions on using crossbows during bow season were split nearly down the middle. But many of you who approved wrote that *only disabled hunters* should be allowed to use them during that time. This suggests that fewer than half of the voters support allowing able-bodied hunters to use crossbows during bow season.

South Carolina voters gave crossbow hunting the highest support, with 85 percent calling it "fair chase." Ohio was next, at 75 percent, with Arkansas at 70. (Crossbows are legal for use during archery season by non-disabled hunters in Ohio and Arkansas, but not in South Carolina.) Conversely, just 32 percent of Kansas voters approved, with Iowa at 35 percent, Missouri 41 and Minnesota 42.

"The only advantage of crossbows is that movement is minimized at the time of the shot," wrote West Virginian Steve Mathess. "They're no more accurate or powerful (than a compound). You still must be more than a gun hunter to kill with a crossbow."

Wisconsin's G.E. Hunter has no use for crossbows, however. "If you have one arm and teeth," he argued, "you can draw a (compound) bow."

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

There's plenty more to come in this series, including the ethics of various management practices. Next month, we'll see how readers across North America voted on such topics as supplemental feeding, importing non-native genetics and using food plots to boost deer size and numbers.



MELVIN'S MAGIC

By putting maximum effort into his scouting, hunting and landowner relationships, this Oklahoman has downed trophy after trophy. Could his methods work for you?

by Mike Lambeth

There's an old saying that lightning never strikes twice in the same place. But that's not exactly true. It finds Oklahoma's Melvin Hart quite often.

Although taking big deer is largely a matter of being in the right place at the right time, Melvin has shown that employing the right game plan can significantly shorten the wait between successful hunts.

"Hunters can do a lot of things to stack the deck on a monster buck," he claims, and his last three whitetails suggest that he knows what he's talking about. The sum total of antlers on those three trophies measures just under 510 inches! And get this: All were shot in less than a year's span!



One of Melvin's proven tactics is to sneak up to a feeding area and glass it from an elevated hiding spot. Once he finds the buck he wants, he usually sets up on travel corridors leading to/from the field. Photo by Mike Lambeth.

I recently spent nearly six hours interviewing Melvin on a number of subjects, and I was blown away by his seemingly unlimited knowledge of trophy deer. Melvin plans his hunts carefully and choreographs every aspect of every day. His foresight puts the odds in his favor, and when trophy opportunities present themselves, he generally capitalizes on them. The central Oklahoma resident spends 40 to 50 days a year pursuing whitetails.

Consider his amazing accomplishments: In 1994, he shot his largest buck to date, a heavy-racked Oklahoma non-typical scoring 201 Boone and Crockett points. In 1996, he took one of Missouri's top bucks of the year, a trophy with tines of over 14 inches and a gross score of 171 6/8. He has taken many 140- to 160-class bucks as well. He prefers

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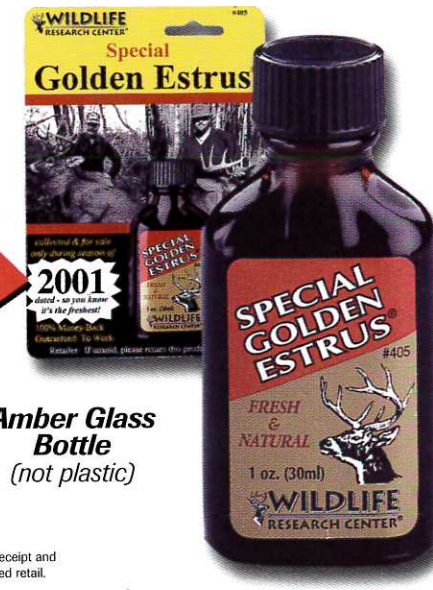
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