

The author, shown here with a fine buck taken on the King Ranch in Texas last fall, is a proponent of the idea that the "competition" in whitetail hunting should be between the hunter and the animal. Photo by Amos DeWitt, Tio Moya Corp.

Where's The Challenge In Whitetail Hunting?

Are you hunting deer for all the right reasons? Or are you simply using this great form of recreation as a way of measuring yourself against other hunters? The answer is more important than you might think.

by Dr. James C. Kroll

My wife is among the ranks of women who've recently taken up deer hunting. This has been great for me in two ways. First, I get to spend more time with my best friend, which is important to a whitetail biologist who seems to be on the road more every year. Second, Susie's introduction to deer hunting has allowed me to rekindle some of the old feelings from my novice days of deer hunting. It's nice to feel my own heart race as she stares down the rifle barrel at a mature whitetail.

Last fall, however, she did a curious thing. We had patterned a mature buck in the Brush Country of South Texas and had carefully constructed a brush blind overlooking a field the buck frequented in the evenings. He had a scrape line and a signpost rub just outside the field's edge. The blind would allow us to see both the staging area and the buck's approach trail.

Just before darkness came to this land of thorny brush, the buck appeared. He stood motionless, staring out into the field at a small group of does that had gathered to feed an hour earlier. Susie raised her gun. There went my heart again! But then, she just dropped the barrel and watched the buck.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"I'm not going to shoot him," was her reply.

I accepted Susie's decision, in spite of my frustration. Later, she explained that while the buck was a good one, he was not bigger than her "personal best." So, she didn't want to shoot him. That's the second time she's done that to me!

Later in the 1994 season, I hunted with several men on a well-known Texas ranch. It was a great event. Over the course of several days, I got to examine some of the finest bucks in that part of North America. But there was downside to the hunt. The hunter who'd traveled to the ranch with me only wanted to know one thing about every buck we saw: "What will he score?"

On one occasion, we managed to stalk an incredible buck with very long beams and tines. In fact, we were able to creep within 25 yards of the deer. At that distance, he truly seemed to be all antlers, though he had a normal-sized body for a Texas buck. But guess what? The guy would not shoot the buck!

When he told me he wasn't going to take this outstanding deer, I fully expected to receive the same explanation provided by Susie. Nope! "He only has 8 points," was the answer.

The guy went on to explain how he had read some article by a respected outdoor writer who had pointed out the "inferior" traits of 8-pointers. "I'm not going home with less than a 10," the guy said. "My buddies would never let me live it down that I traveled all the way here to shoot an 8-pointer!"

Returning home, I picked up an issue of an outdoor magazine, only to read about the latest deer "hero" who had been caught killing deer illegally. In my book, *A Practical Guide to Producing and Harvesting White-tailed Deer,* I had interviewed this very man, to find out what makes him a trophy hunter. "It's the competition, pure and simple," had been his reply. He went on to explain how much it meant to him to outdo the other guy.

I could go on recounting story after story, each with a similar theme. But instead, I think it's time to ask the question: Is competition killing deer hunting?

A COMPETITIVE ANIMAL

The 1970s were interesting in many ways. The decade gave rise to the concept that man could actually be an overachiever. All of the ills of the world were attributed to competition brought on by a post-war society. It was just no longer cool to be competitive.

Then came the '80s, with a re-kindled interest in survival of the fittest. This "new" attitude then became passé in the '90s, when market-force economics became the new villain responsible for society's woes.

However, no matter what your political beliefs, there is one irrefutable fact about man: He has survived the millennia by being a highly competitive creature. It is his nature to be competitive, and in terms of building a large population, it has worked almost too well. It's not competition that's bad, only the way in which it manifests itself in modern civilization.

Aboriginal man lived off his wits. On a daily basis, he pitted his intellect against prey and predators with superior physical skills and senses, yet he survived and even thrived. The competition was man vs. animal, and the winner lived to hunt another day. Clearly, there was

natural selection that favored a competitive creature, and man filled the bill nicely.

That worked well until civilization came along. Living in cities and fed by agricultural crops, modern man retains all of the instincts developed to survive in the animal world. Yet these instincts are not well-served in an urbanized society. Only recently have we come to admit that man's instincts slumber just beneath his skin. Unfortunately, this competitive nature often creeps out at the most inopportune times!

MAN, THE MODERN HUNTER

It's safe to say that most of us would not starve if we failed to harvest a deer this season. That's often used against us by the anti-hunting forces. Frankly, the term "sport hunting" has caused us many problems, for the idea of hunting and killing an animal for "sport" does not set well with an urbanite whose only contact with animals is the squirrel in the park. However, many people fail to recognize that those darned instincts just keep cropping up.

Take apart "recreation," and pronounce it differently. Try re-creation. Modern "recreational" hunting (as I prefer to call it) is not killing for sport. It is the only thread binding us to our heritage and the natural world. Unfortunately, we bring to hunting the skills and habits we have learned at the office or shop.

As a professional whitetail biologist, I have discovered that my job more and more is to help people enjoy themselves. The average guy I hunt with has to be *told* when he is having a good time.

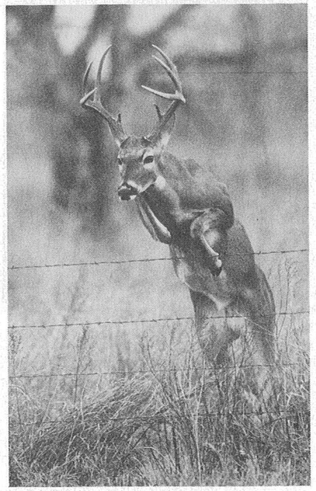
For example, consider the case of one of my friends, Julian. He has trained bird dogs for all of his life, producing some of the best in the country. A few years back, I invited him to participate in a quail hunt. He would handle the dogs, and I would guide. Our guests were three industrialists, each a very successful, wealthy man.

It was one of those magical days when everything came together. The time was early November, and the morning temperature was a perfect 42 degrees. The dogs were a marvel to watch. Covey after covey was found, and each time the brace of dogs performed at their peak. Keeno would go on point, with Emmy Lou backing. But do you know what the hunters were doing? Betting on how many birds each would take.

Suddenly, my friend Julian stopped dead in front of the hunters. Behind him were Keeno and Emmy Lou, doing what they had trained their entire lives for. "Gentlemen!" roared Julian. "Look at the dogs!"

Startled, the three men obeyed the command, and from that time forward, they were like different people.

"Wow!" exclaimed one of the hunters. "Look at that!"



Regardless of a buck's score, he should never be reduced to mere numbers on a page, the author says. Photo by Mike Biggs.

For the remainder of the hunt, those three men had the time of their lives. I'll bet you that even to this day, they remember that hunt. I also bet that not one of them remembers who shot the most birds! They had simply been doing what they did on a daily basis in their non-hunting lives: measuring success with a numerical score.

TRUE HUNTING COMPETITION

We're not going to change the fact that man is competitive. But can't we apply our competitive nature in a more enjoyable and productive way? I do not claim to have all the answers on this. I fall into the same traps as many of you. However, allow me to offer four points I use in order to enjoy deer hunting more.

1. Acknowledge that the real competition in deer hunting is between you and the animal.

This is the first and foremost rule, in my opinion. If you are out there trying to harvest a buck to make yourself appear larger in the eyes of your hunting buddies, you need to undergo some self-analysis. If you don't, you never will be happy with your sport.

I once knew of a man whose claim to fame was that he'd killed a buck on every opening morning of his entire 50-year hunting career. He was revered by everyone in his hunting camp. Unfortunately, however, I had the opportunity to observe him firsthand for 15 years of that career. He killed a buck each opening day, all right — a *yearling* buck! Afterward, he showed no interest in the animals and seemed relieved to have kept his reputation intact. The rest of the season found him in camp, drinking and telling stories about his great hunting skill.

Now, I'm not attacking those who harvest young bucks. What I *am* saying is that, on this particular club, there was no challenge to killing an 18-month-old buck. The place was crawling with deer, and they were lured into range (legally) with corn piles.

My Alberta hunting buddy, Dave Bzawy, is one of the world's best at making the most of the challenge of deer hunting. Teaming up one very cold November morning, Dave and I called in a mature buck in the fringe habitat of Alberta. It was not the largest buck I have harvested by any means, but he was old, experienced and not easily taken.

As Dave walked away from the scene of the kill, he turned to me and said, "I'm going to get the truck, so you can have a few moments alone with your buck." It truly was a *recreational* experience — one I'll never forget, no matter how many monster bucks I take. We had competed against a marvelously adapted animal, the same way our ancestors had, and on this day we had won.

2. Establish standards for yourself.

I'm not suggesting that my wife's refusal to shoot a buck smaller than one she'd already taken was the only "right" way to approach the situation. However, the real point of her argument — that all hunters should

set challenging standards — is worth repeating. I'm embarrassed to say this insight had to come from a novice hunter! Ask yourself: Is it important for me to kill a deer, no matter how much I have to lower my standards? Can I let a young buck walk and go back to camp without a nagging fear of having to explain why I didn't kill a buck this season? Whom do I have to please?

A hunting career, unlike other sports careers, can cover an entire lifetime. So, you probably still have plenty of time. Set *realistic* goals for yourself. As noted, there's really nothing wrong with harvesting a yearling buck. But once you've done it, might you not strive for an older buck?

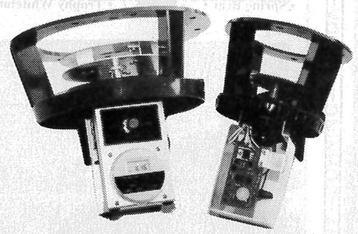
In our book, *The Art and Science of Patterning Whitetails*, Gordon Whittington and I defined "big" as mature. Older bucks are virtually always a challenge, no matter what their racks look like. In fact, some of the finest hunts I've had were for mature bucks with less than trophy antlers.

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An aggressive, old 6-pointer, of all things, comes quickly to mind. He was an old buck on the Diamond H Ranch in South Texas. Biologist Mark Ellett and I had tried to harvest this buck for three years. He was one of the smartest bucks I have ever known.

Finally, on a late-December afternoon, this old boy and I finally met up. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled into a thick, brushy bottom where I knew he had to be hiding. Backed against a mesquite, I rattled with all the vigor I could muster.

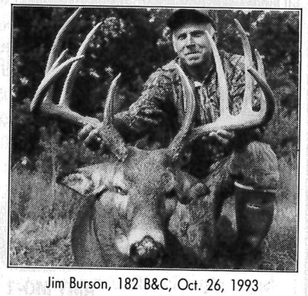
Within seconds, the commotion directly in front of me left nothing to misjudge — he was coming! The deer leaped over two 6-foot-tall clumps of brush in an effort to get to me. Backed against the tree, I had no place to go; it was just the two of us. He suddenly appeared at least 8 feet above my head, as he made the final leap to my feet. Although the buck was most likely just unaware of my exact position, I really thought for a

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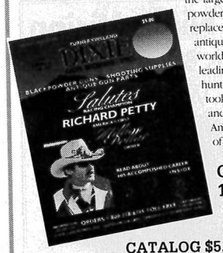


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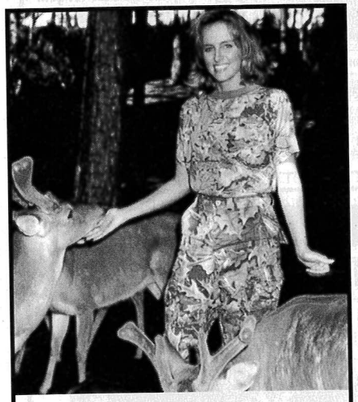
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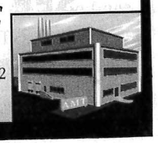
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moment he would skewer me to the tree!

I only had time to raise my 7mm Rem. Mag. to "half mast" before firing, but the bullet caught the old buck dead center in the back of the neck. He fell dead with an antler lying on my boot! Needless to say, it was a few moments before I could regain my composure.

Later, you should have seen the curious looks I got when folks asked about how my hunting season had gone. "I shot an old 6-pointer," was my reply. I'm sure some hunters were disappointed for me, but I consider that buck to have been a splendid hunting memory.

3. Be experience-oriented.

Each year I receive countless calls from hunters wanting to know the best place to harvest a trophy buck. Although I usually can make some recommendations, I try to find out what type of hunting experiences the guy has had so that I can try to steer him toward new ones.

"Have you tried hunting South Florida?" I often query.

"Nope, not interested," is the common reply. "There aren't any monster bucks there!"

Well, big antlers and heavy bodies aren't everything in whitetail hunting. As noted in my recent two-part series, "The Many Faces of the Whitetail" (August and September issues), there's a lot of enjoyment to be had from hunting deer in a variety of habitat types, regardless of what those deer will score on some measuring system.

A whitetail from New Brunswick and one from the deserts of New Mexico have little in common, and in many ways, they can be viewed as different species. Due to extreme differences in habitat type, hunting pressure, etc., hunting across the range of the species is quite varied, and that means the hunter must adapt if he is to fill his tags. For example, in parts of Florida the rut occurs in the summer; would you know not to waste your time rattling there in November?

4. Develop your hunting skills.

The move to primitive weapons is, in my opinion, a positive development in whitetail hunting. There are many motivations for a person taking up the bow or blackpowder rifle (including, unfortunately, getting the drop on

other hunters), but it can be argued that these weapons take more skill than the modern rifle or slug gun. Yet your choice of weapon is only part of the overall picture.

At a recent hunting show, I gave my seminar in a small room adjacent to the exposition hall. It was an unusual venue, because folks could come into the seminar room before entering the main exhibit area. As customary, I finished my talk and solicited questions.

I have heard just about all you can dream up. But a fellow asked me a unique question that made me think. "Before we go into that hall and have all those folks try to sell us something," he said, "would you mind telling us what we really *need*?"

The question set me back. Suddenly, it occurred to me that the best answer was just to list the equipment I personally use in hunting mature whitetails. You know what? The list was shorter than many hunters would believe. Skill does not come with equipment; it comes with experience. Don't try to use gadgetry as a substitute for hunting savvy. Instead, select gear that will complement your knowledge.

Primitive man survived quite well on very little equipment and a great deal of experience. However, it also can be argued that he was out there day after day, depending on his experience to put food on the table. The modern recreational hunter is only out there for a few days or weeks at most. This means it will probably take you more years to perfect your skills than it did him. But that's all right. Remember, your hunting career will span many more years. Strive to perfect old skills and develop new ones each season. It will pay off in greater memories.

I hope I've given you something to think about. The whitetail hunter is an evolving creature. Modern deer hunting is a relatively new activity, in many places spanning only the last few decades. The old standards for "success" and "failure" do not apply today. Studies show that society *will* accept deer hunting as a legitimate activity *if* the general public believes hunters are highly skilled, ethical individuals who truly care for the resource. Becoming too competitive with each other is a sure way to erode that support.

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