

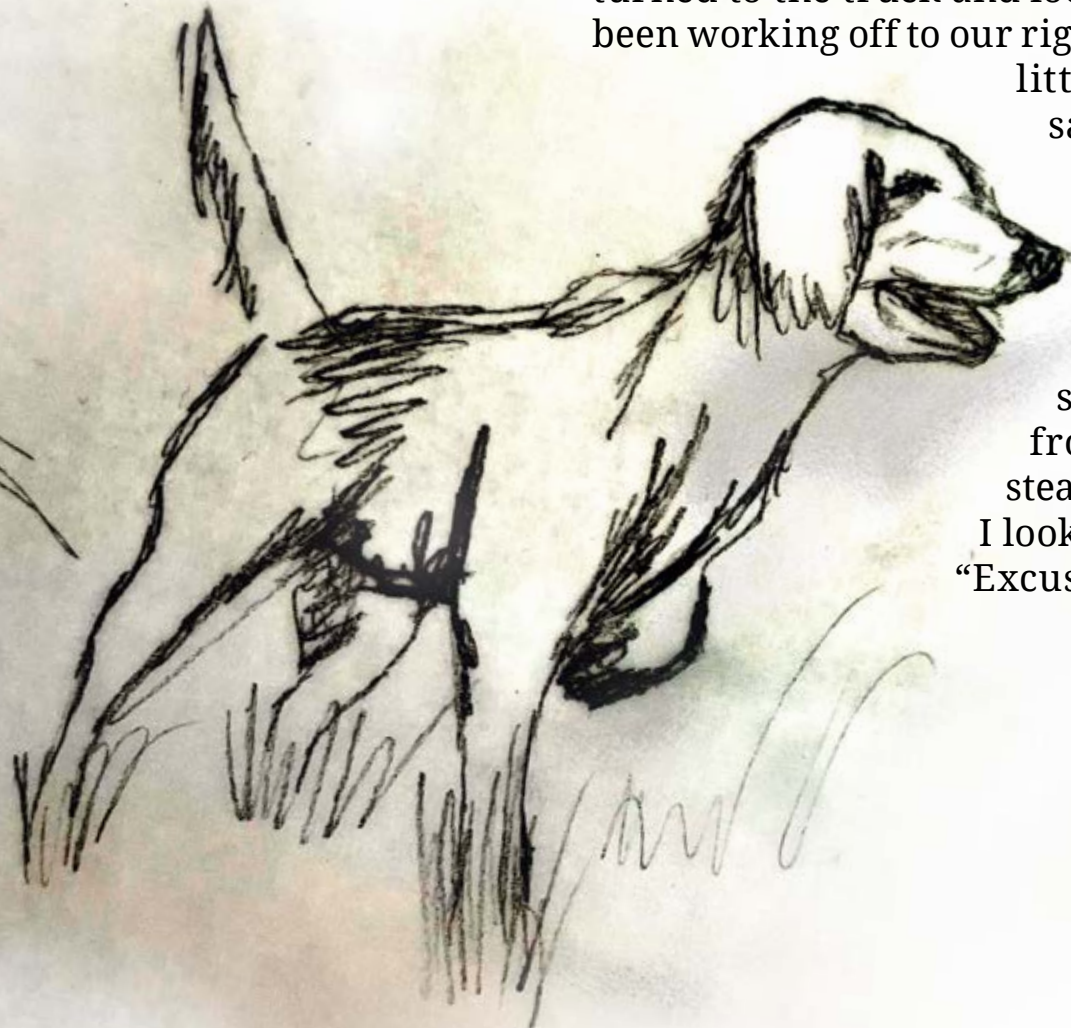
# TROPHIES

We walked side by side that day, talking. I had a shotgun slung over my shoulder, but we had not seen anything to cause me to lift it. Instead, it had been a day of good conversation and exercise. A calm, easy day with a nap beneath the rattling leaves of a yellowing aspen and the feel of September sun on our skin. As the day faded and the chill came down the valley from the mountain, we turned to the truck and looked to the dog. He had been working off to our right, and we were paying

little attention until she said, “Where’s Hank?”

I called once and then saw him, a full quarter mile away, a solid white buoy on the gray canvas that is the sagebrush sea. He was frozen in point, holding steady, a classic setter pose.

I looked at her and grinned. “Excuse me for a minute.”



I ran toward Hank, and he stood. He held, and I made time, shotgun now in my hands, a handful of shells bouncing in my game vest as I vaulted over sagebrush. Closer, I slowed, caught my breath, and walked in. The dog did not move. It was beautiful. I swallowed. Then a big male sage grouse, as big as all outdoors, launched into the air. I swung on him, pulled the trigger, and piled him. The earth seemed to wince when he hit, and the big male setter, old Hank, was on him and bringing him back.

That was almost a decade ago. I buried the dog a couple years after that. I've got lots of pictures of that dog. I've even got his collar in a special place in my living room. But those pictures, and even that collar, don't bring back the memories as strongly, as fully, as the big bomber sage grouse that sits on my gun safe. For some reason, I had that particular bird mounted by a good taxidermist. Perhaps it was because the bird was a big old lunger and probably as tough as boot leather to eat. The dog had many more spectacular points and retrieves in his brief but brilliant career. But whatever the reason, I had that particular bird mounted and, also without plan, that is the last sage grouse I ever shot. I've given myself a hopefully temporary moratorium on shooting sage chickens because they are scarcer than they used to

be and because I haven't really felt like shooting something that is having such a tough go of it in modern-day Wyoming. And so that sage grouse sits there on my gun cabinet, and when I look at him, I'm back in Wyoming and back on that sagebrush steppe with a shotgun in my hand, a pretty girl at my side, and one hell of a bird dog before us.

I have other animals and birds mounted in my house, and they, too, bring me to special places, places where time comes back as clearly as good gin melts ice in a highball glass. I have photographs of other times, but nothing brings the waves of recollection up as sharply as the animal itself.



THE ETHICS OF SPORTSMANSHIP IS NOT A  
FIXED CODE, BUT MUST BE FORMULATED  
AND PRACTICED BY THE INDIVIDUAL, WITH  
NO REFEREE BUT THE ALMIGHTY.  
-ALDO LEOPOLD



There's a Coues' whitetail deer, a nice little buck that I shot in college not far from the Mexico border in Arizona. I remember how he burst from a stand of oak and sprinted across a canyon, flying his white tail, and I remember how I snapped my .270 to my shoulder offhand. I squeezed as soon as I found the crosshairs on his neck, and he lay there in the December grass between the spears of giant agave and scattered acorn shells. I remember how I felt sad and happy all at the same time. I shot a bigger one a few years later, but I didn't even bother to mount him for some reason, though his antlers are as close to the "book" as I'll ever get for that species. But the mounted buck takes me to 1984 and college. That winter, I drove my LUV truck up into a remote canyon where a pounding, week-long rain made a

dry creek bed roar with a good stream, and there I met my buddies, one of whom had driven a Triumph Spitfire up that rough road, fording the creek over the door frames in a car that belonged on an English motorway and not an Arizona backroad. We were deer hunting and common sense was something yet in the future. Sometimes far in the future. You do strange things in college, and if you're lucky, those memories will stick with you.

There's a sheep that came very close to full curl. I shot him on the Trident at last light and then spent the night out in the rain under a big old spruce—the only green tree in a sea of fire-charred timber on the edge of Yellowstone's east boundary. I curled up in wet saddle blankets and ate from a tin of smoked oysters I had kept in my saddle bag for years for just such an evening.

There's a moose, a bull with a cattle-catcher rack of antlers, and when I look at him, I'm in the Absarokas, and I am hearing him snore as I slip through dark timber. I see him there, head resting on the spruce needle carpet, sound asleep. I take a knee and then I have a whole bunch of work to do.

The men I hunt with are of the same cloth as I. None have taken a game animal for its size alone.

Some of those mounts have gone on the wall; a friend has a tremendous bull elk that he mounted European style, and I know it takes him back there to a rainy day in September. Another friend has a tremendous bull he took in a blowdown jungle while the bull was mid-bugle. There is frost on my friend's hunting mountain now, and his elk days are winding down, but that memory hangs above his head every evening when he sits down to watch the evening news. He mounted a fair antelope buck that he shot not long ago after a tremendous stalk and a patient, hour-long wait for just the right shot.

I have never suffered the fools gladly. These are the men who shoot trophies for the collection alone. They stuff their game rooms full of heads just to carve a notch in some ego tally book, and they brag in numbers: That bull went 389. That buck scored 250. If it hadn't been for that kicker, he would have gone 270. My memories are not numerals. I avoid these people because they hunt a different planet.

But if I walk into a person's house and see a beautiful mount in a place of honor, I ask: "Tell me the story of that bull."

It is those stories and those memories that draw my interest. The trophy itself is deeply personal. As it should be. ■

