



BIG GAME AWARDS

THE BEST WORST LUCK

NON-TYPICAL MULE DEER - FIRST AWARD (TIE)

TRAVIS P. REITMAYER

252-4/8 POINTS - TREGO COUNTY, KANSAS

THE BIGGEST MULE DEER TO COME OUT OF KANSAS IN MORE THAN 20 YEARS WAS THANKS, IN LARGE PART, TO A STUBBORN TEENAGER AND A BROKEN-DOWN DODGE.

The story behind the story was the best part of how I shot my dream mule deer buck. Every year since I was old enough to drive myself four hours northwest of our hometown to my family's land, I had done the same thing every fall: I'd spend four weeks hunting, starting in October. We would begin the last week of October, and for the first few weeks, we scouted and did a lot of glassing. We typically left on Tuesday after work and stayed through Sunday morning's deer movement before heading home.

By the last week of our 2021 season, the pressure was on. Thanksgiving was the following week, and I didn't think our wives would let us go hunting then. We left Tuesday evening as usual, but we were on a tight deadline. Every year on Thursday night, 20 or more friends arrive for the second weekend of pheasant season—a 30-year tradition of birds by day and cards by night. If we didn't tag out by Thursday morning, our deer season was effectively over once the bird hunters arrived.

My 18-year-old son, Trenton, drove a 2008 Dodge Ram with approximately 500,000 miles on it. It was good enough for getting to school, but not for a road trip. When he told me he was coming up with four friends to deer hunt, I told him, "Absolutely not. That truck won't make it, and I don't have time to

mess with it this weekend with all those people coming." He insisted he was coming, swore the truck would make it, and promised not to call me if anything happened.

COMEDY OF ERRORS

Earlier that season, I had missed a giant buck—a monster with a 10-inch drop tine. He was all I had been looking for since, but I never saw him again. My buddy and I spent Wednesday and Thursday searching for him with no luck. We knew we were done deer hunting as the pheasant hunters arrived that night. The next day, we hunted birds all day and then went to dinner in town. I had just ordered a juicy ribeye when my phone rang.

Yep—it was my son, and his truck had broken down.

He said it overheated. You just couldn't make it up. I left my steak and friends, rushed to the gas station to buy six gallons of water, and crossed my fingers. It was a 30-minute drive, and of course, he was in a draw we often hunted, which was a nightmare to reach. To make matters worse, when I arrived, he told me his friend, Hunter, had shot a deer. Everything that could go wrong went wrong.

I finally got to the boys, and Trenton still had a couple of friends in deer stands. We loaded the deer and filled the radiator with more than half the water jugs. The water pump was blown, and water poured

out as fast as we poured it in. My uncle's farm was about ten miles away, so we hung the deer there, refilled the jugs, and went to pick up the other two boys in the pitch dark. With no cell service and no clue what was going on, it was total chaos. Since there was no auto service nearby, I told Trenton to wake up in the morning, fill the jugs, and head to a town 40 miles away to get the pump replaced.

The next morning at 10 a.m., as we were walking a field for pheasants, Trenton came flying by in his truck, water pouring everywhere. He stopped and told me they had decided to just buy 20 jugs of water and keep filling it every 20 minutes. At this point, my blood was boiling. They drove off, and I tried to focus on the group and the pheasant hunting.

Saturday ended, and the bird hunting hadn't been great. Everyone was tired, sore, and ready to go home on Sunday morning. However, I was still haunted by the memory of that 200-inch drop tine I had missed. On Sunday, I asked my friend at the cabin if he wanted to search for the drop tine one last time. He wanted to sleep, so I took off alone. Another friend, Zach, who was hunting solo that weekend, called and asked what I was up to. I filled him in, and he asked to ride along.

We met at my uncle's farm, and while we were there, two more



Travis's impressive
"broke down buck."

friends arrived and showed us a picture of a monster buck they had just seen in a picked cornfield five miles away. We drove over, set up the spotting scope, and couldn't believe his size. He was massive—wide and heavy. Sadly, he was in the middle of a cut corn section with only three-inch-tall stubble. There was no chance to get within a quarter mile before he saw us. We stood there in awe of a deer most people will never see in a lifetime.

ONE LAST SHOT

Just then, my phone rang. It was Trenton. His truck had broken down again. The serpentine belt had snapped. At that point, I figured it was over. I headed back to the cabin to pack and hit the road. Fortunately, Zach was alone, so we put Trenton's friends in his truck to deal with their gear. We moved my dog box and transferred the dogs to Zach's truck. Since it was Sunday and nothing was open, we locked Trenton's truck and left it there.

Once home, I rearranged my work plans so I could tow his truck to a mechanic on Monday. I told Trenton we needed to leave at 2 a.m. He looked at me like I was crazy and started whining, but I told him I wanted to get back out there and try to find that monster buck. He had last been seen on my cousin's land, which covered more than one section. The idea perked him up, and we set out in the middle of the night.

We arrived as the sun was rising. We went right back to where I had seen the buck the previous morning, but there was no sign of him. We searched south, east, and west for hours. By 8 a.m., it was time to tow the truck. I told Trenton we might as well head north one last time since it wasn't far out of the way. Two miles into the drive, Trenton yelled, "There's some!" We stop, put the glasses on them, and yes—we found them.

Trenton's reaction was priceless when he saw the size of the buck. He was still with the same four does in a patch of picked corn with stalks four to five feet tall. He was standing about 50 yards from a perfect CRP waterway that, luckily, hadn't been baled yet.

It felt like the stars had aligned. I grabbed my son's crossbow and started moving, hunched over in the tall grass. The last 200 yards felt like an eternity as the adrenaline kicked in. I got as close as possible, but the does were

getting jumpy. I ranged the lead doe at 65 yards. Two of them moved off slowly, and I knew it was now or never. I had no shooting sticks, so I had to freehand it. I was shaking so badly I thought they might hear my heart pounding. As the doe he was tending started to move, I put the 70-yard pin on him and squeezed. I hit him high and back. Off they went.

I ran half a mile back to the truck. I was shaking so hard that Trenton had to cock the bow for me. I started the run back, but the deer were already another half mile away and heading for the road. Luckily, a farmer cutting milo on the hill changed their direction. As they moved into the cornfield, I used a sketchy waterway to close the distance to 65 yards. Again, I was freehanding and shaking uncontrollably. I squeezed the trigger. I hit high again, but this time, I paralyzed him.

He dropped in his tracks. I ran back to the truck, hysterical and shaking so much that Trenton had to cock the crossbow one last time so I could finish it. As we stood there admiring the unbelievable animal, Trenton said, "Holy crap, Dad, this will go 240!" I told him, "No, but maybe 220!"

I looked over, gave him the biggest bear hug, and said, "I'm so glad you drove that piece-of-sh*t truck up here!" ■

Travis P. Reitmayer (center) received his plaque and medal at the 32nd Big Game Awards Banquet, shown here with Boone and Crockett Club Past President Anthony Caligiuri and Michael Opitz, Vice President of Big Game Records Committee.

