

THE ETHICS OF FAIR CHASE



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The Hunt Equation: When a Hunt is Not a Hunt

I had the opportunity to share a campfire recently with one of my relatives, Lifetime Associate David Bradford. We could not talk our way around the notion that somewhere along the way a fellow produced an outsized white-tailed buck in a pen, and a

“hunter” agreed to pay him a ridiculous sum to shoot the buck. The deed done, we wondered what he thought and what story he told his friends and relatives. We could not, for the life of us, come up with a reasonable answer as to why anyone would want to participate in, much less pay for, such an experience. We decided to write about it so you would be burdened with the same question, and perhaps you would share the story with your friends in the hunting community and they with theirs, in hopes that we could all work together to make the question moot someday.

It all starts here—uncertainty is the denominator of the hunt equation. There are many factors that comprise the balance of the equation like knowledge, skill, effort, and plain old luck. But uncertainty is the wondrous, magical element of the hunt that compels us to spend remarkable amounts of time and money and, more importantly, heart and soul. It is the spontaneous quality of hunting that distinguishes it from any other pursuit in life and it is why the trophy means so much to us. Nowhere does the proper calculation of the hunt equation include human manipulation of the animal or the circumstance. Why anyone would want to diminish any part of this magnificent endeavor is incomprehensible.

We are hunters, not collectors. We are knowledgeable, serious, responsible, and committed. We take pride in the effort spent, experience earned and challenge met. We do not look for shortcuts, easy outs or manufactured outcomes. When the hunt is complete and we reflect and analyze, inches are not the final measure of success in our adventures afield; they are the lagniappe—but only if everything goes exactly right, particularly those things beyond our control.

If the winner of the Super Bowl, the World Series, the Stanley Cup, or the NBA

Finals were predetermined, would we have the party and invite our friends? If the outcome of the Masters, the Daytona 500, or the Rose Bowl were known before the competition, who would spend the time to watch? What if we knew that money could be the determining factor in the result? I submit that these iconic events would have played out years ago and the sports themselves would not hold their lauded place in our culture as they have done for generations. They have risen above the misbehavior of their athletes and managers, and they continue, despite the setbacks and misdeeds. They are each a long-lived institution, because next year things might be different; because the season-ending contest has an uncertain outcome; and because there is always a chance, despite the odds, that our team might come out on top.

This analogy is particularly relevant today when anyone with the financial means can shoot a 300-inch whitetail with guaranteed success. Let’s be clear as crystal here: when the circumstance is contrived and/or the animal has been “manufactured,” it is not a hunt. Webster defines contrived as having an unnatural or false appearance or quality. David and I would define it further as an unacceptable substitute lacking in the fundamental qualities from which it would otherwise derive its value, such that investing time and effort into acquiring it is foolishness. It is undignified, unworthy, and trivial. Ultimately, eliminating or manipulating the elements of uncertainty reduces the pseudo-hunt to an arranged shooting of livestock. It is the antithesis of fair chase, and it is simply not hunting.

More than undignified, man’s intervention into the natural development of game animals is an erosive, irreverent, biologically unsound practice, and it has dire long-term consequences. Beyond reflecting negatively on our way of life as hunters, this manipulation has led to the spread of chronic wasting disease, has developed specimens that cannot survive on their own and ultimately derives a greater damage to our wildlife on a genetic scale as it undermines the North American Model. To paraphrase the words of Jack Ward Thomas, big antlers do not mean better deer. This bigger-at-all-costs-approach with such significant financial backing is an extraordinary threat to our culture.

Having said all this, the business of creating these artificial opportunities is legal

in our country, and it is not our place to condemn or even judge a legal business. The hardworking people and their financial backers are doing a good job of meeting the demand for their product. And the demand has grown and continues to grow. This is now a \$3 billion industry! When you collectively spend that much in an effort, you can fool a lot of people. This wrongful association is threatening the public’s continued support of legitimate, fair chase hunting and its longstanding value to the conservation and proper management of publicly owned wildlife. And so goes, to the highest bidder, the North American Model.

Closer to home, because these scenarios are typically traded based on B&C inches, we need to ensure there is recognizable distance or separation between them and us. Because their product is packaged and sold as a “hunt,” we need to make sure everyone sees the stark difference. This is not a subtle, close-enough issue, although their marketing pitch needs and wants it to be “just like the real or natural thing.” The point is that it has become a business proposition, not a vocation or a passion. When that happens, there is a shift in the ethics, and most of what we hold so dear is left on the cutting-room floor.

But this is just an ethics column. And after all this ranting, what the breeders and their customers are doing is perfectly legal, and we have determined that it is not a hunt. So, that should be the end of the discussion, right?

Not so fast. We didn’t start it, but there is a fight here, and we are obligated to get in the ring. We have to help our brothers and sisters understand that the pseudo-hunt product is not worth the price, and it damn sure is not worth the consequences. There is tremendous exposure and marketing in place that says the pseudo-hunt is the real thing. We must put that to bed. Ethically, we have to engage, explain, and emphasize the facts and ultimately devalue the product. When the pseudo-hunt is exposed as unworthy and undignified, it will be less acceptable at the campfire and eventually it will lose its legs. If not, someday we will not recognize the animals or places that future generations hunt—if they hunt—and if there are any healthy animals left. ■