

# A Second Chance

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My daydream was interrupted by a strange sound. It was the swishing of distant weeds as something moved through them. I turned my head to locate the source. "Oh, my God!" The words were whispered in awe.

It was a beautiful morning in southwestern Wisconsin. I had left my hunting shack just as a promise of light was evident in the Eastern sky. I walked the half mile to my favorite treestand and climbed in. There was no wind on this fourth day of November, 1993, a condition that always adds to my delight. The rut was in progress. There were still 12 days left in the early bow season, and I intended to hunt every one of them.

As has become my habit since taking up bowhunting in 1983, I had given priority to the sport over everything. I had probably spent in excess of 150 hours already this season waiting for the right deer to offer the right shot. Not that the wait was boring or frustrating... far from it! But I had yet to see a buck within range.

But there he was! One hundred yards away my eyes were treated to the sight of huge antlers, dwarfing a deer's head, floating above the tall weeds on my hunting property. My heart immediately went bonkers. I didn't dare concentrate on this magnificent creature. I looked away. I checked my watch—7:07.

Every buck I had ever seen walking north through that weed patch, walked as far as the fence line, over which I was perched, then turned east and walked under my tree stand. Several of them had wound up in my freezer, but none of them had bragging-size antlers.

I looked back in the general direction of *the Buck*. I tried to see him as

a silhouette, rather than risk cardiac failure. He was at 75 yards, moving slowly and steadily. His course was still due north, which would put his range at 60 yards when he got to the fence. I looked down to check my bow. My hands were shaking. I had to settle down.

"Quit acting like a kid on his first date! You've lived well over half a century, and hunted deer ever since you could handle a rifle. Breathe slowly and deeply!"

*The Buck* arrived at the fence. I watched as he smelled the ground. After ten seconds he turned to the west and slowly walked away from me. "Oh,

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no! Why? Why?" Then it hit me.

I had dragged out my wife's doe along that fence two days before. "He must smell the blood or the glands."

*The Buck* had taken about five slow steps to the point where I had pulled the doe over a sagging spot in the fence. He stopped momentarily, then abruptly did an end-around. Now he headed straight at me.

It is extremely hard to estimate elapsed time when each second seems like a minute. Many times, since that day, I have stood in that tree stand and mentally retraced his steps. I believe it took between 8 and 9 minutes for him to make the trek from the point at which I first saw *the Buck* until he stopped at 25 yards. My guess is he stood there about 15 seconds. At the time it seemed to be 15 minutes, since most of him was obscured by a limb in my tree.

Why is it you never hear yourself breathe unless you have a deer in close? Then it sounds as if you're capable of powering enough windmills to generate all the electricity consumed by the free world.

*The Buck* stood and I generated.

After an eternity, *the Buck* felt satisfied with conditions around him. He walked under my tree and stood broadside at 5 yards. My bow was drawn, but I didn't like the shot. I wanted both lungs, and I'd have to settle for one, or hope to hit the spine. I waited.

Suddenly he switched ends and started to walk back, then turned to go around my tree. Before he became hidden by the lower limbs, I released the arrow. The range was 10 yards.

"Twang!" The string noise reverberated in my ears. *The Buck* stopped and looked up at me. He stood there for about 15 seconds without moving. "Fall down!" I felt as if I were shouting it. *The Buck* walked away.

I scrambled to get another arrow out of the quiver. I drew and aimed. There was a red spot on his foreleg. I released the arrow at 40 yards.

"Twang!" *The Buck* couldn't tolerate that sound again, so he made a quick left turn and disappeared into the pines.

Silence. Silence only broken by my pounding heart and heavy breathing. I saw the doe that had caused his abrupt change of direction. She was 200 yards to the north. I stared at the ground 15 feet below. No arrow was visible.

"Well, Idiot, you screwed it up. You have had trouble in the past with

real close shots. This time you screwed up on *the Buck of a lifetime*. Why are you deadly at 15 to 30 yards, but you can't hit the close ones?"

I climbed down the tree steps and scrutinized the ground. No arrow. I followed the path *the Buck* had taken after the first shot. After 20 yards I saw a small red spot on a leaf. Two yards farther I spotted another, and another. "I hit him!"

I dumped my fanny pack and bow and headed back to the shack. A friend who hunts turkeys with me was visiting to help with an addition to the shack. When I walked in, he was dozing on the couch. "You back already?"

His question didn't require a response. I grabbed the cup I had used two hours earlier and poured from the pot. I took a sip, set it down, and gestured with my hands.

"Big! Antlers this big! I hit him! Help me track him."

One and one-half miles of wandering blood trail were followed that morning over a three hour period. After we lost the trail, we combed the area for another hour before heading back to the building project. When the realization hit me, I was sick. To lose a magnificent animal such as *the Buck* made my stomach very queasy. The blood trail seemed to indicate he wasn't badly hurt, but I hated being responsible for wounding him.

On November 26, I sat in the same stand. This was the seventh day of our nine day gun season. I had made it a point to hunt from this stand for a couple of hours each morning since *the Buck* had come through. Later in the day, I hunted other stands. I really didn't believe I'd ever see him again. It was a nostalgic thing. That time of day was devoted to remembering the incident, while I listened for the woods to come alive.

During the gun season, I hunt differently. I try to slowly move my eyes constantly to avoid missing any deer activity in sight. I don't have the luxury of being able to enjoy nature as much. Of course the woods are noisier, and the

deer tend to be moving faster. It really is a different sport than bowhunting.

My eyes had been scanning the meadow to the north and swinging to the west. As I mentally crossed the fence, *the Buck* was there. This time there was nothing leisurely about him. He was out 50 yards, heading directly at me, straight down the fence line on a fast trot. I scrambled.

This time I had six seconds. There was no pounding heart — no heavy breathing — no time for thought. I grabbed the rifle and shouldered it in one smooth motion. I swung it past his rib cage, as he put on the brakes. *The Buck* repeated the movement that had become etched in my brain — the end-around. This time it was not in slow motion. Around the tree he went — I swear he was stepping in the same tracks he made 22 days earlier. As he moved to the north, I found his shoulder in the scope and squeezed. At ten yards I don't have the problems with the .30-06 that I have experienced with the bow. At 20 yards my scope found his massive neck just ahead of the shoulders. It was over.

I was dazed. I had spent so many hours reliving the first encounter, that I didn't believe there had been a second one. I looked at my watch—7:42. I have tried to recall my actions after that big moment. I know I decided to climb down, after a couple of minutes. Then a doe burst from the pines. Hours later I retraced *the Buck's* steps in the snow, and discovered the doe had been with him, but had jumped the fence into the pines before I looked in their direction. That accounted for his switching directions again.

I walked over to *the Buck* and pushed him twice in the back with my foot. He didn't move. I didn't look at the rack. I still didn't believe it. I headed for the shack.

Halfway back I met my wife. She was spending the gun season with me, but not hunting it. She is a respectable bowhunter, but doesn't feel comfortable



with all the gun noise.

"I heard your rifle. What did you get?"

Confidence. She never considers I might miss with the gun. She knows all too well I sometimes miss with the bow.

"Remember the shot I screwed up with the bow?"

"You got him! Great!"

We walked back. As we approached the spot, I saw the antlers sticking above the vegetation. Then I believed!

*The Buck* was scored at 187-6/8 points. It is the highest scoring buck ever taken in the county in which I hunt. It was awarded first place in both major deer shows in the State and ties for 124th in the Wisconsin record book.

The similarity between the two events is startling. *The Buck* was travelling along the same path. He made the same turn, evidently to join up with a doe each time. If you consider the time after sunrise, he was two minutes later the second time. Yet, those were the only two times I ever laid eyes on him, in spite of the fact that I had sat in that stand about 50 mornings.

This series of events testifies to the ability of whitetail deer to recover from injury. *The Buck* showed no trace of a limp. I had to wonder whether his twin brother was the one I arrowed earlier. However, examination of the hide revealed a cross-shaped mark on the foreleg.

Great hunters have taken bigger bucks, and will continue to do so. But I have to think there is hope for all the average hunters in the world. I bungled the first time, but sometimes there is a second chance.

B&C ASSOCIATE, GEORGE E. BRIGGS WITH HIS WHITETAIL THAT SCORED 187-6/8 POINTS. THE BUCK WAS TAKEN IN WISCONSIN DURING THE 1993 SEASON.