

A Family Tradition

TROPHY BLACKTAILS

Fortunately for me, my entire youth was spent living on a small ranch with my parents and paternal grandparents in La Honda, California. My grandpa, Dan Sr., was retired before I was born and was an avid hunter, trapper, fisherman, and one of the last old-time cowboys in our country. He also had the patience of a saint with kids. These qualities, combined with my love of hunting and his love for teaching it, enabled us to spend countless days in the field every year hunting and fishing. These outings with him would prove to be some of the most enjoyable times of my life. It was not just time spent with Grampa and nature, but a time of learning lessons that I would use throughout my life in the outdoors . . . and in many cases in life in general.

One such lesson was to be patient while hunting, and now as I sat quietly doing just that, my mind drifted back to September 1973. My cousin Zeke and I were playing in our yard when suddenly our fun was interrupted by the sound of honking horns—our family's signal that a buck had been taken during the day's hunt. My uncle Gary arrived first and my family quickly gathered around him. He emerged from the truck and told us, "Big Dan killed a hell of a buck!" Then Dad and Grampa pulled in with the largest blacktail ever taken in San Mateo County, California.

Grampa had taken him with his .300 Winchester Magnum at about four feet, firing from the hip as the buck exited the same trail in which he had been standing. At the time, it was the only buck from our county to make the Boone and Crockett records book—a massive 3x3, 23 inches wide, scoring 136 points. Two years later, Dad would take a 25" 3x3, which had the widest spread in the county. Although it didn't make the book, it was good enough to win a Silver Bullet Award from the NRA. With Dad being a Boone and Crockett official measurer, all of our largest bucks would get scored each year just to see how they would fare. Grampa would always ask if his trophy was still the largest and when we told him it was, he would just smile and walk off, satisfied that the record was still his.

In September of 1983 Grampa

died of cancer. Before passing away, he gave me his .300 Mag, and now, five years later, I sat watching the grassy ridge on the other side of the canyon, waiting for a huge 3x3 buck to emerge from the oaks that bordered the field. I just knew that in the next half-hour or so, both Dad's record for the greatest spread and Grampa's Boone and Crockett buck would be bested. Dad and I had been watching this buck since May. Every night he fed out along with several other bucks including a big 5x4 and a 3x3. I knew that it would be difficult to sneak up on so many eyes, ears, and noses. This proved to be the case when I blew the stalk the opening evening.

After letting the deer rest for a few days I was back, having put a Harris bipod on my rifle. I had come up with a simple plan. I would get to my spot early, then when the buck fed out, I would shoot across the small canyon—I estimated the deer would be

roughly 300 to 400 yards. Soon all the bucks fed out. I let them feed toward me until the big 3x3 turned and started feeding away. I then began to set up for the shot, and to my horror, realized that the hill was too steep for me. Even with the bipod fully extended, its legs were too short to allow me to keep the barrel level while shooting from a sitting position.

About 30 yards in front of me I could see an old downed picket fence. If I could get to it, I could stack some pickets on top of each other and set the bipod on the platform, which I hoped would give me enough elevation. I thought of something Grampa had taught me when I was a boy hunting rabbits with a .410 in my family's orchard. He said to line up a tree be-

tween me and the rabbit, walk directly toward the tree until I was within range, then step to the side and shoot. Now as luck would have it, there was a large greasewood bush growing in front of me. I crawled on my belly through the stickers, keeping the bush between me and most of the bucks. After reaching the bush, I turned left and crawled to the fence. I stacked some pickets, waited for the buck to turn broadside, and tried to no avail to calm my nerves.

With daylight fading, I decided it was now or never. Everything looked perfect through my 4x scope. The buck had turned three-quarters broadside, and I estimated the distance at approximately 350 yards. I held high on his back and squeezed the trigger. The gun cracked, followed quickly by the sound of the bullet striking the buck, which dropped in its tracks.

After getting the blacktail home, we put the tape on it. It was 22 inches wide with a Boone and Crockett score of just over 130 points. A huge buck in its own right, but scoring just short of both Dad's and



Grampa's trophies. Later I got the 5x4, which turned out to be a 20-inch 6x4, scoring 117 points (in California's "A" zone, two bucks can be taken). When Dad and I scored my bucks, I am sure Grampa was smiling—knowing that his record still stood—a tribute to a great hunter, teacher, and friend. ▲▲▲

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dan still uses his Grampa's .300 Mag and has taken three more Boone and Crockett blacktails since the writing of this story. One in 1995 broke his Grampa's record, scoring 138-3/8 points. His dad's record for the buck with greatest spread in San Mateo County still stands.

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Check out Dan's field photo
on page 59 of this issue.