

14^A-Month Quest

By Kim Schwanky
Photos by T.J. Schwanky

A dozen years ago, when my husband announced to me that he was heading into the backcountry for a week in pursuit of a bighorn sheep, I silently questioned his sanity, and mine for that matter. I had willingly married this crazy man. How could anyone in his right mind logically consent to such a task? I asked myself why anyone would put his body through such a grueling process. Sliding on scree, teetering on boulders, and toe holding on narrow ledges was really not my idea of a nice time. Why would he want to do this? My fear of heights and considerable lack of physical coordination challenged my mind

to come up with the answer. As a born and bred flatlander, I struggled to understand how those menacing rocks piercing high into the heavens could have such a strong pull on someone. I secretly wondered if he would fall off a mountain or die from exposure. However, this was his life for which he was free to make his own choices and as long as he never, ever, ever asked me to go sheep hunting, I could live with his brief periods of insanity.

T.J. returned home a week later with a handsome eight-year-old ram that scored 176 Boone and Crockett points. The hunt had been arduous, wondrous, magical, mind-altering, and deeply rewarding for him. He somehow seemed different although I couldn't pin down exactly how. I admired the grand trophy and appreciated the meat, but had

little interest in the story and the challenges of the hunt. I just couldn't relate to this hunt and let the whole thing quickly slip from my mind.

Time passed with no mention of bighorn sheep. It appeared that T.J. had healed from his affliction and all was right again. We hunted deer, moose, and elk, and I felt safe and content in my world. But, just when you feel smug and in control, you get blind-sided.

"How about hunting sheep together this fall?" T.J. asked me.

I was floored by my response. "Let me think about it." Never had I thought I would answer this way. I was actually considering the hunt. By June I had done more than consider the hunt. I announced confidently to T.J. that I wanted to hunt bighorns. And, although internally I was racked with fear, T.J. took me seriously and we began our preparations for August.

As a first-time sheep hunter there were many unknowns but I never felt any regrets



ABOVE: While horses were used to get into the remote backcountry of the Willmore Wilderness, the author took her ram on a backpack hunt in the southern portion of Alberta. **OPPOSITE:** The author not only had to endure the hardships of sheep hunting, she had to overcome her very real fear of heights.

or reservations about my decision. I had set my goals and planned to fulfill them regardless of the time and effort required. I knew T.J.'s backcountry experience would get us through most anything. I hoped his support and encouragement would keep me moving in those high rocks, as my fear of heights had not abated over the years.

With four days remaining until the opening of the 1998 bighorn season, we found ourselves traveling eight hours north of our home to the Grand Cache area of Alberta with our three young, inexperienced horses in tow. We were planning a remote, horseback hunt into the Willmore Wilderness. It seemed like such a perfect setting for my first bighorn hunt. The Willmore is shrouded in history and haunted with memories and stories from old-time sheep hunters. With two days of riding and some 50 miles ahead of us, and the distinct possibility of never encountering another hunter during our journey, we were headed into some of the most awe-inspiring country of Alberta. Tales of basins littered with large groups of rams seemed like a fairy tale, and spending a week with a hunter I truly admired and loved to hunt with made it all feel magical. Slowly my excitement was breaking through my fears and the thrill of our ensuing adventure filled me.

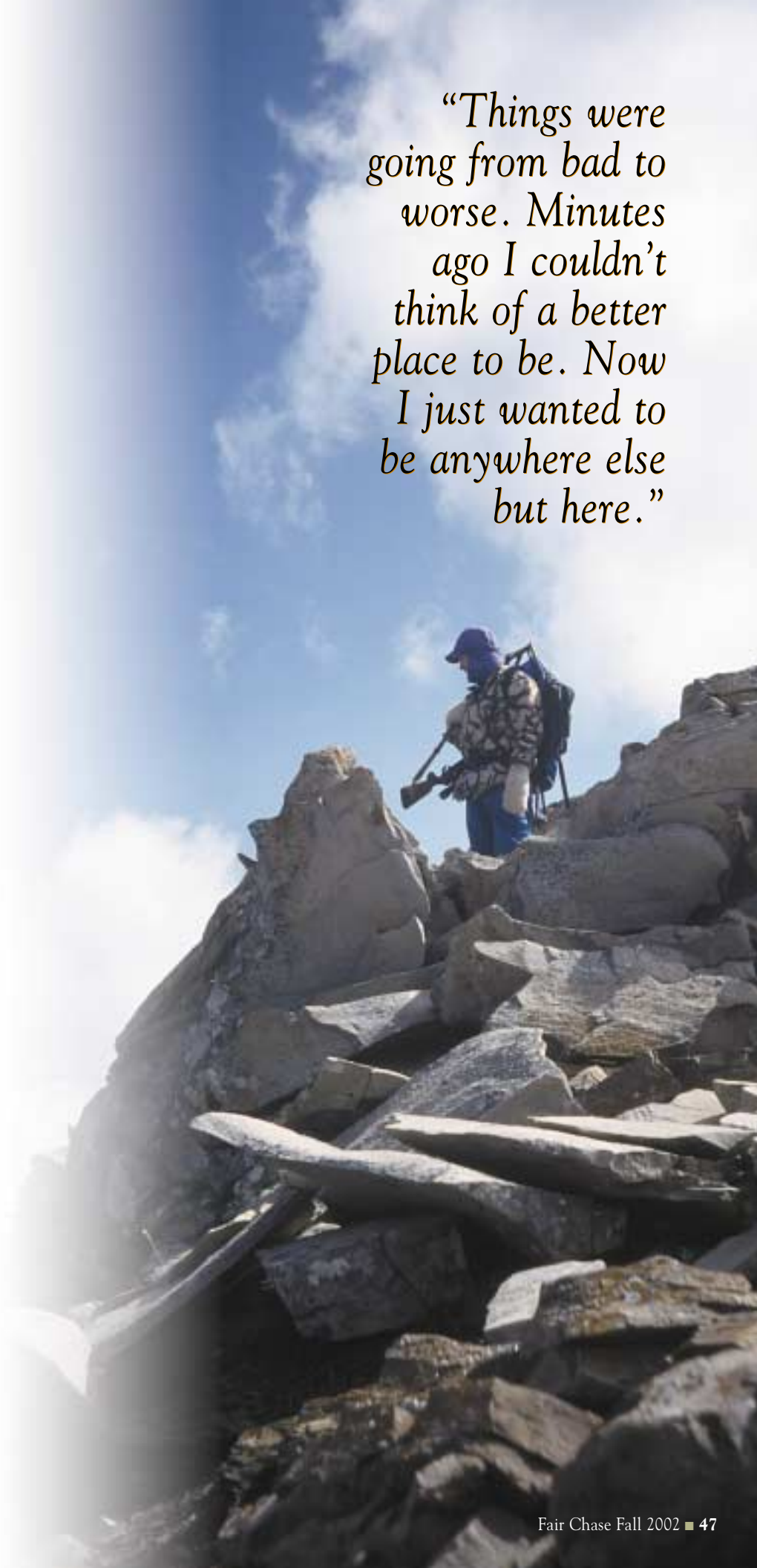
At the exact moment that T.J. made the final pull on our diamond rope, the fears all came rushing back and the reality of the situation set in. Why wasn't I saying anything? Why wasn't I stopping us from starting down the trail? Something was driving me on.

An hour later I had quit hyperventilating and my heart no longer felt like it would jump out of my chest. I started to relax. The horses were doing well. T.J.'s navigational skills were finely tuned and he confidently led us into the unknown. Okay, so maybe this really wasn't that bad. Suddenly, the lead shank connecting me to our three-year-old packhorse, Jigsaw, was gone. I watched horrified as he somersaulted head over heels down a hillside only to land hard, upside down against a deadfall. T.J.'s horse had kicked open a hornet's nest and now Jigsaw was bearing the brunt of the angry stings.

I sat stunned as T.J. jumped off his horse and careened down the steep slope. He yelled instructions at me as he grabbed Jigsaw's head and neck. T.J. would try to hold him down as I removed the pack boxes. Amazingly, Jigsaw lay quiet as I struggled to untie our diamond. It had held tight through all of the commotion.

Though nothing was being said, we both were having the same thoughts. Jigsaw

“Things were going from bad to worse. Minutes ago I couldn't think of a better place to be. Now I just wanted to be anywhere else but here.”



was in a bad position and a broken leg was a real possibility. Slowly, T.J. lifted his weight from the horse's neck. Jigsaw lunged, throwing his head back and squarely hitting T.J. in the face. The horse was standing on all fours but now my husband lay unconscious from the blow he had received. Things were going from bad to worse. Minutes ago I couldn't think of a better place to be. Now I just wanted to be anywhere else but here. By some miracle everything turned out fine and we were soon on our way down the trail again, only slightly bruised and battered.

When we arrived at our planned trail's end, we were greeted by three other hunters. Although at first disappointed by the prospect of spending the week with others, the security of knowing help was close by was com-

BELOW: Hunting sheep in the Alberta Rockies requires countless hours of glassing.

INSET: This fine ram was the culmination of 14 months of living and breathing bighorn sheep for the author. It did little to quell her desire to hunt sheep, however, as sheep are the focus of the majority of her hunting outings now.



forting to me. They were genuinely welcoming and seemed excited about me hunting.

We had allowed ourselves two days to scout before opening day, knowing this was pushing the boundaries of sufficient time to hike and glass the nearby mountains in search of a legal ram. It was with childlike excitement that we watched 17 rams in the first basin we checked. The band lounged lazily in the black shale as I rested my eyes on a beautiful chocolate-brown ram. His sweeping horns surpassed the minimum 4\5 curl requirement to be legal in Alberta and aged out at nine years. T.J. pointed out one other ram over the minimum but I assured him this was the one.

A plan was formulated and as we lay 500 yards from the rams at first light on opening morning, T.J. worried. Greg, a hunter from the other camp had joined us and was going to try for the second legal ram after I shot. T.J. suspected that this would be tough for me and by late afternoon his suspicions were confirmed. It had taken the entire day to get within 365 yards of the rams and now Greg was anxious for me to shoot. This was out of my comfort range and I could feel the pressure crushing me. On our own,

we would have backed out of the basin and tried again the following day but Greg assured me he was ready and for me to go ahead anytime. Anytime. I could hardly breathe and the ram seemed blurry in the scope of my .30-06. Anytime. I squeezed the trigger. Greg sent several shots at the second ram. I watched the second ram fall as the

chocolate ram buried in the band moved away. I had missed.

Although deeply disappointed, I spent the rest of the week hunting with T.J., putting every ounce of my soul and spirit into my quest. The chocolate ram only presented himself one more time, but I was not able to get off another shot. I left the valley feeling fulfilled, yet empty. I did not have a handsome trophy ram to show but the experience had been unequaled and I knew I would hunt sheep for the rest of my life.

I never did harvest a ram that year, but the desire to hunt them remained unfaltering. We spent the next summer in search of a perfect ram range. After one of our many hikes we felt we had found it, six miles in. The high rocky ledges and rich grassy slopes could not be more perfect. Several more visits reinforced our feelings. We never did see a ram but the spot felt right.

On opening day I was back in the heart of the Willmore Wilderness. Things were a little different from the previous year. Our trip in was uneventful (certainly I had no complaints about that), but instead of being within 500 yards of a gorgeous, legal ram on opening day, I was trapped in a tent in the worst thunder and lightning storm I had ever encountered. A mountain storm is like no other. I wondered how many days it could pound us but as the day drew to a close, it eased and our spirits lifted in hopes of a better day tomorrow.

At daybreak the heavens were clear and the ground white. Never does the world seem so pure and untouched to me as when the snow is trackless and the sky uncluttered. We were rested, fresh and enthusiastic as we set out. It wasn't until late in the day,

however, that we found them, 21 rams deep in the bottom of a valley. The only approach was from above, on a steep slope, with few hiding spots. The footing was treacherous and we had to be careful not to kick out loose rocks. Hours later, T.J. had us within 200 yards, a much better range for me, but the rams were tightly bunched and the one I was interested in was in the middle. A lesser ram was in the open but I choose to wait, and wait we did. Two hours passed before the rams started to move and feed.

Hunkered behind some rocks and sitting slightly lower on the slope than T.J., I struggled to see the ram in my scope.

"Shoot," T.J. urged.

"I can't, there are rocks in the way."

"Shoot!"

Thirty yards out the rock exploded. The group of rams headed over a nearby ridge and I wondered if I was meant to hunt these creatures. Hard luck seemed to shroud me. We continued to hunt hard for the remainder of the season and T.J. continued to blame himself for my troubles. He pushed himself to spot a legal ram for me. He wouldn't rest. He wouldn't stop glassing. He wouldn't give himself.

Day after day he headed out and with three days left in the season he arrived home elated. He had spotted two legal rams that he felt were a sure thing for my last day of hunting. He was probably right, but my gut told me to go back to the valley we had discovered in the summer. The insanity of sheep hunting had truly infected me. Giving up an almost sure thing for a gut feeling seemed beyond foolish but was absolutely my style.

Our tiny flashlights guided us up the trail for the first three hours until the breaking rays of sunrise became strong enough to replace them. T.J. had barely raised his binoculars to his eyes when he had them, five sheep on a rugged ridge some three miles away. He knew by their body shapes that they were rams but actual horn size was impossible to judge. It didn't matter. We were excited over the sighting and the potential possibilities.

It took two miles of a steady walk/run to give us our next look. T.J. studied them intently.

"Two are legal. The biggest one should go 170." The sureness in his voice was profound.

I smiled widely. "Lets go!"

Later, T.J. would tell me all about the stalk. Although I was there for every step of the two-hour ascent, I remembered little of it. My mind and body functioned separately. While I focused on the ram and the hunt, my legs somehow carried me upward and onward. The steep, snow-covered slope pro-

vided the perfect terrain to keep us out of sight of the rams. Unfortunately, it also meant that we couldn't see the sheep and had no way of knowing if they had moved. Again, T.J.'s navigational skills shone and he stepped us out of the trees 500 yards downwind of where we had last seen the rams. But they weren't there. I scanned the slope. Busted! They were 125 yards straight up, looking right at us. There was no getting out of this one. Time was of the essence. T.J. threw his pack on the snow in front of me to utilize as a rest. Desperately he searched. In a split second his eyes assimilated the unfolding images, integrating them into thoughts. "He's the one in the lead. Whenever you're..."

The sound of my .30-06 deafened me. It felt great. Finally, things had gone as planned. I had connected with a fine trophy. Feelings of elation, pride and relief warmed me. Admittedly, I had wondered if my deep desire, lasting dream and hard work would ever come to fruition, but here it all was, playing out right in front of me.

"I hope he is legal."

I stared at T.J. in disbelief with my jaw almost touching the snowy hillside. "What?" was all I could get out.

"I'm just kidding," he laughed.

The ram was a true trophy and as T.J. congratulated me I could feel the tears sting

my cheeks. The ram was bigger than we had thought. His official score after the 60-day waiting period was 176-2/8 points. The weight of his bases carried well through the large, loose curl of his horn. For the past 14 months we had physically beaten our bodies and poured our hearts and souls into this one goal, and now we had been so greatly rewarded. Together we had earned this magnificent trophy. It was as much T.J.'s as it was mine.

We spent the next few hours laughing and reliving the events of the day while T.J. photographed the ram from every possible angle. Caping and deboning seemed like play.

Finally, with packs heavy laden, we began to write the last chapter of our story. We now had the long pack out and the better portion of it would be spent in the dark. Once again our flashlights would be our only guides.

Somewhere on the trail on the way out I had noticed the full moon but it wasn't until we were heading home that I paid it any heed. When the pack of 12 wolves crossed the highway and then lingered in the ditch, I felt a mysterious, almost eerie presence wrap around me. My life felt somehow changed by so many profound first experiences. To pursue these elusive mountain creatures is like nothing I have ever done or will ever do. I just know I need to be out there with them. ■

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