

H

What Calls All

Hunters

Times Haven't Changed Much –

An insightful article written over 60 years ago by one of the original developers of the Club's current scoring system

By Grancel Fitz
Photos by Author

Circa 1940s – Before this year is over, an army of more than 14 million armed men will have invaded the United States. These men will have penetrated even the most remote parts of every state in our country, and the huge horde is likely to outnumber the greatest army that any nation, in all history, has ever mobilized in a single season. What is more, it will have been supplemented by various expeditionary forces operating in Alaska, Canada, and Mexico, and even in Europe, Asia, and Africa. There is no reason for alarm, though, for these are the ever-growing legions of American hunters.

Betty and Grancel Fitz with a Dall's sheep taken in the Yukon in 1946. This ram completed Grancel's Grand Slam.

The riflemen and shotgunners who take to the field every season represent a very sizeable proportion of our adult male population, and they are strengthened by a female contingent that is increasing steadily. The more we learn about this situation, the more logical it seems. Here we have a sport that provides a place for a devotee of any age. The physically fit can hike over many miles of rough going in the pursuit of upland game birds, or climb rugged mountains in a hunt for deer, or mountain rams, or Rocky Mountain goats. At the other end of the scale, there is nothing strenuous about sitting in a duck blind, or on a "deerstand." The individual hunter can take as much or as little exercise as he needs, and call it a day when he has had enough. Furthermore, it is a sport that can be fitted to any purse. Consider the Nimrod who limits his hunting to a short walk through nearby fields, and returns with a few rabbits, or possibly a pheasant. He gets just as much thrill, in proportion to his outlay of time and money, as the man who makes a long safari to a far corner of the world.

Hunting is also a game that can be played in almost any kind of weather. The



hunter of ducks and geese is quite likely to welcome a stormy morning that will keep the birds in the air. But here again—and unlike the football player, for instance—the hunter can stay indoors whenever the weather doesn't suit him. Incidentally, non-hunters are often appalled at the thought of hardships and exposure. Our mountain climbers and our sailors can tell them something about that. While the discomforts can be severe enough when we pit our puny strength against raw nature, they are more than compensated by the exulting discovery that we can stand them.

More basically, the hunter's imagination is captured by the infinitely varied challenge. The shotgun enthusiast often shoots clay birds, at the traps or on the skeet field, and that sort of shooting calls for a great deal of skill. But then he thinks of the kind of shots he has to take at grouse, when they whirr up without warning in the frost-painted glory of our autumn woodlands. In comparison, the clay birds seem a monotonous and standardized proposition. The deer-hunting rifleman must match his woodcraft and his hunter's luck against an animal so resourceful that it wins, more often than not. The number of deer hunters, every season, is far greater than the number of deer that they bag.

To a lot of us, there are aspects of this whole picture that seem puzzling. A great many intelligent people haven't the foggiest idea of why anybody should ever want to go out and shoot something.

"What constructive function can hunting serve," they ask, "in a civilized country such as ours? Why can't we let the game birds and the deer and the other animals live out their lives as Nature intended?"

These are the people who, quite properly, are deeply moved by the sight of a wild deer in the forest. They think of its grace, and its big, beautiful brown eyes. They do not know that we'd have no deer for them to worry about if we had no hunters, so this deserves a closer look.

Due to the efforts of hunters, and to nobody else, there are now more whitetail deer in many regions than when the first white man set foot on this continent. For reasons that had nothing to do with deer, directly, we opened the unbroken forest in a way that made for much better deer habitat. Then, in the ruthless looting of natural resources that marked our first couple of centuries here, our settlers and old-time market hunters killed deer until, only 50 years ago, comparatively few whitetails were left. What brought these deer back? Dollars. Hunter's dollars. Simply

because our sportsmen are numerous enough to be a political force, and because they want deer to hunt, the many millions of dollars that they pay for hunting licenses are used to support the programs of our state conservation departments, and these have produced startlingly satisfying results.

What would happen if all deer shooting were stopped? We have killed off the wolves and the panthers that used to prey on them, so they would multiply unchecked. They would eat everything fit for them in the country they now inhabit. Thousands would starve, right there. The rest, descending on farms like ravaging locusts, would be killed off by the farmers in sheer self-defense, laws or no laws. As it is, many hundreds of fawns starve, every winter, because they cannot reach as high as bigger deer for the forage left in over-browsed areas. To prevent this waste of deer and damage to our forests, even does must be shot, this season, in certain areas of the Adirondacks.


Not long ago, at dinner in the Westchester County home of a couple whose interest in sports runs only to golf and sailing, I heard a revealing bit of conversation between our hostess and another of her guests, a man who is an enthusiastic hunter of upland game birds.

"One afternoon last week I happened to look out the window," she told him, "and just beside the rhododendrons, only a few yards from the house, was a most wonderful cock pheasant! I don't know when I've been so thrilled. A shaft of sunshine lit him up like a spotlight on a stage, and I couldn't stop looking at his perfectly gorgeous feathers until he went back into the bushes. When he was gone, I felt that my life was a good deal richer for having seen him. I honestly wonder how you men can possibly shoot them."

The hunter looked thoughtfully at the sliced chicken on his plate.

"I don't imagine that you ever saw an Asiatic jungle cock," he said at last. "They are beautiful, too, and they are the ancestors of our domestic chickens. The pheasant that was in your garden—and don't think that hunters are blind to his beauty—is also descended from wild Asiatic stock, but he has certain qualities that set him above the level of mere food, delicious as he is. Our own ancestors brought pheasants to Europe for the sole purpose of hunting them, and you would never have had your thrilling sight of one if a later generation of hunters hadn't introduced them into this country for that very same reason.

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"Strange as it may seem, I'm convinced that our most experienced sportsmen have a greater love for the animals and birds that they hunt than anybody else. There is certainly no question that the hunters take more interest in our game species than those who never go afield."



"Today," he continued, "pheasants are raised like chickens on our state game farms. They are liberated in the best localities we can find for them. And then they can fulfill their destiny, in offering much more than even their beauty and their food value to hunters, who know them best. In return, we try to give them a sporting chance to escape. That is more than a chicken ever gets. We might as well face the fact that most chickens bleed to death, slowly, after having been 'stuck' in the throat. I'd imag-

ine that shooting would be more humane."

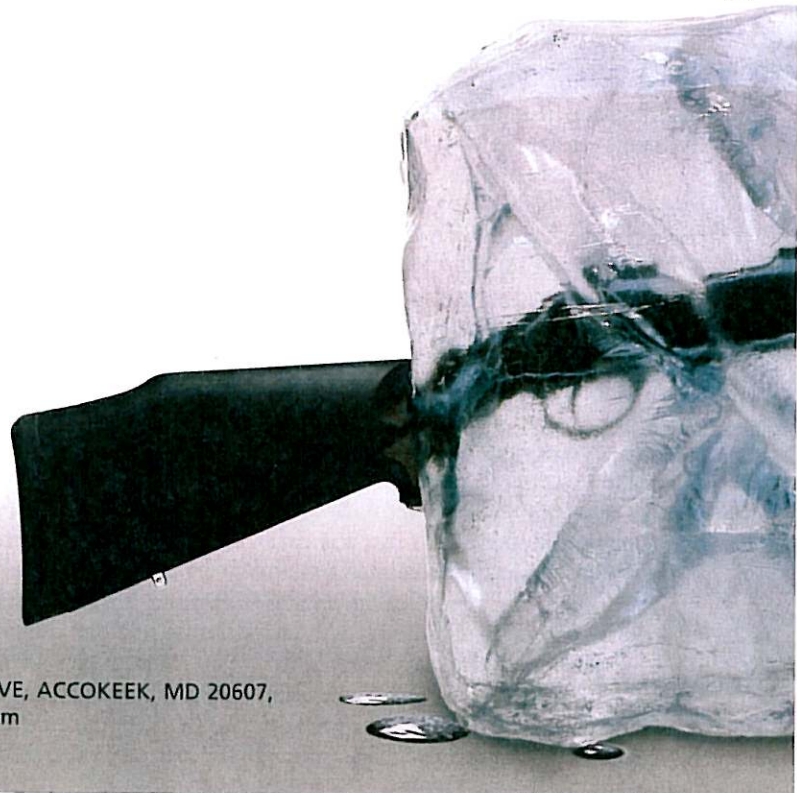
"Your comparison is hardly fair," the lady countered. "The chickens are killed for necessary food. After all, we have to eat."

"I think so, too," the hunter replied, "but there have been some distinguished vegetarians, such as Bernard Shaw, who would hardly agree with us."

In that single exchange of viewpoints, I think we can find the hunter's basic answer to the inevitable question of how he can bring himself to kill. He knows that a deer, cleanly shot, dies more painlessly than one that starves, or one that is torn to pieces by wolves in some remote, primeval wilderness. So his conscience doesn't trouble him. From Nature's own book, at first hand, he has learned that life feeds upon life, wherever we look.

There is another aspect that seems to mystify our non-hunting friends. From a good deal of personal experience, I've come to believe that many sportsmen often have to explain just what it was that first made them go hunting. There is nothing mysterious about that. Normally, a hunter gets his first start as a boy. In this, he is no different from our skillful par-

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ticipants in tennis, fishing, baseball, or any other outdoor sport. The youngster's interest in any of these is mainly a compound of hero-worship and a yearning to take part in something that isn't a child's game, but one in which adults engage, often with a good deal of glamour and popular acclaim.

Any boy, progressing from a pop-gun and a cap pistol to an air rifle, is likely to dream of the day when he can go afield with a real gun. To him, the great hunter and crack shot is a highly romantic figure, like an All-American fullback or a champion boxer, and the lack of opportunity prevents many more millions from trying to develop these skills. As firearms are much too dangerous to be used by any boy without proper supervision, it is only the lucky ones who get this vital training from an adult who can teach them the lore of the game lands and instill the spirit of sportsmanship.

When young sportsmen learn enough to go out on their own, I believe that another factor may incline them toward hunting, and toward fishing, as well. A lot of us are more shy than we like to admit. Many a youngster, uncertain of his ability, is uncomfortable in team sports because his ineptness may make him something of a

public spectacle. In contrast, the lone hunter plays a game in which only his triumphs are brought to the attention of his fellows. He can work out his problems without pressure. Alibis are unnecessary. Even the best hunters and fisherman often fail, and the unique part of this is that they very often have a good time in the process.

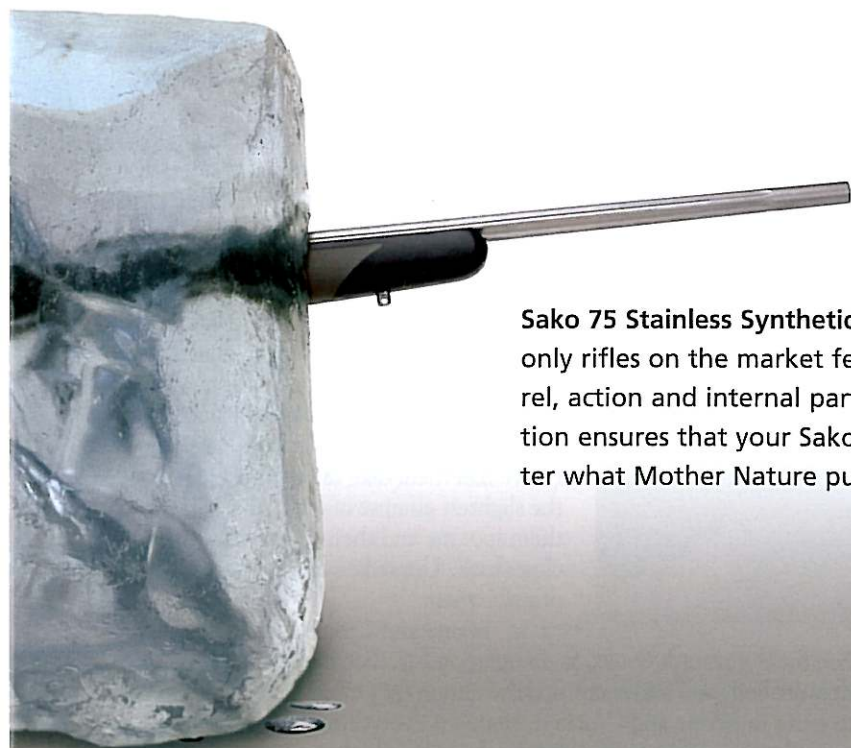
The question of why people hunt becomes many-sided when we apply it to the hunters who return to the game fields year after year. For the very human reason that most of us like to do things we do pretty well, and tend to drop out where we cannot perform creditably, it is a pretty safe bet that our seasoned sportsman is uncommonly competent. At least, he thinks he is. Maybe he employs a guide who is many times as good as he will ever be. That, as he sees it, doesn't count. But his own abilities must measure up to those of the companions or friends that he uses for comparison. I might add that many hunters are better shots than their guides, and such men take a good deal of pleasure in exercising their skills. So do good golfers or billiard players.

There are other attractions. When a hunter goes into our forests, or deserts, or mountains, he must observe the fine print in

Nature's book of wonders. He gains an appreciation and an understanding of his native land that he couldn't possibly get from a sight-seeing tour, or from a casual walk in the woods. Finally, his enforced study of the habits of his quarry is almost certain to bring him a knowledge of the problems that those birds and animals have to face, and this, in turn, often brings sympathy and a very real affection for them. Strange as it may seem, I'm convinced that our most experienced sportsmen have a greater love for the animals and birds that they hunt than anybody else. There is certainly no question that the hunters take more interest in our game species than those who never go afield. And it is to this interest that we owe the measures taken for the conservation of our game, as well as the wise harvesting of it. ■

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Club would like to thank Betty Fitz's estate for donating many of Grancel Fitz's original articles and photographs. Not only was Grancel on the committee that developed the Club's copyrighted scoring system, but he and his wife Betty coordinated the day to day records keeping activities of the Club for many years from their New York City apartment.

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