

FIELD

There is nothing easy about field judging sheep. Every measurement is critical, each has its subtleties, and all are difficult.

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JUDGING

By Craig Boddington

B&C Professional Member

TROPHY RAMS THE EIGHTH IN A SERIES

Spotting the rams on that distant mountain was one of the most amazing pieces of glassing I have ever seen. I knew they were there because our Mexican guides said they were there—but it was a long time before I could pick them out, and I had better optics than they did. Outfitter Kirk Kelso found them first, of course, but despite lots of coaching, it was some time before I could pick them up. Finally I had them, two rams, one clearly larger than the other.

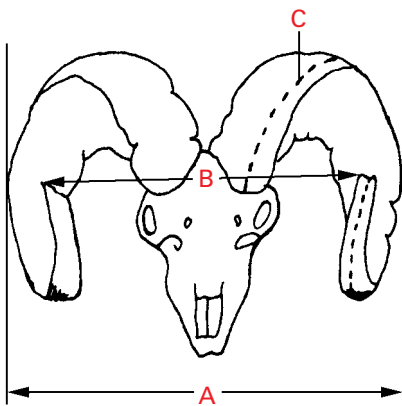
We watched them bed before making our move, and it took several tough up-and-down hours, climbing in crumbling rock, before we finally set up below the bench where we thought the two rams were bedded. At this point, we had no idea what we really had other than one apparently small ram and another that had potential. But we had to get close enough to see, and once we were close enough, we had to get ready just in case. So we eased into range as gently as we could. I set my pack on a rock, adjusted the rifle onto the pack, and snuggled into a neck-straining sort-of-prone position.

Luck was with us. Kelso had them pegged, which was not luck, and we were in reasonable shooting range, about 325 yards. The lucky thing was that, once we got set up and started glassing, the larger of the two rams was visible, more or less. He was bedded on the edge of the bench, partly hidden behind a screen of mesquite. He looked pretty good, clearly heavy-horned and carrying his mass well,

but there was no shot and still no certainty that he was what we wanted. So we waited, me on the rifle, Kelso on his tripod-mounted 20x60 Zeiss glasses. I'd waited 30 years to hunt desert sheep, so I have rarely felt so much pressure building as the minutes passed.

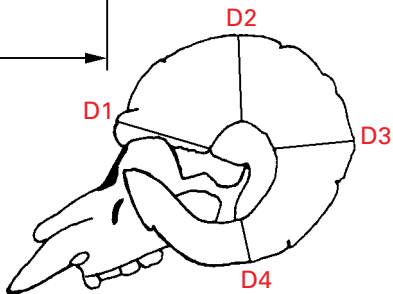
Finally he stood up, still mostly screened. Kelso was right behind me but a few inches higher; from his vantage point he could see the ram much better. "Craig, I think you'd better take this ram if you get a clear shot."

A few seconds later the ram stepped to the edge of the bench and stood clear. I adjusted slightly for a right-to-left crosswind and squeezed the trigger. The ram vanished off the bench, reappeared below and to the right for an instant, and then piled up in heavy brush. He had looked just great to me, but I had to ask: "How good is he?" Kelso said that he thought he was in the mid-160s, not a book head, but a very fine Sonoran desert sheep. It took a while to get to him, but he was there, under a mesquite, and he was beautiful—old, heavy-horned, perfect. Eventually we got around to putting a tape on him, and green-scored him at about 165 points.



UNDERSTANDING A SHEEP FRAME

- A – Greatest Spread
- B – Tip to Tip Spread
- C – Length of Horn
- D – Circumference



A TOUGH CALL

No human being can judge a ram any better than that . . . and often you can't do as well. On the surface it seems that wild sheep should be easy to judge. After all, it's just horn length and four circumference measurements on each side, much less to worry about than deer or even pronghorn . . . and let's not even talk about caribou and moose! Simple or not, sheep are very difficult to judge.

There are two reasons for this. First, length of horn is not a linear measurement, which would be a bit easier, but a circular measurement around the curl. It isn't easy to visualize, and since it's a circular measurement, the size of the circle is everything. Second, and perhaps even more important, circumference is extremely important on wild sheep—much more important than on any antlered game. This is because circumference makes up at least half of the total score—sometimes much more. Let's say you have a bighorn that makes the All-time minimum of 180 B&C points. Obviously it's a very good ram, so let's say that its horns are 40 inches around the curl. Do the math. That's 80 points on the two horns—the other 100 points come from the circumference measurements.

Many Rocky Mountain bighorns (and most desert sheep, with a lesser minimum of 168) that meet the All-time minimum have horns quite a bit shorter than 40 inches. With bighorns, horn lengths of 35 and 36 inches are well-represented throughout the listings. With desert bighorns, record heads with horns as short as 32 and 33 inches aren't uncommon. So, with all the bighorns, circumference is everything—and it is very hard to judge.

While bighorns often "broom" or rub down the ends of their horns, the thin horned sheep—Dall's and Stone's sheep—often do not. These sheep thus tend to have longer horns that are of smaller diameter (thin horns versus bighorns, right?). Statistically then, circumferences are not as important with thin horns—but more important than you might think. The Dall's sheep minimum for the All-time book is 170 points. So let's take a really great Dall's sheep measuring 43 inches on each horn, with a score of about 172 (there are actually several Dall's sheep like this in the All-time book). Yep, you're right—circumference, the hardest thing to judge, is 50 percent of the total score! Judging sheep isn't easy, and there is no way to make it easy. But with practice and experience you can come fairly close.

HOW GOOD SHOULD IT BE?

That is always up to you, of course, but sheep

hunting is a bit different from a lot of other big game hunting. For one thing, some kind of qualitative judgment is almost always required. There aren't many "any sheep" areas! In some areas a "3/4-curl" ram is legal, and in some Dall's or Stone's areas, a full-curl ram is the legal minimum. Under these circumstances there is usually an "out" to take into account old rams that have broomed back their horns, such as a legal minimum of "3/4-curl or seven years old." Whatever the legal criteria in the area you're hunting, it's important that you read the regulations and understand them. And then, even if you aren't specifically trophy hunting, you are obligated to study any ram you see to make sure it's legal . . . long before you consider shooting.

The other thing about sheep hunting is that it isn't like deer hunting in your back yard. If you're on a guided hunt, you've put a lot of money on the line. You want to get a ram, almost certainly the best ram you can find. Even if you're hunting on your own, the situation isn't much different. Sheep hunting is hard work, and (with the possible exception of residents in Canada and Alaska) the tags are precious. It can take a lifetime to draw a bighorn tag, so of course you're looking for the very best ram you can find.

That said, I believe in being practical and realistic in your expectations. There's no such thing as a bad sheep tag, but not all sheep areas produce monster rams. It's important to learn what kind of sheep the area you're hunting has been producing

in recent seasons. As with anything else, an extra-large trophy can turn up almost anywhere—but I think it's foolish to look for a ram that's better than, say, the upper average of what the area you're hunting has been producing.

On that hunt in Sonora, for instance, I knew that a record-class ram was an extremely remote possibility. The hunt was extremely expensive, at least for me, and I also knew I couldn't afford to do it again if unsuccessful. So I had made up my mind that I wouldn't pass a mature ram in the low 160s, which is the upper end of what mainland Sonora's desert sheep country has been producing. When we found a ram that met that criteria, I didn't hesitate.

It was different back in 1994, when I drew a bighorn tag in one of Montana's really good areas. Jack Atcheson, Jr., and my dad joined me on the hunt, and we passed up a whole bunch of rams before settling on a really good one. The area was so good that I probably could have done even better, but I wanted to take a ram while Dad was with me, and I'm glad that I did. In 1998, I drew a Wyoming bighorn tag. That was an entirely different story! Wyoming has a lot of sheep, but they also give out quite a few tags (God bless 'em!). Really big rams are rare in most areas. I figured it was extremely unlikely that I would beat my Montana ram, so I decided not to even try. My goal was a mature ram that

Dall's and Stone's rams often go well beyond full curl, with the tips flaring out...you must start with the measurement of the full curl, then estimate how much more horn there is beyond the full curl.



Photo by Joey Olivieri

FIELD JUDGING

“looked like a bighorn” — heavy, nicely broomed, completely grown up. Even this proved a difficult standard to meet. Hunting with outfitter Ron Dube, we passed a whole bunch of barely legal rams, but it was the 11th day of the hunt before we found a “bighorn that looked like a bighorn.”

Everyone has to establish his or her own trophy standards. Mine may well be lower than yours, and that’s fine. I do want the



best I can find, within the constraint of what the area I’m hunting will produce. Now that I have all four North American sheep, I may well try to improve on what I have. That means some of my future sheep hunts will probably be unsuccessful! I do believe a sheep needs to be mature—at least seven or eight years old, preferably over ten, to be a real trophy. But that is also up to you, and passing or taking a legal ram is a tough decision. You need to consider not only the area and what it is likely to produce, but also how many hunting days you have remaining, how many sheep you’ve been seeing, and, realistically, how important it is to you to be successful. The reality of sheep hunting is that it isn’t always possible to “try again next year,” whether for financial reasons or the grim reality that you may never draw another tag.

DEPTH OF CURL

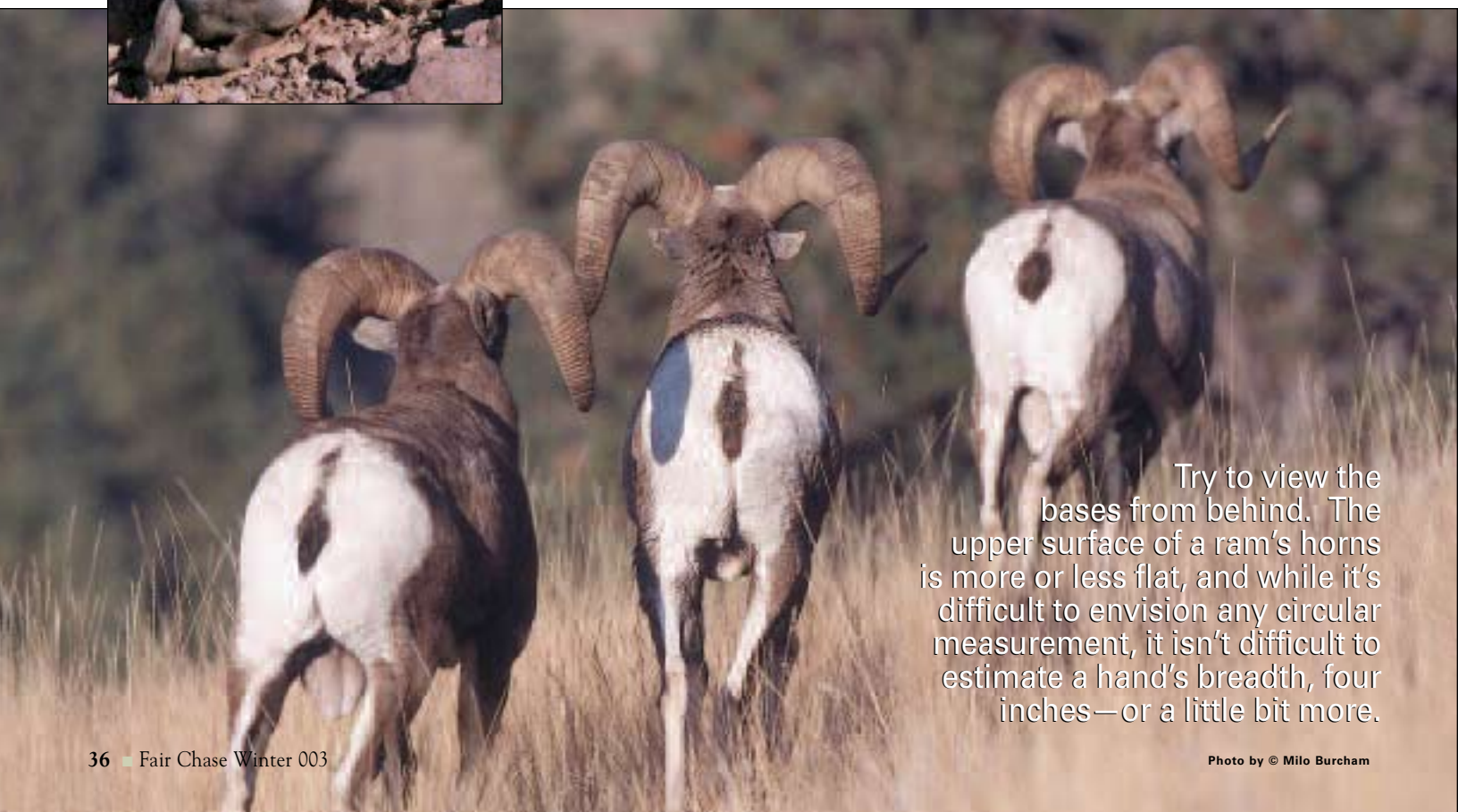
Okay, with sheep, the length is the easiest thing to judge. Do not succumb to the allure of the full curl—this actually means very little. In terms of determining legality, not all juris-

A great Sonoran desert sheep, taken with Kirk Kelso in 2003. Mass is excellent and it carries it well, but horn length isn’t long enough to meet the All-time minimum. That’s just fine; it’s a great ram for the area it came from.

dictions use the same criteria for determining what makes a 3/4-curl or full curl ram, but so long as you study the regulations this isn’t difficult. A 3/4-curl ram usually means that the tip of the horn breaks an imaginary line from the base of horn down through the eye. Simple. The tip of a full-curl ram’s horn usually breaks the bridge of the nose. Also simple.

Unfortunately, this doesn’t mean much. A whole lot of record-book bighorns are barely 3/4-curl . . . and most full-curl Dall’s and Stone’s rams won’t come close to the minimum. What matters is the length around the curl, not specifically how much curl there is. So it’s the circumference of the circle, and the bigger the circle the larger the circumference. Most sheep hunters refer to this as “depth of curl.” This varies tremendously from ram to ram. A lot of Dall’s and Stone’s sheep have very tight curls, and a complete full-curl ram may have horn length of just 33 or 34 inches. Such rams may indeed be beautiful trophies—but they won’t measure very well. It’s easy to be fooled, too. Once I saw a magnificent Dall’s sheep in a trophy room, a beautiful sheep with well over 1-1/4-curl to its horns, the tips flaring out like an argali. Just out of curiosity I put a tape on it. The curls were very tight, and horn length was barely 37 inches.

A quick way to check for deep, open curls is to make sure the bottom of the curl is below the jawline—the farther the better. If you see this you need to do some more studying. Unfortunately, with sheep, there is no



Try to view the bases from behind. The upper surface of a ram’s horns is more or less flat, and while it’s difficult to envision any circular measurement, it isn’t difficult to estimate a hand’s breadth, four inches—or a little bit more.

really quick solution. That's okay, because under most circumstances you can study sheep at a distance before you start to close in. There is also no quick way to learn quantitative judgment on sheep. It takes time and experience—but studying mounted heads is just as good as studying live rams—and it's a whole lot easier to put the tape on them to check your guesstimates.

My old friend Jack Atcheson, Jr., is one of the best sheep hunters I know. Not only does he have several North American slams to his credit; he has guided bighorn hunters in his native Montana since he was a kid. I asked him about depth of curl, and he told me he uses the “softball/volleyball” technique. You must see the ram from the side so you can visualize the opening within the circle of the horn. If it looks like a softball will fit into that opening, and if the ram is full curl, you're probably looking at a 39 or 40-inch ram. If a volleyball will fit, then you're looking at one of the big boys, 44 or 45 inches.

There are, of course, subtleties. Dall's and Stone's rams often go well beyond full curl, with the tips flaring out. The principle is the same, but you must start with the measurement of the full curl, then estimate how much more horn there is beyond the full curl. Supposing it's a fairly tight-curved ram (a hardball in the circle?), maybe 36 or 37 inches at full curl. If there's just a hand's breadth of horntip flaring out beyond the full curl, then you've still got a 40-inch ram. A 40-inch ram is a very good ram, always and forever . . . but not all 40-inch rams will approach record-book dimensions. That depends on the mass.

BASES AND QUARTERS

A bighorn can have a base circumference of over 17 inches. Dall's and Stone's sheep cannot grow that kind of mass. In Boone and Crockett Club's All-time records book, *Records of North American Big Game* you will find Dall's and Stone's sheep with base circumferences of little more than 12 inches. A mature bighorn almost never has horns this thin, and those that do will never qualify for the record books. So, potentially, there is five inches of difference in base circumference between bighorns and thin horns. Potentially, yes. Practically, the differences aren't that extreme. You can figure really good bighorns will have base circumferences between about 14 and 17 inches. Dall's and Stone's sheep range from somewhere in the 12s up to the 16-inch range.

It isn't difficult to see the difference between a really heavy-horned ram and one that is spindly—but fine-tuning a qualitative

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judgment is very difficult. As always, experience counts and there is no surefire formula. Another good tip from Atcheson: Try to view the bases from behind. The upper surface of a ram's horns is more or less flat, and while it's difficult to envision any circular measurement, it isn't difficult to estimate a hand's breadth, four inches—or a little bit more. If that flat surface seems to be about four inches, then you're looking at a ram with base circumference of 14 or 15 inches (not bad for thin horns, a bit skimpy for bighorns). If that flat surface seems to be as much as six inches, then you're looking at really good base measurements of 16 or 17 inches.

While the base measurement is important, what matters even more is how well the ram carries the mass on through the rest of his horns. Regardless of base measurement, and almost regardless of horn length, a ram of record dimensions will have first and second quarters measurements that are very close to the base measurement. One of the subtleties, according to Atcheson, is that some rams have horns that are sort of round, while others have horns that are more square or triangular. Again, look at the flat surface on top of the horn. Now look at the horn mass below it. Does the horn run straight down from that flat surface, or does it bulge outward? If the latter, you're looking at one of the “round-horned” rams, and this may give you as much as an extra inch at the quarter measurements.

While all the circumference measurements are very important, most important of all is the third quarter measurement. To “make book” a ram simply cannot die at the third quarter. Really great bighorns, generally aided by brooming, will carry a third quarter measurement up into the double digits—10, 11, occasionally even 12 inches. Thin horn sheep will usually have a smaller third quarter because they will often still carry their “lamb tips” at the ends of the horn—but even with thin horns a third quarter measurement approaching half of the base measurement is usually essential. Again, this is very difficult to judge precisely. As you're glassing the ram you need to mentally divide the horns into their quarters, and then examine each quarter measurement in relation to your estimate of the base circumference.



TIME AND PATIENCE

There is nothing easy about field judging sheep. Every measurement is critical, each has its subtleties, and all are difficult. Based on his extensive experience with Montana bighorns, Atcheson believes it is possible to consistently come within two inches—but lone rams can fool you. It's important to view a ram from as many angles as possible, preferably in the company of other rams because this will give you a size comparison, not only with horns, but also body size.

The most important point of all is that, if record-book score is important to you, you must take plenty of time. Good optics are absolutely essential, but with wind, mirage, and distortion, even the best optics aren't enough. You have to get close in order to be sure. Atcheson told me that he likes to get within 200 yards—and then use the best optics—in order to have real confidence in his estimate. This, of course, isn't always possible—but the greater the distance, the greater the potential error. There are other factors here. Sheep hunts are precious, and they're also a whole lot of hard work. It's all too easy to commit yourself before you close in, and when you do get close, all you're worried about is shooting rather than making a final judgment. I believe that's where I was on that desert ram in Sonora—I hadn't yet seen him properly, but my main concern was taking the shot. I was lucky in two ways. First, Kirk Kelso was not prepared to commit to a shot until he'd gotten a much closer look. Second, the ram was everything we wanted. Had he not been, I hope I would have had the courage to walk away and keep looking. Ultimately, that is the most important thing if you want to hunt for the very best rams. ■