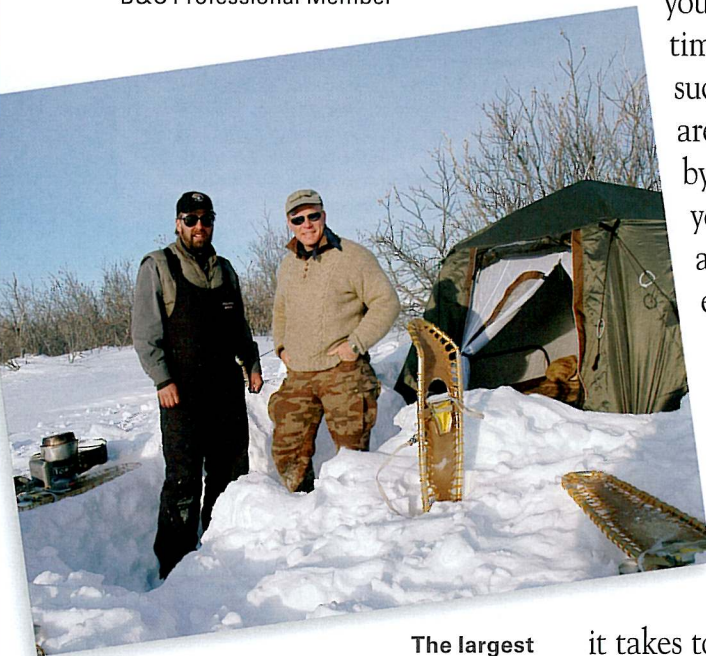


Hang In There

Staying tough is much more difficult than being tough

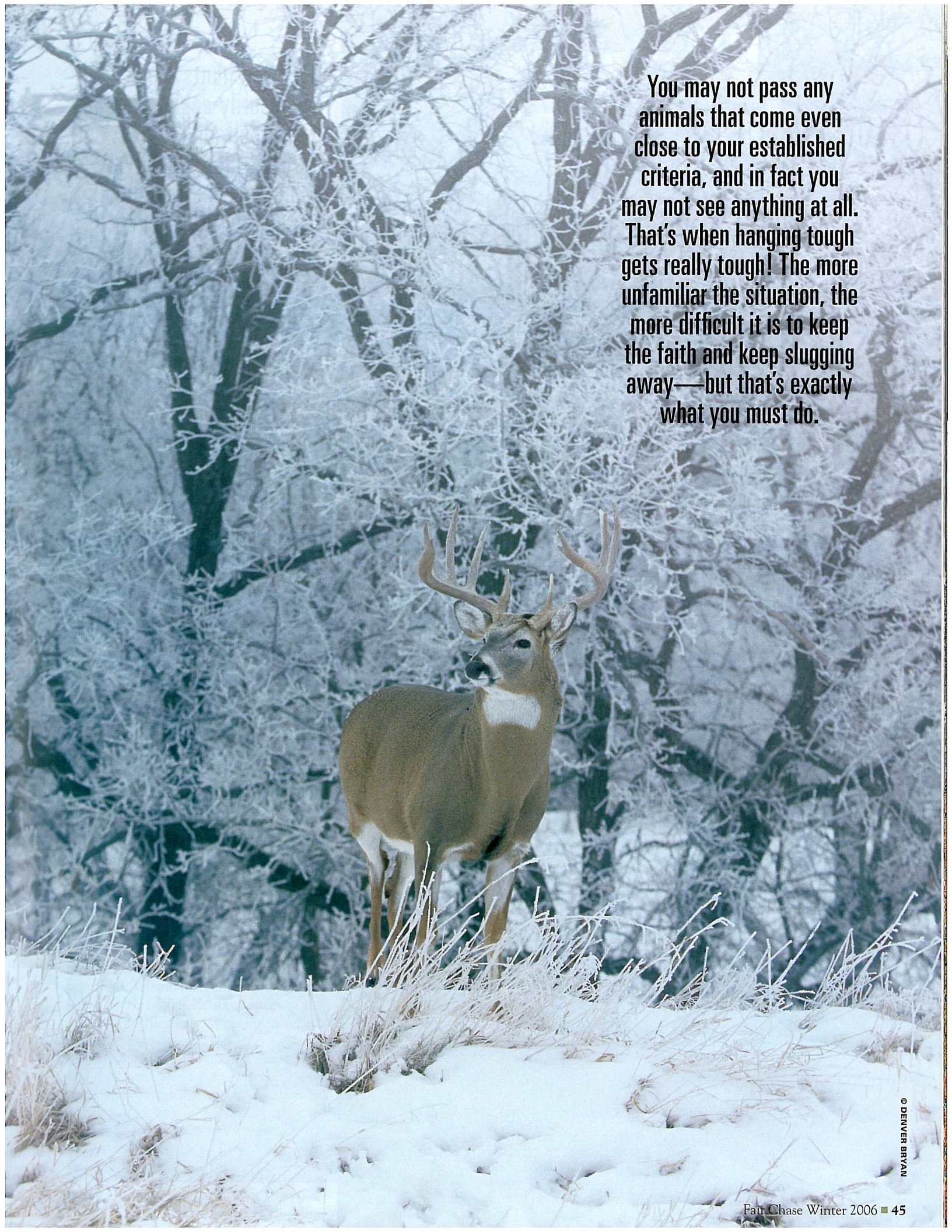
By Craig Boddington
B&C Professional Member



The largest mental block that I play with is I hate cold. I can deal with it, but in order for me to remain focused and keep the faith I need good cold-weather gear. I can handle the cold when I have to, but you can't make me love it!

Physical toughness is really the easy part. You get in shape or you don't, and you can handle a given hunt or you can't. It is extremely foolish to get into any situation that is genuinely beyond your physical capabilities. You won't have much fun (which, ultimately, should be the primary goal), you probably won't be successful, and you might well get yourself or your partners (who are trying to look after you) into genuine danger. Let's start out by accepting the premise that, if you care about your hunting, you will get in the best physical condition your age, health, and schedule allow. Obviously these variables are different for each of us, and change over time. For instance, I accept that I can never be in as good condition now, in my mid-50s, as I was in my 20s. I gain weight faster, lose it much quicker, and need to work out a great deal more than I used to in order to keep in shape. At the same time, my schedule continues to escalate, so the necessary time for working out no longer exists. So we do the best we can, understanding that over time the ground we can cover will diminish, and the time it takes to cover that ground will increase.

Mental toughness, however, is often much more important than peak physical condition. There are several key reasons for this. Primary is that much of fatigue is really in the mind. In order to do something difficult you simply must want to do it, and you can't talk yourself out of it. Again, I don't recommend anyone going beyond actual physical limitations. Every year hunters ignore the warnings and have heart attacks and strokes in elk camps and on sheep mountains. This is obviously not desirable. On the other hand, over



You may not pass any animals that come even close to your established criteria, and in fact you may not see anything at all. That's when hanging tough gets really tough! The more unfamiliar the situation, the more difficult it is to keep the faith and keep slugging away—but that's exactly what you must do.

Hang In There

Outfitted hunts aren't necessarily easier than do-it-yourself adventures, and the faith that keeps you going is based largely on the degree of confidence you have in your guide.



Coues' deer hunting is the most optics-intensive hunting I know, and if you haven't done a lot of glassing it's very difficult to keep the faith, to believe the buck you want is really there, if you could only spot him.

the years I've seen quite a few hunters quit a hunt or a portion of a hunt. Sometimes they were truly at the limit, so backing off was the right decision. All too often, however, the hunters appeared to be young enough and fit enough to top the ridge and see what lay on the other side. They just didn't want it bad enough.

Another key reason mental toughness is more important than physical toughness is that many hunts are indeed very difficult, but not especially physically demanding. This perfectly describes the vast majority of whitetail hunting. You don't have to be a marathon runner to sit in a deer stand—but when it's -20°F in Saskatchewan you'd better be tough! This kind of hunting is as classic an example as it is extreme, so we'll probably come back to it several times. As the days drag on you have to want a big buck



really bad to stick it out, and you must have enough faith to believe he's really going to show. You also must have proper equipment, else you're going to freeze to death!

KEEPING THE FAITH

The primary element in mental toughness is desire. Hills seem less steep if you really want what lies at the top, and long, cold waits seem to go by faster if you think the end justifies the means. But just wanting it isn't enough. You must believe that whatever you are doing is the proper approach for achieving results: You gotta have faith. There are lots of ways to achieve it, and in fact very few situations are alike. If you're hunting whitetails in a favorite hot spot, then your faith is based on years of experience. You already know where the bucks are likely to be, and what techniques are most likely to yield results. As in almost all hunting, nothing is sure, but you know you're in a good place and you know how to hunt it, so it's pretty easy to stay focused and do what you know how to do.

Hunting new country is a bit different. Hopefully you've done your homework, because the faith required to hunt properly and effectively—and to go the distance—is based on it. Hands-on scouting is always the best, but effective scouting can be done with topo maps and by talking to area game war-

dens and wildlife biologists. If you've done your homework well, then you simply must believe that the game you're seeking is there. It is your job to find it. The search may be simple or it may be very difficult, and you might not be successful—but you have no chance at all if you don't believe the game you seek is out there.

Things are different yet with an outfitted hunt. Unless you're a repeat client you have no experience with the specific area, often not with the game you're hunting. You probably haven't done any specific research on the exact area you'll be hunting, and indeed you may not even know where your outfitter or his guide is taking you. On the other hand, you'd better have done your homework on your outfitter. Outfitted hunts aren't necessarily easier than do-it-yourself adventures, and the faith that keeps you going is based largely on the degree of confidence you have in your guide. Word of mouth is often the very best way to find an outfitter you can trust, but the search should always be exhaustive, including checking references and asking hard questions.

Once you've made your choice it's pretty hard to second-guess it... and often counter-productive. By this I mean that if you're plunking down hard cash for a guided hunt, you should be prepared to listen to your guide and, within reason, follow his recom-

mendations. Hunting guides aren't always perfect, and there are a few real psychos out there, but most of the time a hunting guide's primary goal is exactly the same as yours: To enjoy a good hunt and have it conclude successfully. You may not agree with all of your guide's hunting decisions, and in fact his decisions probably won't always be correct. But remember, you're paying good money for his expertise. So use it. You have the right to disagree, especially if your opinion is based on actual experience. But there is a whole lot of psychology involved with working with a hunting guide, especially when it comes to altering his methodology without alienating him completely. Don't be afraid to offer opinions, but walk softly.

And remember, the reason you're there is because you believe this outfitter and this area can produce the game you desire. There may be setbacks like unfavorable weather, stalks that don't work, shots that get missed, or animals that just plain don't cooperate. Ultimately you may not find what you're looking for, because hunting is hunting. Still, you must keep the faith and keep on trying, right up until the last minute of the last day.

FIRST DAY, LAST DAY

When I write for this magazine I try very hard to maintain a pure North American

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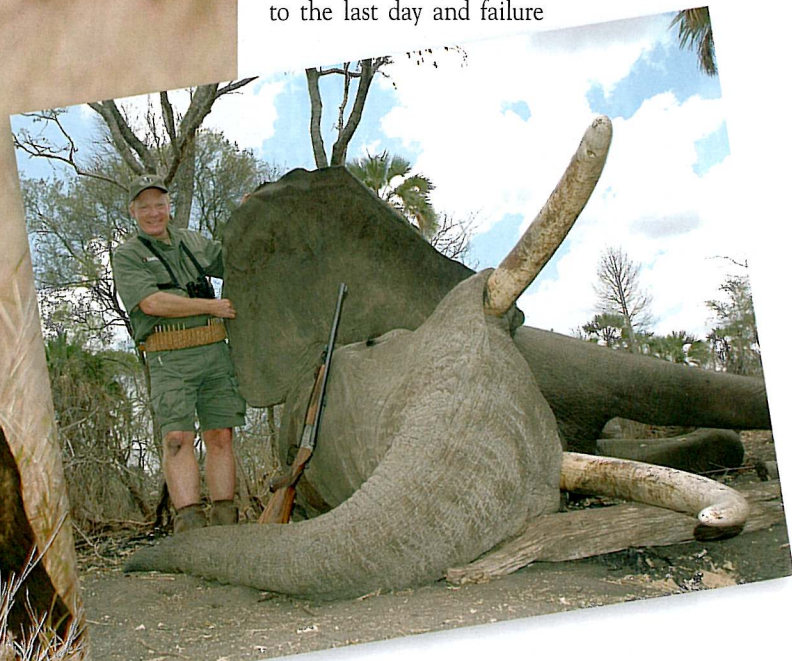
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Hang In There



focus. This is not always appropriate because, after all, in so many ways hunting is hunting, and I spend an awful lot of my time hunting on other continents. Just this once, please let me wander off our shores. My partners and I in our *Tracks Across Africa* television show have a little phrase that seems to pop up when one of us is really frustrated: "It's just the first day." It goes back to a serious drought period in the Zambezi Valley, when buffalo were scarce and hard to catch up with. Most guys were getting their buffalo, but ten-day hunts were going right to the wire with few buffalo taken before Day Eight. One of our sponsor reps got lucky and got into several beautiful bulls on the first day of his hunt. At least one was a monster, over 40 inches in spread, with heavy bosses and a beautiful shape. He blithely passed them all saying, "It's just the first day." Nine days later, at the eleventh hour, he finally took a bull that was much smaller than all the bulls passed on his first day.

Personally, I don't like to shoot on the first day. As a writer I'm always thinking about the story, and if success comes very early it's difficult to build a good story line. From a writing standpoint, I suppose it's for the best to have a real outdoor writer cliff-hanger finish, in the last hour of the last day. This I really hate. To a degree any hunt is a business proposition to me, and I want to get the story. When it comes down to the last day and failure



Some hunts are longer than others, but on any given hunt success can come on any given day, especially if you stay focused, hunt hard, and continue to believe. This Tanzanian elephant came on the 17th day of a 21-day hunt.

© DENVER BRYAN

is a looming reality there's a lot of pressure and I don't care for it. If I had my choice, every hunt would be successful somewhere in the middle, enough time to get a good story, but before the "final inning" pressure starts to build.

This, of course, is totally ridiculous. A hunt is like dice, except the number of faces on the die equals the number of days you have for any given hunt. The odds of a given number coming up are exactly the same on every throw of the die, and the odds of you being successful are theoretically exactly the same on every single day of any given hunt.

Admittedly, there are subtle differences between theory and reality. Any given day can be weathered out. Provided you're out there trying even the most unfavorable weather doesn't preclude success, but can greatly reduce the odds. In some ways, the first part of a hunt may offer slightly better odds. Assuming you're hunting a finite area, at the start of a hunt the country is less disturbed and the game movement most natural. Also (like the country) you are fresh and rested, and it's likely that your confidence and your faith are at their highest level.

On the other hand, even though your activity may have caused disturbance, and even though your faith is fading just a bit, the latter part of any hunt also has advantages. By now you have learned a great deal

At least one [of the buffalo] was a monster, over 40 inches in spread, with heavy bosses and a beautiful shape. He blithely passed them all saying, "It's just the first day." Nine days later, at the eleventh hour, he finally took a bull that was much smaller than all the bulls passed on his first day.

about exact game movement during the specific period you are hunting. You know what techniques aren't working, and hopefully you've been able to make some adjustments. If you're hunting with a guide, then your teamwork will (usually and hopefully) get better and better as the hunt progresses.

Thus there are advantages and tradeoffs between the various semesters of a hunt, but so what? Exactly when success

comes is not something you have any control over, so it's foolish to even think about it. You have to take every day as it comes, one step at a time. Some hunts are all-day affairs, while many are just mornings and evenings—and occasionally only mornings or evenings. That doesn't matter at all. You have to take each day as it comes, holding the mindset that "this will be the day." This is not easy, especially as the days pass. Just keep in mind that the last day is truly as good as the first day—and so is every day in between. It's a matter of keeping the faith, continuing to believe, and above all, continuing to work hard and smart toward the goal.

Now, back to this business of passing or shooting on the first day. There are very few situations where trophy animals can be stockpiled. A

nice animal passed up on the first day probably cannot be relocated on the last day. A friend of mine has a credo that goes like this: "Any animal I'd take on the last day I'll take on the first day." This is not a bad approach. Certainly I don't think it's a good approach to hold extremely high trophy standards right up until the end, and then take whatever comes along just because you're now short on time.

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Hang In There



Better, to me, is to establish reasonable standards from the very start: Trophy standards that are attainable in the area you are hunting. But that's me, because I don't like to chase unicorns. It's perfectly acceptable to establish extremely lofty goals, just so long as you understand you will probably go home empty-handed. If that's okay with you, then that's trophy hunting at its most pure. Does that mean you should shoot on the first day if you see a nice trophy? Perhaps, but not always. Hopefully you know a bit about the area, and the weather forecast so you can make an intelligent decision. Just understand, if you pass a very nice trophy early in the hunt, you might do better later—or you might have lost the best and only opportunity you're going to have. It's a very difficult judgment call. On a guided hunt it might or might not be easier. In my experience very few good guides are anxious to tell you what you should shoot; they view it as your nickel, your hunt, and your animal. Unless it's a genuine no-brainer, the best you'll usually get is fairly gentle advice such as, "I really think you should consider taking this animal."

As my friend and partner Dave Fulson likes to point out, remember that while it might be your first day, your guide has been there through the season and has a pretty good idea of what's out there and what the game movement is like. It's best to take his advice. If you don't (and you don't have to) you are accepting a lot of risk. Just last month I was hunting pronghorns in west Texas with outfitter Hunter Ross. We were a group of three, Mike Martinez from Yamaha, Steve Johnson from Hornady, and me. We saw a real monster on opening day, and since Mike and Steve were the "industry hosts" and I was the "writer," it was my shot. I passed, insisting that Mike take it because he had

Passing something really good on the first day (or any day) is fraught with risk. It was my shot on the first day of this west Texas pronghorn hunt, and I knew how good this buck was. I was hunting with Mike Martinez (left) who had never shot a pronghorn and Steve

Johnson (right). So I pretty much forced Mike to take it, knowing it would be unlikely for us to see a better buck. We didn't!

never shot a pronghorn. He did, and it was a wonderful buck. I knew it was very unlikely that we would see a better buck, and indeed we didn't. But I'm happy with my buck and even happier that Mike shot the big one. If you do something stupid like that, just make sure you know what you're doing, because you can't second-guess it later!

Of course, this may not come up. You may not pass any animals that come even close to your established criteria, and in fact you may not see anything at all. That's when hanging tough gets really tough! The more unfamiliar the situation, the more difficult it is to keep the faith and keep slugging away—but that's exactly what you must do. I've just concluded a hot, difficult elephant hunt in southern Tanzania. I got my bull on the 17th day (of 21 hunting days). I wasn't yet frantic, but I was getting nervous, to put it mildly. My professional hunter and outfitter, Michel Mantheakis, never wavered and never seemed concerned, so I could only follow his lead and keep on trying.

My partner on this hunt, Rigby's Jim Crawford, had it even worse, and for two reasons. First, he had never before hunted elephant, so didn't have any background in this most difficult of African hunts. Second, his hunt went down to the wire; he took a fine tusker on the evening of the 20th day. I was simply amazed at the positive attitude he maintained throughout, far better than I could have done.

MIND GAMES

For most of us, with age comes a small modicum of wisdom. I still get pretty frantic as the end of a hunt draws near and success remains elusive, but I'm getting better at this. Difficult though it is, it's essential to keep in mind that hunting is supposed to be fun, and that hunting is hunting. There are no guarantees of success, and indeed nobody (not even you or me) will be successful all the time. If you can't face this reality and still have fun, then you're in the wrong game.

As difficult as dealing with failure is keeping yourself from radically dropping your standards when things get tough. No opportunity at all is tough on the psyche, but there isn't any issue about shooting or not shooting. Ah, but when things are really tough and you have an opportunity at something, well, that's where mental toughness is really important.

Let's go back to that treestand in Saskatchewan at 20 below zero. I've been there, believe me. I think I've done five hunts in the "big buck country" of Alberta and Saskatchewan, and I've taken two



© MIKE BARLOW

bucks. Neither are monsters, but both are good, solid, mature, and very typical examples of what a northern whitetail should be. Mentally this is perhaps the most difficult hunting I have ever done. Usually you don't see a whole lot of game, and I hate to be cold a whole lot worse than I hate to be hot. Every day it gets more difficult to stay still and sit it out, and after three or four days any poor unsuspecting little buck that wanders by becomes your ticket out of the freezer. It takes real discipline to hold your standards, and this is a place where it's essential that you do so. Deer densities are low up there, and you haven't done anybody any good if you fold up and take a 2 1/2-year-old eight pointer.

CUTTING YOUR LOSSES

Over the years I've seen a few hunters give up, just simply walk away from a hunt in progress. Sometimes this is a realistic admission that the hunt is too tough for a person's health or condition. This must be a soul-searching and heart-breaking decision to make, but it certainly isn't a wrong decision. Other times I've seen people walk away from hunts in what, in other occupations, would be considered acts of cowardice. Absent health issues, you've just got to keep trying.

Except, every once in a while, the sensible tactic is cut your losses. I cannot believe I would ever have said this, and perhaps that's a part of the aging process. Or maybe it's simply because I did it last year, and I need to justify my actions. I drew an Arizona elk tag in what should have (shoulda, woulda, coulda) been a very good unit. It was not. Or at least, it was

Mental toughness, however, is often much more important than peak physical condition.

not at that particular moment in the particular part of it I was hunting. Several days passed with no elk and few tracks spotted. There were too many hunters in camp, and nobody was doing much better. These days my life is under a spotlight, and I realized that if I somehow slopped into a bull under these circumstances everyone else in camp would assume I'd gotten special treatment. It seemed not only hopeless, but a "no-win" situation.

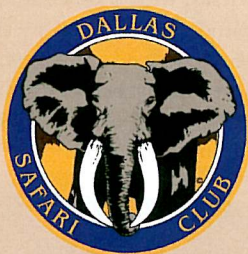
So, with a couple of precious days left, I said my thanks, tipped my guide, and headed home. Again, if you ever consider this course of action, make sure you know what you're doing. There can be no second-

guessing, and no recriminations; you picked up your marbles and went home, which is always your right... but you forfeit all rights to post-mortem discussion!

THE RIGHT STUFF

Just briefly, it's essential to keep in mind that the right gear has as much to do with mental toughness as it does with physical well being. A couple of years ago Kimber's Dwight Van Brunt and I went on a Stone's sheep hunt in southern Yukon. Blisters turned his feet to hamburger, while my feet were (certainly by comparison) just fine. He got his ram just fine, but with feet like that it was a great deal more difficult for him to concentrate and keep a positive attitude than it was for me.

Come to think of it, any adversity whatsoever makes it more difficult to concentrate, stay focused, and keep the faith. As I said, I hate being cold, so those northern whitetail hunts are pure murder for me. I simply could not sit still without the very best cold weather gear, likewise on any Arctic hunt. Good raingear is as essential as good boots. When it gets really hot, well, I don't know what to tell you—but I can assure you I couldn't have made it through that elephant hunt without darn near a gallon of sun block! ■



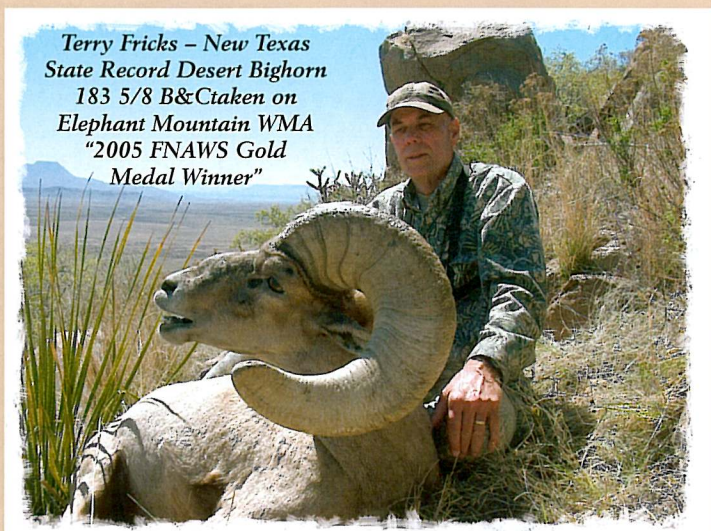
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