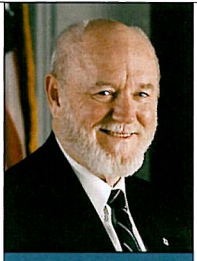


# CONSERVATION COMPASS



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## Will I Be Able to Hunt?

A month or so ago, I took the big plunge relatively common to, shall we say, older hunters — full knee replacement. The knee that I had been limping around on since a football injury at age 16 finally, 52 years later, was a hopeless wreck. The docs told me that it was the end of the road to full knee replacement — no more cortisone injections, no more cartilage to remove, and no bone surface to polish.

But, “Doc, will I be able to hunt?”

“Well maybe — but, again maybe not. Whether you can keep hunting depends on how much you are willing to put into the physical therapy, luck, and overall physical condition. That is all, or at least mostly, up to you.”

I couldn't decide if I was encouraged or discouraged by the good doctor's words. His skills could take me only so far — the rest was up to me and chance.

The last thing I remember lying on the operating table, before the surgery, was straining against gravity and pain to squirm into a prone shooting position for a shot at the biggest bull elk I had ever seen

before he slipped away over the ridgeline. I never knew how the dream turned out. But I think the dream itself said it all.

During the months of recovery, I had much time to let my mind drift where it would, and when the pain medications became less effective, I could travel where I wished to go and in the process wash away the pain and the tedium. I was surprised about how often my thoughts turned to hunting and all it had entailed over 60 years. I thought mostly about the hunting, those with whom I hunted — both people and animals — and little about the killing. In those dreams, the people and animals were as they were then, vibrant and filled with that special spirit of the hunt that

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magnificently amplifies actual experience. They were not old and sick or crippled from the vicissitudes of age.

During the recovery period, I could sit in my living room and watch the ring-necked pheasants, white-tailed deer, and various species of ducks that make the ponds and unkempt portions of the “back 40” home.

There was time to relive the past, to live in the moment, and to ponder the future.

The past was to be treasured for what it was, a storehouse of experience and adventures and misadventures. It was what made me what I am and equipped me for what I can and will be tomorrow. It was where I learned what I thought worthwhile to pass on to others. The past is a great place to visit, but it is not the place to live.

We must live in the present with our actions guided by the lessons and experiences of the past. But we cannot be content with that — not if we care about what comes after us. The future is always just out there in the mists and can take a dozen forms depending on circumstances. Yet, it is, at least partially, the circumstances of today that set the road map toward the future. Those of

use blessed to be hunters and conservationists have the duty to help formulate that future as those who came before us did.

As I write these words, I still have no real idea how the combination of a new knee and nearly two-score in years will affect my hunting. Probably my dream of a hunt for bighorns or mountain sheep is no longer realistic. But there are other deserving quarries that thrive on flatter ground. The important thing is that there are other hunters, especially younger hunters, along for the ride and the life-changing experience.

For without wild lands there is no hunting, an absence of what can be learned from hunting, and, ultimately, in a tightening spiral no hunting at all.

My knee replacement surgery, coupled with increasing age, has afforded me opportunity to consider what hunting has meant to me and will always mean regardless of the surgery's outcome.

We hunters have come far and helped accomplish many worthwhile objectives relative to maintenance of a hunting heritage and wild lands, but it is a journey and a dream. It is critical to that living dream to be able, generation after generation, to hunt wild things in wild places.

One should not have to undergo knee replacement surgery to figure that out. ■

