Thinking Through the Shot

Success is Right There. Don't Talk Yourself Out of It!

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You're sitting in your tree stand, watching a trail intersection. There's nothing there, so you scan to your right, slowly turning your head. You turn back, and there's the buck, motionless, almost broadside. Slowly, slowly you lift your rifle. The safety sounds like a cannon shot, but it must not be, because the buck doesn't move. Your crosshairs find the shoulder, and the rifle goes off.

Or perhaps you're up in the high Alpine, and you've glassed a good mule-deer buck feeding in a basin. There's a little finger ridge just above the buck, and it has a prominent rockpile. The wind is good, so you duck back into the timber and stow your spotting scope. You circle back and come in behind that little ridge. It looks different from this side, but as you near the crest you spot that rockpile. You stop to breathe for a few moments, then you remove your pack, chamber a round, and creep forward. There's a good rock, just the right height. Slowly you push your pack up onto the rock, then you slide your rifle on top of it and nestle in behind it. The buck is still there, feeding, not 200 yards below you. He's quartering slightly away, feeding. You align the vertical wire with the off foreleg, and the rifle goes off.

This was the position I used when I took my desert bighorn in Sonora. The position was cramped and uncomfortable, and I've never had that kind of pressure on a shot. It's amazing I didn't come unglued, but mental exercises help.

IT AIN'T THAT EASY

One thing I've learned in 40 years of big-game hunting is that any shot can be missed at any distance. Therefore I'm not at all certain there is any such thing as an easy shot at a game animal. It's true that the

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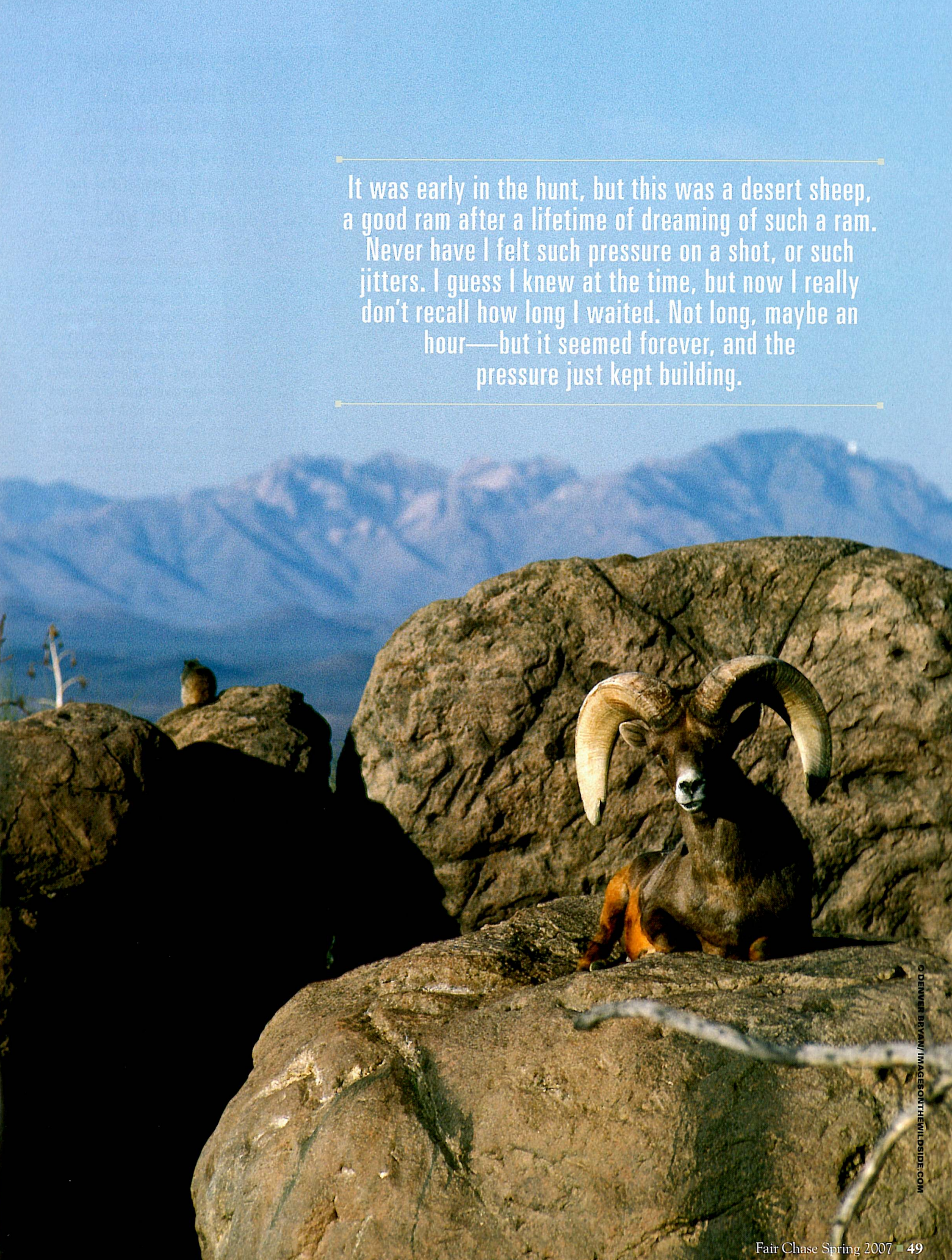

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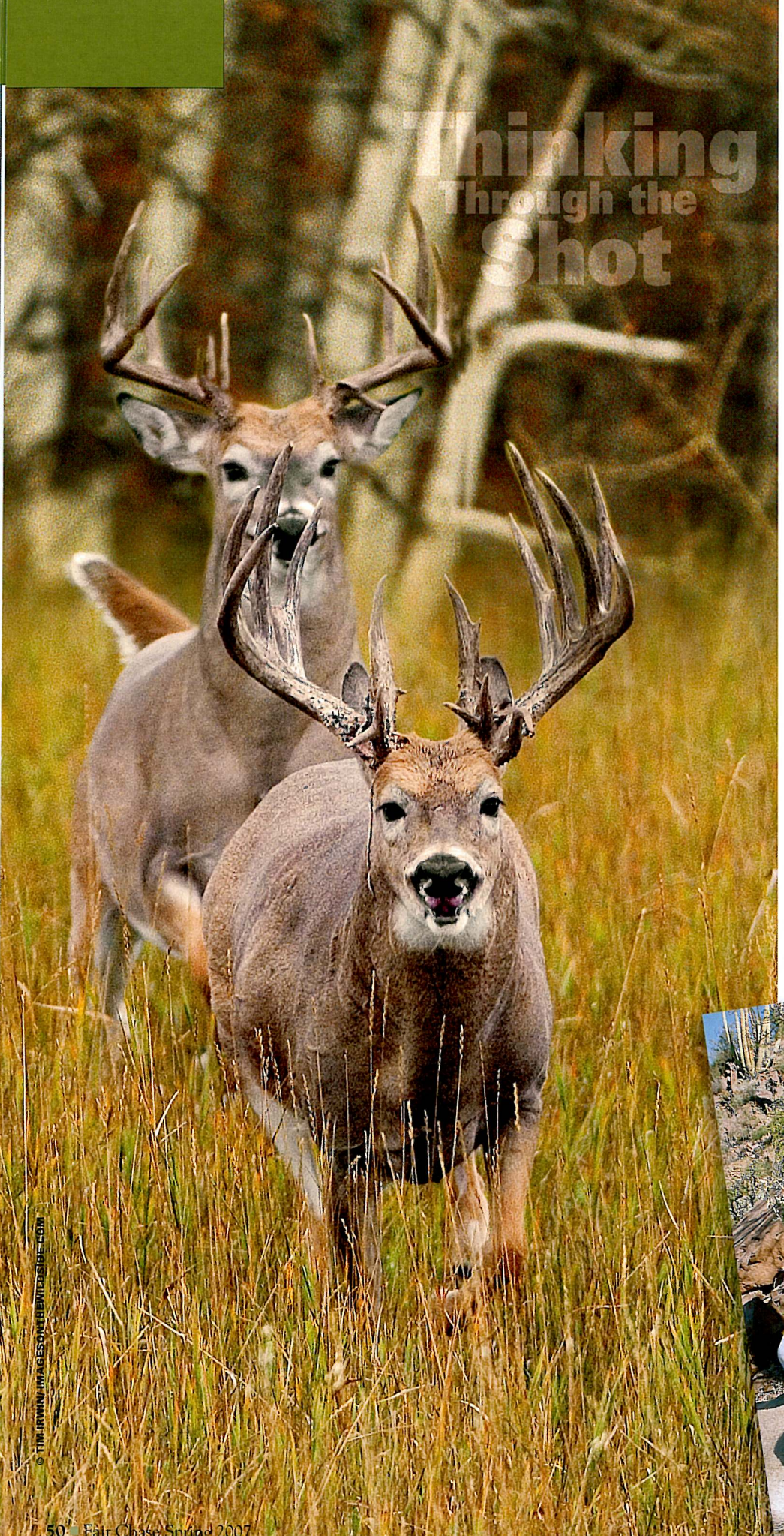
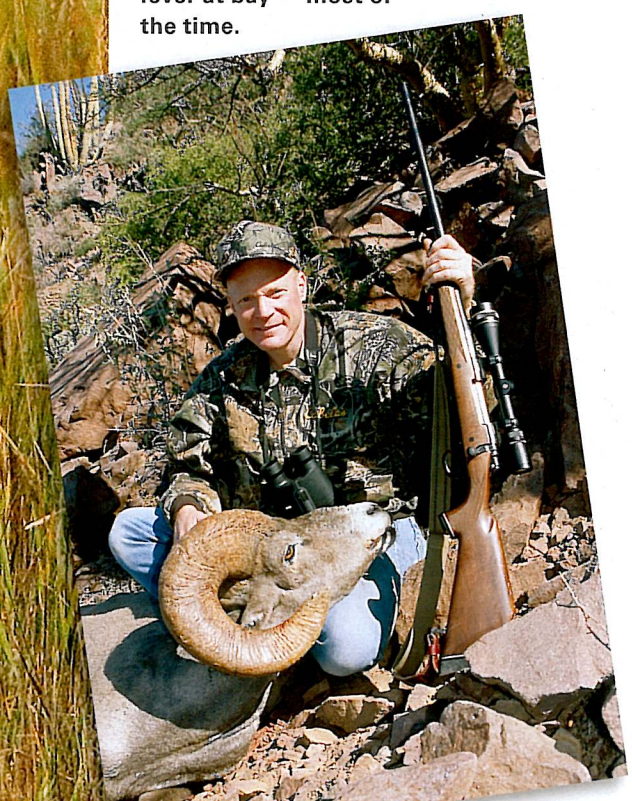
I carry a grunt call when hunting whitetails, and in my experience a grunt call will stop even a hard-running buck, provided he isn't running from you.

vital zone of even a smallish deer is fairly large. Regardless of distance, if you can hit a pie plate you can cleanly take any animal we think of as big game, and in some cases, like moose, your target is as big as a car tire. So why is it that so many game animals are missed (including by me)? Although I've used the phrase a lot, it isn't really because there's a whole lot of bullet-absorbing airspace around an animal. The target is plenty big enough, and if taking the shot makes sense at all, then we should be able to place our bullet in the vital zone. All too often we don't, missing completely or, far worse, wounding the animal.

Things do happen. You can slip on your rest, or the animal can start to move just as you complete the trigger squeeze. Bowhunters know a lot more about animals "jumping the string" than gun hunters like me, but stuff happens. And there are usually good excuses lying around, like the



A beautiful desert bighorn taken with Kirk Kelso. I waited an hour for him to get up, then took the shot at 335 yards. Over time I've learned to keep buck fever at bay — most of the time.



moon and the sun being in improper alignment and affecting the flight of your bullet. Creative excuses are part of the hunting experience, because sooner or later we all miss. If it hasn't happened to you then there are only two possibilities: You have partial or selective amnesia, or you simply haven't hunted enough. Keep at it, and your turn will come.

Regardless of what excuse you decide to use, to my thinking there are two primary reasons for missing: You shouldn't have taken the shot in the first place, or you talked yourself out of a solid hit you know you could have and should have made. The former is just one of those things. No hunter should ever take a shot at game unless he or she is very certain that a vital hit can be made. Unfortunately, sooner or later most of us push the envelope. It could be shots that our experience and practice didn't prepare us for. Or it could be a matter of pushing our equipment, which could mean distance, visibility, wind, partially obstructing brush, you name it. Unless you're really sure of your ability to make the shot and your bullet or arrow's capability to reach the vitals you're better off leaving it—but most of us who have hunted a great deal have attempted some chancy shots. To some extent this is the way we learn, not only how to make the tough ones, but also why we shouldn't try them in the first place!

An important part of building confidence is knowing how to get steady for a shot. There are lots of ways to do it, but you can't learn them when there's an animal in front of you. If you use sticks, practice with them on the range.

This article, however, is not about tough shots, or about whether they should be attempted. Difficulty is, after all, relative to one's own ability and experience, and the equipment you're using. For instance, a given shot might be fairly easy with a scoped .270, but almost impossible with an open-sighted muzzleloader. Instead let's focus on the shots we know we can make, and why we sometimes don't. And now I'd ask you, just this once, to be honest with yourself. Again, everybody misses. If success were absolutely assured with every squeeze of the trigger or release of the bowstring, hunting would be far less exciting than it is. But, truly, it shouldn't happen very often. If you are one of those hunters who has to delve deep into your memory banks to recall the last time you blew a shot you should have made, then it's quite likely you're wasting your time here, and you might want to turn to another article. On the other hand, if you're among the many hunters whose hits and misses approach an equal ratio, it's likely you're talking—or thinking—yourself out of shots you should be making. Read on!

TIMING THE SHOT

The two scenarios I related at the beginning are more than slightly fictional. To me they are dream scenarios. In the first case the animal simply appears and you take the shot; in the second case that mule deer buck was still in the right position at the conclusion of the stalk, and all that was necessary was to steady the rifle and squeeze the trigger. The good thing about both these scenarios is that all you have to do is do what you know how to do. Practice and experience should take over, and there isn't time to think about it too much.

Sometimes it happens that way—but not as often as I wish!

More frequently things aren't quite right, so you must make a conscious decision whether you should take the shot or wait. This is probably more an art than a science, and although we all get better with experience, there is really no way to be certain what the animal is going to do. Obviously you're hoping for a better opportunity or a better shot presentation—but there's always a chance it's going to get worse. I've waited

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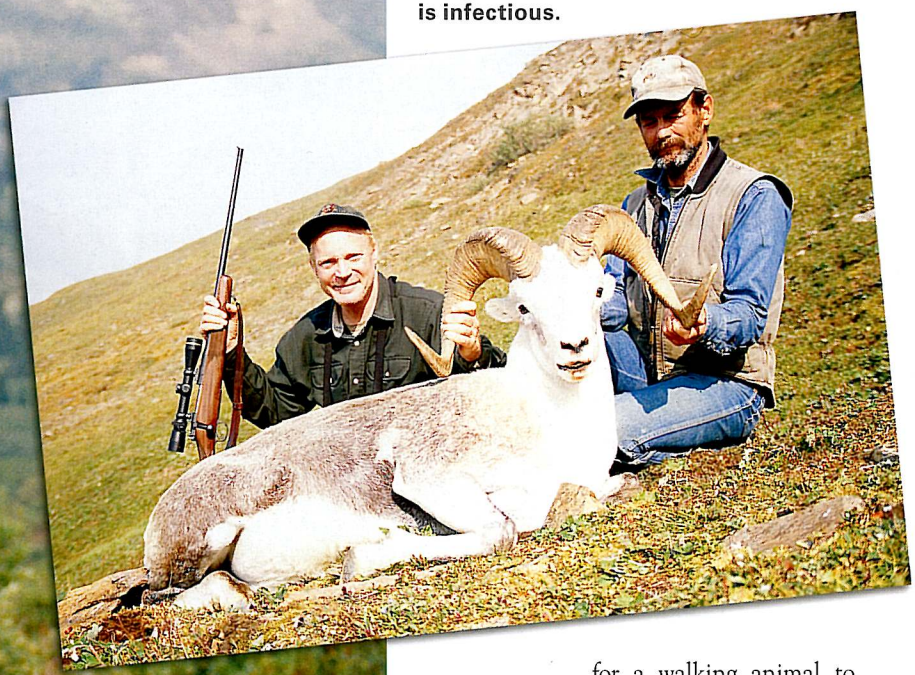

Veteran sheep guide, Randy Babala and me with a nice Stone's ram from the Yukon. Babala is the toughest man I've ever been on a mountain with, but in the presence of game he is also wonderfully calm, and his confidence is infectious.

for a walking animal to stop, certain it was unaware of my presence, only to have it break into a run and go out of my life forever. Which isn't to say you should take a moving shot. Probably you shouldn't, especially if it seems likely the animal will stop—or there's a good chance you can stop him. I carry a grunt call when hunting whitetails, and in my experience a grunt call will stop even a hard-running buck, provided he isn't running from you. My old friend and Texas guide Mike DeWitt likes to give a catcall, and I have yet to see a buck that wouldn't stop for at least an instant.

Obviously you must be ready to shoot when the moment is right. I regard not shooting when everything is right a failure almost equal to missing, and I've certainly done that more than once. Remember, the target area isn't all that small, so good enough is good enough. It's a bad thing to rush the shot—but it can be just as bad to wait too long, waiting for absolute perfection.

Often, unfortunately, you have absolutely no choice but to wait it out. Maybe the animal is standing in brush. Maybe it's facing dead away. You have absolutely no choice but to wait. Maybe the animal is lying down. You might have a shot, but not a real good one. When animals are lying down, the vitals are squashed in odd positions. The target area is greatly reduced, and it can be very difficult to find the correct aiming point. So you make a conscious decision to wait. This is what I hate. Your mind starts to work overtime and buck

fever rears its ugly head. The longer I have to wait the worse it gets.

Tough as it is, it's far better to wait for a good (but not necessarily perfect) shot than it is to take a chance—but long waits, when the animal is right there, are when your mind really works on you. This sort of thing can happen with almost any animal, but I've done more nerve-wracking waits on wild sheep than anything else. This is not necessarily because I've done a vast amount of sheep hunting; it's probably more because of the nature of the sport. So often you will glass a ram—or, for that matter, any wild goat—moving and feeding early in the morning, then watch him bed. Once he beds you have the day to get to him, and it might well be late afternoon before he gets up again.

It was the eleventh day of a ten-day Wyoming bighorn hunt when Ron Dube and I finally found a mature ram. Actually, there were two, in the odd company of a single ewe. They were bedded on the far side of a draw well below timberline. We slipped in to 265 yards, and I set up over my backpack. I was shooting a very accurate Rifles, Inc., .300 Weatherby, so the distance was not an issue. The second ram was behind a tree, and he might well have been slightly bigger—but the ram in the open was big enough. He was lying facing away, his body ascending the far slope so that his back looked like a target frame. With that rifle from a steady rest, I know I could have made that shot. So making the decision to wait, knowing the jitters would set in, was a tough call. I think it was the right call, but as long minutes passed it didn't get any easier. After numerous eternities the ram stood and I took the quartering-away shot. Since I made it perfectly, I guess waiting was the right thing to do—but I was extremely nervous, and if I'd blown it I'd still be kicking myself.

During a stalk, I try to focus fully on the job at hand. I keep imagining the shot and talking myself through it. If I let my mind wander then the jitters get worse.

Sometimes you have no choice at all. That was the situation with my desert sheep a decade later. We watched him bed, then stalked into the best position we could find. He was 335 yards away, up on a little bench, with his horns and just a hint of his body barely visible behind a thick screen of Palo Verde. I was over the pack again, but facing sharply uphill, my neck cramping after just a couple of minutes. It was early in the hunt, but this was a desert sheep, a good ram after a lifetime of dreaming of such a ram. Never have I felt such pressure on a shot, or such jitters. I guess I knew at the time, but now I really don't recall how long I waited. Not long, maybe an hour—but it seemed forever, and the pressure just kept building. Finally the ram stood, silhouetted behind that green screen. These were the worst moments, and of course I didn't know if I'd get a shot or not. Then he took a few steps forward and stood on the edge of the bench, quartering to me. I held into the wind just a couple of inches, and the bullet took him on the point of his on-shoulder.

VISUALIZE

Because of the "j" factor ("j" for jitters), waiting isn't always the best course of action. Also because you really don't know what the animal is going to do. The wind could change, or another animal could blunder along and blow him out. These are the risks in waiting, and perhaps the deciding factor should be the "c" factor, this "c" for confidence.

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My rule is to take the shot when I'm confident I can make it. I won't stretch a wait if I don't have to, but I also try hard not to shoot unless or until I'm very sure of it. Some very good hunters I know have a firm rule that they will not shoot an animal that's lying down. As you've gathered, I don't like to—but I don't have any firm rules. There's always a judgment call to be made based on the situation, and I don't like to wait unless it's necessary. That bighorn, for instance, was far enough away that it was unlikely we could spook him—and also far enough away that I didn't much care for the shot angle, even though I was pretty sure I could make a good hit.

Last year, in Mongolia, we watched two ibex go to bed, and after a couple of hours of hard scrambling we pitched up on a little crest barely a hundred yards from them. The largest billy was lying almost broadside in a little cut. At that close range there was significant risk of spooking them at any moment. A lying-down shot isn't optimum, but it beats heck out of any running shot! So I took the shot, and the ibex never moved. The primary consideration, however, was that I could clearly see the shoulder, and it was easy to visualize exactly where the shot should go.

This is always a key consideration: Regardless of attitude or angle, you must be able to see not just the animal, but fully understand and visualize exactly where the vitals are and how you must hold to get your bullet into that critical target area. This is also not a perfect science. There have been many times when I've believed I was dealing with a broadside shot, but the wound angle made it obvious that there was a bit of angle. Because of the size of the vital zone slight misreadings are usually not critical, but it's very important that you assume nothing, and try to visualize the shot presentation exactly and correctly.

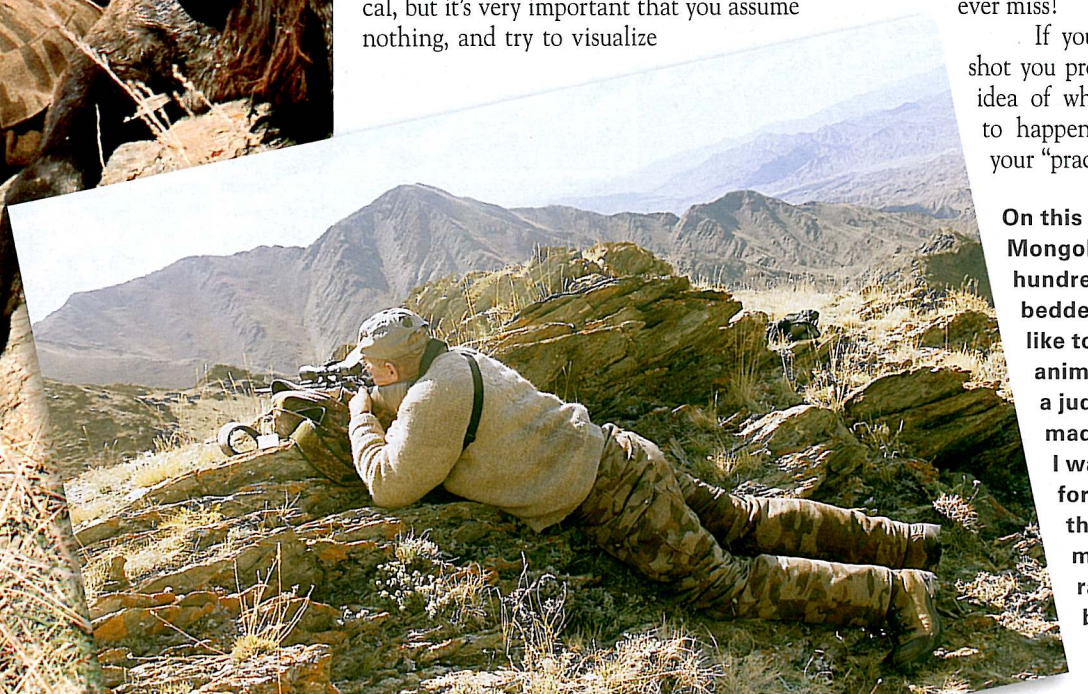
The word "visualize" has another meaning as well, and this second context may be even more important. Years ago John Wootters explained to me that many successful athletes perform mental exercises, visualizing themselves being successful in their disciplines. This seemed a very good idea, so I took it to heart and have practiced it ever since. When I'm planning a hunt I imagine the animal (of course with huge horns or antlers) at various distances and attitudes. Mentally, I squeeze the trigger. This exercise continues during the actual hunt. Note that I never, ever imagine myself missing! Just as basketball players don't spend a lot of time imagining themselves missing the hoop.

Unfortunately I don't have second sight. I don't recall any actual shots that were identical to my mental scenarios, although some have been similar—but this doesn't matter. The point is to visualize the animal and where to aim, and to further visualize yourself being successful. It is simply the power of positive thinking at work. When an opportunity happens along you are mentally prepared, and training takes over. Mental exercises don't take the place of shooting practice—but they do complement each other.

TALK YOURSELF THROUGH IT

If you find yourself in a situation where you must wait an animal out to get a shot then this mental exercise becomes extremely important. For me I'm sure it makes the difference between making the shot, or letting buck fever get the better of me. The whole time I'm waiting I'm mentally practicing the shot—and in this mental practice I never, ever miss!

If you're waiting for a shot you probably have some idea of what is most likely to happen. You're focusing your "practice" on the most



On this ridge in Mongolia I was just a hundred yards from a bedded ibex. I don't like to take bedded animals, but there's a judgment to be made. In this case, I was too close for comfort, and I thought the shot might get worse, rather than better.

likely scenarios, but you want to be careful not to focus too much, because the animal might surprise you. What's important is to stay ready and keep a positive attitude. For me what is most valuable about constantly thinking through the shot is that this mental exercise helps keep the jitters at bay, and precludes negative thinking. Make no mistake, if you convince yourself you are going to miss you surely will!

It's really a matter of talking yourself through it. If I'm alone I talk myself through the shot very seriously. Come to think of it, although I never say an audible word, I talk myself through every shot at game whether I'm alone or not. I give myself commands like, "Breathe, Relax, Aim, Squeeze." The point to this isn't that I might forget the shooting basics. Rather, it's to help me concentrate on the job at hand and keep the jitters at bay. Jitters, by the way, aren't altogether bad. If you don't get excited in the presence of game, then you really should be playing golf or tennis. The trick is to not let the excitement get the better of you. Keeping your mind fully occupied with the task of shooting will help.

If you're with a friend or a guide, another person can help this effort. Or hinder it. Everybody gets excited, and I know even veteran hunters who start hissing "Shoot, shoot, shoot." This is not helpful. If it's not your shot, the best help you can offer is to stay calm. Sometimes you can help by talking your buddy through it or offering a bit of advice on how to get steadier—but that depends on the person, and if you don't know him or her pretty well it's probably best to keep your mouth shut and just stay calm.

A good Siberian ibex taken at just a hundred yards. I could have waited him out, but I was close enough and steady enough, and most importantly I could absolutely visualize his vital zone and where I needed to put the bullet.

This seems my day to tell sheep stories. A couple of years ago I was hunting Stone's sheep with veteran sheep guide Randy Babala. We had seen a nice ram, together with a youngster, vanish over the top of a ridge. It took a brutal climb to get up there, and the sheep had simply vanished into a huge basin. They had to be there somewhere, so we sidehilled along until we found them in a little cut. They were feeding away from us at little more than a hundred yards, just the top of their backs visible for long eternities. We crawled up a bit, and I lay prone in a tight sling. And then we had to wait.

Finally the larger ram stepped clear, but he was feeding dead away so we had to wait some more. Babala is one of the toughest guys I've ever hunted with, and on the mountain he's more like a drill instructor than a guide. But now, lying beside me, he was incredibly and infectiously calm. While we were waiting he did something so uncharacteristic that it took my mind completely off the impending jitters. He glanced over and whispered to me, "Are you okay?" Nothing more, no orders, no instructions.

I was okay, partly because he was so calm and confident. Eventually the larger ram turned almost broadside. I shot him with the little Kimber, and he danced away a few steps and went down. That's the way it's supposed to go, provided you don't talk yourself out of it—or let anyone else talk you out of it. ■