

FIELD NOTES

FROM THE TRM RANCH

Becoming a Jägermeister

Advanced Hunter Education
for the New West

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Securing a place for public recreation on private lands has been challenging in the face of social and economic pressures pushing for changes in land use. These challenges are felt most strongly on western rangelands where public interests extend beyond the political boundaries of land ownership. In Montana, for example, some 60% of the land base is privately-owned,

harboring some of the most productive habitats for wildlife—wildlife which is held in public trust for all people to enjoy. The demand for accessing these recreational havens—mostly for hunting—has steadily increased over the years as more people head afield while, at the same time, fewer landowners are willing to grant public access. The conflict over public versus private rights is simmering across western rangelands.

In securing a place for public recreation on private lands, two approaches are currently being tested to circumvent further polarization among parties. One approach involves economic incentives, mostly monetary, to those

landowners allowing public access. Typically, such programs financially compensate landowners according to a formula for the number of days and type of public recreation provided. Montana's "Block Management," administered by the state wildlife agency, is such a program. It allows landowners to earn up to \$8,000 per hunting season in exchange for managing hunters on their property. The Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch has been successfully enrolled in this program for some time now. The other approach, which is rapidly gaining momentum, is advanced hunter education. Here, the idea is to promote excellence among hunters in the field and in the public arena. This excellence, in turn, is assumed to translate into greater appreciation and willingness by landowners to allow access to those sportsmen who have been recognized publicly as behaving ethically, knowledgeably, and skillfully.

In devising these voluntary, advanced hunter education programs, instructors are taking a close look at the German model of hunter education—a program, which has been in place for some 60 years now. Prior to becoming a licensed German hunter, an applicant must successfully complete a rigorous and comprehensive train-

ing, mentoring, and testing program. In essence, the German hunter becomes qualified to fulfill the role of a state wildlife manager charged with the responsibility of securing resources necessary to support wildlife populations over time, albeit at a much smaller scale. Heralded for breadth and depth in advancing shooting proficiency, responsible behavior, and practical ethics, the German training program to become a "Jägermeister" has received much attention as a model for other hunting-rich cultures, including, as of lately, the western hunting heritage. As a licensed German hunter, I would like to share some of my thoughts on this education program and its potential applicability to the new West.

At age 16, I first signed up for the training program to become a "Jägermeister." The nationally accredited program is taught by experienced and certified instructors and entails attending two to three hour-long lectures twice a week in the evenings over the course of a year. Topics range from the biology/ecology of wildlife species—both game and non-game, handling of firearms, wildlife law (e.g. land access, game ownership, and stewardship decree), to the history, ethics, and philosophy of a highly ritualized hunt. Besides attending these lectures and completing homework, it is also obligatory every Saturday morning to practice shooting skills with both shotgun and rifle at the local shooting range. We practiced using clay pigeons, steel rabbits, and paper silhouettes of roe deer and Russian wild boar as targets. Additionally, it was mandatory to participate in a mentoring program with a local, recognized hunter for the duration of the course, and better yet, for a number of years prior to becoming a hunter. In my case, growing up in a hunting family helped me gain practical experience early on with the game, the land, and the hunting heritage. My father had taken me to his hunting lease ever since I was able to walk, a lease, which he has held for more than 30 years now. The idea of the mentoring program is to weed out those aspirants only

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marginally interested in hunting and those pursuing hunting for the wrong motivations. The permission to hunt in Germany is foremost about the privilege of tending to the game and the land and less so about the opportunity of pursuing and killing animals for sport. The mentoring program aims at introducing prospective hunters to the duties and tasks of operating a lease, which can be humbling and daunting. The apprentice helps with the year-round chores including building tree-stands, training field dogs, feeding programs, monitoring game populations, organizing game drives, setting traps, and processing game. In the process, the apprentice learns the rituals, traditions, and ethics of the hunt, which cannot be mastered from lectures alone—they must be discovered through practical experience. Often the apprentice-mentor relationship turns into a friendship, which will then give the young licensed hunter an opportunity to learn more about hunting as a guest without having to actually lease a hunting ground.

After a year of comprehensive training, a rigorous examination procedure completes the program in the spring. Following a four-hour written test (by far more challenging than the driver license test here), shooting proficiency and safe handling of firearms must be demonstrated in front of a panel of judges. Unsafe handling of a firearm instantly disqualifies a student from continuing the testing procedure. Next in line is a field test in which the student's knowledge of and familiarity with the environment is appraised. Here, a student must identify plant and animal species, tracks, and dog breeds, as well as demonstrate safe and skillful handling of firearms in simulated hunting situations. This is then followed by an open-end oral examination by a committee panel where an individual's integrity and stamina are tested, more so than factual knowledge. Each step in the testing procedure occurs on a weekend over the course of four weeks. The success rate averages 50-60%! A candidate who fails any one component of the test has

to repeat the entire one-year program and test. Up to three trials is permissible, each of which costs the equivalent of a few thousand dollars in fees and expenses. I finally succeeded in meeting the qualifications of knowledge, experience, and stature as well as a good dose of humbleness in the third go-around when I received my lifetime hunting certificate.

Clearly, such a training, mentoring, and examination program would not be feasible and practical for hunters in the new West today. Only few individuals would be able to afford the time and money to complete such a program. Furthermore, the rewards for completing such a program are not very well developed at this point in time. Hunters who participate in advanced hunter education here do so because it is a means to an end. The end being greater opportunities for accessing private lands for sport hunting. Participation in advance hunter education is one way of differentiation within a crowd plagued by an identity crisis; one way of saying: "I'm different than any of my fellow hunters, some of which are slob." For example, Oregon is currently experimenting with a "Jägermeister" program where hunters are trained to participate in "sensitive," game-rich depredation hunts near residential developments. The program is designed to establish a cadre of safe, responsible, skillful, and knowledgeable hunters who can get the job done without causing conflict and public outcry in the process. Access and preferential treatment seem to be the main reasons for a hunter's participation. Becoming a German "Jägermeister" is something entirely different. It's all about preserving the conditions necessary to secure and cultivate a hunting heritage in a highly industrialized country of 83 million people—it's all about identity, responsibility, and stewardship, and only secondary about hunting as the activity per se. Through training, mentoring, testing, and experience the hunter progresses to the rank of a publicly recognized steward of the land and its

game with a strong commitment to care and nurture in a way proven to be successful over time.

For the German "Jägermeister" model to work in the new West, a new identity for the hunter is essential—an identity that would extend beyond differentiation in the game of competing for access and preferential treatment. This identity must demonstrate to the hunting and non-hunting community, unequivocally, that hunting as an activity is more than venturing afield to harvest the fruits of the land. It is instead harvesting the fruits of sound, committed, and compassionate stewardship by reaping the dividends of an investment made by hunters into the land and wildlife. This investment is committed to protecting the resources necessary to sustain wildlife and a hunting culture in spite of strong pressures to change. Equipping the hunter with the knowledge, skills, and experience to masterly fulfill this stewardship role is the responsibility of the hunting community today.

In the new West, there exists the opportunity to preserve the wild in its integrity and beauty through responsible and wise stewardship. In Germany, we lost our wildness in the relentless pursuit of efficiency and mechanization. It is the responsibility of western hunters today to live up to the challenge of preserving what is still wild. In this challenge, the German model of becoming a "Jägermeister" might serve as a starting point for developing an education program tailored specifically to the history and culture of the hunt in the western landscape. ▲ ▲ ▲

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