

Land
↑

TAKING IT

By Col. Craig Boddington USMCR
Professional Member
Boone and Crockett Club

The morning was surprisingly cool for central California in July, and my jacket felt good. Especially since I was sitting well up on a bare ridge, catching the light breeze. A few hundred yards below me two friends, Roy Chevallier and Kyler Hamman, were hustling to cut off a nice pig on its journey from nighttime feeding grounds to thick bedding cover. They probably weren't the least bit cool. Roy, also a Marine colonel, was the shooter. Kyler, who runs a guiding business in the next-door town of Atascadero (Boaring Experiences Unlimited, 805-461-0294), was try-

Although a steady rest or the prone position are preferred — in that order — I use the sitting position a lot. With practice it is very steady and fast to assume, and in many circumstances it gets the muzzle above intervening obstructions.

ing to maneuver them in position for a shot. I was mostly a spectator that morning, so I was probably having the most fun of all.

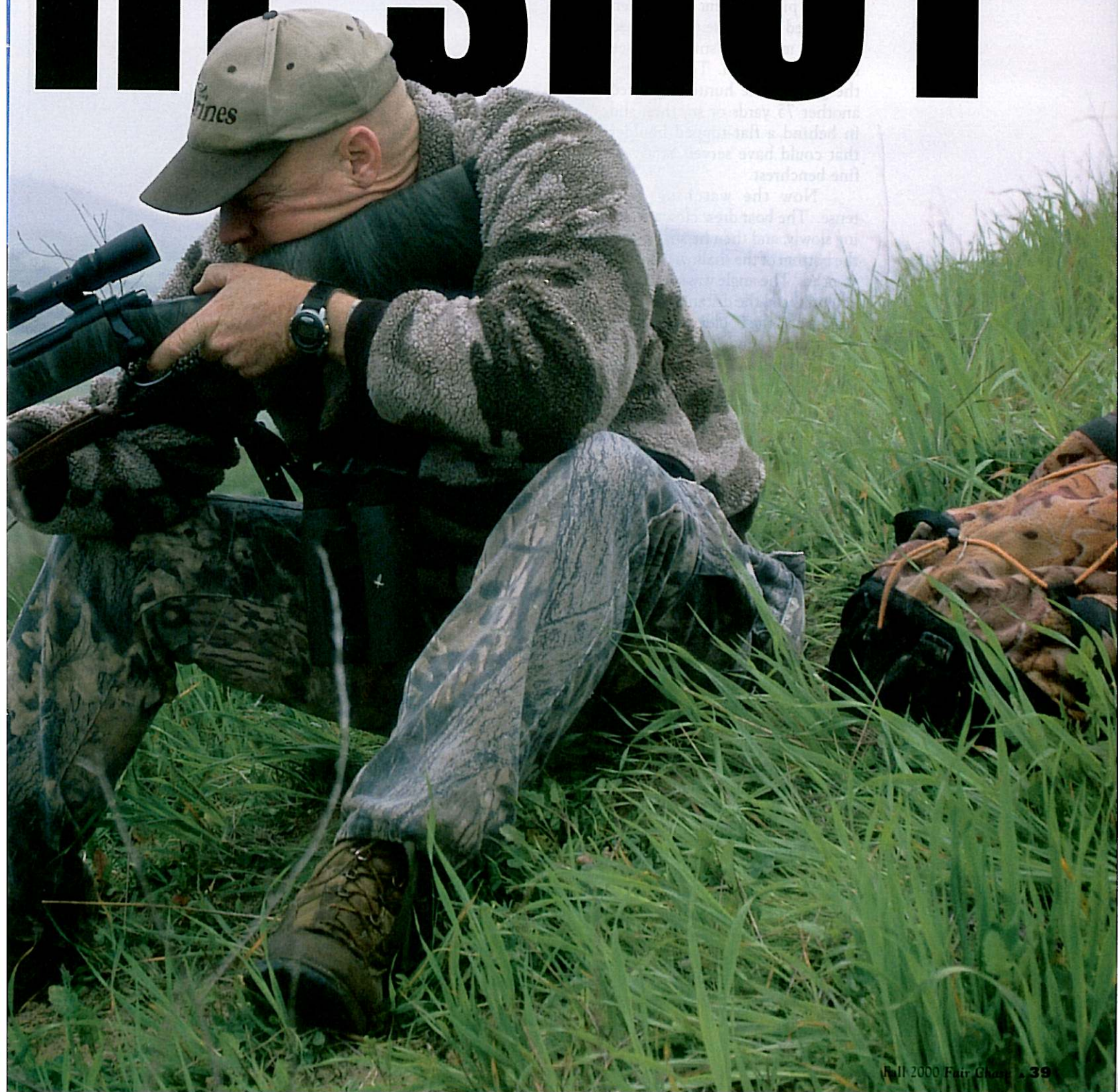
At dawn we'd taken a vantage point on a big hogback overlooking a broad vista of open pasture. There was heavy chaparral in the hills behind us and barley fields on the far side of the pasture to our front. There were pig trails everywhere, indicating we were on their route from feeding areas to bedding grounds—but exactly where they might cross depends on the day. Today they were swinging far to the left of our ridge, and several groups had slipped past. Now there was a good-sized solo boar angling toward a shallow watercourse in the

A shooting opportunity may come as a gift or you may work hard to get a chance. Either way, the outcome is all up to you!



Making)

THE SHOT



TAKING THE SHOT

(and Making)

center of the field, and Roy and Kyler were hot-footing it to intercept him.

The boar was walking, then trotting, then walking some more. He knew where he wanted to go, and he knew the open ground was dangerous in the daylight. I was sure the pig had them beat. Then he altered his course and stopped for long moments, sniffing to see if danger lay ahead. This changed the game. The hunters sprinted another 75 yards or so, then slid in behind a flat-topped boulder that could have served as a very fine benchrest.

Now the watching grew tense. The boar drew closer, walking slowly, and then he strode into the bottom of the shallow draw and stopped. The angle was such that I couldn't read the distance between the pig and the boulder, but I knew it was close enough. I also knew that the wind was no longer favorable, and any second the pig would bolt. So I was pulling for Roy, mentally

willing his rifle to go off. Nothing happened. The long seconds seemed to stretch into eternity; in seconds a simple broadside presentation would become a tough running shot—or no shot at all. Then a big puff of white dust rose from the black hide on the pig's shoulder, and an instant later the sound of the shot reached my ridge. The pig was rocked by the heavy bullet, recovered, and made ten yards before piling up.

As soon as I got down there I gave Roy a hard time for taking so long. I was kidding; he could have been a couple of seconds faster, but the shot was perfect. He took the bait, immediately admitting that he'd been nervous as heck, and had taken a long time to get the rifle under control. The shot was actually pretty routine, but that comment got me to thinking, because there were several good lessons there.

The "E-Factor" gets me the worst when I have a long time to wait out a shot and think about it. I have to play all kinds of mental gymnastics while waiting out a shot.





My own formula for fighting off the jitters revolves around concentrating on the shooting basics — the "BRASS" rule taught to me by Marine Corps instructors many years ago.

Breathe

Relax

Aim

Sight
Check alignment

Squeeze
the trigger

MISSING IS POSSIBLE

First off, there are hard shots and easy shots . . . but there is no shot that can't be missed. Compared with the challenges posed by all forms of competitive shooting—especially if you have aspirations to be in the winners' circle—most shots at big game are actually quite routine. Exceptions

are running shots and shots at long range, but for most of us such shots are rare . . . and most hunters avoid them like the plague. With modern centerfire rifles and the telescopic sights that are almost universal today, any shot at a stationary animal within 250 yards is actually quite routine, at least from a pure marksmanship standpoint. Yes, proper shot placement is essential. But

Excellent accuracy builds confidence, which is a good thing. The reality, however, is that in most circumstances you don't need this level of accuracy for field shooting. Or, put another way, most rifles today are far more accurate than their nervous, unsteady users!



on deer-sized game this means hitting an area about the size of a volleyball; on elk-sized game the ability to hit a basketball consistently will do nicely. Most over-the-counter sporting rifles today are capable of producing groups no larger than 1-1/2 inches at 100 yards. This translates to potential accuracy of 3-1/2 inches at 250 yards. Many production rifles and

most custom and semi-custom rifles will cut these groups sizes in half. Either way, placing a bullet into the vitals of a big-game animal at normal hunting ranges shouldn't be a great trick.

And yet we all miss. Oh, yes, we all miss. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, so I will say right here that I have made some spectacular misses. Unfortunately, most of the time this has been in front of witnesses, so there's no point in lying about it. I do have a lot of shooting experience, not only in the field but also in the Marines and several different competitive venues. So I don't miss terribly often, but it does happen.

Undoubtedly some of you miss more frequently than I do, and others less often. However, whether it's one of my local pig hunting guide-buddies like Kyler Hamman, a Wyoming guide, an Alaskan guide, or an African professional hunter, one of the consistent laments I hear from the guide/outfitter community is how poorly their clients shoot. Many of the stories start something like this: "This guy came into camp and said 'Just show me an animal and I can hit it' or, stronger yet, 'I never miss.'" Yes, you can. It is possible that it hasn't yet happened to some of you reading these lines, but stick around. Without getting too personal, whenever I hear someone say that he or she has never missed, I figure one of two things: that person has either limited experience or a very selective memory!

Confidence is a very good thing, provided that it's based on knowledge of and faith in your abilities and your rifle's capabilities. But tempered with that confidence must be the knowledge that there's a whole lot of airspace around the animal at which you're shooting. In order to hit, and hit properly, you still have to do all the right things. So overconfidence is a very bad thing, and if you succumb to it your bullet is likely to be sucked up by all that airspace.

THE "E" FACTOR

Not too long ago I did a story for another publication on confi-

dence, which really is a key element in any and all shooting. I called it the shooter's "Vitamin C," and you get it from lots of practice and, over time, field shooting experience. Working against "C" and all the other good things, like sound shooting basics, knowledge of your rifle, and a steady shooting position, is "E" for excitement.

Excitement is not in itself a bad thing. In fact, it's a good thing in that it's part and parcel to why we hunt. If you don't get excited in the presence of game, then you really should be spending your time playing golf or tennis. And if your pulse rate, breathing, and production of sweat don't increase in direct proportion to the size of antlers or horns you're looking at—or the difficulty and/or magnitude of the hunt, then you really aren't a hunter.

I have been fortunate to have hunted a tremendous variety of game in a great many places—but I still get real excited. I shot a nice "meat pig" just a few minutes after congratulating Roy, and I got plenty excited enough that I had to concentrate on taking a deep breath and controlling the rifle's wobbling. That said, I have been far more excited on the rare occasions when I've had a chance at a really spectacular member of any particular species. I've been more excited, too, when a shot has come toward the end of a long and difficult hunt (this comes under the heading of "don't screw it up now!"). Certainly I've been more excited when I've been blessed with a shooting opportunity at one of the great prizes of the hunting world, like an Alaskan brown bear, a bongo, or a Marco Polo sheep. But this is merely a matter of degree; I always get excited in the presence of game.

The adrenaline rush that precedes and accompanies a shooting opportunity is primeval, part of who and what we are. I, for one, wouldn't wish it away even if I could. The secret, however, is to control the excitement and do what you know how to do in spite of it. Letting it get to you, by the way, is what we call "buck fever." It has many manifestations, but



(and Making)

TAKING THE SHOT

Practice shooting off the benchrest is good for building confidence and learning what your rifle will do, but it doesn't do much for actual field shooting. On the range, the best course is to concentrate on practicing from a variety of positions you might actually use.



given the size of the target and the quality of the equipment in use today, so long as you have a more-or-less stationary target at reasonable range the technical shooting difficulty is limited. I believe the "E factor" is to blame for most of the missing most of us do.

So, while I was watching Roy's pig through my binoculars, agonizing as the seconds ticked past and willing him to shoot, he was doing exactly the right thing. He knew he was excited, and he knew he didn't have the rifle under complete control. So he took extra time—probably not more than six seconds, although it seemed an eternity—and made absolutely sure. There is a fine line here; I know pigs, and since that pig was standing stock-still the clock was running. It might have broken and ran before he got the shot off, and an easy shot would have turned into a difficult shot or no shot at all. On the other hand, had he not taken those extra moments to steady his breathing and let the sights settle, he might have missed or, far worse, wounded. This particular animal was accommodating enough to give him those few seconds, and he executed the shot perfectly. In any case, he did exactly the right thing in not shooting until he was sure.

This is a key point. The faster you can get into position, get steady, and take the shot, the more easy shots (and fewer difficult shots) you will have. When the setup is perfect and the game is close, there is usually limited time before things change. On the other hand, there is absolutely no point in shooting before you're absolutely ready and know you can make the shot. I don't know about you, but this is often easier when we're alone. Hunting really isn't a spectator sport, but hunting buddies and guides are also hunters, so we get almost as excited as the shooter. Regardless of your exact

role, if you aren't the shooter, it isn't helpful to start hollering, "Shoot, shoot, shoot!"

It may be helpful to offer a calm word of encouragement, perhaps suggest a steadier rest or position, or give the range and the hold if you really know. Otherwise the most help you can give is simply to keep your mouth shut. The actual shooting is strictly between the hunter and his quarry. Each of us, each time, must work out the shooting solution for ourselves—and we must find our own means for keeping the "E factor" at bay.

I can't tell you what will work for you. I can tell you what works for me. I concentrate on the shooting basics I learned many, many years ago from good teachers like my Dad, shooting coaches, and tough Marine sergeants. I've written about this before, but it's important enough to repeat. The Marines teach the "B.R.A.S.S." rule: Breathe, Relax, Aim, check

Sight alignment, Squeeze the trigger. Whether you're using a rifle or a pistol (the terms would be slightly different, but also a bow), this is a time-proven system for hitting what you're aiming at. For me, concentrating on these things is also how I hold buck fever at arm's length. This isn't always easy. Sometimes I have to stop myself and take a few extra deep breaths. That's okay. Shooting faster is usually better than shooting slower . . . but only if you're absolutely ready. Rushing a shot is never the wisest course. Many times, especially if I'm winded from climbing a hill or sprinting to get into position, I have to back off the trigger and start over several times before I get it right.

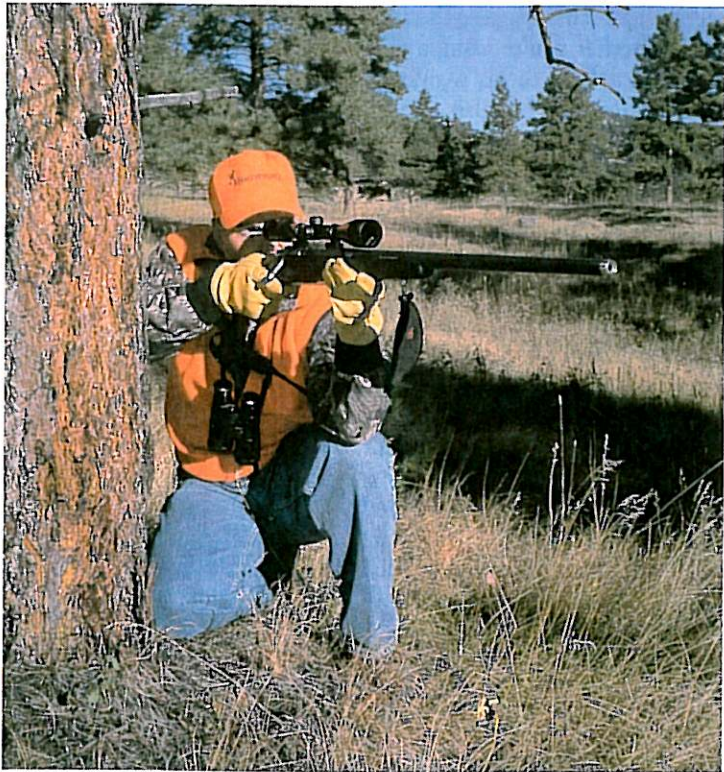
So let's take it from the top. Assuming I'm already in an acceptable shooting position, I take a couple of deep breaths and let the last one part way out. Then I try to relax my body completely. The

TAKING THE SHOT

(and Making)

This big Kansas whitetail presented a difficult shot, from the sitting position at nearly 400 yards. The good news was that I had no time to think about it; all I could do was sit down and shoot. We're all different, but that's the kind of situation I tend to handle best.





Kneeling is faster and higher than sitting - but not nearly so steady. This is a very nice and well-posed photo, but the question is obvious: Why in the world isn't this hunter leaning against the tree behind him, a much more stable option?

trigger squeeze. That next-to-last-step, checking the sights one last time, is essential. If they aren't right, it is usually best to take another breath and start over rather than trying to make a last minute adjustment.

Mind you, I'm under a great deal of excitement and pressure throughout this litany. I am not telling you I get it right every time. Of course I don't. Sometimes I've been just plain wrong in my hold through failure to adjust properly for range or wind. Or I've had an improper hold because I didn't accurately visualize the animal's presentation. Other times I've wobbled just as the trigger broke—or had the animal start to move. These things will happen, and if you hunt enough they will happen

rifle is already bearing on the target, but now I concentrate on placing the cross hairs or the front sight on where it must be to place the bullet where I want it. Then I check sights one last time, and if they're right I commence the

to you because, believe it or not, none of us are perfect.

On the other hand, by making myself concentrate on the basics, I can't remember a time when I missed through sheer nervousness. Read that sentence again carefully. I'm not saying buck fever has never gotten me. Thanks to a lot of training, I was technically a good (never great, just good) marksman before I started doing a lot of hunting with a rifle. But if I think back far enough, I can recall a few instances where the "E factor" got to me. Chances are it will again on occasions to come, but even though excitement is always present, I can't recall losing a shot to it since I consciously adopted my "system" on concentrating on the basics.

Of course every situation is different. I find that the more time I have to think about a shot the more difficult it is to stave off buck fever. Mind you, I can (and have) missed under almost any circumstances, but I'm at my best when things happen fast. Many of my very best shots have been made when I'm technically least prepared; when there is no option but to get as steady as possible and take the shot—now! Even if it's a split-second thing, subconsciously I still go through the B.R.A.S.S. sequence, but I'm usually better off if I don't have too long to think about it.

One of the most difficult setups I can recall in recent years happened last year on a bighorn sheep hunt in Wyoming. In fact, everything about it made it difficult except the actual shot, which was technically quite easy. It was late morning and the light was perfect. The ram was about 275 yards away, walking very slowly at a slight quarter angle. I was shooting an extremely accurate Rifles, Inc. .300 Weatherby Magnum, and it was rested solidly over my daypack, which, in turn, was nestled on top of a boulder. The rifle was topped with a Leica 4.5-14X scope, and I had it turned up most of the way. What could be simpler?

Except. We were on the 11th day of a 10-day hunt. Outfitter Ron Dube and I had been hunting our hearts out, and this was the first

mature ram we'd seen. I had three cracked ribs from a fall off a horse and a terrible cold. Ron had spotted this ram the evening before, but we couldn't close on him before dark, so we'd spent a long, cold night on the mountain wrapped in saddle blankets. We'd found the ram bedded and had gotten all set up. He was bedded facing straight away, ascending a slight rise, so through the cross hairs he looked like a target frame. I knew that the longer I waited the more the nervousness would build, so I desperately wanted to take the shot then and there.

To his credit, Ron Dube didn't try to talk me into it or out of it. I knew, and he knew, that a bedded shot at that angle was tricky. I got all set up, checked the sights a half-dozen times, then made the tough choice. I whispered that I would wait. Dube just nodded. We could have waited most of the day. As it was, I suppose we waited just an hour or so. I concentrated hard on not looking at my watch—or anything else except that ram through the scope—but the wait was agonizing, and the pressure was tremendous. After 20 years of applying, this would be my only Wyoming tag and this ram was my only chance. Easy shot? Not under those circumstances!

After an eternity the ram finally got up. Dube, also to his credit, simply said, "Kill him." At this stage, with this setup, the shot was simple—except for everything that was riding on it. Unfortunately this is a situation where experience counts heavily, and there is no way to get that experience without putting in the years. But it is also a situation where training—mental training as well as shooting practice—also counts. This you can attain without a lot of hunting experience. I am not fully conscious of letting out part of that last breath, but I do remember putting the cross hairs just behind the shoulder, centered on the body, hesitating for a split second to make sure it was right, and squeezing the trigger.

POSITION MATTERS

Earlier I used the phrase, "Assuming I'm already in an ac-

ceptable shooting position . . .” That isn’t a throwaway. In fact, that might be the most important thing of all. If the range is reasonable and the animal is more or less stationary, a steady shooting position makes up for a lot of sins. Conversely, an unsteady position makes even the simplest shot very, very difficult.

Buck fever affects us all in different ways. I’ve seen people become completely unglued and do very strange things. However, the most common reaction I have witnessed is for the nervous hunter to throw up the rifle and start blazing away. There are times when the only way to get a shot is stand on your own two feet and shoot. Therefore it is wise to practice offhand shooting a whole lot—but it is extremely unwise to shoot offhand unless you absolutely have to. My own rule for offhand shooting is that it’s a fallback position when the animal is very close—

preferably well under 100 yards—and there is absolutely no other option. Even when the animal is close I always seek a rest if there is time and anything—a rock, a tree, a fence post, my packframe—is available. Failing that, I lie down, sit down, or kneel in that order of preference. Only if vegetation is too tall or it’s truly “now or never” will I take an offhand shot—even though I’m actually quite good at offhand shooting.

For me there are actually two benefits to seeking a steady shooting position. The first one should be obvious: the steadier I am, the more precisely I can place my shot. Also, the less effect any slight wobbles will have. The second is more subtle. If I’m concentrating on finding a rest, getting into a shooting position, adjusting a sling on my arm, and so forth, I am fully occupied and I don’t have time to get nervous. I also have those few extra seconds to get my breathing

under control. Just like the B.R.A.S.S. sequence, getting into the best position time and circumstances allow—in many cases, a much steadier position than I really need to make the shot—is part of my long-established “routine” for controlling the “E factor.”

It works for me. Whether it was conscious or not, this is exactly the system that Roy Chevallier used last week when he made a fine shot on that pig. I can’t tell you what might work best for you, but I can tell you that a well-placed shot, however simple it appears, is rarely a matter of luck. Any shot can be missed, and experienced guides will tell you that it’s often the easy ones that are blown. Close or far, treat every shot with the same kind of respect you give the animal you are hunting. Accept that sooner or later you’re going to miss—but it should be the exception, and it should not be because of excitement! ▲▲▲

*Left to Right:
Boddington, Kyler Hamman
and Colonel Roy Chevallier
with a couple of nice
California hogs. Chevallier's
shot was not difficult,
but he did it perfectly —
which means he did a
whole lot of things exactly
right when it counted.*

(and Making)

TAKING THE SHOT

