

# Your Setting Sights

Goals are important in hunting as in life...  
so long as they're sensible.

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This article is the first in a series on the “mental” aspects of our sport. They are important, not only to success, but also to the enjoyment of our pastime. We’re going to start with this

discussion of setting goals. I happen to think this is important, but just like everything else in life, should not be carried to excess. Hunting is supposed to be fun, and whatever goals you set for yourself, it’s extremely important to not be obsessed by them. I don’t honestly know if obsessive behavior is fun for the person suffering from it, but I know for darned sure it isn’t much fun to be around!

One of my lifelong goals has been to take a really nice grizzly bear. I finally accomplished this in May 2005 with Alaskan Master Guide Dave Leonard.

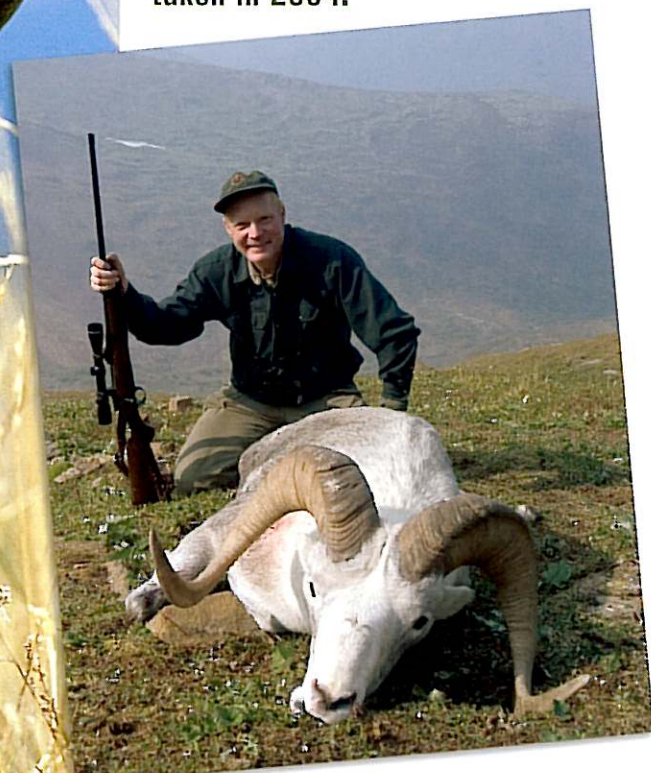
Given a choice, I will take the best horns or antlers I can find. Excepting that I will often take an older animal with character in favor of a younger animal that, in record-book terms, might actually "score" higher.



# Setting Your Sights

I am often accused of being a “trophy hunter,” as if those were dirty words. It is absolutely true that I have a lot of trophies, and certainly true that I go into any hunt hoping for the best or, preferably, oldest animal I can find. Unfortunately, somehow the public seems to equate “trophy hunting” with “wanton waste” of wild game. The concepts are not mutually exclusive. Whether in North America, where utilization of game meat is generally mandated by law, or in Africa or Asia, where meat utilization is “merely” a moral imperative, it’s something I’m almost rabid about. Sure, I donate a lot of it... but I also like to eat it myself. Hell, I even ate the chops from a leopard I took last year. But, given a choice, I will take the best horns or antlers I can find. Excepting that I will often take an older animal with character in favor of

I grew up in the shadow of Jack O’Connor, and I had a lifelong goal of taking a “grand slam” of North American wild sheep. I did it, but opportunity is such that this is no longer a sensible goal. Better to set as a goal to enjoy any sheep hunting. This is my most recent North American ram, a Yukon “Fannin” sheep taken in 2004.



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a younger animal that, in record-book terms, might actually “score” higher.

I am also not unduly wrapped up in trophy size. That is secondary. Actually, in my case, probably tertiary. For me, honestly, the most important trophy from any hunt is the stories I can write. For most of us, the primary trophy should be memories of a fine experience. Inches of horn, antler, or skull should be a good distance down in priority. We are going to talk about setting goals, but in that context I think it’s important to discuss two great ills that I believe too many modern hunters have succumbed to. The first is relatively well known, and I call it “record-book fever.” The second is perhaps more insidious, and that’s “checklist fever.”

### Record-Book Fever

It’s one thing to desire the biggest and the best. There’s nothing wrong with that. Some of us may simply continue to pass, year after year, until we find what we’re looking for. This is a wonderfully pure personal ethic, but most of us settle for less and try again if we can. There’s nothing wrong with that, either.

Record-book fever, on the other hand, is an all-consuming hunger for a trophy or trophies that will meet a certain very high standard. If untreated, this malady is almost always fatal, at least to the enjoyment of the sport. (And, all too often, to the reputation of the sufferer.) Kept to yourself and pursued honestly, I suppose this is okay. Except it seems to me there should be more to the hunting experience than trophy size. If you’ve hunted a lot, you’ve seen this malady in action. The animal has just fallen, and proper time hasn’t been taken to both savor the moment and honor the creature whose life has just ended. Instead, out comes the tape measure. If the animal measures up, it’s time for celebration. If it doesn’t (and, ground shrinkage being as it is, usually the animal isn’t larger than you thought!), then somehow the stalk and the shot and the beauty of the animal are lessened. Leave the tape measure at home, or at least in camp, do the best job you can, and enjoy your animals for what they are, not what you wish they could have been.

Carried to its ultimate extreme, record-book fever becomes a most dangerous malady, and most people who succumb to it can rightfully be accused of hunting for the wrong reasons. As in, thirst for recognition rather than a passionate pursuit. All too often this leads to cutting corners. In recent years we have had far too many

Grancel Fitz was actually the one who coined the term “Grand Slam.” Fitz is pictured below with one of bighorn sheep he took during his hunting days. Fitz is also credited with being the first person to take one each of all of the varieties of North American big game. Today some of these animals are no longer huntable, like the jaguar Fitz is pictured with here.



examples of extremely skilled and legitimately successful hunters who wanted the recognition so badly that basic rules (and sometimes laws) were bent or broken. In goal setting, it is perfectly fine to establish lofty standards for oneself.

For instance, someday I would really like to take a whitetail deer that, net and dry, exceeds the Boone and Crockett minimum score of 170. I’m in no hurry. Every fall I hunt two or three areas where this is possible, and I often don’t shoot at all. I recognize that such a buck is, nationwide, perhaps one in a half million. In some of the areas I hunt the odds might be as good as one in several thousand, but it’s still long odds, and that’s okay, too. It remains a goal, one that I might never realize. But it’s fun to keep trying. Along the way I’ve taken some beautiful bucks and enjoyed some good venison—and I’ve seen a lot more beautiful bucks that I chose not to shoot. I simply can’t imagine poaching, buying, or stealing a rack and claiming it; or taking

a buck within an enclosure and claiming it was free range. These things sometimes happen in the final and most severe stages of record-book fever, and are obviously not what we hunters are about.

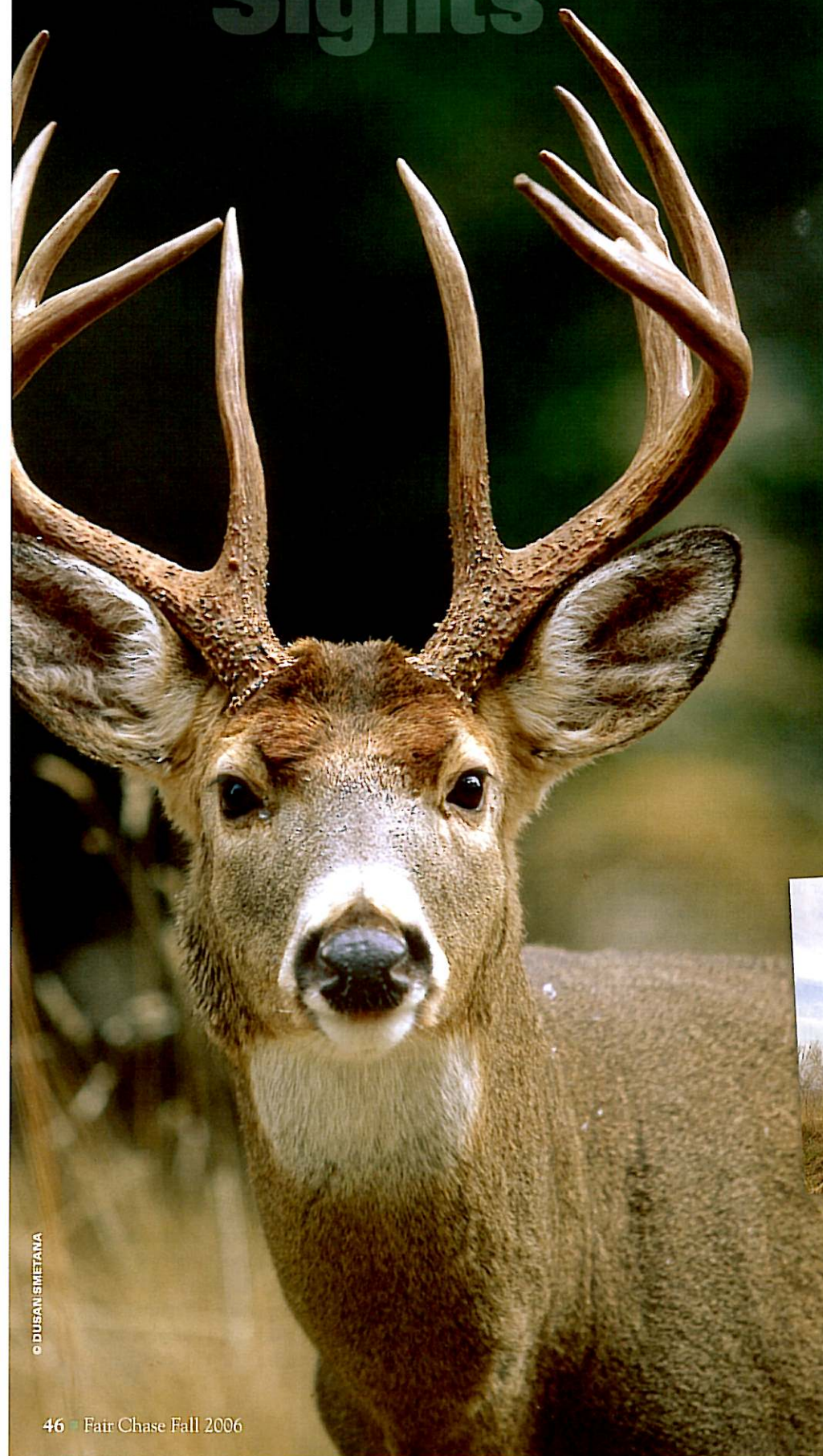
### Checklist Hunting

Every hunt is a wonderful experience. Some of us are more fortunate than others, able to string together a great many wonderful experi-

ences over long and active hunting lives. It is natural for those of us with less mobility, physical agility, and/or financial capability to feel at least a wee bit of jealousy, but nobody ever said life was always fair. Some of us are able to do more of almost anything than others, including hunting. For several years now I’ve served on the selection committee for the prestigious Weatherby Hunting and Conservation Award. By virtue of occupation, and perhaps a wee bit of determination, I’ve been able to get out and about a fair amount, but as I see the Weatherby ballots come and go I am consistently awestruck—and a bit envious—of the hunting these guys have been able to do.

On the other hand, I occasionally pity them. Especially in the final stages of the quest for that lifetime achievement award, I see some of these guys running hither and yon, filling the ballot without truly enjoying each experience as it unfolds. That particular award is on a global scale, of course, but I have seen similar situations

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with hunters in search of a "complete" (more about that later) North American collection, or a Grand Slam of wild sheep, or any other collection you can think of. With our 50th presentation coming up in January 2007, just yesterday we were interviewing the former recipients present at our summer board meeting. Rex Baker won the Weatherby Award four years ago and, unlike some, hasn't rested on his laurels but continues to seek out the toughest hunts for the most difficult game. His advice to prospective Weatherby winners was telling: "Enjoy each hunt along the way. It's all about memories."

Regardless of what goals you set for yourself, enjoy each moment. Do your homework, reading about and studying any unfamiliar area or animal before you go, and don't catch yourself running hither and yon completing lists of animals or experiences that you have set for yourself, or someone else keeping tabs has set for you. It is perfectly reasonable to set some goals that will take you to various places, and I've certainly set some of those for myself... but don't let them consume you, any more than you allow the record book to consume you. Savor each moment along the way.

## Slamming The Slam

There are goals within goals, and most of us probably have multiple goals. Some may be to someday take a very specific animal. For instance, it was a long-term goal of mine to take one, just one, very nice interior grizzly. Along the way I must admit I compromised. I took a medium-sized bear the first time I hunted grizzly, back when I was a kid and



I have a long-standing goal to take a whitetail meeting the tough B&C minimum of 170. I'm not in any hurry, and I may never get there. Along the way, I am grateful when I have the opportunity to take a heavy-racked old buck like this.

didn't know any better. Another time, to my shame, I made a mistake on the last day of a hunt and shot a bear that I should not have shot. Last year I finally realized this goal, taking a wonderful old boar up on Alaska's Noatak River.

Other goals are really multiple objectives strung together, as in completing a Grand Slam of North American wild sheep. I have no problem with this as a goal, and in fact it was one of my goals, completed in 2003, fully 30 years after I took my first wild sheep. But there are pitfalls in "slamming" as a goal. Jack O'Connor has often been given credit for creating the term "grand slam." In fact he did not, and later in life he came to abhor the concept; he felt it was ruining sheep hunting, driving up prices and having people seeking the various sheep for the wrong reasons. I do not abhor it, but carried to the extreme it can be "checklist hunting," and, in some contexts, can be downright meaningless.

It was longtime Boone and Crockett Club supporter Grancel Fitz who actually coined the phrase "grand slam" as related to taking one each of the North American wild sheep. As we know, a great many hunters over the years have bought into this concept (me included). Our four North American sheep are distinctive and offer distinct and wonderful hunts. No prob-

lem. Clear back in 1978, as a young writer looking for a ploy to sell a major story, I hit upon the idea of taking one each of the North American deer in a single year. Back then there were just four: whitetail, blacktail, Coues' whitetail, and mule deer. The Sitka blacktail, thank God, had not been separated out. I pulled it off and *Outdoor Life* ran the story, but I would never want to go through another fall as hectic as that!

Grancel Fitz is also credited with being the first person to take one each of all the varieties of North American big game, which is a "slam" of a very high order. I must tell you that, even as a boy, this was a goal I established for myself. Unfortunately, it was a silly childhood goal that can never be realized. Since Fitz's time, numerous races and subspecies have been split off, not just Sitka blacktail, but Central Canada barren ground caribou, Roosevelt's elk, tule elk, and more. This is no problem; those who thought their goal was realized just have another hunt or two to go on. But some perfectly legitimate North American game animals that were available for Fitz are no longer huntable. It seems possible that someday we might hunt Pacific walrus again, mainly because the numbers and biology support a harvest even if the politics don't. But it seems extremely unlikely that Mexico will ever reopen jaguar hunting.

So, there you have it: A genuine "slam" of North American big game is not possible, and has not been possible for many years. This is a fact, so a complete North American collection is a goal that cannot be realized. I must admit that, over the years, I have observed with some amusement and several cases of what O'Connor would have called "the vapors" as various luminaries in our sport have created (and sometimes actually trademarked) their own lists, based upon not what is really out there but what is currently available. This will change over time, so such a practice seems to me to be checklist hunting for profit, which seems even worse than doing it for the glory.

### Aim High, But Be Realistic

In concept, I don't have any problem with establishing as a goal the taking of any animal that particularly interests you, or any series of animals that likewise hold your interest. Either way, it's also equally okay to establish your own trophy criteria. On this last, let's emphasize your own criteria. As I told you, I'd like to take a whitetail—someday—that meets the minimum standard for inclusion in our all-time records book. So I guess you could call that a goal, but it's a very flexible goal, one that I recognize I may never attain. If you put numbers on things,

## Perfection, and all its advantages.

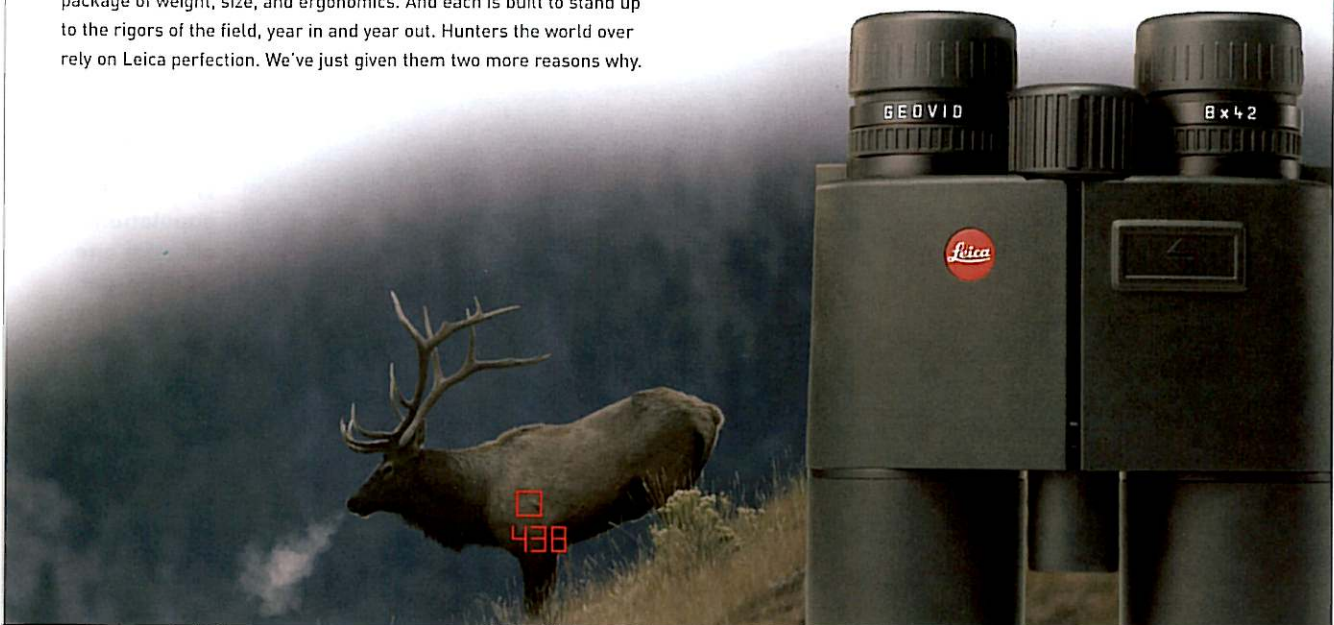
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**Because they are hunted lightly, and because the populations are currently exploding, musk ox offers a wonderful opportunity for records-book-size specimens.**

like a "170-inch whitetail" or a "375-inch elk," you may be buying into more frustration than satisfaction. Better, in my view, to establish as a goal to take a really fine, mature specimen that you are happy with, forgetting about anyone else.

Our records book has been around for a long time, and the standards are very high. Although I think it's a very silly goal, if you establish as a goal the desire to take an animal that qualifies for the all-time book, there remain some pretty good opportunities. Because they are hunted lightly, and because the populations are currently exploding, musk ox offers a wonderful opportunity for records-book-size specimens. So do some of the caribou herds. Even elk offer some small semblance of decent odds, again because the population is exploding across the West. But if you must have a "Boone and Crockett class" specimen of numerous, but intensively hunted species like whitetail, mule deer, or black bear, you are bucking the odds. Remember, too, that not all areas where a given species ranges are capable of producing the biggest and the best. This is especially true with widespread species like whitetails, but here's the point: To take a monstrous specimen of any given species, you must hunt where genetics, nutrients, and herd dynamics nurture such specimens and allow them to grow.

We have "sort of" blacktail where I live. Technically we are too far south for true Columbia blacktail, but whatever our deer are, they are small-bodied deer with generally poor antlers. Still, these are "my" deer and I love to hunt them. I could travel a few hundred miles north and hunt genuine Columbia blacktail, as I have in years gone by, and I'm sure over time I could take a few more really good ones.

But that would mess up my own deer hunting at home, so I don't do that anymore. I'm happy with my own deer, even though none of them will ever go in anybody's book... except my own.

Stringing like (or disparate) species together and hunting them is also a perfectly logical goal. Ultimately, this is what "slamming" really is. These days quite a few hunters establish as a goal the taking of a nice buck of each recognized variety. That's a wonderful goal, involving not only distinctly different and fascinating hunts, but seeing a lot of the country along the way. Others do the same with caribou, moose, bears, and whatever. This is all perfectly harmless, but it might be sensible to factor a small dose of realism into your plans, because some of these things are becoming extremely difficult to achieve.

I grew up in hero worship of Jack O'Connor, Grancel Fitz, and all the rest. A goal of mine was to take a grand slam of the four varieties of North American wild sheep. When I established this goal, clear back in the 1950s, it could not be foreseen how difficult or expensive realizing this goal would be. I'm glad I did it, but I'm not sure I would wish this goal on anyone. To go sheep hunting, you bet. To apply for the tags and hope for the best, absolutely. To enjoy every day on a sheep mountain, regardless of the local variety, no question. As we establish our goals none of us can predict exactly what the future holds, so I believe hunting goals—and all goals in life—should be high, but should rest within the attainable. And, above all, hunting is not a competition, except against yourself. Make yourself work hard and follow the rules, but enjoy every step along the way. ■

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**This Colorado bull is hardly a monster, but I'm proud to put my tag on him. With exploding populations, elk offer one of the great opportunities to produce big trophies, but not all areas have record-book specimens. Enjoy the hunt, and be happy with the results.**