

“FOLLOW THROUGH, WATCH THE ARROW HIT.”

By W. ROBERT NICHOLS
B&C Associate

Back in February of 1989, the Texas economy didn't look too good. I had the opportunity to lease a pasture on the King Ranch that I thought held a Boone and Crockett buck behind every bush. My fifteen year old son, Wallace, and I flew to Kleberg County Airport on a cold February day to inspect the lease. We were so excited that we couldn't sleep. We arrived at the Borregos gate before 6:00 a.m. in a rental car to drive 25 miles through the ranch to the Lampasosa and Medio Luna pastures.

It was one of those freak nights when all of the highways were covered with a clear sheet of ice. The ice storm had coated fences, trees and everything living with a clear coat of ice. I had hunted many times in South Texas and had never seen such an ice storm. As we arrived at the Borregos gate in our 2-wheel drive rental car, the lady at the gate informed us that the ranch was closed to all traffic because of the ice on the roads. No security patrols would be available if we slid off the road in our rental car. After a lengthy negotiation, we persuaded the lady that our driving skills and risk acceptance were adequate to accept the risks of being on the ranch alone. We happily but foolishly drove slowly through seven bump gates across the ranch to our pastures. We had never been on the Santa Ger-

trudis division, but had a good map. I was foolish to expose my fifteen year old son to the risk of a car breakdown or sliding off the icy road, but we were so excited that no risk seemed too great to see our new pasture. Either of us would have gladly walked through the ice to get there.

When we arrived, our pastures looked just like all the other pastures we had just passed through. I don't remember seeing any deer that I thought were exceptional. As the ice thawed, we were even bold enough to drive some of the well-maintained roads through our pasture. Still, no big bucks, and not many deer at all. We spent the day, had a cold lunch in the car and returned to Kingsville elated. We didn't see anything to indicate that this was a hunting paradise, but we were happy to have been able to have spent the day on the ranch. It was still nine months until the beginning of any hunting season, and we had already begun to plot and plan our fall season of 1989.

During that season, we found there was not a trophy buck behind every bush, indeed there was not a record-class deer on our lease. There were lots of old deer, 6-1/2 years and over and lots of does. The best deer we killed that year was 7-1/2 years old that scored 126 points. We turned to the wildlife manager of the ranch, Butch Thompson, and our old friend,

Wayne Peeples for advice about how to improve our pasture. Both told us the same thing — shoot your quota of does and kill only the older bucks. Wayne Peeples had taught us how to age the deer on the hoof and we felt qualified to pick out the 6-1/2 year old deer from the 4-1/2 year old deer. We didn't know how much better we would get as the years went by. Year after year, we killed lots of does and not very many bucks. We made sure that every buck killed was over 5-1/2 years old.

We dreamed in the off season of how good the bucks we left would be the next year and we were right. Gradually, the size of the deer began to increase and the ratio began to improve. By the fall of 1994, we had a number of bucks in the 140 point class and at least three in the 150 point class. Through the years, my fifteen year old son grew to twenty-one and my nine year old son grew to fifteen. As our hunting skills improved, we all gradually moved from the rifle to the bow. In the fall of 1994, all of our hard work paid off. My older son, Wallace spent 20 days at the Medio Luna in October. With careful scouting, and lots of work with binoculars, he reported that he had found several Pope and Young bucks on our lease.

In mid-October, Wallace took me to the part of the pasture that was my buck's core area. Sure enough, we saw the buck and I couldn't believe my eyes. It was bigger than any deer I had ever seen or killed anywhere. Excitedly, I gathered my bow hunting equipment and fell out of the truck. As I scrambled behind a prickly pear I told Wallace to drive on in hopes that I might get close enough to the buck for a shot. As luck would have it, the buck came within 18 steps. It was a typical South Texas day, 85 degrees and humid. We had also done an excellent job over the years of raising mosquitoes. As I was sitting there in the heat watching my buck at 18 steps, I looked down at my left hand. It was covered with mosquitoes having lunch at my expense. They were all over my neck, my face, my ears and my hands. So now I was frozen behind the prickly pear, not able to blink, with my buck 18 steps away

and being eaten alive by mosquitoes. Inch by inch as he turned his head away I tried to move to my right to get a clear shot around the bush. I was not about to take a risky shot at such a magnificent animal. After what seemed like an hour, I tried to move a foot to my right. His head was turned away, so I tried to raise my bow to get into position to draw. As I raised my bow to draw, his head whirled around and he had me nailed. Within seconds, he disappeared into the brush and my hunt was over.

As I got back into the truck and healed my wounds from both the mosquitoes and my own guilt, Wallace and I decided to only hunt him from a tripod in the future. I think Wallace thought that my ground hunting skills were somewhat less than they should be to get a shot at such a smart buck. We set up two tripods in the buck's core area and I hunted both diligently.

As luck would have it, later in October as Wallace and Wayne Peoples let me out of the truck to climb into my tripod, the buck emerged from the brush. He was now standing 20 steps from my tripod. But because he walked out while the truck was still there and I was climbing up into my tripod, he had me spotted again. He was staring straight at me. It seemed like an hour that buck stood and looked at me trying to determine if I was something to be scared of. Finally, the buck lowered his head to eat. It presented me with a shot with the buck facing me with his head down.

I had sighted in my bow the day before and knew I could easily shoot a three inch group at 20 yards. I mistakenly elected to try the top of the neck shot from the tripod. I slowly and carefully drew, thinking the thoughts a bow hunter is supposed to think before he releases: *pick a spot, follow through, watch the arrow hit the deer.* As I released the arrow, I thought I had made a perfect shot. The deer heard the bow and dropped just far enough for me to see the arrow sail harmlessly over his withers. Miraculously, he didn't know where the arrow had come from. He stood and looked around just long enough for me to knock

another arrow. I knew I must shoot lower. While he was looking the other way, I drew and held lower on the deer. *Follow through and watch the arrow hit the deer,* I told myself. As I released the second arrow, I just knew I had made another perfect shot. The deer was motionless, yet the arrow sailed over the top of his back. The deer ran off scared to death. I had spooked my magnificent animal. The buck would never come near that tripod again.

My guilt for having bungled two easy shots was enormous. For the rest of the season I hunted only that deer. Day after day I would return to his core area, move my tripod, climb the tripod with my bow and wait for him to emerge. Occasionally, I would see him from a distance, but never from the tripod.

When I sighted in my bow after missing the deer, it was eight inches off. I don't know why it was off, bows are delicate. I had sighted it in the day before the hunt, and it was fine. I spent lots of guilty and miserable hours on that tripod kicking myself in the fanny for making several mistakes on such a magnificent deer. I had decided I wouldn't shoot another deer, but would wait for this one.

Charlie Cash, my son, Wallace, Lauren Gulley, and I decided on Sunday, January 8, that we would all go to the pasture and hunt. They let me out at one of my tripods in the deer's core area. I knew that if I saw the deer, he would be spooky and hard to kill. After I had been on the tripod about half an hour, the buck emerged from the brush and walked across my field of view at 30 yards. With heart-pounding, I was hoping every way I knew to hope that he would turn to his right and come closer. Unfortunately, he turned to his left and began to quarter away from me. At 35 yards he stopped and looked away.

I took the shot and watched the arrow harmless hit the dirt as it passed under his body. He heard the

string and the arrow and was gone in a flash. I sat miserably on the tripod. I kicked myself for not practicing more, I kicked myself for taking the shot. I kicked myself for not spending more hours on the tripod or placing the tripod in the wrong position. As I was beating myself up badly, once again, the buck came back chasing a doe. This time he was headed straight at my tripod. Since I was to be given another chance, I wanted to make sure I didn't blow it. *Follow through, watch the arrow hit the deer. Follow through, watch the arrow hit the deer.* As he paused, 20 steps from my tripod, I followed through and



watched the arrow pass through the top of the deer's shoulder on its way down through the body cavity. I saw the arrow hit, heard the arrow hit, and knew it was a killing shot.

I climbed down from the tripod and quietly crept through the grass and the mesquite trees to where I last saw the beautiful animal lay down. He was there, dead on his side, with his antler silhouette against the beige grass of the Medio Luna pasture. All the work, all the does, all the passing of all the bucks paid off. The magnificent animal before me would gross 152 points and net 150-2/8 points. He was a fawn in February of 1989 when Wallace and I had foolishly drove all over the pasture in the ice. He survived that winter and five more, to become the best deer in our pasture.

ROBERT NICHOLS, CENTER, WITH HIS SONS, CAMPBELL AND WALLACE WITH ROBERT'S WHITETAIL TAKEN IN 1995. BOTH OF ROBERT'S SONS TOOK TROPHY CLASS WHITETAIL ON THEIR LEASE BETWEEN 1994-1995.