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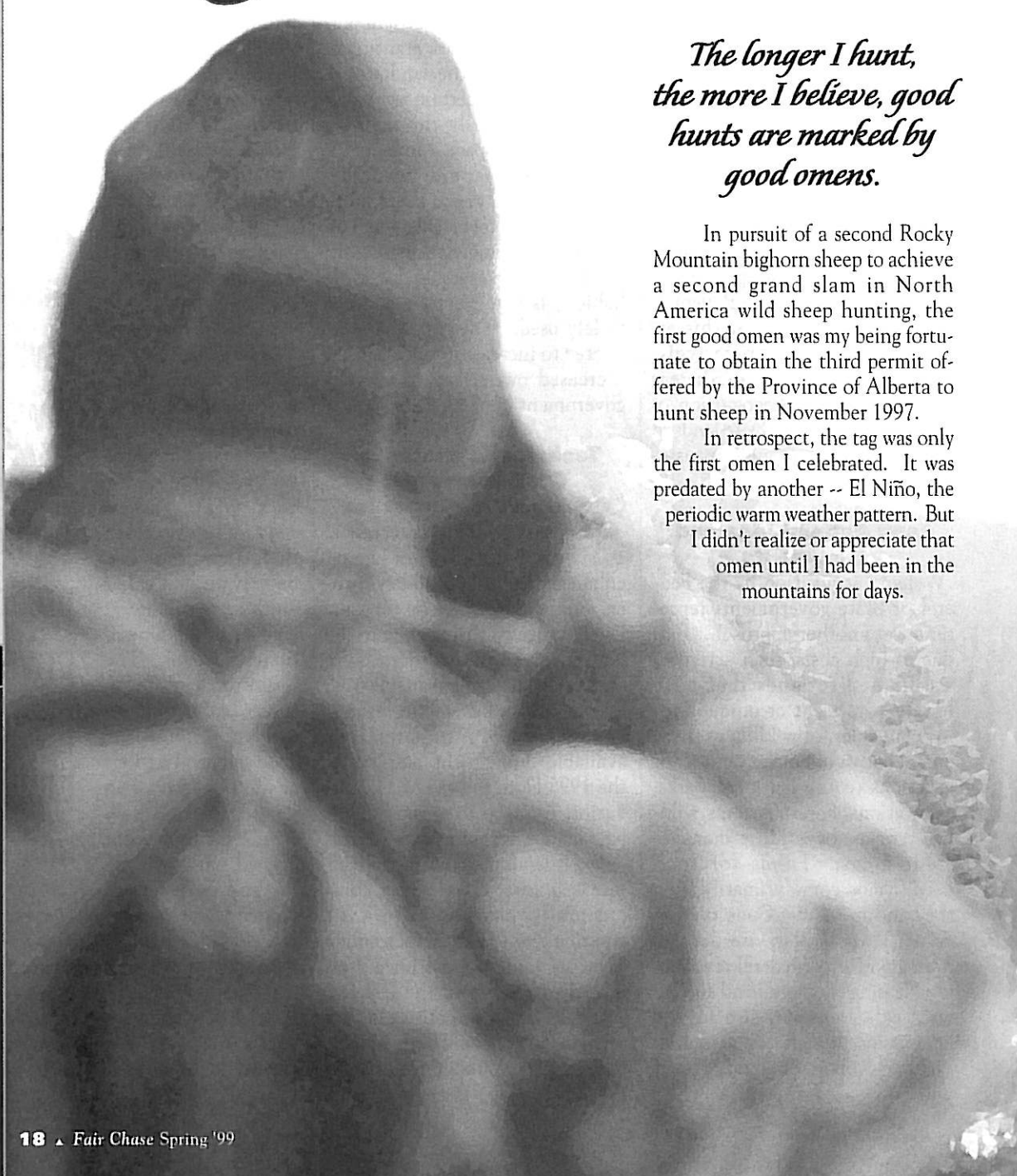
# an Argali in Alberta

By Tom Pawlacyk • Lifetime Associate

*The longer I hunt,  
the more I believe, good  
hunts are marked by  
good omens.*

In pursuit of a second Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep to achieve a second grand slam in North America wild sheep hunting, the first good omen was my being fortunate to obtain the third permit offered by the Province of Alberta to hunt sheep in November 1997.

In retrospect, the tag was only the first omen I celebrated. It was predated by another -- El Niño, the periodic warm weather pattern. But I didn't realize or appreciate that omen until I had been in the mountains for days.



Another key was hiring Randy Babala as my outfitter. Randy has an exceptional reputation as a sheep guide. He's intense, has good eyes, and burns with honorable desire to put out maximum effort to get his hunter a ram. His log home sits at the foot of the east slope of the Canadian Rockies in Cadomin, Alberta. That's where we made our base, returning each evening to be renewed with wonderful, hearty home-cooked meals prepared by his girlfriend Lenore.

Then there came Robert, though he is no less important. Robert is a 24-year old Ojibwa guide from Grand Cash, Alberta. He, too, has excellent eyes and is very knowledgeable. A fine, personable young man, he was a pleasure to be with and made the hunt fun.

Speaking of the hunt, we best get to it. There were other omens, and if I were to stay on them, you may not last through my story.

## *The Situation*

I had 17 days to harvest a ram. The first seven were devoted to evaluating sheep as they moved safely below us on coal leases of the Cardinal River Mine and the Gregg River Mine. Thanks to El Niño, the weather was ideal – sunny, little wind, daytime temperatures between 32° and 40° F. There was no more than an inch of snow covering the lower slopes. I welcomed the opportunity to observe the most beautiful mountain country I'd ever been in, searching for a potential trophy, while my lungs adjusted to the elevation and thin air.

The area makes for a unique hunting environment, opportunity and challenge -- all rolled into one. The large, open pit, strip coal mines were established on the East Slope of the Alberta Rockies in 1969. Once coal is taken from the land, the government requires the pits to be refilled, covered with top soil and planted with lush grasses, such as alfalfa and clover. Prairies of wonderful feed for wild sheep are the result.

In this land, creatures do not come wiser than Alberta bighorn sheep. It's their home, and no animal, especially man, knows it better. The sheep are attracted to the rich food on this green refuge, which is roughly two miles wide and 15 miles long. The sheep realize they are safe here because hunting is not allowed on mine property. The sheep also know they cross an unsafe, two-mile-wide hunting zone above the mines to get to the grasses. The hunting zone is from where we watched. Above it lies Jasper National Park which also sprawls down the western slopes of the mountains. Of course, hunting is not allowed in the park. The sheep know this, too, and many of them live among the park's steep, dangerous precipices.

The mines employ a biologist to monitor the sheep. He estimated 650 sheep congregated on the leases during this November rut. It was amazing to witness their sheer numbers, watch their migration to food, and spy on the rituals of the fervent young rams, constantly harassing ewes, only to be just as rudely rejected by females not precisely ready.

## *The Goal*

The goal was to harvest a ram with horns that would register a Boone and Crockett score of 200 points or more.

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are the largest of the four species of North American wild sheep. With dark chocolate coats that can border on being black, Alberta sheep have larger bodies than those found in the states. Alberta rams grow larger than 300 pounds because of a diet rich in protein.

With their coats of lighter color, Montana bighorns usually have larger bases -- their horns have been known to exceed circumstances of 17 inches. A 16-inch base makes for an exceptional Alberta bighorn. However, the

mass and shape of their horns give Alberta rams more character. Their horns flare up and out at the tip, making them more romantic and majestic looking. To me, Alberta rams generally make for finer trophies.

## *The Target*

On the fifth day, we first saw him. Through the spotting scope, Randy and Robert estimated the base of his horns to be 16 inches. The horns appeared to be of equal and extreme length -- 47 inches -- with massive first, second and third quarter measurements, which could have put his B&C score at about 205. Anything 190 or better is considered a world-class ram, with 208-1/8 points being the World's Record. Randy speculated this ram might even approach the record, and he became the standard for the hunt.

Awed, Robert immediately nicknamed him the "Argali Ram" after the legendary species found in Mongolia. The name stuck, withstanding the test of time.

## *Moving Upward*

We glassed the prairie for two more days. No creature approached the size or majesty of the Argali Ram. We assumed he must have moved up the mountain because we didn't see him below us again.

On the eighth day, we began moving up the mountain, alternately working White Horse Creek, Prospect Creek, the Cardinal River Drainage and the Gregg River Drainage -- the routes sheep take to come down from the peaks of the park to eat.

It was magnificent. There wasn't a day we didn't see rams. In this game-rich country, there were

# an Argali in Alberta

also mule deer, elk and wolves. The cold, crystal clear trout waters are capable of taking any human breath away. Wherever you looked, there were rugged mountain peaks that you knew would out duel any man or beast in the right circumstances.

Beyond each hill is another. My nature is always to seek what's on the other side. I soon learned in this land that whenever you reached a crest, invariably there is yet another peak to climb to reach the summit. This wasn't a devastating revelation. Rather, the desire to reach the pinnacle, to be afforded the vista and view into the valley, that is what the hunt is all about. The price is the hard work of the climb, the pain to your body and total exhaustion. But those tolls are also what etch irreplaceable memories.

*I turned back to the ledge that our ram had just used as a throne to look over this beautiful land. Just above and beyond, silhouetted against the sky, stood the Argali Ram, looking me in the eyes.*

With each passing day and summit scaled, I felt greater appreciation for the kind weather of El Nino. In the best of conditions, this type of hunting is not for the light-hearted. It is dangerous and treacherous. You can be hurt at any turn if you are distracted, lose a hand hold, or suddenly become an unlucky victim of a coincidental rock or snow slide. Had the weather complicated the conditions, it's hard for me to imagine what the hunt would have been like. At this time of year, we easily could have been faced with two or three feet of snow, bitter cold and unrelenting winds, which would have severely limited our mobility or eliminated days from the hunt.

But we had none of that. The weather was on my side. El Nino allowed us to be mobile and more or less climb at will. I was afforded rare conditions to wonder and partake in the Alberta Rockies as only

a few men have experienced them during a November rut.

## Doubts

By the 16th day, we had worked our way up to Mystery Lake, a beautiful body of mountain water that borders the east side of Jasper National Park and marked the outer limits of our hunt. By now, I would have gladly harvested an Alberta trophy, but we saw no ram to rival the Argali. And there had been no further sign of him, either.

At times, I began to feel almost desperate. We saw rams, but none that we could get close to. We caught glimpses of some moving across treacherous precipices that you read of rams falling from, to their deaths, in obsessive pursuit of unwilling mates. Others seemed content to remain on the land reclaimed from the mines. The ewes and lush grasses persuaded them from ventur-

this time of the rut, ewes often fled that sanctuary because of ever-increasing harassment. On the contrary, the movement we saw indicated rams were coming down the slopes from the park and onto the mines.

As I weighed my last chance, I saw in my mind's eye the Argali Ram as I had seen him on day five, grazing on the safe prairie, when he made me hold my breath, and the hair stood up on my arms. The one time I saw him, I had seen him from the hunting zone.

"Let's go back to the hunting zone above the mines," I retorted.

The morning of day 17 was the coldest and windiest of the hunt. By 8:30, when the light is legal, we were at the top of the hunting zone above the mines. Randy and I would work the north side. Robert would glass the zone from the south. Randy and Robert reviewed the hand signals they would use to communicate.

By 9:30, no contact was made with Robert. Concerned, Randy wondered aloud why Robert had not signaled.

At 9:45, Randy spotted the Argali Ram! He was with a ewe in the valley. But where was Robert? He must have seen him, too. Why no signals? Was Robert pinned down?

There weren't answers to those questions. There was just unspoken strategy that I could see developing behind Randy's eyes. He suggested I hustle down the slope. The aching muscles and unhealed wounds from 16 days of hard hunting left me. The despair I had begun to feel also had flown. My mind was fresh with hope that we were going to harvest this ram.

By the time I reached the river, Randy caught up with me. There had been no sign from Robert, so we proceeded to climb the other side of the drainage. Looking down, we saw Robert walking. Randy signaled for him to join us.

We were all together again at 10:30. Robert told us he had seen the Argali Ram with the ewe. He had nearly walked into the pair. He had been pinned down and wouldn't risk signaling us for fear of being skylined and spooking the sheep.

Had Randy and I taken Robert's role, glassing the hunting zone from the south, we would have harvested the Argali Ram that morning.

ing back home to the park, across the dangerous hunting zone.

The weather was taking a turn for the worse. The winds picked up steadily, and the temperature fell. As we climbed the mountain and 50 mile-per-hour winds stung our faces with tiny balls of ice, I saw one of the incredible happenings of my life. A ram and three ewes took refuge from the elements in a cave inaccessible to us. They looked down with a nonchalance that only comes from knowing we presented no danger. For the first time, it occurred to me that I may return home without a ram.

## Day 17

"Where do you want to hunt your last day?" Randy asked me after day 16's supper.

We had seen no sheep leaving the mines as we passed back and forth during the last week, even though by

## Sighting

We decided to make our way up the mountain, to the point where the Argali Ram had been spotted by Randy. When we reached it, there was no sign of the ram.

I stayed in a patch of timber while Randy and Robert went to higher ground to glass for the Argali Ram. They saw nothing and returned within a half hour. After eating a sandwich for lunch, we moved to the outer edge of the timber.

Randy spotted a huge ram resting on a ledge of the mountain. Rather, he spotted a magnificent set of horns. Because of the height of the ledge, and our extreme angle, we could only see the tops of his horns. We believed they were the horns of the Argali Ram.

It was now 12:30. Time was literally running out. We knew we were in a bad position. We had no choice but to climb and pursue across open country, hoping he would not see us.

To complicate the situation, five ewes had moved in between us and the ram. We knew if we spooked them, they could easily spook him.

## Stalking

The intensity was almost overwhelming. Very few words were spo-

ken. The desire and concentration in Randy's and Robert's eyes screamed, "How are we going to get this ram?" It was getting colder by minute, with the temperature ultimately falling to 20° F. The gusting wind picked up more force, spitting snow and ice in our faces.

But our blood was boiling as we inched up the mountain. I remember trying to will myself not to sweat – if we had to stop and wait for a shot, I couldn't afford to be shivering when it was time to squeeze the trigger. We walked single file like sheep, bent at the waist, backs parallel to the ground. Every second, Randy's eyes were glued to the ledge where the ram was bedded. In turn, Robert's and my eyes were fixed on Randy, ready to freeze at his slightest signal.

The climb was steep, taking most of an hour. At one point, we flushed the five ewes. As they bolted, we froze, holding our breath, praying the Argali Ram would hold his ground. He did. The cold wind and spitting snow, blowing in our faces, were our allies, hiding us.

When Randy figured we were as close as we dare get to the ram, he hunkered into a bowl. Robert

and I followed. Pointing to a shelf above us, Randy whispered, "You can't see the ram now, but you'll see him when he stands up. As soon as he stands, shoot."

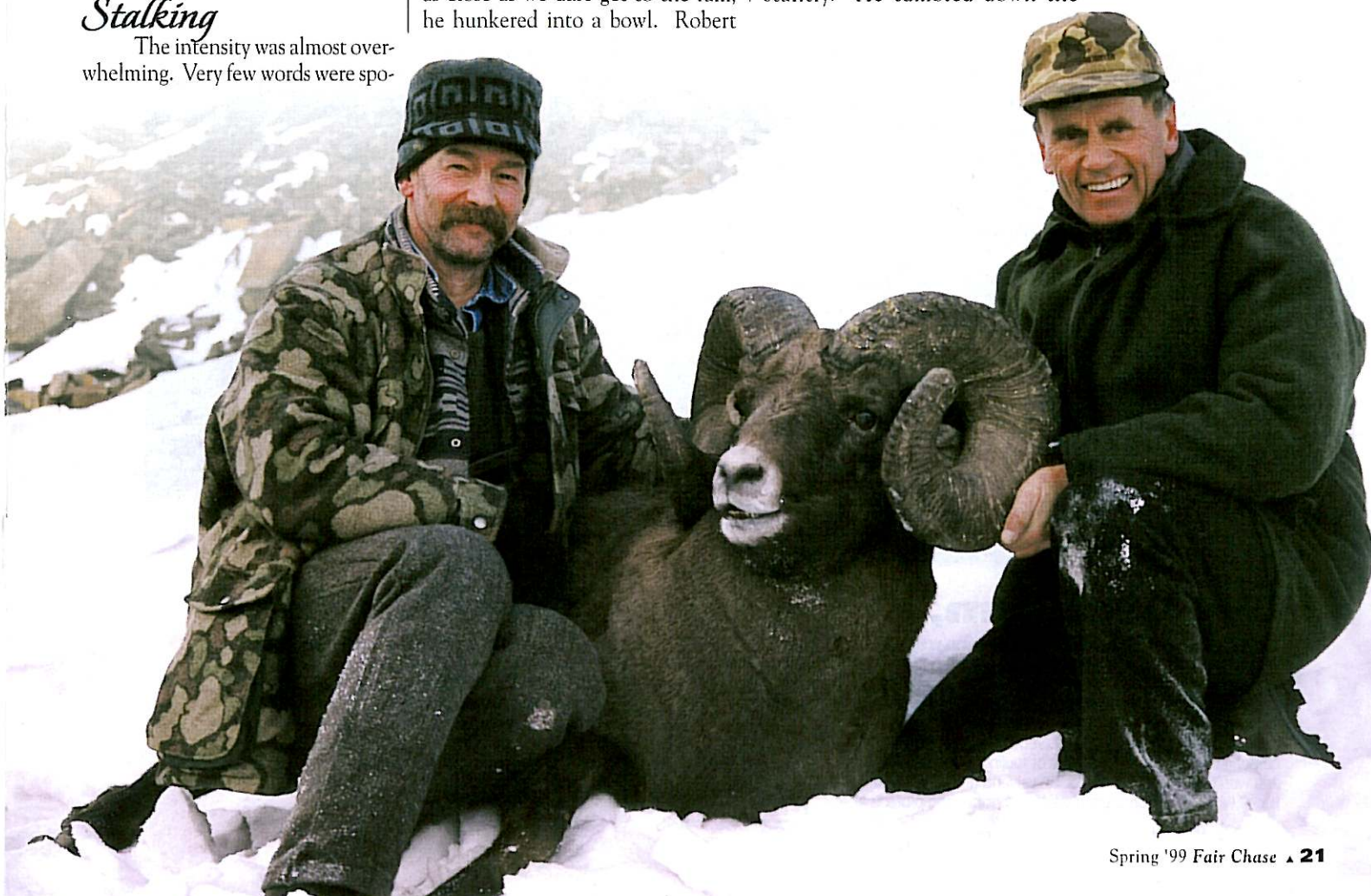
## Decision

Within 10 minutes, the five ewes we had spooked appeared on a ledge to the right of the Argali Ram. As they moved toward him, he stood. But they gathered close around him, as if intentionally protected him, preventing me from taking a shot. It was then that we realized he wasn't the Argali. It was 1:30, and I had to make one of the toughest decisions of my life. Do I harvest this magnificent Alberta bighorn, obviously a solid book ram? Do I allow this animal to live and continue to look for the Argali Ram? Or, do I complete my slam?

It had been a long hunt. I was worn out. I remember feeling unsure about how much further I could go. I made a decision to harvest this beautiful sheep.

The ewes moved away. I fired a well-placed shot that hit him in the left shoulder and killed him instantly. He tumbled down the

*Guide, Randy Babala (left) and Lifetime Associate Tom Pawlacyk with Tom's bighorn ram scoring 185-7/8 points.*



# an Argali in Alberta

mountain directly at us. Randy issued a quick warning to watch out because he could roll into us. But he landed in a pocket of snow that had drifted into the side of the mountain. That's

where he stopped, and we made our way up to him.

would be the envy of virtually any hunter blessed with my opportunity. Robert was especially excited. Making every effort to console me, he hooted, hollered and assured me that even though this wasn't the Argali Ram, he was surely the next best.

It was time to take pictures, and the wind rocked me as I shot a roll of film. Then Robert and Randy

than three hours to do it. I turned back to the ledge that our ram had just used as a throne to look over this beautiful land. Just above and beyond, silhouetted against the sky, stood the Argali Ram, looking me in the eyes.

"Randy," I said, nodding above.

Randy and Robert stood. Like me, they recognized the Argali immediately, and all of us shared the same empty feeling that comes with the realization that nothing could be done because the hunt was over.

From a mere 200 yards, the Argali Ram gazed down upon us calmly, allowed us to watch him for what seemed like an eternity. I was thinking, "What's incredible about these sheep is that, all of a sudden, they have the ability to appear right in front of your eyes from out of nowhere."

Randy broke the spell. "Well, I guess it wasn't meant to be," he said.

He and Robert resumed their work. I continued to watch the Argali Ram until the five ewes that remained in the area met up with him. Then the lot of them disappeared over the ridge. ▲▲▲

*After seeing the Argali Ram so close and for so long, Randy thinks that he could be a new World's Record. After all was said and done, after I fully realized what had happened, I was a little disappointed. But very little. It was a fair chase. That's sheep hunting.*

## Rewards

Although he wasn't the Argali Ram, we had harvested a magnificent Alberta bighorn sheep, one that

commenced to skin and butcher the animal -- Alberta law requires every pound of meat to be taken off the mountain, and there was less



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