

Although you may think that 30 and 26 do not add up to 2, the arithmetic makes perfect sense to me, especially when I am talking about desert sheep. I have hunted sheep for 30 years, almost half my life. My son, Dr. Charles Conte, harvested his first ram 26 years ago. We

was starting to believe him. For 20 years, Charles and I had tried to draw non-resident permits for desert sheep in Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico, without success. Now at 68 years of age, I was running out of time. My two children decided that now was a good time to “pay back”

Dad for sending them to college, business school and medical school. So, along with my son Charles, I went south of the border to hunt desert sheep with an outfitter.

Sheep

hunting is a matter of patience, conditioning, good optics, experienced knowledgeable guides, and quality habitat that holds rams. We tried to put all of these elements together in choosing Martin Leon Outfitters, which operates out of the Candelaria Ranch. The Candelaria Ranch is a 120,000 acre expanse of desert in Sonora, about a two hour drive from Hermosillo. It holds possibly the greatest concentration of desert rams in the world. However, the rough terrain, steep grades, and primitive hostility of the desert presented a formidable challenge. Success would come only after hours of meticulous glassing, difficult climbing in extreme heat, unwavering determination, and a measure of good luck!

The first day, Charles and I hunted different areas. I headed into

the La Tinaja Mountains with Martin Leon, Jr. and Antonio Aguliar searching for a magnificent ram that had been spotted a month earlier by Martin Leon, Sr. We hunted hard, sweating our way over jagged ridges of unstable rocks as sharp as coral, moving cautiously along side hills studded with cactus. As darkness descended on the desert, we headed down a steep slope, weaving past the cholla, which the locals call “jumping cactus” because it literally jumps off the bush, goes through your pants, and stings you something fierce.

My first day of hunting in the Sonora Desert had ended without even a glimpse of a desert sheep. The sun set behind the mountains, and the sky blossomed into a vivid panorama of orange and lavender. A chill engulfed my overheated body. I couldn't help but feel a little discouraged. “Don't be disappointed, Anthony,” Martin cautioned. “It's only the first day. I know that ram is here and he is very special. Tomorrow... maybe tomorrow we will find him.” This was a difficult day of climbing for a 68 year-old sheep hunter with a surgically repaired right knee. But the desire to earn my Grand Slam filled my mind with enthusiasm and my body with renewed vigor.

Shortly before sunrise on the following morning, we were back in the La Tinaja Range. After two hours of glassing from various vantage points,

30 + 26 = 2

BY ANTHONY J. CONTE

B&C ASSOCIATE ▲ PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

had each taken four sheep during our hunting careers – Dall's, Stone's, Rocky Mountain bighorn, and California bighorn. All we needed were desert sheep to complete our Grand Slams of North American Wild Sheep. Our dreams came true when my son and I harvested a pair of trophy desert rams in Mexico in February 1999. So, you can see that in my family, 30 (*years of hunting*) plus 26 (*years of hunting*) add up to 2 (*Grand Slams*)!

For most sheep hunters, desert bighorns are a very elusive trophy. The famous outdoor writer Jack O'Connor once said that “the chances of being able to collect a desert bighorn are about as good as a man's chances of being elected President of the United States or winning the Irish Sweepstakes.” I

GRAND ARITHMETIC

Antonio located three rams on a rock knob some 700 yards away. One ram looked truly exceptional with heavy full-curl horns that framed his head and slender neck. Martin set up the spotting scope and studied the animal. "That's him," he beamed. "That's him!" This was the huge ram his father had spotted a month ago.

Martin and Antonio viewed the magnificent ram and his two companions for some time before planning an approach that would bring us to within approximately 200 to 300 yards of our quarry. I listened carefully as my guides outlined the stalk. I followed closely behind Antonio as we traveled the desert floor and climbed the steep rock slope. "Put one in the chamber," Martin advised, "and be very quiet. The rams will be about 250 yards away and below us when we look over this ridge."

We picked our way up the ridge and over the loose rocks single file. I took off my backpack and carried it in one hand until I reached the area above the animals. I slipped into shooting position and rested my rifle on my backpack, but could not find the big ram in the scope. I assumed it was because of his camouflage coloration. "Eight o'clock from that green 'palo verde' tree,"

Martin whispered. The ram was barely vis-

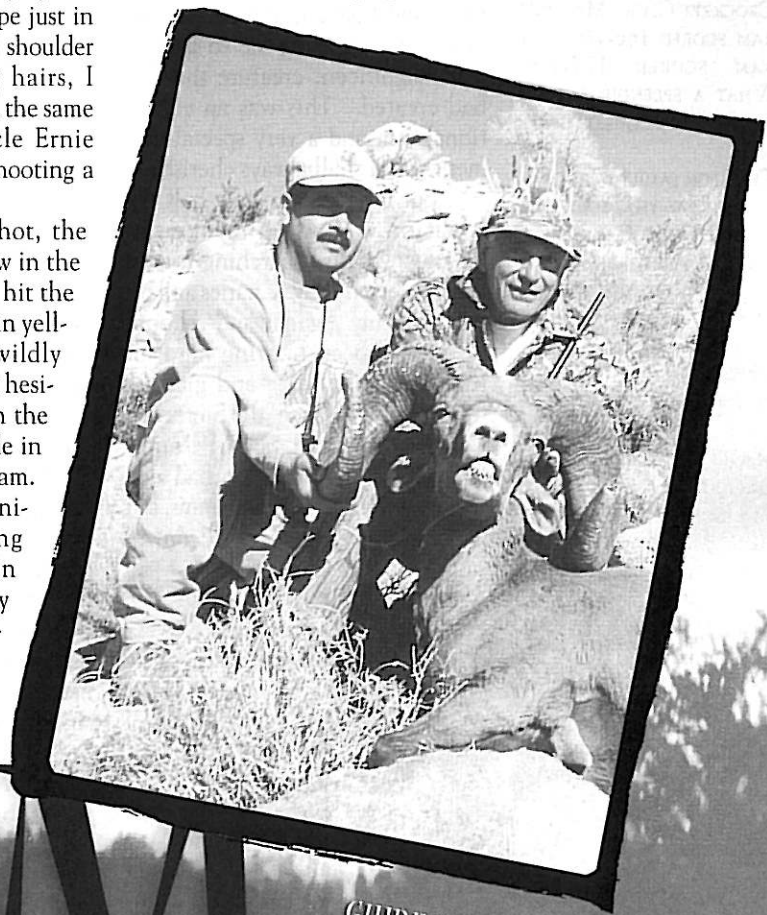
ible against the rock background. His gray-brown color blended in perfectly with the terrain.

Suddenly, the ram betrayed his position by moving his head, and his mahogany colored horns glistened in the desert sun. I adjusted for the sharp downward angle into the deep draw where the ram was standing, and placed the cross hairs low on the ram's shoulder. The crack of my Browning .300 Winchester Magnum shattered the silence of the desert. "Just high," Martin advised. "He's running up and left." I picked up the ram as he was running up the slope, and slipped the scope just in front of his body. As his shoulder moved across the cross hairs, I squeezed the trigger. I used the same technique that my Uncle Ernie taught me years ago for shooting a running deer.

After that second shot, the ram disappeared from view in the scope. I wasn't sure I had hit the animal until I heard Martin yelling and saw Antonio wildly waving his arms. Without hesitating, Antonio ran down the draw and up the other side in order to get to the fallen ram. When he reached the animal, he began hollering something to Martin in Spanish. "This is a really big ram," Martin translated, "really exceptional. I don't think you realize it yet, but this ram is a

very special trophy. Probably the largest ram ever taken from La Candelaria Ranch!"

Once I saw the sheep, I knew this was an outstanding desert ram. His massive horns of 38-2/8" and 36-4/8" were heavy throughout the full-curl. His face and body bore the scars of 12 years in this harsh desert environment. Curiously, one of the trackers had hog-tied three of the ram's legs together with a rope and tied the other end to his wrist. He explained to us that if this ram took off, he wanted to be able to stop him or die trying – the



GUIDE AND OUTFITTER, MARTIN LEON (LEFT) AND THE AUTHOR WITH HIS TROPHY DESERT RAM – THE LARGEST EVER HARVESTED ON THE CANDELARIA RANCH.

SLAMMETIC

GRAND SLAM ARITHMETIC

$$30 + 26 = 2$$

AFTER THE REQUIRED DRYING PERIOD OF SIXTY DAYS, OUR RAMS WERE SCORED BY JOHN STEIN, AN OFFICIAL MEASURER FOR THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB. MY SON'S RAM SCORED 166-7/8. MY RAM SCORED 177-2/8. WHAT A SPLENDID ENDING FOR A 30 YEAR QUEST!

THE LEON FAMILY WERE GRACIOUS HOSTS THAT MADE OUR ENTIRE STAY AT CANDELARIA RANCH A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE. OUTFITTER MARTIN LEON IS A FINE HUNTER AND A BILINGUAL GENTLEMAN OFFERING HIGH QUALITY TROPHY HUNTS.

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THE AUTHOR AND HIS SON,
DR. CHARLES C. CONTE, WITH
CHARLES' TROPHY DESERT SHEEP.

tracker had never seen a ram this big!

After much backslapping and many photos, I asked everyone to share a moment of thanks with me. We then performed a ceremony that I learned from Glen Roberts, the Grand Ram Master of Colorado, with whom I had taken my Rocky Mountain bighorn in 1993. I buried the heart of my ram and built a small pyramid of rocks over the spot. We then put our right hands on the rocks and I gave thanks to the Almighty for allowing me to harvest this magnificent creature that He had created. This was an exceptional ram and a very special moment that I shall always cherish.

But my ram was only half the equation. Meanwhile, my son Charles was still searching for his desert sheep trophy. Charles and his guides, Chuy Aguilar and Alfonso Leon, had been hunting hard for three days, climbing and glassing from the lofty crags of the Sierra Del Viego Norte (Old Man's) Range. During that time span they had seen over two dozen fine desert rams, but Chuy had turned them all down. "Too small," he would smile.

By the end of the third day, Charles was exhausted. "Today was one of the toughest days of sheep hunting I have ever experienced," Charles admitted. "We were all over Sawtooth Mountain. It is rugged and steep. The rocks are like razors and very unstable, and the

jumping cactus bites you like low brass 7-1/2 birdshot!"

"Tomorrow," I told him, "might be your best day of sheep hunting."

We knew there were good rams in the area. Earlier that day, Martin, Antonio, and I had gone off on a separate scouting party and had located six desert rams, two of which were quite large. They both had heavy bases and massive full-curl horns that dropped well below the jaw line. We studied the band of sheep for hours until it was too dark for glassing. My last look through my Leica 20 x 60 spotting scope was a classic view, with one of the mature rams looking directly at me. He was truly exceptional, with huge full-curl horns that appeared too large for his head and neck. I was certain that Chuy would not turn down this ram... if we were lucky enough to find him again! We were filled with anticipation and even though the rigors of the desert had taken their toll on our minds and bodies, sleep did not come quickly.

The next morning, the nighttime chill of the desert was rapidly dissipating and the black sky turned cobalt blue as the sun began to peek over the jagged mountains. Charles, Martin, Chuy, two trackers, and I were sprawled over a cactus infested ridge of razor sharp volcanic rocks, searching for the six rams that we had located the previous day. As the shadows began to lift, Chuy found the band of sheep, now numbering eight, in the spotting scope. They were about 800 yards away. Martin and Chuy studied each ram and finally Martin singled out the one with the largest horn structure. He turned to me, smiling, and said, "He will go 160 points."

A plan was formulated and Martin explained the strategy. "Charles, Chuy and I will circle towards the rams, keeping the ridge between us and them. Anthony, you stay here with the two trackers and keep an eye on the rams. We will glass and check with you to see if

they move." We watched the three men, in single file, move up the steep slope, gingerly picking their way over the loose rocks until they disappeared from view.

About an hour later, the trio emerged on a rock ledge in perfect position above the band of sheep. The only problem was that two small rams had moved between the herd and the rock ledge. They had spotted the men, and were now staring directly at them. Charles and the guides remained motionless, afraid the two rams would spook the entire band. Fortunately, after staring at the hunters for 20 minutes or so, they began to graze again, moving towards the top of the slope. Through the spotting scope, I watched the two small rams slowly move across the skyline over the jagged ridge, and disappear.

Meanwhile, Chuy and Charles were scrambling towards a rock outcropping that hid them from the two larger rams. Suddenly I saw Charles drop down, rest his bolt action Browning .300 Winchester Magnum on his backpack, and sight in on one of the large rams. As the report of the rifle reached my ears, I could see Chuy pumping his arms in the air! It was evident that Charles had finally harvested his desert sheep, after 26 years of anticipation and waiting.

What a special moment this was for both of us. I was privileged to be with my son when he harvested his first four rams, and now, here I was with him again when he took his desert sheep and collected his own Grand Slam! I hurried up the mountain to congratulate him, take photos, and admire the 11 year-old ram he had harvested. The horns of his ram were chipped and battle scarred, lending great character to his trophy.

We were happy, indeed, to fulfill our dreams beyond all expectations in the primitive and beautifully rugged Sonora Desert with a pair of trophy rams! So you see, according to my Grand Slam arithmetic, 30 + 26 really does equal 2. ▲▲▲