The Wrong Shot

Long shots test your marksmanship and your character. Short ones can, too.

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Had I stayed with Danny, I'd surely have killed the elk. Well, almost surely. What we think, is commonly tempered by what we wish. No kill is certain until the eyes glaze.

But I took a parallel path a stone's toss down slope. Separated, we'd see more of the ridge.

Alas, it was my lot that day to choose the wrong track. Danny's whistle brought me scrambling. Through the trees I spied him crouched, his right arm raised, motionless. I stopped, chest heaving. A screen of conifers hid the meadow from me. Danny hissed: "Right there!"

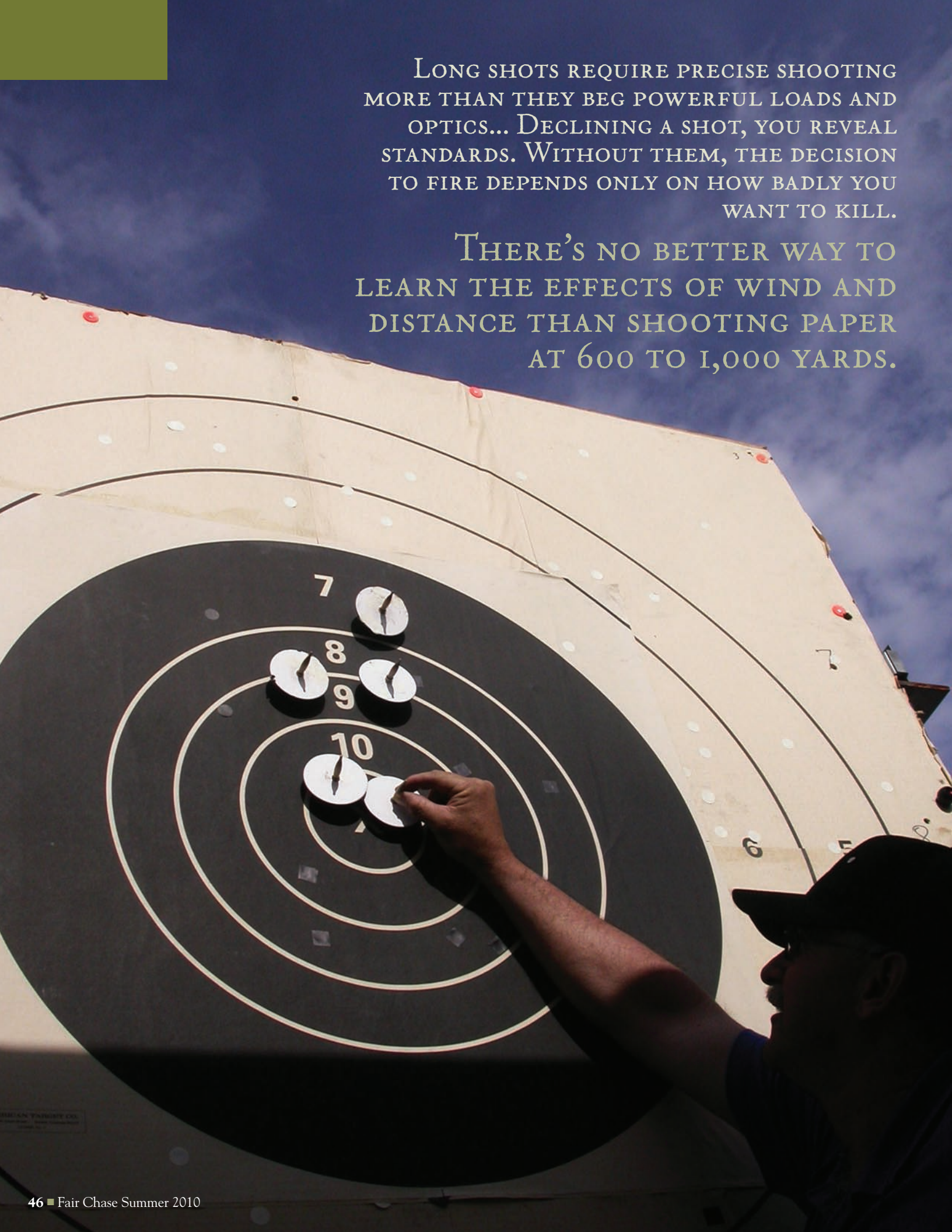
In fact the elk was 300 yards off, at the far end of the meadow. Ivory tips on six long tines finally caught my eye through the boughs. The bull was staring at Danny.

Prone, it was a makeable shot. Heck, it was a cinch. But I wasn't prone, couldn't get prone or even sitting without losing the elk below the hump of the ridge. Offhand, the crosswire bounced crazily, on and off the chest.

Practice at long range makes you lethal at long range. A bipod is a valuable shooting aid for prone shots.

Long shots require precise shooting more than they beg powerful loads and optics... Declining a shot, you reveal standards. Without them, the decision to fire depends only on how badly you want to kill.

There's no better way to learn the effects of wind and distance than shooting paper at 600 to 1,000 yards.



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The decision was simple: fire offhand or try to reach Danny and a clear alley while prone. I declined the shot and crept forward. The bull turned and was instantly gone. I don't believe I've ever had better antlers in front of my rifle.

Long shots require precise shooting more than they beg powerful loads and optics. If you can't steady the reticle, shooting is simply an exercise in hope. Declining a shot, you reveal standards. Without them, the decision to fire depends only on how badly you want to kill.

Risky shots aren't all long. Once, still-hunting through thick lodgepoles, I caught a wink of russet color. In the Leupold it became an elk ear, 18 steps away. I was not gulping air; the reticle quivered, but in a tight, controlled way, like an eager shorthair anticipating the shot. Problem was, brush blocked the bullet's path to brain and spine. I could only guess where the shoulder lay. Seconds later, a breeze kissed the back of my neck. The ear vanished.

No one can specify a sure-kill distance for shots at big game, as no one can declare a safe maximum speed on a highway. Conditions matter. Hunters who boast of long shots may in fact be conscientious—a long lethal hit is no less legitimate than one taken up-close. Arguably, sniping from afar diminishes the thrill of the chase; and the cynical might say a habit of reaching beyond point-blank range indicates that you're lazy or inept. But neither long shooting nor fast driving is irresponsible of itself. Years before distant shots at game became fashionable, I rolled a deer at roughly 480 yards, judging by bullet drop. The hit—through the heart—followed two misses with my .30-06. The buck looked very small in my 4x scope, and I had to double my initial allowance for drift. The killing shot was a good one, intelligently engineered and well executed. It was also as reprehensible as the first two. These days, I fire only when 90 percent certain of a kill; that is, when under prevailing conditions I can expect to land a bullet in the vitals nine times in ten tries.

Distance is only one of several factors that influence a shot. Of course your hardware has limits. But rifle, cartridge, and optics seldom count for as much as shooting position and shot execution. Wind matters most at long range. Steep angles, quartering presentations and intervening brush can scuttle shots up close. So can other animals in the background.

"Anyone who says he wouldn't take a risky shot at a big bull on the last day is a liar!" A reader once posted me that note, after I had suggested that neither an animal's trophy value nor the likelihood of another shot qualify as conditions. If your aim is to kill, only variables that affect the probability of a lethal hit matter. Wishing hard that you'll kill doesn't justify a shot any more than wishing earns you a gold medal, a winning lottery number, or a Ph.D.

Shooting when you're not sure of the shot is like poaching in this way: both events show you can't abide discipline. Hewing to standards in shot selection is like obeying game laws. You restrict yourself so that, whatever the outcome of a hunt, you will have acquitted yourself well.

Such high ground can be costly to hold. Pass a shot at a record-class animal, and you may have passed the only one you'll ever have. No shoulder mount. No accolades from pals. No listing in the book. "Your one chance to be a celebrity, and you turn it down—why? Because there's only a 50-50 chance of killing? Good grief! At least put a bullet in the air! If the shot's off the mark, no one needs to know…."

Now, if you're with a guide or a partner, someone will know when you botch a shot. And remember, you might also confront the rule, increasingly common, that blood drawn is a tag filled. Guiding an elk hunter years ago, I spied a fine bull on a distant spine.

At the bench (here with a Tikka rifle in .308), Sam Shaw refines his zero. Next step: field practice!

Launching a bullet should be carefully considered. Riflemen who shoot cavalierly or beyond sure-kill range boost crippling loss. They also color the public's perception of sport hunting. Sadly, declining a wrong shot is not as easy as it is noble…

Practice, Practice, Practice and Then Some More

LEFT: Offhand shooting is challenging even up close. Here Wayne practices with a Weatherby .22. BELOW: Wayne levels his Remington over tundra in the NWT. Prone, with a sling, you can shoot far accurately.

MIDDLE LEFT: Practice with improvised rests. In the field, a pack may be the only steady support your rifle gets! ABOVE: Quick shots are steadier if you learn to fire kneeling. A sling helps in all positions save, arguably, offhand. LEFT: Sitting puts you above grass and low brush. Practice it with a sling to extend your effective range.

Quickly we scooted closer. Setting up my spotting scope in a copse of aspens, I was startled by the blast of my client's .300. He had wanted that elk badly and opened up—offhand—at ridiculously long range. My objection was drowned by his second shot. Grimly, I trudged to where the bull had stood and found blood. We trailed the animal until the blood petered out. Then, because I could not dismiss the wound as superficial, we spent the rest of that week passing up other bulls to find the injured elk. We failed.

If you're alone, a "first blood" rule still makes sense. You're not afield to spray the scenery with soft points and hope something falls over. In its pure sense, sport hunting is testing yourself. It is not simply carcass collection.

Sometimes others in your party may test you too. A guide who really wants rid of your company or to visit his girl or attend Saturday night festivities at Billy Bob's will want you to shoot early. Ditto an outfitter looking to bump his success rate or spare the groceries or beat a storm. Resisting that pressure can make for a tense camp. But taking risky shots to please your companions won't sit well in memory.

Once, in Africa, my professional hunter (PH) and his tracker led me on the long trail of an eland bull. We were all physically fit, but by mid-afternoon, sun, sand, and thorn had exacted a toll. Then, suddenly, Kamati snapped his finger. I heard it: the faint click of eland hooves. We crept forward. The tufted face of a huge bull appeared 60 yards away. Slowly the crossed sticks rose, and I slid my rifle into place. But a screen of acacia loomed in the sight.

"Shoot," hissed the PH. "Your bullet will get through."

I shook my head. A second later the eland vanished. We began the long hike back in uncomfortable silence. As luck would have it, I killed an eland later that week, a fine bull that dropped to one bullet. All was forgiven.

But you're foolish to count on second chances. Not long ago, on assignment for a

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television show, I turned my ankle on a rocky hillside and fell so quickly I couldn't save my rifle from a bruising—a freak event. Our party spotted an elk barely an hour later, quartering away in a small window in dense alder. Range: just shy of 300 yards. Ordinarily I'd have bellied down and fired. But there was no divining how my tumble had affected my scope. The alders wouldn't show a bullet strike and would surely prevent a follow-up. "Sorry," I mumbled to guide, cameraman, and company. The rest of that week was an exercise in public relations, as no other elk appeared. The scope, by the way, had not lost zero. But conduct matters. A lucky hit on the heels of a risky shot simply means an animal died in spite of your judgment.

Shots at crippled game needn't meet a 90-percent-certain standard. I recall a partner hitting a grizzly not quite well enough. The bear roared, spun in a tight circle, then dashed for cover. We both let fly, though neither of us would have fired at a running grizzly that was unhurt.

Another time, I took an ill-advised poke at a Cape buffalo up close. Tense moments, a dash through thorn and several Winchester solids later, the animal died. It was not a neat kill, but once you commit, your task is clear. The time for deliberation is before loosing that first bullet.

No matter how confident you are of a lethal hit, be ready to follow one shot with another. Reaction to a hit in the paunch often mimics response to a heart or lung shot. Animals escape when hunters reload slowly or don't reload at all. Fast bolt work can give you a second hit.

Game that drops instantly worries me; the bullet may have clipped a spinal process, delivering shock that floors the beast but causes no lethal damage. A bullet severing the forward spine or breaking both shoulders yields the same result. You can't know exactly where the bullet landed, so be ready! Make a fast bolt throw part of your practice routine, part of each shot afield. As a handloader, I fight my habit of opening the action slowly to pluck and pocket the empty. Such a delay could one day cost me the chance to finish an injured animal.

The best place from which to fire a second shot is usually where you fired the first. You're in shooting position, you know the range, and you may still have a clear-shot alley. If you move forward to close the distance, odds are that a second chance will come quickly, when you're least able to capitalize on it. You'll lose time getting ready to shoot and taming your pulse. Terrain or brush may prevent a shot from a low position. Finally, you risk alerting the animal to your location. A rifle's report and a bullet's strike give the game little information about you. Instinct tells it to identify a threat before committing to an escape tactic or direction. Stay still until there's reason to move! A pal once set up to shoot far at a big mule deer, then waited patiently for an hour for the bedded buck to get up and expose a shoulder. Eventually that happened. The bullet struck; the deer rolled out of sight. Wisely my amigo stayed put a few seconds. But that wasn't long enough. As he climbed through brush toward the bed, he heard the wounded buck scramble off. He never recovered it.

Once the animal is gone—down or out of sight—your best strategy is to stay still for two minutes. Watch and listen, rifle ready. This delay costs you nothing. The kill was nearly certain; why rush to a carcass? If the beast is ambulatory, silence works in your favor. You can hear movement without revealing your position. Wounded game that thinks it is hidden will likely stay where it fell or bed nearby.

FROM LEFT: This young lady made a careful shot to take a lovely Texas whitetail. Careful shooting pays at any range! ■ Wayne could have shot this Australian buffalo at 50 yards. He crawled to within 27. Much more rewarding. ■ Wayne shot this Alaskan black bear quickly with a .30-30 from 90 yards. It was, he concludes, a risky shot. ■ 300-yard shot nailed this fine Alberta buck. The hunter held a hand's width high, with a 200-yard zero.

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Long shooting is controversial partly because recovering distant game can be problematic. No matter how well you mark the spot, you can lose it after crossing a deep, brushy ravine. Missing by a few yards, you may not see that buck. Besides, not all game dies close to the impact site. If you're nearby, you can hear hooves, twigs, a cough, a stumble. Far away, game that reaches cover in a jump gives you no clue as to its mobility, speed, or direction. By the time you arrive, it may have changed course, found a hidden bed, or simply put so much distance behind it that you'll run out of daylight catching up.

Then there are dolts who don't check after a shot. They might stroll across a meadow. But lose a quarter-mile elevation and labor up the far side of an abyss and return? "Nah. Probably missed. Won't find blood anyway. Knees can't take that. Not enough time." I've found animals shot dead where recovery was probably not attempted. Once, guiding a deer hunter, I spied a buck loafing just 200 yards away, but across a steep coulee. The fellow fired. The deer ran off. I suspected a hit. The hunter insisted he'd missed. I told him we were going to check anyway, and since I had no rifle, he'd have to follow me. Grumbling, he relented. We descended, then climbed to where the deer had stood. Leaving my client to catch his wind, I tracked the deer into cover, where I found a tiny drop of blood. The buck lay dead a few yards farther on.

Now, it matters not to an animal whether a lethal bullet comes from 50 yards or 500. Nor does shot distance figure into wildlife policy. Harvest is harvest. Hunter motive is likewise immaterial to the animal and the biologist.

It seems foolish to me to measure hunting ethics in yards. I once killed an elk at just over 600 yards—twice as far as any other I've shot in 35 years of hunting these creatures. My rifle was chambered to a mild round most hunters would think more suitable for deer, even at modest ranges. But it was an accurate rifle, with a scope whose elevation dial had been calibrated to my load. More importantly, I had time to sling up, settle into prone and confirm dead-still air. Most importantly, I had practiced with this rifle on targets at extreme range. My bullet lanced both lungs. Had the target been a cantaloupe, I'd have hit it.

Still, I'm not especially proud of that kill. I took the shot not because light was fading and a close approach nigh impossible, but because it was a 90-percent shot. A 30-yard hit after a long sneak would have been more satisfying; but conditions this time narrowed my options. I could fire or decline.

Those options are yours always, regardless of other opportunity. One evening, hunting kudu, I came upon an old bull browsing in thick thorn. Wind and luck were with me as I edged close for a shot with an open-sighted .470 double. At 23 steps I fired. The animal reeled at the impact, then vanished. I could have fired my second barrel as the bull suddenly re-appeared, jetting through a gap; but I thought better of it. What if this was a second kudu and the first lay dead in the thicket? To my chagrin, the track showed only a trace of blood. In the failing light, I'd nudged the front sight too high in the notch, merely clipping the neck. Apparently 23 steps had been too far.

Another time, in Alaska, I stalked a black bear in tall coastal grass. When the wind turned abruptly, the bear loped toward cover. I rose, swung, and fired. Forest enveloped the bear. My guide was not impressed. My .30-30 he considered marginal at best; now dusk was closing after a hasty shot. We hurried forward. Under dense canopy, the blood trail—indeed everything—got dark fast. We pushed through giant fern and found the bear dying. My bullet had struck its heart. I breathed a prayer of thanks, and an apology. Success aside, 90 yards had really been too far.

Launching a bullet should be carefully considered. Riflemen who shoot cavalierly or beyond sure-kill range boost crippling loss. They also color the public's perception of sport hunting. Sadly, declining a wrong shot is not as easy as it is noble, because it means foregoing shots that would have killed. ■