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While the NFL is back at the drawing board trying to decide what is and is not a catch, and other professional sports leagues continue to make tweaks to their refereeing system and booth-review processes, it makes one wonder if hunting has had it right all along: We police ourselves and call our own shots.

While hunting is not an organized, competitive team spectator sport, hunting can draw some parallels along with some important differences. Participant rules for organized sports are akin to our hunting laws and regulations. Referees and umpires consist of game commissioners and wildlife officers. Yet, the rest of the rules in hunting are either self-defined, those established by a group to which we belong or those set forth by a respected name like Boone and Crockett Club.

To be fair, hunting is not a field or a team sport like traditional sports, or a competition with other hunters. It does not come with a list of participant rules that need enforcement administered by impartial referees or umpires to keep the play safe, fair, within the rules, and on time.

A group of friends who share a hunting lease may decide everyone must shoot a doe before taking their buck, or that bucks under 2½ years are off-limits. If you break one of these rules, you might be looking for another place to hunt next year or find yourself

digging the new outhouse. On the personal side, we have our own standards by which we live and hunt. These are not written down and handed to someone with instructions. It's more like, "Watch me and see how I do."

We referee ourselves. It's one of the special aspects of hunting. We're the ones who pack home the memories and the meat. We are the ones who reap the rewards of a good decision and a good chase. We're also the ones that live with the consequences of taking a shortcut or making a bad call. Of all the things we take into the field, the most important thing is our own attitude and approach. That's because fair chase is defined by values we believe in and are committed to upholding.

The biggest difference between traditional sports participants and hunters is what the great conservationist Aldo Leopold reminds us, "Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching—even when doing the wrong thing is legal." Leopold also made the point that, in the field, you are your own referee. There is no one else to "call the shot." At the end of the day, the measure of the hunt is a measure of oneself.

If we think about it, this is true in everything we do. In hunting, getting our game is the purpose, but not the only purpose. If this is true, filling our tag is a measure of success, but not the only one. If it were

the only measure, we would be disappointed most times and likely find something else to do.

Let's be honest. How much of the hunting experience is thinking about going hunting, practicing, honing skills and preparing? How much of it is the chess match we play with the game we pursue—the strategies, the physical and mental effort, the uncomfortable conditions, and the challenges overcome? The answer is all of it.

One of the many benefits about hunting is that it teaches and never stops teaching. It forces us to learn, prepare, acquire skills, and solve problems. In other words, it teaches life skills like decision-making, accountability, self-control, determination and self-reliance. These are all character traits we can pick up in other ways, but hunting teaches us the whole lot in one lump. These life skills are something that is always conveniently left out when hunting is criticized, or branded as just killing. Why is that?

With or without someone watching, it is human nature to do what we personally feel good about, and to not repeat doing those things we do not feel good about. It is never a good feeling to have to end an animal's suffering because of a poor choice we made in forcing a risky shot. As legendary bowhunter and

bowhunting advocate Fred Bear once said, "Be sure of your shot. Nothing is more expensive than regret."

We hunt for many reasons, including the enjoyment and the memories. A fair-chase approach ensures "no regrets." It also ensures that we never feel the need to strategically leave out parts of the story of a hunt when telling others, or block out the same when reliving the experience ourselves.

At the end of the day, hunting is better served by sticking to no referees and policing ourselves. Yes, there rightfully should be a standard like fair chase that sets the tone, and thankfully, responsible hunters follow this tenet. Past this, if we pile on more rules, we risk being able to maintain any credible claim that hunting is done by principled men and women who hold themselves accountable to a code of ethics that extends beyond the law. There are not too many things people do that can make this claim. ■

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