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Photos Courtesy of Author

The Follow-Up Shot

because basketball stars making millions of dollars still miss free throws

Why is there time to do it over, when there isn't time to do it right the first time? Our first efforts often fail. Even after we know how to get it right, we get it wrong. And we don't always have a chance to do it over.

These were my thoughts as I peered through the aperture sight. The bead covered nearly all I could see of the elk—a patch of rib above the elbow. It was a long poke, as iron sights go. I squeezed the last ounce. The bull vanished in recoil as the “whup!” bounced back. I climbed, found hoof-gashes, then red spray in the snow. He lay dead, perfectly shot.

I'd like to say all my bullets flew true. If that were so, however, I'd not bother to load magazines.

Killing with the first shot isn't always imperative, though you can make it so. Hunting with a muzzleloader, you assume you have just one try. A single-shot cartridge rifle imposes the same constraint, if not an equal handicap. Or you can shackle yourself with rules, per Wyoming's One-Shot Antelope Hunt—a celebrity contest adapted from routine killing.

A follow-up to a miss is an indulgence every shotgunner covets when chukars pitch hard into a



Rain, brush make first shots difficult, follow-ups more so. After a hit, shoot moving game again, fast!



Approach ready to fire again, from behind the animal, rifle up front. Save congratulations for later.

canyon's maw, or when in grouse cover, alders eat the first ounce of 8's. Riflemen enjoy second chances less often, the advantage going to those who can cycle a bolt fast from the shoulder. Bullets that hit game without killing it put you in a different place. The option to fire again becomes a requisite. That stricken animal is *yours*. You damaged it. You can't fix it. The best you can do now is kill it, right away.

Late one afternoon in thickly falling snow I still-hunted a pair of mule deer near timberline. My shot staggered the buck; the blizzard erased him. Then, suddenly, he reappeared, laboring from a hit that struck too far back. I fired again, called a better strike and hurried on the track. Snow as heavy as any I'd ever seen filled the prints. I swept a rock; it winked back, naked and glistening red. As darkness curtained the trees that had swallowed the buck, I found a trail down. The next morning I climbed back up, to flounder helplessly in powder deep enough to hide a picnic bench. The deer lay forever lost.

An animal hard hit but with vitals intact can "carry lead." Perhaps, as some hunters argue, "it's adrenaline." Recovering and determined to escape, your quarry can push beyond ordinary limits of speed and endurance. Dangerous game targeting hunters has brooked hailstorms of bullets. The powers of terror and murderous intent can propel animals with shredded vitals. In contrast, a lethal first shot, landing as a surprise, brings no fear or rage. There's little urgency when the impact remains a mystery.

If you need a second bullet, often you'll need a third bullet. Your first chance is almost always your best because it offers the most options: fire or decline. If the animal is undisturbed, you can approach or get a better angle, but after you fire alternatives evaporate.

Once with a single-shot 7x57, I fired at a deer quartering away. Alas, the buck was farther than I thought and took the bullet low. I pressed to follow across alpine slides that showed no track and occasional blood. A tall north face brought me up short. A rock rolled and the buck broke for the top; my little Ruger fired as he disappeared behind a chimney, then silence. Then he burst from the shadows, somersaulting down the steep talus—heart-shot. Most gratifying, but I had been foolish to fire my first round. The second was less my redemption than the buck's due. Part of becoming an able marksman is knowing which shots you can make and which you can't, then declining the latter.

Betting all on the first bullet seems to me the hunt's proper finish. With a life at stake, "I'll try to hit him" doesn't make sense. It demeans the creature and cheapens the event. Killing with one hard-earned shot caps your effort and confirms it as a hunt. Killing with a second hit, however, can bring back what was squandered or was lost to conditions beyond your control. True aim can't trump a wind gust, an unseen branch, or a pause in the animal's step as the trigger breaks.

Some time ago I crept toward an elk moving fast toward a timbered canyon. Still far off, I stabbed a rib with

the crosswire and triggered the 7mm. As the bull struggled to stay afoot, I dropped the lever and slid a second round home. Another hit floated back. The breech closed again but the elk had collapsed. I waited, sling taut; movement! The shoulder came clear; the rifle jumped. All three bullets had been lethal, but had I relied on the first, I might have lost that bull in the depths of the canyon.

Follow-ups often fail because hunters don't think about them early. Even when you're certain a second shot won't be needed—or even possible—you're smart to prepare for it.

With a caplock rifle, I once tracked a big mule deer into cover that throttled my step and popped and cracked as I pushed through. About to yield, I spied the buck in an opening 90 yards on. I thumbed the hammer and pressed the trigger: "clack!" With no time to reload, I cocked again and fought the urge to

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HOW TO CYCLE A BOLT

Running a bolt is as easy as pulling car keys from your pocket. Fast, faultless cycling when it counts, however, is more like finding the right key with frozen fingers in driving sleet. Urgency makes us fumble. A little practice helps; so too a big, smooth bolt knob. Having botched bolt manipulation in every way, I'm well schooled in what not to do. But some methods can make you very fast. I've run seven rounds through my bolt-action Lee-Enfield as quickly as a pal emptied his Winchester 94 lever-action.

Lifting the bolt handle (knob), use the first joint and mid-section of your middle finger. Bring the bolt back with that middle finger and the first joint of your index finger. Retract smoothly and fully, with enough force to kick the empty. Then hook the base of your thumb over the handle. Shove it forward and down in an arc motion, and that's all. Don't pinch the knob between finger and thumb. You'll lose camming force and your grip will fail in rain and snow.

Practice cycling with dummy rounds, from hunting positions. Always run that bolt as if you must make another shot quickly and accurately! To coddle empties at the range, spread a blanket and spill 'em!

Vigorous bolt manipulation also points up feeding glitches you'll want to correct.

ON HARDWARE

Most lethal hits result from good marksmanship. But rifle, loads, and scope affect how well you shoot—and how fast and effectively you can follow up when first shots fail. Heavy rifles that settle fast in supported positions handicap you when animals dash away up close. A rifle of eight to nine pounds, trailside, seems to me about right. Loads that deliver more power than you need still cripple if you don't hit vitals, and their stiff recoil slows you for second shots. Modern bullets that expand aggressively and drive deep without losing significant weight add lethal effect to ordinary cartridges. In my view, a .308-class round works fine for any North American game, excepting perhaps big bears.

Ironically, optical sights seem to give hunters a lot of trouble for both first and second shots. The trend to higher magnification and complex reticles serves shooters toppling steel at distance. But for big game you're better off with a scope of modest weight and power, and a crosswire or plex reticle. The last animals I killed, from 14 to nearly 300 yards, fell to 6mm and 7mm rifles with variable scopes at 4x. They included tough, elk-size game. A low-mounted sight with a broad field helps you point the rifle naturally and speeds your aim.

hurry the shot—a natural tendency with any misfire. By great luck the primer ignited. Through white smoke I saw the buck kick, lunge, and then tumble in a flurry of sun-shot snow.

Another time with my arrow deep in the ribs of an elk, I remained still. Readyng a second shaft made less sense than staying invisible. With no apparent threat, the mortally stricken bull stood before moving off. As he quartered away, I loosed another shaft. It slipped inside the near shoulder and exited the chest. Not alone fatal, it spilled blood that helped me find the elk after the first wound stopped leaking.

On the heels of a shot, you'll watch the animal's reaction. Confident of a lethal hit, you may wish to delay movement to avoid detection. If the bullet landed well, there's no need to move. If you're unsure of the hit, it's best to cycle the action fast. As this is written, the last elk I shot took the bullet through an alley in thick brush at 14 steps. But my target vanished entirely during recoil, so I ran the bolt right away. Then I stood, watching several minutes for movement. There was none; the bull had died.

Absorbing the shock from a high-velocity bullet, fatally lung-shot game often keeps its feet. A heart shot typically spurs action—a

death-sprint. When an animal drops instantly, you're smart to ready another round. Instant collapse results when the bullet severs the skull or spine or shatters bone needed for support. When not fatal, these shots anchor the animal for a follow-up hit. More problematic and quite common, is impact that breaks a leg or splinters a spinal process above the spine proper. Such damage and attendant shock can floor an animal as if it had been beamed with a sledge. But seconds, even minutes later, as the shock wears off or when you approach, the creature may find its feet. If it does, you must fire fast or cinch up for a long walk.

Once after an elk wilted to my first bullet, I cycled the action and stayed prone despite my pal's assurance that the animal was dead. I waited three minutes, reticle on the grass and blow-down that obscured my target. After a long climb down to the bull, I found him almost able to rise despite shattered shoulders. I put a finishing bullet from the point of his brisket up between his scapulae. Such a shot, incidentally, is a good clincher. You can stay clear of the animal and out of its ready view, in no danger but also posing no visible threat. A bullet so angled kills quickly and ruins little meat.

Aimed shots are the only



Big, smooth bolt knobs help you cycle fast. Use the bases of fingers and thumb. Cam on the return.



Modest magnification speeds recoil recovery and follow-ups. Wayne keeps his scopes at 3x or 4x.

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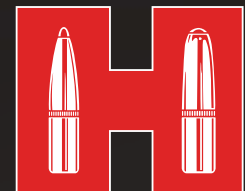
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useful shots—first, second, or the last in your magazine. Firing kills only when bullets land well. Recently in Africa, a friend hit a blue wildebeest a bit too far forward with a .270. The resilient bull galloped off with the herd, then split to bed in the shade on a hill where he could watch his back-trail and the behavior of nearby springbok. They broke just as we got within rifle range. He left, and we followed fast. He paused on the edge of a thicket nearly 300 yards off. Tempted to fire when the Professional Hunter handed me his sticks, I could hold no tighter than four minutes of angle, twelve inches of uncertainty. “Too much,” I shook my head. Delay was a risk, but I insisted on a steadier position, slung up against a tree. The “thwuck!” of my softpoint signaled a hit that broke the bull’s shoulder.

On the other hand, a bungled first shot may justify taking pokes you’d decline at uninjured game, especially if the wounded animal is moving, wheels intact, toward cover. A cripple is doomed whether you fire again or not. Don’t think about meat damage; your first priority is to anchor the beast. I’ve shot several animals quartering

away, pulverizing hams with bullets that proved unnecessary after autopsies showed lethal first hits. Better to be sure than to stall for a cleaner shot and lose all opportunity!

If the animal stops and I can slip undetected to an opening for a better angle, I do so, rifle ready. An elk I hit with a .30-06 Springfield Ackley Improved shrugged off the strike, then stopped in a thicket. Rather than fire at the animal in the shadows, I waited some minutes until it took a step. My next bullet, threaded carefully between branches, shattered both shoulders, dropping the bull. Another time, a shot through thin willows into a moose miscued by a couple of inches. The animal splashed out into a pond, weakened but mobile. I paused. The bull gathered himself and lunged for the bush. I fired twice quickly; both .35 Whelen bullets found vitals. He crashed out of sight and collapsed—in a more convenient place than pond-bottom!

On yet another occasion, after a long day hunting buffalo in Namibia’s Caprivi Strip, my PH and I came upon a small group of bulls. Bless his heart, he let

me scurry ahead and sling up, prone on a hill to shoot the biggest bull. My 300-grain .375 A-Frame blasted the near shoulder and drove through the lungs. But Cape buffalo are tough. The bull struggled to keep pace with his companions. Their path, a huge arc, brought them galloping past at 50 yards. I had held my follow-up; now I loosed it, sending a solid through both shoulders. The great animal nosed into the grass.

The wounding of dangerous game prefaces many memorable tales. In text, animals that can hurt hunters become demons—not only physically, as meat-grinders, but savage in their determination to get even. You couldn’t blame them for wanting revenge if that were true. Mostly though, animals just want to get away.

Decades ago I knew a fellow who’d guided many hunters to brown bears. He carried a Smith & Wesson Model 29, which he said was little better protection than a slingshot. “Brownies pay no mind to revolver bullets.” One day he crawled into cover after a bear he thought hard hit by his client. The beast was quite mobile, however, and burst

from the alders a few feet away. My pal emptied the .44 into that bear as it knocked him down and ran him over, to expire in the bush beyond. He just wanted out.

When you’re hunting game that has the means to fight back, insurance shots make at least as much sense as the hyperbole recommending them.

In Alaska, a companion and I once sneaked crosswind to within 60 steps of a grizzly. My amigo’s .30 magnum spun the bear, which roared frightfully and tore up the tundra in its wrath. Then it sprinted for a thicket. I fired first, by a blink, and heard the bullet strike. The bear tumbled. The hit that crippled the animal, and the prospect of trailing in alders thick enough to curdle smoke, justified the running shots.

Whatever the game, there’s no shame in a second shot. A fast follow-up to an animal still mobile is as much an imperative as careful placement of the first bullet. A finisher to an animal down and dying, from a distance that spares it further terror, takes that life more humanely than would nature. All shots, it seems to me, are best delivered to that end. ■



This bull vanished at the shot from 14 yards. Wayne cycled, stood ready for a follow-up. Unneeded.

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