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Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

BUILD YOUR HOUSE

Experienced shooters tend to think we know everything. For sure, we should know what works for us. However, almost everyone develops their own techniques and favorite positions. Hunting and shooting are pretty much solitary sports; even in competition shooting, we're often much too focused on what we're doing to pay attention to anyone else's nuances.

One answer for rapid improvement is always to get training! In the last 10 years, I've been to several "shooting schools" with good coaches, and I always pick up some useful tricks. One of the better ones is a little catch-phrase I got from Doug Pritchard at a SAAM (Sportsman's All-Weather, All-Terrain Marksmanship) course at Tim Fallon's FTW Ranch in Texas. When teaching deliberate shooting from "stable" positions using a rest (whether natural or man-made) he exhorts his students to "Build your house."

Doesn't have to be a large or fancy house, but what this means is use what you have to get as steady as possible—in the time available. In any field-shooting situation, the clock is ticking. Usually, you have no idea how much time you really have to prepare for a shot. You sense the animal is nervous and fixing to run, so you rush the setup. Maybe you get the shot off, but maybe you don't—and he runs a few

Rainy day in Southeast Alaska and a nice black bear, taken at about 300 yards with a .375 H&H. The shot angle was weird; Boddington and his companions piled up all their packs to get the height right.



A guide's or buddy's extra pack is prime material for house building. Here, the rifle is over one pack; a second pack is used to stabilize the shooting elbow.

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yards and stops again. Or, the animal is bedded, and you think you have all day to set up with an agonizing wait before he gets up. Then the wind changes, or another animal dashes in, and things go to hell in a heartbeat.

A fast shot at close range is usually taken from the best impromptu position you can manage: offhand, from sticks, whatever works. For a deliberate shot at longer distance, you need as much stability as you can get, and you have an unknown amount of time to set up. This is when you "build your house." I'm not suggesting you should dither. Misses happen—and for innumerable excuses (some valid, some stupid, all irrevocable). However, it seems to me that two of the bigger reasons for messing up opportunities are rushing the shot and being too slow, while the opportunity passes.

There isn't always a happy medium, but the idea is to think fast. Figure out what you need to get steady enough for the distance (and size of target) and what you

have (and what else you might need) to set up a good position. Regardless of how much time you think you have (or don't have), when you start to set up for a shot, "Build your house" is a good little litany to run through your brain.

The proper height, relative to the animal's position, is critical. On a rainy day in Southeast Alaska, we'd been watching a black bear for hours steadily working his way around a huge basin. Invisible for an hour, then he'd pop up again 1,000 yards farther along. Finally, he was in a spot where we just might make a run on him. Tough stalk, but we caught him in a V-shaped valley, ground sloping down fast on our side. Distance maybe 300 yards, far for a bear, and not close for the .375 I was carrying. Packs are wonderful building material! It was a backpack hunt, three of us, all carrying packs...so we piled up all the packs we had. Awesome, steady, backline hold, bear down.

Despite the legend, I've had to take very few "long" shots at sheep and goats.



Often, you can get closer, but I've passed on a lot of long pokes—unreadable wind, unable to get steady enough, or just too much risk; better try again tomorrow! But there have been times. In the Bonnet Plume Range, my biggest Dall's ram was feeding at the bottom of a steep valley, about

MIDDLE: At the SAAM course, Doug Pritchard works with Caroline Boddington, teaching her to use a pack to stabilize the shooting elbow. **BOTTOM:** Boddington shot his Wyoming bighorn from this position...on the 11th day of a 10-day hunt. Here, Nature smiled: Perfect height for the angle, rifle over pack, shooting elbow firmly grounded with no other support needed.



TOP: Boddington's best Dall's ram, taken in Yukon with a 500-yard shot. The angle was steeply downhill; building a steady rest while depressing the muzzle enough took all the packs present plus a rolled-up sleeping bag! **MIDDLE:** A Texas-style box blind offers a wonderfully stable shooting platform. Left-handed Boddington always tries to shoot from the left side, so he can rest his shooting elbow on a side window. **BOTTOM:** Craig and Donna Boddington with Donna's 2021 desert bighorn. Taken on the last day, the pressure on this shot was enormous; Donna built her house carefully!

to go up into some nasty stuff I had no intention of climbing. A bit over 500 yards, but the wind was dead calm. Plenty of time to figure the solution—maybe. I was up on a ledge, shooting steeply down, with trouble depressing the muzzle enough and maintaining stability. Fortunately, it was another backpack hunt, lots of building material for a tall house!

We'd seen the rams drop over our ridge. Not anticipating they'd already reached the valley floor, we'd dropped our loads a few yards behind. My pack frame, not enough. Two pack frames, not enough. My guide retrieved a thick sleeping bag roll...*perfect!* With a wonderful house built, I made one of the longest shots I've needed to make on mountain game.

Those among us who hunt with kids, partners, or buddies that happen to be of different stature need to pay attention here: A perfect house for a tall person is altogether different from a perfect house for a short person. The worst altercation I've ever seen on a mountain was between Donna and a Spanish outfitter...who was both stubborn and more than a foot taller. Partly my fault, I should have stepped in sooner, but it was like watching a vehicle without brakes going downhill. He put a pack on some rocks to shoot a chamois across the valley, not so far, but not so close—and not so easy. It was obvious the height of the rest was impossibly wrong for a person Donna's height. It would have been easy to fix, but this guy wasn't getting it, refusing to recognize the problem, exhorting her to "shoot, shoot, shoot."

The result was inevitable: Frustrated and getting nowhere, she eventually threw a shot somewhere at the next mountain, mostly to get the guy to shut up. Then

he turned on me, not pretty! It is always the shooter's responsibility to get the position as steady as possible and take the shot...or not. However, if you find yourself in the role of guide, partner, or mentor, try to be part of the solution, don't add to the problem. Pay attention to height and angle: Build the house or lower the roof, as required!

Although not so critical as a steady rest of the proper height for shot angle, a key factor to maximum steadiness is to stabilize the shooting elbow (left for southpaws; right for the majority). Practice this on the range, and you'll be amazed at how much it helps to firmly rest the shooting elbow at a comfortable angle. At SAAM, part of the "goody bag" includes a little beanbag that weighs almost nothing. Do I carry one? Not often, but I'm conscious of the lesson! Part of "building your house" includes stabilizing that elbow!

In the tree stands (or blinds) that many of us shoot our deer from, think about using a stick or shortened hiking pole crosswise under your shooting elbow or maybe the sill of a side window. From field positions, how about a rolled-up jacket or a daypack under that elbow?

In January 2021, we were on Carmen Island in the Sea of Cortez trying to get Donna a desert bighorn, kind of a big deal. We saw a lot of rams and had opportunities, but we got down to the last day (now a very big deal!) with an old ram on the right side of a steep canyon. Donna has also been to SAAM, so as we crept to the top of a rocky ridge, expecting a ram on the far side, I whispered: "Build your house."

With a plump backpack under the rifle, smaller pack under her shooting elbow, her house was built. The last day is as good as the first! ■