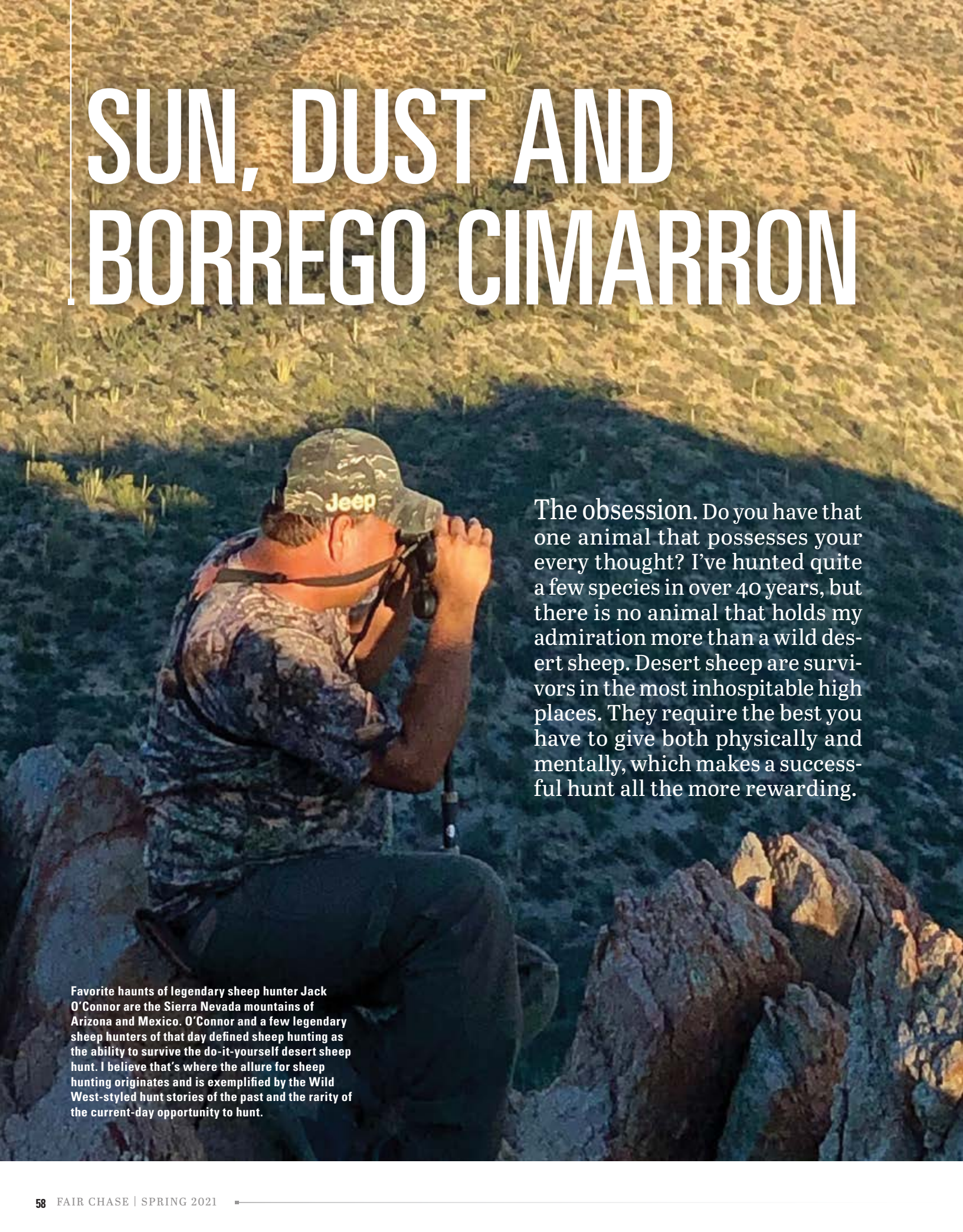


# SUN, DUST AND BORREGO CIMARRON

A man in camouflage gear and a 'Jeep' cap is sitting on a rocky mountain ridge, looking through binoculars. The background shows a vast, hazy landscape under a bright sky.

The obsession. Do you have that one animal that possesses your every thought? I've hunted quite a few species in over 40 years, but there is no animal that holds my admiration more than a wild desert sheep. Desert sheep are survivors in the most inhospitable high places. They require the best you have to give both physically and mentally, which makes a successful hunt all the more rewarding.

Favorite haunts of legendary sheep hunter Jack O'Connor are the Sierra Nevada mountains of Arizona and Mexico. O'Connor and a few legendary sheep hunters of that day defined sheep hunting as the ability to survive the do-it-yourself desert sheep hunt. I believe that's where the allure for sheep hunting originates and is exemplified by the Wild West-styled hunt stories of the past and the rarity of the current-day opportunity to hunt.

This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

## BEYOND THE SCORE

Angelo Baio

Photo Courtesy of Author

It's ironic, though, that such a tough survivor is having such a difficult time. The circumstances surrounding the population struggles of desert bighorns predate my existence, and in many cases are still the same. In spite of the conservation success, desert sheep populations are still on the edge; the opportunity for hunts are rare but improving every year. Their population recovery is so painstakingly slow that the majority of us will never get that chance. Yet, in spite of the odds we reflexively enter our lottery ticket every year for that chance. We're sheep hunters. Perseverance and hope is what drives us.

I decided to approach this from another angle. I piled my environmental conservation experience on a plane to Arizona and volunteered as a "citizen conservationist" in the Arizona Game and Fish Commission's Santa Catalina desert bighorn capture-and-release program. I figured I probably would never get the chance to hunt them, and this would be the next best thing.

I did put my hands on a live desert bighorn, and that in-and-of-itself was a once-in-a-multiple-lifetimes experience. Yet, that wasn't enough.

### HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

Raymond Lee, former president and CEO of the Wild Sheep Foundation, stated in his 2008 paper, "Best Practices in Sustainable Hunting," that hunting as a tool for wildlife conservation—the case for sheep hunting in Mexico that I believe best sums up the current understanding not only in Mexico but the United States.

Addressing the history of sheep hunting in Mexico, Lee writes, "Bighorn sheep have existed in Mexico for more than 10,000 years. While pre-settlement numbers were quite large, the population did not fare well in the face of subsistence hunting and diseases contracted from domestic livestock. Bighorn sheep numbers continued to decrease to the point that the hunting of bighorn sheep in the state of Baja California Sur was closed in 1917."

Jack O'Connor, when hunting the deserts of Arizona and Mexico, wrote of his observations about how difficult the terrain was for wild sheep to survive. Ranching practices stress the landscape while poaching and domestic animal-transmitted disease exacerbated survival challenges. In fact, it's difficult to even obtain historical population numbers to get a baseline for measurement of conservation efforts. However, the Wild Sheep Foundation resident biologist Clay Brewer sees a light in this tunnel when he states, "Through the cooperative efforts of landowners, conservation organizations such as the Wild Sheep Foundation and the Mexican government, desert bighorn sheep numbers and distribution continue to expand in Mexico."

### ON THE GROUND

Favorite haunts of legendary sheep hunter Jack O'Connor are the Sierra Nevada mountains of Arizona and Mexico. O'Connor and a few legendary sheep hunters of that day

defined sheep hunting as the ability to survive the do-it-yourself desert sheep hunt. I believe that's where the allure for sheep hunting originates and is exemplified by the Wild West-styled hunt stories of the past and the rarity of the current-day opportunity to hunt.

O'Connor and crew often slept in tents, in the back of a car, or simply on the desert floor next to a fire. One thing was clear from his works, money wasn't what dictated the success of the hunt; skill and sheer grit was the theme of the day. How I would have loved sharing bourbon and a story with those guys and enjoying a cigar next to a campfire under the stars of a crystal-clear desert night.

Jack has written that when hunting desert sheep, he preferred the Sierras around the western coastal town of Puerto Libertad, Sonora. In a colossal stroke of luck, I was graced with an opportunity for a cancellation hunt with David Artee, an outfitter that hunted those same areas as



February was the perfect time to hunt; the daytime temps were in the low to high 70s with overcast skies keeping the heat down. Occasional sprinkles of rain combined with cool temperatures made for comfortable hiking conditions.

O'Connor. David's experience comes from his father (David, Sr.), an avid hunter that imparted desert hunting skills to his son. David also has access to a 250,000-acre concession of the Aguirre Mountains and a free-range desert bighorn tag available. My once-in-a-lifetime hunt was afoot, and I was certainly going to take advantage.

### **SOUTH OF THE BORDER**

My outfitter chose to pick me up in the airport at Tucson, Arizona, and drive into Mexico. This is mostly a cost saving option as the flight leg to Hermosillo is quite expensive. There is an internal fight for law and order there and exhibited by the masked military at its "welcome center." The feeling you get crossing over is edgy but strangely comforting when escorted by your native guide.

Just past the struggling border town, a four-hour drive lay ahead along the west coast of Sonora to our remote camp. As each mile passed, I was floored by the vast stretches of open desert plains punctuated with saguaro cactus and flowering brush. As the sunset reflected color off the occasional high

ground, the cool moisture-laden fog approaching from the Gulf of California revealed orange and yellow flowing scrublands lit up by the soft, yellow light of sunset. Undeveloped Mexico is where the real desert beauty is found and lessened the long drive.

### **HOME IS WHERE YOU LAY YOUR HAT**

There seems to be only one paved road that runs past the town of Puerto Libertad. The entire interior of the town was built on dirt roads. Our remote hacienda camp was 10 minutes north of town on the desert flats—a mile as the crow flies off the paved road. This entire range, over 250,000 acres of desert flats and the Sierra Aguirres we would hunt is David's private concession.

The Mexican shanty accommodations were rough but clean and comfortable. Clients are afforded the use of a bedroom; a bathroom, a galley and a palm frond-covered sitting area where the brick barbecue is used for most evening meals. Water is gravity fed for the sink and a toilet. Two very pleasant local women cook and keep the place clean. They kept us well-fed with traditional

Mexican food simply for the asking. It's remote, rustic and realistic; exactly how I hoped it would be.

### **THE CREW**

The people you chose to live this dream with will live in your memory for life. David has a good relationship with his well-experienced local guides. For a visiting hunter, this is extremely important in order to shorten the learning curve on the area and the animal.

The main hunt director and partial concession landowner is Freddy Medina, a 30-year veteran sheep and mule deer hunter, commercial fisherman and oyster diver who lives in the neighboring town of Puerto Libertad. Freddy suffered a loss of an eye some 20 years ago in a serious rollover car accident that nearly took his life, but this tough-as-nails 44-year-old proved to be sharp, energetic and committed to helping me get my sheep.

The satellite crew changed and was a conglomeration of past seasons' help, but each had a great eye for sheep. The core group was Freddy, David and Freddy's son that we affectionately

named Pinky for this trip. Siri, a local native Indian is Freddy's right-hand-man but prefers to have his name remain anonymous. Other than David, no one in camp spoke English, but through hand gestures and broken "Spanglish" we got our points across just fine. Collectively the group was accommodating and pleasant to be around which fares well when a hunt may not be going as well.

### **STRIKE ONE**

I found February to be the perfect time to hunt; the daytime temps were in the low to high 70s with overcast skies keeping the heat down. Occasional sprinkles of rain combined with cool temperatures made for comfortable hiking conditions.

The first morning started with a drive on a traditional "high-rack" truck through the valleys between known sheep haunts. As we drove, we stopped often to glass, and about midmorning Freddy found sheep tracks crossing the dirt road. Typically, sheep will cross between mountains at night, and fresh sign in the road gives you a starting point to glass that particular mountain range.



A pleasant outdoor setting where traditional Mexican food was prepared.

As he suspected, Freddy caught sight of a group of sheep about 1,400 yards off and feeding below skyline. Believing a good ram was in the group, we followed the tracks up the drainage, shaving off 600 yards for a better look.

As Freddy moved ahead in 8-foot-high brush and before topping a hill crest, he caught a glimpse of the group feeding about 400 yards off. We tightened our group behind Freddy to reduce the silhouette and moved another 10 yards. Mid-stride Freddy pulled up, and bam, we were caught flatfooted by a beautiful, heavy horned ram standing broadside atop a rock outcropping and staring us down. David quickly ranged him at 398 yards while Freddy is excitedly blurted out in Spanish and motioned that I take an off-hand shot standing from his monopod shooting stick. I knew there was no way I could confidently make the shot, so I insisted we move up for a better position.

Honestly, the three of us were shocked at the sight of the ram that just stood there motionless while we frantically shuffled forward for a better shot position. We went as far as we could, and I

insisted on a prone position, but there was no chance with the tall ground cover. We managed to get within 338 yards, but I still would not take that off-hand. The best I could do was to prop the gun in a Torote tree branch and hope for the best. I quickly forced my way into the branches of the tree thinking my window of opportunity was closing and placed the fore end of the rifle on the thickest branch I could find. The branch was too high, so I couldn't take a knee.

The tree limbs are like rubber, and my bent-over position made the cross hairs dance all over the animal. I needed to be prone for a shot at that distance, and I wasn't going to ruin this experience with a bad or missed shot. We scurried around for a prone shot but I was screened by brush. I knew this wasn't going to work, and even though Freddy insisted I take the shot, I passed. The ram slowly turned and hurriedly walked off.

Freddy thought it would be worth trying to catch him on the backside of the hill, so off we went, but after an hour of hiking, we never saw him again. As we

walked back to the truck, the gravity of what just happened only a couple of hours into the first hunt hit me like a brick. I spun every detail over again in my mind and found it hard to accept that I had my dream ram within my sights but couldn't close the deal. In retrospect, I believe I did the right thing. I wasn't confident of the outcome, and I didn't want to allow my desire to get this done to cloud my judgment. I have to believe I made the right choice. I named that ram "Nicky" for getting away in the nick of time.

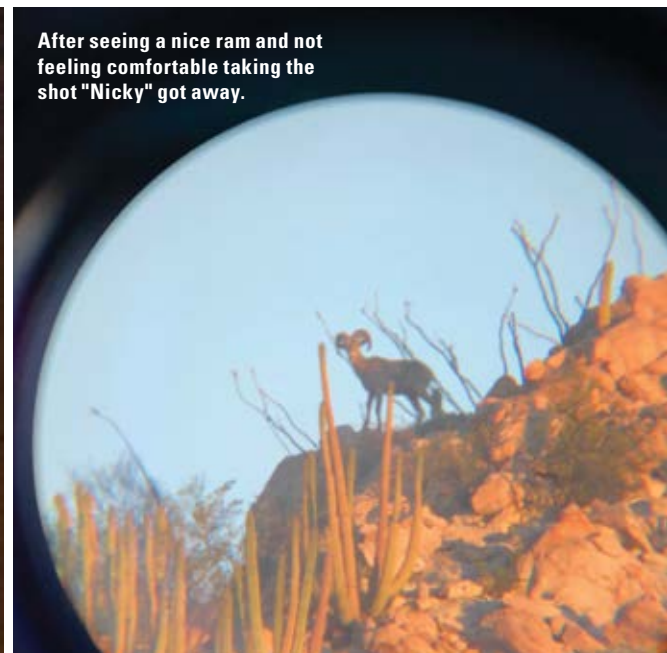
### STRIKE TWO

The following morning, we headed to the backside of the mountain from the previous day. No sooner did we put glass to mountain we found a group of two young rams at about 800 yards. Having no additional luck, we returned to camp to get out of the sun and let the rams bed.

Returning that afternoon to where we left off, Freddy spotted what he believed was Nicky's group and possibly a mature ram at about 1,500 yards at the crest of the mountain. Without delay we scrambled up the mountain, side-hilling on a

30-degree angle of marble-sized granite making footing and forward motion almost impossible. Pausing to glass, we noticed a nice mature ram at 490 yards. Again, there was no viable shooting position, so we moved forward to 350 yards, where they were feeding without noticing us. I elected to move closer, so we made our way to a side hill about 250 yards from the group and stopped on some boulders to use as a gun rest and cover.

I was so overheated from the ascent that when I got on the scope, the steam from my forehead fogged it up. While trying to clean the scope, I could see with my naked eye sheep moving back and forth among some bushes at the mountain's crest. I settled back on the scope and found the ram behind bushes to their left. Trying to settle down, I confirmed we were in sync and focusing on the right animal. I prepared David for my shot, declaring that when the ram clears the brush, there was a 20-foot-wide open window. I flipped the safety and waited to fire when he stopped. I could feel it down in my bones; this was my 50-year moment.



After seeing a nice ram and not feeling comfortable taking the shot "Nicky" got away.

The ram cleared the brush and quick-walked the 20 feet to the top and out of sight. I sat up in disgust—I couldn't believe what had just happened. While we stood there with our mouths open in disbelief, Freddy didn't skip a beat, and we were after him to catch him on the backside.

We covered quite a bit of that mountaintop, climbing for at least another hour. When we reached the summit, Freddy peered over the top and not 20 yards in front of us was the group of ewes and lambs feeding right toward us. I could literally hear them chewing and the slight murmur of soft bleats from the lambs. We all thought that just over the rise would be the ram, so I moved backward to put my silhouette below the rock and shuffled on my hands and knees to my right to look over. As I did that, I came 15 feet and face-to-face with a ewe staring right at me. She caught my movement and led the group in a trot over the crest.

I quickly stood up thinking I could catch sight of the ram running downhill—but nothing. He was nowhere in sight.

### CONDITIONING DAY

Day three started with a one-mile hike into a box canyon looking to catch feeding rams working their way uphill. As

we reached the end, we surprised a group of sheep we believed our ram was hanging with but there was no sight of him. Siri, scouting the backside of the canyon, had found two rams banging heads, so we headed for the summit hoping to peer over and catch them in the act.

It was a tough climb taking more than an hour, and as we summited, Siri radioed that they were moving off. Freddy caught sight of the two rams walking the ridge hundreds of yards off. Thinking we could gain ground faster on the ridgetop, we took off, hoping to cut the distance. Two hours later we lost them; giving into the heat and the exhaustion, we headed back to the truck on the opposite side of the mountain. The day ended with another missed opportunity that weighed heavy on the crew.

### THREE'S THE CHARM

On day four, skies were overcast, and the forecast that threatened heavy rains the following day created an urgency to close the deal. Right off we found a few ewes and lambs, but no rams. I could see the concern on Freddy and David's faces as we returned to camp for the afternoon.

At camp, Freddy and David worked on a new plan, and by the hand motions I

interpreted that Freddy believed the rams moved to hidden areas on the backside of the ranch. In the afternoon, we would drive to more remote locations, hike in and glass.

At this point, it was difficult to stay positive, but I consciously forced myself not to lose sight of the beautiful surroundings and the experience. As we drove to the jump-off spot, I couldn't miss seeing the desert was alive with colorful yellow, orange and purple-flowering brush drinking in the moisture. I didn't dare distract anyone to stop and take a photo, and in hindsight, I regret it.

At the beginning of an arroyo, we set off for a long hike to the north section of the ranch. This area had little disturbance, and we gambled that the big rams were hidden here. The hike in was about two miles through peaks reaching 3,000 feet. For 45 minutes, we glassed and moved, two scouts, myself, David and Freddy. In spite of the firepower behind the glass, I could see the end of the arroyo ahead and the end of the day with no rams in sight.

With light slowly waning I slowed down the last few yards because I just didn't want the day to end on a bad note. David and I put our glass down with a disappointed side-glance, and at that same

moment, Freddy whirls around with a fist pump and blurts out, "Machos!" He's literally jumping up and waving his arm to move up quickly. In a fraction of a second the mood switched to excitement with laser focus on an area Freddy was pointing to a spot a more than a thousand yards away. David and I threw up the binoculars, and miraculously, four heavy, dark-coated rams materialize midway up the mountain and almost a mile off.

We hustled to climb all the way up, but it took every bit of 40 minutes as the rams fed and moved to our left. At 30 degrees, the incline was steep and drained every ounce of energy—some from the mountain and the rest from the excitement. Freddy and David were frantically speaking Spanish, forgetting I have no idea what they were saying, and in my struggle up the mountain, I lost sight of the rams that moved higher and to the left by hundreds of yards. David stopped and ranged them at 450 yards, and tells me to take a position for a shot.

It took at least three minutes for me to find them again, while Freddy and David blurted instructions in Spanish that I had no idea what they were saying. I took a seated position against a torote



Four heavy, dark-coated rams materialized midway up the mountain and almost a mile off.



Freddy with Angelo's sheep back at camp.



David and his crew provided me with the most rewarding free-range, true-to-form Mexican desert sheep hunt just as I imagined it to be. I couldn't help feeling both ecstatic and sad that my 50-year quest was over.

tree for a rest. I found the ram behind some brush at 450 yards. He moved and exposed his body broadside; I breath, and squeeze off a shot.

I overcompensated for the angle and the shot went high, burying itself in the soft dirt while the ram hardly knew what happened. At recoil I lost sight of the ram that lazily moved again while I settle down and try for a better rest. This time I used the

monopod as an additional support to the tree branch, and I was rock solid. I put eye to scope, but I couldn't find the rams. I frantically searched the same area but they moved left more than a hundred yards, and Spanish is not even my second language.

David stated the range at 438, but again, we misunderstood each other's directions, and I was having a problem finding the rams. Freddy

was forcefully uttering to shoot and I panicked. But I put down the rifle and grabbed the binoculars from David to find them again. The excitement instantly changed to quiet when I said, "I found 'em." I dove down to the same position, recalculated the angle, take three deep breathes and squeezed off the shot.

Recoil pushed me back from the scope and I lost sight of the ram, but I could hear the "whomp" of a solid hit. Freddy saw the hit and yelled out in congratulations but David is unsure because the ram wasn't moving. David orders, "Take another shot." As I prepped, David started yelling, "He's down, he's down!" as the ram tumbled downhill, head first, for 30 yards and lodged himself on a steep boulder field.

It took 30 minutes to climb to recover the ram, and when I reached him, I was amazed at his deep, rich, chocolate-colored hide and horn. He was an absolute beautiful

animal, and I almost couldn't hold back how grateful I was for it to end this way. David was as broken up as I was, while Freddy just sat there resting from the exhaustion. He had put so much self-inflicted pressure on himself to succeed for my sake, and I just didn't know how to thank him other than to simply give a bear hug. His smile was ear to ear, and I was happy to see it.

After a round of back-slapping, high-fives and photos, I left my legacy stone next to the ram in a memorial for the experience. Under the glow of our headlamps, I carried my ram the four miles back to the truck to be certain I did my part to bring this hunt full circle.

David and his crew provided me with the most rewarding free-range, true-to-form Mexican desert sheep hunt just as I imagined it to be. I couldn't help feeling both ecstatic and sad that my 50-year quest was over. Thanks, David! ■



Angelo packing out his ram.