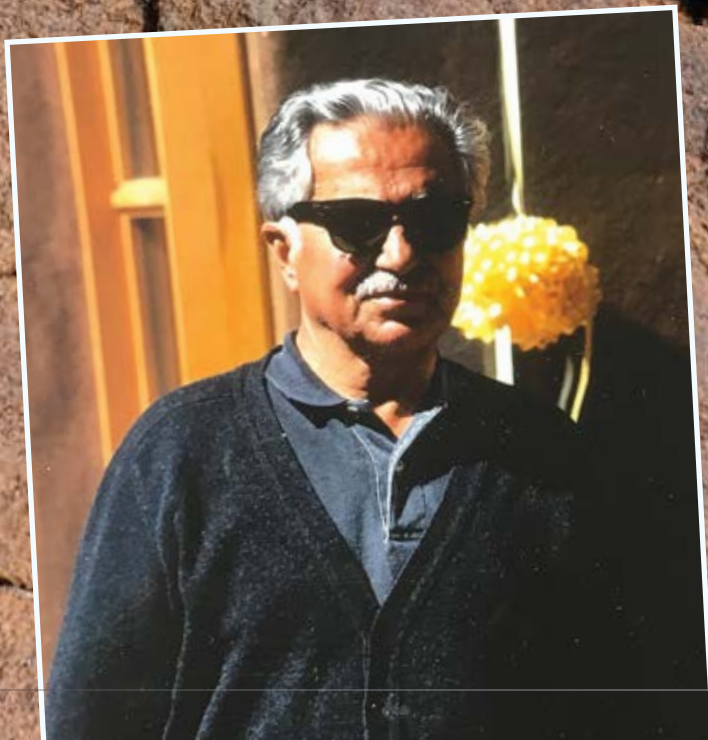


Probably my most favorite picture of the heavy ram. Scars of battle and old age on this ram make it that much more desirable.



Thank you Pop
for this ram.
You are always
in my heart!

A Ram from Pop

Our camp was below
Thimble Mountain.
Jack O'Connor would
have approved!

Sometimes miracles seem to descend upon us. On July 1, 2019, the 25th anniversary of my father's death, I dreamt he wanted to tell me something—though exactly what, was unclear—and I awoke in cold sweat.

The next morning as I was arranging credit card pre-approvals for a European trip, the service agent on the phone asked if I wanted to pay off my card's balance in advance. Odd, I thought. I had not used this card yet. When I inquired what charges were showing, she paused and then said, "Arizona Fish and Wildlife." My heart raced, and I let out a jubilant yell that rocked my wife out of bed.

Was this really possible? There are only nine desert sheep tags issued to the

entire world, outside of about 100 reserved for Arizona residents, and against all odds, I drew one of them! A sense of gratitude and the possibility of divine intervention descended. My heritage is filled with sheep/ibex hunting, and any news, article, chat, or program that remotely mentions the words "sheep" or "goat" (including passages in the Bible) snags my attention. This was, however, over the top.

During the months that followed, feelings of putting my hands around a broomed

set of horns on a desert ram occupied my dreams. I would have loved to make this a DIY hunt, but work engagements interfered; thus, I hired Craig Steele of Exclusive Outdoor Pursuits to help me find a mature ram. Craig lives in Kingman, Arizona, on the edge of my hunting unit. Craig knows every tree, bush and mountain in that country—the perfect guide. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event, access was easy by sheep standards and it represented a great opportunity to share the hunt experience

more widely; thus, I invited my younger son Miguel, my Cranbrook buddy Ken and my California pal Masoud to come along and share the hunt/camp life. Without a doubt, I owe this tag to Masoud's application knowledge (thanks, pal).

On November 30, we all met up in Kingman, and after the usual introductions we headed out to our camp—a wall tent to accommodate us all on the scenic leeward side of Thimble Mountain. We were surrounded by natural desert plants including jumping

cholla, mesquite, palo verde, Joshua trees and century plants. The cackle of Gambel's Quail and the occasional bray of the feral burros crossed the thin air. My study of Jack O'Connor's Arizona desert game pursuits came to mind.

I always re-check rifle condition and scope zero after travel, so we found a safe spot, and I fired a couple of short and long shots. With a 240-yard zero, the custom Lilja-barreled .280 Remington was spot-on. My pal Masoud had brought his rifle, nearly identical to my own Alberta sheep rifle, to save me the hassles of bringing my own rifle from Canada. After supper, Craig showed me some pictures of rams that he had scouted prior to our arrival, and it was an impressive lineup. Craig understood

that like Cape buffalo hunters, I opt for age and character over size, symmetry or arbitrary point scoring. His search respected these wishes. As luck would have it, on the day we arrived at camp, a new ram with very heavy characterized horns had moved into our hunting area. We would have to locate him and try to age him before deciding if he was the quarry I sought.

We arose at 5 a.m. on opening day, December 1. After a quick cup of coffee, we drove 30 minutes through the desert and started hiking in the dark to reach the perched basin where Craig thought the heavy ram might be holed up. We climbed steadily for an hour and a half, and as the southern alpenglow warmed the peaks, we crested a knoll and settled in to glass the landscape. The extra eyes were welcomed, and after 45 minutes, we located a band of

five rams. However, the heavy horned newcomer ram was not with them.

We waited in the still desert air, watching and scanning further. Suddenly, there he was, darker than the rest but just below the group. The ram band was calmly feeding about 1,500 yards away on a side slope below a rock band. We huddled and formulated a hunt plan. Craig, Miguel and I would initiate the stalk from the current location, and the rest would hunker down and enjoy the show from this vantage point.

The open terrain between us and the rams made the stalk tricky, so we switched back and forth between three arroyos and closed the distance to 600 yards for better viewing. But that was still too far, and there was no remaining cover. It was the ram's move now, and our task was to remain patient.

They started feeding

down towards a creek bottom and eventually dropped out of sight. There was a boulder the size of a Volkswagen, and if I could reach that, I would have a responsible and ethical shot. Now, if we could only make it there before the rams changed their minds about leaving the country or bedding down. Unfortunately, when I looked around, I spotted three burros staring at us from the basin that led to the rams. My worry was that spooking them would also frighten the rams, so we backtracked and detoured 500 yards out of their sight.

Moving gingerly through rocks and cacti we reached the large boulder, and thankfully, the rams were still there undisturbed and feeding slowly downslope. The heavy ram stood perfectly broadside with his head down feeding on chollas; it is an image burned indelibly into my memory. Craig ranged him at a very achievable 305 yards, so I settled in prone for the shot.

As Jack O'Connor once said:
Hunt sheep with your eyes
and not your legs!



I lined up the reticle of the 2.5x8 scope on the ram's shoulder, and with a cool head and a small prayer, I squeezed the light trigger. The spitzer found its target; the shot felt good. It was. The heavy ram took a forward leap followed by a rear flip, expiring instantly. A sense of joy and gratitude flooded over me, but at the same time sadness settled in my heart. My dad's presence was forefront in my mind, and I thought how wonderful it would have been to have him next to me when the heavy ram fell. He was there in spirit, and he may well have urged this hunt on, but how and for what reason? Reflecting on this later, I realize that my own son Miguel was in the role I used to fill with my own pop. Was I passing the same passion and joys that I had received? Was this backward look to Pop one that my own son will have after I am gone?

We radioed the gang to join us before we walked up to the ram so as to share the arrival at the anschuss as one. I had tears in my eyes when I

saw the quality of the ram we had just killed—I say “we,” for it was a team effort. His horns were bright bleached yellow, typical of the *desert nelsoni* subspecies. As sheep hunters often describe dimensions, his chipped, dinged and scarred-up horns were impressively thick at the base, carrying the mass all the way to their heavily broomed tips; in fact, the brooming magnified the massiveness of the spreading curls. His dark chocolate coat graded to lighter undertones on his belly. We aged him at 9½ and later on, having seen pictures of him in 2012 from a biologist's files, I suspect he may have been even older. His horns were broomed back to 32 inches around the curve, but he had 14-7/8-inch bases. In short, the perfect ram to kill.

The weather was ideal, and I quickly changed to a Gondola T-shirt I had purchased in Venice, Italy, with my dad back in 1966. I closely guard this shirt and wear it annually on the anniversary of his death. Same goes for his Ray Ban sunglasses.

We took lots of photos, and then propped the ram on a ledge. I took a moment to remember my old man, my uncle and their steady infusion of hunting, appreciation, and wildness. I also remembered my living friends, my family and all those who helped me come to sit by this gorgeous ram. Following a toast, we got busy with an efficient hour of caping and quartering.

Despite my back surgery a couple of years ago, I proudly packed the ram's head and cape down the mountain

while others carried meat. Once we arrived at our camp, I deboned all the meat and made backstrap shish-kebabs and heart-meat skewers. We celebrated our success over a great meal of fresh sheep meat. We laughed and told stories (Ken mostly...) well into the night.

The next morning we registered my ram in town. I was flattered to see how many of the Arizona Game and Fish employees came out not only to see this beautiful ram but to shake my hand and congratulate me. They were true



ABOVE: My sheep entourage: Ken, Miguel and Masoud. **LEFT:** The heavy ram as first seen through the spotting scope. Note his distinctive darker coat compared to his amigos.



professionals, and many are hunters. They took DNA samples, captured photographs from several angles and followed their strict protocol for the registration. I deliberately downplay ram scores, but it is such a part of sheep-hunting lore that I am pleased to report that after the 60-day drying period, his final score was 167-3/8. It is noteworthy that such scores lack consideration of animal age or horn character!

This hunt did not have the challenges of harsh elements that I am accustomed to in the Great White North or Asiatic alpine hunts. In fact, it was perhaps the easiest sheep hunt I had ever experienced. However, it was made special because it came as a

true gift from God as it channeled my old man's presence in my life while simultaneously linking me to my son. Ultimately Pop, my uncle, and my sons will all hunt sheep and goats in heaven where every ram is over 12 years old with missing teeth and every billy's horns touches its back.

In closing, I compliment the Arizona Game and Fish for outstanding sheep habitat and population management in the face of disease, predation and harassment factors with my undying appreciation for the state allowing us outsiders to try our luck at drawing a tag. Keep on applying, my friends, and remember: hope knows no limits!! ■



Carrying your ram down a mountain is a joy money can't buy.

ABOVE: T-shirt weather for the Three Canucks! I also owe this ram to the application knowledge of my California buddy Masoud. You da best amigo!
RIGHT: Camp chores and trophy care with love; a pastime that the new generation of hunters need to learn.

