



NEW MEXICO ELK

Passion: a strong and barely controllable emotion.

If you know anything about “PA” hunters, you’ll know many of us are passionate about deer and hunting. As a Pennsylvania native, I was certainly no exception. Once reaching the minimum legal hunting age, my annual motivation to finish schoolwork and complete home chores was to solidify my earned time in Penn’s woods to hunt.

The sensory memories gained in a young hunter’s career resonate with them throughout their lives: the radiance of the sun shining across the autumn mountainside; an earthy leaf smell in the wind; backed against an oak tree on an Appalachian ridge top; the sounds of laughter in the dim light of hunting camp around a crackling wood stove. While everyone’s experience of becoming a hunter is different, most of us all share one similarity: someone helped us get into hunting. I believe every sportsman can recall that one individual who was pivotal to their passion for the outdoors: a parent, relative or close friend; that one person who helped build those memories and guided us through experiences and opportunities that solidified our identity as hunters.

My dad, Donald “Donnie” Russell, was that person for me—my constant mentor and hunting companion. My earliest childhood memories centered around deer hunting, bouncing around shotgun in Dad’s single-cab 1980 Ford pickup to a favored hunting spot on a central Pennsylvania state game land. My father was a blue-collar guy; a dedicated civil servant and hard worker who loved his family, country, and the outdoors. Motivated by my interests in hunting and shooting, Dad was always eager to expand our partnered outdoor pursuits from a seasonal scale to a year-round lifestyle. My youth included participation



Kyle’s father, Donald “Donnie” Russell in 2011 with the last, and biggest, deer he ever took.

OUTSIDE THE CAMP AREA NEAR BANCO JULIAN, NEW MEXICO

in shooting sports at our rod and gun club, volunteering with hunter education programs locally—our weekends together were always predictable. Consistently, Dad always put my development as an individual and a hunter ahead of his own interests.

My outdoor passion and involvement within the local outdoor community paved the way for my professional path, leading me to a 12-year career as a professional wildlife biologist. This success hasn't been my own. I was the product of persistent, dedicated involvement and guidance of my loving parents and the influential individuals that exposed me to conservation and hunting opportunities. My career choice is a unique one, and mobility is necessary to success. By embracing unique opportunities, Dad and I often shared new hunting adventures together outside of our Pennsylvania roots. Those unique opportunities offered locations where I was employed. However, within a year of his retirement in 2011, my dad had been diagnosed with

vascular dementia. Although the condition ruthlessly took away Dad's independence, keeping him from hunting and shooting, he never lost his passion for the outdoors, often recalling our hunting pursuits. Our talks exponentially became shorter as his condition seemingly worsened every month.

Family and a commitment to East Coast comforts kept my focus of professional pursuits within several Mid-Atlantic states. However, I always dreamed of experiencing a western lifestyle and hunting excursions, often questioning if I would ever know either. My only experience in the western United States occurred during a handful of childhood vacations. While seemingly improbable, the idea of chasing bugling bull elk across a Rocky Mountain range or stalking pronghorn on the Wyoming plains always stuck in the back of my mind; an unshakeable yearning. As fate would have it, I was offered a once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity in central New Mexico. Professionally, the

Kyle's dad with the first deer he ever took. This was in Franklin County, Pennsylvania in 1973. **BELOW:** In 2008 Kyle and Donnie were able to share an experience of a semi-guided hunt in the Ozarks in Missouri.





TOP: Donnie was a hunter education instructor. One year the Mount Holly Fish and Game Club stocked the pond for the first day of class and Kyle was able to do some fishing while helping his dad out. **MIDDLE:** In January 2007 both Kyle and Donnie went hunting in Franklin County, Pennsylvania. This was the only time they both took deer on the same day. **BOTTOM:** Hanging out at Donnie's hunting camp in Lycoming County, Pennsylvania. This was known to his buddies as the Griz Den.

pros of relocation far outweighed the cons, and my wife and I strategized how to balance our new lifestyle while remaining connected to our families on the East Coast. For me, the move meant an added bonus of western big game hunting opportunities. How could I say no? My wife, a water loving Eastern Shore of Maryland native, didn't weigh the hunting "pro" as much as I did. Confidently, I'll gladly be paying for this sacrifice the remainder of my life—I love you, dear.

My learning curve as a green horn, western big-game hunter began with trying to secure a tag. I'd lived my life purchasing over-the-counter tags, never knowing anything otherwise. New Mexico has big game draws like other western states but does not issue preference points. One can strategize for the draw by considering unit draw odds, availability of tags, and applying under a group tag; but really, you just need to be lucky. The anticipation of drawing is comparable to a Christmas morning moment or the feeling a fur trapper gets the night before checking his line. In the West, one quickly appreciates the opportunity to hunt, one of the lucky few for that season. Thankfully, I secured an early archery elk tag on a group draw with several colleagues and hunting companions.

The successful hunt draw was bittersweet. Days after my draw notification, a call came from home in Pennsylvania. "If you want to speak to Dad, you need to get home now. He isn't going to be able to communicate much longer." Twenty-four hours later, I was at his bedside in the Harrisburg hospital. Hospice was providing relief to Dad's declining condition, reducing most of our conversations to mere exchanges of comments to provide comfort. As my

visit neared its end, I realized I was spending my final moments with my dad. As he began to fade to sleep near the end of my visit, I yearned for more time. "Dad, I have this elk hunt coming up this fall, and..." His eyes shot open with life, his face full of excitement, as he began to ask subtle questions about the hunt. Before falling asleep, I asked, "Dad, do you want in on this hunt? Promise me you'll be there." Confidently, with watery eyes, he replied, "I'll be there."

On April 5, 2019, my lifelong friend and hunting partner lost his battle to dementia at the age of 62. My dream elk hunt had taken on a whole new meaning. I was going to give this hunt everything I had—for Dad.

My tag was for the first of two early archery hunts in northern New Mexico, only miles from the Colorado border. My destination for the hunt was the predominant public land available in the unit, the Carson National Forest. Northcentral New Mexico isn't as widely recognized for producing trophy bulls like other parts of the state. However, the area supports good resident and migrating elk numbers for a quality hunting experience, or "high demand hunt." By mid-April, hunt preparation and scouting had consumed my mind. The season had begun.

I'd only ever experienced rutting elk behavior once—observing elk in the small population around Benezette, Pennsylvania. Every prospective elk hunter dreams of golden-tinted mountainsides of aspen timber, rattled by the heart-pounding bugle of Rocky Mountain elk, raging into the call of a focused hunter. We've all seen this scenario play out a thousand times on television hunting programs, watching Michael Wadell hunt the Navajo Nation

of New Mexico with a team of skilled local guides. But this was a DIY hunt, on public land, in the early archery season, pre-rut. Bulls would have just begun breaking out of bachelor herds and bugling to establish dominance.

How would my hunt come full circle? Annually, back East I'd fill my freezer with whitetail during early archery season by taking advantage of summer habits, working patterns for food and cover. Thankfully, these strategies would prove helpful on this hunt. On a grander scale, scouting some of the summer essentials exploited by the local elk herd proved promising. Watering holes, bedding areas, and observing elk movements in late June gave some optimism for early September success. I focused on practicing calling as well; specifically the ability to replicate cow and calf calls. Frequently, the use of a fawn bleat effectively incited the motherly instincts of a whitetail doe into bow range, and I'd planned to apply the same technique to pull in a concerned cow elk or curious bull.

Practice makes perfect, and I am a firm believer of committing to as much pre-season shooting practice as possible. As bowhunters, we owe it to the game we pursue, consistent with my personal definition of Fair Chase. I knew elk hunting would demand longer shots in open country, something I didn't often encounter in dense forests pursuing thin-skinned, East Coast whitetails. To ensure maximum penetration on a thick-skinned elk, I chose to shoot a two-blade fixed broadhead (Kudu 100-grain single-bevel broadheads). Other preparations for this hunt posed new considerations I'd never experienced—and were paramount to elk hunting: "If I harvest an elk, how am I gonna get this thing out?" The

selection of a good big-game frame pack seems obvious, but for the DIY hunter, it shouldn't be overlooked, nor compromised (especially when miles in the bush with a legitimate need).

As a rookie elk hunter, I wanted to keep my expectations realistic—stay focused mentally, remain dedicated physically, and at least close into bow range of an elk. Within the first day of the hunt, all of my goals were on track. I began the morning still-hunting against the wind and navigating the ridge tops of a canyon system towards a cattle tank. I briefly set up on a well-used trail to a water source, but an ever-changing wind alerted several cows keen to my plan. With the onset of dusk, I stalked a ridge back to camp, observing several cows and a bull feeding through a canyon meadow. Like a rookie, I made a hasty move to intercept their path, only to bump the cow and the bull with a subtle change of canyon winds. Frantically, I puffed on a cow call producing a soft, short calf bleat. The cow called back several times before fleeing over the ridge with the bull. Just a small-town guy from central

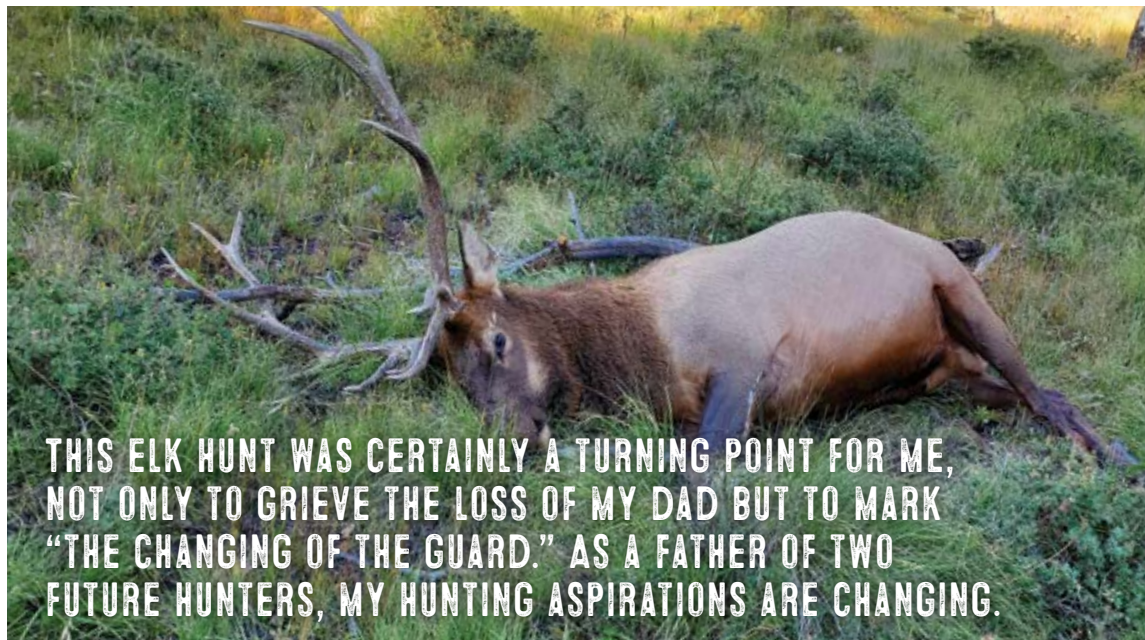
Pennsylvania, and I'm talkin' with an elk! My first day in the hunt, and I'm bitten.

After a sleepless night, the excitement didn't slow. Early the next morning, a colleague and hunting partner, connected with his first bull elk ever, a fine 5x4. The bull had succumbed to my colleague's arrow on a precarious edge of a steep, densely vegetated ridge. We spent the remainder of the day relishing the memory of the morning, carefully working together to quarter and pack out the harvest while racing against the early September heat.

By the third morning, my hunt was back on. After an uneventful morning still-hunting near another water source, I decided to make a three-and-a-half mile excursion back into the canyon system I'd hunted the first morning. The midday heat slowed my legs, already strained from the previous day's pack out. Physical fitness isn't lost on the elk hunter, and despite my best effort, I was definitely feeling fatigue all over. At the final hours of daylight, elk began to erupt from the timbers. I stalked a cow and calf from against the wind down on a ridge top, but

they moved onto one of the many trails that I wasn't on. As dusk set over the landscape, I settled the evening on a ridgetop watching several cow elk feed at the bottom of the canyon, while others exchanged calls to an eager bull bugling, signaling the onset of the fall rut.

At the conclusion of the third night, I'd put nearly 40 miles on at over 10,000 feet. While my motivation and vigor remained, I certainly had entered a physical aspect of hunting that I'd only read about. The demands of home life had taken their toll on my hunting companions as well, as I would start the fourth morning of the 14-day season alone. I had decided to wake extra early to set up on a trail system leading near the water source where my colleague had encountered his bull. On September 4, 2019, the sun had just started to crest the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, illuminating the city of Taos and Rio Grand Gorge Valley, east through the tree line in the distance. Several downed ponderosa pine branches pulled together constructed a makeshift blind. With the sun rising, I sensed the confident footsteps of a bull elk,



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Kyle with his bull elk. He had to set up a timer to get this great selfie.

peripherally observing the silhouette of a branched-antlered cape staring me down. Our stare down felt like hours, although I knew only seconds slipped by. As the bull finally withdrew his guard, I quickly drew my bow into position, established a confident range, and released as the bull re-entered my site window.

In a moment of overwhelming joy and reflection, I carefully approached my downed trophy, a 6x6 bull. Holding the antlers of this majestic animal and reflecting on what had just transpired, I immediately thought of Dad and a lifetime of our memories that had brought me to this moment. I'm confident Dad had kept his promise, as I could sense his presence on that mountain morning in the Carson National Forest. For me, this hunt marked a sense of closure, as if Dad was assuring me that everything was okay. All of his sacrifice and effort to expose me to the outdoors culminated in this moment. Hunting served just as a catalyst, a vehicle to an eternal

bond that has guided my entire life as a hunter and conservationist.

This elk hunt was certainly a turning point for me, not only to grieve the loss of my dad but to mark "the changing of the guard." As a father of two future hunters, my hunting aspirations are changing. Now more than ever, social media and some non-hunters seem content to villainize what they don't understand; a way of life for my family and thousands of others in the hunting community. To watch my 6- and 3-year-old boy's eyes light up as they play with a duck call or ask a million questions about my hunting gear, I feel like I'm holding those elk antlers in my hands again.

Dad, and the hunting mentors of our lives, have given us the blueprint to ensure the passion for hunting endures and that our hunting traditions will continue in a changing world. Pay it forward, and continue our families' hunting heritage. Guaranteed it'll be a good return on investment. ■

GEAR:

HOYT NITRUM 30

BEEMAN ICS HUNTER CARBON ARROWS

KUDU 100GR BROADHEADS

QHD ULTRA REST

HHA OPTIMIZER SIGHT

ADVENTURE
AWAITS

If you have any DIY hunts you would like to see featured in the column, please email Justin Spring or Karlie Slayer for details.

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