

Birthday Bighorn

by Mick Rusing

It was 8:00 a.m. and the heavy overcast at dawn prolonged the absence of daylight. Quinn Rusing is celebrating his 10th birthday laying on a relatively flat but very rocky hilltop, trying to harvest a particular bighorn ram out of a group of three, around 280 yards away as he curled around the ported .300 Winchester Magnum. The group of three is moving constantly, albeit slowly, as they forage across the hillside, which makes his task difficult. In addition, one of the rams is a near mirror image of the largest of the three, which is Quinn's quarry. Although he must have been as nervous as a 10-year old can be, he seemed as calm as a SEAL sniper as he took direction from the various adults present, in particular friend and guide Rom Dryden of Rincon Outfitters.

This little adventure had started six months earlier when word got out that the annual Arizona hunt draw had taken place and results were showing up on credit cards. I called VISA and heard the magic number \$272.50 had been charged by Arizona Game & Fish, which meant desert bighorn! Since I had been putting in for this coveted once-in-a-lifetime tag for over 30 years, I assumed that I'd finally hit the jackpot. I left for a family vacation to a remote area of Vermont before the results hit the Game & Fish website, so I did not know which unit I had drawn for, and I could not get good Wi-Fi reception where we were staying. Rom agreed to check for me and I gave him my SSN. He came back with the startling news that it had not been me that had been drawn, which meant it had to be my wife Carolyn. I gave him her SSN and it was confirmed that she was the lucky recipient of the tag. The unit was 43B, consisting largely of the Yuma Proving Grounds, an Army live-fire training facility just north of Yuma along the Colorado River.

And this is where things got interesting. Arizona has a rather unique stipulation in its draw system whereby a parent or a grandparent can gift a tag to a minor child or grandchild. Carolyn made the decision to give it to our youngest child, and only son, Quinn. The season for bighorn runs the entire month of December, but Quinn would not turn 10, the minimum legal hunting age in Arizona, until December 17. In addition, a person can only hunt at that age if he/she has successfully completed a hunter's safety class, which was on our to-do list for that fall in any event. Now, however, things had to start progressing at warp speed. Quinn and his hunter sister, Cali, immediately signed up for and took the online hunter safety class, which required several days, and then had a day-long range course, which they both successfully completed. Then Quinn started practicing extensively with a youth model .243. The fact that he was playing in two different basketball leagues with back-to-back games every weekend helped immeasurably to put him into physical condition for the strenuous hunt.

As Quinn's birthday approached, the final arrangements were made. On Saturday, I bought food to last for the entire group for approximately one week and on Sunday the rest of the team departed for the campsite. In addition to Quinn and me, that included my dear friend and avid hunter Boyd Drachman, who had also served as pilot for the orientation trip. We arrived at camp and literally within two or three minutes a ram appeared silhouetted against the skyline on the mountain ridge nearest us. How could we not help but think that this was a great omen? We went out that last afternoon and evening before the hunt, and



ultimately bedded down two separate groups of three rams, each with a shooter. After comparing pictures and noodling it, we concluded that one particular group had the superior ram, and that became Plan A. Fortunately, there was just a sliver of a moon that night, which gave us some hopes that the rams would not move much before we could reach them at dawn.

Early the next morning the camp was jittery with excitement and anticipation, and at first light we put Plan A into operation. The set-up on the ridge couldn't have been more perfect as it was an uneven broken up mass of rocks about 20 yards long with a flat area at the far end. This allowed us to observe the rams without being sky-lighted as we picked out the shooter. The sheep were grazing down the opposing hillside and toward us. When we initially acquired them, they were approximately 300 yards away and had closed probably 30 yards when Quinn was setting up for the shot. We had previously made a decision that if the shot was within 200 yards Quinn would shot his .243, and at a greater distance we would use Rom's .300 Winchester Mag, equipped with an incredibly efficient muzzle break, so that was the gun we picked. It was mounted on a bipod and Quinn was able to lay down behind it on the flat area and we started talking him through the shot.

The big problem, and the one that worried me greatly, was the fact that the sheep were constantly moving. This created two problems: a) they were moving; and b) they were changing positions while they moved. So, it was one of those "He's the one on the far left. No, now he's the one in middle." Quinn's marksmanship and patience were now the critical unknown variables. I was amazed at how calm he was; I know I would have been visibly much more nervous if I was shooting a bighorn sheep for the first time, which I haven't.

After much acquiring and reacquiring the targets in the scope, the rams were finally in a good position and Rom whispered to him, "Quinn do you see two animals in the scope, one above and one below?"

"Yes."

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takes place after a sheep hunt is like winning the World Series. Ironically, you just about have to put together a baseball team to make it all come to successful completion. I'm extremely proud of my son but also am very thankful for all the help provided by Jay, Larry, Arlis, George, Russ, Dean Dunaway, Pete Winn and his son Greg. Arizona Game and Fish estimated "Galileo" was 8-years-old with 163 gross and 161-7/8 net score.

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Rom: "Shoot the upper one. Now."

In a matter of seconds, the .300 Win Mag went off and we all saw what was clearly a good hit, knocking the ram off his feet. He rolled over and downhill a few yards with his feet in the air. By wild coincidence, because of the way the animal had been grazing, it was close enough to a road and flat enough to enable us to get a Rhino within about 40 yards. Four of the adults each grabbed a leg and carried it right down. It's just wonderful when a plan comes together!

So within an hour of daylight on his tenth birthday, Quinn became

the youngest hunter known to take a desert bighorn sheep in Arizona. It unofficially measured 161-4/8 when we checked out at Arizona Game & Fish and is a beautiful specimen with all kinds of character. There couldn't have been a happier 10-year old! Quinn told his mother later that his 10th birthday was the greatest day of his life, and the second greatest day of his life was when he heard that she was going to give him the bighorn sheep tag that she had drawn. He was indeed, at least that day, a very lucky little man. Quinn has not always been so lucky; he was diagnosed at 3-years-old as a Type 1 diabetic and has been insulin dependent ever since, but he's never let that slow him down.

with me and the fact that I had harvested a trophy desert ram in the very same unit my father first took me hunting back in the mid 1970s also were two more thoughts running through my mind. I only wish he were still alive to share this with me.

A Desert Ram at "Home," continued from page 8

After a nerve racking hour, the bedded ram decided to get up for a stretch and walked over by the smaller ram. He immediately bedded back down, but this time he was clear for a shot—I just had to scoot up about 10 feet to clear the ledge below us. Preston reminded me to hold low for such a steep down angle.

After scooting up into position, I got locked in, confirmed with Preston that I was going to shoot, took a couple of deep breaths, and squeezed the trigger. I heard Preston say "Dad, he's up, hit him again!"

I was already locked in on him and wondering how I could miss such an easy shot, all the while my mind was trying to analyze why his legs seemed to be wobbling. But, at Preston's command of a follow up shot, the second bullet, though not needed, was already on its way. My ram was down! At this point my emotions were overwhelming; I cannot describe nor will attempt to try to describe the feelings that rushed over me. All I can tell you that is after 35 years of hunting, I had never experienced such strange emotional feelings. Outweighing everything else that was going through my head was the fact that I had my 17-year-old son sitting next to me on such a momentous experience. My good friend Marvin Parsons was

Another sleepless night followed, but we were up early and getting things packed up to leave. The temperature was extremely warm for this time of year and I wanted to get the meat refrigerated as soon as possible. We had ten days of supplies so it seemed like we were reloading everything we had just unloaded two days earlier. Jim Heffelfinger of the Arizona Game and Fish Department was eager to meet us that afternoon at the Tucson office to check in my ram. When all was said and done, my ram green scored 175-1/8 inches, had 16 inch bases, over 35 inch long horns and was aged at 6-years-old (my taxidermist says he's 7). I'm confident he is the biggest ram that we had seen during our many scouting trips. Several Game and Fish officers present during the check-in (or is it check-out?) process couldn't believe that I had harvested such a quality ram on a self-guided hunt. I assured them that if Preston, Marvin and I couldn't make it happen, there wasn't a guide alive who would be able to do it either.

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