

# ON HOPE & PROMISES

BY PAUL TAYLOR

**A** soft thump against my bedroom door followed by a scratch and then a low whine by first one, then by my other Wirehaired Griffon, made the alarm about to go off at 4:15 am unnecessary. Flipping the switch on the clock, I mentally sorted out

whether it was a “pack” day or a “gym” day. The tails excitedly beating against the walls reminded me that, to them, it’s always a “pack” day. And so starts another round of stretching and body weight exercises. I know that the stairs and hills on our four-and-a-half-mile

walk carrying a pack loaded with 60 pounds won’t fully prepare me for the rigors of my Alberta backpack bighorn hunt—a hunt that I have been dreaming about for over three years—and due to COVID, is a year delayed. While I stay in relatively good shape year-round, I had stepped





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up my exercise regimen for a hunt that might not even happen. The daily refreshing of my internet search for Canada border status had joined the ritual of post-walk protein shake and coffee. The anxiety of trying to get in some semblance of "sheep shape" was compounded by the gnawing fear that my hunt might be doomed by something completely out of my control. But what else could I do other than be as ready as possible and hope for the best?

My outfitter, André van Hilten of Willow Creek Outfitters, did his best to keep me informed of what he was hearing regarding the border status. The hopes expressed on hunting and fishing social media posts were tempered by U.S. and Canadian news stories, which led to even more confusion and uncertainty. However one thing was certain, the adverse

economic impact on Canadian outfitters was very real and if the border remained closed for another season, it would most likely result in many of them not being able to stay in business. I realized that it would simply be too much to ask André to hold my spot for another year... so I could only try to be as ready as possible and hope for the best.

Through the spring and into the summer I alternated workouts between gym days, combining rigorous cardio and weight training with days carrying my pack while being towed by two Griffs. I felt pretty good about my conditioning for a sixty-four-year-old.

Then the call I had been hoping for came from André in mid-July... the border would open on August 9 for non-essential travel to Canada by Americans! At last I finally found

myself going through Canadian customs in Calgary without a hitch.

André and his brother Hans arrived right on schedule and while driving to the trailhead filled us in with a few more details of our hunt in a wilderness area. We would all horseback in together, and then once in the mountains, Hans would serve as one of our guides and another guide we would meet at the trailhead would take the other hunter. It was great to see Quinn Chattaway whom I had met with André at the *Sheep Show*® in 2020.

As soon as the group saw me around the stock I really didn't have to inform them that, while I am from Texas and I love barbeque and country music, I know absolutely nothing about riding horses. My inexperience was obvious, yet the guys guided me through the process







and made me feel like I belonged. An older Palomino gelding named “Cash” would soon become my new best friend. He has been with André for many years, and like all of his stock, was well equipped, in excellent shape and very steady. The coordination of efforts while tacking up and packing the horses is akin to a NASCAR pit crew. There was no wasted effort, and other than good-natured kidding, very few words were exchanged. Everyone seamlessly moved between blankets, saddles, bridles, panniers, etc. It’s was very apparent that André, Hans and Quinn were very experienced, enjoyed working together and were focused on getting us into sheep country as efficiently as possible.

The ride in to our base camp was spectacular...scenery so beautiful

that unless you’ve seen it cannot be truly appreciated. Unlike driving at highway speeds, being on horseback as part of a pack train, you experience snow covered peaks, jagged draws, and pristine lakes like never before. The serpentine trails going up and down through multi-colored forests takes you back to another time...a time without the pressures of modern society, work stress and global pandemics.

Just over eight hours in the saddle seemed like minutes and we arrived at André’s remote base camp. Greeted by packers/wranglers, Levi and Ty, each of whom despite their youth, were capable horsemen and integral to the operation.

After a night in the comfort of a wall tent, we each selected enough oatmeal, protein bars, freeze dried

meals and snacks for ten days. We then loaded up for another full day ride deep into the backcountry.

Spirits were high as we made camp in a gorgeous valley near a creek surrounded by mountains and drainages known to hold sheep. As the sun set, I was reminded of how fortunate I was and I vowed to never take the privilege of being in country like that for granted, ever again.

The following morning, guides Hans and Quinn assisted by Ty, Chris and myself backpacked up a drainage above camp with provisions for ten days. The hike would take pretty much all day with the initial ascent serving as a stark reminder that my training regimen wasn’t nearly enough. Especially when the additional twenty pounds of food, full water bottle, and rifle was added





to the weight that I had been using for training. Fortunately, Hans and Quinn made sure that we understood that this wasn't a race and that we had plenty of time. Nevertheless, I constantly sought confirmation that we were progressing at the rate that they desired, and felt relieved that I not only was keeping up, but able to stay a bit ahead of the pace that they were hoping for. The enjoyment of the hike with the splendor of the views gave way to a sense of accomplishment as we made camp at the end of the day.

We decided to spend the first real hunting day as a group of five going up together over a saddle between two peaks. As we started the hike, the steepness of the route ahead was intimidating. Following switchbacks along well-established sheep trails helped take some of the burn out

of the thighs. But as we stopped and looked back down at where we began the day, our tents increasingly appeared to be nothing but small dots before disappearing completely.



At first, through binoculars, the sheep were barely discernable shapes, but as the guides quickly found them in their spotters, rams came into view! Three along a two-mile-distant ridgeline appeared to be young, with only one close to

being legal. However, all three were clearly interested in something in the opposite direction from us and were displaying the look animals often do when watching another animal. To get a closer look it would take a full day to close the gap, and since we were already quite a distance into our hike, we decided to continue to stick with our original plan. We continued the climb, paused for a snack on the very saddle that had seemed so difficult to reach earlier that morning and surveyed a breathtaking landscape. We enthusiastically glassed for quite a while. The wind picked up dramatically as the shadows lengthened and we opted for a return to our spike camp while we had plenty of light. Even though not in our immediate area, we were buoyed by our earlier sighting of rams and those thoughts helped pacify a windy night.



As the hours of glassing passed, I imagined what it must have been like for the First Nation's people and early explorers to see this for the first time and wondered if they shared my same sense of awe or was this feeling outweighed by their quest for mere survival.



The next morning over coffee and instant oatmeal, Hans and Quinn decided that we would break camp and split into two separate groups. Hans and Chris would go in the direction that we had seen the three rams the day before, while Quinn, Ty and myself would go back up and over the saddle where we had glassed the previous day, but push a bit farther out and establish a new camp. We would then hunt the many drainages in that area. I was surprised that even with the added weight of additional food, tent, etc., I made it fairly easily back up the steep climb, over the saddle and down to our new camp site. Quinn estimated the

trip to take five hours and we made it in just over four. We excitedly got our tents set up, quickly ate a snack and headed up a drainage toward an area where sheep had been seen in previous years.

As the hours of glassing passed, I imagined what it must have been like for the First Nation's people and early explorers to see this for the first time and wondered if they shared my same sense of awe, or was this feeling outweighed by their quest for mere survival? I was snapped back into the present by Quinn telling Ty and me to remain at this spot while he hiked to the top of a nearby peak to look into the other side. We watched him

ascend at an astonishing rate. While it may be easy to think, "Oh to be young again..." I have to admit that I was never in that good of shape and doubted that even if I were, I wouldn't be able to move over the skree with the ease that he did. He returned with a smile saying that he found what looked to be a legal ram. Unfortunately, it was quite a ways off and there was no way for us to get anywhere close in range from our location. And, any other approach would be cut off by shear cliffs and thus impossible to reach. Quinn's experience and hunting savvy became very evident as he decided the best thing to do was to be patient, stay in the same glassing point, and hope that the ram and perhaps other unseen rams might make their way toward us. We remained at that location right up until he felt we were in the time frame needed to get back to camp in the twilight.

Safely back at camp over a quick meal, we exchanged favorite lines and scenes from movies, talked about other hunts, and laughed at follies from each other's lives. Though four decades separated us in age, you can always find a common bond in the mountains.

We got up a bit earlier than we had before as we wanted to be back up on the peak at our glassing point as the sun came over the mountains. We found our spot, glassed for a while and then decided to edge a bit further up the ridgeline. Quinn crawled up to a group of pickup-sized boulders and peered over the top.





He quickly slid back down and his wide smile told us what we had been hoping to hear. There was a ram in view below us a couple of hundred vertical feet and just over 1,200 yards away. He took his spotting scope and tripod as he crawled back up to his position between some rocks. After a few minutes he waved me up to take a look. The majestic ram was feeding and appeared to be alone. He had the distinct sway back, large belly, massive shoulders and neck and rump of a mature ram. His right side was beyond full curl, while his left side was broomed back a bit. The mass of his horns was obvious even at that distance. I softly asked Quinn what he thought of the ram—was he worth going after? Through a wry smile he whispered, “Paul, that’s a dream ram!”

For over two hours he only moved perhaps 50 yards. Then he nonchalantly eased over to the edge of the bench and stepped down into what appeared to be a small coulee.

Just as he did, we looked up to see a beautiful rainbow cresting over a distant mountain. We watched for a few more minutes to make sure that the ram didn’t re-emerge, and once satisfied that he was likely bedded near the cusp of the coulee, Quinn decided our best (and only) tactic, was to go back 400-500 yards, drop down into a series of drainages and carefully work our way toward where we had last seen the ram. Quietly walking in single file, we stealthily closed the distance keeping boulders and rock piles between us and where we believed him to be.

As we were reaching the vicinity of about where I thought he might be, Quinn crouched down and held the palm of his hand in a sign that everyone who has been in the field recognizes as “Stop”. He then turned, smiled, and gave a “thumbs up.” Duck walking the few feet back to me, he said that the ram had come back up out of the coulee and was

feeding again roughly 350 yards just ahead of our location. He pointed out a group of boulders 70 to 80 yards in front of us and said if we’d slowly inch our way to them, we should have a great shot from there.

Laying down I slowly opened the action on my Hill Country Custom .300 WSM and quietly slid a live round into the chamber to join the other three in the magazine, making sure that the gun was on safe. With a slight breeze in our face, the few moments it took for us to get positioned behind the boulders without the ram in view seemed like hours. Peeking through an opening, Quinn ranged him at 264 yards. As I leaned against one boulder and rested my stock on another, my first glimpse of the ram through my scope was shocking—my sight was bouncing all over the place. With panic on my face, I looked at Quinn and said that I couldn’t get steady. He calmly smiled and said “Don’t rush...we’ve got plenty of time...take a couple of breaths...you’ve got this...” Just then, my crosshairs became rock solid and as I settled in on his shoulder.

The recoil wasn’t even felt as the ram dropped at the shot. Quinn and I just looked at each other as if neither of us could believe what had just transpired. As he broadly grinned with a look of absolute satisfaction, I became emotional and my feelings poured out. I picked up my brass, carefully saving it in my shirt pocket, and after waiting a few minutes, we walked to the fallen warrior. He was every bit of the ram that we imagined. Heavy mass, a lot of scars, dark cape, one very distinct chunk out of his right horn, and 10 years of age. InReach notifications



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to my sons Cole and Jake and father Joe were returned with heartfelt congratulatory messages from each, while my wife Brenda simply admonished me with "No more full body mounts!"

After caping, quartering and deboning, we divided up the load and laughed at Ty's constant one-liners on the trek to our camp arriving early afternoon. We decided that while still full of adrenaline, we would break this camp down and go back to our first spike camp. Evidently the adrenaline effect wore off about 15 minutes into our pack out and we were all relieved as we reached our objective five hours after we started—and just after sundown. Topping off the freeze-dried food with hot cocoa and chocolate bars, we all slept very soundly.

A good night's rest and the jubilation of a successful hunt propelled us down the mountain and back to the horse camp where we would be joined by the others prior to the two day ride out.

In addition to running an outstanding outfit with excellent



equipment, stock, and staff, André van Hilten's attentiveness to detail continued as he coordinated the ram inspection as well as assisting with getting my ram to one of Canada's premier sheep taxidermists. Further,

I can't say enough good things about my guide Quinn Chattaway. His enthusiasm, encouragement and yeoman-like efforts made all the difference and turned my dream into reality. WS