

PERSISTENCE & PATIENCE

BY ANDRÉ VAN HILTEN

Mountain hunting isn't all roses and those of us that partake in it on a regular basis usually have to earn our stripes, just like one does in the military. Yes, there are easy ones for sure, but it is not the norm. Most sheep country can be very humbling – where mother nature quite often shows her more extreme side. Here we have to give up our controlling nature that we are so used to having in modern civilization. Sheep and the places they call home don't care one bit who you are or how fat your billfold is!

Mother Nature will ultimately choose your course in the mountains.

Over the years, the pursuit of wild sheep and mountain hunting has taken me to some of the most stunning places. Many pairs of hiking boots have taken me up, down and around countless mountains since that first sheep guiding season in the Yukon twenty-five years ago. I have been fortunate to put boot tracks in numerous mountain ranges from old Mexico to the Northwest Territories for all of North America's sheep species. The desire to see more wild country from what we are blessed to have here on this continent has led me to amazing places like New Zealand, Europe and Asia hunting for the mountain dwellers that call those places home. It is here high in the mountains, away from the influence of society, that I can truly appreciate

the life I lead, the health and ability to experience it, and the friendships I have forged along the way with clients, guides and outfitters.

Guiding quickly became a way of life – and the natural progression of wanting it to be a full-time job – led my brother Hans and I to start our own Alberta outfitting business, Willow Creek Outfitters, in the year 2000. We started small with a handful of deer tags we bought from saved guide wages and gratuities. As time went on, I went on my own with Hans choosing a different career. Word spread, the business blossomed and we took on more archery and rifle deer hunters, spring black bear hunters, and also added a large waterfowl area to the mix. The downside to this new growth was a reduction in my sheep guiding, which

I had a hard time accepting as the years rolled by. Don't get me wrong, I was still more fortunate than most, putting in more hunting time around the globe in the slow season. The busy schedule still accommodated for shorter sheep guiding jobs in the summer and off season. There were priceless experiences hunting big Dall's a number of times on the Kluane permit hunt or helping out for giant desert rams on Tiburon island.

I was ready for a new adventure – and when the opportunity to purchase the right bighorn area came up – I signed the contract and secured myself the time in the mountains that we as sheep hunters crave. With this new acquisition came new challenges. The days of roaming for white Dall's rams in high



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alpine pastures were now over!

An over-the-counter bighorn hunt is arguably one of the most challenging mountain hunts out there. Bighorns in their northern ranges can truly test a hunter mentally and physically and will give you a whole new appreciation for them as a species and the habitat they call home. The only places you can just buy a tag and go bighorn hunting are in the provinces of BC and Alberta and the unlimited area of Montana. Obviously, there are a number of other bighorn hunting opportunities in the US that require a draw or the highest bid on an auction



The author with his brother Hans on one of many mountain adventures together.

tag, but typically, the hardest part of these hunts are the wait times to draw a tag or coming up with *mucho dinero* to get a governor's tag. Not to take anything away from hunting a

bighorn from a draw or auction tag but typically these sheep can act quite different. Most of them receive very little hunting pressure and many of them are more habituated to human activity and some are known so well they acquire a name from the numerous people spotting or photographing them.

If you took a poll of all the hunters that have successfully achieved taking a FNAWS that included an over the counter bighorn, I am sure a big percentage would say the bighorn was the toughest hunt of the four. Whether it was due to tough access to get to sheep country, unpredictable



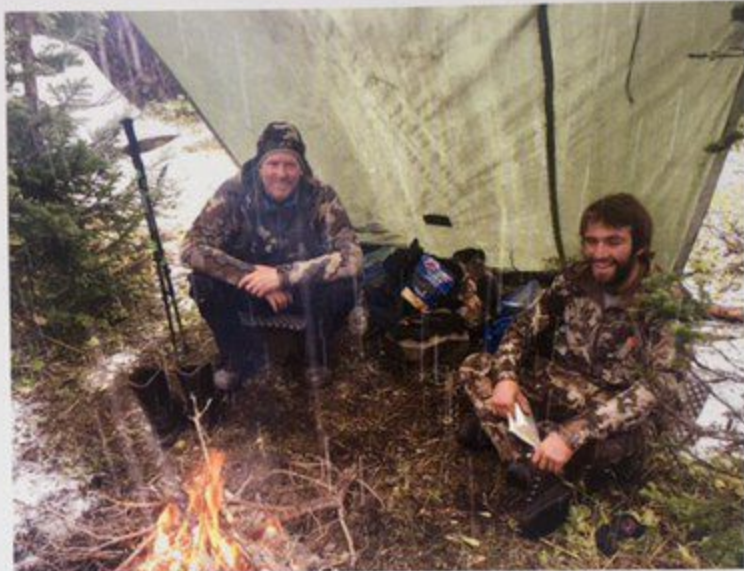
The trail, winding horses on most bighorn hunts.

weather, the rams were in the timber or a combination of all the above, rarely is it a quick and easy ordeal!

Not much has changed over the years on this hunt. Most areas have limited or no motor vehicle access, using planes or helicopters are not an option, so it has to be done the old fashioned way, on horse or foot. What has positively changed in this day and age is the availability of good gear that can keep hunters in the field longer. Communication has been a game changer as well, for the good and bad though. It is invaluable when it comes to fluent logistics and in the case of an emergency. On the downside, not many are out of touch with the civilized world anymore and so many hunts with longer durations get cut short due to something becoming more important on the outside than what is going on in the mountains. Unfortunately, quite a few people still expect the same results from a short amount of time as when the hunts were a month long in the old days.

The 2017 season was pretty tough on Alberta sheep hunters. The smart ones looked at the forecast and decided their time was better spent doing more productive things. Those of us that decided to give it a whirl, had a hunt booked with an outfitter or had to be out there for work got a true education on how weather conditions play into the outcome of a hunt. Mother nature stole the show this season reminding us how little control we really have out there.

Myself and my crew have always strived to do whatever it takes to put forth the extra effort to make



Waiting out less than ideal conditions for long periods will bring out the true colors of whoever you are sharing a camp with.

each client's experience the best we possibly can. As guides and outfitters it is our duty to provide our best efforts with the elements of the hunt we can control – and on the flip side of the coin – the client has to understand it is not a magic show where we pull a rabbit from a hat and make the weather change or the desired animal appear!

All of our clients had to endure numerous days stuck in a tent with nothing to look at. Early in the season many of the valleys were choked full of smoke from the wildfires in BC leaving little country to look at. Later on in the season the weather switched, pushing out the smoke, but in turn, it blew in snow that didn't seem to quit. Deep, heavy snow blanketed already meager horse pasture, flattened unattended wall tent camps and broke-off uncountable trees making trailing

a string of horses anywhere a long process.

A couple of clients, Gary Wiechens and Brent McNamee, approached me about doing a return trip when they had to leave empty-handed on an earlier hunt due to limited time caused by weather. These two guys totally understood they were buying an opportunity to hunt a sheep and that it was the uncontrollable elements that might keep them from achieving their goal. Both were also appreciative of the efforts put forth by the crew and horses and made the best of the experience they had. I felt compelled to go the extra mile on my part to make it attractive for them to do a return trip. They both needed a bighorn to complete their FNAWS.

Fast forward to the next season. Gary and Brent showed up and we had most of the same crew back, so everyone was comfortable and

If one puts in their time and appreciates the whole process of getting to a desired result, it will happen.

positive that we had the right team to tackle the task at hand. Mother Nature decided to show her soft side and throw us a bone with an awesome-looking weather forecast for the start of the hunt.

With panniers full and lash ropes tight, we left the trailhead and started the long journey winding our way into bighorn country. After many miles we split the pack string at the fork in the trail, bid each other good luck and headed our separate ways. We reached our respective camps, turned the horses loose for a much deserved rest, tightened our

boot laces, donned our oversized backpacks and sweated our way into the alpine country that the sheep called home.

Gary was with myself and the young Quinn Chattaway, and we were into rams as soon as we broke out of the timber. The band of rams was at the back end of the valley and one looked liked it could be legal. We would wait until morning to get a closer look.

We were up at dawn, and in short time, we had ourselves at a good vantage point to relocate the rams. They showed themselves across the

valley and now there were more of them, including a ram that defined what bighorn dreams are made of.

With the rams out of sight, we crossed the open valley just to have a young ram come back over the crest to check his back trail like they always seem to do. The stare down began as we waited motionless and then finally he turned, not liking what he saw, trotting back over the ridge out of sight. It was time to hustle, cutting up high to see if we could head them off. With not much cover or undulation we slowed our pace as we rolled over the ridge.



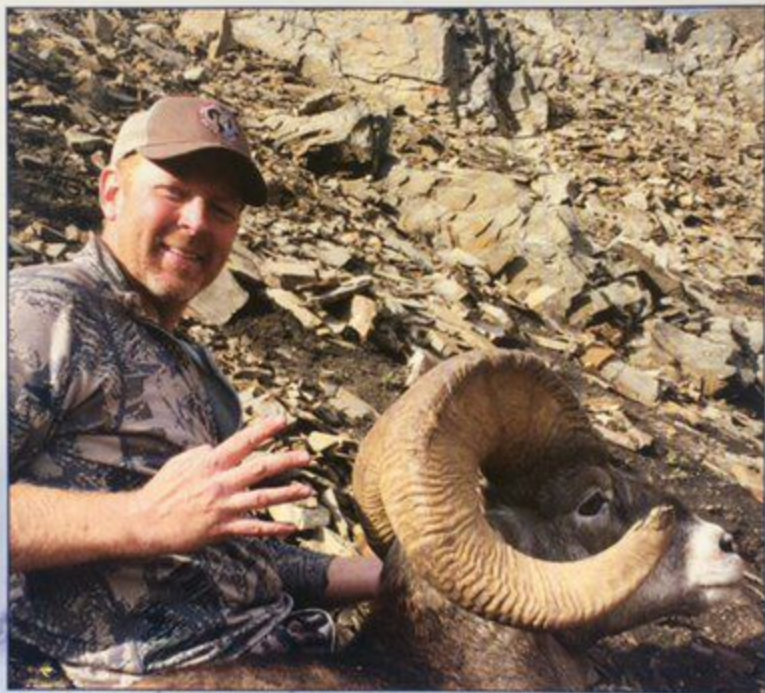
New Zealander George Wallace always kept the camp in positive spirits no matter what the situation was... life is too short to worry about the uncontrollable aspects.

The crown of a ram's horn appeared on the skyline and we hit the deck. A few more appeared above us and then they decided to bed down at two hundred yards. For four hours we remained in a stalemate. One of the rams just chewed his cud casually as he watched us weaken from the cold wind as we put on more layers

at a painfully slow pace, hoping not to alarm him. Then they were up, feeding and headed our way. They passed us by at less than forty yards without a care in the world. Witnessing this was so worth the frigid wait! While the big ram was not in this group, the one we thought that was close to legal was, but he was

right on the line and better left for another year.

It wasn't until the next evening that Quinn reacquired the big ram. We put him to bed and headed back to the tents. At first light we were back where we had last seen him, he hadn't moved more than a few hundred yards. Now it was a waiting



Brent MacNamee with his well earned FNAWS ram.

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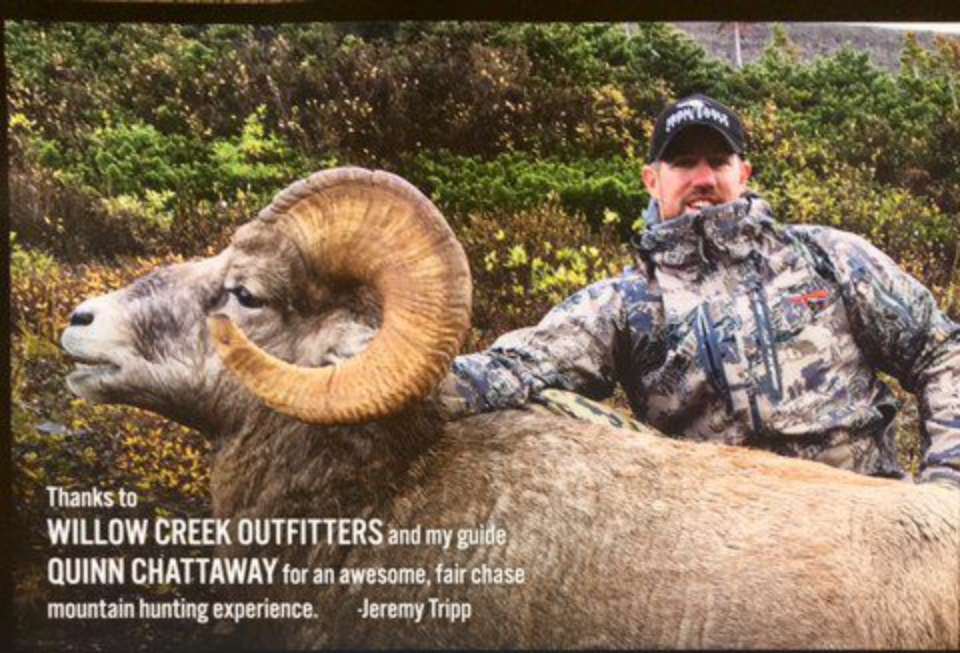
game to see what direction he would go. There was one main sheep trail on his side of the valley which would either take him away from us or right to us. After a long wait, the ram got up, stretched and worked his way down to the trail, paused and then started heading our way. Gary was set up perfectly, and when the ram got into a comfortable range on a good spot on the trail, he sealed the deal with one shot and another FNAWS was completed. It was a well-earned ram – and even though it was only day three of this hunt – it was really day fifteen if you include the prior year.

Not all that far from us as the crow flies, Brent McNamee was hunting with Kelly Wiebe and George Wallace. It was day five when it happened for them. A long, but calculated shot and it was all over. Brent's dream of completing his FNAWS was now a reality.

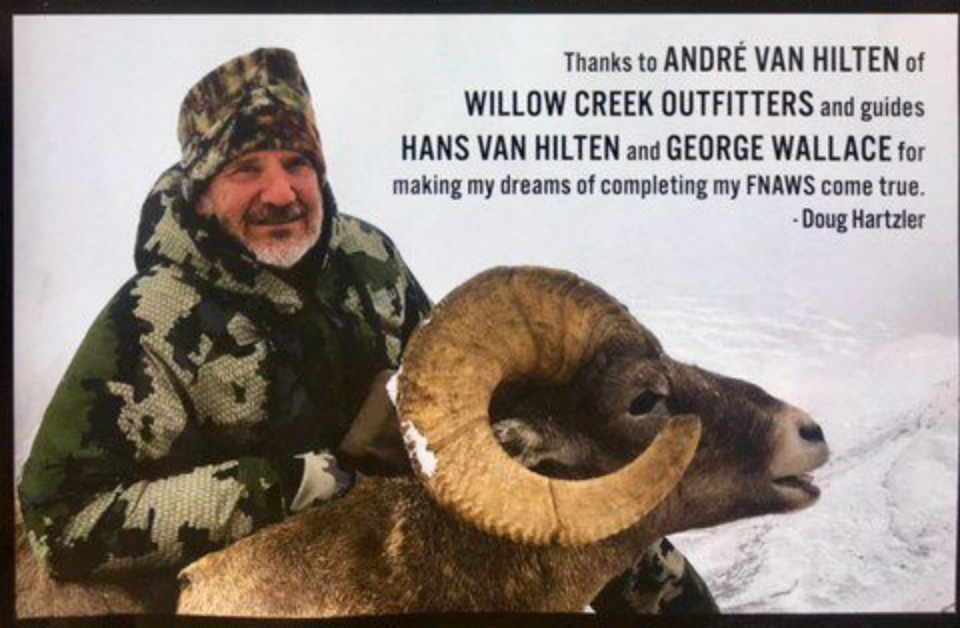
Neither one of these successful hunts would not have been possible without experienced crew, positive clients, cooperative weather and a little good luck. If one puts in their time and appreciates the whole process of getting to a desired result, it will happen. Maybe it won't be on the timeline originally set out, but eventually, it will. With confidence in the crew and the hunting area and understanding that Mother Nature is ultimately in control, Gary and Brent knew this is where they needed to be to get a ram, and it paid off in a big way.

I believe that good things happen to good people. I guess you could call it Karma for a lack of a better word. Sometimes we get lucky early in a hunt, and other times we go home empty handed. In the end, the ones that appreciate and respect the country and animal they hunt and the people that help them get there will be greatly rewarded. A fitting quote that sums it up. "Patience, persistence and perseverance make an unbeatable combination for success."

– Napoleon Hill WS



Thanks to
WILLOW CREEK OUTFITTERS and my guide
QUINN CHATTAWAY for an awesome, fair chase
mountain hunting experience. -Jeremy Tripp



Thanks to **ANDRÉ VAN HILTEN** of
WILLOW CREEK OUTFITTERS and guides
HANS VAN HILTEN and **GEORGE WALLACE** for
making my dreams of completing my FNAWS come true.
-Doug Hartzler