

Reppin' Our Sport



By **Zeke Pipher**

Photos by the Author

I was the only man in the group. I was the only one from rural America. And I was the only one who hunted. Three minutes into the week-long Nebraska Writers Workshop, I knew representing my values as a sportsman would be a challenge. As I took a seat in that University of Nebraska-Lincoln classroom, I settled into the reality that for the next five days, I was going to be the odd man out.

These women would have to hear about hunting all week. I signed up for the workshop to improve my outdoor writing, and most of my articles deal with deer hunting. The way this class was structured required each person to bring a new article or story each day to read to the group. Each participant was encouraged to interact with each other, primarily offering advice and suggestions pertaining to writing style. We would learn how to write better from one another, so most of the feedback addressed issues such as voice, mood and grammatical style.

Most, but not all.

On the second day, when I read a personal essay about teaching my children how to field-dress and process deer to enjoy the entire field-to-table experience, I ignited a powder keg of personal remarks. As I finished reading, hands flew up in the air throughout the room. They asked about my conscience. They asked me how I could pull the trigger and take the life of such a beautiful creature. They even asked personal questions about my parenting. For example, one lady asked, "Aren't you worried that teaching your kids to enjoy bloodshed might

desensitize them? They might enjoy hurting people when they grow up.”

Yup. That was an actual statement one participant made that day, and during the week, I received dozens of comments expressing the same or similar sentiment.

A Common Curiosity

Unless you live under a rock, you’ve had your participation in deer hunting challenged. As an outdoor writer, I’ve received dozens of emails through the years from anti-hunters wanting to voice their opinions. Several of my hunting buddies have been politely challenged or viciously attacked because they hunt. I recently mentioned to a friend that I was working on this article and asked if he’d ever encountered rudeness from an anti-hunter. He chuckled. “Well, sort of,” he said. “Someone in a Prius flipped me off once when I was checking in a deer at a gas station.”

Non-hunters outnumber hunters in America. The percentages are bleak. In our country, for every person who puts on camo and heads to the field to fill his or her freezer, over 20 people will stick to their street clothes and buy meat that’s packaged in a store. Sadly, those stats are moving in the wrong direction. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, hunting license sales have decreased from about 17 million in the early 1980s to 15 million. Our numbers have leveled off somewhat the past few years but our sport is constantly under attack, which places a tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of those of us who hunt. We must represent and represent well.

I realize some hunters will disagree with me, perhaps saying something like, “Forget ’em. Why should we care what they think?” Some might even suggest that we return the middle finger with the middle finger, but that attitude only hurts our cause and feeds the negative stereotypes that continue to plague our sport. One of the women in the writer’s workshop told me after class one day, “I’ve never liked hunting, but it’s not so much the killing animals that I have a problem with, but rather the few hunters I’ve known. They would drive around town with a dead deer in the back of their truck, tailgate down, just to make us mad.”

It seems that how non-hunters think of hunters will have a great bearing on the future of our sport. Things such as our rights and privileges as sportsmen, or how successfully we recruit new people into deer hunting, will be greatly affected by how we present our sport and ourselves today. I believe in the you-catch-more-flies-with-honey-than-you-do-with-vinegar approach to reppin’ deer hunting to non-hunters.

Scott’s Way of Reppin’

Full disclosure: I haven’t always represented our sport well. I remember a few times, in my early 20s, driving around Lincoln, Nebraska, with the tailgate down to show off the buck in the bed of my truck. I remember a moment in a college psychology class when I obnoxiously debated an anti-hunter, throwing out stats and anything else I could think of to make that fellow student feel stupid. I didn’t care about him. I cared about hunting, and I’m pretty sure that came through loud and clear. I have a handful of memories like that from my early years of deer hunting, and I’m embarrassed by them.

I needed to change, and one man, Scott, helped me catch a vision for doing a better job. Scott was and remains a uniquely successful deer hunter. He’s a biologist and a well-known outdoor speaker. As I think about Scott, three specific qualities come to mind that help paint a picture of how to represent our sport well.

Humility: Scott has shot more — and bigger — bucks than almost any other deer hunter I’ve met, but you wouldn’t know that from talking with him. He has a gentle but effective way of turning each conversation back to the person with whom he’s speaking. For example, someone might ask him a question like, “How many Boone and Crockett bucks have you shot?” And he’ll probably reply, “I’m not sure, but tell me about your best whitetail.” And with that, he has you talking.

The first time I met Scott, he was speaking at an event in Nebraska. When I went up after his talk and thanked him for coming to Nebraska, he replied, “Well, thank you for having me. What brought you here tonight, Zeke?” I shared my life’s story with him, and he seemed genuinely interested to hear the unabridged version. He has a gift of making the other person feel like the priority.

Self-respecting: I don’t mean to paint a picture of Scott that suggests he’s soft or pandering. Far from it. This might sound odd, but Scott is masculine to the core. I’ve always believed you can tell a lot about a person by their handshake, and Scott’s gives him away. It’s not wimpy or limp-wristed, but it doesn’t crush your hand in some selfish attempt to prove its strength. And for what it’s worth, Scott could crush your hand. He’s a big guy with meaty paws, but his presence makes people feel safe and at ease, never threatened or on edge.

The way Scott represents deer hunting is similar to his handshake. He’s slow to speak, but when he does, you can tell that he respects himself and his choice to hunt. He doesn’t apologize for what he believes. He doesn’t try to soften the rough edges of a sport that takes the lives of other creatures. He’s able to acknowledge some of the difficult aspects of our bloodsport, yet in a way that demonstrates his



Aidan Pipher, Zeke’s son, with a large whitetail he shot two years ago with his crossbow.



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convictions that hunting is ethical and should be respected as a valid way to practice conservation and provide food for our families or those in need.

Preparedness: Along with his humility and self-respect, Scott also displays intelligence and preparedness for conversations with non-hunters. I've heard Scott speak a few times and watched him field questions not unlike the ones I received at the writer's workshop. Scott always began his response with, "I appreciate that question," or "That's a really good question, thank you for asking." Then, after respecting the humanity of the other person, he always gives concrete, intelligent responses that draw from various disciplines, such as conservation, ethics, social sciences and personal experiences.

For example, at a natural resources conference several years ago, a non-hunter made the statement, "Hunting is dying out, and it's a good thing. Kids shouldn't learn to kill things."

Scott replied by referencing how the bonds between young men and women and the natural world are breaking at an alarming pace today. He discussed how a child's mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health is greatly improved simply by getting outside and encountering wild places in positive ways. He said, "For me as a dad, deer hunting was one way that I could pull my kids away from screens and get them into some breathtaking places."

The objector was a bit shocked by the response and ended up agreeing with Scott's entire reply. He said, "Yes, I see your point. I suppose that if hunting helps children put down their phones and video games and go outside, there's some good in it."

That's just Scott. He has a gift of being able to disarm someone. A non-hunter might come at him with both barrels loaded, but when they're done talking with him, they've forgotten they were holding guns.

I present Scott's example as one way of conducting ourselves around those who don't hunt. We'll each have our own way, driven in large part by our personalities, but the virtues that Scott displays — humility, kindness, other-centeredness and respect for those with whom we disagree — ought to be a part of our strategies to rep' our sport well.

Back to Writers Group

That writer's group turned out to be an amazing experience. Thanks to the writing-related responses of the women in the class, I believed I grew quite a bit as an outdoor writer that week. Specifically, they challenged me to add color and detail to the stories I write. They encouraged me to work harder at character development. They even threw out ideas for how to write with more emotion, helping readers identify with the ideas I'm trying to communicate. These women helped me better understand the world of words, and I'm grateful for their contributions.

What's more, thanks to the non-writing-related responses — the objections and questions about deer hunting — I got to practice many of the qualities and strategies I've witnessed in Scott. I doubt I completely turned anyone around on the subject that week. I'm guessing the odds of any of my new friends purchasing a deer tag this season are pretty low. I think, however, I've represented our sport well.

One of the women — the one who said she disliked the hunters in her hometown — came up to say goodbye on the last afternoon. We exchanged best wishes, and then she walked toward the door. Before exiting, she turned around and said, "Have a good deer season this fall."

That felt like movement. I'll take it. 