

The **BEST** Worst Season Ever

By Matt Harper
Photos by the Author



All of us – This certainly wasn't a picture of the biggest deer I have ever taken but remains one of my favorite deer pictures.

If anyone tells you getting older is great or a totally enjoyable experience, don't fall for it. Because aging is inevitable, getting older beats the alternative. But now that I'm 47, I realize the physical aspects of getting progressively longer in the tooth are not necessarily something to look forward to.

Age has a few advantages, one of which is that the accumulation of experiences molds your perspective and changes your ways of thinking. I was blessed to have a dad who taught me to hunt at a young age. We hunted small game mostly because that's what he grew up hunting. When I grew older, I took up deer hunting with friends, and 30 minutes into my first hunt, I stood mesmerized over the fat doe I had just shot. I knew I was hooked. Back then, we party hunted, which meant we conducted deer drives and shot deer until all the tags were full.

For a teen-age boy, it didn't get much more exciting. There was shooting everywhere and deer running this way and that. People yelled, "They're headed north of the fence row," and if you were in that spot, anticipation-driven adrenaline pulsed through you. When I went off to college, I returned during deer season and hunted with the same guys. But for some reason, the excitement began to wane. For about four years, deer season came and went, and my shotgun never left the gun cabinet. I still loved hunting, but the passion had gone away.

Then I was blessed to start working as the national sales manager at the Whitetail Institute and made my living talking to people about how they could manage and hunt deer more effectively. One of my first sales calls was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, at the archery distributor, Lancaster Archery Supply. I met the owner, Rob Kaufhold, and he politely let the green sales guy bumble and stutter his way through the pitch. He then asked if I bowhunted. When I walked out the door, I had not sold Rob anything, but I carried a brand-new bow and a quiver of arrows. I had been schooled in the art of selling and thought that if I continued, I would be broke within a month. Seriously, Rob was not trying to make a sale. He simply wanted to introduce me to the world of bowhunting and the passion the sport invoked. For that, I'll be forever grateful.

I somehow clipped the jugular on a yearling forkhorn during my first archery hunt, and my passion for deer hunting was reborn. During the next several years, I got a little better at bowhunting and shot some really good bucks. I also took up muzzleloader hunting during the late season and added a few more bucks to the wall. In the past 20 years, I have taken several Pope and Young bucks, with a few Booners thrown in. Many factors contributed to my success, including learning the benefits of food plots and deer minerals, managing for big deer, and spending time with some exceptional hunters who shared a treasure chest of knowledge. Also, I lived and hunted in southern Iowa on Dad's or my properties, which allowed for more opportunity at big, mature bucks.

But even considering those factors, there's still a massive piece of

the puzzle with which all hunters must contend: luck. No matter how good of a plan you put together or how sharply you hone your hunting skills, luck still plays a major role in triumph or defeat. I have heard people say that you make your own luck, and no doubt being a better deer hunter increases your odds of tagging good bucks. However, if bad luck is served that day, no amount of hunting prowess will overcome it.

I have experienced periods when luck landed on both sides of the fence. I have taken several trophy bucks when there was no reason I should have. One season, I shot a 178 (gross) 8-pointer in November on a 63-degree day, when no mature buck should have been moving. The same year, I shot a 183 nontypical, even though my muzzleloader misfired on the first shot. Conversely, I've had streaks of bad luck when it seemed I was doing everything right but my tag stayed in my pocket. But even with bad luck, dogged determination usually wins. If I keep at it long after others have filled their tags, it should all eventually come together. Except for two years ago.

That year was an epic adventure of bad hunting luck. Starting in spring, I chased a couple of call-shy toms for about two weeks. The turkeys won, and the season closed with me not filling a tag for first time in about 12 years. During my Utah mule deer hunt, I had my cross-hairs on a 180-inch velvet 4-by-4 at 400 yards, and after the shot, the deer appeared to do a death run over the hill. Upon examination, we found no deer but some blood, which we followed for eight hours only to have the buck break from cover and speed away like he didn't have a scratch. Two weeks later, another hunter shot him and confirmed that my bullet had creased the buck's brisket.

Even though the year was not shaping up to be one of my best, I still had whitetail deer season on my home turf, and I was flush with the confidence built from years of success. Early season came and went with no big buck sightings. I saw some shooters on camera, but nothing crossed my path while hunting. No matter. I normally had the best success during the rut, so I remained positive. The rut was early that year, so I hunted hard from late October through early November — and ended up seeing squat.

However, I sliced my leg pretty good when I slipped on an icy branch. I also dropped my bow 18 feet out of a tree and almost froze during several hunts. I wasn't even seeing shooter deer on my trail cameras, although there was no reason for their disappearance. Even though I tried to bolster my confidence and stay positive through the late rut, continued nonproductive sits without seeing big bucks began to crush my resolve. In late November, a scraggly looking 4-year-old got to within 50 yards, and I took a half-hearted shot, only to watch the arrow fly harmlessly over his back. Somehow, I knew I was going to miss. That night, I gave up. Shotgun season started in a few days, so I said to heck with it and figured I would just sit around and sulk, waiting for the late muzzleloader season.

Amazingly, my 81-year-old dad had never shot a whitetail buck. As mentioned, he grew up hunting small game and upland birds, so he really never got the deer hunting bug. He went with me a few times, but he had never connected. He mentioned that he really wanted to shoot a buck that year, so I decided that when late muzzleloader season started, my goal was to get Dad his buck. I bought a couple of shooting houses with the safe stairs and rails to make it easier for Dad, and when the first day of season arrived, we settled down in the new blind.

A week passed with nothing to show for our efforts, and I began to think that my bad luck was contagious. But then one day, when trying



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to stifle my laughter about something goofy Dad had said, a thought occurred. I had spent more time hunting with Dad that season than I had since I was a child. Even though we weren't seeing much, I looked forward to going each evening because Dad and I were having fun simply hunting together. Early one afternoon, several days into season, a good 8-pointer walked into the field, and Dad said he wanted him. Dad made a perfect shot, and our quest for his first deer ended in success.

There were still three or four days left of the late muzzleloader season, so I figured I would try. Dad said he wanted to go with me, so it made for a good excuse to spend some more time together. We hunted

a couple of evenings with the same results I had experienced all season, but I didn't care that much. I was going hunting now more to hang out with Dad. In fact, I wasn't even trying to stifle my laughter anymore. Dad and I just joked around and drank coffee, occasionally halfheartedly looking around for deer.

On the last day of season, we were sitting in the blind, and I was listening to Dad loudly tell a story I had heard at least 100 times when I noticed a couple of does coming up the draw toward us. Right behind her was the scraggly 4-year-old I had missed during bow season. He came to within about 80 yards, and I poked the gun barrel out, thinking I might as well take him, as it was the final day,

“Hurty, he’s getting up.” I made a second shot as he stood in the middle of the oak trees and then watched him move down into a creek bed and out of sight. I didn’t know what to think, but my built-up negativity from the season screamed that I wouldn’t find him. Dad and I walked to where we last saw the buck and found a blood trail, but it wasn’t good.

The trail played out after 50 yards, so we started walking toward where we thought the buck might have gone. I looked down at a suspicious red leaf when I heard deer running up the next ridge to the east. The buck I’d shot was in the group, and five seconds later, he was gone. Dad and I got back to the truck, and I thought that was an exclamation point to the season. All the thoughts I had about the blessing of hunting so much with Dad remained, but they were overpowered by self-deprecation. I endured my 30-minute drive home, filled with tormented replays of my failures that year.

When I got home, my oldest daughter, Emma, who was back from college, met me in the kitchen. I relayed to her my tale of woe, and she brightly said, “I’ll go with you in the morning, and we will find him.” I appreciated her optimism, and she is a really good blood trailer. However I was sure it would be a wild goose chase. Regardless, she talked me into it the next morning, and we picked up Dad and headed to where I’d found the last blood.

Emma is good with blood trails, and her young eyes picked up traces of blood I’d overlooked, following the trail another 100 yards. But eventually, even she lost the trail. I was almost ready to quit when she suggested that we search a couple of ravines on our way back to the truck to meet Dad. So I trudged up the ridge to look in the upper part of the ravine while she covered the lower end. A few minutes later, I heard her yell at me from the bottom of the ravine: “Hey Dad, was the deer you shot an 8-pointer?”

“Yes,” I replied, with guarded optimism.

“Well, there’s one lying dead right here,” she replied.

Sure enough, she had found him. I slid down the incline and hugged my daughter, who was beaming at me. Dad had heard the commotion and soon joined us to round out the three-generation search party. I will never forget that moment as I looked at the buck with Dad, who was with me when I’d shot it, and my daughter, whose persistence and positive attitude drove her to find it. It was a good deer, although not exceptional and not my biggest. But that memory will stick with me long after memories of other hunts and bigger deer have faded. That’s not because of the deer but because of the people who shared in my hunt.

Some think hunting is all about killing trophy animals and that success is tallied merely in inches but in my opinion it’s far deeper and richer. Although that season two years ago was one of my worst seasons in terms of game harvested, it was actually one of my best seasons because of the experiences I had afield with my family.

Does that mean I don’t chase trophy whitetails anymore or get excited when I harvest a giant? Of course not. I still chase them and get going is an experience filled with many aspects aside from the kill. If Dad or I would have shot a deer the first day, we would not have had all that time together. If we would have found my buck the night I shot it, I would have missed the incredible experience with my daughter. Ultimately, there is luck in hunting, but I also know God has a plan. Like other things in life, we might not understand the plan, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t one.



and he was a cull buck.

I pulled the trigger and the buck bolted, but then stopped, looked around and walked into the trees. I had missed. What should have been a slam dunk was a pure miss. I was disgusted with myself and angrily reloaded, even though I figured that shot had ended the season. Five minutes later, Dad said, “There’s deer coming out of the timber to the south.” Sure enough, does were trickling out of a stand of young oaks, and behind them was a good 8-pointer. Dad and I had to shift in the blind, and I was shaky on the sticks with the emotions of the previous few minutes. But I tried to calm myself and squeezed off a shot.

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