

Regular HUNTS: Hunter National Training Scheme



Learning the art of hunting

FIRST NIGHT OF THE WAIKATO DEERSTALKERS HUNTS COURSE, AND 17 OF US ARE SITTING HORSE-SHOED AROUND A ROOM.

WORDS BY: MARK HUNTER

An instructor welcomes us. “What do you want to get out of this course?” is his question. As each person answers in sequence, I can see I will be last in the arc. The best answers are taken long before my turn, but I know my two reasons for being here. “I’m 53 years old and have lived in suburbia all my life. I have very few practical skills. I am here to learn something useful, to be able to bring back meat to fill someone’s fridge.”

I gesture to the right to where my 18-year-old son is seated.

“I also want to do something interesting with Ben, something memorable. I think hunting together could be great.”

That was Week 1 of learning to hunt.

Weeks 2-7 were a blur of classroom meetings, and while the hours were content-rich, the bigger learning moments happened outside the walls. Like on the shooting range.

In 53 years, I had done next-to-nothing with a rifle. But how hard could steady breathing and stillness be, especially with crosshairs to guide me? “Very hard” was the answer. Yes, I shot within the red a few times, but I suspect luck was the reason. From the standing position, my crosshairs moved like a dancer on speed.

This was a problem. Not because I lost a shooting competition with my son and had to shout beers, but because in one week I would be lining up a living animal, hoping to take it with a clean shot. Miss a paper bullseye by a hand-width and the only thing hurt is your ego. Miss a kill shot by that same margin, and you seriously injure a goat. Not what I wanted.

Two things encouraged me. The first was how much difference a properly set up rifle could make. During the morning session, I used a gun whose owner was anatomically different from me. No matter what position I adopted, my head was too close to the scope, causing the lens to be haloed with shadows. The only way I could widen the gap was to crank my neck or arch my back. Neither was good

OPPOSITE: The author and son Ben with their first animals.

for accuracy. But in the afternoon, I tried three different rifles and found each to be set more to my liking. Yes, the crosshairs still gyrated like Elvis, but I could at least see the full circle, and my shot clusters were tighter.

Ben and I also became steadier throughout the day. That’s not surprising. Any new action is done without the help of neural conditioning, the brain-muscle connection. In the morning session, millions of fibres and ligaments were receiving rifle-shooting instructions for the first time. But by the afternoon, a little muscle memory had carried over, and father and son shot more cleanly.

“That’s good enough for hunting next week” was instructor Gary’s assessment of our shooting clusters. Can’t tell you how good it felt hearing those words.

A week is a long time to ponder something. Thoughts like, ‘What if I maim the goat?’ And ‘How will I react to getting my hands inside the entrails of an animal?’ And, ‘Instructor Chris has mentioned eating goat testicles several times: If he cooks them up, should I have a try?’

Hunters who have been doing this for years (shooting and gutting animals, not eating testicles) don’t consider such questions, but I found myself working them through in my head. I admit, I was nervous.

Hunt day arrived and everyone showed up at Paddy’s farm with all their gear. Except the dumbass father who left the tent in his car when transferring vehicles.

Ben carrying his goat out.



Bad start, but it led to a good lesson. Even if you screw things up, you can improvise and sort things out. Which Ben and I did with an orange sheet of plastic.

With our makeshift tent now set, it was time to hunt. Which leads me to the great thing about the Waikato Deerstalkers. Because their priority is giving everyone the opportunity to shoot, gut, skin and



Learning how to bone an animal out while under the watchful eye of an instructor gave us great confidence to do it on our own in the field.

bone an animal, they opt for hunting goats rather than deer. Their reason is simple: goats are easier to find, and there is no way all 17 participants will even see a deer let alone shoot one.

For the hunt, Ben and I were paired with Glenn. He'd been tracking animals since he was a boy and had trained most of the current instructors. Exactly what two rookies needed. Off we went into our block of hill country, and within two hours, we had learned a bunch of things you can't get from a classroom.

As we started out, Glenn cautioned us not to be too eager to reach a destination. "There will be opportunities along the way – you never know when an animal will show up. So, let's tread lightly and keep our ears open."

No joke, within 100m of hearing this advice, all three of us heard the rustle of foliage in the bush below. Something primitive and instinctive happens in moments like that: you freeze and listen. Every sense is heightened.

More rustling. Whatever it was, it was bigger than a bird and heading toward us.

Within two minutes, I saw it: a small brown goat making its way up the rise.

Rather than beating faster, I felt my heart slow down. My breathing also. On the elevated flat, I took a prone position as Glenn handed his rifle to me. He whispered a series of basic instructions and I lined up the shot.

Just as I'm about to shoot, a second goat appeared and passed in front. A new target. Crosshairs realigned, breathing steady, no mental noise, I squeezed the trigger. Bang. Drop. Silence. The sequence was so clean, the first goat remained in play, and within two minutes, Ben had shot his first animal as well. A special moment for us both.

What followed was messy, but equally important. We learned that there is a helluva lot inside a goat, and there's an art to getting it out. Likewise, there's plenty of technique to skinning and boning. Were we good at any of it? No, we weren't. But we'd made a start, and we walked away with plenty of meat for the week.

More than that, I came away from the Hunts Course with a new way to hang with my boy.

P.S. Chris did cook goat testicles on Sunday morning, and I did have a taste. They're all yours, Chris. **NZHW**



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