

The Tapidero Ram

By T.J. Schwanky

There are two types of people that ride with *tapideros* on their stirrups: dudes, those city slickers whose total experience with equines is limited to the plastic horse at the local grocery store and, seasoned horsemen that spend their days riding through thick cover, where willows, alders and jack pine all grab at exposed boots with the ferocity of a caged lion. There was no doubt that my guide, Garry Dowd, fell into the latter category.

He eased through the heavy stands of bush with grace and composure. I floundered. His stirrups rolled up and over large boulders that stood sentinel along the trail, they glanced off snags and fallen trees that dominated the old burn through which we rode. I floundered.

“Ouch.” I winced with pain as my left foot hooked yet another black, claw-like branch extending from a charred stump, twisting my leg into a Gumby-like position.

in my direction. “No,” I shouted back over the driving rain, not wanting to admit my dudeness. I’m no stranger to horses and rough riding conditions I thought to myself and, up until now, I had been doing my best man-of-the-mountains impression. There was no way I was going to admit that I couldn’t keep up to and do everything Garry could, at least not in front of him. “Just giving Pat heck for being so poky.”

This was the first day Garry and I had spent together. It was the sizing-



up day; guide evaluating hunter's experience and hunter evaluating guide's prowess. I had already given him an A+. I think my report card was similar to my Grade 12 French mark: C-, but Garry was giving me ample opportunity to upgrade. Guides are always testing their hunters. Some are blunt about it but others, like Garry, are masters of subtlety.

"Is that an elk track?" Garry asked knowing full well it wasn't.

"Looks like a caribou to me," I responded full of doubtful confidence.

"Hu," was all he gave me for that brilliant piece tracking. I stopped and examined the track again. I was sure it was a caribou, I think. I later found out that "hu" was Garry's ultimate expression of approval.

Like earlier that day when we were packing the horses for the trip to a new camp, nine hours down the trail. "You know how to throw a basket hitch?" Garry asked while hoisting one of the heavy pack boxes up onto the packsaddle.

"Sure," I responded with confidence. Sure indeed. I'd seen one tied a couple of times, but


somehow I managed to tie or throw, as the real packers say, the perfect basket hitch. I was standing there so proud admiring my creation when Garry walked around to look at it.

"Hu. Give that diamond rope a pull."


Hu indeed. Was that all that Divinci got when he created the Mona Lisa? Was that all that Michelangelo got for his handy work on the Cistine Chapel? I think not. This basket hitch was worthy of submission to the Smithsonian. "Give that

diamond rope a pull," came again from the other side of Smitty, the unwitting packhorse who was now adorned with what was unquestionably the finest basket hitch ever thrown.

But it was the next day as we were setting up camp that I realized what praise "hu" actually held. We had just finished up setting up my tent, a 14-foot square pyramid tent with three log beds and a wood stove. The weather had been anything but cooperative and I knew a drying rack for wet clothes was in order.




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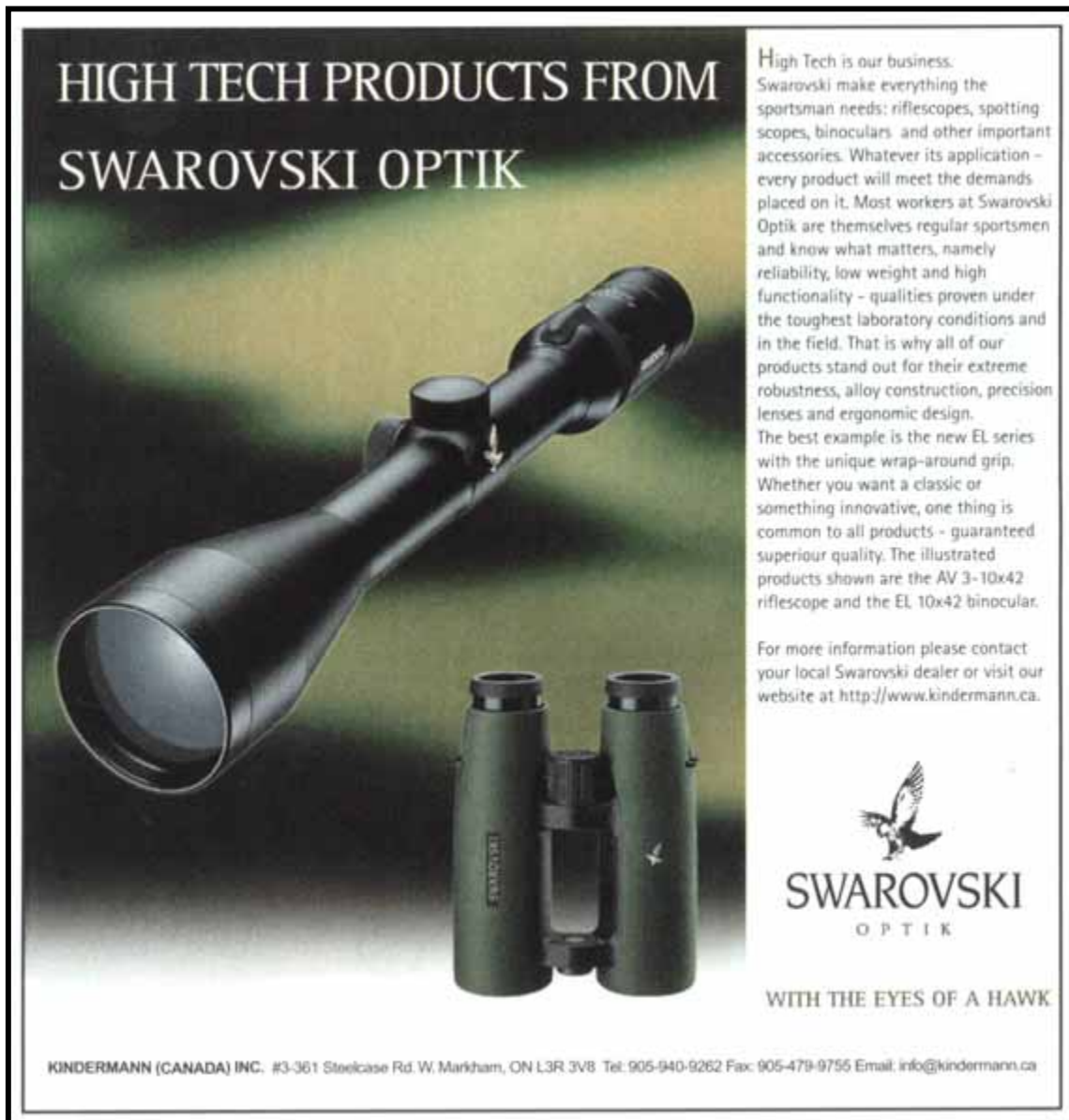
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Carefully, I constructed one branch from green poplar, and just as I was finishing up Garry walked in. "Used poplar. Uh. Guess you didn't want pitch on your clothes. Looks heavier than some of my hitching rails. Uh."

It was mid-September and I was in northern British Columbia, back hunting with Darwin Watson and Christina Falls

Outfitters. I had taken a beautiful Rocky Mountain goat with Darwin



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in 1995 and now it was Stone sheep and moose I was after. Darwin's area contains one of the most southerly populations of Stone sheep in North America and he has a long-standing tradition of providing quality hunts for outstanding trophies. His father began outfitting hunters in the late 40s and Darwin, following in his father's footsteps, took over the area in 1978. Since then he has expanded the area to include some more prime Stone sheep real estate.

I hunted the first few days with Darwin, as Garry had a group of moose hunters until the 24th. Darwin, like most outfitters, was so busy with the day to

day operations of the outfit that he had very few opportunities to get out and enjoy the very reasons he got into the business for, but for two days we rode countless miles, scoured high basins for rams and reveled in the bonus days of Indian summer.

We saw game too, lots of it. There were bands of ewes and young rams filling their bellies on high alpine slopes. There were caribou enjoying the fly-free days in the lower valleys. And there were moose, boy were there moose.

Darwin has built much of his reputation on the quality moose hunting he provides and after a

couple of days of riding around it wasn't hard to see why. There were moose in the willow-choked valley bottoms, there were moose on the lush avalanche slopes, and there were moose on the tops of grass-covered peaks. There were moose everywhere. While I had a moose tag in my pocket, it was sheep I was after and the moose would have to wait.

The following day Darwin flew me to another camp where I met Garry, his wife, Heather, and their kids Zach, Meg and Tell. We would be moving to a new camp, closer to Stone sheep

country. Nine hours later we arrived at a tiny cabin on the banks of the Ospika River. Indian summer was over. The entire day had been spent in a bone-chilling rain and the high basins were filling up with snow. This set the stage for the weather for the next two weeks.

“Do you want a quick ram or do you want to take a chance on finding a big ram?” Garry asked me.

“Big ram of course. What have we got to lose?”

“About a week,” Garry replied.

It was then that I realized how big the country was. There was a mountain right at the edge of Darwin’s hunting area that didn’t often produce rams, but when it did, they were hawgs. Garry recounted the story of a 42-incher taken several years earlier, and another one that scored right around 175. But he was right, it took two days of riding to get there and another full day to get back, and the two days we spent spotting were dominated by low cloud, more rain and snow.

There had been a pack of wolves actively working the creek, and we

found three dead rams right near camp. Whether they had fallen victim to an early snow storm the previous fall and starved to death or they had become unwilling meal for the wolves was

By the eleventh day of my hunt the weather was starting to get everyone down. It had been raining and snowing for nine straight days and I hadn’t seen much more than

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unclear, but there was no doubt the wolves really had things stirred up. During the brief breaks in the clouds we searched the high basins, but time and the weather conspired against us and we finally gave up and headed back to the main camp.

teasing glimpses of the mountaintops, the very place Stone sheep call home. I wanted a ram so bad, more so than any other hunt I had been on, but I could see my opportunity slipping away.

So it was on the eleventh day that we headed

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back another day," I chanted to myself.

"You say something?" Garry asked.

"Nope"

Garry and I had pretty well settled into a routine in fly camp and both knew our jobs without the other one saying a word. I'd get breakfast and lunch ready in the morning while Garry rounded up the horses. We'd then saddle and pack the horses. By the

out on yet another four-day journey, in the pouring rain. This was my last opportunity.

"There was an old white-faced ram up there last year that was about thirty seven inches. He wasn't full curl but he had lots of mass and was at least ten years old. We killed one with him that was identical except he had a dark cape," Garry said as we started up the creek.

"When was that?"

"October fifth. We shot an eleven year old ram out of there earlier this year, but the band the white-face ram runs with wasn't there."

The five-hour ride seemed to slip by and we soon had camp set up and supper on the fire. Fly camp was sparse, little more than a two-man tent, tarp and a tripod over the fire, but it gave us the portability we required to search the vast Stone sheep country. A wall tent and stove would have been more comfortable but too bulky and too time consuming to set up. Our camp was fine. The tent kept us dry and I had a warm bedroll, what else could a man want? A smile came over my face as I poured a puddle of water off my plate that had collected between the moose steak and beans. "Rain, rain go away, come

end, Garry never even checked my basket hitch. I was pretty much a B student in high school and I think Garry's mark for me would have been somewhere in that range. I certainly wasn't as comfortable and confident in the vast British Columbia wilderness as he was, but I was holding my own.

It was day 12 when Garry uttered the words I'd been waiting to hear for nearly two weeks. "There's a ram."

We'd ridden several hours up the valley from fly camp and spotted the ram on a high, snow covered bench. He appeared to be a young ram but easily made the full-curl minimum required by British Columbia law. "Wait there's another one," Garry said just as I was bringing the first into focus.

It was the white-face ram. He stood heads and tails above the other ram, outweighing him by at least 100 pounds and there was no comparison in their horns. Even though the white-face ram did not quite make full curl, he carried the head gear of an old, mature ram that had survived many winters, attacks by wolves and fights for dominance. It

It was fairly late in the afternoon when we spotted the rams and Garry thought it best to leave them until the following day. It was a tough decision for me to live with. The rams were tangible. They were only a four-hour ride away. They were live. They were breathing.

"I've never lost a big ram after we've spotted it," Garry said, sensing my angst.

And with that we rode back to camp.

Day 13 dawned cold but clear. The nighttime temperature had dipped into the minus digits and saddles, tent and gun were all frozen

Garry said almost pleading. "There have been so many screw-ups this year."

My trusty .264 had never let me down, but to placate Garry I confidently took aim at a tree 80 yards away. I slowly squeezed the trigger, and squeezed, and squeezed and squeezed. Nothing happened. The action was frozen solid. Red faced I dug out my Leatherman and went to work freeing the frozen parts. Again I took aim and after the report of the big magnum I confidently walked to the tree to show Garry the bullet hole, four inches above a knot I was aiming at, but it wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere. I had completely missed a 30-



was like looking at an apparition. I don't necessarily believe in ghosts, but after 12 days I didn't know if I believed in Stone sheep rams either.

It took us an extra hour that morning just to get things thawed out and packed up.

"Why don't you try your gun this morning,"

inch diameter tree at 80 yards. The second shot hit the tree, albeit nearly a foot to the left. The third shot finally found the mark.

The excessive rain and cold temperatures had taken their toll. Water trapped between the stock and barrel had swelling in the process and throwing the accuracy of the gun drastically off. The heat from the three shot had brought it back into line, but for how long. With my confidence slightly shaken we headed up the valley.



The rams were nowhere in sight when we arrived at our vantage point and I was certain they had decided to head for new range. There were a few tracks coming off the bench and across the valley. They were gone! “Guess we may as well head home,” Garry said.

“Shouldn’t we look over.....,” I stopped mid-sentence knowing I’d been had once again fallen victim to Garry’s rapier wit.

After several more hours of riding Garry pulled his binoculars to his eyes and smiled. “There they are, right above the horse trail.”

There they were, bedded as peaceful as could

be, enjoying the warm afternoon sun. My anguish was quelled, at least for the moment. Yes they were in sight, but far from hanging

the malfunction earlier that morning.

We emerged from the snow-covered balsams a

on my trophy room wall back home. We continued riding to another camp where we quickly unpacked the horses and planned a stalk.

The rams were right above the horse trail yes, but the trail had not been used for several years and countless blow downs and two feet of snow hampered our progress. About half way up we abandoned the horses and continued on foot. The sun was beginning to dip behind the tall mountains, the temperature began to plummet, and I worried again about my rifle. These were the exact conditions that had caused

little over 300 yards from the bedded rams. There was little opportunity to get closer and with daylight rapidly running out, time was of the essence. It was now or never. I tried to work the bolt on the pre’64 action. It was frozen solid. With much forcing it finally opened. I slipped a 140-grain cartridge in the chamber. I heard the firing pin lock. While 300 yards is a long shot, I was confident. The .264 is incredibly flat shooting and zero was right at 325 yards. I snuggled in behind the scope, laid the crosshairs on the ram’s shoulder and squeezed.

“Where did I hit him?”

“You didn’t”

again centered the crosshairs close to losing one. I was in the middle of his back soaked with sweat,

I chambered a second round. The ram was now standing. The second shot also failed to find its mark. I chambered the third cartridge. My adrenaline was running high. I could see my dream, my lifelong quest slipping away. I had come so far only to be denied now by an ice entombed rifle. The third shot had been right on that morning, I hoped for a similar result. The ram was running up the steep slope as I squeezed the third time. He faltered and chose an easier, downhill route. The fourth shot at the running ram also sounded good.

Garry and I took off running, trying to circle around the steep cliffs and cut the ram off. Neither of us was certain if he was wounded or not. We finally picked up his trail and a bright red ribbon of blood ran parallel to it. He was hit, but how bad. The trail headed down into the cliffs and at 40 yards I spotted the ram, breathing hard but not down. Taking careful aim in the middle of his back I sent another bullet on its way. A shower of rocks exploded several feet to the right of the ram. I chambered another round. The ram reappeared at 80 yards and I



and squeezed the trigger. adrenaline had replaced the blood in my veins and I began to shiver. The sun was now gone and temperatures had dipped to -15. We admired the downed ram for a couple minutes but quickly got on with the tasks at hand. Garry headed back for the horses while I went to retrieve our cameras and

spotting scope. It was nearly Box 450, Hudson's Hope, two hours back to camp and British Columbia, Canada, we were both close to VOC 1V0, 250-783-9454. hypothermia.

The ram, a grand old monarch of the mountains, was 11 years old with a deep curl and heavy bases. It was Garry's 43rd ram in his 18 years of guiding and while not the biggest; he certainly was one of hardest earned. I seriously doubt many guides would have put in the time and effort under such adverse conditions as were required to take this ram. Yes it was my ram in the sense that I had the tag and I pulled the trigger, but it was Garry's ram. I had just helped him harvest it. It was his ram like it was his country. I was comfortable in it, but Garry was at home in it. I can think of no one else I would have rather shared such a fine trophy with.

For more information, contact: Christina Falls Outfitters, Darwin and Angie Watson,

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