



## *Too Young?*

By Gene Wensel

As multiple deer seasons slip behind my boot tracks, I seem to spend more time reminding myself of the importance of hunting deer for what I personally consider the “right reasons.” I *need* to maintain and retain the romance of deer hunting because I love challenge. I love being selective. Too many short cuts or gadgets often eliminate our most important objectives. Less than honorable intentions lead to portrayals of disrespect for our quarry; something I’ve proudly grown to detest in my old age.

I seldom watch today’s television shows..... the same ones you too are probably tired of viewing. I don’t pay much attention to the often annoying whispering, especially when its dished out in hard to understand southern or foreign accents. I amuse myself detecting all the “hidden” commercials. Picking up on not so subtle endorsements and wildly exaggerated claims, I can’t help but ask myself why I can smell a fart though carbon pants. I ask myself how ozone units work in any decent breeze. I witness time saving technology suck the life blood out of our passion by way of the sporting industry and tasteless presentation of hunters on daily television. Television often makes hunting look far too easy, thus creating a sense of disappointment among novices.

More recently, I’ve witnessed a disturbing trend among hunters trying to involve youngsters in the quest for big game at *very early* ages as part of a master plan to insure the future of hunting. On the surface, this is presumably a vital aspect in the legacy of our passion. *Please* don’t misunderstand me, I am NOT suggesting that we discourage people from taking youngsters into the outdoors. Unfortunately, today’s “too much, too soon” culture brings temptations that quickly get out of control in a society now geared toward skipping steps or avoiding any degree of apprenticeship whatsoever. Far be it from me to

dampen our legacy spirit. In reality, the true challenge is as simple as learning to walk before we can run. Like church “elders” who fight acne while going door to door, the word *maturity* comes to mind and must be considered by parents and mentors.

I once met a cowboy in Texas who bragged about his son killing a whitetail buck at age two! TWO?? Yes.... two! That, my friends, is far too young to be killing big game. Let's break things down into reality. What reasoning skills does one possess at age two? What ethics level has been formed or even considered by someone who cannot yet speak a complete sentence? The kid was possibly still in diapers! Will there be a market for camouflaged diapers in the near future? The “hunter” probably wore pajamas with the feet attached and gets a lollipop whenever he sleeps dry. He couldn't sign his own name on a hunting license. He probably couldn't even climb the magic ladder into the shooting house because the steps were too far apart. My guess is that he shot the deer with someone else's rifle, in someone else's shooting house, over a food plot planted by someone else. Dad locked and loaded, aimed the scope and instructed little Johnny to touch the trigger when everything was lined up. Is this a stunt to be proud of or to brag about? I ask you, did the boy *hunt* that deer or just *shoot* it? The deer was probably older than he was!

Several years ago I met a *ten year old boy* who had already killed his “Big Five” in Africa! That includes elephant, people. I was tempted to ask the kid what he did for work but I left well enough alone. Instead, I asked myself what caliber of gun a person hands a ten year old kid to shoot a 50 year old elephant? What does that boy have to look forward to in his adult life?

I was raised in another generation. I was not allowed to hunt deer until I turned 14 years old. That *doesn't* mean I didn't hunt as a youngster! I was pure hell on rabbits, birds, squirrels and groundhogs when I was a kid. As far as I was concerned, that's why God gave us small game. In my generation, most kids started with slingshots, and were later routinely “issued” BB guns. Many a tweety bird fell to my trusty Daisy. I was taught gun safety and right from wrong. I was allowed to hunt small game with a .22 rimfire at somewhere around eight years old. My dad, in his infinite wisdom, knew my brother and I weren't old enough nor mature enough to be killing big game but he permitted Barry and me the freedom of roaming our farm for close range woodchucks and squirrels that we always tried to shoot in the head.

I grew up suburban or rural. Like most kids, I went through all the immature and irresponsible stages of capture, where boys shot toads with rubber bands and paper clips, put lit firecrackers into the mouths of flopping suckers, and ran soda straws up the butts of live frogs, inflating them to the size of apples. It was pretty brutal kid stuff, where “boys will be boys” attitudes prevailed whenever adults were not looking. But we knew better than to even think about “popping” a deer. Eventually I learned more outdoor skills like how to trap minnows and small game. I saved my chore money, bought a leg hold trap and caught my first muskrat. When I walked up to the poor thing, I didn't really know what to do next, so I killed him by punching him in the head until he died. The thought of using a club never entered my mind. Sad but true.

The entire woodsmanship venture is more often than not being skipped by modern American youth. Early on, either by my dad or through Scouting, I was taught basic outdoor skills; things like how to start a fire, how to dress a rabbit, how to tie good knots, how to catch nightcrawlers, how to use a compass, how to sharpen a knife, and how to tie

flies even before I owned a fly rod. I eventually learned how to stalk close to catch bull frogs by dangling a colorful trout fly a couple inches in front of their nose. I started as a Cub Scout. Merit badges were something to be proud of because they were *earned*. Today, the term “boy scout” has taken on a whole new meaning, if you get my drift.

As I said, generations have evolved over the years, allowing outdoor participants to skip any and all apprenticeship. I recently spoke with a guy whose son just returned from basic training in the Army. Out of 260 men in his entire company, *only 22* qualified their first day at the rifle range. Less than one in ten knew how to shoot a gun! They had to be taught. The finest fighting forces the world has ever known were once made up of American farm boys raised with firearms. They knew guns and how to use them. They hunted, ate red meat, and understood life and death. They also had what I like to call “heart.” They understood and believed in patriotism and realized this thing known as freedom was worth fighting for. I don’t mean to imply that modern American soldiers are no longer good warriors, as technology has filled in many of the gaps, but the simple fact remains that many, if not most, recruits now have to be taught woodsmanship, shooting, and basic survival or outdoor skills. On the plus side, one of the positive aspects of training new recruits who have never shot a gun is the fact they have also never taught themselves poor shooting form or other related bad habits. On a different note, I might also add that, if given a choice, I would rather be in the trenches of war with any ten people reading this piece than any hundred people attending an animal rights convention.

Although many states have minimum age criteria, gun caliber limits and draw weight restrictions for bowhunting, some states do not. I regularly see “hero” pictures of small children posed behind defunct deer, often not even smiling. It makes me wonder. I see six year olds “hunting” deer successfully on television shows. Most of the time, Dad appears a lot happier than the kid, who would often just as soon be down at the mall or at home watching cartoons or playing a video game.

Television hunting celebrities have programmed our youngsters to expect success without really earning it. They make it look so easy. Young hunters try to emulate the things they see outdoor celebrities do on television. Many are beyond even wanting to understand. They just want to be put in “a good spot.” The taste of instant gratification is demonstrated weekly at it’s very worst. Our heritage is being affected. Youngsters are being spoon fed exotic destinations and quick results before earning the privilege.

In all honesty, I feel that many adult hunters themselves have a very difficult time differentiating love from lust, mostly because hunting has sadly turned into an industry.

So, when is a child ready to hunt big game? Notice, I said *big* game. Not until they are mature enough to comprehend what real hunting is all about. Not until they know that hunting has responsibilities that include things like honor and respect. Not until they understand life and death. Not until they realize animals don’t talk and “Shotgun Red” doesn’t really breathe. Not until they become aware that some people actually still build their own arrows and even *enjoy* sharpening broadheads or reloading ammunition.

Some kids are probably ready for big game sooner than others. I’ve known a small number of youngsters who were skillful enough at under ten years old, but very few are ripe enough until sometime after their twelfth birthday. In the old days, young boys would squirm while waiting in anticipation for their fathers and uncles to come home from the hunt, anxious for the day when they too could participate. As the song goes, Davey Crockett “killed a bear when he was only three.” My guess is that the bruin was

probably treed or shot while eating from the Crockett family garden or garbage can.

In summary, I guess what I'm saying is that anticipation can be a wonderful feeling, but kids should not be driving until they are mature enough to take the wheel. Nor should they be holding down paid jobs except for basic chores. Nor should they be voting, dating, drinking beer, or running for office. I feel strongly that an outdoor apprenticeship is *mandatory* before allowing a youngster to hunt big game. Eagerness to learn is an important part of growing up, but doesn't really count until a lot of questions are addressed and answered with integrity and honor. Cultivation is only the first part of growth to maturity.

Take kids into the woods in decent weather. Show them tracks and explain deer sign. Run a "trap line" of trail cameras. I guarantee excitement and anticipation will be shown when they check their "traps." Let them assist you in selecting treestand sites. Help them plant some trees. Take them along when you search for shed antlers; that itself is a form of hunting. Teach them that building something solid first requires creating a good foundation.

I think it's only natural for every hunter to want their child to grow up to love the outdoors the way we do. But before you hand your daughter or son a tool that can drop a deer, ask yourself if he or she is *honestly* ready to do so in an honorable and respectful fashion. If, in your heart, you aren't absolutely sure of the answer, give them more time. Don't allow them to "take the wheel" of big game hunting too soon. Offer additional opportunities to hunt small game, then maybe a called in gobbler from a blind, close flying ducks over decoys with a light shotgun, or a small wild hog. They will eventually be ripe and ready. The first deer season they are mature enough to participate in will certainly come. Until then, encourage them to slow down, learn, and enjoy the outdoors for what it really is, rather than just allowing them to take from it. After all, hunting is not any sort of race. It is, or at least should be, strictly non-competitive. You'll know when your child is ready. And your heart will absolutely soar as they grin from ear to ear when you finally say, "See his white belly?"