



Creating My Own Luck

By Dan Evans

In 1992 I experienced my first success at bowhunting elk. I was alone in the national forest of northern Idaho...standing there over my first bull after calling him to within 6 steps...I knew I was hooked. Even backpacking that bull out to the truck wasn't enough to sway my outlook!

Now, eleven seasons later, I'm 31 years old and have been fortunate enough to have bowhunted trophy elk probably as much as anyone has in as many years. From 1992 through 1996 I hunted only one state each fall (Idaho). In 1997, I began to do more research and apply for elk tags in many western states. I have had 3 or more archery tags each year for these last 6 seasons. I've filled 19 of the 25 elk tags I've had. These 19 bulls represent over 6000 inches of antler, approximately 315 inches per bull average. 16 of the 19 qualify for the Pope and Young record book and several have over 350 inches of antler. All of these bulls were taken on self-guided hunts predominantly on public land. I have only wounded one bull and missed once, since taking my first bull. Am I proud of these numbers? You bet! Has any of this been as a result of luck? Of course! Do I plan on continuing to be "Lucky"? Definitely. My definition of luck in the elk woods is "being in the right place at the right time". Of course, this can and does happen out of pure chance sometimes, but I believe if I spend enough time in the right places, doing the right things, the odds are very good I will be there at the right time.

Consistently being in the right places isn't always as easy as it might sound. I work on this year round. I have been a subscriber of the "Huntin' Fool" for several years, every month the latest issue serves as I reminder of what I need to research and when & where I need to apply. I have been applying for several areas that offer over the counter tags or very good draw odds in case I need a backup plan. Most of my bulls have come from areas with easily obtainable tags. Up until this season I have only drawn a couple tags with tough odds. The last 2 years I have also started exploring guaranteed tags. By this I mean landowner or conservation vouchers that allow you to purchase tags that you would otherwise have to draw. This option has not been in my budget until very recently, but if it is feasible, it can open up a way to get to know and hunt a great area every year that may take you years to draw. Many people feel the most comfortable if they have one good tag and they can just concentrate on that hunt. Personally, I enjoy having "too many tags"! For example, this year I have 6 archery elk tags...the first season begins the 21st of August and the last closes the 19th of October. Half of these tags also give me the option of hunting a later season.

Equipment selection and preparation before the hunt, is extremely important to me. I enjoy shooting in tournaments and try to place myself in pressure shot situations as often as possible year round. I believe in putting a great amount of importance on every shot I shoot, whether it is in practice, competition or hunting. There is no excuse for not being a good shot! I feel I owe it to the elk. When I work very hard for an opportunity at a great bull, I do not want something I can control to be a failure point! I believe in shooting up to my potential, knowing my own limits and staying within them. My advice is, when faced with a shot opportunity, don't take it if you doubt you can make it, but if you know you can, don't hesitate! Practice beyond your expected shot distances. If you practice regularly at 60 yards, a 35-yard shot will seem simple. My average shot distance has been 34 yards. The archery equipment that I use for elk hunting is all chosen for a reason. I want equipment that is consistent, quiet, and accurate. My personal setup includes: Martin Scepter bow, Winners Choice strings, bow-mounted quiver, Trophy Taker sight, Trophy Taker fall away arrowrest, Doinker stabilizers, Easton ACC arrows and tough fixed blade broadheads. I shoot around 75 pounds of draw weight.

Physical and mental preparation can make or break your season. I am not someone who enjoys running marathons, but I do enjoy mountain bike riding and hiking to stay in shape in the off-season. I feel that the better shape I am in going in to the hunt the more options I have, which obviously gives me an edge. That being said, I definitely think mental toughness is the most important. I have hunted with people that seemed to be in great shape that were not able to keep their wits about them after a long hike in tough terrain, or when we found ourselves stuck in the alders in a steep canyon, miles from the truck after dark. Being prepared to deal calmly with any situation the mountains hand you is key!

One of the trickiest parts of being consistently successful at bowhunting trophy elk is getting within bow range and finding a shot opportunity. This may sound strange, but I have found one of the best things you can do is to not get stuck in a rut! Every year I talk to people who have “figured it out. “They killed a good bull, and now they are going to do it every year! But they don’t, because they go out and hunt the same way they have been, over and over. I don’t limit myself to one technique or one strategy. If it is legal, and you are up to it, try it. I have killed bulls on water hole, by bugling, using only cow calls, spot and stalk, “heading them off at the pass”, and plain old still hunting.

My theory on calling is very simple; if you convince him you are an elk it can work, if you don’t, it won’t. And, don’t expect him to come to you, but be ready if he does. This theory applies to trophy mature bulls not necessarily young bulls. It is imperative that you can call well. Work hard to master a diaphragm call. Diaphragm calls can be used to make almost any sound elk make, they leave your hands free, and they can be used to stop elk even when you are at full very well. I always carry several different calls. Many times I have killed a bull after switching the call I was using and finding one that he really liked the sound of. Maybe sometimes I give the elk too much credit, but in each situation I try to think how things look to the bull. My goal is to make it as easy as possible for the bull I’m after to come within bow range. If I am in thick country, I try not to make the bull come more than 20-40 yards to check me out. Obviously, getting that close in open country may not always be possible, but the principle is the same, “make it easy for him!”

I am amazed when I hear that it is easy to kill a big bull on water! Every year people do get “lucky” and kill a monster their first time sitting on a water hole. However, from my experience there are some details that can’t be overlooked if you want to be consistent. In much of the southwest sitting waterholes is the common way to hunt. It doesn’t take long for the resident herd to learn that something can be strange about those piles of brush with the black holes in them! Many times large bulls will use the water only at night, or will carefully circle downwind before coming in. I have had great success when properly using ScentLok along with scent eliminator sprays and body wash. I also think many situations are blown by too much movement at the wrong times.

Last but not least! I try to get to know the areas I am going to hunt as well as I can, preferably ahead of time. Scouting is something I love to do. In fact this year I have tags in two areas I have never hunted before. I spent a few days in each of these units already this summer and I’ve talked to several guys who have hunted there before. I’ve gotten some great leads, I have all the maps, and I’ll make it for one more short scouting trip to each place before the hunt starts...It’s looking really good! Of course when I know I’m going to be chasing the big one in only a few more weeks, it has to look really good!