

My Muy Grande Comes Home!

By: Lee Phillips

We have all heard the old saying...."Good things happen to those who wait". This was certainly the case for me in the 2022 Muy Grande Deer Contest. The Muy Grande contest was the first deer contest being established in the 1960s in Freer, Texas, and has grown to be the largest deer contest in the state. The participation in the contest is quite large, and it is both difficult and a huge honor to win one of their large trophies and a jacket that the contest is famous for.

I was very fortunate to grow up in a hunting family. My Dad and our relatives began hunting whitetails in the mountains of West Virginia in the 1950's. Some of my earliest memories of my childhood involved anxiously awaiting Dad to return from his annual hunt, so that I could see the deer and hear all of his stories. Even at the young ages of six and seven, my desire to become a deer hunter was becoming embedded within me.

This was the late 1960s, and it was vastly different than today. There were no lines of instant communication and daily updates on anything were made via the telephone or radio. The same was true for hunting information. There were no hunts for viewing on YouTube or on The Outdoor Channel. To obtain the most current happenings in the outdoor world, most hunters subscribed to the popular magazines of the day; these being *Outdoor Life* and *Field and Stream*. I was lucky as we subscribed to both of them.

I would eagerly await the arrival of both issues each month, and I read through them multiple times. Each magazine featured an advertising section and I would look over all of the ads with great enthusiasm. Once Dad and I finished with the magazines, I would share them with my buddies, and the excitement for the stories led to much fun as we imagined that someday we would be able to be accomplished hunters like those that we were reading about.

As my friends and I constantly talked about hunting, we also admired and dreamt about the articles that featured the Muy Grande Deer Contest. My friends and I would read the articles and admire pictures of the big deer that would be entered in the annual contest. At that time in Ohio, whitetail deer were few and far between. We were lucky to see a deer, and we had never seen anything that remotely compared to the big Texas deer featured on the pages. This continued for a few years, and every time that my friends would mention deer or seeing one, we would all reply...."But was it big enough for the Muy Grande?!" There was no doubt – we had whitetail hunting in our blood.

My dad noticed my enthusiasm, and at 10 years of age my training would begin. Even though I had tagged along on several squirrel hunts, Dad began showing me what deer trails, deer tracks, and other forms of deer sign looked like. The plan was that I could go on some hunts with him, but only as an observer as I would not be allowed to take a weapon. I made my first trip with Dad to West Virginia at age 11 for the first week of rifle season. This was late November in the mountains and it was COLD! We only had leather boots, wool socks, standard long-johns, and wool pull-overs for hunting garments. There were no special insulated boots or clothing like there is today. I was so excited knowing that I was going to see some deer in the wild, that the cold took a back seat. My desire to see deer overtook my discomfort from the cold.

I saw plenty of deer on that first adventure, but Dad and I never saw a buck during the entire week's hunt. I was really disappointed that we didn't harvest one, but my spirits were not dampened. I continued these annual trips with Dad, and I harvested my first buck at age 15. The deer only had 4 points, but it was a giant in my eyes. It was the first buck I had seen while hunting with an actual rifle since I started at age 13. My dad determined that I had put in enough time, and I was allowed to purchase a Winchester 30-30 from money I saved from my paper route.

As the years went on, Dad and I became bowhunting addicts. We hunted every weekend that we could and 2 weeks of vacation time when possible. The deer herd in Ohio had really begun to develop and buck sightings were now a regular occurrence. The bows at that were fairly primitive as compared today's standards, and we began using Allen Speedster compound bows. That changed in the 1980s when Ohio became one of the first states to allow open crossbow hunting. We were thrilled with this development as we now had weapons that were greatly improved. We became efficient with this hunting setup, and we both began to harvest a buck each season. Dad and I both had a love for this endeavor, and we kept right at it for the next 20 years. My Dad began to have declining health at age 70, so our ability to spend time in the field was severely limited by then.

The years and then decades went by but I never stopped my obsession for hunting whitetails with a crossbow. I had been blessed with the opportunity to hunt many parts of the country, and I was now a Field Editor with Crossbow Connection Magazine. It was then that idea hit me that participating in the Muy Grande contest would make a fantastic article and could possibly be a feature story for the cover of the magazine. I knew it would take many steps to make this happen, so I began researching the Texas hunting laws. I soon found out that things were different there than Ohio. We simply don't have things like low fence or high fence hunting, multiple buck limits, and pasture bucks. All of this was pretty confusing since Ohio has a one buck limit on state or private land. I just could not make sense of it all, so I decided to contact the Muy Grande contest directly.

I reached out to Imelda Sharber who is the owner of the contest. Her Dad started the contest in the 1960s, so not a better source for information could be found. Imelda was kind enough to take the time to explain all of the aspects of Texas hunting and how the contest worked. She was very polite and enthusiastic, so I was encouraged that I was headed in the right direction. Now it was time to get something set up so I could participate.

The contest has a category for the best out-of-state typical and non-typical bucks. I entered this for several years and I missed out on winning either category for 4 years. Even though I had harvested some truly nice whitetails with a couple over 200 inches, I always came up short. Finally my luck changed and my typical free-range buck from Ohio won the category in 20xx. As you can imagine I was thrilled! That year my wife and I drove to Texas to attend the awards ceremony so I could receive my award in person. The awards ceremony is a big event, and we so enjoyed meeting Imelda and her family.

I had done very well in the contest since deciding to participate, but now it was time to do a trip to Texas to hunt. After several hours of looking at Texas deer pictures, I located a buck that had a fairly wide antler spread. The deer was located on Ty Detmer's T-14 Ranch just outside of Freer, Texas. I had met Ty at the contest so we some history. If you followed college football in the late 1980s, you'll remember that Ty quarterbacked those great Brigham Young University football times at that time.

He also won the Heisman Trophy in 1990. I made a call and the plans were set; I would try to get the buck named "Wide Boy" with my crossbow.

My flight to Texas went very smoothly and I drove my rental car right to Ty's ranch. This was the day before the scheduled hunt. We shot my crossbow to check for accuracy, and enjoyed a hearty home-cooked dinner. The next morning found us in an elevated box blind right at first light, with several deer moving around including several bucks. Being from Ohio I certainly was not used to seeing this many deer at one time. We sat there a few minutes and Ty said "Here he comes" and handed me the binoculars. I gave a look and my eyes about jumped out of my head! The buck had antlers well past each ear and he was 60 yards out walking right towards us. I eased my bow up in to position while he was walking and settled in to nibble on some food 30 yards in front of us. We watched him for a minute or so and Ty whispered "Take him". I typically harvest my deer at 20 yards, so with this being a bit further, I held my top crosshair on top of his chest and squeezed the trigger. The big buck jumped at the noise from the bow and bounded off into the thick Texas brush. We sat for 10 minutes or so and eased down out of the blind to see if we could find any blood or better yet my arrow. After a bunch of careful looking, we did not find any blood or my arrow. Luckily Ty was filming the shot with his cell phone, so we analyzed the clip of the shot. As best as we could tell, I missed the heart by a couple of inches with my arrow hitting squarely on the front leg bone. The power of the crossbow drove the arrow right into his leg bone which prevented any full penetration. We decided to let things settle down and headed back for some lunch.

We reviewed Ty's video more and studied it extremely well. It was as we thought, I somehow made a bad hit on the deer. Our only option now was to head back out and search the brush with hopes of finding an indication that the deer was bleeding. We did grid searches back and forth for a couple hours and we only found a few small specks of blood. It certainly was a depressing time since it looked like my dream buck may be gone forever. We continued to hunt hard for the remainder of my trip, and I took a very nice 9 pointer and a boar hog which made the flight home much more enjoyable.

The following spring I received an email from Ty. It was a picture of my buck with small velvet antlers on his head; I just couldn't believe it! Somehow he had survived the winter and escaped harassment from coyotes. We were both thrilled and I immediately made plans to return later in the year to hunt him.

As my trip drew nearer that fall, I was following the weather closely as the upcoming forecast looked rainy. I took my crossbow and my 12 gauge shotgun on the trip just in case the weather was to wet for crossbow hunting. We began the hunt for the wide deer in a different blind than we had used previously since Ty reported that the buck's pattern had changed and he was using a different section of the ranch. It was raining and wet, so I took my shotgun instead of my crossbow. Just like the previous hunt, we had several deer around us at first light. We sat there for several minutes and Ty signaled with his left hand. He looked at me with a smile as the buck was approaching us from the left. I eased into position as it looked like he would pass right in front of the blind. That is exactly what happened. He walked right passed us and began eating at 27 yards in front of us. I put the shotgun on his mid-section and squeezed the trigger. The shotgun roared and I had completed my quest for the Wide Boy buck!

Ty's ranch was close to Freer so we took the deer to have it officially measured for the contest. The tale of the tape gave him a 25.5 inch spread, and we were thrilled as this put him into second place in that category. I couldn't help but be filled with pride as several people stopped to admire my buck and it looked like I might finally win a big trophy!! I kept up with contest and checked the results on-line for a couple of months. My dreams came tumbling down one day when I discovered that another buck had taken over my spot in the contest. It made for a couple of rough days as my efforts for the last two years didn't go as planned and again I missed out on the Muy Grande trophy.

For the next couple of seasons, my travel was severely limited by the COVID virus. I did not take any trips out-of-state. I decided to try a hunt close to home so I booked a free range crossbow hunt with Buckeye Whitetail Quest. It was a 1.5 hour drive to the outfitters from my house. I arrived in camp which consisted of a nice lodge in a rustic farmhouse. I checked my crossbow with my bag target that I had brought with me, and I was all set for the morning hunt. I would be hunting from raised box blinds overlooking food plots. I was pretty excited with hopes of seeing some deer, and hopefully I could get a buck to show up during my 3 day stay.

By the end of 3 days I had plenty of actions seeing a total of 27 does but not one buck. I wasn't really discouraged but it looked as if I'd be going home empty-handed. As we were driving the gator back to lunch on the last morning, I noticed a buck that had a unique rack standing in their preserve fence. I discussed the deer with my guide, Camp Newcomb, and I decided to stay an extra day to hunt him.

The next morning we quietly slipped into a box blind on the preserve. We had nice comfortable seats and we enjoyed a fun morning with several deer sightings which included a couple of bucks, but not the one we were looking for. It was now 11:30 am and we had decided to break for lunch soon. It was just then that Camp noticed some movement way out in a bean field. He put his binoculars up and whispered...."There's your boy". I looked at him through the binoculars and he certainly had a bunch of antlers on his head. He was still over 100 yards out but he was walking in our direction. We just sat motionless and I got in position when he was at 60 yards. His paced had slowed and I just sat there hoping that he would close the distance. He started to walk again and it looked like he was heading straight for us! He kept coming as a steady pace but in a stroke of luck he stopped broadside at 20 yards. I instinctively put the crosshairs on his rib cage and squeezed the trigger. The deer gave a small jump with the shot. He took a couple of trots and he was down for the count within 25 yards. Needless to say we were thrilled! We got down and looked at the great buck. He had an extra third beam and 17 scoreable points. His score came out at 175 7/8.

I wrote an article on this hunt titled From Tragedy to Triumph and it was published in *Crossbow Magazine*. As usual I had entered the Muy Grande contest buck, but unfortunately my buck was smaller than one already entered in the Out-of-State Non-Typical category. I was looking over the other entries in the contest, and then I thought that I should submit my story in the Top Story of the Year category. I decided that I would do just that and I emailed my story and some photos to the contest.

A couple of months later I was notified that my story had won the category! Naturally I was thrilled with this, but even more excitement was to come. Due to prior commitments, I wouldn't be able to attend the awards ceremony. A couple of weeks after the contest I was informed I had won a big Trophy and that it, and my winning jacket would be shipped to me.

I was elated and it had finally happened that after 9 years of trying I had finally won a big trophy in the contest! My trophy and jacket soon arrived in the mail and it was still hard to believe. After all of my years of hunting, and all of my aspirations in my youth, my dream was finally realized. I thought of my Dad and my Uncle who have passed on and how proud they would be.

When I was just a kid my Uncle Junior told me that I could see a deer in the wild better than anyone he had ever seen, and one of my Dad's favorite sayings was..."The harder I work – the luckier I get".

Maybe it was a bit of hard work and luck; even at age 61 some dreams do come true!!