

Exclusive **BOW & ARROW HUNTING**  
Feature Article: Excerpt  
from Joe Bell's new book,  
**"TECHNICAL BOWHUNTING,  
The Ultimate Guide to Shooting  
Performance."**

# Delivering at the Moment of Truth

Staying mentally tough at crunch time

By Joe Bell

*“What this power is I cannot say; all I know is that it exists and it becomes available only when a man is in that state of mind in which he knows exactly what he wants and is fully determined not to quit until he finds it.”*

—Alexander Graham Bell

“My friends and I called him “Big Jim,” because he was clearly one of the biggest Southern California mule deer we’d ever seen loping the coastal mountain range. I had a fascination

with this buck to the deepest extent. Weekend after weekend, I’d trek the rugged, brushy slopes searching for this buck. On one occasion, I spotted him vacating a canyon area, and I ran for more than a mile with my pack and heavy boots, trying to intercept the giant 4x4 buck. And I did, only the shot was much too far.

One day, I left the office a little early and got to my hunting area on time. My boss was fully aware of my obsession for this buck. I knew of a

deep, nasty canyon filled with brush where a spring jutted from the ground. I set up on a fairly open hillside 100 yards above it, and then waited in the hot, August sun.

About 1 1/2 hours before dark, I noticed a doe coming out of the Godforsaken ravine. I quickly became excited, but then relaxed a bit, knowing it was only a doe. But like a mirage, his giant antler beams jutted from the foliage. There he was—my Big Jim—nosing, pushing the doe up

*Every bowhunter gets excited in the face of a trophy. The key is to manage this excitement by thinking about every step of the shot, just like you do on the range.*



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*Consistent bowhunting success doesn't just happen. To make high-pressure shots again and again, you must have a system in place, such as a mental drill you go through just prior to hitting full draw.*

the gnarly, 40-degree slope.

I waited for a shot, almost shaking. Little by little the twosome got closer, as the monster continued his harassment. Over, around and even through bushes they went. Before I knew it, the doe was just below and climbing upward. She popped out of cover about 35 yards away.

I knew the shot would come to fruition; it would soon be my golden chance at this legendary buck. Knowing full well he'd appear in seconds, my nerves became increasingly tangled. Emotions were now in full flow.

At full draw in a flash, I held for the moment I so longed for. Despite my physical strength, mentally I couldn't draw a good bead on the buck's vitals; my focus was obviously on his wide-sweeping 26-some-inch beams. Uncomfortable, feeling physically awkward as I held for nearly a minute, I frantically whipped my sight onto his chest and released. The arrow flew hair lengths below his armpit. Even today, it stands as the worst bowhunting moment in my life.

The interesting part of all this is, during this phase in my archery career, I could place arrow after arrow in a tight cluster on a 60-yard butt. I had successfully shot other deer at ranges beyond 50



*A lot of bowhunters fail to draw at the right time, and usually get busted doing it. It's better to foresee where an animal will appear, come to full draw, and then wait for the opportunity to arrive.*

yards. And, nearly every other weekend I had drilled one ground squirrel and rabbit after another at challenging distances. I thought I was ready for Big Jim, and so did my friends. Yet, "buck fever" had the power to heighten every nerve in my body, all at the worst possible time.

Feeling excited is natural under intense encounters with big game. The problem is, high excitement will plague your shooting. Controlling this emotional element is crucial in executing a good shot. Here are some helpful tips on how to overcome, or at least manage, this common bowhunting ailment.

### **PRACTICE WITH PRESSURE IN MIND**

Certain things stick with you, and I remember an old friend telling me, "You'll shoot (at big game) like you practice." Simple, but poignantly true. To expect to perform better on big game than on targets is absurd. A steady, accurate shot in the woods only comes from executing perfect shots on the range.

■ **Fact:** *To control excitement, keep your mind preoccupied with all the steps necessary to make a great shot.*

When practicing, allow each shot to absorb you. Focus on each step (Chapter 1), and just before drawing the bow, visualize the perfect shot. Practice this enough and simply allow autopilot to take over when the chips are down. Chances are, you'll do it right, just like you have so many times before, and the odds will be leaning on your side.

Please don't take this process lightly. You can't ingrain it one day and leave it out the next. Nor can you learn it a couple of weeks before opening day. Carry it out throughout the spring and summer so it becomes a customary habit, like the mindless act of inscribing your signature on a check.

### **PICK A SPOT!**

In the heat of the moment, most bowhunters fail to do it, despite it being so elementary. When you're about to pull back on a trophy, taking a gander at the lower one-third part of the chest—where you want your arrow to strike—just isn't refined enough to counter a less-than-perfect aim. In practice, if you were to aim at this large of a target, you'd scatter arrows all over, every time. Precise aiming equals precise arrow impact, particularly when your breathing is elevated and your sights could be trembling in a giant 2-inch circle. Pick out the smallest patch of hair or crease on the animal's vital zone and start performing some serious tunnel vision.

This is your only objective at this point—until your arrow splits this mark. This kind of focusing has a way of poisoning your excitement so you can perform as a shooter. "I find I do best when I think of only one thing, and for me it is 'pick a spot,'" says Mike Slinkard, pro shooter, accomplished bowhunter and President and owner of Winner's Choice Bowstrings. "I just keep mentally repeating this in the moment just before and during the shot. I find this helps control my nerves—ones that will make even an easy shot impossible. "If there is time I will quickly picture the shot happening perfectly in my mind (just as I do when shooting a target archery shot)," says Slinkard. "All this happens very quickly,

and again it's really about controlling emotion more than anything. As far as the shot itself, that will just happen subconsciously as it does in practice."

### HAVE A HUNTING PRE-SHOT CHECKLIST

Before shooting at an animal, develop a mental checklist, similar to the kind of routine the top experts use. Well-known bowhunters Randy Ulmer and Chuck Adams have good ones.

"My checklist has evolved over the years," says Ulmer. "If I know a shot is eminent, I start to focus my mind on certain variables; this helps me combat buck fever. I try not to do anything without thinking about it first."

#### ULMER'S PRE-SHOT CHECKLIST:

1. Examine Shot Angle (mostly applies to mule deer and sheep hunting): As an example, if he estimates the animal is on a 25-degree slope, he knows to take off 10 percent from the shot distance.

2. Establish Exact Shot Distance: Ulmer wants to put his pin exactly where it needs to be for a perfect shot, not a close-enough hit.

3. Examine Arrow Flight Path: Possible interferences are things like tree limbs, etc.

4. Determine Pin Placement: Make sure you're using the right pin in exactly the right place.

5. Patience...Patience: Ulmer's mantra: Patience seldom goes un-rewarded.

6. Aim: Aim...Aim...Aim...until the shot breaks.

#### ADAMS' PRE-SHOT CHECKLIST:

1. Is the shot clear? Have an overview of possible obstacles. Visualize the arrow's path when necessary.

2. Angle of shot—compensate accordingly. (Adams has carried an angle meter for about 30 years.)

3. Get the range. If time, use laser rangefinder; if not, eye the distance as best as possible.

4. Pick a spot.

5. Point the bow straight at the

target, pull straight back.

6. Relax bow hand as much as possible.

7. Take the first good high-percentage shot.

### HOW TO GAIN CONFIDENCE

Following your checklist during the moment of truth won't be enough. You'll have to put it into practice well before this moment—over and over again. Stump shooting, small-game hunting and 3-D tournaments are perfect places for refining your execution.

I like combining all three, since each has qualities to offer. Stump shooting and small-game hunting allow you to "suit up," just like you do for a big-game outing. When hunting small game you are out stalking and/or ambushing, just like you would with a buck or bull. You use camo duds for concealment, a binocular to enhance visibility and a rangefinder for accurate shooting distance. You're essentially big-game hunting, only the target is smaller.

■ **Fact:** *Picking a spot and focusing on that spot is the most powerful medicine to cure buck fever.*

3-D shoots, though different from hunting, bring on beneficial pressure variables. Small crowds of people watching you shoot can create

nervousness, and this is just what you want. If you can master shooting "under the gun," chances are, you'll do well at combating buck fever.

Visualization practice is very helpful as well. During practice sessions, Slinkard practices a lot of visualization, imagining a real shot on a live animal. "The interesting thing is that your subconscious mind—for all of its strengths—cannot tell the difference between reality and vividly imagined events," says Slinkard. "So, by actively practicing while vividly imagining performing well under the stresses of a hunting situation, it is possible to actually gain a simulated high-stress hunting experience. When the real-life shot occurs, the subconscious mind thinks that it is just something it does all the time, and stress levels and corresponding mistakes fall dramatically."

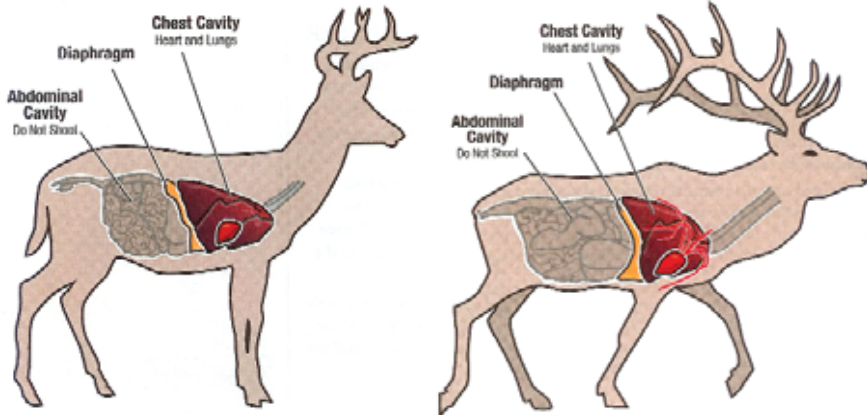
With this technique, Slinkard says it's important to visualize some things not working out either, such as the animal moving too fast for a shot, presenting the wrong angle or spooking. This way, it's much like reality in the hunting woods. Shots don't always work out, so you want to visualize that as well, and eventually move on to other images where it does.

### WHEN TO SHOOT

Shots at big game are precious for



*The author remembers feeling a strong dose of buck fever while drawing down on this Wyoming whitetail. His saving grace was aiming intensely at where he wanted to hit, which seemed to force a good shot.*



To be an ethical bowhunter, you must have intimate knowledge of a deer or elk's vital organ structure so you can deliver a killing shot accordingly.



Participating in 3-D matches will help you shoot better on big game.

most of us; you may only get one chance during a long hunt. When that chance comes, it's important to recognize it. Interestingly enough, a lot of bowhunters fail miserably in this department. A whole lot of factors come into play that will define the right time to shoot. Animal behavior, shot angle and personal shooting comfort are key factors. However, the key, in my opinion, is to recognize the first good opportunity, not the very best one in the world.

A lot of hunters are looking for those hallmark chances—an animal at 20 yards that is relaxed, perfectly

broadside or slightly quartering away—a gimme shot, really. That's great, mind you, but the reality of it is that this kind of shot may never come during a week's hunt. You may have to settle for a more challenging, but certainly doable shot, like a buck standing 37 yards away with its vitals only exposed through a 12-inch circle in the brush.

Don't take me wrong, now. By no means am I advocating unethical shots on game (desperation shots are for fools), but if you've practiced like a madman all spring and summer long, and you know your arrow's flight trajectory inside and out and confidence is reigning, I say take the shot. Don't mess around. "I take the first good high-percentage shot within my killing/confidence level," says Chuck Adams. "A lot of bowhunters tend to dawdle when faced with animals in their effective range, waiting for the best shot in the world. In the end, they go home empty-handed."

A few seasons back, I stalked three nice mule deer bucks, all 4x4s with 26- to 28-inch spreads. The deer were feeding in the open with nothing but pine needles and a few scraggly bushes separating us. When the moment was right, I crawled a bit closer and got within the outer edge of my personal effective range. It was a pretty long shot, but I knew I could make it. I knew, because I had no lingering doubts—that's your greenlight go ahead.

From there, I went into proactive mode. Once the first deer disappeared

in a cut in the terrain, I hit full draw. I tracked the second deer, but it too dropped out of sight. When the third and smallest buck stopped momentarily, the shot was off and the arrow made a resounding thump. Later that day, as I was packing out deer quarters, it was obvious I had made the right decision.

In that example, I could've done many things differently. I could have been more patient, waiting for the deer to possibly get closer—you know, for that slam-dunk opportunity. Or, I could have waited for any of the bucks to reappear again, hoping they'd calmly graze once more, so I could shoot at motionless 3-D-like target. Yes, I could've, but no guarantees exist in any of that. Why gamble when a good shot opportunity was already before me?

Experience is the true indicator of what constitutes a good or bad shot for you. However, after years of bowhunting, my advice is this: Be as proactive as possible when animals are within your effective range. Think, but be ready to react quickly. There's a fine line between all this. Exercising patience is crucial; if there's any doubt about the shot angle, don't shoot. The last thing you want to do is ruin a potentially great shot opportunity by forcing things and shooting at the wrong time, perhaps causing a superficial wound or a lengthy blood trail that begins, but then leaves you going home empty-handed.

"I think inexperienced bowhunters often rush the shot," says Ulmer. "They're so excited to finally get a shot that they want it over with. They are afraid the deer is going to get away. If they would take an additional 10 seconds, they would shoot more deer—an occasional buck would get away but, in the long run, they'd have more success. You usually have more time than you think to execute the shot."

If there's a time to slow down, it should be during the shot phase. Focus on the steps of the shot and carry them through. As was stated earlier, this will help you keep your cool.

## WHEN TO DRAW

*If the shot's a go, the next step is to get drawn, unseen. This is a huge battle in most situations, and again, many bowhunters do it wrong.*

Mistake No. 1 is drawing within view of the animal's eyes. The sharp eyes of a bull or buck will catch such movement every time. Wait until the animal's eyes are obscured by a tree, bush or rock, then hit full draw.

Mistake No. 2 is not drawing early enough into the encounter. When an animal is too far for a shot, but is moving in your direction and you predict a likely shot encounter, it is the time to get to full draw. Most bowhunters seem to want to wait until the animal is in the wide open before placing the rangefinder on the animal and then coming to full draw.

This works only some of the time, given the animal turns his head so you can draw undetected. But, most of the time, the animal never turns and, in this case, drawing your bow is impossible without being seen.

■ **Fact:** *Visualize the perfect shot before attempting to take one. By doing so, you increase the chances of it becoming a reality.*

In cases like these, predict where the animal is likely to travel, pre-determine shooting distances to these windows using your rangefinder, and be ready to strike—that means waiting at full draw as the animal pops into view. I can't emphasize this enough. This is all part of recognizing a good, high-percentage shot.

Here's a great example. A few seasons back, while hunting Sitka blacktail deer on Kodiak Island, Alaska, I spotted a group of deer grazing along a snow-covered slope. Noticing there were three decent bucks in the bunch, I stalked in from below, totally hidden by snow and brush. However, as I eased upward, I could see the tops of the deer, including one good branch-antlered buck.

Instantly, I figured the distance by placing the rangefinder on his polished

horns, and drew my bow. I walked up the hill 5 more yards before the snow bank was clear of his chest. At the very instant the buck snapped his head in my direction, the arrow was on its way.

Maneuvering until I had a clear shot on that buck, then drawing my bow would have proved to be a huge mistake in this case. The deer would've surely caught my movement and likely bolted, ruining the shot opportunity all together.

## SIZING UP ETHICAL SHOTS

As far as I'm concerned, if you take

anything other than broadside or slightly quartering-away shots on big game, you're flirting with being unethical. There could be a few rare exceptions to this, but not many. Let's explore the details of ethical shots, and perhaps some exceptions to this rule.

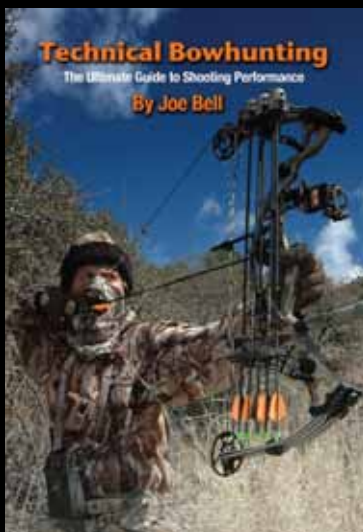
Anytime an animal is standing perfectly broadside or at a slight quartering-away position, its vital organs are unobstructed by heavy bones, allowing the best possible access and penetration for the arrow and broadhead to bisect both lungs, which

*Continued on page 59*

## THE ULTIMATE BOWHUNTING BOOK GEARED TO THE SERIOUS ENTHUSIAST

Author Joe Bell, expert bowhunter and editor of *BOW & ARROW HUNTING* magazine, rounds up tips from some of the best bowhunters in the industry and brings it all to you in an easy-to-follow format. This book is one of a kind! It's your true shortcut to archery success!

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### \*What renowned bowhunter Randy Ulmer says about the book:

"Joe Bell is an archer, an outdoor writer, and an editor. He is a master of each of those disciplines. However, Joe is a bowhunter first and foremost, and that fact will become very apparent as you read this book.

If you are a bowhunter who yearns to master your equipment and your shooting form without wading through volumes of unnecessary fluff, then you need to read this no-nonsense book. I read this book cover to cover and liked it so much I immediately read it again."

—Randy Ulmer, *Hall of Fame bowhunter*



When mentally preparing himself for the shot, Randy Ulmer likes to preoccupy his mind with certain variables, such as shot angle, exact shooting distance, and when to draw, for example. This helps him combat buck fever, he says.



Chuck Adams believes in taking the first good, high-percentage shot that comes his way. He says a lot of bowhunters tend to wait for the very best shot in the world, which rarely happens.

expires the animal quickly. This is the goal in effective bowhunting—to hit the animal through both lungs.

The perfect aiming spot on a broadside deer is the point 4 inches up and in line with the knuckle on the leg (right where it meets the brisket).

With a slight quartering-away deer, come up the same amount from its brisket, but horizontally align your sight pin with the offside leg. Either of

these shots allows for maximum margin of arrow placement to the vital organs, which includes the lungs and heart.

Beyond this, things become dicey as the vitals are covered by heavy bone and tissue, which can cause all kinds of penetration and deflection issues.

One of the most tempting shots is the quartering-to shot, but it's a huge mistake. In this position, the animal's shoulder and leg bones cover most of the lung/heart region, except for that rear portion of the onside lung and possibly the liver (given it's on the animal's right side). To catch this single lung, your arrow must hit perfectly one-third of the way up the chest cavity, barely nick the edge of the shoulder blade, where it will bisect this 3-inch portion or so of the lung, then bury itself into stomach and intestines. With this hit, the animal will eventually die, but its death will come through slow, arduous infection. This does not constitute a good shot, even if you happen to hit the animal perfectly.

Straight-on shots become dicey as well, though some experts will take these shots under certain criteria. For example, I've seen a lot of pronghorn antelope shot more or less straight on as they drank at a watering hole. With moderately thin bones, penetration on

these animals is not much of a problem given your bow generates more than 55 foot-pounds of kinetic energy.

Randy Ulmer (a veterinarian) had this to say about straight-on shots. "I have never taken this kind of shot and never will. It's better to be patient. Your chances of killing that bull are 1 in 10, and the same goes for a deer. You are basically shooting for the thoracic inlet. It's a hole about the size of your fist, but where is it? You don't really know."

Chuck Adams says he would take such shots, but only under certain circumstances. "On a big-boned animal like an elk, I would not," said Adams. "For shots like that, two factors become important: Size of the animal and temperament of the animal. I've never taken a shot at a whitetail deer straight on because you know they'll jump the string. On the other hand, I shot my formal world-record Sitka blacktail deer back in 1986 with a full-frontal shot from 35 yards. I knew from past experience that these deer are not notorious for jumping the string. I also knew my powerful bow/arrow would shoot straight through the brisket bone and into the vitals. However, if you wait, you'll usually get the broadside shot you need."

As far as I'm concerned, all other shots at big game are to be avoided—period. To intentionally shoot an animal in the mid-section (guts) or through the rear end (ham or anus) is purely immoral and leaves way too much to chance. The odds of dispatching that animal quickly are slim to none, whereas the chance of gimping the animal or causing slow, painful death is extremely high.

■ **Fact:** *Ethical bowhunting means shooting an arrow through both the animal's lungs for a clean, rapid kill.* ←

**Author's note:** *This chapter also includes several insightful sidebars, but due to lack of space in the magazine, we did not run them in the article.*