

Hangin' With the Stars

BY JEFF SCHLACHTER

Back in the mid-1990s, while watching Bentley Coben's first video production and listening to the soft, soothing narration of the late Gordon Eastman, I saw Cody Robbins for the first time. He was just a young punk kid, but I could tell instantly by the sparkle in his eyes that we shared one thing in particular: an incredible passion for hunting. Over the next few years, I always made sure to get Bentley's production of the year, looking forward to seeing what this young hunter had done over the season. He never disappointed and seemed to come through with a tremendous buck each and every fall.

Before long, Cody was becoming a star on the camera, capturing some spectacular scenes of the giant bucks found near his home turf. When I heard that Jim Shockey had snapped him up as his cameraman, I wasn't surprised. Once Cody was teamed with Jim, a rock-solid combo was immediately formed and both of their careers instantly skyrocketed. I always enjoyed following the two stars on their hunts, which found them travelling throughout the world, adventure after adventure.

Cody quickly proved that his onscreen charisma was as spectacular as the award-winning footage he always captured when behind the camera.

I'm almost certain, like many others out there, that it was Cody and Jim who inspired my hunting partners and me to try to outdo one another with the camera year after year. I always wondered what it would be like to be in front of the camera, followed by a video superstar like Cody; the footage we would capture!

Fast forward to the fall of 2007, when my wife, Jodi, and I planned a career



Jeff Schlachter of Wadena, Saskatchewan, took this massive mule deer south of Chaplin in 2009. Jeff and cameraman Cody Robbins made a perfect stalk on the old boy, but had to wait for the massive buck to rise from his bed. The antlers carry incredible mass, great forks, and whopper-sized G-4s. Circumferences are mostly over five inches, and the longest main beam goes 24 inches. With a 23 2/8-inch spread, Jeff's buck ends up grossing 196 6/8 non-typical points. This great photo was set up by Jeff Schlachter, who put his camera on a tripod so they could capture the moment.

change and a move that took us into the heart of Saskatchewan's northeast. It wasn't long after that, while at a hunting banquet, that I met *Big Buck* magazine's star, Garry Donald. Now I had talked to Garry many times on the phone, written a couple articles for the



magazine, but meeting him in person was a real treat. We sat together and chatted the night away, talking about the stunning buck he had named “Heavy Duty,” and drooling all over the sheds that Garry had brought with him. When the topic turned to videoing, Cody Robbins' name was mentioned and I said, “Without a doubt in my mind, he had hands-down become the best cameraman in the biz.”

Now Cody and Garry had become good friends over the years, and I was trying my best to get my foot in the door and set

up a chance to meet Cody for my very own. I reassured myself it was all going to happen; it was just a matter of time.

After many years of dreaming, in mid-June of 2009, I finally booked a Dall sheep hunt with Ram Head Outfitters in the Northwest Territories. As you can imagine, I was extremely pumped and really looking forward to this hunt of a lifetime. At long last I had the chance to meet up with Cody, and we chatted for hours about the possibility of him coming with me to video this hunt. Cody only had one problem to keep him away: he was

just in the process of launching his fabulous new show, “Live 2 Hunt,” and had many deadlines to meet. Well, we went back and forth right down to the wire, and although it never worked out for Cody to come film my Dall adventure, I did go up there and shoot a gorgeous full curl ram.

Once I got back from my N.W.T. hunt, Cody and I met up a few times over the next couple of months, discussing the mulie tag I had drawn in southern Saskatchewan. He reassured me that he wouldn't miss the opportunity to come film the hunt and this time nothing would keep him away. I had hoped to get down to the south country with my bow, but the late harvest we were having in Saskatchewan was keeping me close to home, and

have the mule deer hunkered down, lower to the ground than the belly of a rattlesnake, and we weren't having any luck at finding a buck over 140 B&C.

The first two days went by pretty much uneventfully with the weather keeping everything lying extremely low. By the third morning and our last day, Garry had talked to his wife, Elaine, and she badly needed him back in Saskatoon, as the magazine was busier than ever and she could barely keep up. After we parted ways with Garry, Cody and I decided to hunt until noon, then head home with our tails tucked between our legs, prepared to go home beaten up, battered, and empty-handed. It had snowed quite a bit overnight, so we hoped this might get the deer



Another look at Jeff's big mulie.

with being a partner in a farm machinery business, my hands were full.

Before I knew it, the middle of October was rolling around and we had finally made plans to head down to the south country in search of a big, old mulie buck. Along with Cody and me was *Big Buck* magazine's one and only Garry Donald. I was very excited and almost overwhelmed to be down there with these two legendary characters, and although I was the only one with a tag, both Garry and Cody hoped they would capture some excellent video footage on our little southern journey in a new area none of us had ever spent any time in before.

Things started off very slowly with strong winds and blowing snow, not the weather we had been hoping for and a terrible way to begin the hunt. The miserable weather seemed to

out of their beds, up feeding and moving around where they would be a little more visible, and finally bring us a little luck that we more than deserved.

We headed down to a little spot that we wanted to check out, and there in the morning snow I spotted three bucks lying on the side of a ridge. A quick glass revealed three smaller bucks, just like everything else we'd been seeing.

I had just about given up when I looked over my shoulder and noticed three more bucks lying right on the top of the ridge amongst some rocks and buckbrush. The binos were raised, and much to our surprise, here were three bigger bucks, with two that needed a closer look.

We quickly snuck up the ridge to study the two a little better. One buck looked high with a huge typical frame and a couple

small stickers, and the other had a slightly smaller frame with insane mass and lots of junk. If the chance presented itself, it would be a tough decision; they were both great deer. The big typical had G-2s over 18 inches, but the big non-typical had six-inch bases with lots of extra points and tons of character.

An old tractor pulling a bale wagon down the road below us, its diesel engine knocking away in the brisk morning air, caused the bucks to all rise warily to their feet. They started over the hill in the opposite direction, and we knew it was time to make our move. Cody and I quickly snuck along the ridge and up over the back side, trying to see where the bucks had gone, being extra careful not to get busted. There was a fold in front of us with a silver willow patch that they had to be in, so Cody had a peek and signalled that all three were there, feeding just below us. I was ready for a shot at just over 100 yards in case they fed up and into the open.

We took turns peaking over the lip of the ridge, watching as they slowly browsed their way closer and finally lay in the brush below us, just out of sight. We decided to sneak in as close as possible, but were a touch nervous with the noisy snow that was a little crunchy on this crisp, cool day.

We formulated a plan, and I slowly belly-crawled towards a big rock on the edge of the draw. Taking one little worm-like wiggle, then a pause, I continued this action until I was right where I wanted to be, while Cody snuck in behind me with the camera running.

I couldn't believe my eyes – there lay the three bucks before me, sleeping with their heads down, at no more than 45 yards! I thought, “Wow, we are right in their bedroom, inside their safety bubble, this is absolutely incredible!” My decision was to take the monster non-typical because mass and junk get me fired up, even though the huge typical was equally as impressive.

I lay prone in the snow for well over an hour with a deadly rest on the rock, while Cody knelt right above me, ready to capture the footage as this incredible hunt unfolded before us. It was tough to maintain my composure, between the massive non-typical mulie lifting and swivelling his magnificent antlers every so often at 45 yards in front of me, to Mr. Cody Robbins practically having me pinned down with one knee and his camera rolling directly above my back.

After an hour, my legs started to shake as did Cody's head, wondering what my problem was. I quietly whispered to Cody it was from lying in the snow, but honestly I wasn't sure if it was the cold or my nerves causing my twitch. I finally began to realize that being in front of the camera was stressful and not for the faint of heart. If I had been alone on this hunt, the quest for this buck would have been long over, right after the first time he lifted his head, giving me a clear shot. But this hunt was different; there was pressure on both of us. It was all about the footage: Cody needed to capture it and I needed to get the job done.

So now we absolutely needed this buck to get up from his bed and stick around long enough to provide us with not only some great footage but the kill shot needed for Cody's “Live 2 Hunt.” If this alone wasn't enough to drop any seasoned veteran to his knees, I had never shot at anything with my muzzleloader other than paper. Pressure, no not at all, I had nerves of steel. Well, OK, maybe it wasn't the cold that was causing me to shake from the waist down!

Finally, after I was practically completely numb, what wasn't numb was definitely cramped up, and I still couldn't believe how Cody had been on his knees this whole time, the first buck finally rose to its feet. I was locked on the big non-typical and the camera was recording as this first buck slowly walked over to the old gnarly non-typical, trying to nudge him to his feet. When he finally rose, it triggered the big typical to rise as well.

Cody whispered, “Wait, wait,” while I stared at the gnarly stud of a buck in the crosshairs of my scope. I was ready as the colossal buck turned and stared in our direction, then slowly turned to face directly away from us. I was worried he'd just quickly bolt in the opposite direction and we'd be left with nothing, but the ol' mulie curiosity “killed the cat,” so to speak, and he couldn't help but turn back for one more look, just to try and figure us out. That was all we needed, and as the camera rolled, the instant Cody whispered “Shoot,” smoke bellowed out from my barrel with a great shot causing the brute of a buck to jump straight up in the air. He only ran about 30 yards before piling up in the brush right before our eyes, all captured on film, by the one and only Cody Robbins, to be replayed over and over again for an eternity.

Cody immediately ran over and tackled me with a big bear hug, camera still recording as we rolled around giggling and screaming about how it had all just worked out perfectly and how this was some of the best mulie footage he'd captured in years. How does it get any better than that? Well, as I walked up to my first trophy with a smoke pole, I was in awe, completely wrapped up in the moment. I still had a hard time believing I was on this hunt with Cody, and now here we were, both kneeling before an absolutely incredible mulie with insane mass, thick gnarly points, and all the character you just crave in a buck. I couldn't put my hands around the bases, they were so heavy, and that combined with all the stickers and uniqueness this buck carried, I was absolutely stunned. It was so hard to comprehend what had just happened. Wow, what a rush and what a phenomenal hunt! Cody said the scenes captured on our hunt are some of his best in L2H's 2010 season line-up, but I guess you'll have to tune in and see for yourself. It is these precise moments and the memories they create why I, too, “Live 2 Hunt” . . .

Well, it took years for our paths to cross, but I finally found out what it's like to be “Hangin' with the Stars” . . . 🍀