

Making Sure of the Shot

By [Gary Zinn](#)

I am not a world class big game hunter. My experience is limited to hunting whitetail deer, mostly in my native West Virginia. There are many hunters who have taken far more deer and other big game animals than I have. However, I do pride myself on one thing: in five decades of hunting, I have never lost a deer that I hit. I attribute this to having learned to set up good shots and take them at the right moment, skills I began to develop using a single-shot .22 rifle on small game and varmints, long before I ever started hunting deer.

The principles I use to guide my shot setups are:

- I will never shoot at an animal that is screened in any way; if I can't clearly see my intended impact point, I don't shoot. This is both for shooting safety and out of respect for the animal.
- I assume the most stable shooting position that the situation allows. I most often shoot from a sitting position; if I'm standing, I try to rest the rifle on or against something and I never take a shot from any position without the support of a "hasty sling."
- I can be very patient, waiting to get a good shot. If the first sighting of an animal involves a situation where the shot opportunity is poor, waiting may provide a good opportunity, as often as not.
- Conversely, when a good shot is presented, I take it immediately. When I know I have a decent shot, I don't wait around.
- I don't shoot at running deer, ever. A stationary animal is best, of course, but a walking deer is okay for me, provided the range is short enough that the time it takes the bullet to get there is negligible. Shooting at a deer that is making serious speed will likely lead to a bad outcome.
- I'm not stingy with follow-up shots. If the deer doesn't go or stay down from the first shot, I put in another one as soon as I can. A deer that goes down for good within sight is a lot easier to recover than one that disappears over the hill.

- I never take a head-on or rear end shot. If I can't see the vital zone (the heart-lungs-shoulder area) that I want to hit at a broadside or quartering angle, I don't shoot.
- Finally, I am realistic about my shooting distance limits. For the two deer rifles I currently use, a .260 Remington and a .308 Winchester, the critical numbers are 280 and 260 yards, because those are the maximum point blank ranges (MPBR) with the hunting loads I prefer in each gun. I have both rifles sighted in with the MPBR as the critical parameter and I absolutely won't shoot at a deer that I know or believe to be further away. In fact, I consider anything over 200 yards to be a very long shot and I will take such a shot only when I feel that all conditions are optimal.

All of this may sound a bit complicated, but it's not. I don't carry a shot setup checklist into the deer woods. Rather, my mind processes the relevant variables of a given opportunity automatically and quickly and it gets easier with practice. Here are three incidents that illustrate the application of some of my self-imposed shot setup guidelines.

Patience: One evening I was sitting in a patch of broomsedge, watching a herd of deer feeding about 200 yards away, at the edge of a pasture. There were four or five does, several half-grown youngsters and a nice 8-point buck. I started to squeeze the trigger on him four times and each time either he turned away or another deer moved in front of him at the last second. The fifth time I finally got a clear broadside shot and an in-the-tracks kill.

It took me over twenty minutes to get that shot, but the result was worth the wait and self-restraint. My only anxiety was that I almost ran out of shooting light before the deal was finally done.

Sometimes it happens fast: One day I was still hunting along a hillside bench through what, in my youth, had been a neighbor's pasture. It had over-grown into brush and small trees, good deer habitat. I heard someone shoot ahead of and across the hollow from me and immediately a half-dozen deer ran up the hillside onto the bench about 100 yards away. They turned toward me, now moving at a lope, and I saw that the lead deer was a 6-point buck.

I eased a couple steps to where I could brace my rifle against a small tree and got my scope on him. The deer kept coming directly toward me. (Don't take a head-on shot; wait - something will happen.) There was a fallen tree directly across the buck's path about 30 yards in front of me and when he reached it, he turned uphill, giving me a clear broadside shot that I immediately took. At the shot the buck hunched, but took a few more strides uphill and then turned to pass directly above me. (He's not down, time to follow up.) At my second shot he crumpled and slid down the hillside, coming to rest against a small bush right beside me. No problem recovering that one.

My first shot was a vital hit through the lungs. This buck would have likely gone down for keeps within 50 yards if I hadn't shot him again. However, I didn't *know* this at the time and since he was still up and moving, my follow-up shot principle kicked in without any real deliberation on my part. When in doubt, shoot again.

The whole episode, from the report of the unseen hunter's rifle to the buck piling up at my feet lasted no longer than thirty or forty seconds. In that short time I got into a steady shooting position, waited for a good shot opportunity, took it immediately when it occurred and followed up when it seemed prudent to do so. No unnecessary haste, just getting the job done.

One that got away: One afternoon a couple of years later, I was sitting on that same hillside, near where the episode I just recounted had occurred. Nothing much was happening until a buck with the biggest rack I had ever seen on the hoof stepped into a small opening on the opposite hillside. When he turned uphill directly away from me, I saw that his rack was much wider than his shoulders. The buck was in sight for only a few seconds, but I saw enough to know that I wanted to spend some time specifically hunting him.

The next morning found me sneaking into the area where I had seen Mr. Big, moving at a pace that had snails scoffing. After awhile, I heard a deer grunt in the bottom below me. I froze and in a few seconds I spied him through a light screen of brush. He was crossing the bottom less than 100 yards below me, following the trail of a doe. I instantly realized that I might have a chance at him, because he was preoccupied and I was sure where he was going. I knew that a well-used game trail ran uphill from the bottom and that it crossed my level on the hillside, no more than 50 yards in front of

me. The brush was thick in that direction along most of the hillside, but I had a clear lane to a narrow opening on the trail I expected him to take.

I dropped into a prone shooting position with my rifle steady and the scope trained on the open space on the trail. I was carrying a grunt call and I put it into my mouth with the intention of trying to stop the buck with a soft grunt when he stepped into the opening; I was ready. Meanwhile, the buck was cooperating by coming up the trail. I couldn't see him through the brush, but I knew he was coming, because he was grunting steadily.

Then a doe stepped from the brush into the opening I was aiming at. She stopped, looked coyly over her shoulder for a moment and minced on up the hill, quickly disappearing from sight. A few seconds later, the buck crossed the opening with a single bound, hot on her trail. He was gone!

I caught glimpses of him through the brush as he went on up the hill, but there was no shot opportunity. I had done my best to set up a good shot and I believe I would have had it if the doe had been further in front of the buck. However, it didn't work out that time. That 's why it 's called hunting.