



by Randy Rosenthal

# THE "SPARTACUS RAM" GLADIATOR OF THE DESERT

Randy Johnson, High Desert Wild Sheep Guides and Randy Rosenthal, the lucky hunter (right) with the Spartacus ram taken in the Zion unit of Utah.

**R**aised as a third-generation logger in a small community in Northern California, I'm well accustomed to hard work, good times, bad times, and relentless, wet weather with downpours that would force a duck to search for dry ground! 2011 was definitely one of those years where life chose to keep my corner of the world very busy with life's coastal storms that made each and every day an epic adventure. With what seemed like no spring weather this year it rained right on into the summer. I was left with plenty of time to sit down and pick my choices for this year's hunting season draws.

With the nation's economy throwing fastballs, curveballs and even an occasional knuckler at all of us I found myself trying to stay one step ahead and was so busy trying to complete several personal construction projects that there were days I hardly had enough valuable time to breathe. Unexpectedly, I received some very exciting and positive news when I drew an Arizona archery bull tag. Then, several months later, I got completely blindsided when I received a letter from the State of Utah notifying me that I had drawn a "Once in a Lifetime" non-resident sheep tag on their Zion Unit. Wow, my adrenalin was really pumping as I scrambled to try and figure out how in the world I was going to find the time for two major hunts.

It didn't take long for my son-in-law Dave Felton to complete some valuable research for me on Utah sheep guides and I was soon on the phone visiting with Randy Johnson of High Desert Wild Sheep Guides. We immediately hit it off in discussing our personal perspectives on life, the fact that he and I were both raised in hard, blue-collar working families and the absolute importance of a man's word! Although Randy and his team were very busy with bookings for the fall he and I were able to settle on a hunting date in October that would work for both of us. Too busy to get the necessary paperwork back to Randy, he and I trusted each other completely and our word became our bond. In today's world it seems that in many instances a man's word can be lost in the confusion of a rapidly changing society. This wasn't the case with Randy and me.

I found a few spare minutes to check out the High Desert Wild Sheep Guides website. To say the least, I was impressed with their experience. Although I had never been on such an extensive backpack hunt before, I began to make the necessary preparations for gear and to get myself physically and mentally ready for the challenges of what would be a very busy fall for me.



**Randy's ram is extremely heavy, scoring over 170" green.**

Believe me, I can't remember a busier summer as the months literally disappeared. In a heartbeat, and before I even realized it, September had arrived and I was hitting the highway for a long drive to Arizona for my elk hunt. At a gas station in Bakersfield I received a call from Randy to check up on me and to wish me good luck. He said that he would be out on the mountain a lot over the next month but would touch bases again in early October.

My elk hunt started off at a slow pace. Early season dates, seven days of monsoon rains, and a lack of rutting activity kept me in Arizona longer than expected. Hunting hard to find a good bull put me even further behind on my work projects at home. I looked at some e-mails from Randy that indicated they had been taking some killer rams and then, in a flash of time, it was only days before I was to leave for Utah. Believe me, I was stressed in preparing to leave on time because I hadn't even found a spare minute to pack. I literally had to have my kind wife throw all my gear into my outfit before I was burning rubber to meet Randy in southern Utah for my "Once in

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a Lifetime” desert sheep hunt. With my frenetic schedule I had in some way misunderstood our meeting date and when I phoned Randy while approaching the Utah/Nevada border he was at work expecting to see me the next day. Well, he quickly adapted and changed his schedule. Upon arriving at his work office in Cedar City we drove about another hour to his home in Marysville. We needed to get his truck that was already loaded and ready for action. We even found a few minutes to try out my new Gunwerks rifle at his local shooting range. After a quick, homemade meal that his wife Jodi had prepared for us we met Randy’s brother/partner Bryant with a friend and were off for the Zion. It was 12:00 a.m. when we eventually got into camp and a warm bed. Man, what a long day! I was exhausted, but excited for this unique hunting opportunity.

Several hours before daylight the early morning darkness found us climbing up a route through some difficult ledges to access the area Randy wanted to hunt. What a crisp, beautiful dawn as Randy showed Bryant a high point that he wanted him to glass from. We moved farther up the ridge to check out a rock-strewn canyon that wound upwards to dissolve into a sandstone, circular basin. It wasn’t long before Bryant got Randy’s attention to come down and look at some rams that were working their way up through the ledges below him. One of the rams was a solid-looking trophy. Randy looked at me and said, “What do you think?” I said, “It’s a beautiful ram, but being the first day, and I don’t want the hunt to end so soon and knowing that there was possibly a bigger ram in the unit--I’m going to pass.” With backpacks on, Randy decided we should check another location. While Bryant and his buddy Mike hiked into a spot that Randy wanted them to glass, he and I took a difficult route into an incredible, but very rugged canyon. For the rest of the day we cautiously worked our way upward through some gnarly side canyons before climbing over the summit to descend back into the area we had started from that morning. I learned several things that day: (1) The air in Utah is very dry compared to northern California and (2) following Randy across those steep, sandstone slabs requires the traction of a mountain goat. Although the day was long I felt good about what we had accomplished as well as the country we were hunting. I was confident that Randy and his team would find me the ram I had been dreaming about for months. I also decided that when I saw Randy get excited about a ram that it would be a good indicator for me to pull the trigger.

That evening, back at camp, Randy’s other partner, Brett Caldwell, joined us. After a good meal and enjoyable conversation I listened as they discussed possible options for the next day. Although Brett wanted to separate from us and drive to a different location that he had been wanting to check out, Randy convinced everyone that we needed to finish hunting the area we were in. Because Bryant and Mike had to leave early the next day Randy assigned them to glass some rough talus slopes in a canyon to the north of us while we maneuvered our way up through those difficult ledges to hunt some nasty breaks that hadn’t been checked out. The light of early morning found the High Desert Team locating a group of sheep with their long-range optics but the rams didn’t seem to generate a lot of interest. By 9:00 a.m.

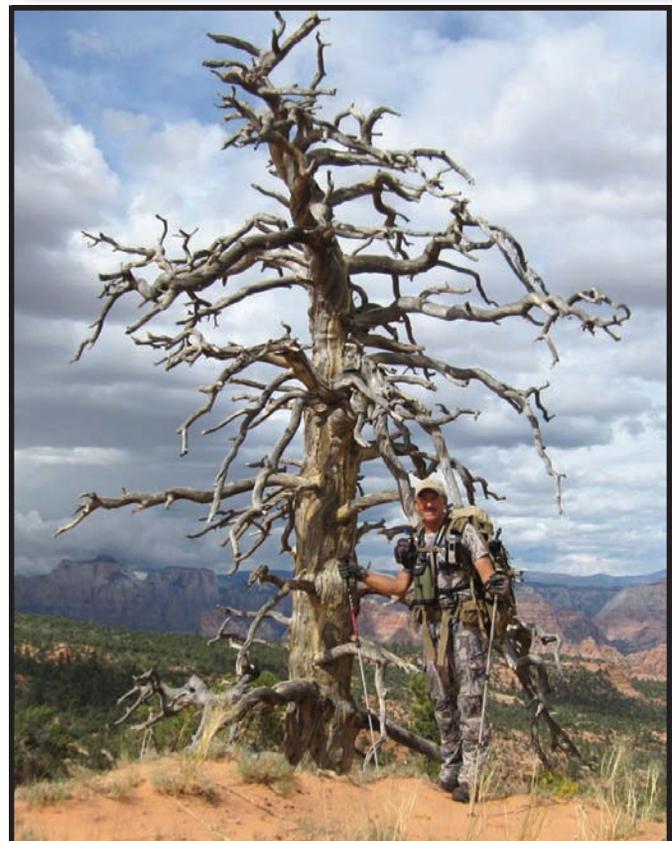


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**Randy Johnson hiking and glassing  
"Sheep Country" in southern Utah.**

Randy led us across a canyon so that we could access a long, very thick pinyon juniper-covered ridge where he wanted us to glass from. As we descended the ridge, in just a split second, there was a band of four bedded rams that jumped up 100 yards in front of us in the thick undergrowth. As the rams spooked, Brett and I broke after Randy as he started to run down the ridge. Suddenly, there the rams were again staring at us. It didn't take long for all three humans to hit the dirt! Brett and I were mesmerized by the mass of one ram in particular. Although Randy was sitting in a cactus I heard him tell me, "We have to kill this ram! Shoot the one on the right!" There was no mistaking the urgency in his voice. In all the excitement, my rifle was still in the scabbard on my pack so I asked Brett to hand it to me. It seemed like it took an eternity for Brett to pull the gun out but I quickly had it in my hands and was noiselessly as possible working the bolt back to load a live round in the chamber!

In front of me, partially obstructing my view, was a large, dead cedar tree that created a limited alley for me to shoot through. I reaffirmed that Randy wanted me to take the massive ram on the right. Time stood still. All I could see of the ram, with the angle we had, was his chest and head facing us. I found one limited opening through the tree, settled the crosshairs of my scope at the base of the great ram's neck and lightly pulled the trigger. I didn't feel my rifle kick against my shoulder as the 6.5-284 broke the absolute stillness of the desert air. It looked to me like the big ram broke to the right but I also heard Randy yell that he had dropped in his tracks. As Brett, Randy and I hugged and high fived one another we also kept a close watch on the exact location where the ram had disappeared. Working our way down the ridge it didn't take long for us to cover the 100 yards to where we had last seen what Randy was calling my "Spartacus" ram. There, piled up in a patch of mountain manzanita was a huge, massive, desert bighorn. This trophy animal exceeded my expectations as I heard Randy say, "You are going to be really happy with this ram."

The sheep gods had truly smiled upon us as I had just taken one of the most sought-after trophies in North America, a magnificent "gladiator" of the desert. After numerous pictures Brett and Randy got to work on caping and deboning my trophy. With the heat of mid-day they worked quickly as we needed to get my ram off the mountain as soon as possible to prevent any spoilage. Before strapping the heavily-laden packs on, Randy made a quick call to the Cedar City office of the Division of Fish and Game so that we could get an appointment to have my ram measured and plugged before the weekend. Officer Scott Dalebout was kind enough to say that he would meet us that evening. I couldn't take my eyes off the massive horns riding on the top of Randy's pack as we maneuvered our way off those ledges. My ram was scored at 171.5" and was everything I had wished for. I asked Randy about a taxidermist and he recommended High Country Horns Taxidermy. I agreed and he made the call. With a 400-mile drive to Salt Lake City ahead, WOW, my long and busy day was nowhere close to being over. Paul Pennie was in the field hunting but his wife was so kind to meet me at a location and pick up my horns and cape. She assured me the cape would go right into the freezer. What a big relief. Thank you, Lesa!

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## Gear List

**GUN:** Gunwerks 6.5 - 284  
**BULLETS:** Berger 168 VLD  
**SCOPE:** Nightforce 5.5-22x50 mm



Randy will receive 100 rounds of ammo from Gunwerks for his story. See page 40 for more info.

The only regret that lingered in my mind as I had to rush to get back to California was that I didn't have more time to take in the absolute beauty of the Zion Unit and just relax and enjoy the company of the High Desert team. They work as hard as any guides I have ever seen. I want to thank the Utah Fish and Game for providing a non-resident tag. My odds of drawing were something like 1 in 4,000 so I feel very fortunate to have drawn out. I'd also like to thank Mike Davidson of Gunwerks for getting my rifle built and shipped out to me with such short notice. Also, thanks to my entire family for their support in helping me go on this hunt. And a special thanks to my son-in-law, Dave, for all the hours on the computer researching guides and gear and, most of all, thanks to my wife, Janice, for being patient and understanding while I chase animals for weeks at a time, doing what I love. What an incredible experience! 