

Guidance from above and below

HER FIRST BULL ELK WAS A UNICORN

Story by Richard Hanners of the Blue Mountain Eagle

Chelsea McDaniel thinks the unicorn bull that came running right at her last year might have been a sign from heaven. She had hunted elk for 18 years without success, and now a big bull was running right up to the juniper tree where she was resting.

"It had become a family joke," she characterized her lack of success.

Drawing first season Northside Unit bull elk tags three years in a row was unheard of, she said. The first year, she went with her father and returned empty-handed.

"Dad got me into a pretty nice bull, but I was shaking so bad I couldn't get a shot, and we ended the year unsuccessfully," McDaniel said.

The next year she went with her boyfriend Butch Goslin and was skunked again. Like her father, Goslin had convinced her he was "practically a professional hunting guide." They finally got into the elk on the last day.

"On top of a ridge, we can hear them all around us," McDaniel said. "We sit down, and I get ready. No sooner than I load a bullet into the barrel, and we hear a gunshot directly below us. Then two more to the right of us."

They were so close but never saw a thing.

She and Goslin had met at the Mountain View Mini Mart in Prairie City, which McDaniel owns.

"He was a big coffee drinker," she said. "That's how we met."

Six weeks after their hunt together, Goslin was diagnosed with Stage 4 esophageal cancer. He'd had trouble swallowing and was in Boise, Idaho, when he learned he had terminal cancer. More doctor visits followed.

"While traveling back and forth from doctor to doctor, we were on our way to Idaho the day the 2017 draw results came out," McDaniel said. "My dad called me, and to my utter disbelief I drew for the third year in a row."

When she got off the phone, Goslin had tears in his eyes.

"He told me he wanted me to have the .257 Roberts rifle that I hunted with the year prior," she said. "He said he knew that gun would bring me all the luck I needed."

McDaniel sighted in the rifle with Goslin's daughter Lacy on

Oct. 9. Two days later, Goslin passed away.

"He'd fought it for 10 months," McDaniel said.

McDaniel told her father ahead of hunting season that she wanted to hunt the same place where she went with Goslin — and she wanted to go alone. On opening day, two weeks after Goslin died, she headed out with tears in her eyes.

"I did find a nice bull shed horn, however no fresh sign or tracks at all," she said. "It was a very emotional day."

The next day, McDaniel didn't want to go back out. As everyone in camp arose excited to get started, she growled that she'd rather stay back in camp. Her father insisted and laid out a plan of attack.

"With no enthusiasm whatsoever, I throw on my clothes, skip the makeup and jump in the pickup," she said.

When they arrived at the drop-off point, she carelessly slammed the pickup door, drawing a blank stare from her father.

"Don't matter — ain't nothing up here anyways," she whispered to her 6-year-old nephew.

Dispirited, McDaniel had decided to find the perfect juniper tree, climb under it and catch up on some sleep. About 10 minutes after leaving the truck, she heard the sound of something big charging through the timber.

"Struggling to get to my gun, which I had carelessly laid against the back side of the tree, I finally see him," she said. "Only he's running directly at me. Scared to death, I grab the gun and pull the trigger."

The bull kept on coming. McDaniel reloaded and fired again without putting her eye to the scope, the butt of the rifle against her hip, dropping the elk less than 50 feet from where she stood.

Her brother later told her as soon as the echo of the second shot cleared the air they heard her screams from several draws away.

"After I danced around screaming and hollering in excitement, I went to check out my prize," she said.

That's when she saw the unusual antlers and knew she'd shot a unicorn.

"I pulled out my phone to call Butch and tell him the news when the bitter truth of reality came crashing down upon me," she said. "Tears filled my eyes, but immediately knowing that this bull was more than a reflection of Butch's personality. I was filled with a sense of acceptance and reassurance that although he may have not been there in the flesh, he was by my side all along."

As her father and nephew approached, her father hollered, "Where did you hit him?"



The skull shows the unique location of the "unicorn's" left antler.



Chelsea McDaniel poses with the "unicorn," her first bull elk kill.

Chelsea reloaded and fired, dropping the elk under 50 feet from where she stood, after dancing around screaming and hollering in excitement, she went to check out her prize. That's when she saw the unusual antlers and knew she'd shot a unicorn.

Chelsea McDaniel with boyfriend and hunting guide, Butch Goslin.