



# 2009 Fall Outlook

## Gaining Perspective

*By Randy Kreil*

JOHN PRETZER

**W**e meet a lot of people as we wander through life. Some are memorable, others regrettably forgettable, and many are unique and special. But now and again we come across someone who changes the way we think or makes us stop and appreciate all that we have and can do in this world.

I met someone like this a few months ago.

In early June I took a day to tackle a long list of chores – clean gutters, mow, trim trees, and so on – that were left to linger since last winter's early arrival. By midmorning, however, I decided it was too nice a day for this type of work, so I grabbed my golf clubs and headed for the course.

Next to hunting, golf is my favorite pastime. I find it a great change of pace from work and pursue it as a physical and mental challenge that I have yet to master.

A great thing about golf is that you sometimes end up playing with people you've never met, and my new acquaintance that day was Matt. We made our introductions as golfers typically do – first names only and no mention of where we work.

It was a fine day with a clear sky and gentle winds. Canada geese were honking on the ponds, orioles singing high in the cottonwood branches, while yellow warblers chattered in the thickets. As we walked, played and made small talk, Matt mentioned how much he loved being outdoors on any day, nice or otherwise, and how he especially enjoyed hunting with his two black Labs. I thought, "This is great ... a fellow hunter with the right breed of dogs, albeit the wrong color, but no one is perfect."

By the seventh hole we had talked about how much fun it was hunting with a dog and how we could not imagine ever doing so without a canine companion. Then Matt stopped me in my tracks when he told me about two falls ago when he missed the hunting season because he was basically paralyzed due to an ongoing battle with multiple sclerosis. I looked at this guy, who had been walking right along with me and hammering the ball down the fairways, and expressed my surprise at how his

medical condition didn't show and how well he functioned.

He told me that his doctors had developed a medication scheme that significantly aided his recovery, but that he still had some serious physical challenges – the loss of sight in his right eye and periodic bouts of weakness. As we played and talked about golf, hunting and his disease, I became more and more impressed with Matt's attitude. His experience with MS and all of its challenges has given him a different perspective on life. Bad golf shots hooked in the woods, or a long putt that should have dropped, no longer seem as important. What is important is that on a day in June he is capable of picking up his clubs and walking 18 holes.

When it came to hunting, Matt's insights were even more inspiring. After several months of being bedridden and missing an entire hunting season, he said the true value of hunting became clear. It wasn't about "the biggest and the most" anymore, but simply about having the opportunity and physical means to put on his boots and go. He contended that if he had to choose between his dogs or his shotgun when he went hunting, the latter would be gathering dust in the closet.

By that time we had made the turn – the transition between the ninth and 10<sup>th</sup> holes – and we were headed down the 10<sup>th</sup> fairway. We both were playing fairly well and our conversation about hunting continued. I asked him what the biggest challenge was when it came to MS and hunting. He said it would be different for everyone, but for him it was selling all his guns, buying new ones, and then learning how to shoot left-handed.

Matt, a righty, successfully mastered his new guns and physical movements, but it took some time. Think about that for a moment. I know I did, and I came to the conclusion that I might not be able to make the transition.

Matt was also once an avid bowhunter in his home state of Iowa before moving to North Dakota, the home of his wife's family. When we visited, he had yet to manage a bow left-handed, but he loved



CRAIG BIRKLE

*The author, and his barely visible bird dog, Ally, teamed up to take this rooster during a late fall hunt.*

to bowhunt so much he was determined to keep working at it.

At first, moving to North Dakota was tough for Matt, as it would be for any avid hunter moving to a new state. Finding new hunting spots was the most difficult, but he said the Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program was critical in helping to build a mental list of favorite places. The PLOTS program worked like it was intended, giving Matt a place to start, explore and gain access to private lands from there.

As we headed down the 13th fairway, Matt asked what I did for a living. I tried telling him I played golf, but the double bogeys on the previous two holes clearly demonstrated otherwise. When I said I worked for the Game and Fish Department he was surprised I hadn't mentioned it earlier. I did this for a couple of reasons. When I play golf it's an escape of sorts from the issues and decisions we face each day at the Department, and the game is difficult enough to focus on without someone explaining their vision of how a big game lottery system should work during my backswing.

The other reason is that I often learn more about how a person really thinks when it comes to hunting if they don't know my profession. That was the case with Matt and his insights about hunting in North Dakota, the PLOTS program, and his struggles with MS as he continues doing what is important to him.

Our conversation on hunting and fall's outlook dominated the afternoon even though it was only June. Matt questioned the influence winter and a cold spring would have on wildlife populations and hunting opportunities. I said we were wondering the same thing and then went on to explain how our spring and summer wildlife population surveys should shed some light.

The bottom line is that winter was difficult and wildlife suffered along with humans. There were losses, resulting in some reduction in hunting opportunities, but not as many as we anticipated while in the grips of winter. Hunting this fall might not be what it was the past few years for some species, but just like Matt, we all should keep in perspective why we are going and what we want out of our hunting experiences.

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