

TO THE HOOB A WHITETAIL

To harness a whitetail

Determination and ingenuity prove far stronger than any physical handicap.

EXHIBIT _____
DATE 1/15/15
HS 176



Bernard Widhalm shoots by attaching the bowstring to a release aid riveted to a leather harness, pushing the bow out with his left hand, and then raising his right hand just high enough to trigger the release aid. This system eliminates strain on his injured right shoulder.

By John Voelker

KAREN WIDHALM HAD been a ranch girl her whole life, and she'd seen men come in busted up before. One look at her husband, Bernard, told her that he should see a doctor immediately. The Valier, Montana, rancher had been rounding up some cows with his ATV and had an unfortunate tussle with a particularly stubborn old cow.

Although he'd almost passed out from the searing pain in his shoulder, the stubborn old rancher insisted on waiting until morning to see a doctor. He figured the shoulder had just been jammed and would be okay in the morning. But when he woke up, he needed help just to get out of bed. So Bernard and Karen headed for Shelby Hospital, where several X-rays revealed that Bernard had dislocated his shoulder when he was knocked off the ATV. The "pop" was audible when the doctor put his shoulder back in place. Bernard then faced two weeks of rest on the shoulder and then six weeks of therapy.

By mid-July, however, Bernard's shoulder had not improved, and the diehard bowhunter knew he'd never be ready to draw his bow in time for the whitetail opener just six weeks away. Another visit to the



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Wise and skilled the surgeon told Bernard that his was the worst rotator cuff tear the doctor had ever seen. If he tore it again, the shoulder might be irreparable.

"Be careful," the doctor said ominously.

Yeah, right, Bernard thought. *Be careful fixing fences, pulling calves, pulling on wrenches, opening gates, and any one of the other hundred tasks a rancher does every day. Not to mention climbing into a tree-stand or drawing a bow.*

Well, Bernard had six more weeks to think about it before taking on many weeks of therapy. During that time, Bernard's brothers took care of the place, and Karen and the kids chipped in, too.

WHILE HE HEALED, Bernard had time to think about the fast-approaching bow season. For years he'd served as a regional representative for the Montana Bowhunters Association, and he'd worked on the handicapped archers committee. In fact, he'd met a number of disabled bowhunters over the years.

The wheels began to spin. Maybe there was hope. Therapy had him feeling better, and one day while he was watching yet another afternoon TV program he decided to call Orville Riley, an acquaintance from Townsend, Montana. Orville had lost the use of one arm and, as a dedicated bowhunter, had developed a harness that allowed him to keep shooting his bow.

Following his discussion with Riley, Bernard was soon sketching plans for his own harness. The old saw about farmers and ranchers being able to fix anything with haywire and duct tape is true, and experience repairing combines, saddles, fences, and truck engines came into play as Bernard stood in front of Karen's mirror and fitted leather panels he had traced from a vest. Making the vest to go over hunting clothes, he trimmed, punched, and stitched.

Minding the doctor's orders, Bernard riveted a release aid to the vest where he could reach it without lifting his injured shoulder. The release had to be secured to withstand the force of drawing a 50-pound bow, and high enough to narrow the angle between the sight and arrow. The vest, made of full-grain cowhide, fit over the right side of Bernard's chest, with the straps and buckles under the left arm. Bernard discussed the project with his orthopedic surgeon, who approved the concept but warned Bernard once

WITH THE HARNESS READY, Bernard prepared for a test run. For a guy with 36 years of bowhunting experience, this should be a natural move. *But with one arm? Now, that was scary.*

Bernard stood five yards from the target butt, knocked an arrow, snapped the bowstring onto the release aid, and pushed the bow to full-draw position with his left arm. Then, ever so carefully he triggered the release aid with his right hand. The shaft flew straight, and its smack into the target sounded, *oh, so sweet. It worked!* Bernard had to make some adjustments — reposition the release slightly, enlarge the armhole — but all in all, the test was a success.

One by one Bernard made little changes until his arrows grouped closer and closer, and finally it all came together. What remained now was practice, practice, practice. Having preached that message as an instructor to Bowhunter Education students in Valier for 20 years, it now held special meaning. Here he was, a very experienced bowhunter, starting all over.

BERNARD AND I have hunted together every fall for 18 years, so come October I was on my way back to his place. The 145-mile drive passed quickly, and we were soon standing toe-to-toe, laughing and shaking hands. A few days earlier he had bowhunted for the first time, and he was eager to tell me his story.

Unable to climb into a treestand with one arm, he had made a blind in a willow patch where he'd seen several nice bucks the previous year. From practice, he knew he could shoot well out to 20 yards. The first morning, a small 4x4 buck walked past Bernard's blind at eight yards. Given his new gear, new methods, and the first buck of the season, Bernard made a bit of a shaky draw, and the buck spotted the movement and bolted.

As Bernard let down on the bow he noticed a second buck watching the first buck run off. Some 30 yards away, this second buck relaxed and continued forward. This time Bernard was ready, and when the buck entered his shooting lane, Bernard released. The arrow sailed over the buck's back. *Nuts!* The arrow had deflected on an unseen twig. But the setup and the blind had worked. The bow season was officially open.

The next morning I hunted from a treestand as Bernard returned to his same

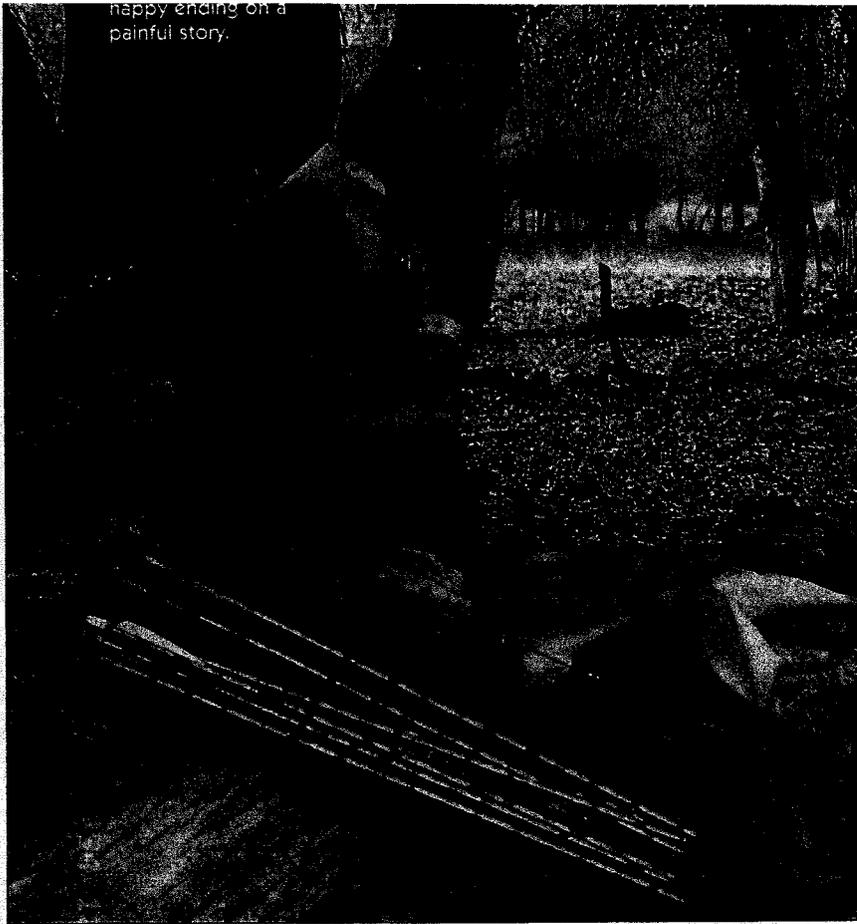
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happy ending on a painful story.

ground blind in the willows. During the morning's hunt, no deer passed through his shooting lane, and to add insult to injury, 10 deer walked behind his blind and directly under his favorite old treestand.

That evening the wind was wrong for the willow blind, so Bernard moved to a fence crossing, where he could hide on a brushy hump that would give him a shot from a somewhat elevated angle. The deer would pass very close along the fence, and a large tree would hide Bernard's movement. With some leaf raking and a few careful snips with the pruning shears, the blind was ready for the next morning.

AT FIRST LIGHT, BERNARD sat in his brushy hide, carrying on a serious discussion with himself about buck fever and the whole new process of shooting a bow released from the chest. Before long a doe came on the scene, followed by a 140-class buck. As the doe passed Bernard's shooting lane, the buck's head was hidden behind a tree and Bernard pushed his bow to full draw. The buck stopped in the shooting lane and posed broadside at 10 yards. In his excitement, Bernard chose

the wrong pin and sent the arrow over the buck's back and into a tree.

That evening Bernard stayed home and practiced. He knew the gear would do the job — if he could just do the job! *Draw, pick a spot, aim, and release.*

A change in wind direction prevented Bernard from hunting the fence stand the next day, so he chose another site along the river where deer had been following an old dry wash to some fields in the evening. A big cottonwood surrounded by debris along the bank created an ideal elevated stand, and shots to the wash would be no more than five yards. The wind was perfect, blowing from the wash to the blind.

As the evening progressed, four muley does and fawns passed 20 yards behind the blind, where Bernard did not have a clear shot. Those deer had just gone out of view when a pair of young white-tail does walked around the corner in the wash and came toward Bernard at a steady walk, completely oblivious. This time Bernard did everything right, and when the lead doe walked past his shooting window, he sent his arrow right into her vitals. *It worked!*

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The elated bowhunter leaned against the rough bark of the cottonwood to relax, savor the moment, and give the deer a half-hour to expire.

WHEN BERNARD WENT to look for his arrow, he was surprised to find neither arrow nor blood. The doe's tracks led down the wash, and he had seen where she entered the brush to the south. Light would be fading fast, so Bernard figured that if he didn't find blood where she had entered the brush he'd meet up with me later and we'd go for lanterns.

Bernard relived the shot over and over. Even though he could find no trace, he was sure the arrow had been on the mark. So he decided to make one more pass along the edge of the brush before heading out to meet me, and as he raised his leg to cross a log he nearly stepped on the fallen doe. Needless to say, he was thrilled.

I knew something was up when I spotted Bernard on the ATV he'd been riding when he'd had the run-in with that stubborn old cow. But later the grin on Bernard's face told all. Eight weeks earlier he'd been wondering if he would even be able to draw his bow by spring. Now, here we were celebrating his "Handicap Harness Doe." I knew we'd be hearing this story for a long, long time. ♪

AUTHOR'S NOTES: Bernard Widhalm proved that desire and ingenuity can make up for physical shortcomings, and we hope his story will inspire others who may have thought that the thrill of bowhunting was out of their reach. The Physically Challenged Bowhunters of America has a website (www.pcba-

inc.org), an excellent source of information for bowhunters with disabilities. Give it a visit and you'll see photos of equipment and links for physically challenged archers. Keep in mind that many state and local bowhunting organizations have resources and members willing to help you out too.

The author lives in Columbia Falls, Mon-

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