

# A Man & His Dog

BY DOUG LARSEN

## A duck club scare provides a meaningful lesson

THERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT I'M EMBARRASSED to know a little bit about.

To get buttons back on my shirts, I taught myself to sew. Universal man law requires every man to grill, but I once worked in a restaurant, so I also know how to bake. I had to take literature classes back in the day, so I know some stuff about books, and a little about theatre. *The* theatre — not the theater with *Die Hard* and 3-gallon tubs of popcorn.

This is how I know about a theatre device called “situational irony,” or the disparity of intention and result. Situational irony is when the ending result is contrary to the desired intention.

The term is important to know about to understand the near-miss I and my hunting buddies had at our little duck club in Arkansas. We came close to losing my friend Pat Pitt, and the situational irony of the story is that it turns out our own rule was almost our worst enemy.

### THE CLUB

Our duck club in northeast Arkansas is known in duck club parlance as a “wet sock” club, meaning it is in no way swank or fancy. Rather, it is the antithesis of fancy. The club house is serviceable, sometimes warm and mostly dry. The furnishings are well-used and donated — think *Wayne's World* — and we lounge around on sprung couches amongst duck feathers.

We have good access to our blinds and pits by road. The group gets along well enough, and we have enough *esprit de corps* to get some of the work done, get the decoys in and out and keep the dishes clean.

In the interest of complete disclosure, I'm tickled just to be allowed near the place. I continue to hear the occasional “Damn Yankee,” and it took me some time to figure out that it was not a reference to Derek Jeter, but rather a reminder that this group had let me slip into their ranks in the first place.

But the factor that defines a wet-sock-type club is the time and money invested in killing ducks, and that is what we do.





## A MAN & HIS DOG

We're all fortunate to have a decent dog or two, and we make the time to hunt a lot more than most folks are able to. We are blessed that way.

We have good duck hunting, and the unofficial-but-very-official headmaster of our club, Pat Pitt, wakes up every day of his life thinking about new and better ways to keep the good hunting happening.

### ACE & PITT

In season, Pitt hunts every single day, and out of the season he hunts in other states and countries. He consults for [getducks.com](http://getducks.com), a specialty duck-hunting agency. He is a top-flight taxidermist, something he putters with when he isn't able to go shooting, and his collection of mounted waterfowl and birds rivals the Smithsonian's. I'm not kidding.

Pitt's current dog, Ace, has been featured on the Arkansas duck stamp, and in January this year, Ace was a few birds shy of his 7,000th lifetime retrieve. When in camp, Pitt sits in "his" chair, and Ace lies nearby in "his" dog bed. Other men don't sit in Pitt's chair, and other dogs don't lie in Ace's bed. That is just how it is, and if you have a problem with a club ruled in the fashion of a benevolent monarchy, then you should probably just wave as you drive past.

Part of keeping the hunting good and consistent is putting rules in place that protect us from ourselves. Early on, Pitt suggested that though they are legal in Arkansas, spinning-wing decoys worked too well. He strongly suggested they be disallowed amongst our group, and they were. Many of us either consider them a crutch or don't like messing with them in the first place, and we have a decent shot at getting good hunting without them.

Another rule, common at many clubs: We never hunt a pit past noon. Every morning when we go out the door, the collective strategy is to get as many ducks as we can, then get out of the way to let the ducks have the fields as soon as practical. It works for us.

And yet another convenience Pitt opposed was the use of ATVs or four-wheelers to get to our pit blinds. Our hunting is conducted in sunken pits,



The Arkansas duck club is a "wet sock club," less formal than its French name might suggest.

sited in flooded fields. To get to a pit, you must walk several hundred yards along a narrow mud dike or check, or wade through the gumbo mud covered in 18 inches of water.

Frankly, it would be far easier to fire up a four-wheeler and run in out to the pit, then park it off someplace while you hunted. But getting four or five men out to a pit by quad requires at least a couple trips, and the ducks would hear all this motorized commotion. Better to walk in quietly and let the day develop. So no four-wheelers allowed. Pitt did once say that "if a man is too lazy to walk to a pit to kill his ducks and then walk out, then maybe duck hunting isn't for him."

### JANUARY 16, 2011

But then came Jan. 16. A dozen or so of us were in camp, and in the dark of the driveway we split up to go hunting. My son and I hunted with another member and a couple of his guests, and as it was January, we were fighting ice. We had a ragged hole for most of the decoys, but it didn't look too snazzy.

Not knowing about the "no four-wheelers" rule, one of the guests trailered one in from his home in Mississippi, but it was parked at the

camp house and we walked to and from our morning hunt. After the hunt this morning, my son and I ran off to town to have one of my truck's tires patched. Most of the other members lounged at the camp house, watching one of the myriad college bowl games named for an insurance company or snack food.

While I was in town, Pitt called me and asked me to procure an onion to go in a big pot of ducks that were headed for the oven. I wandered into the grocery store's produce section still dressed in waders, snagged a huge sweet onion and headed back for camp with the onion and four good tires on my rig. On the way, a Chevy truck went past me at a speed that I can only describe as far beyond reckless.

Only when I got to the camp did I hear that Pitt had suffered a heart attack, and the truck had been his son racing him to the emergency room.

While I was in town, Pitt had uncharacteristically decided to make use of the four-wheeler that was parked in the yard, using it to haul a liner to one of our pits to repair a leaking dog box.

Pitt's son had taken the liner, Pitt and Ace about 500 yards to the blind by four-wheeler, then returned to the truck. Moments later Pitt called to his son and told him to "come get me" in



a voice that was strangely weak and strained.

His boy did as he was told. The ATV quickly crossed the field and within minutes, Pat and his boy were back at the truck, racing to the hospital. The four-wheeler and Ace were left behind. Other club members were notified to retrieve the abandoned dog and gear while the speeding truck got Pitt to the hospital in the nick of time. He was resuscitated five or six times before he was stabilized, while manual chest compressions broke several ribs.

After the fact, Pitt told me that he had seen a tunnel of bright lights sometime along the way. I have not pressed him for details, but his mention of the tunnel of bright lights speaks volumes about the gravity of the situation. He was moved to a room that evening, and after they cut the brand-new neoprene waders off him, doctors put stents in his arteries.

We sat around the clubhouse and waited for text messages and phone



calls. We busied ourselves by cleaning birds and making food.

That evening, Ace wandered aimlessly through the house and spent hours standing near the door, waiting for his master to come through it. The next morning, we all went hunting, as we figured that was what Pitt would like us to do. One of the men took Pitt's dog along on his hunt, figuring that just getting him out would be the best thing to take a duck dog's mind off missing his partner. After killing a mallard right in the decoys, the man sent the dog by his name, shouting "Ace!"

But Ace just stayed in the dog box. Without Pitt, the normally high-energy dog refused to pick up a bird all morning.

**EXIT STRATEGIES**

Doctors told Pitt that his hunting season was over for the year, but with two weeks left in the Arkansas season, he was loathe to follow instructions. After some recovery time he got another new pair of waders, and the last week of the season Pitt was again in a pit blind with his boys and his friends, who watched while Ace made his 7,000th retrieve.

Heart attacks happen to hundreds, if not thousands, of people in the United



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## A MAN & HIS DOG

States every day, and depending on the severity of the episode and the distance from treatment, the victim of the heart attack either receives treatment and recovers, or he doesn't. In Pitt's case, the odds were tipped in his favor by the sheer, winning-ticket-caliber luck of having a four-wheeler at the very site of the episode for one single day out of the more than 90 or so days that the camp is occupied. It is likely that without it, Pitt would have not made it out of the field that day.

Before writing this story, I asked Pitt if it would be OK, as I have been concerned for his well-being and haunted by the hours I spent watching Ace stare at the door, waiting for his master to return.

Pitt responded that if telling the story would help one other hunter in a similar situation, then it would be well worth telling.

I urge you to look at exit strategies for the places you hunt before you go to the field this season. My club will likely have four-wheelers nearby from this



day forward, in which case we hope the situational irony will reverse, and we'll never again need one.

But go prepared, be prepared, tell people where you are going and when you'll be back. Bring your cell phone on every single hunt, and consider how you'd get yourself or a buddy out of your blind or the field if they were partially or fully immobile. Answering those questions will likely give you some peace of mind, and may be the

key to your reuniting with the loved ones and dogs who wait each day for your return.

Driving the truck toward Memphis almost a week later, I was pawing through the debris in the cab of my truck and found the onion Pitt asked me to buy. I never did give it to him. I guess it slipped my mind.

*Doug Larsen hunts safely from Sewickley, Penn.*

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