

ARON SHOFNER

B&C OFFICIAL MEASURER
Photos Courtesy of Author

RYAN'S TIME



"TO SAY THAT I AM PROUD OF RYAN IS SORT OF SILLY AT THIS POINT. I AM ALWAYS PROUD OF BOTH OF MY BOYS JUST FOR WHO THEY ARE. IT WOULD BE A BETTER CHOICE OF WORDS TO SAY THAT I AM HAPPY FOR HIM AND THIS SORT OF RESTORES MY FAITH IN HOW I FEEL THAT THINGS SHOULD WORK. GOOD THINGS WILL HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE EVEN IF IT TAKES SEVEN YEARS."

- ARON SHOFNER, RYAN'S FATHER

Aron's record-book typical whitetail deer (right) was taken in 1998 while hunting in Marshall County, Illinois. This buck scores 160-6/8 points.

When I recount the events that have taken place leading up to this moment, I can't help but tear up with pride, joy, and relief. Maybe I'm getting old or maybe my soft side is just finally coming out.

I was blessed with two sons many years ago; Luke, a senior in high school, and Ryan who is currently taking some college classes. Like most kids, they wanted to be just like their dad. Everything that I had done in my life, they wanted to do. My primary hobbies are demolition derby and deer hunting. They wanted to do and have done both.

I have numerous deer mounts on the wall so naturally that is what the boys wanted. Luke's first youth season of hunting yielded him a 145-inch, ten-point on the wall. Ryan always seemed to get things the hard way. He would spend long hours in the stand or sit in bad weather, not seeing anything; all the while hearing stories of others' great success. I could see the yearning in his eyes growing stronger for his moment, something that I

assured him would come some day. Ryan had taken a few deer in his time hunting but not one for the wall.

This season would be different. A close nephew had acquired the lease of a small farm just before the first gun season. We went to the new lease on the Saturday of the first season and set up two ground blinds. First firearm season was the usual—we saw does and little bucks, but not many of either. Both boys and I went without filling a tag.

It was Wednesday, the eve of the second firearm season, and based off of recent activity, we decided that both boys should go to school rather than go hunting. Luke comments that every time I go hunting and they don't, I see or shoot a deer that they would have, and in a place that I would have put them. Thinking back, it has happened that

way quite a few times.

Jokingly, I told him, "Great, I am getting a deer tomorrow."

Thursday morning I hunted with my nephew on his boss's farm. I saw a few deer but nothing I wanted to harvest. That afternoon I planned on going to the west blind on the lease since the wind was perfect for it. I had a few errands to run then had to drop some stuff off at home. Upon arriving at home, I saw Ryan's vehicle there. He heard me come in and greeted me in the kitchen as I asked what he was doing home. He explained that his teacher was sick and they were free to leave class.

I could see the excitement in his eyes since that meant he could go hunting. I told him that the wind was perfect for the west blind and that was where I was heading. I quickly followed up and told

him that I felt it was the best spot and I wanted him there. I figured I would just go to the blind on the other side of the road where the wind was questionable depending on where the deer came out.

We got to the blinds and saw both were downed from the wind but luckily still there. We both reset the blinds and settled in. I sent my nephew a text saying, "I have been demoted to the east side of the road. LOL. Ryan got out of class early so I sent him where I had planned to go." He responded saying that he hopes Ryan gets something good over there.

After about an hour, I had five does and fawns out in the field in front of me. They fed and made their way out of sight. Soon after that a young doe entered the field with a decent eight-point in tow and two smaller bucks following.



Evidence of the Shofner family's love of whitetail hunting.



Ryan's deer was taken in Putnam County and will be scored after the 60-day drying period.

ILLINOIS RECORD WHITETAILS

NO. OF ENTRIES	CATEGORY
748	Typical Whitetail Deer
583	Non-typical Whitetail Deer
1,331	Total No. of Entries for Illinois

NO. OF ENTRIES	COUNTY
55	Pike
51	Adams
51	Fulton
45	Jo Daviess
37	Macoupin
30	Schuylerville, Peoria
34	Hancock
31	Brown, McHenry
27	Greene
26	Randolph
25	Clark
23	Sangamon
22	Bureau and Knox
20	Vermilion
18	Edgar, Morgan, and McLean
17	Shelby
16	Calhoun, Cass, Jersey, Ogle, and Perry
15	Henderson, Iroquois, Jasper, La Salle, Mercer, and Rock Island
14	Coles, Lake, and Warren
13	Fayette, Henry, Madison, McDonough, Menard, Pope, and St. Clair
12	Marshall, Wayne, Will, and Williamson
11	Christian, Jefferson, Kankakee, and White
10	Hamilton, Jackson
9	Lawrence, Livingston, Montgomery, Richland, Union, and Whiteside
8	Clinton, Edwards, Logan, Macon, Mason, and Woodford
7	Grundy, Johnson, Lee, Saline, Stephenson, Tazewell, and Washington
6	Bond, DeWitt, Franklin, Kane, and Winnebago
5	Alexander, Carroll, Cook, Crawford, Cumberland, Gallatin, Marion, Pulaski, and Scott
4	Clay, Douglas, Effingham, Kendall, Moultrie, Piatt, and Wabash
3	Champaign, DeKalb, DuPage, Monroe, and Stark
2	Boone, Ford, Massac, and Putnam
1	Hardin

Note: Illinois has 7 additional entries with unknown or incomplete location data.



I started to regret the blind choices since the eight-point in the field was big enough that Ryan would have likely been happy to shoot. Some time went by as I watched the bigger buck keep the doe in check and keep the other two lesser bucks away. Suddenly, I heard a shot ring out that I thought must be Ryan. I immediately clasped my hands in front of my face, closed my eyes, and thought to myself, "Please be a good one."

It seemed like forever before I heard any news, all the while my mind racing. Finally, the phone rang, "I just shot a nice one. He turned and ran." I asked for some basic information but his emotions had taken over and he was barely coherent on the phone. "Just relax and calm down, I will be there as quickly as I can," I said.

By the time I got to Ryan he had calmed down a bit. I asked the size of the deer referencing a buck my niece had harvested for comparison and Ryan thought this buck was bigger than hers.

"Oh boy," I reply. "Well let's find him and see."

I had him guide me to where he thought the deer was when he shot. I could not find anything other than a hoof print and I was unsure if it was even from the buck that he shot at. I circled for a bit then started blindly looking down a well-used trail. My stomach was knotting up because over 20 minutes had gone by and we had not found anything to indicate a hit. I wanted this so bad for him, but started questioning the shot or distance, yet thinking that he had been shooting so well, there was no way he missed.

I was about to call it a night and come back in the

morning to look again when I heard his voice. Ryan yelled, "I got him."

I ran to him standing there holding his flashlight above his head shining on this magnificent animal ten yards ahead of him, tears rolling down his face, "I got him."

I glanced at the deer not really paying much attention to it other than it appeared big at first glance. My focus was on Ryan as I embraced him and we both broke down. Despite my death grip hug on him, he managed to softly whisper, "I got him" one more time. I could barely speak but managed to get out, "Yes, you did."

I have relived that exact moment many times since. I am positive it is one that will stick with me forever. We gathered our composure and I finally focused on the magnitude of his deer. Now seeing the actual size and character of it I mentioned that house rule #1 had been broken. He laughed as he wiped his face and recited rule #1... "Never shoot a deer bigger than any of Dad's."

In talking later, Ryan expressed sorrow knowing that I had planned to go there and possibly would have shot the deer myself. His selflessness never ceases to amaze me. I am humbled daily by the two great young men that my wife and I have raised.

I could not imagine the day playing out any better. I don't say this because he is my son; I say it because I know him and know his character. He is the most caring, kind-hearted, deserving person that I know and anyone else that knows him would agree.

Reading the story, one may say that it was pure luck and being in the right place at the right time as we had no knowledge of this deer prior, but I see it as fate that brought all of this together. It was simply Ryan's time, finally. ■