

THE FULL CURL®

THE PINNACLE OF

NORTH AMERICAN HUNTING



by Don Peay

More people have climbed Mount Everest than have taken all four species of wild sheep - the Dall, Stone, Desert and Rocky Mountain bighorn. Considering that over the last 100 years there has been over 50 Million big game hunters, just over 1,300 hunters, have taken all four sheep - known as the "Full Curl®".

As two-time, NBAMVP, two-time Olympic Gold Medalist and Hall of Famer, Karl Malone knew, and found out, you can't just buy the Full Curl®, you have to earn it. Karl said, "The Full Curl means more to me than an NBA Championship ever would have. It is harder to accomplish, and it is just between you, the mountain and the weather. Referees can't take it from you. To achieve the Full Curl, you need a great team of friends, guides and outfitters, but you have to earn it yourself." The fact that Karl Malone finished his Full Curl® has a lot to do with our friendship, and a legendary sheep hunting Outdoor Life writer, Jack O'Conner. And, just like I was inspired to hunt, and dedicate my life to wildlife conservation by Jack thirty years ago, I am writing this story to hopefully inspire some other young hunters/conservationists for the next generation.

The reason I got interested in sheep hunting is because as a young boy, I read about the romantic adventures of sheep hunting by the late and great, Jack O'Connor in Outdoor Life. While hunting mule deer as a 15-year-old boy, I sat up in the high peaks of Provo Canyon, dreaming one day about hunting sheep, but I had never seen a sheep, or even personally knew a person who had hunted them.

The backside of the mountain shown above is where Jack O'Conner killed his last ram. This is also where Karl took his Stone ram.

The power and passion of wild sheep changed my life in a dramatic way. I grew up in a very blue collar family, and had never hunted out of the county I grew up in. That was until at my wife's urging to chase my dreams, I booked a Dall sheep hunt in 1991 and also started the Utah Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep (UFNAWS) the same year. UFNAWS went on to become instrumental in completing 28 major habitat acquisition projects and assisting the Utah DWR start over thirty new Rocky Mountain Bighorn, Desert Bighorn and California Bighorn herds in Utah. Back then there were fewer than 500 wild sheep tucked into the remote corner of southeast Utah. Today, twenty one herds, and almost 5,000 bighorns are found throughout the mountains and deserts of Utah. There used to be less than ten public sheep tags issued each year, and now Utah is now closing in on over 100 sheep hunting tags in a year!! This is a wonderful wildlife conservation success story with over \$4.5 million in private funds donated to bring the sheep back to Utah.

Based on the early conservation success with wild sheep, I started Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife (SFW), a group that has helped put more than \$125 million into conservation, won many major political fights against the anti-hunting agenda, and established Western States wildlife management programs that has produced incredible results for elk, mule deer, moose, and other species.

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It is hard to decide which part of Karl Malone's Full Curl® odyssey has more irony, the fact that we spotted Malone's ram within 50 yards of where O'Connor killed his last ram, or the fact that Karl's Rocky Mountain bighorn ram came from a herd that he and I started in the Provo Peaks.

Only in America can young kids from Summerfield, Louisiana, and Provo, Utah live their dreams, seek great accomplishments and come together to reach the pinnacle of North American hunting. America, like the pursuit of rams, is there for those who have the courage to go and get it.

A lot of people have asked how Karl and I ended up friends. The short answer is we both love to hunt, and when Karl asked the State Director of Wildlife Resources who he should get involved with for wildlife conservation and hunting, he was told, "You need to call Don Peay."

Because of my life's work for wild sheep restoration, hundreds of hunters have had the opportunity to hunt sheep, and nearly 100 have finished the Full Curl® after taking a sheep that has been the direct result of our wild sheep conservation efforts. And, if future generations remain vigilant in their conservation efforts, thousands will reap the rewards from the conservation efforts we have made.

Sheep hunting isn't for the timid of heart, for those who accept failure easily, it is for those who love a truly wild adventure in God's most wonderful creations. Wild sheep guides are some of the toughest people on earth. They spend months on end out in the wilderness, hiking, riding, and living on the ground.

I was with my younger brother, Ben, when he made a tremendous 500 yard shot on a Wyoming Rocky Mountain bighorn, high in the Absaroka Wilderness of Wyoming to finish his Full Curl®. It was a dramatic moment. After 19 days in Wyoming for my bighorn, and 11 torture-filled days in the rugged Escalante Desert, I finished my Curl with a desert ram on the fourth and final shot, just before the ram and 13 other sheep jumped into the Canyon of No Return. I also was fortunate to accompany Karl on his quest. So, now, here are the highlights of Karl Malone's Full Curl® adventure.

THE DALL RAM

Karl took his first ram, a Dall ram with Arctic Red River Outfitters. Kelly Hougen runs one of the best sheep hunting operations in the world, and shows no favoritism to hunters, rich, famous, or otherwise. Every hunter gets a chance for a great ram. Karl's hunt was somewhat complicated. He was in the height of his NBA career, and we only had a 48 hour window to hunt. After hiking for 12 hours, we were right up in the top of the world, when a cold arctic storm came in. The only flat spot in the peaks was in a hole that a grizzly bear had excavated hunting marmots. We froze, huddled up under rain gear – no sleeping bags – and the 5 a.m. sunrise in the land of the midnight sun was so welcome. We spotted Karl's ram at 5 p.m. on the second day of the hunt. After a six hour hike, Karl shot the ram at 11:00 p.m. We hiked all night long with the sheep cape, meat and horns to the helicopter rendezvous spot the next morning. Hiking 40



Karl Malone's desert ram was taken in California. Shown (left to right) are Wade Ovard, Troy Justensen, Greg Bird, Don Peay, and Karl Malone.

hours out of the 48 hours in this hunt tested even one of the greatest athletes to ever play professional sports. But, Karl had his first ram, and he knew why so few people had completed the Full Curl®.

THE DESERT BIGHORN RAM

Toward the end of his career, Karl attended the National FNAWS annual fundraising convention in San Antonio, Texas. Karl received two standing ovations during his short speech on why he was proud to be a hunter and conservationist. To my complete surprise, he bid \$85,000 for the rights to hunt the state of California for a Desert bighorn. FNAWS has helped raise over \$50 million in such funds that have greatly expanded current wild sheep populations throughout North America. It was an easy decision to go with Troy Justenson and Greg Bird of Xtreme Outfitters. These guys were good friends, and were great sheep hunters. The California hunt took place in the Mojave Desert. It wasn't necessarily a tough hunt, but it was a good one. Karl now had his second ram – I liked to kid him that I was the dominant ram who would kick a little “half curl” ram's butt! Of course we knew who really was the dominant ram, but since he only had only taken two rams, he was just a half curl!

THE STONE RAM

On two separate occasions, Karl came home without a Stone ram. We hunted hard every day. We slept in little tents in the snow, and waited in a blizzard for three hours waiting for a storm to end, only to have the ram be one inch short of full curl. We dodged grizzly bears, and hiked for nine hours to get on to a band of rams, only to have the fog lift, and the band of nine rams vanish. We passed on a couple of legal rams, looking for the big one. The elation of bagging a ram is so much greater, knowing the agony of defeat heading home – twice without one.

Karl's third attempt for the Stone ram was with Scoop Lake Outfitters, in beautiful northern British Columbia. We were hunting out of Colt Lake, the location where O'Connor took his last ram. After five days of tough hunting, we hadn't seen a legal ram. We were starting to get anxious, we really wanted to get the Stone, because Karl had bought the Utah Governor's Bighorn tag, and really wanted to finish the Full Curl® on that tag.

Early in the morning on day six of the Stone hunt, Karl said, “Hey Don, do you know someone who could use a boost in life? I want to give someone my Pavant elk tag – a \$55,000 best elk unit in the world tag.” I said, “Karl, two of our Sportsmen group members in small town Utah were just



Karl's Stone sheep took three trips to the rugged backcountry before he harvested this beautiful ram.

killed in the coal mining accident, another donor was killed in a freak accident last week, and a key fundraiser in that town had just been diagnosed with terminal, inoperable cancer. He only has four months to live." "Perfect, get him on the satellite phone." It turned out that a dying hunter took a great 360" plus bull elk, The Mailman always delivers for those in need. After a phone call to deliver the hunt-of-a-lifetime to my dear friend with cancer, I asked the sheep gods to bring one home to Malone. After a total of 26 days hunting Stone sheep, the score was sheep 26, Malone 0. Karl has always said, a great shooter would rather be 1 for 19 than 0 for 18, just keep shooting!

We were supposed to go out and hunt the face by the river, but our guide said, "We are going to a different location. We are going up into O'Connor Basin." Karl and I looked at each other, and had a good feeling riding out of camp that morning – day 26 for Stone sheep.

It was the first warm and sunny day we had had in B.C., and that afternoon, we spotted a band of six rams, three were just short of being legal. The guide said, "Let's go up where O'Connor killed his last ram and have a look into the basin." Prior to starting the hunt, we had read the 1969 Outdoor Life article about Jack's last sheep hunt. Our guide showed us the spot where O'Connor had taken his last ram, and it was clear from the old black and white photo, we were in O'Connor Basin.

We rounded a corner, and I said, "Karl, there is your Stone ram." This ram had a gorgeous dark cape, and had five other rams with him. He led them up through some impassable cliffs, ledges and snow fields. Four rams bedded down near the top, but the big guy took a young ram and went over the top of the mountain. An hour later, the ram poked his head over the mountain, and we knew he was headed into a basin where we could get a shot. The hike and the chase was on!

Halfway to where we wanted to be it started to rain. The weather can change so fast in sheep country. No negative thoughts, this time, we would prevail. After a two hour climb, suddenly, Karl said, "Hey, there is a ram below us." I threw up the glasses and said, "There's the ram you want to kill just to the right." They had dropped into a canyon and were headed into the willows to get out of the coming storm. The sheep were 400 yards away, the wind was howling, and they were on the move. I told Karl, "Get ready to run" - the sheep were headed right into a basin where we could get a good shot. As soon as the rams went out of sight, Ken said, "Let's go." We were off and soon had the ram in Karl's rifle scope. At a distance of about 300 yards, Karl hit his ram twice, dropping his sheep.

With heavy packs, we packed the ram out well into the dark and rainy night. We hiked for four hours without stopping.



Karl took the Rocky Mountain Bighorn in Utah where years earlier he watched the trailer doors open as the transplanted sheep ran up the ridge to their new home above Provo.

THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIGHORN RAM

The record book Rocky Mountain bighorn hunt started in 1976. I thought how cool would it be to see a band of rams high up in the Provo Peaks. In 1998, the chance to buy out the last domestic sheep allotment presented itself, and thanks to dedicated members and wealthy donors, including Malone and Robert Redford, the \$150,000 payment was not a big deal. Finding transplant stock would prove more difficult, and then there were the politics to deal with. One biologist said, "Over my dead body will we put sheep on Timpanogas and Provo Peaks - it's not sheep habitat. Well, there are lots of dead bodies of people that we as sportsmen groups have walked over to make things happen in the West for big game hunters.

Lee Howard, a dear friend and co-founder and co-manager of Utah FNAWS called one day and said, "Hey, I just heard another state backed out of a sheep acquisition in Hinton, Alberta - home of the gigantic rams." "Why?" I asked., "Well, they can't make the logistics work, getting blood samples, then driving them down to the Boise, Idaho lab, and then getting the lab work done. I told Lee, "Done deal! We'll charter a jet." "Peay, you are crazy, but good." Lee said. So, with the help of the Utah DWR, a group of Utah Wild Sheep advocates went to the Cardinal Coal mines, and as fate would have it, we ended up with 32 bighorn sheep. After a freezing January day, waiting

for the nets to fall, and a two-hour drive on snowy roads to the airport the Leer jet took off from Edmonton, Alberta. We landed in Boise at 1 a.m., the lab was paid triple time to start the test that minute, and eight hours later, the lab results came back clean. The biologists had been creeping on icy roads all night toward the US/Canadian border for hours, when the lab results were faxed to the border to clear the last hurdle. Eighteen hours later, Karl Malone had a day off the court, and was able to bring his son to open the gates and turn those sheep loose on Timpanogas and Provo Peaks. In the media interview, Karl said, "Won't it be cool to hunt these rams one day?"

Utah FNAWS had completed 21 projects, raised \$4 million, and barely got a mention in the press. With Malone there for the bighorn release, it was the front page story, and TV helicopters filmed the release. Karl's financial and political support for hunters and conservation could be the subject of an article in and of itself. It has been HUGE!!

A lot of additional work went into removing eighty mountain lions in this area over two years to keep the sheep on the mountain. FNAWS paid BYU graduate students to monitor the sheep. Ever year, I would go down and watch these young, but growing rams rut in the foothills above my hometown. I would call Karl, somewhere in an NBA town and say, "Your ram is getting bigger." "What is he doing?" Karl would ask. My reply was, "Looking over his kingdom and his ewes."

In January of 2007, at the Western Hunting and Conservation Expo – an event that raised nearly \$12 million for Wildlife Conservation – the Utah DWR offered the Governor’s Bighorn tag, and announced that the Wasatch unit would be open to hunting. Malone prevailed at \$75,000 and the tag was his.

We were anxious all summer long - hoping the big ram would not be taken by a lion, or hit on the highway. Malone’s \$75,000 donation was immediately put to work, paying to bring 95 additional Montana bighorns into Utah. Thirty-five went to Flaming Gorge and sixty went to Timpanogas and Provo Peaks and Mount Nebo. Eighteen Colorado bighorns were also placed on Mount Timpanogas five miles to the north. We hope in the future, there will be 10-15 bighorn permits annually on these mountains that tower over Utah Valley. The big money guys, dedicated members of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, and wildlife biologists have made a team in North America to bring sheep back from the brink, and provide all of us the chance to someday get lucky and draw a permit so we can hunt them.

In the fall I got a call from a good friend and business associate, Troy Justenson who said, “Hey, Birdman just found the rams, they are headed to the rutting grounds and the big guy is with them!” Karl is now retired and living in Louisiana so I got him on the phone and said, “Get that Citation in the air. We are hunting sheep tomorrow morning!”

On the evening of October 5th, Greg and I put the big ram and four buddies to bed, high on a ledge looking out over Utah Valley, our boyhood hometowns. Greg and I reflected how interesting and wonderful life had been for two kids who grew up in West Provo. That night, we couldn’t sleep. We were like kids the night before the first deer hunt. Another kid who grew up in absolute poverty, where most of his childhood friends ended up dead or in prison, looked out the window of his private jet at the Brigham Young University’s “Y” painted on the mountain and knew his dream-of-a-lifetime was about to come true.

At dawn, the rams were bedded where we had left them and the stalk was on. As we approached the band of rams, I told Karl, “Championship series, three games to zero, we are up 25 points, two minutes left and we are at home.” There was a big grin on the face of a kind and generous man, that was once ranked in Forbes Magazine as the 42nd most notable celebrity in the World. We got set up and the the rams were bedded 150 yards away. Two little rams stood and started to feed. Soon they were all feeding. It took 30 minutes until we had the right shot opportunity. Patience and hard work are virtues in sheep hunting. Tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of vertical feet, years of planning and saving and it came down to the moment of truth. The second biggest ram walked over to the one we were after and butted heads with him. The smaller, full curl ram rocked backwards from the impact – kind of like the old Mailman used to do to opponents while clearing the lane before hammering down a thunderous dunk. Kaboom, A perfect shot from Karl and the big ram took two steps forward before falling. It was over.

Today, in America, there are a bunch of young boys who are being told they are too slow, their skin is the wrong color, they belong to a different religion, hunting isn’t cool, they come from the wrong part of town or their fathers aren’t members of the club. Maybe their dads abandoned them and they are told they won’t amount to anything. We have taught our boys, it doesn’t matter what color your skin is, what you believe, how much money you make, where you live or how fast you can run. What matters is what is in a man’s heart and soul.

After lots of hugs, tears of joy, phone calls to dear friends and loved ones, we hiked up the big ram. Dreams do come true. It might take 30 years of relentless pursuit when most quit or say it can’t be done or shouldn’t be done, but we did it. I can assure you that the joy that comes from the road less traveled is worth every step. For the rest of our days, we will continue to work for wildlife and land conservation, predator management, and protect the opportunities to hunt. Very few people are blessed with the precise skills and physical attributes to play professional sports. However, lots of us can work hard, and achieve greatness in the field and in conservation. To complete the Full Curl[®], or take a huge bull or buck is worthy of the conservation effort to put them on the mountain, and to take them home. The road less traveled is the only road to choose.

Karl and I have teamed up to form the Full Curl[®] Society, a program within SFW’s conservation efforts. The Society will raise funds to propagate wildlife conservation, and to assist in providing hunters for future generations to achieve their hunting dreams throughout North America. ! So Jack, hats of to you! You may not have known it when you wrote those wonderful stories about hunting, but you inspired some young boys who have made a tremendous difference for conservation, and followed your footsteps chasing the ultimate quarry in North America – the wild sheep!^T_H

EDITOR’S NOTE:

Don Peay wrote this article shortly after Karl finished his Full Curl[®] in 2006. They were not sure what to do with it, as they have learned, writing an article like this might just create a lot of jealousy, so like a lot of things, they kept that part of their life private. They decided to share Karl’s story because the conservation efforts that are going on in Utah are simply amazing. Karl and Don have played a major role in this effort.

Don Peay has since been recognized in the Fall of 2008 for the Outdoor Life 25, as one of the best leaders in conservation in North America. They also featured Karl Malone for his tremendous contributions. It is time to share this story and hopefully inspire another generation of hunter/conservationists!

We encourage you to attend the Western Hunting and Conservation Expo in SLC Feb. 11-14 and join Karl Malone and Don Peay as they announce some very exciting new sheep conservation and sheep hunting efforts. If you have questions, please email Don at Don@sfwsfh.org.