

In Memory of Ronnie Weatherman: Mentor, Friend, Master Outdoorsman

by David Tetzlaff

Unusual for Ronnie and me, we didn't hunt until dark on the second day of our hunt on legendary Saint Vincent Island. We both had independently elected to call it a day and ran into each other on the sugar sand road back to Indian Pass camp where we had stashed our kayaks just off the beach. Our conversation was low and casual as we walked. The pressure was off. Ronnie had put a good hog on ice on opening morning and I had arrowed a doe that evening. We wondered aloud how our new friend, Mark Normand from Louisiana, was doing as he too had put a doe in the cooler and was hog hunting for the afternoon. Abruptly, Ronnie froze mid-step, nodded up the road, and hissed, "Deer!" Two whitetail does had just ghosted across the road bound for a scrub oak thicket.

"Go shoot one of those deer," Ronnie whispered with encouragement.

With my doe down, I too was a hog hunter for the remainder of the trip. "I can't Ronnie, it's a one deer limit, you go shoot one of those deer."

Ronnie oozed up the road. At twenty-five yards one of the does paused at the edge of the thick stuff. For Ronnie Weatherman, and his beloved Black Widow bow, that is a doable shot, all day, every day. As he always did, he released a perfect arrow but this time the deer was wired and was not there to meet it. For most of us, a miss is a largely disappointing affair, but Ronnie shrugged it off. Which is easy to do if you typically kill half a dozen deer a season with a recurve bow. Ronnie did just that. Often.

But those who knew Ronnie well, get the real point of the story. He wanted *me* to get that deer.

Many have stated that our Traditional Bowhunters of Florida is not a club, it is an institution where lifelong friendships are forged. Among those of us who have served the club in an official position it is that and more. John McCormick writes of hunting camps at Saint Marks NWR. Shadowed in the campfire light could be the faces of Ronnie, John, me, and Chris Brodeur who served as my vice president for many of the years I was fortunate to helm the club. There is a brotherhood here, those who have assumed the enormity of managing the club. As John once said, when a shoot is done there is a sadness, not dissimilar to leaving a family reunion. Without TBOF none of us would have met Ronnie and thus our lives would have been that less enriched.

Ronnie did not require verbosity to make a point. One night after hunting Lake Panasoffkee we sat in the local fast food joint. Sipping on a vanilla shake I expressed my frustration with a fellow who had taken on the club presidency and had asked me to serve as vice president. As only a three-year member I certainly assumed that others were far more qualified, but I reluctantly agreed. Months into my new role I was increasingly unhappy with our president's lack of initiative. Great guy, but wrong seat on the bus. Ronnie's solution, "Just do

what you can do.” That’s it. That was all he needed to say. The enormity of those six words was an adrenaline shot.

I immediately began *just doing what I could do*. I side-stepped the club president and started doing his job. He soon left the club, leaving the presidency in my lap. *Now I had done it*. I was terrified of the responsibility yet excited for the ability to steer the ship in the direction I thought best. And humbly, I had John, Jimmy Zetwick, Jay Campbell, Wayne Carter, Nick Coullias, Mel Bulger, and other past leaders to prop me up. But most of all there was Ronnie. He was the guy who took the club to sellout status making it “the” shoot in the Southeast. As John said, Ronnie might not have agreed with everything he did, or that I did following John, but he respected our efforts. As the time when I bought the African animal 3-D targets when they first came out. He found them strange on our ranges, he was deer, hog, and elk guy, but he ten-ringed them just the same. Without his quiet mentoring my time as president would have suffered. None of us tried to fill Ronnie’s shoes. That was too far reaching a task. We just tried to walk in his footsteps.

When a new job moved my family from south to central Florida I was delighted that our new home was a short twenty-minute drive from Ronnie’s house. On my first visit we shot his 3-D range twice. And typical Ronnie said afterward, “You hungry?!” Me, “Always!” Minutes later deadwood crackled in the fire ring, a bottle of something red and plastic cups were on a camp table, and the venison was on its way to a perfect rare.

When in the hunting woods, Ronnie’s words will forever echo through my head:

“I spend more time picking a tree than picking a spot.”

“If you hunt on the ground, you best be able to see the game before it sees you.”

“I’ll take a sabal palm over a pine tree any day.”

“You almost can’t aim too low on a hog, that heart is way down there.”

“If you hunt from a tree, keep a low bow shoulder, remember to bend at the waist.”

“Really learn about the woods, most hunters only learn enough to kill a deer.”

“Listen to the squirrels, their alarm call is different for a bobcat than a hawk.”

“If you see other game when you’re hunting hogs, you’re moving too slow.”

An avowed public land hunter, Ronnie didn’t think much of leased hunts. “Use it or lose it” was his mantra for his unapologetic justification of hunting our WMA’s and NWR’s over leased land. Few knew Florida’s state and federal lands as Ronnie did. I am sure he had far better things to do than traipse around the WMA’s near my home on humid August mornings. But he wanted to share those decades of knowledge and even give up a few hard-earned spots.

And in our new world of chest-thumping social media hunting stars, Ronnie was the antithesis of that self-aggrandizing sideshow. The walls of his self-designed Florida Cracker style home are adorned with whitetails, turkey, monster hogs, lunker bass, and two spectacular Colorado elk. And out in his bow shop stand buckets of nice antlers that any of us would proudly put on the wall. Every animal has a story, but you must gently tease them out of Ronnie's memory. He was far more interested in his guests' stories. He had an intense way of listening to you as if there was nothing more important in the world than the conversation at the time. And if the story ended in a miss or a blown stalk, he most likely would have politely interjected, "Well, if you would have..." And, as you made a mental note to self, you know he would have been right.

On another Saint Vincent hunt we had a wild, dangerous kayak paddle which will be told in part in an upcoming issue of Traditional Bowhunter Magazine®. I am grateful that Ronnie had a look at it while he was still with us. He rubberstamped my retelling of the story while sheepishly admitting we were lucky lunatics who should have been shark food.

Ronnie's passing is a shocking, devastating loss to his friends in the outdoor community. The campfire won't lick the night sky so brightly, the tireless blood trailer won't be there to look over our shoulders as we sort out puzzles in the leaves, the master bow tuner won't be here to answer our questions, no more squirrel salad sandwiches at TBOF shoots, and no more texting conversations—

"You home, Ronnie?"

"Yea!"

"You wanna shoot pistols?"

"C'mon up!"

Someone called Ronnie Weatherman to "C'mon up" far too soon.