

Jax to the Rescue by Patrick Heskey

It was Saturday Dec. 12th, the last day of Pennsylvania Rifle Season. I had punched my tag on a beauty of an 8 pointer during 2020 rut-cation on Nov. 10th. Rick, my father-in-law, was still grinding it out. Putting in hours, passing on smaller legal bucks and does, for an opportunity on a 'good' PA mountain buck or the old massive white-faced doe he saw and could not get a clear shot at, the day prior. The last day of the season met him with abnormally high temps in the mid-50s, and more little bucks moving through his area.

During any hunt, we will text each other through out the day, checking in and letting the other know what is moving. The following is an exact transcript of our text messages, while I was at the playground with my Kids, roughly a mile and a half from Ricks tree stand.



Rick 10:35 – Watching six point and a couple does out at about 80 yards. The does never gave me a shot, the buck was wide open, nice perfect six. He will be real nice in two years. Three little ones came by me I didn't want to shoot them. Seeing deer.

Me 10:46 – Nice that's a good couple days. The deer moved back in. What stand are you in?

Rick 10:51 – Top Bottom (stand). Decent Morning for sure

Rick 12:40 – Another Little buck and three bears. That six point is still in the same spot.

Shot heard in the distance

Me 12:48 – Was that you shooting?

Rick 12:48 – Yes where are you

Rick 12:49 – I knocked it down, but it got back up. 4 bucks

Rick 12:58 – Do you wanna bring Jax up?

Me 1:20 – We're heading back.

For some reference, where our community playground is, there is very poor cell service. So as I heard the shot, I knew it was close to where we hunt. I sent the message and I did not receive Ricks reply, until he was able to get through and call me at 1:00pm. On the call we talked shot placement and the deer's movement post shot. We planned for me to go to the house and get Jax, the SM, who's tracking ability was put on full display when he tracked and found my buck

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earlier this year. I am talking about a 2-mile track, literally over the river and through the woods, that ended with my biggest buck to date. To say that I have confidence in Jax, is an understatement. I knew that if Rick put a kill shot on this animal, Jax would find it. No question in my mind. My kids (Everly who is 4 years old and Colton who is 2 years old, desperately wanted to join us on the track) and I high tailed it back to the house, to drop them off with Mimi, as Jax and I headed out on the adventure.

Jax and I met Rick at his tree stand. Rick's plan was to have me be the handler for Jax and Rick would follow behind carrying his .270, if a follow up shot were needed and marking blood on the trail as we went. After shedding my outer layer, we started into the clear cut where Rick's first shot met the deer he was hunting. Prior to us arriving, Rick had marked where he found first blood. I needed the trail markers to find it, Jax did not. His nose would shift from the ground to the air, locking on to his target's scent almost immediately. It's hard to describe the adrenaline rush you get when you know that your dog is on the trail and he is pulling as if the deer is within eye site. Your brain is telling you to verify that the deer had been there, by any type of sign, almost second guessing the dog's ability to scent track. Do not do that. Trust the dog, the nose knows. I left those false intuitions, at the hooves of my deer after the 5-hour track job the month prior.

I held tight to the lead as Jax did what he does best, find wounded deer. He moved me through the thicket of the clear cut, leaving my own blood in place of the deer's, as I was down to a t-shirt and jeans, into a patch of beach saplings. Where we found the buck's first bed clearly was outlined with good blood and sign. He was not there long before us and as we pushed through, Jax was telling me the chase was on and he was close. Rick followed behind and marked blood that he saw along the way. As with most tracking jobs, the blood disappeared the further we went.

We would call out back and forth and when Jax and I would get too far from him, we would halt and let Rick catch up. Jax would wait with frustration, as he knew the target was within reach and his prey drive was in high gear. We made our way across a dirt road, leading down to a creek bottom we knew well, from the tracking job the month before. The 9 pointer was heading down hill, towards water, with the wind in his face. As Jax and I raced through the brush on the bottom, I found myself again saying, where's the sign? No snow, no blood, hard to distinguish deer tracks in the leaves, no way for a human to verify that we were still on the trail. Trust Jax.

As we figured it would, the buck's trail led to the creek. Jax got a quick drink and jumped in the

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mountain stream, tracking through the water. Again. Seeing this once for the first time was amazing, as my buck headed down stream in the middle of the creek, for a rough total of 400 yards, seeing it twice was just impressive. About 50 yards down the stream, Jax exited over the creek bank and pulled hard on dry land, over logs and dead falls. I heard branches snapping out a head of us and as the bottom opened up into a clearing, Jax and I both laid eyes on Ricks buck, forcing itself through the timber till it was out of site again. I was sure it had made a break back across the creek and up the hill we had just traversed down. Trust Jax. We waited a couple seconds for Rick to meet up with us and as I told him what I saw, Jax eagerly pulled to continue the chase. Rick agreed with his dog, lets go get him.

Jax took me right to spot where I had last seen the deer, no blood to be found, but to be honest I wasn't able to look down for it, other than trying to be as athletic as I could to keep up with Jax and his ability, which is that of an Olympian. His endurance and conditioning are immeasurable, he stays singularly focused on the job, finding the deer. Always smelling, always searching, always hunting, all the time.

Back on the trail, he led us back to the creek. Jax took a step into the water and gave pause to the action, nose in the air. I was intent on making it to the other side as I envisioned the buck being up on the bench above us. He would not go, instead he circled to my right, nose to the ground, only to stop and hold on point with some mountain laurel and a dead fall in front of us. I yelled for Rick, He is on point! My tunnel vision and adrenaline had taken my focus to the log and as I searched for what Jax was pointing, I heard Rick from behind reinforcing Jax's point with a "Woe" to keep him holding and steady, and then the buck shot out from behind the log and into the creek, mortally wounded and struggling to head up stream. Arriving at a fallen tree that blocked his exit only 20 yards from where we jumped him. Jax had stayed silent for the entire track, until he saw the buck 'flush', at that point his 'spurlaut' had over taken him (as it should) and he let out his barks and calls that he had found his target and it was in site. Only feet away. Rick was able to put a final round into the Buck. Jax had done another phenomenal job. We celebrated in the creek bottom with Jax, as we had done a month before only about a 100 yards away, recognizing and giving him all the credit for two deer that we would not have been able to find and tag had it not been for Jax and his tenacious ability and steadfast dedication to the hunt. He had done good, really good. And I was lucky to be along for the ride. After snapping some pictures with Rick, Jax and their trophy, it was time to switch gears and figure out how to get this deer out of the bottom, again. Rick jokingly, (I think), said, "Well Patrick this is why I let you marry Maria" as he looked back up to the ridge we had just came from. It was time to drag!

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Reflecting on both tracking jobs, one as the shooter and the other as the handler, I can not say which is better or which I prefer, all I do know is that I wish we could get on the track of a mountain buck and onto another adventure over and over, not just a handful of times in the fall. However, I know that the anticipation and hope of another deer season in 2021 and another track job, is what makes these moments unforgettable, unique and embedded in our memory banks. I look forward to writing about those hunts to share with my kids and the hunting community, so the memories and stories I hold near and dear are not lost to the passages of time.

