



1. Kuiu founder Jason Hairston scans the ridgeline for a big ram.
2. The hunters on their way to the top of 13,113-foot Old Mike Peak.
3. The prey: a Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep.

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The New Predators

Cult gear company Kuiu is outfitting a new wave of superfit, adrenaline-craving, tech-savvy athletes who are transforming hunting into the next extreme sport. And critics are taking aim.

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IT'S JUST BEFORE DUSK in New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and Jason Hairston is getting pummeled. The light is fading, and he's hiking up a ridgeline at 11,000 feet, higher than he's ever been. A cold front is passing through, and wind gusts are reaching in excess of 60 miles per hour. Every few steps another blast hits, knocking him sideways. Hairston's companions, Brendan Burns and Willie Hettinger, aren't faring much better, stumbling around in front of him like a couple of drunks.

The wind is howling with such force that it's almost comical, so Hairston, who's on the mountain hunting sheep, breaks out his iPhone to record an Instagram post, looking like one of those hackneyed meteorologists reporting from the middle of a hurricane. "We saw a group of rams on the far mountain, and now we're heading up to check out another area," he shouts into his phone. "We're just getting hammered by the wind."

Hairston, the 45-year-old founder of the hunting-gear company Kuui, is after his first Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, a sure-footed ungulate that lives primarily above tree line, often in locations so steep and rocky that they're impossible to negotiate on two feet. "It's the pinnacle of big-game hunting," Hairston says. "You have to go farther and harder for them than for any other species."

Among a segment of hardcore big-game hunters, no brand is as revered as Kuui. The company's high-performance fabrics — bonded fleece and waterproof breathable synthetics — are pulled directly from the mountaineering world, and its distinct Tetris-like camo pattern looks more like standard-issue SEAL gear than the fake shrubbery so common at Walmart. Today Kuui camo is as much a status symbol in hook-and-bullet culture as Louis Vuitton's monogram is among the Hamptons set. And it has as many celebrity boosters: UFC commentator Joe Rogan is a fan. Metallica's James Hetfield owns a guitar emblazoned with Kuui camo, and Kid Rock has a piano wrapped in it.

On Instagram, Hairston has some 21,000 followers who track his far-flung hunts and gear updates and tag their own posts with #kuuiation. Detractors, of which Hairston

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has a few, occasionally use the comments section to rail against his trophy shots and what they see as hunting for the 1 Percent. But it's hard to say how much Kuuiation or Hairston's critics will get from this impromptu weather report: With the thin air, he inhales heavily between sentences, and his voice is almost entirely drowned out by the wind's roar. After stashing his phone in his pocket, he wipes snot from his nose.

"Ain't sheep hunting great!" he says.

The three hunters spend the next hour scouting and see a group of promising rams, but with darkness creeping over the eastern plains, we call it quits for the night and head back to camp. The next morning, conditions are far more favorable, so we load up our backpacks and set off in the violet predawn looking for a sheep to shoot.

When it comes to finding big rams, Burns and Hettinger are two of the best in the business. Burns works for Kuui as its lead product tester and resident hunting guide. Hettinger's main gig is as a personal hunting guide for rich clientele; he's here

because he knows these mountains better than just about anyone.

Once outside of camp, it takes Burns and Hettinger less than 10 minutes to spot the same group of rams two ridgelines over, a straight-line distance of maybe a mile. Hairston has a rare management tag from the Taos Pueblo, a 120,000-acre tribal homeland in northern New Mexico, which requires him to shoot an old ram, eight to 11 years old, that probably won't survive another winter or two, its molars ground down so far that it'll eventually starve. Based on its horns, the largest in the group looks like a shooter, but to get within range we have to hike up and over a 13,000-foot peak, then down and around the back side of the ridge where the sheep were first seen. Doing so takes most of the morning, stopping and starting to catch our breath and continually watch the movement of the rams. Now, as the three hunters prepare to clamber to the edge of a slight rock outcropping to take a closer look, Hairston unlatches a custom-made .300 WSM rifle from the side of his backpack and loads a 200-grain bullet

1. Hairston taking aim.
2. Filling up in town before heading to the mountains for three days.
3. Packing out his ram.



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“It’s the pinnacle of big-game hunting. You have to go farther and harder for them than for any other species.”

into the chamber. “It feels good to finally get some lead in the pipe,” he says.

But in the four hours we’ve been on the move, the sheep have wandered into the upper reaches of a grove of pine trees, behind a slight knoll. No shot. The three reassess. They settle on crawling to the edge of the knoll, knowing that Hairston will be within 150 yards of the animals, a strategy that could easily spook them.

“We can roll right over the top,” Hettinger says, “but we won’t have much time to decide whether to shoot.”

“If we push them,” says Burns, “we won’t see them again — not on this trip.”

Both turn to Hairston to make the call. “That’s fine,” he says with grin. “We’re professionals. This is what we do for a living.”

YOU’LL BE FORGIVEN if your idea of hunting is paunchy old dudes rumbling down back roads in beat-up pickup trucks. Plenty of sportsmen still shoot whitetails out of tree stands or wait on the edge of sloughs for a flock of mallards to decoy in. But these days, hunting has been embraced by a new breed of devotees: athletic, tech-savvy, ethically minded professionals who like to play year-round in the mountains. They’re often the same mountain bikers and runners on the trails outside Moab or Bozeman in summer. But come fall, they trade Lycra for camo and pick up a rifle or bow, many for the first time.

Tim Ferriss, the *4-Hour Work Week* guru,

is a recent convert to hunting. So is actor Chris Pratt. Even Facebook king Mark Zuckerberg has boasted about killing the meat he eats. Much of hunting’s newfound appeal is because the payoff is a year’s supply of organic, antibiotic-free backstraps — the new ethical eating. But it’s also a way for mountain lovers to get deep into the outdoors, tempting people who have no desire to sit in a duck blind.

“It’s a totally different way of interacting with these wild places,” says Kenton Caruth, co-founder of the performance-hunting apparel company First Lite. “I know plenty of pro mountain guides who are in the woods every day and they’ve never seen a wolf, but that’s because hikers or climbers are always walking around. They’re never silent, still, taking in every sound and smell. As a hunter, I’ve seen a wolf quite a few times.”

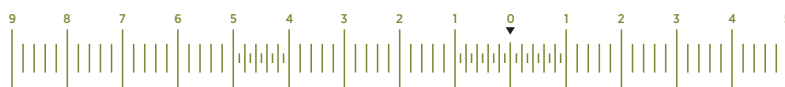
For adventure athletes, hunting is a challenge that’s every bit as difficult as finishing an ultramarathon — stalking animals for miles on end, packing out hundreds of pounds of meat, navigating through the backcountry in snowstorms. It also offers the rush that comes with having to make consequential decisions in the mountains, just like in climbing.

“The athletic world is very physical but pretty sterile,” says Mark Paulsen, a former strength and conditioning coach who has worked with NFL players. “Whether you’re on a football field or on a basketball court, it’s a known event. Whereas you go into the

woods, you have no idea what you might be heading into. For people who love the mountains, that’s the beauty of it.”

Paulsen now owns Wilderness Athlete, which creates nutritional products like meal-replacement powders for these new so-called backpack hunters. Twenty years ago he was training athletes at the University of New Mexico when a friend took him bow-hunting for elk, hiking six miles into the mountains with 70 pounds of gear. The weight and altitude nearly killed him. “I wanted to throw up, lie down, crawl under a tree,” he says. “I thought, ‘This the most athletic thing I’ve ever done in my life.’” On the last day of the hunt, a bull elk bugled so close that Paulsen could feel it in his rib cage. He felled the bull with an arrow from 15 yards. “It was the single most exhilarating experience of my life,” he says.

If backpack hunting can be said to have a celebrity, Hairston is it. Much of that has to do with his seemingly endless series of big hunts, which he regularly posts about on Instagram, much to the dismay of anti-hunters and even some in the hunting world. In the last six months alone, he has bagged a trophy room full of animals. In July, he shot a 3x4 blacktail buck in northern California. In August, he flew to the Yukon’s far north and killed a 10-year-old Dall sheep with perfectly symmetrical 42-inch horns. In September, on private land just north of Bozeman, Montana, while hunting with his



eight-year-old son, Cash, and his 72-year-old father, he brought down a monster bull elk with a compound bow.

"It's in our DNA," says Hairston. "It's two million years of genetics. Whenever I hear criticism online I just respond to them: 'Before you knock it, get out and do it.'"

UP CLOSE, BIGHORN RAMS register less as living creatures than as props in a prehistoric diorama in a natural history museum. Their tousled, purplish coats gleam in the sun, and the growth rings on their horns are demarcated by clear, dark lines. With a good spotting scope, you can age a sheep by counting the rings at a distance of a few hundred yards or more. Few people are better at this, or enjoy it as much, as Hettinger and Burns.

Hairston met Burns at a trade show a decade ago. At the time, Burns had become something of a phenom in the hunting world by besting Montana's archery record for a nontypical elk. He'd tracked the animal for three days before sneaking within 12 yards and shooting it with an arrow. The horns alone weighed 54 pounds. He was just 22 at the time. Burns has racked up an impressive series of kills — two of which landed him on the Boone and Crockett Club's record list, essentially the *Billboard* music charts for hunters. But these days his knowledge of and obsession with sheep has earned him the nom de guerre Sheep3PO. "The only way to get him to shut up about sheep," Hairston says, "is to turn him off."

Burns and Hairston hunt together multiple times a year, taking pride in going farther afield than nearly anyone. Lately that's meant to Canada's far north for 10-day expeditions with a local guide — a prerequisite when buying a sheep tag up there. "The guides are often excited, because they've never been able to take clients to some of these places," says Hairston. "They're too difficult to access, but with us they know we can go." On their Yukon hunt this year, they flew to a remote airstrip near the Arctic Circle, crossed a river via boat, and then hiked three days into the mountains before

the one." The rams are grouped together tightly, and they clearly sense that something is amiss. At first they dart one way, then another. Finally, they disappear into the trees. Hairston never pulls the trigger.

"Fuck," says Burns. "Fuck."

Hairston slowly gets up and looks back with a pained smile. "I never had a shot," he says as way of explanation. Now the animals are gone, maybe for good. "Come on," Burns says. "Let's get ahead of them." So we take off side-hilling it across the mountain, doing our best to catch up to an animal that can run uphill faster than most NFL cornerbacks can on AstroTurf.

LIKE MANY HUNTERS, Hairston views the sport as the ultimate proving ground. It's part of the reason he is so fond of the idea of backpack hunting, which may be the sport's purest, most self-reliant expression. Before setting out, he often fills out spreadsheets with each piece of gear and its corresponding weight listed in ounces. "You've got to," he says. "Every once adds up over a 10-day period to thousands of extra calories burned." He budgets two pounds of food per day, divvied up by day in Ziploc bags. He also trains year-round, spending 10 to 15 hours per week in the gym or hiking with sandbags in his backpacks. For mountaineers, none of this is new, but in the hunting world there are only a handful of people who prep the way he does.

Hairston has been hunting in one form or another since he was a kid growing up in Southern California. Like his father, Hairston took up football in high school and then college, playing linebacker. He was good enough that the San Francisco 49ers signed him as an undrafted free agent in 1995. He stayed with the team for a season without playing a down, then retired a year later after suffering an injury to his C5 and C6 vertebrae during a mini-camp with another team. His career as an NFL player was over before it even began. "I couldn't really watch football for a few years," he says. "I was angry about what it had done to me."

ing gear and ice axes," he says. The apparel options for each of those sports, he noticed, was far superior to anything he had for hunting. Hairston had a similar epiphany when realized he was shopping for his gear more in REI than Bass Pro Shops.

So in 2005 Hairston and Hart decided to make high-performance synthetic gear specifically for hunters. They named it Sitka, after a town in Alaska. They designed a new camo pattern, made some sample jackets and pants, and then convinced mail-order catalog Schnee's to take a chance on the line. Sitka was a hit from the get-go, finding a home with sportsman looking for an upgrade from the subpar cotton offerings. By 2008, Sitka topped \$4 million in sales and its products were on store shelves across the country, including Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's. In 2009, W.L. Gore & Associates, the \$3 billion behemoth behind Gore-Tex, acquired Sitka for an undisclosed sum. Today it's one of the largest brands in the performance-hunting space.

The deal was worth millions, but the partnership between Hairston and Hart unraveled. Hairston never wanted to sell, he says, and his misgivings became apparent during a meeting about the acquisition. Execs wanted to expand Sitka's footprint, making new camo patterns for whitetail and duck hunters. In Hairston's view, this was unthinkable. "You lose the core appeal," he says.

Increasingly frustrated, Hairston left Sitka (Hart says he was simply not offered a job after the sale) and immediately got to work on Kuui. With Kuui, which he named after a game-rich Alaskan island — perhaps not coincidentally located across an icy strait from Sitka — Hairston decided to sell online, directly to consumers; that way, he'd be able to control everything and avoid retail markup. He worked with an engineer to create a carbon fiber backpack frame that was lighter and more ergonomic than anything on the market — and that could comfortably carry 120 pounds of fresh meat. He teamed up with the Japanese company Toray, a competitor to Gore-Tex,

"I wanted to throw up, lie down, crawl under a tree. I thought 'This is the most athletic thing I've ever done.'"

they were even in sheep territory.

This New Mexico hunt is a far cry from those expeditions, but it's a better bet for scoring an old bighorn. As we crawl to the edge of the knoll for a closer look at the group of five rams that moved off downhill, it becomes clear the oldest one is perfect. He has a massive body, probably 300 pounds, with thick horns that end in flat stubs, the product of years of bashing heads with rivals during the rut. He's nine, maybe 10 years old based on his growth rings. Hairston drops his backpack and lies flat on his belly, propping the rifle up on his bag to take aim.

"The one on the left," Burns says. "He's

Hairston then sold commercial real estate, flipped a few franchises, and became increasingly focused on hunting. Around that time he was often out with Jonathan Hart, a friend from college. On their first backcountry hunt together, in Idaho's White Cloud Mountains, the weather fluctuated wildly — cold and snowing one day, sunny and 80 degrees the next — and their gear was soaked nearly the entire time. Both knew there had to be something better.

Hart thought about the gear he used for other outdoor activities. "In my garage I'd have shotguns and rifles and bows and arrows, but I also had kayaks and climb-

to develop a line of apparel. During the 18 months it took to produce everything, Hairston blogged obsessively about the process, building anticipation and earning trust among a dedicated contingent of hunters.

Kuui launched in 2011 and was an immediate success. It now sells everything from \$300 rain jackets to backpacks, game bags, and tents. Sales are approaching \$50 million, at least according to Hairston, and the company is expanding its offerings beyond hunting. The Navy SEALs, he says, have reached out to develop a line of tactical gear (to be released to Kuui customers in 2017), and even Disney hired Kuui to create a backpack



frame for its costumed performers. Hairston has plans for the company's first brick-and-mortar store in 2018, and a traveling pop-up store will be hitting the road this summer.

With Kuui's success, Hairston has fielded a number of offers to buy the company, but says he'd rather be good than big: "I made that mistake with Gore. I won't make clothes for women, and I won't make clothes for fat guys, because then the skinny guys won't look good in them. I want Kuui to be an aspirational brand."

AFTER PASSING ON the shot on the big ram, Hairston, Burns, and Hettinger get into position atop another rock outcropping, just up-valley from where the rams disappeared. The vantage point offers a clear sight line into the bowl below. But the sheep never show up.

The hunters are silent, pondering the next move — if there is one. Earlier in the morning, Burns had checked his phone and noticed a photo about an acquaintance's recent, unsuccessful hunt. The post basically said the experience of hunting in the mountains was reward enough. "That's great and all," Burns said, "but I'd rather get something. You either win or you lose."

Hairston does not like to lose. In the business world his competitiveness has earned him a fair amount of flak, including criticism by competitors for misleading claims about the performance of his products. But much of the concern centers around conservation. Whereas most of the new hunters packing rifles into the backcountry are doing so on public land, with tags won in public lotteries, many of Hairston's hunts are through private landowners or outfitters. To some this resembles the pay-to-play hunting model so common in Europe, where it's a rich man's sport. Walter Palmer, the dentist who shot Cecil the lion, placed a big order from Kuui before he jetted off to Zimbabwe. And Eric Trump and Donald Jr., who have been photographed at length with their kills, are Kuui customers and friends of Hairston's.

Kuui donates a fair amount of money to conservation organizations like the Wild Sheep Foundation and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, which have been a boon for those species. But a central tenet of organizations like these and many state wildlife agencies is protecting species with funds raised by auctioning off premium hunting tags, some that sell for upwards of \$100,000. It's an effective strategy in some areas, but it's also controversial because it's hard to know just how much money is going to conservation. It can also come at the expense of public-draw hunters.

"We start to get into trouble," says Land Tawney, director of the nonprofit Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, "when more and more tags are allocated in the name of raising money, and then we turn into a system where only the rich and elite have the opportunity to get those tags."

Plus, selling high-dollar licenses tacitly feeds a trophy-hunting mentality that continues to flag the sport — warranted or not — as hunters go after animals simply because they'll score well on a record list.



Hairston's wife, Kirstyn, with Cash and Coco

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"When the pursuit of an animal as a status symbol becomes more important than the experience surrounding it," says author and TV host Steven Rinella, a respected figure in the outdoors world, "you enter into very troubling terrain."

Hairston has turned Kuui into a cult favorite by transforming his camo apparel into a hardcore-lifestyle brand, much like CrossFit, and making himself the face of the company. That plays well when you're selling products and prepping for big trips, but it can come off as self-aggrandizing once an animal is on the ground.

Jonathan Hart, Hairston's former business partner, sums him up this way: "It's like in *Seinfeld*, the J. Peterman catalog that Elaine works for. It's all about him. Jason is about Jason."

AFTER LOSING THE RAMS in the trees, Hairston and Burns discuss their options. By now, the animals may be long gone. The wind is blowing, circling around the mountain, and we start moving back to where we last saw the rams. Hettinger sets off to track where they went. Then suddenly, there they are, just a hundred yards downhill. Hairston and Burns take up nearly the exact same positions they had an hour earlier, while Hettinger creeps closer to spook them out of

the trees. This time, the big ram shows itself clean, broadside to Hairston. He shoots.

The report, like a door slam, quickly dissipates in the wind. From below the ridge, the sound of snapping branches rings out — the ram stumbling at full gait into a tree. Then it's just wind. Burns reaches over and fist pumps Hairston. "You got him," he says. "You got him." Burns grabs his spotting scope and runs downhill toward where the ram disappeared. Within seconds he lets out a high-pitched yip. "Yeaoooo! He's right down here."

By the time Hairston arrives, Burns and Hettinger are already marveling at the ram's thick, almost violet cape. "That is as an awesome of a cape as you will find on a big-horn," says Burns. "Look at the mass on that thing!"

"Awesome," Hairston says. "That is awesome."

After admiring the ram for a solid 15 minutes, the hunters drag him under a few big trees for photos. Burns breaks out a bottle of Super Glue to affix the ram's mouth shut, so it doesn't hang loose. Then we spend the next hour shooting photos: Hairston alone with his kill; Hairston, Burns, and Hettinger with the ram; a close-up of the animal's horns. After they're sure there are enough good pics, Burns and Hettinger break out knives no bigger than X-Actos and carefully start removing the hide, everything from the hoofs to the head, to preserve for the taxidermist. Hairston wants a full-body mount to display in Kuui's

offices. As his partners cape the animal and cut off each quarter, Hairston quickly debones the meat, making it lighter for the pack out. Still, the meat, horns, and cape weigh a combined 150 pounds or so, and it takes three and a half hours to get it the mile or two back to camp.

Once there we all unpack our bags into our tents, then regroup around a fire. Soon everyone is emailing about the day's events. Hairston texts with Joe Rogan about an upcoming elk hunt. Eventually, we call it a night. Hairston heads off to his Kuui tent, tucking the sheep's cape and head into the vestibule so a bear doesn't get it in the night. It's a strange sight, but it's hard to blame him: even sticking out of the top of his pack, the ram still looks regal.

Earlier in the day, shortly after shooting the sheep and walking down to where it lay, Hairston did something almost all hunters do. He set his gun and backpack down and crouched beside the animal, with his hand on its shoulder, clearly in awe. And then a silence came over him. Everyone stopped and let him have the moment.

Finally, Burns weighed in. "That thing is just the perfect sheep," he said.

After a few more seconds of silence, taking in the animal before him, Hairston looked up and agreed. "It's good to be a winner." 