There is an old military adage that goes something like this: "Even the best-planned battle strategy is lucky to survive the first shot fired." When I returned to South Africa in August 2005 in pursuit of a mature nyala bull, I discovered that military warfare and big game hunting have more in common than I ever imagined. Like a battlefield general who fails to react to an enemy's unanticipated actions, a hunter who fails to adapt to the clever and often frustrating survival instincts of his prey will go home defeated.

I began my latest South African pursuit by booking with Dries Visser
Author with a truly regal nyala bull.

Bowhunting Safaris. Dries, who specializes in bowhunting all types of African game, assured me he could get me into bow range of a large nyala. I arrived at his Citadel hunting concession electrified with anticipation for the upcoming hunt. My professional hunter for the week was Hein Lottering, whom I had met two years earlier on my first hunting trip to South Africa. We spent the evening reacquainted and discussing strategies and expectations for the coming hunt.

The next day, we stationed ourselves over a waterhole that, Hein said, a mature bull had been frequenting. With less-than-favorable weather and a full moon the previous night, I was slightly pessimistic about our chances for success. But as the day progressed, the sun began to shine, the wind ceased blowing, and the animals began to move. Before I knew it, an nyala bull was standing no more than 11 yards away. Moments later, another young bull approached. The pair remained around the waterhole for more than an hour before drifting back into the bush.

Hein confidently predicted the big bull would show next. It wasn’t long before a figure materialized in the bush 60 yards out from our blind. My anticipation soared. Cautiously, the animal inched his way toward the waterhole. He carried heavy, long horns and a regal white mane ran the full length of his back, and I instantly knew this was the magnificent bull I had been waiting for. However, this bull hadn’t gotten big by being stupid. Forty-five yards out, he stopped and then, as if some sixth sense had told him something was not right, turned and vanished before my eyes.

That night in camp, I recounted the day’s happenings to my good friend and Gulf War veteran Keith Dvoroznak. In true Marine fashion, he said, “You’ve got to adapt and overcome.”
The following day, Hein and I were back at the water hole. In early afternoon, the two smaller bulls from the previous day sauntered in to drink. They stayed around for only a short time before abruptly departing. We were both puzzled but remained hopeful the big bull would show, as he had the day before. But we sat the rest of the afternoon without sighting him.

After we’d climbed out of the blind that evening, Hein concluded from the tracks what had occurred. The larger bull had followed the lesser ones to water. However, instead of coming directly in, he had circled downwind of our ground blind. Sensing that something wasn’t right, he spooked, and that’s when the other bulls made their departure. Both Hein and I knew our chance of getting the bull at this water hole had vanished.

That night at dinner, Hein, Dries and I discussed the previous two days of hunting and talked strategy for the upcoming day. Keith’s words of inspiration from the night before were ringing fresh in my head – I needed to adapt my strategy if I hoped to achieve success. So Dries and Hein decided to switch our hunt location to an area that had not been heavily hunted for a few years. To take full advantage of daylight hunting hours, we decided to leave immediately and do some late-night reconnaissance of the new area.

The truck headlights found an old game-capture pen with an isolated water hole some 30 yards from it. We discovered a tree that would be suitable for elevated stands and a brush pile that would serve well for an alternative ground-blind setup. Before leaving, we set up a trail camera, hoping to gain some insight into the size of the bulls in the area. The next day, the trail camera showed at least one good bull. With plenty of good sign around, we hung tree stands and brushed in a pop-up ground blind.

The next morning found us hidden in the ground blind, watching the waterhole. It wasn’t long before a young nyala cow eased in for a drink. Within seconds, she froze in her tracks, looked directly at the brush pile we were hiding in and exploded out of the area. She was so scared I actually wondered if there was a leopard sitting in the brush pile beside us. A few minutes later, a group of nyala cows approached, and as soon as they got within sight of our ground blind, they pulled the same vanishing act. Hein and I were stunned. So much for assuming it would be easier to hunt unpressured animals.

Because the ground blind was a bust and the animals were approaching from a direction that prevented us from using the tree stands, we had no choice but to change our strategy. Our only remaining option was to utilize the abandoned game-capture structure, which fortunately was still intact. We brushed in the open end of one of the loading shoots, wired in a few native trees and soon were situated nicely in our unconventional ground blind.

Two separate groups of nyalas approached the water, but each time I tried to position for the shot, they scattered. The brush and walls of the dilapidated loading shoot were not adequate to conceal even the slightest movement from their sharp eyes.

I was now halfway through my hunt and getting concerned that taking an nyala with my bow on this trip might not be in the cards.
However, Keith’s “adapt and overcome” advice still stood tall, so that is exactly what we did. Hein and I knew we had a good location and all we needed to do was conceal ourselves better. We got some old burlap feed sacks and used them to line the inside walls of the blind, and we added a roof. It was perfect. We left for the day to let the area rest.

Early on the fifth day, my confidence was boosted when, after we’d settled into our remodeled blind, a band of females approached the water and paid no attention to our setup. Young bulls and small herds came and went for most of the morning until finally, three hours later, a mature bull showed up. He had heavy horns and good length and was larger than the one we had captured on the trail camera. We studied him for a while, and I reluctantly decided not to shoot.

My judgment was rewarded late in the morning when a magnificent, ivory-tipped bull strolled in to water. This was the animal I had come for!

Thirty minutes and numerous near-attempts later, I finally had him broadside in the clear at 21 yards. The arrow struck low in the shoulder and passed completely through. The bull raced 35 yards, stopped, wobbled and fell over. Words cannot describe the elation I felt.

Looking back, I remember thinking, on more than one occasion, This just isn’t going to happen. But after five days of persistent waiting, scouting, building blinds and hanging stands, and constantly revising my hunting strategy, I was finally rewarded with a truly impressive bull. Thankfully I heeded a friend’s sage advice: “Adapt and overcome.”

The dilapidated game-capture pen that served as our hide.

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