

# Blood Brothers

THINK COLLEGE FRATERNITIES ARE ALL ABOUT PARTIES? SPEND A DAY PUSHING BEARS THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS WITH THE YOUNG MEN OF PENN STATE'S TAU PHI DELTA, THE COUNTRY'S ONLY FRATERNITY FOR DIEHARD OUTDOORSMEN

BY T. EDWARD NICKENS

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The bears don't want to leave the thick stuff. They've been in there for 364 days straight, unmolested, and they're not coming out on their own. If you want a bear from Sliderock Den, a steep tangle of rock and thicket in north-central Pennsylvania, you'll have to roust it out, push it from its bed or off the trails that wind under the



THE SPORTSMEN OF TAU PHI DELTA  
Back row, from left to right: Derrick Nahill, Bob Hivish, Casey Fenton, Clark McColly, Luke Ulsamer; middle row: Jeff Gowen, Josh Halladay, Rick Mather, Shaun Doran, Adam Miller, Mark Haffley; seated: Nick Duffy, Phil Brumbaugh, Nick Spinelli, Kyle Ziegler, Ryan Giles.

rhododendrons like subterranean tunnels. You'll have to drive it to its feet and shoot it on the run.

It is a task that defies imagination. The ground here rises 1,000 vertical feet in a meager half mile. Cloaked in rhodos 20 feet high, the slopes are cobbled in rivers of mossy, loose rock. Surveying the lone stretch of open ground on the mountain, a pipeline cut that runs like a claw mark straight uphill, Pat Weiss counts out 15 specks of blaze orange strung out in a skirmish line. He is co-captain of the Tau Phi Delta bear drive, perhaps the largest, likely one of the best, and certainly the most storied Pennsylvania bear drive of the last half century. "The bears," Weiss tells me, as he readies to order his men into the breach, "have been in that hellhole all year long, and there's only one day they have to worry about anybody. We're the ones. And today's the day."

The lone professional and social forestry fraternity in the United States, Tau Phi Delta is a fully accredited member of the Interfraternity Council at Pennsylvania State University. In many respects, it's just like the other 50 fraternities at Penn State. Tau Phi Delta has a residence house, a Little Sister program, a formalized pledge process, and regularly scheduled—if, to be frank, marginally successful—mixers with Penn State sororities. Its philanthropy is proven: TPD regularly wins the Penn State "Blood Cup" for best participation in the annual blood drive and is the only Penn State fraternity that has been honored with a city proclamation for its service.

But that's where the typicality ends, for TPD was born and bred and

continues to evolve as a brotherhood of diehard outdoorsmen. The frat house boasts a meat pole and freezers for the brothers' spoils. Venison is a dining-hall staple. There's an archery range in the side yard. And for the last 30 years, the so-called Tree House has turned into a de facto hunt camp during Pennsylvania's three-day bear season over Thanksgiving week. Brothers skip class. Alumni show up with cots and sleeping bags. And they do it the traditional way of Pennsylvania bear hunters—a squad of pushers, a squad of standers, and in between, a hunk of gnarly Penn's woods.

We'd gathered in the shadow of Sliderock Den in the first minutes after dawn. Twenty-four active brothers and returning alumni were dressed in every permutation of hunting and farm garb, and not a single item of clothing was fresh from the box: blaze orange bird vests, camouflage deer parkas, brush pants, boots flecked with timber-marking paint, worn-out leather chaps. They wear ankle braces and soccer shin guards and glance nervously at the mountainside, soft and brown and smooth as antler velvet from a half mile away. It's an illusion. "I did this last year," says one brother, shaking his head. "I can't believe anything lives on that f---ing mountain."

#### CAMPUS CAMO

Brothers Adam Miller, Casey Fenton, and Nick Spinelli hanging out on the library steps.

Now it's four minutes into the hunt and I have fallen five times and punched a hole in my left thumb that is bleeding down my wrist. I lost sight of my two flankers within 10 seconds of entering the woods, but I can hear their whoops and yells like distant beagles and cowboys: *Aaaaa-oh! Aaaaa-oh! Woo-oop! Woo-oop!* From knee height to 15 feet overhead, rhododendron branches web in all directions. I drag my gun, push my gun, thread my gun through a mat of wet leaves and veinlike boughs, with broken branches as pointy as stilettos. I worm my way under the really horrible parts spelunker-style, on my back. Then I walk for 40 feet without ever touching the ground, like a monkey through the canopy, crashing, bashing my way along. Rarely can I see farther than 5 feet.

All around me are the cries of a bear drive in action—guys drenched with sweat and dew, screaming out in frustration and resolve as they push for the bear. Every few minutes a cry passes up the mountainside, from one pusher to the next: "Hold the line!" Someone is bogged down in the brush, or sprawled on the rocks, and needs a break. We gauge our progress, and more importantly, the shape of the line, by the hoots and hollers of the pushers above and below. It's critical that no one gets ahead, or behind, or moves too close to someone else in the line so as to create a gap where a smart bear could slip through unnoticed. It's a carefully crafted vise that tightens incrementally, step by step, on the bears hungered down in Sliderock Den.

But those steps get more and more diffi-



**ATTENTION, STUDENTS:** Do you practice fly casting on campus? Is a deer mount the most valuable thing in your frat house? Send your best photos of being an outdoorsman on campus, along with a short description of why your school is a great place for hunters and fishermen, to [FSletters@time4.com](mailto:FSletters@time4.com). We'll run the best on [fieldandstream.com](http://fieldandstream.com).

cult to take. A cold front is moving through, and the mercury is plunging. Now every snot-slick branch is slimed with ice. At times, there's no choice but to shield my eyes with a forearm, cup the rifle's trigger guard with my other hand, and plow blindly forward until my progress is halted by a wall of vines. I cartwheel and karate-chop through the rhododendron jungle for a half hour...45 minutes. Then I sense the vise slowly closing. There's a palpable feeling of anticipation in the wet air, like the scent of game. The standers can't be far. Surely the bears have run out of options. And that's when the shooting starts.

## A Greek Effort

"Nobody shows up here saying, 'I've got to kill a bear,'" Weiss told me on Sunday night, as the TPD brothers and some two dozen alumni crowded into the frat house Chapter Room for a logistics and safety briefing before the next day's opener. "It's all about the *we*." Weiss is slender and bespectacled and scruffily bearded—as if Ted Nugent had inhabited John Lennon's body. The brothers call him "Captain" partly out of respect for his considerable hunting skills and partly as a nod to his non-sense way of running the hunt. "I killed a bear on my first post, and I want other people to experience that feeling. That's why I ride these guys so hard to do it right. It's only three days, so we're balls



### TEAM SPORTS

Top: Nick Duffy, Joe Di-Girolama, and Chad Hartzell on a drive. Right: Pat Weiss follows as Mark Haffley helps Kevin Walter pack out his bear. Bottom: A pre-hunt meeting.



to the wall. If I have to hurt a few feelings to get it done, so be it."

At the moment, the room is little more than a hunt camp. For the rest of the year, TPD takes great pride in keeping the house remarkably clean; it is swept, mopped, and scoured top to bottom seven days a week. Now, double rows of cots line the walls, and the floor is littered with boots, packs, sheath knives, long underwear, bottles of aspirin, and greasy earplugs. Topographic maps spill over a table, held in place with venison salami and cups of stale beer and tobacco spittle. Above it all, the faces of bear hunters past grin in framed annual fraternity portraits hanging on the walls.

The origins of the Penn State Chapter of the Tau Phi Delta fraternity

reach back to 1922. That year, the 18 members of a forestry club persuaded the owner of a rooming house to rent rooms only to the club's foresters. Officially, TPD came to life two years later when those young men at Penn State and another small forestry fraternity at the University of Washington hammered out a national charter.

Over the next 50 years, a number of chapters flourished and faded at major universities. A University of Minnesota chapter "literally died out" during and after World War II, says Earl Howar, an alum and executive with the Izaak Walton League of America who serves as the frat's unofficial historian. The cofounding chapter at the University of Washington fizzled away in the 1970s. The brothers of Penn State are the last of the line.

But that doesn't mean they're a dying breed. The fraternity's numbers go up and down, but new pledges find their way to the Tree House every year, and the group has become a brain trust for wildlife conservation. TPD alumni stack the rosters of conservation agencies and nonprofits across the country; they work for just about every Pennsylvania resource agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and National Rifle Association.

No doubt the bear drives have played a part in keeping the group vital. They began in 1974, at brother John Shotzberger's grandmother's farm. "In Pennsylvania, you can't use bait and you can't use dogs," explains Howar. "But here you had a

bunch of young, fit college kids who loved nothing better than to go running through godforsaken places. It had a twisted kind of logic to it."

The fraternity's homespun *Bear Drive Chronicles* tells the story of those early, glory days:

- 1974: Three hunters got turned around in a huge snowstorm and were lost for the day. No bears were seen.
- 1975: No bears were seen.
- 1976: No bears were seen.
- 1977–78: Closed season.
- 1979: No bears were seen. The windchill was minus 15, but "a baggie full of old bear shit" was produced to prove that bears had been in the area.
- 1980: A big year for the bear drive. Bob Walley left the beer tap running and drained the keg onto the floor. The sewer backed up into the dining room. Poker games went on all night. The washer broke down, and a flood roared through the ceiling and into the Chapter Room. But the TPD Little Sisters started a beloved tradition of preparing opening-day breakfast and lunch, and the brothers finally drew blood: a 402-pound male shot at least seven times before he went down. **[Continued on p. 111]**

## Blood Brothers

[Continued from p. 90] In 1987, the year *Pennsylvania Sportsman* magazine declared bear drives “nearly a lost art,” Tau Phi Delta went on a tear. They killed bears for the next six seasons in a row. Over the years, the drives grew to be huge affairs, with upwards of 50 participants until the state regulations limited the number to 25. About that time, some of the older alums formed a couple of TPD bear drives in Potter County and Forest County—“the prodigal sons of the north,” as one brother describes them.

But the hunts out of the Tree House are only getting better. In 2004, the brothers put four bears on the ground, three in a single first-day drive. Much of the second day was spent successfully blood-trailing the fourth bear through pouring rain. On the third day, shifts of eight men took turns breaking through the rhodos, and they licked their wounds after hauling 1,000 pounds of bear out of the mountains.

### BEARS ON THE RUN

Back on the drive, when it finally happens, it happens quickly, with each player isolated in his own world of thicket and fog. No one really knows what’s going on. It’s only later that the story is pieced together, bit by bit over venison chili back at the frat house, and in truck cabs bouncing over logging roads. One thing is clear: All hell breaks loose at the end of the pushes.

The first animal is just a few yards from the posters’ line when Shaun “Slo-Mo” Doran catches a glimpse of black fur. He yanks his gun up, follows the blur, heart pounding, finger wavering over the safety, but he can’t get a bead. That’s bear No. 1.

A few minutes later, Kevin “Krusty” Walter hears a squirrel in a thicket so dense it couldn’t be anything but. The pushers are hollering like madmen just 100 yards away; surely any bear has long since fled. He stretches out on the ground to look under the branches. Four black paws carefully piston up and down through the brush. Walter groans. He killed a bear the year before, and the \$800 taxidermy bill nearly broke him. TPD brothers are largely forestry and wildlife management majors who receive a diploma, stiff college-loan bills and, if they’re lucky, jobs with salaries that make business majors cackle. Plus, he’s engaged. The last thing his fiancée had said to him was “You’re not going to kill another bear, are you?” He had told her the chances of that were like a million to 1.

Walter stands up, puts the rifle bead in the only opening he can find, waits until the bear’s white-flecked chest blots it out, and pulls the trigger. It’s a double lung shot at 12 yards. Bear No. 2. Kill No. 1.

With one bear down, it’s a scramble to get the second drive under way. Weiss wades into the disorderly line of hunters, brow furrowed, jaws working on an ever present wad of Gummi Bears. He orders silence. Two bears have been

jumped, and there's a very good chance that more await in the woods ahead.

The second drive is a longer push, and this time I'm covering a post high on a ridge where gusts of wind break against the mountainside. The ghostly hollers of the pushers grow nearer. The vise is closing, the bears' options disappearing by the minute, but there are no bears. I hear shouts ring out—"Posters ahead!"—as the pushers spot gunners and spread the word. It's just about over, and then it begins.

A single shot cracks far below, followed by war whoops that echo up and down Sliderock Den. On the post, Bob "BB Gun" Hivish misses bear No. 3. It turns and crashes back into the line of drivers. Minutes later, there's another volley from high on the ridge, where a group of local hunters have taken up stands hoping to kill a bear off the brothers' sweat. Bear No. 4, and the second drive is not yet done.

Down by the creek, the posters and pushers who drew low numbers can do little but cheer. One of them has had plenty of experience listening to others shoot. Bob Fitterling is the second man up from the stream. A 1992 graduate and now a forester with the state, Fitterling took part in the TPD hunts for 16 years before finally felling a 460-pound brute in 2003. Fitterling is crashing through brush when he hears an upslope pusher yell, "Bear!" He steps into a rocky opening, racks a shell into his .30/30, and spies bear No. 5 closing the distance at 20 yards. By the time he gets his gun up, the bruin is eight paces away. Fitterling breaks its neck with one shot. Two bears are down.

A few hundred yards away, alumnus Chad Hartzell listens to it all, leaning against a massive hemlock. In eight years of pushing bears for the house drives, Hartzell has seen four animals but never had a shot. This year, he pulled poker chip No. 5, a low post and not a great one, given the bears' predilection for bolting uphill. Hartzell hears someone shout, "Bear in the drive!" but he can't get a fix on the direction. The creek is gurgling, and there's a distant shot—brother Shawn Cable misses a running bear. Then Hartzell hears a twig snap.

He looks up, straight into a sow's face peering out of the rhodos. She is 50 yards away, tops, takes a step closer, and disappears in a gully. Hartzell raises his gun. Unless the bear turns, she will rise from the ditch at 20 paces. The bullet catches her in the chest and flips her backward, silent and still in the wet leaves. Six bears on two drives, and three are on the ground.

An hour after the shot, Hartzell's hands are still shaking as he pulls a gut-hooked fixed-blade skinning knife from its sheath. A mob of orange-coated brothers pound him on the back, but he doesn't seem to notice. He looks down at the prize. He whispers, "Thank you, bear."

### HOME SWEET FRAT HOUSE

Back at the house that night, three bruins are hoisted on the TPD meat pole. A few Little Sis-

ters come by to hear the stories. They're in low-rise sweatpants, with navels showing under T-shirts that don't mince words: STIHL LITTLE FELLER, REDNECK GIRL, KISS MY AXE—PENN STATE TIMBER SPORTS. The brothers are exultant. It will be difficult to top a day like this one. "It's amazing," says Weiss. "We've all followed the writings of T. Edward Nickens, so we knew what an amazing man he was. But we never guessed that his simple presence here would have such an effect."

The joking and sense of family here typifies life at most fraternities, but the brothers of TPD are convinced there is something more at the Tree House, something deeper and more purposeful. With 40,000 students, Penn State is a huge school. "People wonder how they are going to fit in at a place like this," says recent grad Dave Gustafson, "especially guys from a rural background. This fraternity is a lifeline."

That may be because TPD seems so very lifelike to those it attracts. "Spend a little time on college campuses," says Weiss, "and you'll see it everywhere: mama's boys spending daddy's money. Not us. We cut our own wood. We cut our own grass. We make our own repairs. We don't have anyone to bail us out if we screw up." TPD brothers have landscaped the house, put in new windows, retiled the bathrooms, built a brick fireplace. The day before the bear season opener, a half dozen brothers dug out a busted sewer line. "You're never going to feel so close to someone as when you're shoveling out a sewer line, knee-deep in poopwater," says Greg Schaetzle. "That's brotherhood."

And these brothers are keenly aware of their role as stewards of the very ties that bind them. "For us, concern about the future of hunting is not an abstract concept," explains Casey Fenton, the current TPD president. "Don't get me wrong. We don't think we're the solution to declining numbers of hunters. We're just 30 young guys in the subculture of college life who love to hunt and fish, and we want other people to experience what we love so much. But maybe, for now, that's enough."

One thing is for certain: For now, there are three bears to skin and two more days to hunt. After the Thanksgiving break, gun season for deer opens. Then it's time for ducks. Lake Erie steelhead through the winter. Turkeys in the spring. Smallies and trout in the summer.

"Rednecks. Backward farm boys. We hear it all," chimes in Nick Spinelli. "But we almost like it when we're walking across campus and somebody says, 'Look at that weirdo in camo.' You know why? Because once they get to know you, they realize how wrong they are about hunters. They learn that we are a bunch of well-rounded guys, from the country, from the city, who really want to give back to the sports that have given so much to us. If everyone could spend a hunting season at Tau Phi Delta, it would change the world." 