

By **BRIAN MCCOMBIE**

So You Wanna BE A Guide?

Forget the three R's. Camping, mulling and critter care are the three most important classes at guide school



Scott Boulanger gave up a successful career as an electrician (and about 50 percent of his paycheck) to become a big-game guide out West.

IN 1990 SCOTT BOULANGER MADE ONE of the biggest decisions of his life. Just 26, Boulanger was already a master electrician who owned a 10-man electrical contracting shop in Vernon, Conn. A lifelong hunter and angler, he had always dreamed of making his passion for the outdoors pay.

So Boulanger enrolled in a hunting-guide school, the Russ Willis School for Guides in Noxon, Mont. During four weeks of instruction, Boulanger learned the fundamentals of working with horses and mules (including how to pack and shoe them), how to set up a wilderness camp and what it takes to guide hunters on successful elk hunts.

"It was awesome," Boulanger says of the experience. "I went as a vacation and to learn about Western big game. I fell in love with it, went home, sold everything and came back to Montana to live and work as a guide."

ON PAPER, BOULANGER'S CAREER change seemed like a big mistake, especially financially. He took more than a 50 percent pay cut at first. "I made great money as a contractor," Boulanger says. "But it wasn't about the money. I didn't want to live on the East Coast any longer, and I'm a people person." That and his love of the outdoors made guiding a logical choice.

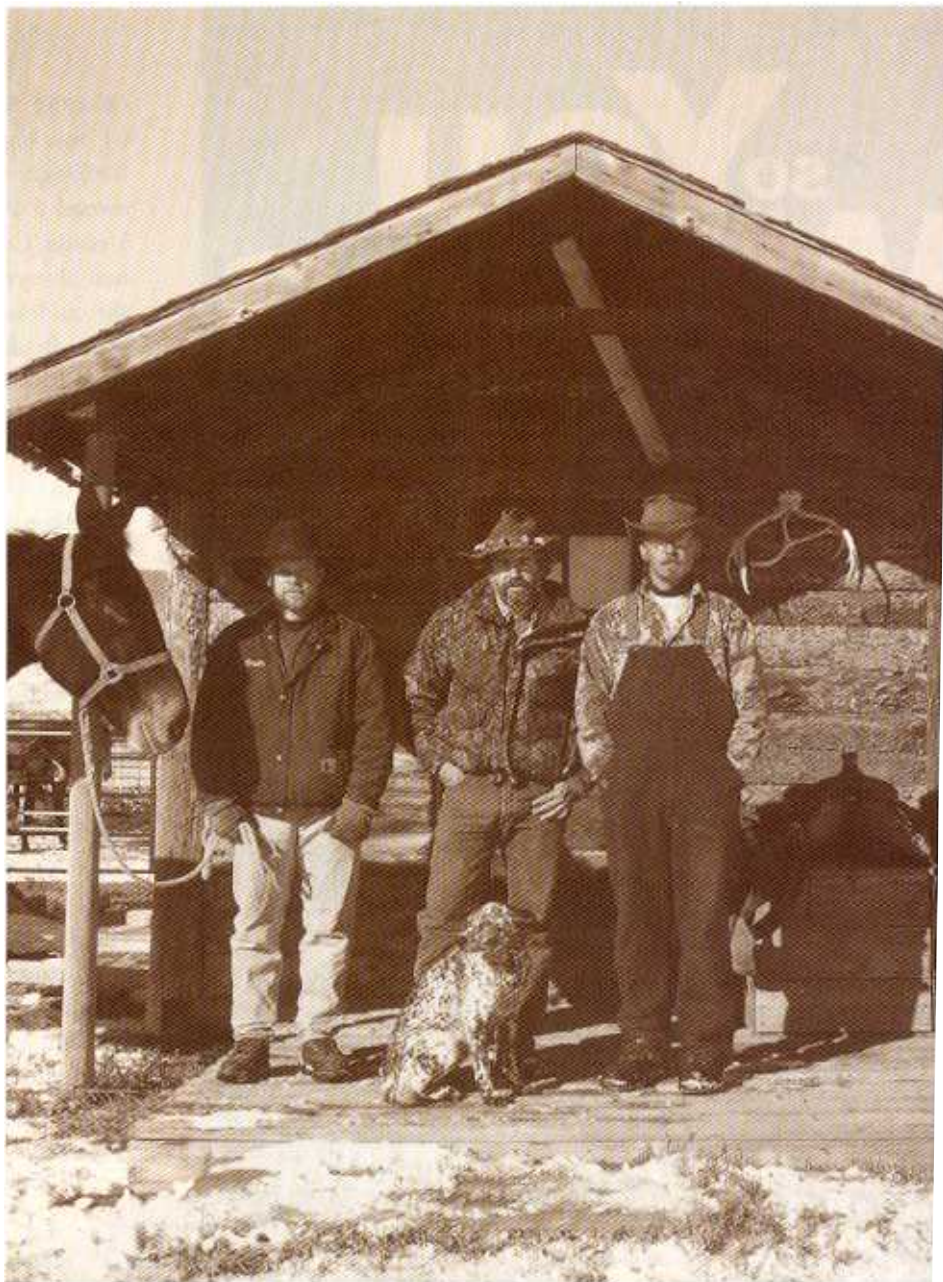
Boulanger guided for seven years; then he bought his own hunting-outfitter business, which he still operates today. In 1999, Boulanger also

Tim Doud (center) flanked by two graduates of his Wyoming guide school, Brian Fontaine (left) and Grant Maahs. The physical demands of a full season of guiding come as a surprise to many students who enroll in Doud's school.

opened the Western Montana School for Guides in Darby. Every spring, the school enrolls about 22 people who long to become guides. The four-week program costs about \$4,000 and focuses on working with livestock, setting up wilderness camps and guiding hunters.

Apparently, many people share Boulanger's dream; he receives nearly 1,200 calls a year for the 20 or so spots in his guide school. The good news is that the market demand for new hunting guides is very strong. Boulanger says almost every one of his graduates lands a job, and fast. Being a hunting guide can take you to some awesome country few other people ever see, and your knowledge of big game and the outdoors will, with time and experience, outpace nearly everyone else's.

Yet being a hunting guide, like most jobs, has its downside. Low pay, cranky clients and the difficulty of finding time for your own hunting are just a few drawbacks. Guide school isn't all that easy, either.



EDUCATION OF A GREENHORN

BRIAN FONTAINE IS FROM LANCASTER, N.H., AND HAS hunted deer with guns and bows since his teens. After high school, he thought about going to hunting-guide school but landed a good-paying job in Lancaster cutting and trimming trees. "But I just wasn't happy," he admits.

So in August 2003, Fontaine, then 26, arrived in Cody, Wyo., to start the four-week hunting-guide course at the Bliss Creek Wilderness Archery Elk Guide and Packer School owned by Tim Doud.

As he immediately discovered, "This is a very demanding job physically. It will separate the men from the boys real quick," Fontaine says.

The school began with livestock work, all of which was new to Fontaine. "I had no horse experience, period," he says. "I didn't even know how to put a halter on a horse."

But he soon learned that and more, including how to load the 80-pound packs that are slung on horses and mules.

After two weeks of livestock training, the hunting work began when Fontaine and his fellow students packed 22 miles into the Washakie Wilderness in the Shoshone National Forest to learn how to bowhunt for elk. Students practiced elk calling and learned how to use the wind, glass the high country and stalk up on big bulls. They also learned the proper way to get their clients in position to take a shot.

When we spoke to Fontaine, he'd just graduated from Bliss Creek two weeks before. He'd been such an outstanding student that Doud hired him as a guide for the coming season. Fontaine was also just back from his first time guiding an actual client, on an archery elk hunt. "I lost ten pounds last week hunting," he says. "You do a lot of sweating. You carry anywhere from a thirty- to a thirty-five-pound pack and hike up and down drainages and across sidehills all day."



Few guides last as long in the profession as Bryan Ross, who graduated from guide school in 1987. He took the skills he learned out West to the White Oak Plantation in Alabama, where he has been guiding since 1988.

schools, including Doud's Bliss Creek outfit. It also provides a home-study course on becoming a hunting guide.

School quality varies, though. Some schools do a very thorough job of preparing you to be a guide. Others? Tim Doud found out the hard way in 1979 when he went to a Colorado guide school.

"Actually, all I did was pay the school's owner to go to work for him," Doud says. What instruction Doud got was more incidental than on purpose, though he learned a lot by working hard, making mistakes and asking (and re-asking) questions.

Unfortunately, Knott says, there's no national guide school accrediting body to evaluate and rate the schools. So a person interested in guide school pretty much has to do his own research. Knott recommends examining available guide-school Web pages, reading the literature and talking with school administrators. For the last, write up specific questions you want answered about the curriculum and the level of instruction you'll be receiving. Better schools will have a list of past students as references.

"Our basic student is someone just coming out of high school or college," says Doud, "someone who loves to hunt and fish and has decided the guide-school thing is for them."

Doud adds that the better shape the students are in, the better it is for them. He specializes in archery elk and, as he puts it, "Hunting elk with a bow is not about sitting and waiting for an elk to come to you. It's about running around and calling and getting an elk in the right position for a shot."

Ultimately, though, Doud says being a good guide-school student and eventual hunting guide is less about physical shape than about attitude. "My perfect student is someone who has common sense and is willing to work hard. That's it. The rest can be taught."

One for the Women

Kelly Hackenmiller (left) briefly went to college after high school and then worked in a factory. But the 26-year-old native of Osage, Iowa, always liked being outdoors. In the summer of 2003, she enrolled in the Western Montana School for Guides, becoming the only woman in a class of 22.

Guide school was a tremendous experience for her, Hackenmiller says, though it was a lot of work. She felt the men in the class were first-rate. "They treated me just like one of the guys and let me do all my work on my own, but I did have my own tent for a little privacy."

Soon after graduating, Hackenmiller landed a job at the Iron Wheel Guest Ranch in Whitehall, Mont., initially taking clients on fishing and horseback riding trips.

She says she hopes to use her hard-won guiding skills to take clients out for big game very soon.

But hunting is only one aspect of a guide's busy schedule. There's setting up camp, cutting wood (with two-man crosscut saws, since chain saws aren't allowed in wilderness areas), clearing trails, hauling in hay for the pack animals and getting everything ready for the next day, which begins at 3:30 a.m. for the guide. Fontaine loves it all and couldn't wait to get back out in the mountains with his next client.

THE ORIGINAL SCHOOL

THE FIRST GUIDE SCHOOL WAS STARTED by Erv Malnarich in 1959 in Corvallis, Mont. Michael Knott took over Malnarich's ELM Outfitter and Guide Training Inc., in 1999, and the school currently endorses five guide

GUIDE BURNOUT

RON MACE GUIDED for gun and bow elk hunts in Montana's Bitterroot Valley from 1995 to 1999, after attending the Royal Tine guiding school in Philipsburg, Mont. Mace was 21 when he started guiding. A resident of eastern Washington State, he spent his teen years hunting and fishing and loving the outdoors. He loved being a hunting guide, too. In the beginning, anyway.

Mace went into the Bitterroot Valley in August to set up the hunting camps and make the necessary preparations for hunting season. That season ended in November, and Mace remembers that he and the other newly minted guides got back into town only once or twice a hunting season, for just a single night each time. But he didn't mind. In fact, he loved it. "It was what we all wanted. We were young and gung ho and didn't care how long we stayed out there," he says.

At some point, though, things started to change for Mace; he first noticed it in his relationships with his clients. "I started getting crabby and snippy at them," he admits. "I started being forward with them, and that's not right because they were paying a lot of money to be out there."

Most clients were Easterners used to hunting whitetails and seeing lots of animals. They often expected the same experience with elk, yet that isn't how it works. "We'd go out and after two hours, the client would say, 'Man, there's nothing out here!'" Mace says. Then the complaints would start.

Part of Mace's growing agitation was due to the poor physical condition of many clients. "I just couldn't take the whining and their being lazy and out of shape," he says. "They all had the old football injuries, and they're all complaining they're not seeing any elk. But they wouldn't go up the next ridge to check for elk because they were too tired!"

Having no personal hunting time also started to wear on Mace. "I got into this whole business because I love to hunt. That was probably



Ron Mace quit guiding professionally a couple of years after he graduated from guide school in order to hunt more on his own.

the biggest reason I got out of guiding."

RETURN EAST

BRYAN ROSS HAS been a hunting guide

for 15 years, but he uses very little of what he learned at guide school. That's not surprising, since Ross works at the White Oak Plantation, a hunting lodge outside Tuskegee, Ala.

While White Oak hunts take place on a sizable amount of land (about 20,000 acres of hardwoods, pines and swamp), there's no need for horses and mules. Ross's guide school taught him to hunt elk, but at White Oak it's all about whitetails in the fall and turkeys in the spring. And with a hunting lodge that holds 35 people, there's no camping.

Ross, who hails from Port Sulphur, La., attended a Montana guide school in 1987 when he was 26 years old. He got a job right away guiding in western Montana's Selway Mountains, but in 1988 went to the White Oak Plantation and has been there ever since.

While he doesn't use a lot of what he learned in guide school, he thinks it is "a good weeding-out process. If you finished guide school, at least you show the I-want-to-be-in-the-woods attitude." Still, he admits that new guides come and go at White Oak regularly.

WHAT'S THE APPEAL?

WITH ALL THE POTENTIAL PROBLEMS, WHY do people even consider guide school and guiding? "They want the freedom they have out here in the Rocky Mountains," says Knott. "You're going to be seeing and doing things a lot of people are never going to experience."

Even Ron Mace highly recommends both guide school and guiding to those who seriously want to do it. "Even if you end up guiding only for a season or two, it's an experience you'll never forget. I wouldn't take any of my time as a guide back. It was one of the greatest things I've ever done."

Guide School Facts

There are at least two dozen guides schools in the United States. Most are located in the West, with the emphasis on using pack animals for wilderness hunting trips. Most schools also train for elk hunting, though some specialize in other species.

Classes meet in the spring or summer for about four weeks; tuition ranges from \$3,500 to \$4,800. That covers food, lodging (much of it in a tent) and instruction. Students pay their own travel costs. Class size ranges from 10 to 20 students.

After graduation, guides can expect to make around \$1,000 per month. New guides often pull in about \$100 in tips from each client per week. A guide with five or more years' experience can make \$2,000 per month or more. **Contacts:** *Bliss Creek Wilderness Archery Elk Guide and Packer School (307-527-6103); ELM Outfitter and Guide Training Inc. (406-961-3603); Western Montana School for Guides (406-821-0017); Winterhawk Outfitters Inc. (970-876-2623)*