



The STOIC HUNTER

As much as hunting is a journey into the outdoors and wild places, it is a journey into the self, an exploration of one's limits in the natural world.

BY CHRISTOPHER ROSS

Two months into season eight of the survival competition TV show "Alone," Clay Hayes, a BHA member, was sinking into a funk.

As fall turned into winter, the days got shorter and darker, and the temperatures dropped below zero. When the weather was bad – which it often was – he was forced to spend days at a time inside his hand-built shelter with only his thoughts for company.

On day 66 of his total immersion into British Columbia's wilderness, rain lashed the log walls and wind howled, forcing smoke down Hayes' chimney. He couldn't even build a fire. Left to sit in the cold darkness, the miseries of his self-imposed trial seemed to multiply – lack of food, lack of pen and paper and, above all,

missing his wife and two sons.

During those moments, it was not the ability to build shelters or find game that helped Hayes survive and win the 2021 season – it was mental fortitude, a practice Hayes learned through a yearslong study of the philosophy of Stoicism.

An ancient Greco-Roman school of thought that emphasizes calm acceptance in the face of fear, loss, joy, death and anything else that fate may hold in store – Stoicism is experiencing a resurgence. Embraced by high-performing professionals in Silicon Valley, the NFL and the military, it has also gained acceptance among prominent North American hunters and anglers, like Hayes.

Advocating for a Spartan simplicity and detachment from the comforts of life, Stoicism speaks to the kind of person who willingly



Photo courtesy Clay Hayes

“Outdoor adventures are full of moments that suck,” said Hayes. “No one likes being cold and wet and hungry. But that’s the price we pay for amazing experiences. We can’t control the weather, or anything else outside ourselves, but we can control how we respond to it.”

carries only the essentials while hiking into the mountains in search of big game.

The stress on mastering individual agency and leaving the rest to providence makes Stoicism the natural, and perhaps necessary, state of mind for backcountry outdoorsmen – those who may nail scouting and preparation but spend days in the woods without seeing a trace of antlers or getting a trout to bite on wild waters.

“Theodore Roosevelt took a copy of Epictetus with him on his ‘River of Doubt’ expedition, probably for the same reason that hunters are reading the Stoics today,” said Ryan Holiday, an author and one of the catalysts of Stoicism’s modern-day revival. “They’re about toughness, resilience and presence as well as disappointment, fear and courage.”

In a 2021 episode of the BHA Podcast & Blast, Hayes spoke about the role Stoicism played in his “Alone” victory with host and journalist Hal Herring. A lifelong hunter, Herring himself is an acolyte of Stoic thought. He was turned onto one of the philosophy’s primary texts, “Meditations” by Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, after hearing author Elizabeth Gilbert cite it as one of her favorite books.

“If a person really wants to be a backcountry hunter, and they aren’t yet a Stoic, they soon will learn the basics, or they will give up that kind of hunting altogether,” said Herring.

Two of the main contemporary evangelists for Stoicism – Holiday and life-hack authority Tim Ferriss – both hunt.

When Wired to Hunt podcast host Mark Kenyon posted a video of the five books he thought all hunters and anglers should read, among his selections was Holiday’s “The Obstacle is The Way.” Kenyon has also cited books such as “How to Think Like a Roman Emperor” by Donald Robertson and “The Socrates Express” by Eric

Weiner as influential in his approach to whitetail hunting.

“A lot of the things I talk about when it comes to mindset and dealing with adversity, how I try to process things, I’m often using concepts that were advocated for, and really established, in the public consciousness in that Stoic era,” said Kenyon.

The philosophy was first developed around the third century B.C. by Hellenistic thinkers such as Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus. Later adopted by Roman culture, figures such as Epictetus, Seneca and Aurelius focused the philosophy on its practical applications to living a more virtuous life. Through the centuries, Aurelius’ “Meditations” and Seneca’s “Letters” have become the philosophy’s most widely read texts.

Aurelius was an avid hunter. “For a philosopher, he really knew his way around the outdoors,” said Holiday.

Though Seneca became wealthy as an adviser to the Roman emperor Nero, he committed himself to a lifestyle of physical privations – plain fare, cold baths, hard mattresses and daily runs. When Nero ordered him to commit suicide, he was “unperturbed,” according to an account by Tacitus. Though both men wrote of the struggles to live up their own ideals in such personal, relatable terms, their ideas remain potent thousands of years later for today’s backcountry hunters and anglers.

Two central tenets of Stoic thought helped Hayes pull out a victory on the show – and of note, he was also the only one that season to harvest a deer with bow and arrow. One was the idea of impermanence or flux. As he sat in his cold lodge, hungry and lonely, he reminded himself that what he was experiencing was only temporary – that one day it would seem like it had passed in the blink of an eye.

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That was the second key to what he cites as a mental turnaround that helped him push through his darkest moment on the show – remembering that there’s no point to worrying about things that are beyond human dominion. Stoics believe that the universe is ordered according to a higher design known as “logos,” or nature – what we might call fate – which should be affirmed no matter how unjust it might seem at any moment.

In “Meditations,” Aurelius valorized the type of person who is “undefiled by pleasures, invulnerable to any pain, untouched by arrogance, unaffected by meanness, an athlete in the greatest of all contests – the struggle not to be overwhelmed by anything that happens.”

For Kenyon, hunting offers a kind of microcosm of life in which to practice the precepts of Stoicism. “[Hunting] squeezes things down. It compresses challenges and adversity. It compresses the highs and lows and life. And Stoicism provides you with a set of tools to navigate that,” he said.

While filming an episode for a show last year, Kenyon took a shot at a buck and missed by about an inch, his bullet sinking into a tree trunk as the deer ran free. It had been a hunting season defined by such moments – close calls, near-misses and mistakes – and the lost opportunity demoralized Kenyon.

Drawing on his study of Stoic thinking, he steeled himself to remember that “all I can do is move forward and control what I can control.” Stoics believe in reason as a divinely instilled capacity, meant to rule over emotions and appetites and draw individuals closer to reality.

When another buck showed up an hour later, Kenyon’s mind was clear – and, this time, his shot was true.

Most hunters experience similar moments in the field. As much as hunting is a journey into the outdoors and wild places, it is a journey into the self, an exploration of one’s limits in the natural world. In that way, it is a form of the examined life championed by Socrates, the founder of Western philosophy and an essential precursor to Stoic thought.

The ethical pursuit of fish and game – and long hours often spent in solitude and nature that such pursuit entails – tends to cultivate many of the same aspects of Stoicism, from self-control to simplicity.

For many hunters, that marriage of the practical and the philosophical lies at the very core of their selfhood. “My life and hunting are not separated,” says Herring. “How I live one is how I live the other. Trying to be a better backcountry hunter is not separable from trying to be a better person.” 🐾

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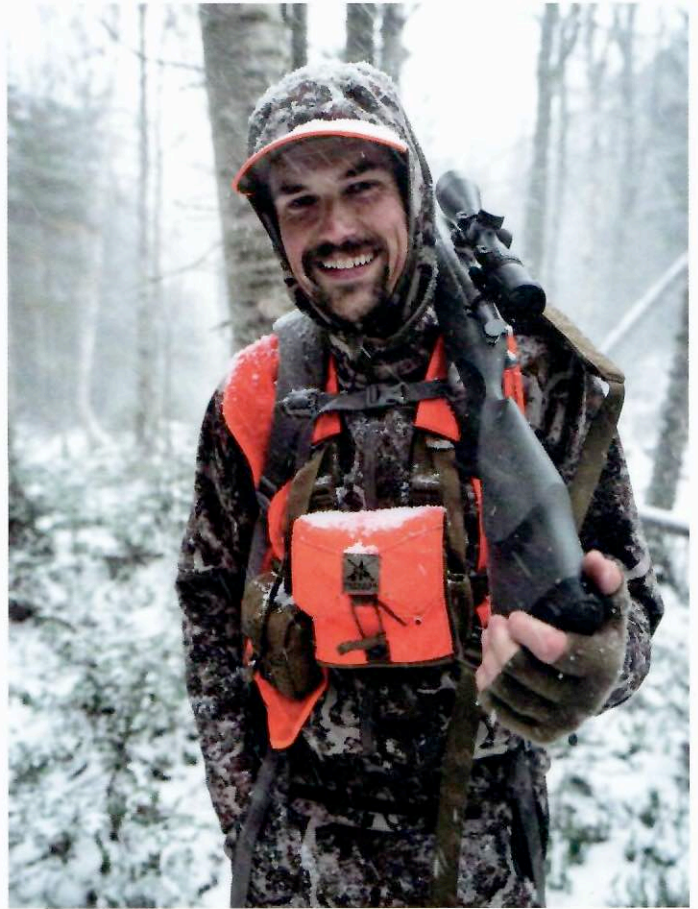
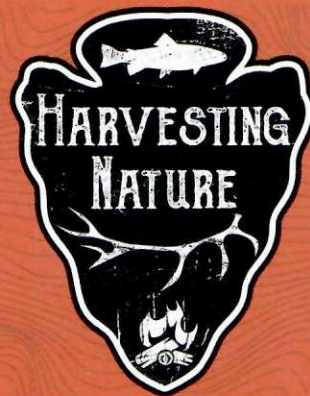


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