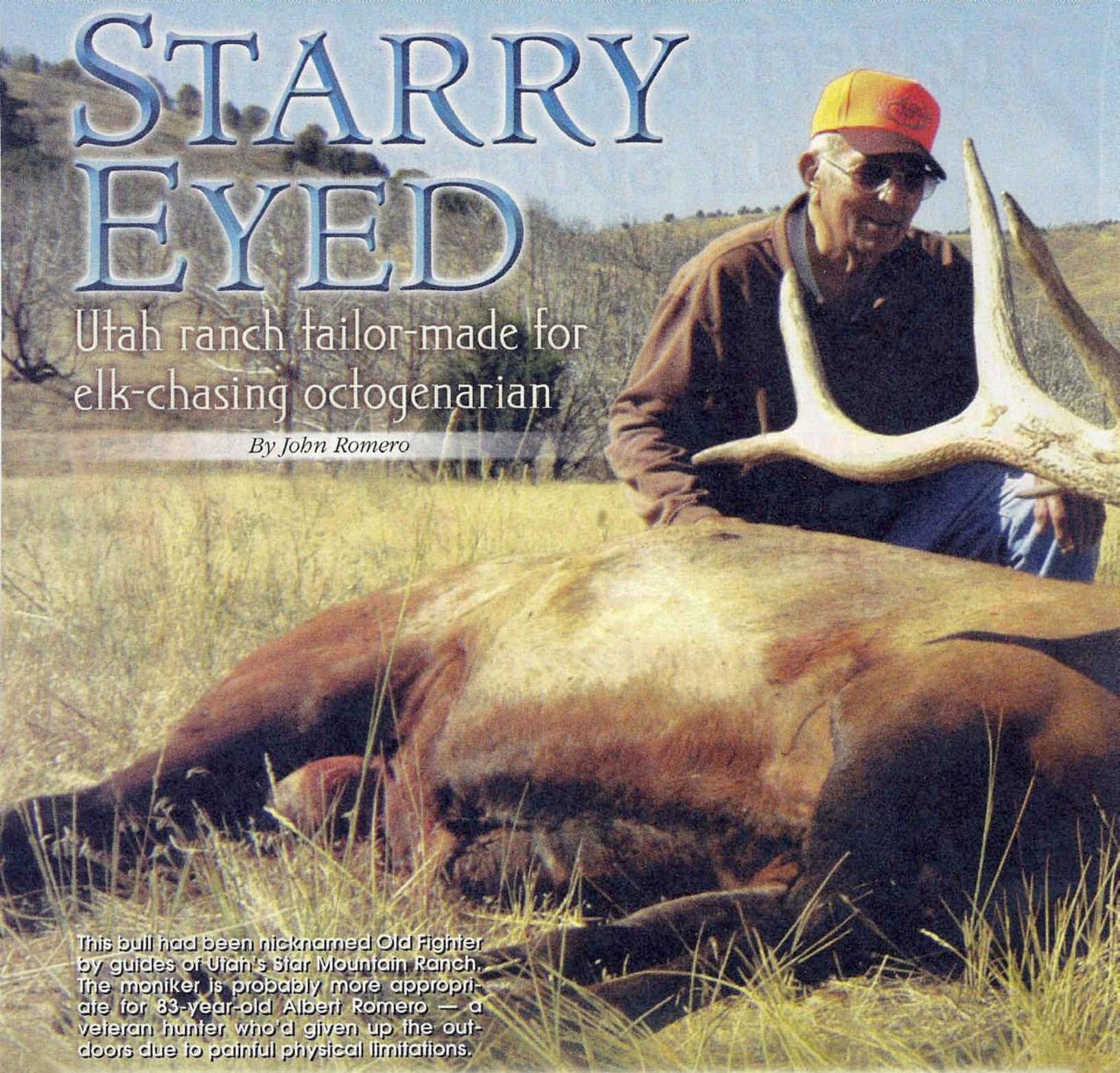


# STARRY EYED

Utah ranch tailor-made for elk-chasing octogenarian

By John Romero

A photograph of an elderly man, Albert Romero, wearing a red and yellow baseball cap and sunglasses, smiling as he holds a large set of elk antlers. He is standing in a field of tall, dry grass. In the foreground, the body of a dead elk lies on the ground.

This bull had been nicknamed Old Fighter by guides of Utah's Star Mountain Ranch. The moniker is probably more appropriate for 83-year-old Albert Romero — a veteran hunter who'd given up the outdoors due to painful physical limitations.

**M**y father, Albert, was a bit long in the tooth in the fall of 2006. Just three months shy of 83 years old, he took up hunting when licenses were a mere \$5 and good for deer, bear and turkey.

The bull that had been nicknamed "Old Fighter" was Dad's equal in elk years. By '06, he had lost much of the spring in his step, too, though few younger bulls were stupid enough to go head to head with an ornery legend carrying more

than 450 inches of headache.

Albert Romero has many kills to his credit. If he had put a notch on his trusty .30-06 for every buck and bull he's outsmarted, there wouldn't be any stock left. His gun was as much a part of him as his right arm. Together, they were a deadly pair.

For the last few seasons, the gun has been in the safe. When my Dad's best friend, Tony, passed away, he decided to call it quits and to hunt vicariously through his sons.

My father's legs and back deal

him constant pain. He cannot stand up straight anymore, and his walk is more shuffle than stride. Yet because the fire still burns within, he was ready for one last hurrah when I arrived to pick him up in late August.

The old man and I drove west to Star Mountain Ranch near Nephi, Utah. Manager Shane Dykster had agreed to personally guide us on Dad's last hunt. Normally, the hunts there are four-day affairs. We were going to try to get it done in one.



Shane is strung tighter than a fat lady's pants at an all-you-can-eat buffet. He'd been keeping tabs on Old Fighter for a week. None of us had ever seen a 450-inch bull, though I've seen my share of outstanding elk. It was Shane who guided me to my best five years earlier, an incredible 372-incher.

Shane was excited about Old Fighter and Dad's chances at him. And when Shane's excited, it's contagious.

Morning came quickly. Shane

was waiting for us in his truck. He said he'd "put the bull to bed" the previous evening and had a good idea where we could find him. Dad was amazingly calm, sipping his coffee as he listened to us lay out a plan for the day's hunt.

The moonless night was becoming decidedly less dark during the westward drive to the ranch. A soft neon glow basked everything in a surreal palette of pink and gold.

When we arrived, I jumped out to open the gate. It was still mostly

dark, but I could see the silhouettes of rolling pinyon-covered hills. The truck bounced across gnarly sagebrush flats before Shane finally turned into a deep shadowy ravine.

We then began a steep ascent up rock-strewn slopes. The truck fought for traction, twisting, climbing ever higher and flinging mud and rock in all directions until we finally reached the summit.

The view was incredible.

I heard a piercing bugle, followed  
*(Continued)*



**Albert and Bubbaroo pose with the monstrous bull that wound up scoring 474½ inches by Safari Club International's yardstick.**

by a screaming challenge. More exchanges followed as other bulls added to the chorus. I eventually saw three bulls, but it wasn't daylight enough to judge their antlers. I helped Dad with his rifle and gear as

we followed Shane toward the uproar.

We were atop "Boots' Hill" at sunrise. Across a vast canyon, the bulls continued bugling, oblivious to our presence. From 400 yards, we glassed

the entire drainage, watching elk, buffalo and Corsican rams amble across the steep hillside. The buglers ranged from a large spike to a 380-inch brute. Except for the one, all the bulls we saw were wearing at least 350 inches of antler.

We looked for Old Fighter until dark. Huge bulls filtered out of the pinyon trees, heading for grass and water in the meadows below. The cedars there were shredded, their branches ripped off and strewn everywhere, just naked trunks. These bulls had been busy. The meadows resembled deserted battlefields.

I never did count all the elk we saw that evening, but I know there were well more than 30 bulls. Darkness finally overtook us, and we had to leave.

We returned to Boots' Hill the next morning, but Old Fighter stood us up again. So we plowed onward

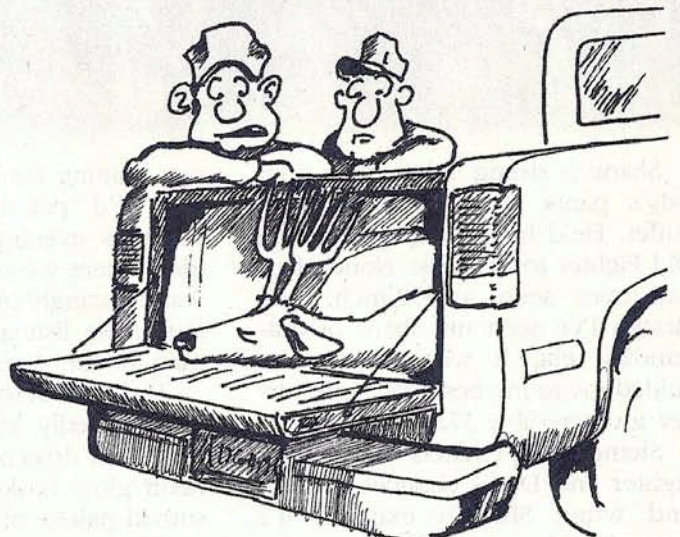
## MISADVENTURES IN TROPHY HUNTING



"I'd appreciate it if y'all wouldn't **B0000** every time I miss."

GARY SAMS

"There's no doubt about it. That's the best forkhorn I've ever seen."



GARY SAMS

on wheels. Dad never could have negotiated the steep trail on foot.

We eventually reached a lush meadow and spotted a huge bull grazing among charred trees on the side of a slope eaten by fire 10 years earlier, which had enabled the grass to flourish. Elk visit that area often, growing fat and sassy on the rich feed.

More bulls filtered out as we crossed Margaret Meadow (named for the owner's mother). We briefly caught a glimpse of yet another massive bull disappearing into the thick canopy. Shane thought it might've been our boy, but he was not sure. To avoid pushing the bull any farther into the timber, we backed off and continued driving.

When so many incredible bulls surround a person, it tends to raise the bar. All the bulls I have seen and shot over the years are of little consequence. Compared to these, mine are all dinks. The biggest bull I ever shot doesn't meet the standard here.

Considering we were looking for a bull with a name and weren't getting anywhere, doubt reared its ugly head. Well into the morning, Dad's trigger finger began itching — the

culprit a 400-plus-inch bull standing broadside at less than 100 yards. He was worried he wouldn't get another chance at such an animal. Yet Shane was unrelenting. He was after Old Fighter and would settle for nothing less.

We continued checking meadow after meadow, spotting numerous fine bulls. But the big boy seemed content to stay hidden in the trees. When Dad's strength waned, Shane called in reinforcements — guides Clint and Kirk — on horseback. The pair began searching for the phantom bull.

Meanwhile, Shane positioned Dad in a meadow favored by Old Fighter. We sat and exchanged small talk to pass the time.

After a while, we saw a couple of bulls two meadows over, moving away from us. We scrambled for the truck, and then raced toward a distant opening, hoping to get ahead of them.

When Shane hit the brakes, Dad leapt out of the truck like he was 17 again. I have never seen him move so fast. One of the bulls was colossal, no doubt the one we'd been seeking. Steve and I stayed back 40

yards, waiting for the shot that never came.

"Why doesn't he shoot?" Steve asked.

Normally a cool customer, Dad was shaking so badly he was unable to fire before the bulls melted back into the timber.

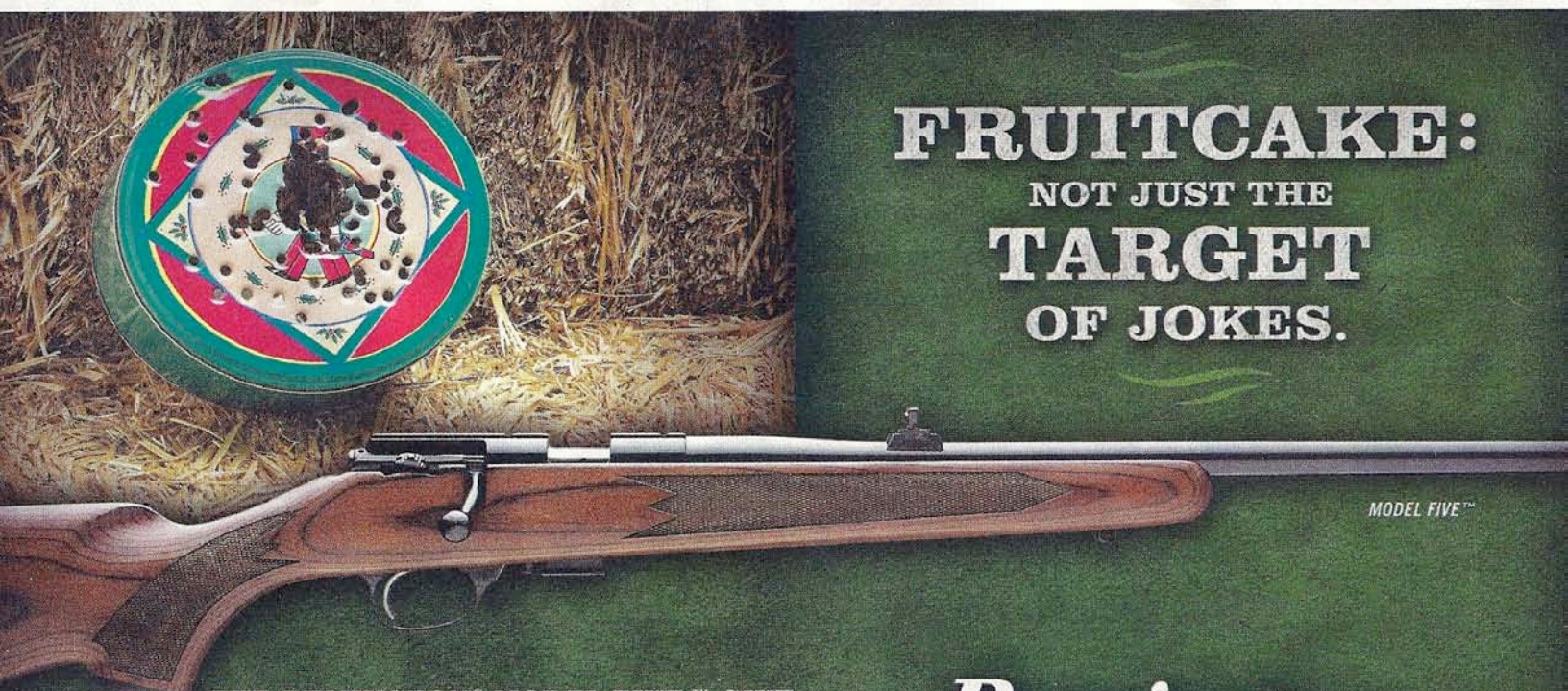
Back into the truck, we sped toward the last bit of open ground. I got fleeting glimpses of hide and antlers flashing through the trees as we skirted the timber.

When Dad bailed out that time, he didn't have a chance to do anything but shoot. Old Fighter was at 40 yards!

Four shots later, Old Fighter collapsed before reaching the timber. No words were spoken as we approached the bull. We all were slack-jawed, even Shane, who'd seen the bull before we ever arrived.

I looked at Dad. The grin on his face was the perfect ending to his final hunt ... unless he changes his mind. ◆

**Editor's Note:** To learn more about Star Mountain Ranch, call 877-2-ELK-HUNT (877-2-355-4868), or log on to [www.utah trophy elk.com](http://www.utah trophy elk.com)



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