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## Man Able To Return To Shooting Big Game After Being Blinded in Explosion

By [Colleen Heild](#)

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Mike Sanders knew it would be the hunt of a lifetime. Others who gathered at the Brazos River Ranch for the first elk rifle hunt of the season weren't so sure.

Then Sanders went out for a little preliminary target practice and came back with a near bull's-eye.

Not bad for a blind man who lost his sight five years ago in a refinery explosion near Gallup.

Not bad when considering he was relying on his wife, Michelle, to tell him when and where to shoot his specially equipped Ruger M77 rifle.

Ranch co-owner and outfitter Bo Prieskorn was impressed but still had his qualms about leading the couple earlier this month through the wind and wild of Northern New Mexico to score a bull elk.

"They (the others hunters) kept asking me, 'How are you going to do this?'," Prieskorn said. "And I said, 'I have no earthly idea.' "

Two days later, he became a convert.

On the second shot, on Prieskorn's signal, Sanders hit a bull elk behind the shoulders from a distance of three football fields away. The elk had five points on each side.

"As I was walking up there (to the downed elk) I'm laughing," Prieskorn recalled. "I'm like, 'I've had guys that can see that can't shoot like this.' It was perfect."

And Sanders? More than a week after all the celebratory Coors Lights and congratulatory handshakes, he still revels in his "amazing adventure."

"I like a challenge. I always have," said Sanders, a former McKinley County sheriff's reserve officer. "I love it when people tell me I can't do something."

### No stopping him

He was burned over 80 percent of his body. He lost four fingers on his dominant left hand, and suffered hearing loss, disfigurement and total blindness.

Sanders was an employee at Giant Industries Ciniza refinery east of Gallup when the blast occurred on April 8, 2004. A volatile chemical compound used in making gasoline spewed out of a valve, forming a vapor cloud that ignited.

He was hospitalized for 16 months and endured more than 30 operations. Early on, Sanders clung to life, slipping in and out of a coma.

"Basically, they were preparing us for a funeral," his wife said.

But Sanders eventually returned to his home east of Gallup and underwent more than two years of physical and occupational therapy.

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In 2006, Sanders and a co-worker also injured in the blast sued Giant Industries Inc., among other companies. The case has since been resolved.

In a recent interview, the 49-year-Sanders didn't dwell on his disabilities, which he calls "inabilities."

"I was going to a psychiatrist and I thought, you know, this isn't working. I'm just going to have to deal with this on my own. And my wife, she was with me the whole time, and she had every opportunity to leave whenever she wanted to and she's still here."

He remembers the day he "turned the corner" in his recovery.

Michelle, his wife of five years, was taking him to physical rehabilitation. She had settled him into his wheelchair and was prepared to push him into the building.

"I thought to myself, 'Why is my poor little wife having to always unload that heavy old wheelchair out of the truck. This is not going to happen anymore.'"

So Sanders stood up, and never used the chair again. He grins as he recalls how he donated it to the "veterans in Gallup."

Since then, with the help of Michelle, he's applied and received a special permit to carry a concealed weapon; has been behind the wheel for a slow, supervised drive down a dirt road; and changed out the starter and alternator on his truck. He and Michelle have trained to become hunter education instructors.

"I think he has changed physically," said his Albuquerque attorney Max Madrid, "but the incredible part is to meet a person that has such a spirit and resolve to do things."

#### **With some help**

One night more than a year ago, a buddy showed up at the couple's Jamestown, N.M., home and announced he had put Sanders in for four state hunting draws.

"He told us, 'We're going to get him out of this house.' He didn't like me sitting around the house and not enjoying what I like to do most."

Sanders learned to hunt with his father, who died when he was 12. He was a marksman and an avid hunter before the explosion, and always ate what he killed.

"I figured when I went blind, I was just going to have to give it all up. Well, with my wife and my friends, I didn't have to give it up. I just have a more difficult time doing it."

They searched the Internet and found a \$900 device built by a man whose father was going blind.

Sanders received a two-year mobility impaired certificate from the state Game and Fish Department. And the special gadget arrived a week before they were to go to an antelope hunt near Datil last year.

He explained how it works: A special camera is mounted onto the scope of rifle, with a small 2-inch-by-3-inch television screen that can be viewed by a "sighted" guide nearby.

"Then my sighted person looks at and gets me started in the right direction, and guides me."

His rifle is mounted in the crook of a tripod-like set of shooting sticks. Sanders typically sits in a folding chair pointing the rifle and takes his cues from the guide: right, left, up, down, over a little. "Gun" is the signal to shoot.

That first time out, he got an antelope in 50 minutes.

"It meant everything to me," he said, adding that he was successful in subsequent deer and Barbary sheep hunts. Now his friends are angling to be there the next time. "They all want to see it happen," Sanders said.

#### **Once in a lifetime**

The Brazos River Ranch hunt would be different from all the rest.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime feeling; a once-in-a-lifetime hunt," he said.

Prieskorn gave Sanders a special discount on the private five-day hunt that usually only the well-heeled can afford.

Sanders knew the pressure was on. He'd be expected to walk more than usual, through unfamiliar terrain. Above all, Prieskorn said, Sanders didn't want to be a burden on other hunters.

"I told him, 'Mike, it is what it is. Everybody's excited for you.'"

Prieskorn decided to personally guide the couple, using elk bugling and cow calling devices.

After a round of imitation bugling that first morning, a grunting elk came within 80 feet of the group. But they couldn't set up the equipment in time to shoot.

They walked back in a bitter cold wind, and at times Sanders said he "couldn't feel his hand," Prieskorn

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recalled.

At camp, another hunter had been more successful. Sanders immediately wanted to feel the horns. "He kept saying, 'Oh, this is beautiful. I wished I could see, I wished I could see.' What do you say to that?" Prieskorn said.

The next day, Prieskorn drove them to a ridge. Near sunset, a bull elk came into view across a canyon. This time they were ready.

"I said, Mike, how do you feel about taking a 350-yard shot, and he says, 'Let's do it.' I told him, 'That's what I want to hear.' I said, 'We've just got to make our own luck. Luck's not happening, so we've just got to make it.' "

Michelle Sanders asked Prieskorn to guide her husband's shot because of the distance involved. He obliged, but said, "I had no clue what I was doing." The first shot sailed over the back of the elk.

They readjusted the equipment as the bull just stood there. Before Prieskorn could finish saying the word "gun," Sanders fired. And they heard a "whap."

"I said, 'You hit it,' and he says, 'I know I hit it. What's it doing, somebody tell me what's going on,' " Prieskorn recalled.

Prieskorn hiked over to confirm the kill and went back to the elated couple to deliver the news.

"Oh, the smile on that man's face was unbelievable," Prieskorn said. Before they headed up the mountain to pick up the elk, Prieskorn said he stopped to thank them for allowing him to be a part of it all.

"It was an experience that I really, truly, cannot explain," he said, "because I got to see for a man."

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