On Tuesday, January 12, I became president of the North American Gamebird Association, a real honor to me. The past two years have been full of action and challenges. During this time period we did a complete staff overhaul, hiring a new executive director, communications director and bookkeeper.

Our publication, NAGA News, was dramatically improved and brought into financial sustainability. And we faced and weathered the most dramatic health challenge to our industry as avian flu swept through the Midwest.

In each case NAGA not only met the challenges, but really performed at a high level. While many different people had their hands on these events, there was one consistent steadying force at work in all of them, our immediate past president Sam Ballou.

If you know Sam, you’re aware that he is a friendly, down-to-earth man. Easy to get along with, and yet firm in his beliefs. While he doesn’t seek out confrontation, Sam is willing to speak up to deal with hard issues when the time comes. These descriptions were all readily apparent during Sam’s time at the helm of NAGA.

Sam was not afraid to step out when he thought we needed to remake the professional staff of the association, and move away from board members performing staff functions. Like changes often do in our lives, it ruffled some feathers, but it quickly proved to be a smart move.

At the same time, Sam is not too proud to step back and let others use their talents when the situation calls for it. That was the case when Sam appointed Bill MacFarlane the chair of the Health Committee, and then allowed Bill to take the lead on the organization’s response. Sam knew that Bill had the expertise on that issue to help us meet our challenge. Even then, Sam stayed engaged throughout the crisis, traveling to meet with state veterinarians and making our case to them as legitimate business in this country.

In addition to his official duties throughout his time as president, Sam and his wife, Peg, worked and spent thousands of their own dollars promoting and mailing NAGA memberships and traveling to regional game bird meetings. Sam has told us that his one disappointment is that membership numbers did not improve during his term despite their incredible effort.

The truth is, however, that Sam has positioned the North American Gamebird Association to meet that challenge, too. And as he handed the baton to me at our convention in Orlando, I really felt that we have made significant progress improving the value of our association to game bird producers and hunting preserves.

Returning to Ohio came with the quick slap back into reality as avian influenza was detected in turkey flocks in Indiana. Fortunately, the event appears to be contained, and state and federal officials were quick to depopulate the sites. This occurrence reminded me why the work that NAGA is doing is so vital to our members. As I write, members of NAGA are working with the USDA on plans that will ensure the movement of birds in the event of avian flu outbreaks.

In 2016, NAGA will continue to improve its value to our members utilizing three goals. 1. Protect the industry; 2. Drive customers to NAGA members; and 3. Implement programs that help NAGA members save money.

The year will continue to bring change, but NAGA is well positioned to make a difference for you as changes occur. ★

Rob Sexton
NAGA Executive Director
rob@mynaga.org

Accept the challenges so that you can feel the exhilaration of victory.” — Gen. George S. Patton