We all know the feeling – a frosty November afternoon, the rut is in full swing and you’re at work. You can’t wait for quitting time so you can grab your favorite weapon and head out to the deer stand for the evening sit. It should come as no surprise that all American sportsmen, regardless of their physical challenges, share the feeling of anticipation for the upcoming hunt. One such girl is 10-year-old Ashley Manes of Knoxville, Tennessee.

At the age of four Ashley was injured in a traffic accident. The accident left Ashley a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down and unable to breathe on her own. Ashley’s father Joe Manes said she had always been interested in hunting and often spent time trying to learn turkey calls and deer antler rattling techniques. The unfortunate accident seemingly ended Ashley’s hunting career before it even started. The key word here is ‘seemingly’.

Since Ashley’s love of the outdoors hadn’t been diminished by her accident, Joe decided they would pursue any hunting activities available to challenged sportsmen. They put in a call to USSA and spoke with Brigid O’Donoghue about Ashley’s passion as well as her condition. It didn’t take long for Brigid to line Ashley up a USSA deer hunt in Sahara Woods State Park near Carrier Mills, Illinois. This special hunt would be hosted by the Illinois Bowhunter’s Society and sponsored by Whitetails Unlimited and Safari Club International. This special deer hunt would be USSA’s third annual hunt at Sahara Woods.

On this group hunt, each of the 12 young hunters was assigned a guide/mentor who was to be their constant companion for the next three days. Mark Kehlikar, a schoolteacher, was assigned to Ashley and an immediate friendship was developed. The weather forecast was less than ideal for optimal whitetail movement, and true to their forecast the weatherman delivered. Very windy conditions were a result of the remnants of the devastating fall hurricane season. Spirits remained high and the high wind couldn’t blow away the enthusiasm of the young hunters.

Ashley, Joe and Mark picked a mixed hardwood stand situated on a slight knob overlooking a clearing. Morning drug on and seemed like forever, but they saw very few deer. They returned and joined everyone for a brunch and then returned to their blind around 1:00PM. At about 4:30PM a wary buck appeared upwind of the stand and started to make its way toward a potential shot opportunity. A full range of emotions was present during the tense moments which were to precede any possible shot at the buck. After evaluating the buck as a real nice one, Mark had Ashley poised and ready for action if a killing shot was presented. Time seemed to stand still.

Well, Ashley’s big chance finally arrived. As she sighted down the scope of her special rifle, the buck seemed to sense something was wrong with the ground blind they were sitting in. A squirrel chattering caught the buck’s attention for a second and Ashley took the opportunity to gently puff into her trigger release. A loud crack signaled the start of a shotgun slug’s journey to pay dirt…

Ashley could barely sleep. All she could think about was finding her deer. Finally morning came and they returned to the field. Ashley waited in the blind while
her dad and Mark trailed the deer. She sat in the blind hoping they wouldn’t come back without her deer. Finally, her dad unziped the blind and peeked in and said, “We found your deer!”

After the buck was field dressed, Ashley asked Mark if she could help pull the buck back to the truck. One of her favorite pastimes is to help her father pull deer out of the woods by hooking them up to her motorized wheelchair. With the dragging done it was back to the camp to share stories with the other hunters and guides. It turned out to be a better day, deer wise, than anyone had anticipated. Everyone saw deer, and other special hunters had harvested a deer as well. A hearty dinner and a good night’s sleep would usher in another day, a day full of expectations and dreams of the whitetail deer.

The next morning, another windy day greeted the hunters. Young deer hunters and their guides loaded their gear and began to make their way out to a date with a whitetail. Ashley and Mark were reminiscing about the previous day’s hunt as their truck headed out into a dark Illinois landscape. As usual, anticipation ran rampant as daylight began to settle over Sahara Woods. Deer movement was unexpectedly decent, and many of the hunters were able to bag deer that day. Ashley wasn’t finished either! She was able to bag a nice doe later that day. There would be no shortage of quality venison table fare around the Mane’s residence this year. “I’ll enjoy every bite”, she thought.

As the saying goes ‘all good hunts have to eventually come to an end,’ this one was no exception. But the question arises, “Does any good concept and ideal ever have to end as well?” At USSA the answer is, “Absolutely not!” People like Ashley are part of a large group of Americans who have traditionall been left behind in pursuit of our shooting sports heritage. The disproportionately small numbers of women and disabled hunters is reflected by the declining hunter enrollment numbers published by many conservation departments. How can our sport survive into the future without participation from all segments of society?

Throughout nature there are many examples of the females of the species being excellent hunters or food gatherers. The lioness is an excellent hunter as well as the caretaker of the pride. We at USSA believe there is a bit of a lioness in all women, including women with physical challenges.

We’d like to thank everyone involved in putting on hunts like Sahara Woods and include a special thanks to Whitetail Fanatic magazine for providing a medium to address important hunting issues such as disabled and female hunter recruitment. God bless you all.

Pictured on the opposite page is Ashley Manes and her dad, Joe Manes. At the top is a group picture of the special hunters and guides at Sahara Woods. In the middle above is Ashley and her hunting guide Mark Kehlikan. Above is Ashley and Lindsey Allington, Brigid O’Donoghue’s daughter who sat in the blind with Ashley during her hunt. This was Lindsey’s first time deer hunting.

Brigid O’Donoghue is the President and Founder of United Special Sportsmen Alliance – www.childswish.com

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