The room was cluttered with tubes and machines with fluorescent dials, and flashing numbers that meant little to many of those gathered in the crowded room. The slow but steady rhythm of the breathing-assistance pump could be heard singing an eerie duet with a heart-monitoring device whose sound was noticeably higher.

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DREAMS FROM ANOTHER SUNRISE

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In a bed lay a thin young girl, desperately clinging to life. Her family was in the room, waiting for encouraging vital signs, and her two uncles were recovering from operations of their own.

Thirteen-year-old Susan from Belle Plain, Kansas, had come down with the dreaded disease cystic fibrosis, a genetic disease affecting approximately 30,000 children and adults in the United States.

A defective gene causes the body to produce thicker-than-normal mucus that can lead to obstructions in the respiratory and digestive systems. Her lungs had deteriorated to the point that she would soon die without a suitable lung donor. Both uncles loved their spunky young niece and volunteered to donate a part of their lungs to give Susan a fighting chance at life.

Although those at her bedside didn’t know it at the time, the operation was a success and Susan would survive to regain her strength—a turn of events that would eventually put Susan on a collision course with a trophy Texas whitetail buck.

Ten-year-old Ryan Gordon of Hinesville, Georgia, was a normal, fun-loving, active boy. From his love of baseball to annoying his older brother Keith, Ryan was the prototype of a younger brother.

As time rolled on, Ryan was having difficulty running the bases on his team; he felt weak in his legs and was falling down a lot, so his parents decided to take him to see a specialist. When a diagnosis of Duchenne muscular dystrophy was given to the family, one could almost sense the disbelief and shattered dreams.

At the time, hopes of a normal life as we all know it was gone for Ryan. The aspirations of matching wits with a trophy whitetail were sinking faster than the sun was on that painful day. Like Susan, visions of a trophy deer hunt were simply wishful thinking for Ryan.

Life-long, renowned deer biologist Dr. James Kroll has always stressed the importance of hunter recruitment to the survival of our sport, and was especially interested in the worthwhile cause of providing a hunting opportunity to all physically challenged Americans. At a Whittails of Wisconsin meeting, he talked to Brigid O’Donoghue of United Special Sportsman Alliance (USSA) about attending one of these hunts with the special children.

When Brigid’s call came through to him, a date was set—a date where a deer biologist, a single mother, a girl with cystic fibrosis, a boy with muscular dystrophy and their respective families all headed towards a Texas college town that lay by railroad tracks, and an epicenter of many deer research projects. They could look forward to a seat near a crackling Sawdust Ranch campfire and meeting the undisputed king of campfire tales, Horace Gore.

East of the Texas state capital of Austin lays in an isolated area along a frontier train station that was destined to play an important role in the lives of countless deer hunters and enthusiasts alike. No, this area was not especially rich in natural resources, or even especially distinctive. That was about to change, and in 1876 that land was to become the first institution of higher learning in the state of Texas.

Out of necessity, a community sprang up to provide living facilities for the students and the professors, and in 1877 the U.S. postal service called the community “College Station,” home to Texas A&M University.

Since its frontier beginnings, Texas A&M has been in the forefront of deer research worldwide, with renowned professors like Dr. Robert Brown mediating prestigious antler development symposium. Texas A&M also works with and supports the renowned Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, which pursues a wide variety of worthy conservation causes.

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Davin and Michael explained to the children that seeing deer is one thing, but getting a decent shot opportunity could be an entirely different matter. The following day, the trip to the rifle range confirmed the fact that Ryan was ready to do battle with a trophy Texas buck if the opportunity presented itself. While Ryan and the guys at the rifle range were all business, Susan was testing out her new lungs by challenging Brigid to a foot race. Quick and agile, like a good quarter horse, the younger Susan got the jump on her longer-legged competitor and beat Brigid by a head at the finish line.

Susan, a tough little critter weighing in at only 60 pounds, chose a .270 Winchester bolt action as her weapon of choice. A few shots later, Susan and her weapon had given notice to the observers that they were ready to go hunting. While Ryan headed to the blind with his guide, a real treat awaited Susan: a ranch tour guided by Dr. Kroll himself. Driving along in prime wildlife habitat with a man who has devoted his life to the study of deer is an experience we all would like to experience some day. It truly enhances the appreciation of the delicate balances in place within a thriving eco-system and just how deer thrive within that system.

Dr. Kroll took the opportunity to question his passenger on exactly what peaked her interest in hunting. One thing for sure, whenever a nice buck was spotted, both experienced game biologists and youthful hunter alike glassed over the animal with awe and admiration.

Ryan's stand was the first to see action that afternoon. A nice but immature eight-point ventured out to graze by the edge of the field. Although not a shooter, he provided our hunters with some entertaining field glass work.

A while later, real nice buck was seen moving through the oaks toward the field. An outstanding 10-point buck walked out into full view, but to everyone's dismay kept right on walking without presenting a good shot. When a trophy buck disappears without ever presenting a shot opportunity, it is only human nature to feel a twinge of disappointment, yet Ryan's upbeat nature kept it from showing as the two watched the buck's tail disappear into the brush.

Sportsmen like Ryan and Susan are no strangers to the necessity of faith and hope, and Ryan's hopeful, upbeat attitude was soon to be rewarded. Later on, the huge buck returned to the back end of the food plot. With the aid of a shooting brace, the focused young hunter lined up the crosshairs with the buck's vitals and gently squeezed the trigger. A telling thump followed the rifle crack, and Michael and Ryan headed out to admire another beautiful Sawdust Trophy.

Meanwhile, Susan, her dad and Davin

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Ryan Gordon's upbeat attitude was rewarded when he connected on this outstanding 10-point buck. Looking on are Kent Moore (left), the owner of the ranch, and Dr. James Kroll.
were waiting on a trophy of their own. As they were to find out, the Sawdust Ranch wasn’t through producing trophy bucks for the kids this fine afternoon. The blind was also situated on the edge of a well-maintained food plot, which served to draw deer from a wide area.

Later that afternoon, a beautiful 10-point, with lots of well-formed tines, decided he wanted a nutritious meal and walked in the back side of the plot. Susan's big, brown eyes became even bigger when she saw the buck take its first bite of succulent legumes. The perfect moment had arrived and her dream was out in the field in front of her.

As sometimes happens to all of us when we are distracted by antlers of this magnitude, Susan’s first shot was a clean miss. The trophy buck jumped, but then was trying to determine where the shot came from so he could make his getaway. Susan’s favorite saying that day must have been "he who hesitates is lost," because she re-leveled the crosshairs and squeezed a second shot off.

The telltale thump of a well-placed shot echoed over the rangeland, and it was off to the skinning rack to see the rest of the deer camp and relive the memorable day by the light of a campfire.

When you think about it, life with a disability or critical illness does not have to be "the end of the line," as was also once the beginning of College Station, Texas. With the involvement of concerned sportsmen and conservationists, a child's life can grow tremendously from involvement in these hunting experiences, while helping to empower others to follow in their footsteps. Indeed, humble beginnings are no indication of the final destination of our future.

A special thanks to the Sawdust Ranch for hosting this rewarding event, B&E Taxidermy in Houston, Texas, and to the Texas Trophy Hunters Association for their part in linking events like these to public awareness and the service they provide. We would also like to thank an outstanding research scientist, Dr. Kroll, for taking the time to attend this hunt and mentoring these very special children.