The state of Indiana is home to countless acres of agricultural lands which hold a thriving population of many game species. The 18 fish and wildlife areas, 12 state forests, 151 nature preserves and 9 manmade reservoirs are all part of Indiana’s rich natural heritage. In 1916, Mr. Richard Lieber helped organize and launch Indiana’s successful parks system. Mr. Lieber went on from there and became an essential force in our nation’s budding conservation movement. Today that same spirit of conservation is alive and doing well in Indiana.

As a youth, John Deem grew up enjoying the abundant natural resources of his home state. After graduation John became a conservation officer and he headed to the front lines where attacks from poachers and game-bag-limit violators daily threatened the viability of our fish and game resources. Being a warden can be a very dangerous job at times, especially when huge antlers further dull a poacher’s limited sense between right and wrong. However, John’s tough exterior appearance was to be matched by a gentle kindness for an extraordinary group of young hunters.

Brigid O’Donoghue, the president and founder of United Special Sportsman Alliance (U.S.S.A.) met John via discussion forums on various hunting and conservation websites. Their debates were quite ‘spirited’ at times, yet both parties seemed to know the other one cared deeply for hunting, natural resources and for the dignity of the humans that pursued those resources. A mutual respect developed and Brigid approached John about the possibility of a multi-child ‘Classic’ hunt in the state of Indiana. John leapt at the chance and began planning out and implementing the hunt details as soon as he hung up the phone.

U.S.S.A. had successfully coordinated a 12-child hunt in the fall of 2003 in the state of Illinois. The Illinois Bowhunters’ Society and state DNR helped with the many details of hosting the hunt and the inaugural U.S.S.A. Illinois Classic was a resounding success. The second annual U.S.S.A. Illinois Classic, which was held the first weekend in November 2004, was outstanding as well. Every indication was that the ‘Hoosier Classic’ would be a time to remember.

Nine young hunters from around the nation started arriving around noon on November 18, 2004, for the two-day deer hunt. A wide assortment of physical troubles were represented, such as cancer, brain injury, blindness, spina bifida, cerebral palsy and other life-threatening illnesses including Lou Gehrig’s Disease.

John had arranged for free lodging at the local Boy Scout camp and the town of Angola’s fire department graciously let the hunters use the facility to eat and get out of the elements when necessary. Area conservation wardens, firefighters, police officers and hunters volunteered their guide services. When the Indiana DNR refused to follow the example of their generous Illinois counterparts in granting free licenses to these financially burdened kids, the pro-hunting organization Safari Club International came through with the necessary license funds. Mathews Solocam, Whitetails Unlimited and Northland Cranberries provided the incidental expenses.

The hunters were welcomed by a goodies bag which included hats, a camera, knife and many other hunting necessities. Many of the guides teach hunter’s safety and that evening they revived the safe operation of the individual firearms. The next morning the youths gathered at the rifle range to see if their marksmanship would hold up if the right shot presented itself. They all did amazingly well and one young lady, Megan Freeman, put two shots nearly on top of each other.
After a delicious meal an array of pickup trucks, 6-wheeler, 4-wheeler and trailers headed into the hardwoods carrying a crew of hopeful hunters and their respective dreams.

A light drizzle fell that afternoon, a drizzle that dampened the ground more than the spirits of the youthful deer hunters and their guides. An assortment of tree and ground blinds waited the youth for their afternoon in prime whitetail habitat. Cory Gram was first to score on a nice buck as it quietly worked its way to a standing cornfield. At days end, five deer were taken and the thought of a hot supper and retelling the day’s events appealed to hunter and guide alike. Among those to score that morning was the sharp shooting young lady, Megan. A well-placed shot assured her and her family that there would be fresh venison from prime Indiana farmland for her family to enjoy until next season.

The next morning the fire station was alive with activity from the hunters, guides and parents. The rain had subsided and hopes ran high. As headlights disappeared into the darkness one could just imagine what was going through the minds of these kids who until now thought primarily upon health issues. Thoughts of a hospital bed seem distant in memorable times like these.

Fourteen-year-old Jordan from Hixton, Wisconsin dropped a nice 7-pointer and Eric from Indiana shot a fine 7-pointer as well. Throughout the Inaugural Classic Event many deer were observed and some fine animals were harvested. Youths were exposed to our natural world and lifelong friendships were made. It is easy to see the universal sublime draw of hunting the whitetail deer.

Our goal at U.S.S.A. is to help initiate annual ‘Classic’ events in each state of the nation. The deer-rich states of Iowa, Minnesota and Michigan would be prime areas to start framing in these ‘Classic’ events for fall of 2005. Our home state of Wisconsin has already added its name to Illinois and Indiana as an event host to these fine youths in 2005. With the whitetail’s tremendous geographic range and adaptability, every state in the union is potentially a grand spot to take these kids hunting. It is up to whitetail fanatics like all of us to take the next step and help make the impossible dream POSSIBLE.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to all volunteers who help make these hunts a reality, and to the businesses, organizations and individuals who support these dreams with their hard-earned dollars. We want to thank the good folks at The Whitetail Fanatic for their valuable assistance in bringing programs like this before the public. Reading about those who overcome physical problems helps encourage others to follow their dreams!