POW!

The echoes of the 12 gauge rattled through the trees and reached across the water to the folks following behind. The driver of the pickup truck stomped the gas pedal, surging his truck forward towards the sound of the shot. As they reached the fence corner, where the built-up dirt road made a sharp right turn, they came into view of a man and a boy on a four-wheeler. Beyond the ATV, a big red hog lay still in the road, and a smaller black one ran away as fast as his stubby legs could carry him.

The truck passengers unloaded and began the back-slapping and congratulations. The young hunter had made his very first big game kill, before he had even gotten to his stand! The necessary photos were taken and then they headed back to camp, leaving the other hunters on their stands in peace. The jubilation of the young man was felt by all, as they shared the warm joy of a hunter’s first big kill. The hearty handshakes were a bit one-sided, though. You see, the victorious hunter had but one hand.

The scene of the hunt was Salem, Florida, and we were hunting with Slaughter Brothers Wild Hog Hunts. Owner and guide Kenny Banaciski had generously opened his heart and his game preserve to some hunters less fortunate than others, in cooperation with the United Special Sportsmen Alliance (USSA). It was Kenny who had spotted the hog and taken the hunter within range of it on the ATV.

The hunter mentioned above is a young man named Ryan. Born with

Continued on page 48
Continued from page 47
out a right hand, he has forged his way in the world with the help of his loving parents, a couple whose common-sense ways have helped him lay the proper foundation for a “normal” life. He is a boy who was taught never to let his lack of a right hand slow him down, and he has been successful at that.

Thursday night, I had met the rest of the crowd. The other USSA hunters on this trip were Chris, a 17-year old fellow in need of a heart transplant, and Mike, a 32-year-old father of two suffering from cancer. Chris’ parents, Michael and Jackie, were there too, along with Michael’s brother Bobby, Mike’s long-time hunting buddy. Michael and Bobby both sported long bushy beards, reminiscent of ZZ Top, and every one of the group has a great sense of humor. As we started to get to know one another, it was apparent that we would get along very well together.

Kenny Banaciski and I have known each other for several years now, and have become friends in that time. When I heard that he was going to donate and host hunts for USSA, I told him in no uncertain terms that I wanted to be there to help out. This was to be my first chance to help with something like this, and I had a very good feeling about it. It turned out that my gut feeling was right on the money.

On Friday morning, I carted the crowd to their stands in Ezereda, my Chevy pickup truck. I’d come back for Ryan and his folks, accompanied by Becky Strickland of the local chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTB), who was along to photograph Ryan’s hunt, and we were on our way to his ground blind when Ryan busted his big sow, a beast weighing over two hundred pounds. We were all proud of his one-shot kill, and that young man grinned without
We spotted nothing, but for a change of pace I went ahead and planted Ezmerelda in a slimy black mudhole, where she remained for quite some time, until we could get the tractor around there to drag her from her mucky bonds. It turned out to be a good chance to get to know the hunters better, as they were there for most of the endeavor. The more I saw of these people, the more I liked them.

Sharon “Kitten” Grantham (also of NWTF) had stuck her truck while Ezmerelda and I were stranded, so we pulled her out after I was finally freed. I’m sure she got stuck just to keep me from feeling lonesome, and I appreciated it. After all, misery does love company.

The afternoon hunt provided no more hogs, though the hunters could hear them moving in the brush nearby. Despite our assurance that they would kill some hogs on Saturday no matter what we had to do to make it happen, Mike and Chris remained cautious. They had heard that before on other hunts, and we could tell they still had their doubts. Our task was to prove them wrong.

Saturday morning, the hunters sat on stand for a couple of hours, again spotting no game. The hot daytime weather had apparently kept the swine in the cool black waters of the swamps, out of sight and reach of the hunters. As we rode towards the gate to try another area, however, fortunes changed. Ahead on the road were two big hogs, along with a smaller black one that was trying his best to have his way with them.

Mike quickly got out of Bobby’s pickup, rifle in hand, and hustled up to Ezmerelda. As the lead sow rounded a stand of pines, Mike fired, putting one right between her eyes! Down she went in a heap. Immediately, Kenny led Chris through the pines as I followed.

The other sow paused, and Chris put one into her shoulder, a perfect shot that should have knocked her winding. She was unconvinced, however, and began to leave, so he quickly chambered another round and dropped her on the run! Most excellent — now all of the USSA hunters had bagged their hogs, on just the second day of their hunt. Them Carolina boys sure can shoot!

Both porkers weighed around one hundred fifty pounds, and were as fat and healthy as any hogs I’ve ever seen. I was starting to think that I wouldn’t have the chance to let Chris field-test the big Sunrise River boar hunting knife as Continued on page 51