I'd hoped, but once again Kenny proved me wrong by generously offering the Carolina crowd the opportunity to hunt hogs with dogs, despite the fact that the USSA hunters had already packed in their promised pork.

We loaded into the trucks at camp and headed out for the hunt. The Carolina crowd included Chris, his parents, Michael and Jackie, Mike, and Bobby. Also along for the ride to help out, take photographs, and just plain be there were John Lance (thereafter known as Wild Man), John Hock, Rick Cagle, Becky Strickland, Dad, and yours truly. Kenny was of course there in charge of things, and he took Mike on the ATV and led Goldie, his best bay dog, to the west end of the property. Rick held catch dog Trigger and old Gyp followed Goldie's lead.

Almost before we knew it, Goldie began to bay, deep in the seemingly impenetrable swamp. Soon Gyp had a hog caught on the other side of the swamp, though the rest of us weren't there to see it. The squeals of a caught hog reverberated across the water as we wondered what the heck we could do about it.

Kenny and Mike plowed through the brush on the ATV, nearing the fight. On their own and without a stabbing knife, they shouted to us. The wind was wrong, however, and we couldn't understand a thing. A couple of folks thought that Kenny had called for a gun.

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Dad handed me his 357 magnum revolver and I turned and said, "Chris, come with me!" and we jumped into Ezmerelda and drove around the way Kenny and Mike had gone. On the way, we heard a single rifle shot from deep in the swamp.

When we got around there, there was no sign of Kenny, Mike, or the dogs. We stopped and hollered, asking if they needed us. "No!" was what we thought we heard, so we headed back around and rejoined the rest of the group. We learned later that in absence of a suitable knife, Mike had carefully shot the hog with his rifle while Kenny and Gyp wrestled with it in the brush.

By now a group of hogs was out in the swamp in front of us, and we watched the tops of the bushes moving as they passed, out of our sight though only a few yards away. Goldie's barking came closer as she bayed one up. We fought through the thick brush, trying to get an eyeball on her so we could loose Trigger for the catch.

Suddenly the barking turned to a cacophony of squealing and snarling, announcing that the hog was caught - old Gyp had arrived! Between the swamp brawl and us was a variety of lush green vegetation, most of it higher than our heads, and seven men fought their way through it towards the fight. Kenny and Mike were on their way back around the swamp as we began to plow forward.

The black water became deeper with every step, and briars ripped at clothing and exposed skin. Footing was treacherous, with underwater limbs and roots threatening to trap our ankles or break a leg. The fight itself was within a copse of myrtles, with a sudden and welcome lack of green plants growing from the water, its own black surface roiled and frothy with the thrashing of animals locked in mortal combat.

Arriving first on the scene, I made a lunge and grabbed the hog's left hind leg. Pulling against the dogs, I grabbed the other leg as the big black hog writhed between the grasp of man and beast. Kenny arrived moments later, as did Chris and several others. John "Wild Man" Lance jumped right in and grabbed a leg to help me hold the hog.

Chris took the long knife from the sheath on my left hip, reached around the hog between me and the dogs, and drove it home. Another swift stroke of the blade, and the beast began to weaken. Seven human hearts pounded in unison as the swine continued to fight, and Chris laid another one into the tough animal, which soon breathed its last. Hoots and congratulations were passed all around, and a wide-eyed Bobby mentioned that he sure was glad he'd decided to come into the brush with us to see the action for himself!

After securing the catch dogs, Kenny asked Bobby if he wanted to take a hog with the knife. The answer was an emphatic "Yes!" Goldie was barking at bay not far away, so Trigger and Gyp were again released. Seconds later the adrenaline-inducing sound of a caught hog announced that it was time to get moving through the deep swamp again.

This time Wild Man beat me to the hog, and had its hind legs secured when we arrived. I jumped in to give him a hand, and this time Bobby took the knife from my side and plunged it through the ribs of the big black porker. This hog was

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a bit more obliging than Chris’s was, and it soon expired. As the critter bled out and the catch dogs were again caught, Wild Man wondered aloud whether the moisture that covered us from head to toe was swamp water or sweat. The answer was “Yes.”

We stumbled our way out of the far side of the swamp, having put its entire width between the trucks and us. As one, we panted and tried to catch our breath. Seven wet, sweaty, muddy, briar-torn and very happy hunters waited as Mike drove Bobby’s pickup around to retrieve us.

After riding around to our starting point and penning the catch dogs, Kenny took a ride down the road on his ATV to see what Goldie had bayed up down there. He quickly returned, saying that Goldie had a huge hog bayed up in the road. Michael grabbed a rifle and jumped on the back with him, and they zoomed back down the fence line.

We followed in Bobby’s pickup, and as we neared the corner we saw Goldie—swimming—following a swimming hog across the deep canal beside the dirt roadway. The bigger hog was long gone, but Goldie was dedicated to this porker and wasn’t going to let it get away. As we jumped out of the truck, the hog and dog struggled on the far side of the ditch in water as deep as the dog was tall.

As Goldie faced off with a hog that was considerably larger than she was, Michael hoped and prayed for a chance to shoot. There was no way he could fire while they were tangled up together, but Kenny’s shouted orders for Goldie to “Back off!” weren’t sinking in. She was into this fight, working hard at what she loved.

Bobby jumped onto the ATV, zooming back to the dog pen to get a catch dog while we stood watching the brawl. The hog finally shook Goldie loose and charged her, the nimble dog jumping side-

ways with each splashing lunge of the open-mouthed swine, staying just clear of its sharp teeth. Then they paused, facing each other only a foot or so apart. Goldie panted happily as she eyeballed the hog, and I swear she winked at us as she waited for someone to finish the job she had started.

Michael stepped to one side, shoulderering the rifle beside me as Dad brought Ezmerelda past on the road beyond the hog, and we waited for an eternity (or maybe a couple of seconds) until the coast was clear. “Do it!” I said, and half a heartbeat later that hog was dead, even before the shot’s echoes reached our ears.

After retrieving the hog, a crowd of very happy, very tired men and women motored back to camp with a heavy load of pork in the back of Bobby’s truck. After a lengthy skinning session, we retired to the air-conditioned lodge to recover from our exertions, and

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to watch the video of the fight between Goldie and Michael’s hog. Again we enjoyed the camaraderie like old friends, laughing and joking together.

I have been told that Chris needs a new heart, and maybe he could use a new physical one, but to me his heart is as big and genuine and strong as they come. There is no doubt that the good people in his life helped him to become the man he is, for the ones that I met are all kind-hearted, generous folks. It was an honor to hunt with them, and I hope to have the chance to do it again sometime.

Kenny and I made a run to the store, and got back to camp just in time to see Bobby’s truck coming out of the gate as they pulled out for their long drive home. They needed to get back home and unwind and unpack on Sunday, for Mike was due for a chemo treatment on Monday. I sure am glad we made it in time to bid those good folks farewell. Handshakes and hugs were exchanged freely, with a tear in more than one eye. My heart ached as we parted with them there at the gate, as if we were saying goodbye to old friends or family members instead of some folks we’d met less than two days before.

We had given these folks all we had to give, hoping to help them forget their troubles for a time, trying to make this hunt something that they’d never forget. I believe we succeeded. I know for a fact that as I type these words with tears blurring my vision, those fine folks have touched this man’s heart and helped to make that hunt an experience that I will never forget. In less than two days we had created personal bonds stronger than some that have taken years to achieve.

Folks, you are welcome at my campfire any old time, and I hope to see you there soon.

Russ Chastain is an avid hunter and shooter who recently discovered a passion for hunting hogs with dogs. To visit his Web site and read more of his work, drop by http://hunting.about.com and check it out.

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