The Three Amigos

By Gubbs O'Toole

The Red River meanders some 540 miles along the Texas and Oklahoma border. After the Civil War, Oklahoma grasslands hosted many cattle drives en route to the Kansas cow towns. Besides a wealth of shared history, the Lone Star state and the Sooner state have another important interest in common—both states share a rich tradition in American hunting heritage.

Web Booth is a 12-year-old young man from Muskogee, Oklahoma, and at the age of 7, he was diagnosed with Duchene Muscular Dystrophy, which has prevented Web from doing most of the things we all take for granted. To add insult to injury, Web lost his father to an auto accident, leaving him and his mother, Melanie, alone. By the Lord's grace, a kind, caring man came into their lives and introduced Web to the sport of hunting and fishing. Since then, Brady Horton, Melanie's fiance, and Web have become regulars in the Oklahoma woods and lakes.

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Web is a bright and introspective young man, with a real interest in the world of nature. Deer biology, as well as deer hunting, fascinated him, so his mother contacted Bridg O'Donoghue of United Special Sportsman Alliance (U.S.S.A.) to see if she could help with Web's dreams and interests.

Bridg was extremely happy to hear about Web's interest in the science end of the sport, and arranged a field trip to visit scientific breeders Frank and Alice Lake, owners of Lake Whitetails in Web's hometown of Muskogee, Oklahoma. As a breeder of over 30 years, Frank was able to answer Web's questions and helped him gain a unique perspective on the white-tailed deer he often dreamed about.

Several weeks later, Web and his family were set to arrive at Wilderness Preserve in Rosbuhl, Wisconsin, for the hunt he had always dreamed about. Wilderness Preserve is a family business owned and operated by Gene and Carol Flees and their sons Greg and Shorty. Besides hosting a busy schedule of fall hunts, the Flees operate a world-class breeding facility. We all knew Web would be in for a real trophy experience that was only a dream for him a few months ago.

After their arrival at the lodge, the first step through the door produced a heart-pounding sensation in all of us. Gracing the walls were some of the largest whitetail buck mounts any of us had ever seen! Although Web is a young man of few words, those mounts really got his attention. It was very apparent the youthful hunter couldn't wait to put on his camouflage, load his .25-06 and head to the hardwoods.

Greg Flees would be the guide that day, and Web's heartbeat picked up when he saw Greg pull up to the lodge in a Kawasaki Mule for the trip to the field. Brady tenderly lifted Web out of his wheelchair and into the awaiting Mule. Greg folded up the wheelchair that had been hand-painted in camouflage colors by Brady and set it in the back. After several "good luck kisses" from his mother, a blushing Web, Brady and Greg headed toward the horizon while Melanie waved goodbye to the special men in her life.

A camouflaged, portable ground stand awaited the hopeful hunters. Greg had positioned it to take maximum advantage of the current deer movement patterns. The terrain consisted of a dense, rocky hedgerow that jutted out from a hardwood ridge. A 50-foot-wide strip of clover ran in front of the blind, and a standing cornfield provided both essential carbohydrates and impenetrable cover for mature bucks trying to avoid human detection.

As often happens on a warm afternoon during the early part of deer season, deer movement was nonexistent. That didn't seem to bother our threesome while they sat in the blind just taking in the start of the autumn color.

Soon, the sound of the Wisconsin "state bird," the mosquito, could be heard as the "Three Amigos" sat and waited for Web's dream to show up. As a resident of a dry state, one could see Web had little experience with these needle-nosed pests. The first one landed on Web and buried its nose behind Web's earlobe. While Greg seemed impervious to the critters, Web would not be as understanding.

A well-placed swat sent the bloodsucking fiend into the history books, and Web spent the next 35 minutes honing his razor-sharp, hand-eye coordination on any mosquito that tried his patience.

As the sun began to set in the western sky, Web had earned a new nickname, one that strikes terror in the heart of all biting bugs. Yeah, you guessed it, his nickname was now "Skeeter."

Well, Skeeter's attention was about to be riveted on two real nice bucks that had appeared like phantoms out of the cornfield to the right of them. Skeeter's eyes narrowed as he looked at a couple of the nicest bucks he had ever seen—even in any picture. He slowly looked at Brady,
who seemed to be as taken with the majestic pair as was Skeeter. He then glanced towards Greg, who was also intently sizing up the pair of trophies in anyone's book.

To Skeeter’s dismay, Greg whispered, “I think we may do better.” Skeeter swallowed hard as he watched the pair grazing slowly but surely away from the stand. If Skeeter thought the dry mouth and lump in his throat were going to end anytime soon, he was sadly mistaken.

The two bucks had stopped their grazing and were fixated on a lone deer walking down off the hardwood ridge towards the pair. Slow and deliberate, this deer was in no particular hurry to reach his destination. He had an air of confidence about him, and reminded me of an unbeaten heavyweight champion as he enters the boxing ring.

The tension in the blind began to mount a bit because we could see the buck quite well in the distance. He was a huge, hearily muscled deer and the bases on his antlers were massive.

Greg had experienced many scenarios like this, where the sheer size of these bucks has a mesmerizing effect on their hunters. Skeeter’s big, dark brown eyes were suddenly bigger than I had remembered them. With his right hand on Skeeter’s shoulder, Greg calmly whispered his advice to the excited young man, and it appeared Skeeter was ready to get down to business. Brady slipped on the ear protection and a moment later Skeeter’s focus was on the large chest quartering towards the blind.

The three deer stopped for a minute and it appeared as though they were trying to identify each other. As with many species, there is a social hierarchy, and whitetails certainly have their own. This hierarchy helps prevent needlessly wasting energy through fights and injury, which ultimately reduces individual survival rates.

Skeeter’s time had come to fulfill his dream. A clean shot on the bruiser presented itself, and the .25-06 barked loudly. The light bullet hitting the massive chest made that unmistakable “hollow” sound, and the buck confirmed the hit.

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with a familiar hunch. Bolting down a grassy hill, the buck lost his footing and tumbled in the tall grass and gave a final kick.

The whole blind erupted in spontaneous celebration and Greg couldn't contain his elation as he watched the buck tumble. As Brady hugged Skeeter, I noticed tears of joy appear in his eyes as this special moment was recorded in the annals of human compassion. This hunt really solidified the concept of "teamwork" in my mind. When the team wins everyone is happy, and this special team in the blind was no exception.

After countless pictures were taken, Brady, Greg and his brother Shorty got the buck into the back of the Mule for the return to camp. As the Three Amigos reached the top of the next hill, the setting sun silhouetted their forms, as well as the huge rack sticking out behind them. It was a magnificent sight and I felt lucky to experience this memorable moment.

Back at the lodge, the celebration continued as Melanie gave her men a welcome home hug and kiss. After he finished blushing again, Skeeter called his grandparents who had accompanied him on his trip to Frank Lake's deer farm and shared with them the good news. It was obvious to all involved that the afternoon would be forever etched in the hearts and minds of the participants.

The inevitable farewells were said and the airplane set sail for Oklahoma. Melanie, Brady and Skeeter were all thinking about the kindness and compassion they observed at Wilderness Preserve and the Gene Flees family. The Flees's were also thinking of their newfound friends, as well as the new addition to the hunting fraternity: a boy named "Skeeter."

Editor's Note: If you have a disabled or critically ill child or would like to donate a hunt, contact U.S.S.A. at (800) 518-8019 or e-mail biotec@tids.net or view them online at www.deerfood.com/ussa.htm.