Back in the game
*Boys leave terminal illness on the sidelines for Alaska bear hunt*

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KUIU ISLAND - Ailing boys hunt this island at civilization's end to renew their humanity.

This week marked the second spring that a band of healthy sportsmen flew terminally ill young men to remotest Southeast Alaska for a rush. The prize was a fat black bear from a place that nurses some of the fattest, an island midway between Petersburg and Sitka. The reward, they found, was brotherhood, the schoolboy inclusion that their rare conditions take from them.

James Lakeman, a 46-year-old Atlanta businessman, started tempting this year's class with the prospect of Alaska adventure up to a year ago. At the time one of the boys, 15-year-old Alabaman Cory Graham, was too sick with leukemia to go on one of Lakeman's more-frequent Southern hunts. Lakeman dangled the words "Alaskan bear," and Graham said he'd be up for it by June.

"It gives them a point on the horizon," Lakeman said. "These kids - when they're not at the hospital they're at home looking out the window wishing they could do things. You give them something on the horizon and they say, 'OK, I've got to make it.'"

Graham, of Cullman, Ala., joined Cory Smith of Altamont, Kan., and Eric Corey of Knox., Ind., as this year's guests of honor in Kake and nearby Kuiu Island. Smith will turn 19 next week and needs a bone marrow transplant to help fight a deadly blood disease. Corey, 18, is unusually young for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis - Lou Gehrig's disease - a degenerative motor-neuron disease that crippled and killed his grandfather.

Two of the boys grew up hunting, so dreaming of Alaska just comes naturally. But Graham came to it after illness and found in it a way to keep living life. Graham was a three-sport athlete before his diagnosis two years ago, but now has to protect a chemotherapy port that probes an artery under his arm. Giving up sports was momentous.
On the first day of the hunt, last Sunday, the party of 10 shuttled from Kake to Kuiu Island in two skiffs and motored along the rocks and gravel-strewn coves of unpopulated Port Camden, a long, forested inlet. They spent most of the afternoon scoping the beaches where bears often graze.

Graham's mother, Lynne, 41, has taken several hunting trips with her son. On this occasion she spent much of the day bundled under blankets and coats while the skiffs moved through damp winds.

"It's God's country, that's for sure," she said.

"It's a blessing to the kids. It's not just about the hunting. It's about the experience, the exposure to culture, the friendships."

As her son had, she mentioned the loss of team sports when assessing hunting's allure.

"Suddenly you're at a point in your life where everything you're used to doing has to change," she said. "They're physically able to do this."

The day's first sighting brought gasps and descriptions like "whopper" and "monster" - a bigger black bear than what some in the party had seen in the contiguous states. It turned out to be a sow with cubs: not legal game, but reason enough for a 10-minute viewing as the cubs swatted and lunged at each other. Then the hunters pulled up on the rocks for a rest and some bologna sandwiches.

"I love it out here," said Smith, who has the blood disease paroxysmal nocturnal hemoglobinuria, which leads to clotting. "I've always wanted to come to Alaska and I've always wanted to hunt bear.

"I've just always seen pictures on the Discovery Channel and stuff, and I've always thought it was real neat up here."

At times he has mused about becoming a zoologist.

"I've always had a love of the animals."

Smith has gone on several hunts guided by volunteers, and says his favorite trophy is an elk he killed in western Iowa.

Back home Smith hunts whitetail deer and doves. A few years ago he also pursued bobwhite quail, but he says habitat changes in southeastern Kansas have pushed the birds out.

"I did a big report about it in (Future Farmers of America)," he said. "They're turning it all into farmland."

In addition to threatening his life and making him time his activities to strict medication schedules, Smith's disease leaves him appearing several years younger than his 19 years. His sportsman's sunglasses, camouflage hat and chewing tobacco were reminders of his actual age and that he might be in college if not waiting for a bone marrow match.

Besides the 400-pound black bear he eventually shot this week, Smith had an up-close look at a harbor seal sunning itself on a rocky outcrop, and he consistently caught flounder on a jig during a break from the hunting.

"I think I took more pictures of that dang seal than anything else all week," he said.

Throughout the hunt Smith spoke with eagerness, often lamenting when the hunters on the other boat radioed to say they had spotted a bear and would move in for a landing.
"I thought it was going to be really hard, but then I got into hunting and pretty much from there I've been able to go further than I thought," he said on a break after quietly padding along an old logging road in pursuit.

"This puts a lot less stress on you than contact sports, and it's a good way to relax and enjoy life."

That's not to say that these hunts are laid back. Hours spent pounding against waves in an open skiff while a cantankerous old man constantly calls you "kinky-headed dumbass" could be a challenge for anyone. But Graham, with a curly blond head (and a girlfriend of six months back home), knew it was in jest. He even asked to ride in the same boat with his tormentor - 75-year-old Alabama taxidermist Al Holmes - after Holmes teased him for missing the first shot of the hunt.

It was a comical but frustrating moment for everyone in the party. Graham, evidently aiming high, squeezed the trigger and a rock exploded into a towering cloud of dust behind the grazing bear. The bear's rear end wheeled at a higher speed than the rest of its body, and instantly the bear crashed through the shoreline brush and was gone.

Graham turned back to the others and smiled sheepishly, exposing a gash in the forehead where the rifle's scope had nipped him on recoil.

"I can't believe he missed that thing," Holmes spat, chuckling.

"I was shooting from the boat and it was shaking," Graham would later offer to the skeptics. "Plus, I was cold."

Holmes is in a small but growing cadre of people Lakeman has helped organize to get sick kids outdoors. He came here to watch the hunt, but once home in Alabama he'll mount the boys' trophies for free.

Lakeman is a former president of the Georgia chapter of Safari Club International, the big-game hunting and conservation organization. He stumbled into the role of outdoor wish granter four years ago when a Wisconsin woman on a nationwide mission for her organization - the United Special Sportsmen Alliance - called his club and asked how many sick kids he could take hunting. "All of them," he found himself saying.

With some donations, including boats from a Wyoming businessman who owns a floating lodge outside Kake, Lakeman and his colleagues spend thousands of their own dollars to spread the experiences they've enjoyed. Often a family is financially strapped by illness, and coming to Alaska would not be an option without the help.
"Get somebody over there who can shoot," he said on one such occasion. Once he said it within earshot of Corey - also destined to shoot a bear later in the week - who kidded that Smith shouldn't get cocky before bagging a bear.

Corey was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease at 15, a startling age for a debilitator that usually strikes between ages 40 and 70. At 18 he is in a wheelchair but can stand and walk short distances when transferring to a boat or truck.

When Lakeman offered the trip to these boys, he contacted Gov. Frank Murkowski's office and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game seeking help. All three got free bear permits, and two got dispensation for shooting from a boat; Corey because of his wheelchair and Graham because he tires quickly.

Corey started hunting in Indiana when he was 5 or 6: deer, coyotes, foxes, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons. Like Smith, he has long dreamed of faraway big game. In a twist of fate, it was a killer disease that brought his dreams to life.

Two years ago Smith went on what then seemed the hunt of a lifetime - caribou in northern Quebec - and the taxidermist who mounted his trophy took note of his illness. He put him in touch with a hunter who travels to Africa, and in short order that hunter offered him a free hunt in Zimbabwe. His quarry had grown from squirrels to giraffes.

Generosity follows him. In Alaska, he said he was most impressed with the Tlingit Native village of Kake. "Just about everybody in town met us at the landing strip and danced for us," he said.

More than that, the greeters christened a canoe two years in the making and took the young hunters on its inaugural ride. Some gave the boys small leather medicine bags, which they wore strapped around their necks on the hunt.

During hunting preparations at the Kake dock, some of the residents stopped by to inquire about the trip, and promised to bring smoked salmon to the boys' hotel before they went home. Others simply dropped off snacks of Pringles chips and chocolate bars, without saying a word.

Eventually it was Kake's generosity that got two of the boys their trophies. After watching the party come back empty-handed for two days, Kake Tribal Corp. officials allowed them on their land near town, teeming with bears. The party then walked gravel roads and waited for the right bear to amble through the brush.

The boys' family rooms back home are continuing reminders of their time in the field with new friends. Corey's home is littered with stuffed game: a bobcat, two turkeys, three deer, two caribou, a cape buffalo, an impala, an eland, three zebras. And soon, an Alaska bear.

"We're going to have to build onto our house, or build a new one," he said.

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