Dousman hunter teaches kids to hunt bears

Organization gives ill, disabled children outdoor adventures

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Hunter safety instructor Jack Nissen sat on a sofa arm at the Dousman Gun Club talking to 11-year-old Brittany Zebrowski about hunting bears. Zebrowski, next to him, stared up with wide eyes, listening closely to his final tips.

“You probably don’t want to shoot the first bear you see the first morning of the hunt,” Nissen said.

Zebrowski nodded. “But if a nice-size bear comes later, then can I try for it?”

“Of course, if the first bear that comes along is a nice size, you can go for it,” he said. “You want to wait for the right one, but you also have to remember that you only have two days.” He held up his hands, palms up, weighing the options of waiting for that perfect bear and time.

Zebrowski knows all about time. After being diagnosed with a brain tumor at the age of 8, she has had to live life in urgent bursts, when not recovering from chemotherapy treatments and surgeries. She recently returned from a cancer center in Boston, where she underwent a two-month proton therapy treatment, which has, for now, stabilized the growth of her tumor.

Deer hunt in Texas. A black bear, it seems, is the next natural notch on her belt.

Her recent radiotherapy, she admitted, has left her fatigued, but the thrill of the hunt easily overshadows that. She took off her baseball cap and pointed to a bare spot in her red hair on the left side of her head, where her tumor was treated.

“This is behind me now. I have it all under control,” she said, bouncing on the balls of her feet, as if on hot coals. “I’m not going to let life get me down. We’re going. We’re going to give a bear a boot.” Then, with a big smile, she gave a kick of her foot.

USSA President and Founder Brigid O’Donoghue said Zebrowski’s excitement is exactly what she wanted to give these youths in need when she began the organization in 2000. “I wanted to get them out of hospitals where they spend so much time and into the great outdoors,” she said. “It isn’t about the harvest of the animals. It is about the natural healing of just being in the beauty of the outdoors. It is about giving them a place of peace to focus on the quality of life. There is nothing like the outdoors for that.”

In the past six years, her organization, based out of Pittsville, Wis., has set up more than 3,100 hunting and fishing trips all over the United States.

But, O’Donoghue said, getting a bear-hunting trip together is not done quickly in Wisconsin, where applying for a state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) tag to shoot a deer is out of the question. "Half of my job is matching the right child with the right guide, and I knew I found him," she said. "I am blessed that there are wonderful people, like Jack, who are willing to take these kids under their arm during these trips, and love and treat them like they are their own.

Hunting mentor — Jack Nissen talks with Brittany Zebrowsky about bear hunting. Zebrowsky was at the Dousman Gun Club for a hunter safety course.

He got permission from a couple local residents to use 80 acres of land in Hayward, Wis., for the hunt and the use of a cabin in nearby Winter, Wis., for lodging.

He received generous donations from the Wisconsin Bear Hunters’ Association, the Dousman Ottawa Lions Club, sportsmanship. I made the first call, but everything about the trip was coordinated on that end.”

She said the largest financial supporter of the USSA is Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre’s Fourward Foundation, which this year is paying the 2006 family DNR tag.