Kentucky girl bags bear on dream hunt

By JONATHAN GNEISER
For the Daily Tribune

Though she could never hold a rifle by herself due to illness, 14-year-old Samantha Baber was able to shoot a black bear with help from several area hunters.

Through the Pittsville-based United Special Sportsmen Alliance, which organizes hunting or fishing trips for terminally ill or disabled people, Samantha and her parents, David and Theresa Baber of Wallingford, Ky., traveled to northern Wisconsin last week.

Samantha has had two bone marrow transplants to combat Fanconi’s anemia, a rare and terminal genetic disorder that leads to progressive, severe bone marrow failure, said USSA president Brigid O’Donoghue.

Lee McDonald of Pittsville was among a group of about 30 hunters from Pittsville, Neillsville, Marshfield and Collettsville, N.C., who volunteered to help Samantha hunt for bears in the Chequamegon National Forest.

After arriving at the hunting cabin near Fifield where they stayed Sept. 11, Samantha rode along with a group of hunters to check bear bait piles, McDonald said.

While rechecking the baits Sept. 12, McDonald said the group found a pile that had been disturbed by a bear.

Samantha and the hunters chased one bear for about six hours before it finally outran the dogs, McDonald said.

Early Sept. 13, the hunters found another disturbed bait site and started the chase. Eventually another hunting party called Samantha’s group to report they had chased a bear up into a tree.

The bear climbed in and out of four trees before the hunting dogs managed to catch the bear on the ground, McDonald said.

Then McDonald carried Samantha within 20 yards of the bear so she could pull the trigger.

“After she got to shoot the bear, the smile on her face was priceless,” he said.

Philan Susa of Neillsville donated her bear hunting tag to Samantha, and her son, Randy Susa, was among those who helped hunt the bear.

“I couldn’t believe how nice everybody was and what they did,” said David, Samantha’s father. “We were all real proud of her.”

Samantha has always loved the outdoors, David said.

“She loves deer hunting, turkey hunting and fishing,” he said. “This is the first time she’s been bear hunting. She really loved it.”

At first Samantha wanted a rug made out of her bear, but after the hunter took up a collection, and a Fifield taxidermist donated his time, McDonald said he’ll be able to deliver the bear to her home fully mounted.

“That was really something that they’d do that for her,” David said.

O’Donoghue said she met Samantha after her successful hunt.

“I could tell she was really happy,” she said. “That’s what we want to see — the joy in their face like that. It’s worth a million bucks.”