Sportsmen teach kids how to bait, hook, reel ‘em in

WHITTINGTON — The yellow bass was a less-than-whopping three inches long, but then again, reeling it in wasn’t the hard part for Rebecca Gay.

No, the hard part for the 15-year-old came when she tried to uphold the strict fisherman’s tradition of those who attend an annual getaway for children with special needs or life-threatening illnesses sponsored by the Rend Lake Resort and the United Special Sportsmen Alliance.

In order to follow that time-honored tradition, Gay had to kiss the first fish she caught.

“He kept jerking and jerking,” said Gay, who is from Clarksville, Tenn. However, her mother, Barbara, said Rebecca “gave it the biggest smack I’ve ever seen and she had the biggest smile on her face I’ve ever seen. It was just a little bitty thing, but she was so proud.”

Gay, who has cerebral palsy, impaired vision, scoliosis and is developmentally delayed, had never been fishing before Monday, when she was paired with one of 16 pro fishermen who donate their time to the event, now in its second year.

“This is an opportunity we would never have been able to give her,” said Gay’s mother. “She was so excited — she kept calling, ‘Here fishy, fishy, fishy.’”

Adding to Gay’s excitement was the fact that her family — mom, dad and brother — got to accompany her on the trip.

“These kids go through a lot,” said Brigida O’Donoghue, founder of USSA, a nonprofit alliance that provides free hunting, camping, fishing and canoeing trips for terminally ill or disabled children and adults. “But so do their families. Sometimes the siblings get a little lost because so much attention must be paid to the kids with special needs or illnesses. This gives them the opportunity as a family to create good memories they can keep forever.”

The kids aren’t the only ones who will leave the event with lasting memories.

Devin Smith uses a small battery fan to keep cool while waiting to head out to do some fishing with the United Sportsmen Alliance on Rend Lake Monday afternoon.
Devin Smith (front) of Mount Vernon and Jake Gibson of Tennessee cast their lines at Rend Lake hoping to catch a big one.

**FISHING:** Professionals teach children to bait, hook, reel 'em in

**FROM PAGE 1B**

Ray Gilbert of Waltonville, who fishes on the Bass Pro crappie master tournament trail, attended the event for the first time this year but vowed, “I’ll be back next year and every year after that.”

“‘We had a great time. They didn’t care that the fishing was slow. They had just as much fun playing in the minnow bucket,” Gilbert added with a laugh.

Professional catfisherman Donnie Fountain came up from Georgia to spend the day with the children. Fountain, who fishes the Bass Pro Big Cat Quest, said he’ll definitely be back as well. “The look on their faces was enough for me. I’ll be back. It was nice to let them experience something I’ve loved all my life,” he said.

For more information on USSA, visit www.childswish.com.

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