Teen recovers from heart transplant to go hunting

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HORICON — For most deer hunters, bringing home a handsome buck is considered little more than a highlight of a successful hunting season. But to 15-year-old Ryan Carlson of Horicon, that accomplishment has been a memorable milestone along his road to recovery following a heart transplant.

The teen recently returned home from a Dream Hunt trip in Missouri made possible by the outreach of strangers from across the country.

Nearly a year ago, Ryan couldn’t imagine the possibility of tramping through a meadow hunting down quail and pheasants. Instead, he wondered if the next day would bring word of a desperately needed heart.

The smile of triumph splitting Ryan’s glowing face as he poses with his trophy is scarcely reminiscent of the pale, thin boy captured on film shortly after his transplant on Nov. 26, 2001.

Seeking medical attention for their son for what they thought was a lingering cold, Vince and Nancy Carlson were stunned when doctors diagnosed their only child in February of 2001 as having Idiopathic Dilated Cardiomyopathy, a cardiac muscle disorder in which the heart enlarges and ventricular function becomes impaired.

“He was a normal kid up until that time — playing in the band and participating in sports,” Nancy said. “The transplant specialist came in and we didn’t even want to talk with her. We thought it real strange that we had to be thinking about a transplant.”

For nearly nine months, the Carlsons followed a whirlwind regimen of visits to cardiac specialists, along with administering an array of medications to Ryan, hoping to stabilize the condition. But when the pressure in his lungs began to rise, Ryan was admitted to the Heart Center of Children’s Hospital of Milwaukee on Nov. 3 and was elevated to priority status on the transplant waiting list.

Just 24 days later, the news of a suitable donor heart from a 17-year-old accident victim sent Vince racing to Milwaukee from his job at Mayville Engineering Co. in Mayville.

Ryan did suffer an acute rejection of his donor heart in November of 2002, but his body has responded well to immunosuppressive treatments. On Dec. 20, 2002, Ryan received another transplant.

A loyal fan of the show, he explained that he was unable to afford a subscription and related the story of his son’s recent heart transplant and his love for hunting sports. The conversation resulted in a free subscription, hat and autographed photo of outdoorsman Jackie Bushman.

A subsequent thank you letter e-mailed from Ryan to the company generated news of handicapped hunts.

With mounting medical bills, the trips seemed destined to remain a dream until the news of Ryan’s plight reached Brigid O’Donoghue, organizer of Dream Hunt.

O’Donoghue, the owner and president of Bio-Tec Research, Inc. in Pittsville, Wis., works with other organizations such as Paralyzed Veterans of America and Benefi4Kids, along with deer and elk farm owners and property owners, orchestrating all-expenses-paid hunts for terminally ill or disabled youths.

“We had an opening for a hunt at Oak Creek W Ranch in Missouri, but unfortunately the boy who was scheduled to go along passed away before then,” said O’Donoghue, who obtained Ryan’s through Buckmasters. “It was the perfect match and the most appropriate thing to do.”

While Ryan is getting his normal routine as a more than Horizon High, he will long remember his life-changing experience and the generosity of so many.