Topping father is 8-year-old’s goal

Quadriplegic enjoys thrill of deer hunt in southern Indiana, bags nine-pointer.

By Don Mulligan
Star correspondent

CORYDON, Ind. — At the age of 4, Ashley Manes was in a car accident that left her a quadriplegic. Now 8, she flashes not only a smile, but a mischievous grin after a recent hunting expedition.

More than anything in the world, she wanted to go deer hunting with her father.

Specifically, Manes wanted to get a buck bigger than the one her father had on the wall of their Alabama home. That would be a worthwhile, though logistically difficult, proposition for any 8-year-old, let alone one in a wheelchair.

Her father, Joe Manes, contacted the United Special Sportsmen Alliance (USSA), which arranged an all-expenses paid guided hunt in southern Indiana. USSA is a nonprofit organization that supplies and organizes dream outdoor trips for disabled or terminally ill children nationwide. Based in Wisconsin, USSA arranged 77 outings in 2002, with many more planned for this year.

“The support we have received from landowners and large companies all over the country has been overwhelming. Currently we have more hunts available than we do kids in some areas,” said Brigid O’Donoghue, founder and director of USSA.

A survivor of childhood encephalitis and brain surgery at age 20, O’Donoghue said what the children want is to do what everyone else does, which sometimes includes taking a bigger buck than their father.

Good sign: Joe Manes and his 8-year-old daughter, Ashley, are excited that their arrow shows signs of a good hit on Ashley’s first deer. She bagged a nine-pointer. When she was 4, Ashley Manes was in a car accident that left her a quadriplegic.

Manes’ deer

At the Whitetail Bluff private deer hunting lodge near Corydon, owner Rodney Bruce went to great lengths to help Manes and 15-year-old Cory Freeman, a hunter with muscular dystrophy, fulfill their wish.

Like his brother, Ronnie Bruce from Lost Creek Taxidermy, who donated free mounts for the children’s trophies, Rodney went the extra mile to make a hunt of a lifetime.

After finding out about the extent of Manes’ disability, Rodney Bruce built her a special blind, made to accommodate her and her father, who would be shooting for Ashley.

As she waited for a special tripod-mounted crossbow that can be fired with the movement of her chin, Ashley happily accepted her father shooting for her. But not without her input and direction in the blind.

After one day of hunting with no success, Ashley waited silently for two hours on the edge of a cornfield until her patience finally paid off. Three bucks that had been seen a half-mile away earlier in the day suddenly popped out of the woods only 30 yards from her position.

Her father quickly started consulting with Ashley on the deer’s movement. It was decided if any one of the deer passed within bow range in front of the blind where Ashley could see, they would shoot.

On cue, a beautiful nine-pointer broke off from the trio and headed straight for the blind. As it passed in front of Ashley, her dad gave her one last look and pulled the trigger on his release.

As the buck piled up only 30 yards away, Ashley chirped out in an excited voice, “Did I get him? I want to go see!”

Successful venture

Though her father had pulled the trigger, this was Ashley’s deer and everyone knew it.

After 20 minutes, Ashley insisted on inspecting the arrow to determine how well the deer was hit, and with help, followed the blood trail until it entered the woods. Once the deer was dragged out of the woods, she then insisted that the drag rope be attached to her wheelchair so she could help drag the deer to the road.

As she and her father dragged the deer with a little help, Ashley, who is generally a quiet child, asked, “Daddy, have you ever got a nine-pointer?”

“No, I haven’t Ashley,” he said while smiling and simultaneously holding back tears.

“Then maybe we should take that little buck you have on the wall down to make room for this bigger one,” Ashley said.

“Maybe we should,” he said.

As it was for his daughter, the outing amounted to the hunt of a lifetime for Joe Manes, too. With the help of USSA, he was able to share his passion with his daughter.

“In order for disabled people like my daughter, and families like ours to have successful hunting trips, we need a lot of friends and organizations like USSA,” he said.

Freeman did not get within crossbow range of a deer that day, but came out of his blind with his father all smiles, anxious to get after it again at dawn the next day.

Anyone interested in referring a terminally ill or disabled child to USSA for a dream hunting or fishing trip should contact O’Donoghue at 1-800-518-8019.

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