

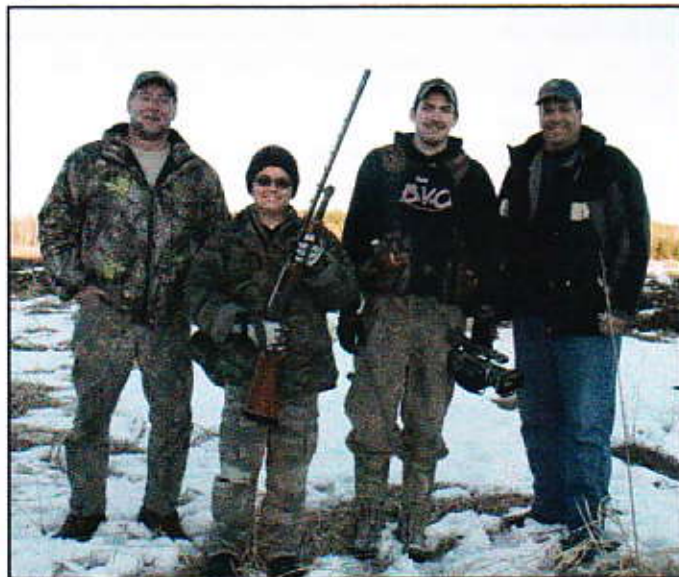
On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

From The Heart

USSA helps disabled and sick children, wounded veterans

by Dick Ellis



The crew at day's end of day 2; Steve Henske, Matthew Johns, Mike Mancl and Doug Johns are still without a turkey but not about to give up.

When it's impossible to do what you would like to for children and their families with life threatening illnesses, or for disabled veterans, some special people just do what they can. That's the essence behind the actions of these many volunteers who make up the United Special Sportsman Alliance, most recently in early April coordinating a special turkey hunt near Wausau. They helped young

people in need and their families. They helped disabled vets. They helped from the heart. And when it's time, they'll do it all again.

The United Special Sportsman Alliance is a "wish-granting" charity that specializes in sending critically ill and disabled youth and disabled veterans on the outdoor adventure of their dreams. Families, according to the organization's website, "are whisked away from

the mundane world of hospitals and high medical bills to places of peace to focus on the quality of life, family ties and the wonders of our natural world."

"I didn't know anything about USSA until I drew my first bear tag in 2004," said John Haydock, Wisconsin State representative for the nationwide organization launched from Pittsville Wisconsin in 2000 by founder Brigid O'Donoghue. "I met a 15 year old girl with cystic fibrosis who had her tag donated through the USSA to hunt too. She changed my life. I told my wife when I got home it was going to change the way I lived. It did. I became more and more involved in USSA as time went on. Susan had two brothers, both with cystic fibrosis too. She lived long enough to see both of her brothers fill their bear tags before she died."

Haydock guided his first trophy deer hunt for the USSA in northern Illinois in 2006. In January 2007, seeking to establish a Wisconsin based USSA turkey hunt, Haydock was having a casual conversation with a casual acquaintance, Larry Trelka in a Junction City gas station. Although the conversation had nothing to do with USSA, Trelka, at the time bat-

ting cancer, mentioned that he hoped to utilize his personal property nick-named "The Pumpkin Patch" in some way to help disabled kids.

"I said, 'Larry, that's what I do,' Haydock said. "The Lord put us together. It was divine intervention"

The Wisconsin USSA turkey hunt was launched in 2007 from the Pumpkin Patch with two youths and their families participating. Eight youths or wounded veterans participated the second year, 17 the third, and 25 or the maximum that the facilities can provide for due to space restrictions, the last two years. The 2011 hunt, which ran April 2nd and April 3rd, included 35,000 acres of public property and 15,000 acre of private land donated for use by property owners. Hunters (including four disabled veterans and 21 critically ill children) and their families were given gas cards for travel expenses, provided lodging at a Motel, provided meals, and partnered with veteran turkey hunters who served as guides and increased the odds of filling tags with Toms or Jakes.

First, hunters gathered at the Pumpkin Patch in the township of Eau Claire April 1st to



A Tom Decoy beckons hens. (Ellis)

meet their mentors, and sight-in shotguns. They also participated in hunter's education curriculum presented by trained instructors and a game warden, and learned about the turkey as a big game bird including eating habits, calling, identifying gobblers from hens, and calling techniques.

This reporter had the privilege of joining mentor Steve Henske of Stevens Point, hunter Matthew Johns of Minnesota, 11, his father, Doug Johns and video expert Mike Mancl, who would film our hunt. Doug and Jodie Johns, Doug Johns said, had lost an older son, Nathaniel, two years before. They are strong as a family but in their great loss, extremely appreciative of the people and support provided by the USSA.

The alarm clock roused us at 4:45 am and we were on the farmer's field set up in twin blinds 30 minutes before first light. The blinds would allow Henske and the Johns boys safe hunting and mentoring from

one tent while Mancl and I would work video and still cameras from the other. Although Doug and Matthew had never before hunted, their physical toughness in cold weather was amazingly "veteran" like, with Matthew once even electing to forfeit a USSA meal to extend his vigil into a fifth and sixth hour hoping for a close encounter with a Tom.

Pre-light gobbling from the roost was non-stop as the Toms and hens awakened to another day. Periodically, hens or Gobblers made appearances on our field, mostly beckoned by Mancl's superb calling. With the exception of a gobbling Tom that came within 50 yards of us for 45 minutes on day two, none of the legal targets came within range. Just flirting from a distance with the gobblers though, was plenty to keep Matthew totally involved. His father, a true class act from the moment of our introduction, expressed gratitude to the USSA and all the volunteers who made the trip possible for his family.

"I think it's great...all the things that USSA does for the kids," he said. "They make it very easy and tailor everything to kids even if they're in wheelchairs. Everyone is friendly. It's nice to have things that can take us away from some of the stressors. Matthew is very excited about it. Losing Nathaniel has made us evaluate some of our priorities. Life is really short. These people help."

When your time is spent with such good

people, even a weekend hunt can be too short too. We said goodbye to Matthew and Doug too soon. Although we weren't fortunate enough to fill a tag, 11 turkeys, including six Toms and one rare bearded hen, were harvested. In the end though, with the USSA it's all about being together, and making things perhaps, a little easier for a little while.

"I had wanted to put together a hunt like this for disabled kids and veterans for several years," said Larry Trelka, who owns the Pumpkin Patch on 40 acres of Junction City property. "I was actually having health problems myself when I bumped into Big John at the gas station and just mentioned what I was thinking. I really didn't know him at all. The words just came out. For some reason the good Lord just made it happen. In my eyes the whole thing is community. We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for friends and family. It's one of the things in life that you just can't explain. Look at the hunters, look at the guides, look at all the volunteers. If we need something, the word somehow gets out that we need it...and somehow...we get it." ^{OW}

For more information on United Special Sportsman Alliance events, connect with www.childswish.org or call 800.518.8019.

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USSA ... Helping People and their Families

According to Doug Johns, Nathaniel and Matthew Johns were born in Washington State. Nathaniel, was born in May 1997. He developed newborn jaundice, which is very common, but he was not treated appropriately, resulting in a preventable medical injury. He suffered permanent brain damage and had a condition called kernicterus. Nathaniel was very bright cognitively, but severely disabled physically.

"When Nathaniel was almost two, and shortly after we were pregnant with Matt, doctors discovered he was "spilling protein," indicative of a kidney disorder called nephrotic syndrome, which eventually requires kidney transplant," Doug said. "Children with this condition eventually stop growing because their kidneys spill and their bodies do not retain necessary proteins. Initially it was thought Nathaniel's kidney problem was a symptom of kernicterus. However, kidney specialists advised that it was more likely genetic, and that if we had another male child there was a one in four chance he too would have nephrotic syndrome."

"Matthew was born in October 1999 with nephrotic syndrome. Because we now had two boys needing transplant we did some research and discovered that the University of Minnesota was the leading pediatric transplant center in the world, having pioneered the procedure. So in March 2000, we moved to the Twin Cities, not knowing a soul out here. Nathaniel was transplanted in November 2001, receiving one of my kidneys. Shortly thereafter, Matt had open heart surgery in April 2002 to correct a sub-aortic stenosis. Both boys remained very healthy until Matt required a kidney transplant in April 2006, receiving one of my wife's kidneys. Both transplant surgeries were and have been tremendously successful, and both boys remained very healthy. However, after his best Midwest winter ever health-wise, Nathaniel developed pneumonia in April 2009 that he never recovered from, passing in May 2009."

"This was a tremendous loss. We all miss him terribly. Going forward, my wife and I want to work toward helping people and families with special needs to negotiate the complex medical world they are thrown into. There is no playbook, and we hope our experience can benefit others." ^{OW}