

One special hunt

Local girl's wish to come true when she goes looking for black bear

BY LES WINKELER
THE SOUTHERN

Samantha Cates wants to upstage her father. Cates, a sophomore at Anna-Jonesboro High School, wants to shoot a black bear this fall. In her calculation, that would one-up the elk her father, Jess Cates, killed.

On the surface, that sounds like nothing more than a bit of intra-family rivalry. However, there is more to this story.

Cates, who has spina bifida, hunts from a wheelchair. United Special Sportsman's Alliance, an organization dedicated to making dreams come true for terminally ill and disabled youths, is sending Cates to Wisconsin on Sept. 14 to 21 for a black bear hunt.

The organization has granted the wishes of more than 5,500 students and disabled veterans since it was founded in 2000.

"It's amazing," Samantha said. "I don't know how to explain it. It's the chance of a lifetime. I'm really excited about it."

The Cateses went through an application process for the hunt. They found out earlier this summer Samantha had been selected.

"I was like, 'Whoa,'" Samantha said.

The guide is providing the hunt free of charge. If Cates harvests a bear, USSA will take care of taxidermy costs.

"We don't have to worry about a thing," Samantha said.

The 15-year-old Samantha is an experienced hunter. She has killed three deer, including a 10-point buck last year.

"I've hunted with my dad since I was probably eight," she said. "I got the hunting gene from my dad. I like spending time with my dad, just the adrenaline ... He taught me everything I need to know."

The 10-point buck Cates killed last year in mounted and displayed in the Cates home. Samantha remembers the excitement of that hunt.

"I screamed as soon as I shot it," she said. "I'm really proud of it."

This excursion will take the hunting experience one step further. Cates has never hunted bear before. She has never seen a bear in the wild.

"My heart will be racing," she said.

The hunt is scheduled from Sept. 14 to Sept. 21. Her parents will accompany her on the trip, and will be with her during the hunt.



Samantha Cates of Cobden will be going on a bear hunt in Wisconsin through United Special Sportsmen Alliance.

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"They put me in charge of the video camera," said Cates' mother, Kim. "I don't know if I'll be able to do it our not. I just may be too nervous, probably because of the bear."

"It's just amazing this organization gives these kids a chance to go on these hunts. She was very, very excited, emotional. We all were."

Cates' father will also be with her.

"I'm just excited about getting to achieve this, getting to achieve it with my dad means a lot," Cates said. "They'll be anywhere I am. I love it. It's a chance to, I don't know how to explain it, share the experience."

In the meantime, Samantha is prepping for the trip by taking target practice frequently at her rural Union County home.

"I have a few targets my dad put up to shoot at," she said.

And, if Cates harvests a deer, what does she do for an encore? "Whatever (USSA founder) Brigid (O'Donoghue) has for me," Samantha said. "I don't know if she has another one planned for not."

For more information on the USSA, go to www.childswish.com.