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Back in the hunt

Group helps disabled outdoorsmen

By LORI NICKEL

lnickel@journalsentinel.com

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Union Grove - Players hit rainbow jumpers at the YMCA in wheelchairs. Runners win track medals on prosthetics at the Paralympic Games.

But the idea of a hunter reliant on a wheelchair weaving through wild brush and mud in the middle of nowhere seems too laborious and demanding.

Yet after Rick Schaefer of Oconomowoc fell out a tree while hunting on Nov. 1, 1997, and permanently injured his spinal cord, he was merely three weeks into rehabilitation when the group of hunting buddies he had known since high school swung by the hospital and got him a weekend release.

His wheelchair was insignificant. It was the gun deer season, and they were going, just as they had every November before. Schaefer's friends placed a board across his armrests so he could hold his gun and took him out in the woods.

"I wasn't really up for it, but I just went. I said, 'I've got to do something,' " said Schaefer. "It was part of the rehab process. You're supposed to go home and show how you can take care of yourself for a weekend. And I went hunting. . . .

"It wasn't hunting like I'd normally done, but I haven't been able to stop."

The injury had ended Schaefer's career as a plumber, but it was that weekend he realized that even with the injury, he could still escape to the great outdoors.

Sports Show



Photo/[David Joles](#)

Mike Little of Milwaukee retrieves his arrows during an indoor archery tournament put on by Adaptive Sportsmen, a new state organization.

That's exactly why Schaefer was at Lori G's Wildwood Archery in Union Grove last weekend for target practice with a new state organization called Adaptive Sportsmen.

The 61-member group of disabled and able-bodied outdoors people has a simple mission, besides getting a snapshot of that trophy black bear: to get disabled hunters away from The Sportsman Channel and out to Baraboo and Black River Falls where they can participate themselves.

Schaefer recently shot an eight-point buck in Baraboo that scored 126 inches in the record books with Pope & Young Club (a national organization that measures and scores big game), from a wheelchair and his all-terrain vehicle.

How much does he hunt now?

"Oh, as much as possible," said Schaefer, including competitions. "That's why I got involved with this group. It's nice for people with disabilities. It's something to do, it keeps them active. Otherwise you're kind of sitting around the house, you get bored, depressed and everything else."

John Mitchell, who grew up in Greenfield, had polio as an infant, but that didn't stop father Bob and uncle Harry from taking him along to target shoots. Back then you could even take a few practice shots with a bow and arrow in your own yard, and Mitchell, like Schaefer, found a way on his own to hunt even as he needed crutches or braces to get around.

His favorite is bowhunting for white-tailed, and he shot a doe earlier this year. After attending a seminar in Minnesota on hunting for the disabled years ago, Mitchell and a few friends decided Wisconsin needed its own such group.

Adaptive Sportsmen was formalized last year and will have a booth at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Sports Show at the Wisconsin Exposition Center at State Fair Park today through March 21.

"Awareness is why we exist," said Mitchell, Adaptive Sportsmen president and founder, and a tax accountant for M&I Bank. "We can help people with physical challenges get out and enjoy the outdoors. Just getting out there - it's not like I'm not a little disappointed when I go out and don't see something - but it's not



Photo/[David Joles](#)

Aaron Czerniak of Lyons steadies his aim at Lori G's Wildwood Archery Range, which donated use of the range to Adaptive Sportsmen.



Photo/[David Joles](#)

A poster at a Adaptive Sportsmen function March 6 in Union Grove displays successful hunts from some the organization's members.

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necessary to shoot something in order to enjoy myself."

At the Sports Show, photographs will help people appreciate what Adaptive Sportsmen members have accomplished. There's Mike Little in of Milwaukee and his nine-point buck, shot with a bow in Chippewa Falls. Cal Popp, formerly of Fond du Lac, is pictured with the black bear he killed in Sawyer County.

One member, a quadriplegic, has a custom-made mechanical device and a tripod (which cost about \$4,000) to help him steady his gun or crossbow.

Adaptive Sportsmen has members all around the state, including the Milwaukee area, Racine, Madison, Eau Claire and the Fox River Valley. Most are men, but there are a few women. Since some of its members can't travel very easily, the group has year-round shooting-range competitions statewide.

Adaptive Sportsmen relies on raffles and fund-raisers, financial support from Quality Deer Management Association and able-bodied volunteers, said Mary Mitchell, the group's treasurer and John's sister. They help hunters find the right adaptive equipment, from tripods to gun rests to simple plastic pipe bought at a hardware store, taped in camouflage. Whatever works.

Some John Deere dealers in the state have donated their all-purpose vehicles for outings by the group. Private landowners across the state have taken members out for weekend hunts.

With such interest and support, the Web page and newsletter editor of Adaptive Sportsmen, Al Neu of Waukesha, hopes to expand the membership and broaden its horizons to include everything from training younger hunters to other outdoor activities such as fishing and snowmobiling. They're hoping to get more donations, such as two-way radios that come in handy for disabled hunters.

"We're trying to give disabled hunters their independence once they're out there, that's why it's so important to have able-bodied volunteers and members," said Neu. "We want to encourage people that we're here to help you get started."

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Friday at the Sports Show

MAIN STAGE

■ **Donnybrook Kennel & "Big Air" Retriever Distance Leaping Demonstrations**, 4 p.m.

■ **Rob Scheer's Lumberjack Sports International**, 4 p.m.

■ **Donnybrook Kennel & "Big Air" Retriever Distance Leaping Demonstrations**, 7 p.m.

■ **Rob Scheer's Lumberjack Sports International**, 7 p.m.

SEMINARS

■ **Fishing and Hunting Opportunities In Southeastern Wisconsin**. Jim Laganowski, 4 p.m.