

A HANDICAPPED OUTDOORSMAN REDISCOVERS
THE JOYS OF HUNTING DEER

STORY BY JENNIFER GRITT
PHOTOS BY TIM GREENWAY



AN UNLIKELY BUCK

For James Heiman of Neenah, participating in outdoor sports is more than just a hobby, it defines who he is. But on Oct. 2, 1995, Heiman suffered a stroke and brain aneurysm that left him permanently handicapped.

Although Heiman can occasionally use a staff to walk, his reliance on a wheelchair kept him from participating in the outdoor activities he loved so much.

And although he was lucky to survive, the difficult task of rebuilding his life — redefining himself in the new context of being disabled — was daunting.

Then, in 1998, his wife, Janet, learned of a unique handicapped deer hunting program established by Ed and Mary Gritt of Black Creek.

In 1988, when the Gritts' nephew, Joe Fassbender, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, and family friend Lee Buntjer, a quadriplegic, expressed interest in deer hunting, the Gritts tried to figure out a way to help them gain access to the woods that dominated their 240-acre farm.

Their original hunting lodge was set back a half-mile from their house and its several scattered deer stands would not work. The Gritts decided to add wheelchair ramps to the lodge, and later built wheelchair-accessible deer stands.

Upon seeing how much hunting meant to his nephew, Ed Gritt looked into the possibility of opening his farm to other handicapped hunters.





The Beyond the Boundaries at Joe's Lodge handicapped-hunting program was born.

Beginning the first Saturday of October and running for nine days, the Gritts' annual handicapped hunt reaches out to disabled individuals throughout the state, giving them a chance to enjoy the thrill of deer hunting with others who face similar challenges.

For the Heimans, the disabled hunting program was liberating.

Janet found the process of adjusting to her husband's handicaps was often difficult and lonely.

"We didn't do much of anything until we met the Gritts," she said.

And while the program allows Heiman to participate in a sport he once cherished, the opportunity to meet new people and establish lasting friendships has been equally rewarding. Taking part in the annual hunt has made a huge difference in her and her husband's lives, Janet said.

"For nine days you feel accepted," she explained. "No one is singled out. People treat us normally. It's just a huge boost and relief to have those nine days. We feel like part of a group."

Fostering a sense of camaraderie is an important part of the annual hunt.

"That's why we do this," Mary Gritt said. "A lot of these people don't have very much in their lives. So [the hunt] for them is a lot more. It's about meeting new people and getting a good meal. It's about having someplace to go and somebody to talk to."

The social benefits are nice for the disabled hunters and their families, but killing a deer is even nicer.

After three years of participating in the Gritts' annual hunt, Heiman had yet to shoot a deer. So when Heiman, and helper Michael Nachtwey arrived at their deer stand

Beyond the Boundaries at Joe's Lodge was created by Ed and Mary Gritt of Black Creek. The Gritts' annual handicapped hunt reaches out to disabled people across Wisconsin.



on Oct. 11, 2002, the chance of bagging a deer seemed slim.

Heiman had shot at deer, but because of his

handicap, he could only use a single-shot 30/30 pistol. The time it took Heiman to reload his gun did not give him much chance to take another shot, and the deer had escaped. But his fortunes were about to change.

Heiman and Nachtwey were quietly sitting in the deer stand when they spotted a 5-point buck heading toward a clearing 200 yards away from their stand. Heiman raised his loaded pistol, fired and missed. However, the deer didn't run away. Instead, the buck began walking closer to the hunters. Heiman slowly reloaded his gun, raised the pistol, aimed, fired — and missed again. Still, the deer did not run away.

Remarkably, the animal kept walking forward, giving Heiman another opportunity to reload. For a third time, Heiman raised his pistol, aimed, fired — and missed again!

The deer continued to walk toward Heiman. With Nachtwey's help, Heiman reloaded his pistol again. At that point, the buck was 20 feet away from the hunters. Heiman raised his pistol for the fourth time, aimed, fired and dropped the buck with a single shot to the head.

"I've never seen anything like it," Nachtwey said.

Ed Gritt, who had been up at his barn feeding his horses at the time, could only hear what was going on.

"It took forever between shots," Gritt recalled. "I just had visions of the deer running away."

After the fourth shot, Gritt figured the deer had finally escaped. So before going to the lodge, he decided to go into the house to check for phone messages. The phone was ringing as he entered the house.

"It was Mike Nachtwey, and he told me I had to get down to the hunting lodge right away."

Not knowing what happened, Gritt expected the worst. "I thought, oh no, somebody got hurt."

Gritt rushed to the cabin, and there, lying along side the lodge was Heiman's deer.

"The way I figure it," Gritt later recalled, "he was overshooting, and the deer didn't know where the gunfire was coming from."

In addition, Gritt noted that the buck had probably picked up the scent of another nearby disabled hunter, and Heiman was sitting upwind.

"The deer probably thought that the small clearing leading up to the stand was a good escape route. Little did he know."

Heiman was reflective about the

Heiman was reflective about the kill. "It's a good thing I didn't have an automatic weapon, or the deer would have ended up in my lap."

Heiman was so thrilled about shooting the buck that he called his mother as soon as he got back into the lodge — a point everyone stresses affectionately and with a certain amount of amusement. Then he called his wife, Janet.

"Everybody gets pretty excited when one of the disabled [hunters] gets a deer," Gritt said. "It's as good a feeling as getting one yourself."

When Janet arrived at the Gritt farm later that day, she was overwhelmed.

"It was just a giant party," she remembered.

For Janet, the annual hunt is a constant reminder of how lucky her husband was to have survived his stroke, in part because the event falls so close to the anniversary of the tragic day. Celebrating his buck that year made the 7th anniversary of his

stroke mean that much more.

"We had the shell casings on the mantle of the fireplace for a year," Janet recalled, saying she had plans to put them in a glass box. "Those are the little things that are important to us."

The chronicle of Heiman's first kill is fast becoming a legend at Joe's Lodge, and the Gritts never miss an opportunity to tell the story.

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Throughout the year, disabled hunters, friends and family gather at the Gritt farm to relive the great moments of past hunts and prepare for the coming season.

"The Gritts have made us feel like part of the family," Janet said.

The handicapped-hunting program has taught Heiman that despite the challenges of being handicapped, he can still participate and succeed in a sport that has long been a huge part of his life.

He learned that his wheelchair, walking staff and any other discouragement did not have to keep him from hunting. But more importantly, the chance to hunt again has made him feel whole.

"And that's what this program's all about," Ed Gritt said. **WJ**

Jennifer Gritt is a free-lance writer from Appleton.

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