

Wayne Greco, left, and Will Gaither check out the territory around a shooting house at Great Southern Outdoors hunting plantation.

# Wheelin' in the woods

Organization provides hunting and fishing opportunities for outdoors enthusiasts with disabilities

BY BRYAN BRASHER  
Outdoors Writer

UNION SPRINGS, Ala. — With the sun descending on the green fields at Great Southern Outdoors hunting plantation in Bullock County, Will Gaither sat nestled inside a shooting house watching as a large doe grazed less than 60 yards away.

## ELSEWHERE

Outdoors calendar  
D6.

Gaither could have taken the deer easily — and would have been well within his rights to do so. But with the deer looking frequently back over its shoulder at the tree line, the 18-year-old Auburn University freshman elected to wait for the buck that might be trailing her.

Finally, with his daylight fading, Gaither turned and offered his gun to his hunting partner, Richard Scott — a 43-year-old freelance writer from Birmingham, Ala., who had yet to kill his first deer.

Scott squeezed the trigger and the deer dropped less than 10 feet from where it had stood.

"I've been hunting since I was about eight and I've already killed 18 or 20 deer," said Gaither. "I usually shoot deer for meat. I don't like to shoot them just to be shooting, so I told Richard to take him."

An attitude like Gaither's is hard to find in today's teenage hunters. But then, Gaither is no ordinary teenage hunter.

Gaither took part in the two-day hunt at Great Southern Outdoors as a member of Wheelin' Sportsmen — a six-year-old organization devoted to providing hunting and fishing opportunities for people with various



AL HUBBARD Special to the Ledger-Enquirer

Great Southern Outdoors was the site of the last outing for the Wheelin' Sportsmen, including a party and awards ceremony after the hunt.

disabilities.

## Unwelcome news

Just a few days before his 16th birthday, when Gaither was a junior at Eufaula High School, doctors identified a small tumor below his left knee as osteosarcoma — an extremely rare form of bone cancer.

During the 18 months that followed his diagnosis, Gaither was underwent 18 chemotherapy treatments and four surgeries — including an operation to replace a portion of his tibia with a donor bone.

Gaither experienced the usual weight loss associated with chemo. He lost all of his hair a short time into the treatments. But through it all, he never lost hope.

And now, more than two years since he was diagnosed with the potentially fatal disease, Gaither's cancer is in full remission.

"It was tough," Gaither said. "There were times when I probably asked God why all of this was happening to me. But I think, through it all, I've grown

mentally — and I've definitely met some fantastic people. People still walk up to me at Auburn and say, 'I know you. I prayed for you.' And I don't even know who they are. That's a pretty good feeling.

"My situation really put a lot of things into perspective for me. I could have had it better, but you can say that about life in general. You can certainly say that about hunting. If I go out there now and don't kill one or don't see anything, it doesn't bother me. I know I'll always have another chance."

## New friendship

Among the people who Gaither met during his illness was Pam Morgan of Wheelin' Sportsmen.

It was Morgan who arranged for Gaither — and five other disabled children — to hunt at Great Southern Outdoors on the final weekend of 2000. And unlike many of the elder hunters, who stood in awe of the maturity and restraint Gaither had shown in giving his gun to another hunter, Morgan wasn't surprised at all.

## Wheelin' Sportsmen

Wheelin' Sportsmen is an expanding organization providing outdoor opportunities with various disabilities.

After a recent alliance with the Wild Turkey Federation, the southern-based organization plans to expand to a more national presence.

Officials already have announced one catfish rodeo in the next few years. And more opportunities have been announced during its six-year history.

For more information, contact Wheelin' Sportsmen, call 1-800-334-395-6300 or check out the web site at [www.wheelin.org](http://www.wheelin.org).

"That's what you get from kids who have a type of disability," Morgan said. "Some of them have been through a lot before their disability seems to faze them."

Morgan's claim was proven again on Saturday when Legare — a 9-year-old from Montgomery, Ala. — suffered brain damage and was unable to control the flow of the water.

While hunting just outside where Gaither was, Legare killed a 80-pound doe. Legare is now a guide staff at Great Southern Outdoors. And just months ago, Legare's five had been hunting. Gaither turned his attention to the kids.

Meanwhile, Morgan said, "I cry a lot," but she said these kids are on a mission. "I don't go right, they don't go right, they don't go right. And we're with (a deer), it's not us. We will ever forget."

Contact Bryan Brasher at (706) 571-8501 or [bbrasher@ledger-enquirer.com](mailto:bbrasher@ledger-enquirer.com).