



At left, on the first day of hunting season, Garrison bagged this deer in Tioga County. The six-wheel all-terrain vehicle enables Garrison to safely maneuver over rugged mountainsides.

Spina Bifida Doesn't Stop Garrison From Shooting Buck, Playing Basketball, Weight Lifting, More

LOU ANN GOOD,
Lancaster Farming Staff

MANHEIM (Lancaster Co.) — Sixteen-year-old Garrison Whitmyer joined thousands of hunters in search of an elusive buck during deer season.

On the first day of hunting season, Garrison took one shot and landed a three-point deer.

While hunters each have their own story to tell, Garrison's is most amazing, because he was born with a handicap — spina bifida. The birth defect results in a split spine and paralysis and confines him to a wheelchair.

Because his dad Gary is an avid hunter, it is understandable that Garrison yearned to share the excitement of a big hunt. Through research and planning, the family discovered that a six-wheel all-terrain vehicle with hand controls was the solution to scale rocky cliffs and rugged mountainsides. These vehicles are allowed on hunting grounds, only with special permits given to the handicapped.

Garrison drove the vehicle outfitted with a special gun rack for his 300 Savage. He drove to a 20-foot tree stand erected on a relative's property in Tioga

County. With sheer arm strength and some assistance from his dad, Garrison was able to heave himself into the tree stand.

"We call it the 'condo,'" Garrison said of the tree stand, which has four walls, a roof, and even some furniture. Although the family had been going to the condo for years, the first day of hunting season was the final day the condo could be used for hunting because the land has been sold.

At 9:30 a.m., the four guys huddled in the condo saw deer running beneath them. Because the deer were running, it was difficult to determine if any were buck.

A whistle caused the deer to halt and sniff out the danger.

The three-second pause was all that was needed for Garrison to get a clear view of the buck and aim.

Garrison said, "After I shot it, I saw it run about 50 yards, but I couldn't tell if I had hit it."

The hunters waited in the tree stand about 20 minutes before searching for a blood trail.

Gary discovered the fallen buck, but it was Garrison who hauled it back to camp on his six-wheeler.

Neither his dad nor the other relatives who were hunting with them saw any other deer that day, making Garrison's trophy even more memorable.

Garrison and his dad butchered the deer themselves, making mostly steaks, roasts, and burger.

While his hunting excursion is unusual considering his handicap, Garrison has long been known for breaking medical

limitations and achievements have been an encouragement to many.

He excels in swimming and even plays on a wheelchair basketball team. Garrison said members of the team, called the Chariot Express, range in ages from 15-40 years. They travel over the Northeast playing other wheelchair teams. More members are needed for the team. For more details about wheelchair

ped accessible, Garrison said, that most people don't realize that many places are still off-limits to people like him.

While public places are required to have bathrooms for the handicapped, often the doorways are too narrow for a wheelchair to pass through, which in effect renders the bathroom useless but in compliance with the law.

Garrison enjoys computers

While his hunting excursion is unusual considering his handicap, Garrison has long been known for breaking medical limitations despite some major setbacks.

limitations despite some major setbacks.

When he was first born, doctors told his parents that spina bifida was often associated with mental limitations. The possibility seemed even more probable when the operation the doctors performed when Garrison was only seven days old caused pressure to build up in his brain and resulted in hydrocephalus. Garrison still has a shunt in his brain to drain the fluid, but from the start, Garrison showed mental alertness and accomplished verbal and tactile skills above his age level.

Doctors had said that he would never walk because he was born without hip sockets and with club feet. But to their amazement, when fitted with leg braces, he is able to walk short distances with crutches.

He has had more than 15 surgeries to correct his feet and replace the brain shunt.

In 1990 Garrison was named the Lancaster County Easter Seals ambassador. His determi-

basketball, call (717) 270-5696.

A sophomore at Elizabethtown High School, Garrison's favorite activity is weight lifting. Last year, he received the school award for outstanding accomplishment in bench pressing. His goal is to break the school record in bench press before he graduates. The school record is 170 pounds and Garrison presses 150.

During the summer months, Garrison works in merchandise sales for Hershey Park. He banks his earnings consistently to save for a car. Although he wants to drive, it costs thousands of dollars for the required evaluation and six hours of training.

Garrison's braces extend from his toes to his armpits, which puts him at risk for skin adhesions.

When asked about his career dreams, Garrison jokingly replies that he wants to go into law enforcement so he can give tickets to the many people who abuse handicapped parking spaces. While many strides have been made to make areas handicap-

ped accessible, Garrison said, that most people don't realize that many places are still off-limits to people like him.

and music. He plays guitar, electric guitar, piano, and keyboard, and sings a bit. He also wrote a song, which is sung at his church where he is active in the youth group.

The Whitmyers live within a quarter of a mile of state game lands and are pleased that some sections are handicapped accessible. Garrison had a special permit to use a crossbow during archery season.

The family says they have a small zoo on their 15-acre property, which includes 6-20 mini-lop rabbits, Zebra finches, pygmy goats, fish, African frogs, a hamster, an Australian herding dog, and 35 Aracanna chickens, a Mexican breed that lays different colored eggs, from mint to olive green. Eggs from the free-range hens are sold to a local natural food cooperative.

Garrison charts rabbit prices weekly to help his mom determine the best time to market them.

Garrison's siblings include Gabrielle, 12; Gavin, 10; Regina, 6; and Gideon, 5.



Garrison with his mom Rita and siblings Gabrielle, 12; Gavin, 10; Regina, 6; and Gideon, 5.



Popping wheelies gives Regina and Gideon a thrill.



Garrison uses a crossbow for hunting on the family acreage and on state gamelands within a quarter of a mile of the Whitmyer's.