

*The Spirit to Live:*

S U S A N C L A R K

*A double-lung transplant couldn't quell this young hunter's passion for the outdoors.*

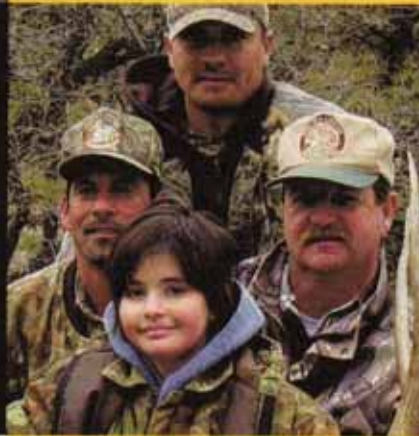


*S*usan Clark likes to beat the odds and did when she survived a double-lung transplant several years ago.

At 14, she has experienced more adventures than most people do in a lifetime. She's hunted Corsican rams, bull elk, white-tailed deer and with her crossbow has killed wild boars in Texas.

It's hard to comprehend how such a tiny girl who battled cystic fibrosis—she is 4 feet 3 and weighs 60 pounds—could accomplish feats so huge. But if someone tells Susan she can't do something, she usually does it. Can't is a word she seldom uses. Ten months after surgery she hunted bull elk in New Mexico.

Susan's parents, Tiffany and Bob, her twin, Bobby, and younger brother, Logan, also made the trip from Belle Plaine, Kan. Both siblings also were born with cystic fibrosis, which causes severe lung damage and nutritional deficiencies. The disorder used to be a genetic mystery, and most people didn't live beyond their teens. But researchers slowly are unraveling the genetic basis of CF. Improved treatments now allow people to live fuller, more comfortable lives into their 30s, 40s and beyond. Susan and her brothers haven't let CF saddle them, either.



STORY AND PHOTOS BY

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#### **IN HUNTING MODE**

The mayor gave Susan a key to the city on her first night in Springerville, Ariz., where the family stayed while she elk hunted. She made quite an impression with her striking dark eyes, gelled, spiky, jet-black hair and French manicured nails.

But Susan was all business on hunt day. Camouflage

covered her from head to toe, and there was a seriousness about her as she ate Cheerios and talked to her brothers about what lay ahead.

"Susan is all girl around the house, but when it comes to hunting, she completely switches to hunting mode," Tiffany said about her daughter's sudden transformation from the night before—only the manicured nails remained.

After breakfast Susan and her guides caravanned to New Mexico, where she would try to kill an elk.

#### **BRING BACK THE ELK**

The elk of North America and its close relative, the red deer of Europe, inspire the human imagination with an intensity rarely fostered by other wild animals. One of the largest members of the deer family, the elk is far more graceful than the bigger moose. Crowned by heavy, sweeping antlers, elk racks are cherished decorations from the castles of Europe to the cabins of La Cueva, N.M.

Rocky Mountain elk are in New Mexico because state government officials and private landowners made it their mission to restore the animals between 1910 and 1966. A private rancher started the reintroduction, and game warden Thomas Gable made the first public releases in 1911. Twelve elk were distributed in

the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Restoration was necessary because relentless hunting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century extirpated the animal from Mew Mexico. The meat of elk is as fine as beef, and they were killed to feed the waves of soldiers, miners and ranchers who came to the state after the Civil War. The slaughter resulted in the extinction of the Merriam's subspecies of elk, as well.

Rocky Mountain elk again are abundant in northern New Mexico, and they grace the valleys and mountains of the southern half of the state where the Merriam's once roamed, which means hunters like Susan have a chance to hunt them.

#### **SELECTIVE AND COMPETITIVE**

Susan didn't have to wait long for the excitement to begin. One of the guides spotted a 5x5 bull on a ridge 150 yards away. The men jumped out of the truck, set Susan's .270 on a tripod and positioned her for a shot. After a few minutes Susan asked if the bull on the hill was as big as the one

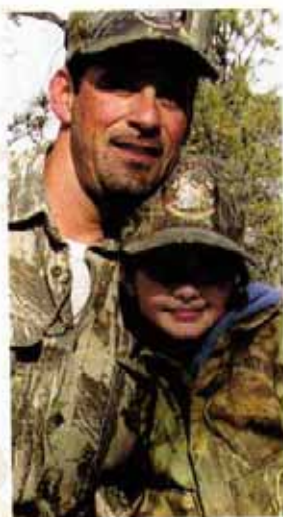
her brother, Bobby, had shot two years before.

"No," said one of the guides as he starred through binoculars.

Susan took the rifle from her shoulder. "I'll pass on this one."

The search began for another bull, but none were to Susan's liking, which meant she'd hunt another day. No one minded though, because Susan's

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laughter and positive spirit were an inspiration. Day two, three and four passed without a bull and everyone except Susan began to worry that she wouldn't kill an elk.

Snow fell on the last morning of the hunt and by afternoon the guides hadn't seen a bull. Their plan to scout intensely paid off. Eventually, a herd of bachelor bulls was spotted on a small ridge. They were hiding beneath juniper trees, and the only way to reach the elk was to walk to them.

Carrying Susan on their shoulders, the guides finally reached the herd. From 98 yards, she shot and killed a 5x5 bull—one bigger than her brother's. **WE** ❧

### **More about cystic fibrosis**

Because she now has two healthy lungs, Susan is cured of CF and her chances of getting it again are impossible. Her donors were two uncles who said they gladly would spare a lung so Susan could live a normal life that, so far, has been filled with laughter, adventure and the spirit to live.

CF is an inherited condition that affects the cells that produce mucus, sweat, saliva and digestive juices. Normally, these secretions are thin and slippery but in CF, a defective gene causes the secretions to become thick and sticky. Respiratory failure is the most dangerous consequence of the disease.

Most babies born with CF are diagnosed by age 3, although mild forms of the disease may not be detected until the third, fourth or fifth decade of life. About 30,000 American adults and children are living with CF.