

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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Inspired by a Joke, One-Arm Dove Hunt Is a Tradition in Texas

Few Feathers Fly as Folks With Missing Limbs Focus On Making the Best of It

By **SUSAN WARREN**

Updated Sept. 19, 2006 12:01 a.m. ET

OLNEY, Texas -- With the cuff of his empty blue shirt sleeve tucked inside his belt, Leon Jordan swung his shotgun to his other shoulder and fired a blast of birdshot at a passing flock of doves. He missed, but he didn't blame it on having just one arm. His blind eye threw him off, he said.

Not that it mattered much. Mr. Jordan was taking part in the annual One-Arm Dove Hunt outside this tiny west Texas town, and there weren't too many doves dropping from the sky that day, though an awful lot of one-armed guys were doing their best. "You know, this ain't so bad at all," mused Mr. Jordan, standing at the edge of a field of drying sunflowers in the fading evening light. "This old life is what you make of it."

For 35 years, dozens of men and women from around the country who have lost an arm, or were born without one, have descended on Olney the first weekend after Labor Day to get a dose of life-is-what-you-make-it medicine. It is billed as the most unusual event in Texas, but those who come here think it is more than that. "It was the first time I've ever been to a place where everyone was just like me," said Kelly Lamkin, 35 years old, who was born with one arm unformed below the elbow.

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The idea for the One-Arm Dove Hunt was cooked up by Jack Northrup and Jack Bishop at the lunch counter of Olney's Cub Drugstore in 1972. The two men had more than their names in common; they each had an arm amputated at the shoulder. The One-Armed Jacks, as they called themselves, also had a roguish sense of humor.

To get the goat of two eavesdropping strangers, the Jacks began talking loudly about going hunting with their muzzle-loaded shotguns and

bolt-action rifles. It was ludicrous because either would be extremely difficult for someone to operate with just one arm. The joke launched the first annual One-Arm Dove Hunt, attended by six Olney men who had lost an arm -- mostly from oil-field accidents -- and a few others who had heard about the hunt through the grapevine.

Its name was an attention-getter, and the One-Arm Dove Hunt grew quickly through word of mouth. So many one-armed people wanted to attend that Messrs. Northrup and Bishop soon expanded the occasion to a two-day event, with a one-arm trap-shooting contest, one-arm horseshoes, cow-chip tossing and a 10-cents-a-finger breakfast the morning of the hunt.

The hunt now has become secondary. People living without the use of an arm gather each year in Olney to exchange personal stories, find friendship and support, and to exchange practical tips for living. The world is engineered for people with two arms, so those without must figure out how to manage nearly every basic living skill, from buttoning their shirt to opening a jar of pickles.

Some attendees, like Ms. Lamkin, were born without an arm. Others suffered accidents that crushed, mangled or severed their arm or hand. Many lost limbs to cancer or other diseases.

"When you cut right through it, there's a lot of pain in this room," said Lisa Roberts, of Norman, Okla., who lost her arm in a 1998 attack by a 900-pound Malayan tapir while she was working as a zookeeper in Oklahoma.

While there are many organizations and events throughout the U.S. geared toward amputees, including sporting events such as fishing, cycling and horse riding, most amputations involve the legs. (That is partly because injuries that destroy an arm often include fatal injuries to vital organs.) The challenges of losing a leg are vastly different



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One-Arm Dove Hunt founders Jack Northrup (left) and Jack Bishop

from losing an arm, so "upper extremity" amputees say they still can feel isolated.

The Olney event has been unique because it focuses on upper-body amputees.

Other organizations are beginning to get into the act. As more injured soldiers returned from Iraq without arms and hands, the U.S. Army's Walter Reed Hospital launched a rehabilitation program last summer to

retrain the wounded soldiers in using firearms, a program that includes hunting trips.

The Olney hunt, attended this year by 80 or so amputees and many friends and relatives, is a way of restoring amputees' confidence and helping them learn that losing an arm doesn't mean giving up the things they used to do with two arms. "Our guns are guns that heal," explained Mr. Northrup, as he punched the button to release another clay pigeon at this year's trap-shooting event.

Taking turns based on their level of disability -- arms missing above-the-elbow or below-the-elbow, as well as a division for double-amputees -- the shooters here have learned there is always a way to get things done. Many have adapted their weapons or fashioned home-made gun-holders and clamps that take the place of an arm. Some simply use their one arm to swing their weapon up to their shoulder, aim and shoot in one swift motion.

Douglas Davis, 36, stood easily on two artificial legs and raised his gun to his shoulder using his two prosthetic arms outfitted with a hook at the end of one and a mechanized clamp on the other. Mr. Davis, of Fredonia, Wis., lost all four limbs to a blood infection in 1995. He attended his first hunt four years ago and hasn't missed one since. Back home, "I can go months without seeing another amputee," Mr. Davis said. But in Olney one weekend a year, "I'm not treated like a guy with no arms."

As a longtime sportsman and hunter, he says he has shot more deer in the years since his amputations than he had shot earlier. When he is sitting in the deer stand on a cold autumn morning, "I don't have to worry about my hands or feet getting cold," he noted.

The two one-armed Jacks, Mr. Bishop, 84, and Mr. Northrup, 71, have become celebrities to those attending the weekend event. Fellow amputees crowded around them for introductions this year and asked them to pose for pictures. The Jacks sat on toilets used as targets for the cow-chip-tossing contest.



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Robert Ancell takes aim during the One-Arm Dove Hunt outside Olney, Texas.

After lunch, there was bingo for the nonhunters, while the hunters piled into their pickup trucks and drove out to the dove-hunting site. Bill and Kay Combel, of Farmersville, Texas, parked along the edge of a field and settled down to watch for doves flying by. Mr. Combel, 61, who was born with only one, semiformal arm, has been coming to the hunt for 29 years. In the early days, he sat on the ground and used his foot to hold his gun so he could pull the trigger with his one arm. Several years ago, a friend made him a special harness with an attachment to hold the gun. Now he says he can "stand and shoot like a man."

The doves didn't have much to worry about. Several birds flew over without a single shot from the one-arm hunters arrayed around the edge of the field. Even when the hunters did shoot, the birds faced good odds of surviving. "You'll see one little bird flying over and you'll hear five thousand shots and that little bird will just keep flapping along," Mrs. Combel said.

At another field farther down the road, the hunters were having mixed luck. With the doves thick in the air, Robert Ratliff, missing both arms, tied a rubber tube around the barrel of his gun and slid his hook into the knot to stabilize it, then used his other hook to pull the trigger. He bagged eight birds in the first two hours.

Meanwhile, 58-year-old John Barrett of Delaware, who lost his right arm at the age of eight, sat contentedly with his shotgun at his side and no birds in sight. "If you come here for the doves," he said, "you've come here for the wrong reason."

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