



The morning sun casts shadows of contestants at Memorial Wharf in Edgartown during the 57th annual island fishing derby.

KEVIN MINGORA photos/Cape Cod Times

Hooked on the derby

Fishing fever brings
island to near standstill
during annual event



By **PAULA PETERS**
STAFF WRITER

EDGARTOWN — There are not many things that can keep Bob Willoughby away from the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby. He has missed the annual derby only twice, once for military duty in 1947, and again in 1951 for reasons he can't recall.

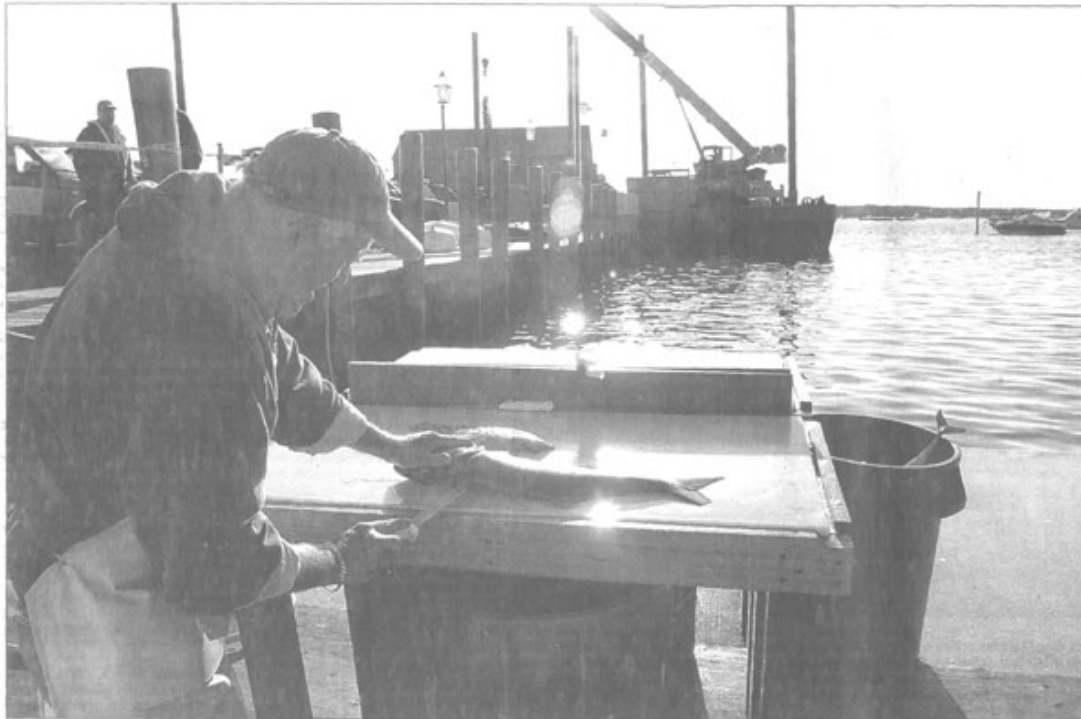
Last year, his truck loaded with gear, Willoughby suffered a heart attack Sept. 11.

"I ended up in the hospital, but I got cards and letters from everyone on this dock," he recalled while jigging for squid last week on Memorial Wharf in Edgartown. A growth of white scruff on his chin, he looked up through glasses smeared with fish slime. "I hate to say it, but I actually cried. It makes you feel pretty good to know everyone was thinking of you."

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With seven days left in this year's derby, a 53.6-pound striped bass is the leader. Bob Willoughby, left, has competed in 55 of 57 Vineyard derbies, and sports a cap of pins to tell his tale.



KEVIN MINGORA photos/Cape Cod Times

Derby volunteer Mike Harrold filets a bluefish for a local soup kitchen in Edgartown. Each day of the derby, volunteers clean and filet hundreds of pounds of fish donated by the anglers after it has been weighed in. The fish is distributed to senior centers around the island.

Derby: Annual fishing fever hits island

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Despite his setback, Willoughby, now 75, managed to join last year's derby for the final week of competition. He caught no fish, but picked up pin No. 68, his for many years. His pin collection marks 54 of the derby's 57 years. He's missing only the ones for the two years he didn't attend, and one for 1970, which he regrettably lost.

Willoughby also has dozens of extra pins he wears covering a black derby cap, which is how most people find him among the dozens of fishermen lining the dock.

"They love my hat," he said. "I have had people want to buy it. I say, 'You haven't got enough money.'"

When the 57th annual Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby comes to a close next Sunday, there will be prizes awarded for big fish and outstanding angling, but make no mistake, there will be many winners.

From the children who learn sportsmanship, to the students who benefit from scholarships, to the elderly islanders who are the recipients of thousands of pounds of free fish over the five-week competition, there are many who consider themselves derby winners, even if they don't take home a big trophy or a Boston Whaler.

And then there are those who enter the contest each year for the pure joy of fishing and friendship. People like Willoughby.

Facing the Mad Max Marina with the Chappaquiddick ferry cutting through the channel behind him, Willoughby sat with his boots hanging over the side of the dock next to a bucket of squid squirming in blackened water.

A quick jerk of the rod and he began reeling until a translucent bug-eyed creature broke the surface of the water. A pocket of black fluid began to rise through its innards like mercury in a thermometer.

"Watch out for the ink, it stains," Willoughby warned just before a fountain of black specked from the fish some call calamari and others, like Willoughby, call bait.

Derby calls

Born and raised in Edgartown with nine brothers and two sisters, Willoughby left the island as a young man and raised his family in Southboro, where he lives as a retired house painter with his wife of 55 years.

Each year, he blocks out the five weeks in September and October and returns to the island where his son still has a home to join what has become the quintessential island pursuit. The quest for the biggest striped bass, bluefish, bonito, and false albacore in two categories, caught from shore and caught from a boat. Next Sunday, a grand prize of a 2002 Chevrolet Silverado



Fishing captain Robin Robinson reels in a striped bass just south of Aquinnah during the 57th annual Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby.

will go to the shore winner, and an 18-foot Boston Whaler Dauntless to the boat winner.

For more than a month, the derby becomes the overwhelming passion of mothers, fathers, schoolchildren and grandparents. When they aren't working, going to school or sleeping, they are fishing. Lunchboxes are routinely packed alongside tackle boxes, and there is a pole on nearly every pickup truck. They fish in the dark of night, in the rain and wind, in the dew-covered sea grass of the early morning.

This year, nearly 3,000 people have entered the challenge. "The majority of them eat, sleep and drink fishing," said weigh station coordinator Martha Smith.

The tradition is passed down through generations on an island where fishing stories are a primary link between the past and the present. That the record for a boat bluefish is still held by his aunt, Jean Hancock, for a 23-pound, 4.5-ounce fish caught in 1972 is not lost on Hollis Smith of Aquinnah. For him, the fishing is now

all about his own 11-year-old daughter Marguerite, who recently won a weekly prize for a 15-pound bass.

"Be nice if she was the one to break that record," he said.

Children are discouraged from skipping school, but island laborers hang out the "gone fishing" sign, as evidenced by the growing piles of stock in lumber yards, noted J.F. Urankor, who stopped into the derby headquarters in Edgartown to watch the morning weigh-in last week.

"If you're an islander, you don't hire an island contractor to do a job during derby. You just know better."

Every day, volunteers clean and filet hundreds of pounds of fish donated by the anglers after it has been weighed in. Volunteers collect the fish and distribute it to senior centers around the island.

The Derby Scholarship Program has awarded more than \$150,000 to island students, and this year will give \$8,000 to graduating seniors of the island high school.

Talk of the island

Jen Clarke, a world-class angler and charter fishing captain from Menemsha, said the length of the Vineyard derby and the fact that it is held after the tourist season gives locals ample opportunity to do their best fishing.

"It favors island fishermen," she said.

"That is what makes this a great tournament, that and the people. They are dedicated and die-hard about fishing it," said Clarke, winner of the derby's Grand Slam award in 1997 for the angler with the heaviest combined weight of all four species.

The drama of the tournament is the talk of the island, where people regularly check the "leader board" posted at the derby headquarters and updated daily.

With seven days to go in this year's derby, Buddy Vanderhoop's 53.6-pound bass is not only the one to beat. The record for the biggest bass is Dick Hathaway's 60 pound, 2 ounce shore-caught fish in 1978. Last year, Lev Wlodyka's 44 pound, 14 ounce fish won in the boat bass category.

But Willoughby doesn't concern himself with records. He probably won't even weigh in a catch this season.

"I have never gotten the big fish," he said, scaling a fish one of his dockmates had offered him \$20 to filet. Willoughby declined the money and took the fish to a cleaning station on the wharf, where he carefully cut the meat from the bone.

Another fisherman asked about lures and he dispensed time-honored advice as freely as his filet services. The return on his investment comes in the form of camaraderie he cannot put a price on.

"I consider myself luckier than anyone who has won the derby," he said. "I got so many friends."

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Reeled in by lure of fishing expedition

EDGARTOWN — "No. 2,992, boat, bluefish, 5.89 pounds"

The weight master's announcement of my registration number, category and fish at the headquarters of the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby on Thursday night did not ring out like the heralding of a contender.

It certainly didn't make any of the leaders nervous, but as a personal best — a phenomenal effort as evidenced by my still aching arms — and my first fish, it was all good.

When I began to investigate this obsession denoted by one word, derby — an obsession that spreads like an infection over the island for five weeks every year, turning hardworking folk into angling junkies — I soon realized I would never fully understand the story unless I experienced it myself.

My only experience at catching fish came when I was a child. The victims were a few unfortunate herring on their annual spring rush against the current in the Mashpee River. Fortunately, most slipped through my tiny hands and went on to complete their reproductive duty in the Mashpee Pond.

But never before had I baited a hook, cast a line or pulled a fish from the blackened depths of the sea. So I turned to one of the island's most accomplished anglers to show me the way.

Angling for instruction

The 1997 winner of the derby's "Grand Slam" — which essentially means tipping the scale with the most combined weight of fish in all four categories — and catcher of the biggest bass in 1999 also managed to win every bit of the American Striper Association's bass fishing contest.

My fishing guide was the Division 1 champion in that contest, chasing bass from the coast of Massachusetts to the southern tip of Chesapeake Bay. This person won the title for biggest fish of the year, angler of the year, and lady angler of the year.

That's right, I said lady.

Tooting out of Menemsha Harbor in Jen Clarke's 33-foot Contender, the Femme Fatale with veteran female angler Capt. Robin Robinson, I couldn't have been in better hands.

Dozens of shore fishermen dropped their rods and waved from the jetty as Jen kicked up the throttle to a cruising speed of 30 knots and left them in her wake.

She slowed as we reached Devil's Bridge off Gay Head. The spark of the constant lighthouse signal flickered in the afternoon sky over the cliffs, which were marbled with clay ranging from moss green to pumpkin orange to crimson.

Live bait fishing is Jen's method of choice, but autumn is a trolling time of year for the striped bass we were seeking. Hunkered down in the rocky bottom some 20 to 30 feet below, bass can be lured out by the rubber tubes and worms dragged along at 3 to 4 knots from our waiting Shimano rods perched on deck. But the bluefish run interference just above them.

We let out nearly all of the 300 feet of wire line, 10 feet for every foot of ocean depth determined by a sonar fish finder in the console. This method applies science to a sport that was once based on a combination of chance and intuition.

"Look at 'em," Jen said, pointing to a patch of red blemishes at the bottom of the screen. "That's fish."

Speaking in code

Capt. Buddy Vanderhoop, the derby leader for striped bass and grand slam, also spotted them and was circling the same area in the Tomahawk. All the while, he and Jen communicated on the two-way radio in a secret code designed not to disclose their findings.

But the mere sight of the Femme Fatale and Tomahawk circling the same waters attracted a fleet of boats, which was tantamount to yelling, "fish over here."

The location was spoiled when an inexperienced trailer moved in and circled too tight.

We moved on to another location I am sworn never to disclose other than to say we were somewhere between Squibnocket and Nomans Island. There, we trolled for nearly an hour with no action on the rods, but it apparently was slow for everyone.

We entertained ourselves with radio chatter about fly fishermen out too deep to catch anything, and watching military jets put on a show over Nomans. The "Osprey" trolled just off shore of the abandoned island once used exclusively for target practice.

"Feel like I'm under attack," Osprey Capt. Patrick Jenkinson squawked.

"Now you know what it's like to live in Baghdad," Vanderhoop barked back.

The reel thing

Then the fish began to hit, and I was suddenly handed the business end of an active rod and told to "reel it in!"

The endless task of turning the wire conjured up feelings of excitement, exhaustion and fear that left me breathless. I wanted to stop because my arms felt like lead, but my hand kept cranking. Jen kept coaching me from behind, yelling, "Be a bass, be a bass!"

Then I saw it, just beneath the surface, battling to stay in the water. With a splash and a thud it was on deck: a bluefish, but a keeper nonetheless.

Robin and I would reel in four more fish before heading in. Each of us netted a bass, but mine was not long enough to be weighed in. Robin's bass weighed a little more than 22 pounds, her bluefish 9 pounds.

The weigh-in was like a community social. Outside derby headquarters, families were jigging for squid to bait their hooks.

Inside, a crowd gathered to see if the leader board would change as young and old lined up with their catch, big and small.

Out the back door, dozens of people gathered on the dock over the fish-cleaning station, where I surrendered my bluefish as a donation to the island's elderly population.

Dwarfed between a giant bass on one side and a significantly heavier bluefish on the other, my catch wasn't big, but it certainly was grand.