

On Island Tables



Pictures by Albert O. Fischer

Molly Fischer, age 12, winning the 2005 Derby with a 49.22-pound striped bass.



Molly fighting her fish, (while the men hide under shelter).



With Scott McDowell just moments after gaffing her fish.

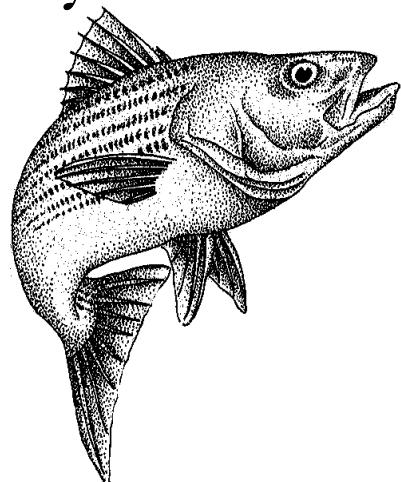
Diapers to Derby Winner Is True Keeper

By CHRIS FISCHER

In 2005 my sister Molly, then 12 years old, caught an enormous striped bass. It was so big when she finally hauled it onto the boat she backed away from it in fear and almost fell head over heels off the side of the boat into the churning ocean. I remember her telling me she thought she had caught an alligator. It is a story that has been told over and over again since then: a 12-year-old girl catching a giant bass and winning the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby. Max Hart wrote a beautiful piece in the Gazette soon after, recounting the fishing trip, the monumental haul and all it meant to Molly, my family and the community, which I still read from time to time.

My mother had given me to a long fight with cancer only weeks before, and though she was not Molly's mother, they had a close bond that was lost with my mother's passing. When the fish was secured and stunned, on its way to death, Molly got onto her knees, looked the bass in the eye, kissed it and then looked to the heavens and said, "Thank you, Jeannie. She was giving my mother thanks for helping her find the strength to reel and reel. As soon as the fish hit, my father, who was on board that day, had known it was a big fish. Molly took hold of the rod and on that cold day in early October the rain began to come down in pelting sheets. All the others on board took shelter while Molly took advice from them, keeping her rod tip up and making sure not to give an inch of slack or else she might lose what would soon be an actual trophy winner.

With the derby winding down this year and a 37-pound bass atop the leader board as I write this, I am reminded of how special it was that Molly caught a 49-pound bass. And a young kid, out fishing with her parents, could hook a fish at the right time, of the right size and take the trophy. But in life there are always firsts, and Molly was the first female of her age to ever sit atop the leader board. I don't think it was a fluke, though, no pun intended. Molly had spent a lot of time on the water



leading up to that day, mostly fishing with my dad. There was something deep inside of her that loved fishing and, with his guidance, she became a very good angler.

She caught her first bass off the beach in Aquinnah. It was a warm afternoon, and as day turned to dusk she cast out into the surf wearing only diapers. My dad unhooked the fish and before he could address her and walk her through measuring the fish to make sure it was a keeper, Molly had already heaved her lure out again in hopes of landing another one, I know from experience that if you fish with Molly she will always catch the largest fish or the most — oftentimes both. Flip Harrington, a great angler himself, puts it this way: "Molly has that gift only a handful of people have, she is in the same league as Buddy [Vanderhoop] and Lev [Włodyska]. It's unexplainable, and no one knows what it is like to be inside their heads." I know now what it was like to be inside Molly's 12-year-old head; she had a lucky song she would sing to herself that brought her luck. She would sing the song Wimoweh, which she learned from the Lion King soundtrack, over and over again until she hooked on to a fish. "Hush my darling, don't fear my

darling, the lion sleeps tonight."

Molly was in seventh grade at the West Tisbury elementary school when she won the derby in its 60th year. There was much hoopla surrounding her big fish, but the time between her catching the fish and the weigh-in were a special time between a girl and her dad. Once the fish was tossed into the back of my dad's red Dodge Ram, he and Molly went for a drive. They had a secret in the back of that truck that would soon excite our Island, but for a few hours they had time together, knowing that soon the fish would be gone and the melee would begin. They drove to the farm and showed our grandparents. They stopped by the Menemsha Texaco and got my brother to take a few pictures of Molly laboring to hold the fish up for the camera. Molly was 12 and she had just spent hours in the freezing rain, reeling and fighting that fish, so before they hit the weigh-in station they did what came naturally and went out for ice cream together. Molly had a soft serve twist with sprinkles at the Galley. By the time they were passing the state forest on their way to the weigh station, word had spread that a huge fish was on its way. Once there, gathering strength from her ice cream cone, Molly insisted on dragging her catch from the truck to the scale with what must have been all that was left in her tank. She dragged it between her legs and stumbled a few times along the way, finally getting it onto the flat stainless steel surface. Her pin was legal and the numbers kept climbing until they reached 49.22 pounds. An eruption of cheers followed and lifelong memories solidified.

We are all still proud of Molly for what she did. Remembering the whole experience, my dad gets soft and sentimental. He remembers fishing on the beach with Molly, just the two of them, when she was a young girl, her potential still unknown, and watching her with pride as she would cast over and

over again. He is so proud of that time together that eventually led to her roller coaster ride as derby champion, and would give anything to have it back.

When Molly's key failed to open the lock for a boat or truck at the awards ceremony that year, and she finally

made it home to her bed, she collapsed in tears. And my dad rubbed her back, just as she had rubbed the back of her bass, consoling her and knowing things would never be the same as they were on the beach when she was hauling in fish, still in diapers.



So huge, Molly had to drag her fish to the scale.

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