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Gone fishin': Marketer snags herself new career

Birmingham marketing professional Jo Dee Bucki (pronounced Jody Buckeye) is taking her love of fishing to the next level: She's going pro.

Bucki decided to try to earn a living through fishing after competing last fall in an ESPN Bassmasters preview event in Dallas. The event was designed to gauge women's interest in a bass tour.

ESPN, which owns the BASS (Bass Anglers Sportsmen's Society) brand, established a 100-boat field and garnered more than enough interest.

Both the preview, and Bucki's showing, were a success. Bucki, who finished fifth as her boat's co-angler out of a field of 88, decided to go pro. She's trademarked the Lady Fisher name and launched a Web site, www.ladyfisher.com.

"My business is promoting myself to sell product," she says.

Based on the success of the preview event, ESPN debuted its Women's Bassmasters tour, which consists of five tournaments. The first is next month at Lake Neely Henry in Gadsden.

Thanks in part to the support of her sponsors, including employer Flex Digital, Bucki will be there.

Her biggest sponsor is The Coca-Cola Co., but she has sponsors at all levels that support her in different ways. FlexDigital, for instance, is allowing her to take five weeks off to compete.

So far, her sponsors cover only part of her expenses. Her goal is to win a boat for both practice and competition.

A lot like work

These days, she and her husband practice in their Carolina skiff, affectionately

known as "the 25 mph bath tub." Her dream boat, she says, is a \$50,000 bass boat with 250 horsepower and electronics such as a depth finder and global positioning system.

Unlike many anglers who like to sit while they fish, Bucki prefers to stand. She says bass fishing is very mentally and physically challenging.

"You cast maybe 4,000 times in an eight-hour period," she says, "and there are hundreds of techniques and methods. I may switch the lure on every rod or use three rods within a five-minute period. It all depends on the bank, the pier, the rocks, how the water's flowing, the color of the water, and the weather. It's a very cerebral sport."

Fishing is also a sport that more women than ever are getting into. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 26 percent of the 34.1 million anglers in the U.S. are women. And according to the American Sportfishing Association, 26 percent of the 28.4 freshwater anglers in the U.S. are female.

The Bass organization's recognition of women's growing interest was a natural, says Bruce Mathis, director of the ESPN Outdoors Women's Tour and Bassmaster Weekend series, founded in Montgomery and now based in Celebration, Fla.

"Ladies' trails have existed over the years, but none of them was able to survive more than six or seven years, mainly because of being unable to get the proper exposure," says Mathis.

"Having the Bass name attached to the women's series will be a good partnership for both of us."

Those who compete in the five tourna-



SPECIAL TO BBJ

Jo Dee Bucki of Birmingham wants to land enough sponsors to fish full time.

ments on this year's inaugural trail will earn points based on the size of their catches.

The top 12, says Mathis, will compete in a women's championship tournament, which will be held alongside the 2007 Bassmaster Classic, an event that in recent years has taken on a NASCAR feel in terms of popularity.

Prizes are significant. For example, each first-place pro winner this year, including co-anglers like Bucki, will receive a Triton boat powered by a Mercury outboard motor, says Mathis.

Bucki hopes she's among the winners. "I want to be one of the elite lady anglers in the world," she says, adding, "I would be miserable if I couldn't do this for a living. I dream about it. Last night I dreamed about tubes, the soft bait that you pitch into weeds, because I didn't get to practice with it yesterday like I wanted to."