

Working the lines

“LADY FISHER” MAKES A BIG SPLASH IN A MAN’S SPORT

story by GLENNY BROCK

For Jo Dee Bucki, jigs have nothing to do with dancing and the cut of her swimsuit is the last thing on her mind when she boards a boat. A lot of women I know would cringe at the mention of a creature called the shaky-head worm, but Bucki actually favors the wriggling invertebrates since she knows that largemouth bass favor them too. Two years after participating in the first-ever Women’s Bassmaster Tour staged by ESPN and BASS, Bucki (pronounced “buckeye,” like the tree) has a boat of her own and a dozen sponsors to help her stay afloat. She’s one of a growing number of women getting into what has traditionally been a man’s sport.

“Women fishing is not unique,” Bucki says. “Wives fish with their husbands, moms with their kids, girls and women on their own. Women tournament fishing – that is unique. Comparatively, there just aren’t that many of us fishing competitively.”

Born and raised in Sanford, Fla., Bucki seemed destined for the life aquatic – her maiden name was Lake. She was an only child and her father first taught her how to fish when her age was still in the single digits.

“Sanford is an old town, a place full of old salty fishermen,” she says. “It’s one of those towns where everybody has a boat and everybody fishes. My father’s been fishing St. John’s River for 60 years – and he’s just 63.”

Carrying on the family tradition, John Lake got his daughter started early. In fact, Bucki can’t remember how old she was when she first went fishing.

“Oh, I was itty-bitty. I grew up on a houseboat so I was fishing from the very beginning, probably before I could walk.”

Her childhood experiences meant she never thought of female anglers as unusual.

“It was just my dad taking his daughter fishing,” she says. “I went alone too. Before I was old enough to drive, I would ride to the lake with my little tackle box.”

At some point, she decided she preferred being in the water to having lines in the water. She was a state swimming champion in high school and then went on to swim competitively at the University of Alabama. A fellow member of the UA swim team, Jay Bucki, would eventually become her husband. The



FISH OUT OF WATER? Hardly. Professional angler Jo Dee Bucki learned to fish before she learned to walk.

couple married and moved to Birmingham after completing their degrees, and Jo Dee took a job in marketing. In February 2004, she participated in her first fishing tournament, more on a whim than out of any desire to win. But the competitive drive from her swimming days seized her in the boat that day.



SHOWING OFF THE BEST CATCH is as much a tournament ritual for women anglers as it is for men who fish competitively.



“It was on Logan Martin, and it was so cold and there I was in my tiny little boat,” she remembers, laughing. “I took a largemouth bass that was almost six pounds — it was 5.5 — and I almost won [the] Big Fish [title].” After such unexpected success in her first tournament, Bucki was – wait for it – hooked.

In October of that same year, she learned that ESPN and BASS were starting a women’s tour. Determined to get in on the action, Bucki went as a co-angler – she was able to partner with another woman and fish in major tournaments without having to lead her own boat.

“Being a co-angler means being able to fish even if you can’t bring your own boat,” Bucki

explains. “In fact, it’s a really good situation for anybody just getting started. The entry fees are not as much and it really gives you the opportunity to hone new skills, to learn fishing form and tournament format.”

After a few events, Bucki decided to go pro. With some help from her grandparents and husband, she bought herself a bigger boat and started looking for sponsors.

“You can’t do this without sponsorships unless you’re extremely well-off,” Bucki says. “Getting sponsors is tough, but then there’s meeting the contractual obligations of all those sponsorships. Being a good investment takes a lot of work. I’m always trying to come up with new ways to show that my performance is worth the money that my sponsors have spent on me.”

According to Bucki, girls and women fishing competitively have a much harder time getting sponsorship money than men, particularly from companies already established in the fishing industry. Men who participate in tournament fishing may already have decades-old sponsor relationships with boating companies and manufacturers of rods, reels, bait, tackle and lines & reel manufacturers. With the industry tied up like that, women wind up seeking “non-endemic” funding sources. In other words, non-fishing related companies are helping these women cover tournament registration fees, transportation and lodging costs. Bucki’s non-endemic sponsors include Coca-Cola and Concepts, Inc., the Pelham-based marketing firm where Bucki works when she’s not on the water.

“When I come home from my full-time job, I have another full-time job,” she says. “I’m very lucky that Concepts is one of my sponsors. I use all my vacation time to fish, but it’s a trade-off that works.”

Bucki has industry sponsors too, including a tackle manufacturing group called Team Daiwa and a Canadian company called Fisher Girl, which promotes fishing as a healthy sport for women and girls. The very existence of the latter is an indication that the industry is becoming more inclusive, albeit slowly.

“There are sponsors out there that do appreciate what we’re doing, but a lot of potential sponsors are taking a sit-back-and-see attitude,” Bucki says.

Even amid her efforts to find sponsors and recruit more girls and women into tournament fishing, the learning experiences are still the greatest payoff for Bucki.

“I’m still learning, you know? I’m very new at this. There are women out here – the wind changes and they know what to do. One day maybe I will get to that point. Sometimes I think, ‘Oh, I’ll never get to that point.’ I wonder, ‘Can I even do this?’ But those are just brief insanity moments. I know that I can do it. I know that I’m going to keep trying anyway.”

Learn more about Jo Dee Bucki at www.ladyfisher.com.



BUYING A BOAT OF HER OWN marked a significant milestone for Jo Dee Bucki as a professional angler. She christened her 220-horsepower Triton “Bette Anne.”