

Fishing *for* **EVERY ONE**

*Anglers of all abilities find
joy and accomplishment
on the water*

by
Brenda Charpentier

From a distance, the blue and white fishing boat with “The American” emblazoned on the back looks like any other. Get a little closer, though, and you’ll see it’s nothing like any other fishing boat off the New Hampshire coast – or any coast, for that matter.

Todd Rohr of New England Disabled Sports has customized this vessel into a 26-foot, floating miracle for people with disabilities, some of whom are eager for a new outdoors outlet, others who wonder how they will ever fish again after an injury, illness or age takes away their ability to move as they once did.

The American boasts special features as varied as spoons in a tackle box. Handrails and padding around the boat’s perimeter protect anglers from falls. Comfortable Kingfish seats replace wheelchairs, which are left on shore when volunteers lift anglers onto the boat. Electric reels make casting possible for anyone, even a person who has lost arms or has limited use of them. The reels feature buttons that trigger either casting or reeling.

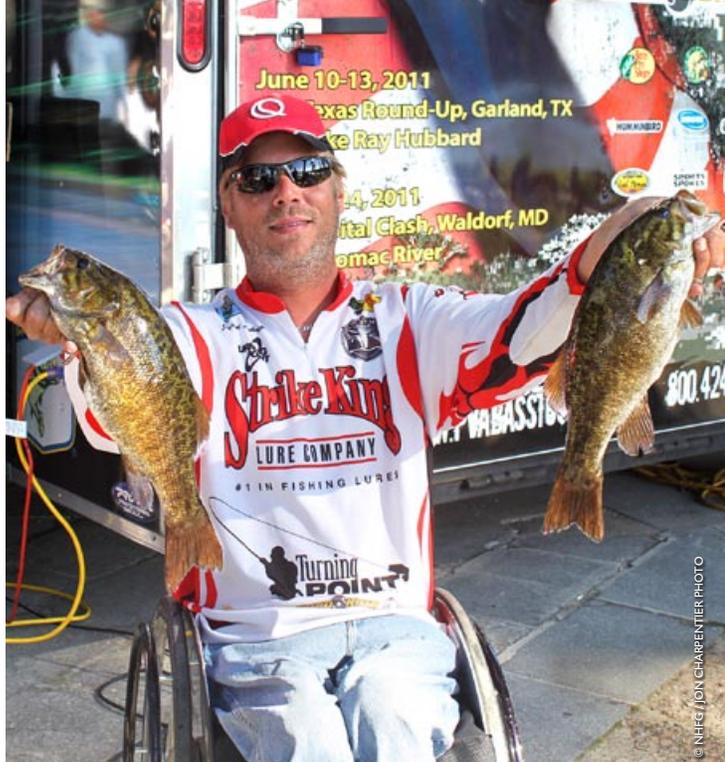


PHOTO COURTESY/ N.E. DISABLED SPORTS

Disabled veterans enjoy a day of deep-sea fishing on The American off the New Hampshire coast.



PHOTO COURTESY N.E. DISABLED SPORTS



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(Left to right) A group of anglers from the N.H. State Veterans Home in Tilton heads out to sea on one of The American's first trips last August. Jason Swanson of Plano, Texas, holds the bass that earned him a first place finish in the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) 2011 National Bass Tour on Lake Winnepesaukee last summer.

“If you can push the button with your nose, you can fish,” Rohr said.

Rohr is the coordinator and military liaison for the fishing program of New England Disabled Sports, which is based at Loon Mountain in Lincoln but runs its fishing program out of Portsmouth. The program is just one example of how fishing, both ocean and freshwater, can be made accessible to everyone. With a few accommodations, people with all ranges of abilities can keep enjoying the sport they love or take on fishing as an exciting new pastime. Some hook up with programs like Rohr's. Others just need to find the right adaptive fishing gear or sites accessible for wheelchairs.

OCEAN FISHING THERAPY

Rohr's work with New England Disabled Sports started after a generous Korean war veteran anonymously donated the boat. The organization, working with the Wounded Warrior Project and Work Vessels for Veterans, raised funds and materials to completely renovate and customize it, with Rohr as chief renovator. As a certified mentor with the Wounded Warrior project whose own injury led him to retire from the U.S. Army Special Forces, Rohr knows how important it is for people with disabilities to be able to enjoy outdoor recreation.

“When they get out of the military, soldiers can't find themselves. They're stuck. They don't know who to turn to, who they can trust,” he says. “These outlets, like fishing and hunting, can help take your mind off the pain.”

John Noonan, 87, and Stanley Strout, 93, both

World War II veterans who live at the N.H. Veterans Home in Tilton, were among the first fishermen aboard The American for her maiden voyage last August. Noonan left his wheelchair behind and sat next to a nurse who, he recalled, caught many more mackerel than he did. The outing was the first time this Navy man had been on the ocean in more than a decade, and he said he can't wait to go again this season. “I enjoyed it immensely,” he said. “We had everything you could imagine.”

Fundraising and dedicated volunteers like boat captain James Savage ensure that disabled vets and service members get maritime adventures free of charge, which Rohr said is an important part of saying thank you for their service and is made possible by many generous partners.

“This project wouldn't be possible without support from New England Disabled Sports. They put \$30,000 into the program just to get the boat into the water,” he noted. Rohr plans to take trips just about every week from May to October. Though the focus of the program is on wounded military members and their families, others with disabilities are welcome to apply for an outing at www.vetsfish.com, or learn more by contacting info@nedisabledsports.org or (603) 745-6281, ext. 5663.

“THE FISH DON'T KNOW YOU'RE IN A WHEELCHAIR”

Another group that aims to make fishing accessible is the Paralyzed Veterans of America and its New England chapter. The group's national bass tour stopped at Lake Winnepesaukee for the first time last



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August, bringing wounded servicemen and women from all over the country to compete in the weekend event. A similar New England-based event takes place here annually as well.

Rodney Anderson, of Georgia, has competed in the national tour for the past 14 years, despite being paralyzed from an Air Force training flight crash in 1985. He found the fishing on Lake Winnepesaukee to be “absolutely fantastic.”

Bass fishing while sitting down takes more than the usual patience and practice, he said, but you can find ways to make it work.

“You can’t throw as far, so you have to adapt your fishing technique,” Anderson said. “It’s a challenge, but I love a challenge.”

Like anglers on The American, the bass tour competitors leave their wheelchairs on the shore and fish from the bass boat seats.

“Volunteers pick them up, help them get into the boat and send them off fishing,” said Alan Earl, the tour’s director. “For the most part, it’s an easy adaptation. Once they’re in the boat they’re just like anybody else. The fish don’t know you’re (usually) in a wheelchair.”

Bass club members volunteer their boats and themselves as partners and boat captains during the competition. Many of the anglers are novices, and the

bass club members enjoy teaching them to fish. Earl said it can be a life-changing experience.

“Some guys think their lives are pretty much over when they lose their ability to walk. They come and see these guys who have been fishing for a number of years and say, “If he can do it, I can do it. Then they figure out there’s nothing they can’t do,” Earl said.

The competition also has a shore-fishing category for anyone who would rather stay on solid ground. You don’t have to be a veteran to take part in the bass tours – anyone with a disability is welcome. “We want as many

people as possible to have this experience,” Earl said. More information is available at www.nepva.com.

LET’S GO FISHING!

Fish and Game’s Let’s Go Fishing Program works with many groups to enable those with varying abilities to get out fishing, and welcomes opportunities to work with more.

“We have a full supply of fishing equipment to work with any school, any group, any organization,” said Karina Walsh, the Let’s Go Fishing coordinator. “We work one-on-one to try to set up a program that will work for everybody.”

One of the tools the program uses is a pontoon boat and ramp for getting wheelchairs onto the boat.

Anglers leave their wheelchairs behind and hit the water to take part in the national PVA 2011 Bass Tour. The tour stopped at Lake Winnepesaukee last August.

“Some guys think their lives are pretty much over... then they figure out there’s nothing they can’t do.”



Alvin LaPlante shows off the prize-winning pickerel he caught at the accessible fishing pier on Turtletown Pond in Concord. He was on an outing with fellow Havenwood-Heritage Heights residents.

For a couple of years, program volunteers and staff have brought the boat and ramp over to the Greenfield retreat of Joni and Friends, a Boston organization that supports children and adults with disabilities.

“Most of the people had not been on a boat before, especially those in wheelchairs,” Walsh recalled of last summer’s activities. “They had a blast.”

The program has also worked with Camp Interactions, providing equipment for blind anglers, and with the Monarch School of New England. With more than a hundred trained, active volunteer fishing instructors all over the state, the Let’s Go Fishing Program is ready to meet anglers’ needs, whatever they may be.

SHORELINE SUCCESS

People with disabilities don’t need a boat to enjoy fishing. Two popular sites for those in wheelchairs to fish from shore are in the Concord area, at Hothole and Turtletown ponds. Havenwood Heritage Heights, a continuing care retirement community in Concord, brings groups of seniors to fish off the wooden piers at the ponds. The railings there are designed to help support fishing poles, said Susan Pollock, Havenwood’s director of programs.

For some seniors, the fishing trips bring back great memories; for others, they’re new adventures. “I’ve taken some who have never fished before. It’s an opportunity to try something new. It’s never too late,” Pollock said.

In addition to wheelchair accessibility, some people need a little help casting. Then it’s just a matter of reeling in the line, and maybe, a nice fish. “Last summer resident Al Laplante caught a 15-inch pickerel on one of our outings. That was very

exciting,” Pollock said.

Some sites offer wheelchair access to boats, such as the Lake Winnisquam access on Lake Street in Laconia. Construction of a new wheelchair access for boating on Newfound Lake is underway at Wellington State Park (see *Wild Places*, page 22). Fish and Game publishes a map that shows fishing and boating locations around the state; it includes a key to accessibility, so anglers can find suitable spots to fish from a pier or from shore. The free maps are distributed at official N.H. Visitor Centers, or can be requested by calling Fish and Game at (603) 271-3211.

FINDING THE RIGHT GEAR

For people without the use of hands or arms, or with limited range of upper body motion, adaptive equipment can be the ticket to catching any size fish.

Caitlyn McPherson is the aquatics director at Crotched Mountain School in Greenfield, where kids and adults with disabilities fish for bass, sunfish, pickerel and perch all summer long at nearby Sunset Lake. They often use Rocket Rods – special fishing poles that launch bait, hook and bobber with the press of a button. They’re useful for anyone who might have trouble casting with a regular pole.

“It gives them more a sense of doing it on their own instead of having someone else do it for them. They can point it in whatever direction they want and cast it themselves,” McPherson said. There are plenty of “DIY” gear improvisations, too, such as using Velcro to attach poles to chairs or wheelchairs.

As the president of Access to Recreation, Don Krebs of California has been selling adaptive fishing gear for 24 years. He said one of the most popular items in his catalog is the Angler’s Aid rod holder, which helps anglers who have the use of just one arm. It features an over-the-shoulder harness so the angler can use one arm to cast, then stuff the rod in an attached holder, leaving the one arm free to reel in the fish. Another item helps a person tie knots with one hand.

Given how much fishing can add to a person’s enjoyment of life, the need is great to ensure the sport is accessible to people with disabilities. Thankfully, New Hampshire offers many opportunities to get outside and get fishing. It may be a matter of getting involved in a fishing program, finding an accessible site alongside a river or pond, or working with adaptive gear. Fishing is truly a sport open to everyone. ❧

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