



American Heroes Saltwater Challenge

The Annual Event Organized and Held at The Beach Plum Inn Gives Back to Our Wounded Warriors

Story by Shelley Christiansen



Two Wounded Warriors casting for blues on East Beach

PETER JOHNSON

The Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass & Bluefish Derby called it a day – or a month, really – and somewhere offshore, the ones that got away probably got together and partied their tails off. Their adversaries got cleaned up and partied hard, too, at the prize ceremony. Richard won honors for the biggest bass. Brendan won the junior grand slam. Steve won the boat. And the biggest winners of all ... stayed home.

They stayed in hospital, actually – far off-island, in Maryland and Virginia. Winners like Carla and Tyson and John. And Robert and Jerry and Emanuel and Scott. They didn't catch the biggest fish or the most fish. Some barely knew bait from boats. Doesn't matter. They were winners.

Carla won the derby the moment she saw a sign-up list for an all-ex-

pense paid trip for wounded veterans like herself to go to some kind of derby on Martha's Vineyard. The staff sergeant had always dreamed of visiting Martha's Vineyard.

Tyson won the derby thanks to his wife Tera, who signed him up in spite of himself. Who wanted to be bothered with a double amputee? The West Point grad found out that a lot of people wanted to be bothered.

John's job in Baghdad was to identify the dead. They weren't always in one piece. He hasn't gotten over it. He came to the derby to feel normal again, if only for a while. John happens to be a Massachusetts guy – not that we're partial that way.

Robert slept in a coma for a while after a brain injury. Briefly, he was clinically dead. Fishing is a good thing. Doing anything is a good thing.

Jerry the sergeant sported

shades – not to look cool but to protect the corneas that were singed in an explosion. But he could still gaze at the waves off Wasque. Waves are wondrous when you hail from North Texas.

Scott may walk with a cane, but the avid angler can wield a rod at the same time. Which is how he nailed the derby's second biggest striper of the day on his third morning out.

Scott would be outdone by Emanuel, a senior airman with a head injury. His 35-pounder earned him a coveted derby pin as the contest's catch of the day.

Make room in the winner's circle for a boy named Jack. When he was just seven, he wished out loud that wounded vets could come fish in the derby. A host of grownups heard him and made it happen. The whole island is a winner for his dream. 🐟

Shelley Christiansen's commentary aired on WCAI, the Cape and Islands NPR station, in October 2011. Hear Shelley's Martha's Vineyard commentaries on 90.1 FM every other Friday at 8:35am and 5:45pm or at www.capeandislands.org.



Fishing charter Captain Buddy Vanderhoop (right) helps get Emmanuel Thompson ready to fish



Everyone's a winner at the Weigh-in station following the day's outing



Celebrations and certificates at the Weigh-in station in Edgartown



Wilson Kerr and John Jarvis



The "Heroes Welcome Reception" kicked off the Saltwater Challenge at the Beach Plum Inn overlooking Menemsha Harbor



Tera & Tyson Quink



Menemsha based fishing Captains (above - left to right) Capt. Jonathan Boyd, Capt. Tom Langman, Capt. Buddy Vanderhoop, Capt. Jennifer Clarke, Capt. Scott McDowell



Beach Plum Inn owner and reception hostess Sarah Nixon (left)