

THE NEW FACES OF FISHING

BY MARILYN DeMARTINI

Fishing has always been a “man’s sport.” However, for a new generation of women, the gift of angling has been handed down from their fathers. Take Heather Harkavy, for example. Her dad Jeff, co-founder of non-profit Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, provided her with a solid background not just in fishing, but also in the consciousness of the fragility of nature.

“He is my best friend, my mentor, and my biggest fan!” Harkavy gushes with heartfelt sincerity and enthusiasm.

Other young women report similar “daddy’s girl” experiences that opened opportunities to explore a world typically not afforded to many girls. Social media has provided an outlet for these women to share their stories, photos, and trophy catches, creating a community of like-minded anglers who are becoming disciples and mentors for a new generation of young girls. This group is not confined to “girls’ sports,” and sheds the limiting beliefs and insecurities that have kept women from participating in one of the world’s most exciting and rewarding adventures.

We share a few of their stories here, in hopes that they inspire other young women to look to the water as a wide-open possibility to toss in a line and get hooked.





Heather Harkavy

“From the first time she laid eyes on it, Heather was attracted to the water,” says Jeff Harkavy.

She would sit with him entranced, fishing for hours at their Coral Springs, Florida, home.

“I fell in love with fishing—there was no looking back!” Harkavy exclaims, brimming with energy, excitement, and gratitude. When Heather was only four years old, her father enrolled her in an IGFA Junior program and she caught the largest big mouth bass, a peacock bass, and a bowfin on a light spring rod and walked away with trophies. At age six, she found her knack for tying flies, and her father still carries one she made with a turquoise-colored star that helped him catch a bonefish in Bimini. At eight years old, Harkavy caught her first world record, a 17-lb. tuna in British Columbia further fueling the fire. By the time she turned 17, she had 100 IGFA fishing world records under her belt and had traveled around the world with her father. She had also learned many lessons under the tutelage of the “First Lady of Fly Fishing,” Joan Salvato Wulff, with whom she and her father bonded.

Like fellow-angler, Jessica Harvey, Harkavy is smitten with Panama’s Tropic Star Lodge where she worked on a Sportfishing TV segment and assisted Guy Harvey with a roosterfish tag project. “Tropic Star helped mature me,” she says. “I am a huge fan of Guy Harvey and how he is guiding the next generation of fishermen and fish.” His example has inspired Harkavy’s dedication to youth education. “I

want to give the opportunity I had growing up to other kids.”

Harkavy is most grateful for the experience and education she gained at a young age through fishing—fly, light tackle, and offshore—learning about different cultures and countries. “I truly love the fish, but that is one small piece. You have to give back, get to know the locals, their issues and do your part—fishing is a catalyst,” she states with passion. To forward that goal, this 23-year old is using her degree in hospitality and marketing from Florida State University to forward the non-profit she created, “Fish for Change” which promotes Connection – Education – Conservation – Exploration. The goal is “to create a generation of conscientious anglers who use fishing as a platform to change the world.” The program has students integrate with local communities and work together on civic and global initiatives.

While backpacking through South and Central America, Harkavy ran children’s programs at Fly Fish Guanaja, Honduras, an all-inclusive fly fishing lodge that was created not just as a fishing mecca, but as a way to offer locals an alternative to drug running and gangs. An example of how ecotourism can change lives, the lodge is also a supporter of Fish for Change. Harkavy plans to spend the summer there and will also create kids’ camps in the Bahamas, Mexico, and Colorado. “We want to give kids the little push they need to do good things through fishing.

Fishing can be a very egotistical sport if you want it to be,” she says. “I am not going to do anything for the world by earning records, but starting this charity has consumed me in the most positive way.”

According to Jeff, “Fishing is a sport with no gender—and if it did have one, it doesn’t anymore.” Just ask his daughter.

Jessica Harvey

Not many girls have the good fortune to have a famous artist, conservationist, and fisherman like Dr. Guy Harvey as a father who raised his family in Jamaica and Grand Cayman where fishing was a natural, daily activity. But it was on a trip to the renowned Tropic Star Lodge, “The Marlin Capital of the World” in Panama’s Darien Jungle, where Jessica Harvey fully understood the addiction to the sport. She recalls, “As a five-year-old, it was magical.” While she watched her father painting a marlin on the lodge’s front veranda, she asked “Can I catch a marlin, daddy?” His response, “Of course you can, pumpkin!” The next day, while fishing, a blue marlin hit one of the lines and she rushed to get “her marlin.” With the help of another famous fisherman, Stewart Campbell, she sat in the fighting chair and reeled in a 400-lb. marlin.

That exciting experience was the first of many trips and treasured memories she has shared with her father, traveling to exotic places to fish, tag, and study all types of sea life. Those experiences “shaped the person I’ve become today in so many ways,” she states. They also led to 17 world records, all in the IGFA Small Fry and Junior Angler categories—two that still stand today.

In addition to all the accolades Harvey has earned as a researcher, her fishing

ability is also notable. She caught a 14’, 650-lb. swordfish, taking the record for the largest swordfish caught in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Atlantic by a lady angler. The catch took nearly four hours of work with an enthusiastic team contributing. Harvey said she was not as “fit” as usual, as she hadn’t trained. The Isla Mujeres visit was originally to document whale shark aggregation, but ended with a day swordfishing trip. Since she had practiced fishing techniques from a very young age, she was able to reel the fish in from 1,500 feet depth. (Some of her fishing practice includes hilarious games with her brother where they would try to “catch” their dad as he pretended to be a fish, running around the yard holding a leader while they sat in a captain’s chair.)

Harvey mentors other women by demonstrating fishing techniques, helping them to understand what to expect before the fish takes off with the line, and ensuring that they don’t tire their arms or hurt their backs. One of her colleagues at the Cayman Islands Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation (GHOF), Louisa Gibson, is one of the young ladies who watched, listened, and learned. Harvey was proud that Gibson overcame her insecurities by asking to take over from the mate every now and then, eventually learning how to leader fish to the boat, gaff, and fillet her catches. “Sure, she made a few mistakes and we lost some fish, but you only improve if you practice...and it’s no different for guys!” she adds.

Louisa Gibson

Growing up in the Cayman Islands, Gibson sat on the dock with little hand lines, catching and releasing baby fish. Though her father was not known for his fishing ability, he took Gibson out on his boat and she went on trips with friends, but without passion for the sport.

After earning a degree in marine and animal biology, with a master's degree in environmental protection and management, Gibson began work for GHOF and developed her affinity by fishing with the best—Guy and Jessica Harvey. She recalls a trip to Costa Rica, being on the water for five days, and watching Jessica catch at least 20 sailfish. Gordon loved the thrill, the hum of the engine, and the meditative nature of “thinking of everything and anything” in between the hours or days without catching a fish. Then, when a fish is on the line, she says, “You go from 0 to 100 so fast!” Gordon experienced that rush when she recently caught a 200-lb. white tip shark, fighting for over 35 minutes to tag and take tissue samples for genetic study. “I love contributing to the conservation of endangered species,” she states, also noting that she uses social media and her career to “inspire others to be more conscious about the way they fish and give back to the ocean.”

Though she is not a record holder, Gibson relayed a moving experience—the softer side of fishing—when she caught a marlin while watching sperm whales and dolphin swim nearby. “It was the most fun I ever had, and I was 100% exhausted! I will never forget the feeling of looking in her eyes, like I could read her thoughts. I said ‘thank you’ and released her, and then dove under the boat to watch her swim for a bit.”

As a “girl guide leader” Gibson enjoys telling young girls about her fishing trips, in hopes they have the courage to try it themselves to build confidence. She also notes that male captains and mates on a boat often assume that a woman wants help to hook her fish. “Women have to learn to say, ‘That’s my line, don’t touch it,’” she states.

Gibson mentors Cassandra MacDowell, a teenager from Cayman Brac and volunteer for the GHOF. “Cassie wants to be a marine biologist, so I give her all the help and experience I can. She is going to do amazing things in life!”



Cassandra MacDowell

Known as "Cayman Cassie" on her prolific Instagram page, MacDowell shares beautiful photos of fishing, nature, and conservation efforts on her island home. She was studying for a science degree at the Brac Campus of the University College of the Cayman Islands, but since it is such a small school, there were not enough students to continue the program. Instead, she is now volunteering as a Guy Harvey Ambassador and conducting a stingray census for the Foundation, continuing her goal to work in environmental conservation.

MacDowell has been fishing since she was two years old, her fishing captain father grooming her to take over the business. But her interests are less about trophy fishing and more about conservation. She currently volunteers and handles the Facebook page for Green Go, an organization that works to control an invasive species of iguana that is disturbing the balance of the islands' native iguanas. Locals are encouraged to hunt them at night and eat the larger ones since they grow to 9' long.

While she doesn't see herself as a mentor, the 18-year old has introduced some friends to fishing and got one "hooked" by helping her catch a 60' wahoo. She is also interesting in conveying a positive image of women who fish. "I usually have my hat pulled down to my eyes, wear long sleeves, and my hair is messy—like most women anglers I see." But, MacDowell notes, "The bikini-clad women get all the attention," alluding to the social media pages of female anglers like "Darcizzle," who promotes herself as inspiring other women to fish on Facebook, Twitter, and via "how to" instructional videos on YouTube. While MacDowell watches YouTube for tips, she would like to see a main channel on fishing to help women learn.

MacDowell earned her credentials in area tournaments including the recent Burger King Big Fish event where her 50-lb. tuna won the heaviest overall tuna and the heaviest fish caught by a female angler. She chuckles that a well-known local fisherman was surprised to learn that a 17-year old girl beat him by a half-pound. She also notes that she holds an IGFA Cayman Islands Record for female angler with a 25.6-lb. dolphin on 80 lb. test.

The best way to build a woman's confidence is to give her the opportunity to catch a fish, says MacDowell, speaking from experience with her dad. "Guys can help a woman learn to do it right, and they can cheer her on saying, 'you can catch a fish as well as I can!' Then women can figure it out as they go along. Once you hear something take the line, you get that adrenaline rush—and once you catch the fish and you've done it on your own, you are into it," she says. "Every time is a new adventure."

