



How Did I Get Here?

by Denese Freeman – 11/15/2007



I grew up in a small town in Texas. It was a quiet town with a population of around 2,200. You know the kind of town I am talking about - where everybody knows each other. You can't say anything about anybody because either someone knows that person or they are related to them. One of those good/bad things.

Some of my earliest childhood memories are about fishing. I use to go fishing on a regular basis with my mom. We would load the car with all our gear and travel out to Red River Army Depot where my dad was a security guard. Depending on which part of the depot he was patrolling, we would either go fishing at Elliott Lake or Caney Lake. My dad would stop by and visit us if he knew we would be out there. Sometimes he would even bring his lunch and eat with us. It was always a special treat to get to see him in his uniform and on duty. He worked the graveyard shift and I rarely got to see him around the house much or spend very much time with him.

I have always loved to fish. I would even bait my own hook with a worm or a minnow at an early age. I didn't like to touch other live bait like crickets, caterpillars or Catawba worms - my mom would put those on the hook for me. I would catch perch, sunfish or catfish and that seemed to satisfy me. I always liked to fish with a bobber - the red and white ones - so I could tell when I had a fish. I never knew there was any other type of fishing other than fishing with worms and bobbers. I had always wondered how other people caught other types of fish, but I just assumed that they had worms and a bobber on their rod and reel too.

One day while fishing at Elliott Lake with my mom, someone was putting on a local fishing tournament. I must have been around 6 or 7 years old at the time but I remember it just like it was yesterday. I had just caught a nice perch and my mom said I should take it over to have it weighed at the tournament. I didn't really know what a tournament was, but off I went with my fish, still dangling on my hook (there was absolutely no way I was going to touch that fish). I ran over to where the crowd had gathered and

presented my fish to the weigh-master. I remember feeling very proud of my catch. After the tournament was over, they called my name to come up for a prize. I won a Zebco rod and reel combo for the largest fish in my age group. Wow! I had no idea that my fish would have won something so grand. It was a spectacular moment for me. I proudly ran back over to show my mom my new rod and reel.



It was around 1968 or 1969 when I won that tournament fishing with Zebcos, worms and bobbers. In 2000, my best friend's husband Allen knew I liked to fish and presented me with an older model Diawa baitcaster. I remember my first reaction was "I'll never be able to learn how to cast one of these". After some instructions on how to cast it, I practiced in my front yard till I thought my arm was going to fall off. I patiently untangled many backlashes as I slowly got the hang of it.

After several days of practice, Allen asked me if I wanted to go fishing. "Sure" I said and was eager to take my new baitcaster to the water to test my skills in a different environment. So I proceeded to put a hook and bobber on my new rig (I knew of no other way to fish). Allen rolled his eyes and said "here, use these hooks and this bait." It was a rather large hook and a fake plastic worm - unlike anything I had ever fished with before. I asked Allen "will a fish really bite this?" "Yep" he said. "Well OK, I guess I will try it" I said with an un-sure feeling and look on my face. I started tying the hook on my line when he said "stop, that's not how you tie a hook - here let me show you. I didn't know there were special knots you were supposed to use to tie a hook to your line. He showed me how to tie a Palomar knot. Once again, I was learning something new. This was beginning to get more complicated as we went and we were not even on the water yet.

Now, I was all fixed up. I had a new baitcaster (well, it was new to me), new hook, new bait and no bobber. My first thought was - I'm going to get hung up in something on my first cast. How is anybody supposed to catch a fish with a rig like this? Allen also had to show me how to work the bait in the water. I eventually got the hang of it and after many casts, backlashes, trial and errors I finally hooked a bass. My first bass no less and on artificial bait! Now, things were starting to get fun. I had finally caught something other than a perch or a catfish. I never really knew you could actually choose the type of fish you wanted to catch - I mean fish for a specific species. I had always thought that you go fishing and you get what you get. What ever wants to bite your hook.

Bass fishing was new territory for me, but like a trooper, I practiced and I practiced and I practiced. Sometime I caught fish, other times I didn't. But I didn't let it discourage me. I wanted to see if I could perfect my casts and learn what to do in certain situations. Where the fish were and how to catch them.

I eventually got tired of fishing from the bank so I started looking around for a small bass boat. I looked in the paper almost every day for several months with no results. I eventually went to several pawn shops. At one shop I stopped, the owner said his wife had a small bass buggy she wanted to get rid of because she wanted a bigger one. Richard (my husband) and I had to go out to Lake Latonka, my local lake, to see what it looked like and what condition it was in. Richard got in the boat first, sat down

and offered me his hand to help me get on board. I put one foot in the boat, saw that the drain plugs were not in place and water started coming in the boat with our weight and I immediately dove for the dock. I am deathly afraid of the water and the last thing I was going to do was get in a boat that was taking on water. Richard assured me that the boat would not sink due to the amount of styrofoam inside and not to worry. After several minutes of convincing me that the boat would not sink, I got in. We went for a short paddle around the boat house and I was sold. I traded my wedding rings from my first marriage for my fist boat - a very nice trade in my opinion.



After several months of fishing out of my little bass buggy - which by the way I was very proud of I was now ready to move up the ladder. For my birthday in 2002 my sister sent me a membership to the WBFA. There was to be a bass tournament on Grand Lake here in Oklahoma and she wanted me to meet her there and try tournament fishing. I thought - it's fishing - how difficult could that be?

Well, I soon learned to eat those words. It was my first tournament - and I felt like a fish out of water. I showed up with my one rod and reel and no tackle. Linda helped me replace the old line on my reel, loaned me some of her rods and reels and sent me out to fish. I fished with Lisa Starnard and Kathy Hurst. I had a great time. I will never forget the very first morning of the tournament. It was very dark. I am scared of the water and

getting in a boat in the dark really bothered me a lot. As it began to get lighter my fears eased to a degree. Then, Willie (the WBFA Director) asked everyone to rise for the National Anthem. I had no idea what took place at these tournaments, but I never imagined that they would sing the National Anthem. It was one of the most moving moments of my life up to that point. After the National Anthem was over there were fireworks. Needless to say, it brought tears to my eyes. And I thought we were only going fishing!

My first tournament was quite an experience. I desperately wanted to catch a fish, but I was unsure of what I would do with it once I caught it. I had never taken a fish off my hook before and I was scared to death. I kept thinking about what I would do if I did catch a fish. I brought a glove with me (my infamous orange glove) just in case I accidentally caught something. Sure enough, I caught a fish and I used the glove to put him in the bag. I took it to the weigh master and he dumped the fish out of the bag and into the sink, measured it and then proceeded to hand me the fish. With my orange glove, I took the fish by the mouth like he said. It gave a strong shake and I dropped the fish on the ground. I had never held a bass before, at least not one that big, and I didn't know how strong they were or that they would flop. It was heavy and I didn't have a very strong grip on it. The weigh master took the fish back to the sink, I guess to wash it off again, handed it back to me and off I went to the scales. It was just over 3 pounds. I won 10th place with that fish at my first bass tournament!

I managed to make one more WBFA tournament on the Ohio/Tennessee River in Paducah, Kentucky. I didn't weigh in any fish at that tournament but it was a learning experience. I fished with Jan Hudson and Sarah Augustine. Both days were completely different experiences. To this day, riding in the early

morning in the boat with Jan Hudson on the Cumberland River has to be the most beautiful boat ride I have ever experienced. Once we got off the Ohio River and took the Tennessee River to the Kentucky Dam all I have to say is WOW! The water was so still in places it was as flat as glass. It was so peaceful and beautiful with the sun rising as we were traveling to our first fishing spot. Coming back was a whole other story. Rough water and driving against the wind - I thought I was gonna die. I had just had gall bladder surgery 3 months prior to the tournament and was still very sore. Waves were coming over the bow of the boat. Jan's hot foot broke and it was difficult for her to come off the gas without pulling forward on the hot foot. She was driving with no shoes on. Her foot started to bleed because of the pressure. I offered for her to borrow my shoe so she wouldn't hurt her foot more, but she said she thought she could make it. We managed to make it back to the launch ramp all in one piece.



That summer, the WBFA folded. I was devastated. I had just gotten a taste of tournament fishing and there were no more tournaments all of a sudden. What was I to do? I was just beginning to get the hang of being a co-angler, bass fishing and fishing tournaments. Now, I had no options.

A few months later, I heard the announcement of the WBT - Women's Bassmaster Tour. I knew from fishing the WBFA that this could not be much different, especially since I had only fished 2 tournaments in my entire life. I signed up for the inaugural event at Lake Lewisville in Lewisville, Texas and I have been "hooked" ever since. I've fished every WBT tournament to date and I love it.

Each tournament I fish, I am just as excited as if it were my first. I get to the launch ramps, put my stuff in the boat, set in my seat, and then we all stand for the National Anthem and I get choked up all over again. I look around and wonder "How did I get here? How did someone like me, born and raised in a small town in Hooks, Texas get to be a part of something such as this?" What ever it was that got me here; whether it was by fate or something else, I'm grateful. I wouldn't take anything for these experiences and the fact that I get to share them with my mentor - my sister - my family.

