

Seasick? Me? I mean, what the fluke!

BY IVY ASHE

One night last fall during weigh-in for the striped bass and bluefish derby, I ran into Captain Kurt Freund from Fishsticks Charters. “Ivy, good to see you,” he said. I returned the greeting and I laughed.

“I’m looking a little less green nowadays,” I said, and we laughed together this time – ha ha ha! The last time Kurt saw me I was sunburned and seasick, wobbling around, squinting in the sunlight like a baby mole, and wondering when my next meal would be. Also, I had lost one of my glasses lenses.

It was all in the name of fluke. And journalism, of course; most of the really dumb things I do are in the name of journalism. I had taken a last-minute assignment for this magazine during the height of summer: go out on a boat during the annual VFW Fluke Derby, write up some copy, take a few photos. The usual rundown. Great!

What I did not do was take a Dramamine.

It is so calm on the water this morning, I thought. And we won’t be out that long. I have my afternoon assignment to get to. But the first rule of journalism is never assume anything, and the first rule of rules is that they’re made to come back around and bite you when you break them.

July 14 started out as a lovely early morning spent on the silver-glassy waters off the north shore, on board Kurt’s boat watching Corbin Buchwald, 10, and Tate Buchwald, 8, haul in scup and black sea bass. A thin mist enveloped the Sound and the boat drifted calmly on a slow-moving current.

“The thing about fluking is you have to drift,” Kurt said. Fluke are ambush predators, he added; they just wait on the currents for some unsuspecting morsel to come by.

Corbin and Tate were totally into it. The fluke tournament was one of their “must-do” summer things, along with going to the Agricultural Fair and Edgartown’s Fourth of July parade. Corbin had come in second place in the twelve-and-under division two years in a row. Tate had placed fourth and fifth. They were both hoping this would be their year.



Catch of the Day: Captain Kurt Freund with Tate, Corbin, and Tamara Buchwald, on the hunt for fluke off the coast of Menemsha.



photo by ivy Ashe

Of course, if you want to win you have to actually catch a fluke, and nobody was doing that. So Kurt moved the boat south, toward Menemsha. The sun peeked out of the mist. The kids each caught a fluke, and then another one – incentive enough to stay out longer. We headed in the direction of Noman’s Land, out of the calm Sound and into the Atlantic. The sun blazed. The boat drifted on the rolling swells. Up, down, up, down. My face turned red. I drank some water. Up, down, up, down. But I had nowhere to go.

There’s a photo in my file of Corbin with his fishing rod, not a cloud in the sky, and the vague shape of Noman’s in the background. There are no more at-sea photos after that.

My notebook has six pages of details about all of the catches, then goes silent.

There’s a short recap of the day (six-inch fluke, eleven-inch black sea bass), but I wrote that back on land, eight hours after we first set out.

Occasionally in the middle of what by all counts should be a miserable experience, there is a moment of clarity when you cede

control simply because there is nothing else to be done. This is a very humbling and also a very freeing moment, and for me it came as I was heaving (for the second – or was it the third? – time) over the side of the boat, when I heard a soft clink. My right glasses lens had fallen out of its frame, bounced off the boat, hit the green-blue water, and sunk beneath the surface – or at least, I assume it sank. I am quite literally blind in my left eye, and hopelessly nearsighted in the right, so I never actually saw this happen. Maybe a fluke ambushed it.

I might have thrown up my hands if they weren't so darn shaky. Instead, I knelt next to the center bench of the boat, put my head on the hard plastic, and closed my eyes – such a professional, I thought. I am the best journalist. Up, down, up, down. Corbin landed a small dogfish. Tate caught a fluke. I saw this through squinted blariness, in between sips of water. Up, down, up, down. My neck, furious with me for not putting enough sunscreen on it, was emitting its own heat now. This was going to peel.

At least, I thought, I didn't really need two lenses. Now I just have a wacky monocle, and monocles are hip and cool.

"Your face..." my coworker said when I woozily met her after landfall – we had that other assignment to get to, on North Road. "What happened to your face?"

Ten-year-old Molly Menton of Vineyard Haven ended up winning the tournament, with a catch so big (nearly ten pounds) it beat out even the seasoned pros. Corbin and Tate, though they ended up with a cooler full of fish and dinner for the next month, didn't place. This year they want to enter as a team.

I'd been nauseated many times while on boats (on planes, in cars, on buses...), but in twenty-seven years had never actually been sick from motion sickness. Records are made to fall, I suppose, and I beat my own record a month later, while I was in the White House press pool covering President Obama's visit.

But that is a story for another time.

The Flat Fish Derby

Now entering its fourteenth year, the annual VFW fluke tournament draws participants of all ages to Vineyard waters in search of the biggest fish. It began as a summer event for kids, with no more than thirty young fishermen participating, and though adults have since joined the mix, the focus is still on the younger set. Organizer Peter Herrmann said last year more than one hundred contestants participated.

Fluke are rarely caught from the shore, so competitors typically head out on the water to try their luck. It might be possible to land a fluke from the new Oak Bluffs fishing pier, Herrmann said.

This year's tournament takes place July 12 and 13. A cookout will be held after the last weigh-in on July 13, with the awards ceremony to follow at the VFW building (14 Towanticut Avenue in Oak Bluffs).

Registration fees are \$20 for adults and \$10 for seniors and teens. Kids twelve and under are free. Check with local tackle shops for more registration info.

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Taking One for the Team: Ivy Ashe, sunburned, sick, and down one lens.

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