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A Line that Binds: Fishing, Family, and the Lure of "The Rez"

by Troy Gipps



October 16, 2016 was a cool, partly cloudy day at Wachusett Reservoir. A southwest wind steadily increased as the sun broke the horizon and rose above the deep green conifers, brilliant orange oaks, and fire-red maples that separate the great expanse of water and sky; a visual spectacle that typifies the splendor of autumn in central Massachusetts. Sunlight bounced off white-capped waves and lit Val Percuoco's face as she unpacked fishing equipment from her woven, wood strip pack basket. She and her father Vinny had fished this section of shoreline on three prior Sundays, testing their mettle against relentless wind, rain, and thunderstorms. Each time they had left empty handed, with one exception: Vinny's impressive catch of a 16.5-inch White Perch which became the new Massachusetts Freshwater Sportfishing Awards Program "Catch and Release" state record. Their return on this brisk day says a lot about the family's devotion to fishing and love of Wachusett Reservoir. To their tribe of die-hard, old school anglers—who have ventured to these shores with religious regularity for well over 30 years—Wachusett is known simply as "The Rez". Sportsmen and

women tolerate the many moods of their hunting and fishing grounds much like one forgives and forgets the personality flaws of relatives. To the Percuocos, The Rez is family.

The Fish Story

When Val arrived at their sacred spot that October morning, she discovered that family fishing friend David "Pudge" Ago had gotten up a bit earlier that day, so she moved farther down the shoreline to fish. That particular spot had traded hands on prior trips between Pudge and Val, and another Percuoco family friend,

Ron Carroll. Their fishing culture is more collaborative than competitive; they all respect and afford the personal space that provides the solitude and relaxation that many anglers seek. Val and Vinny walked down the sandy, rock-strewn shore and discussed live bait options. Vinny decided on a shiner, but he encouraged Val to be inventive with her bait selection. Each type of bait provides the chance to catch a variety of fish species. That's when Val decided on a nightcrawler. It was a decision that would burn an indelible mark on her fishing career.



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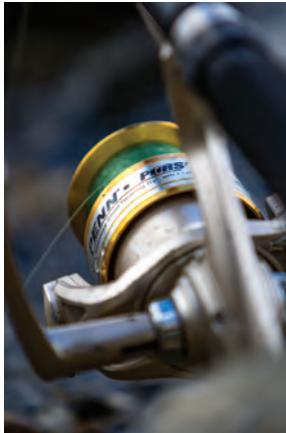
Her index finger swept up the 10 pound test Trilene Big Game monofilament line; she opened the bail, and cast the crawler into the world of angling dreams that lies beneath the surface. She was fishing that day with a rod the family affectionately refers to as “The Blue Rod”; a weathered, royal blue Diawa Apollo spinning rod that wears a Shimano Sienna reel. Val used this outfit 23 years earlier, at the age of five, when she caught her first Awards Program “pin fish”—an 11 pound Lake Trout. The many nicks and scratches on the rod’s black foam handle tell stories of countless days at the water’s edge. Pink nail polish reinforces the long since frayed thread wraps that secure line guides to a rod that has stood the test of time. Soft black Velcro loop material is wrapped tightly around the rod just above the handle, which is where the “Julie’s Gutabite” live bait device sits. Val set the rod at a slight angle on two piles of small rocks, one under the handle and one farther up the rod, and she ran the line through the Gutabite, which holds a small fluorescent green rectangular flag under tension. When a fish takes the bait, the flag pops up.

Val’s line swayed in the breeze for about an hour before the flag went up. She ran to the pole and checked to see if the line was running—not running—so she reeled in her bait and discovered that both sides of the worm were gone; a near miss. She quickly re-baited the hook with another

crawler, and launched it back into The Rez. Fifteen minutes later, the flag popped up again. The line was running, but not very fast, and the movement was slowly subsiding. She pulled some line out from the spool to provide some additional slack and closed the bail. The lazy coils of the slack line began to tighten as Val picked up the rod. She set the hook and the old blue rod bent forward. The fish blew the drag and the fight was on! Val monitored the squealing drag—not yet reeling—

and allowed the fish to take line. Vinny stood by her side as she played the fish. Based on the character of its fight, he thought his daughter had hooked a nice Smallmouth Bass. It swam to the right and ended up about four feet from the shoreline. It wasn’t until Val got the fish just a few feet from shore that they realized it wasn’t a smallie. As it swam into view, a shimmering bronze flash revealed what seemed impossible for a fish of its size—a White Perch. Vinny reached out and carefully grabbed the line between his fingers and with

one gentle, consistent, and careful pull, he slid the giant White Perch onto the sandy shore. Val’s first thought was to reach for a tape measure, so the fish could be measured and photographed for a Catch & Release award submission, but it quickly sunk in that she had caught something very special—a dream for most anglers. Val, Vinny, and Pudge grabbed their scales and each took turns weighing the great perch. Pudge’s scale read



Photos © Troy Glipps



Photo © Vinny Percuoco

Val Percuoco holds the 3 pound 8 ounce White Perch she caught at Wachusett Reservoir on October 16, 2016. The 18-inch fish, which boasted an impressive 13.5-inch girth, was certified as a Massachusetts "Catch & Keep" State Record and was also recognized by the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame as an official World Record White Perch for the 10 pound test line class.

3 pounds, 9 ounces. Val's scale landed at 3 pounds, 6 ounces, and Vinny's scale settled at 3 pounds, 8 ounces. "That's a state record Val!" Vinny exclaimed. He immediately got on Pudge's cell phone and called his friend in Leominster who owns a bait shop with a certified scale, but realized during the call that the drive to that shop was too far. Val needed to get the fish to an official certified scale as fast as possible. They settled on B&A Bait and Tackle in West Boylston. Val put the fish in a plastic garbage bag, placed it in Pudge's metal bait bucket, and started running—fast—back to the gate. She ran up the dirt path and over the steep collapsing embankment, then up the slippery needle-covered trail through the pines, then up, down, and around the twisting, turning access road. She was dressed for standing on the cold, windy shores of The Rez, not for running—four pairs of pants, three shirts, a vest, and knee-high black Muck boots, and her pockets were stuffed with hand warmer packets. The bait bucket swung wildly

as she sprinted down the final stretch of dirt road. Heart pounding, panting, and soaked with sweat, she reached her car, hopped in, and sped off for the bait shop. It felt like the longest drive of her life. When she walked into the shop with the bait bucket in hand, the shop owner, Ed Fair, casually made his way to the counter expecting she had stopped in to buy bait. She set the bucket onto the counter and opened the bag inside. Ed's jaw dropped. When Val said it was very likely a state record, wide-eyed Ed started to shake. He had never weighed in a state record. Ed placed the White Perch on his certified scale and the digits settled at 3 pounds, 8 ounces. Val Percuoco had, in fact, broken a 22-year old state record—also set at Wachusett Reservoir—by 3 ounces. Her 18-inch White Perch boasted an impressive 13.5-inch girth, and was later described by a MassWildlife fisheries biologist as a remarkably perfect specimen. Val called Pudge, who was still fishing at The Rez with Vinny. "It's a state record!" she yelled

and asked Pudge to pass the phone to her dad. She then called her uncle Paul, who has fished with her and her sisters since they were kids. Val brought the fish to MassWildlife's Field Headquarters in Westborough the following day where it was weighed and measured, and officially certified as the new White Perch "Catch and Keep" state record. The fish sat in a cooler under Val's desk at work for the remainder of the workday and a call was made to the family's taxidermist that evening.

The Family Story

It is important to note that Val Percuoco is not a one-day wonder in the world of fishing. She, and sisters Nicole and Lynn, have been fishing all of their lives.

It all started in 1962 with a boy, a piece of wire, and a hook. At the age of 7, Val's father was walking along the shoreline of Tripps Pond in Hudson when he saw several kivvers (Sun-fish species) swim out from inside a culvert. They passed into the sunlight and then back into the dark reaches of the pond. It was a fleeting glimpse of life beneath the surface that captured Vinny's imagination and it was at that moment that he decided to become a self-taught fisherman. He stopped at Al's Market on River Street on the way home that day. His mother sent him there often to pick up milk and eggs and other items between the family's weekly trips to the grocery store. He knew Al was a fisherman because of the many mounted fish he had hanging throughout the store. He stepped up to the counter and told Al what he had seen at the pond, and Al gave him one little gold-colored hook.

Vinny ran home smiling and went straight to his father's workshop where he found, and with great stealth, took a piece of wire. He wrapped one end around the hook's eyelet and created his first fishing outfit—save the rod, which wouldn't come until his next birthday when he begged his father to let him spend one dollar at Grant's department store in Hudson to purchase a fishing outfit complete with a steel pole, plastic reel, a plastic fish, and no hooks; which he now recalls as being a toy and a piece of junk. A few years later, Vinny's father brought the family to Spag's discount department store in Shrewsbury to buy "real" fishing poles. Vinny went home that day with a Zebco 202 spin casting combo and his fishing career took off. As time passed, his love for the art and science of angling and the outdoors grew. He started his own family with his wife Zenaide, and when Val and her older sister Nicole were very young, he unexpectedly found him-

self laid off from work for a year and a half. It was a tough time for the family, but in retrospect that period provided a unique opportunity to introduce his daughters to his love of fishing and the outdoors. Some may consider a father and daughters fishing to be a non-traditional example of a fishing family, but Vinny doesn't see it that way. When asked why he introduced his girls to fishing, he said what many family members say when such a question is posed: that's what I did and my girls were going with me. The kids wanted to be with their dad, and of all the kids Vinny has introduced to fishing since those early days; nieces and nephews, his daughters' many friends, and other neighborhood kids, he said the



Photo © Troy Cipps

Vinny Percuoco's love of fishing began when he was a boy with a piece of wire and one gold-colored hook. The family fishing tradition he has since built is a testament to the power of the outdoors to strengthen family bonds.



Photos © Troy Gipps



Photo © Percuoco Family



girls were the ones who continued fishing.

Each member of the Percuoco family is drawn to fishing for different reasons, but when I met with them recently at their home in Leominster it was immediately clear that fishing is the line that binds them as a family. Their wood paneled "Walls of Fame" are covered with trophy Lake Trout, Smallmouth Bass, and Largemouth Bass mounts, dozens of framed photos of the girls when they were young—smiling with their dad on

the shores and on the ice of local lakes and ponds. A sign the girls gave to their dad reads, "Some people wait their entire life to find a fishing buddy ... I raised mine!" and a small, decades-old child's pencil drawing of the three long-haired sisters each holding a fish speaks volumes of what fishing has given to their family. They share a touching measure of closeness.

The serenity of The Rez and time spent with "his pups" has fueled Vinny's lifelong

love of fishing. Zenaide enjoys the peace of the house when he takes their daughters fishing. Although she doesn't fish, she has gone with them on occasion and happens to be the only member of the immediate family who likes to eat fish. Nicole, who now lives in Connecticut, wasn't as interested in fishing as a kid—as shown in pictures of her reading books amidst piles of lakeside tackle—but now feels she is more like her dad and truly enjoys time spent fishing with her family during weekend visits. Val remains addicted to the thrill of the catch and describes

fishing as a little like gambling in that you never know what you will catch or when you will catch it, and you have to play to win. Val's younger sister Lynn is the most accomplished angler of the three daughters, with 20 Sportfishing Awards Program pins for seven species, including a gold pin, which is awarded annually to anglers who catch the largest fish in each species category. Lynn attained that milestone in early 2005, after catching a 10 pound, 1 ounce Broodstock Salmon at Comet Pond in Hubbardston during her 2004 Christmas vacation. It was a hand-line fight through the ice that lasted nearly 45 minutes. As the salmon cruised past the hole, Vinny told her to be careful not to step on the line. "I'm under enough pressure as it is ... my back is killing me!" she responded sharply. Lynn was 11 at the time.



Sisters Val, Lynn, and Nicole and their father Vinny Percuoco on the sacred section of Wachusett Reservoir shoreline that has been the stage for countless fishing and family memories over the past 30 years.

The Sportfishing Awards Program's youth category, for anglers 17 and under, was created in 2005, which made Lynn the program's first youth gold pin award winner for the Broodstock Salmon category. She still proudly wears that pin on the front of her faded and worn pink fishing hat which is covered with all of her other bronze pins—the majority of which were awarded based on adult weight and length standards, even though she was a youth angler at the time of most of the catches. Lynn still strives to become the program's Angler of the Year, an award given to the person who weighs in the largest number of species that meet the minimum weight requirements (Catch and Keep category) or submits the largest number of species that meet the minimum length requirements (Catch and Release category).



Photos © Troy Gipps

Back to "The Rez"

It's the first Sunday in November. My truck rolls to a stop on roadside gravel near the Percuoco's favorite access gate at The Rez; one of 40 gated public access points that lead to over 32 miles of shoreline open for fishing on the 4,057 surface acre reservoir. Vinny, Paul, and Val are loading their gear into pack baskets for the long walk to the coveted piece of shoreline where Val caught her Catch & Keep state record White Perch, and where, six weeks earlier, Vinny caught the new Catch & Release White Perch state record. Nicole and Lynn plan to join us later in the morning. A window to the world of Percuoco family fishing will soon open.

We retrace the route taken by Val as she sprinted to her car with her trophy perch three weeks earlier. Two white-tailed deer emerge from the forest and pause,

watching as we approach. We continue; snaking through the forest as the sound of the wind streaming through leaf and limb heightens. The Rez comes into view. White caps rise and fall. Tree tops bend and sway. We descend through a pine forest and step onto the sacred section of sandy beach that has served as the stage for countless Percuoco family fishing memories. I am introduced to family friends Pudge Ago and Luis Fontanez, Jr. who wait patiently beside their baited lines; each pauses briefly from their watch to greet and embrace Val—a clear sign of the familial nature of their angling clan.



Unofficial location names pervade the language of anglers who trod these shores. Terms such as The Cellar Holes, The Rook, Button Cove, White Hill, Boat House Cove, Diamond Hill, The Fire Station, Bull Rock, and Sand Banks—

to name a few—hold special meaning to those who share this language. The terms secure the location of notable fishing grounds from newcomers and reinforce the integrity of the veteran angling culture that calls this place home.

Even though the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, which oversees Wachusett Reservoir, permits shore fishing only from dawn to dusk and only during a set season, these management parameters never deterred Vinny from selecting The Rez as his preferred fishing ground. “It’s close to home and it holds trophy fish,” he said. His knowledge of the underwater structure of The Rez and the ebb and flow of its fishery comes from years of experience along its shores. His knowledge of where and how to fish is all in his head, and he has worked hard to transfer that knowledge to his daughters.

When you open Percuoco bait buckets you won’t find store bought shiners. The family catches all of their own bait and keeps it in aerated tanks in their home (see mass.gov/masswildlife for baitfish regulations). It’s how Vinny first got his girls involved in the sport. He taught them how to catch bait, before he taught them to fish. Worms, frogs, crawfish, shiners, perch ... you name it and they caught it. Zenaide fondly remembers finding a dead baitfish stuffed in Val’s pants pocket. It was moments away from going through the laundry. Today’s bait buckets are full of juvenile Yellow Perch, native shiners, and nightcrawlers. Val opts for the crawler and Vinny decides on a perch. But before the lines are baited there is important business to tend to. Zenaide never thought of Vinny as superstitious, but when it comes to fishing there are exceptions. Each member of the Percuoco fishing team carries a lady bug trinket for good luck and they are all placed on shoreline rocks prior to lines hitting the water. Vinny then performs the time-honored Percuoco tradition of “waving the net.” He loudly proclaims “Big fish in the net, in the net!” while waving the long handled net in the air as an offering to The Rez. Val stands beside him holding a bright red, stuffed lady bug with its face to the wind. She then rings a small silver “dinner bell” to entice fish to the table. It may seem crazy, but it



Photos © Troy Gipps

works. Moments after their bait hits the water, a flag is up! Vinny hustles down the shoreline and picks up the rod. Line zips from the spool. He closes the bail and sets the hook. A few minutes later, a 4 pound, 3 ounce Lake Trout slides onto shore. Nicole and Lynn arrive, and another flag pops up. It’s another Lake Trout, this time for Luis.

As my time with the Percuoco family draws to a close a Bald Eagle soars above us, riding the raw wind along this storied section of shoreline. I say my goodbyes and climb up the embankment. I turn to The Rez, and pause, looking down to see a family in their element. Waves crash on the shore and through the roar of the wind whipping through the trees I hear a voice. It’s Vinny yelling “A flag is up!” His girls spring from the warmth of their snack-munching sister huddle and sprint down the beach to the rod. You just never know when the next flag might be a new state record.



About the Author

In addition to serving as the editor of Massachusetts Wildlife, Troy Gipps is an avid hunter, fisherman, and forager of all things edible.

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