

Long Island charter skipper Barb Fusco satisfies her lifelong passion for fishing by teaching others about the sport and the marine world.

Making the Connection

by Tom Tripp
photographs by Jim Levison



With her long, brown hair, trim figure, white shorts and tank top, Barb Fusco doesn't fit most people's image of a seasoned charter skipper. Indeed, the woman who greeted my two daughters and me on the dock of Ralph's Fishing Station in Mt. Sinai Harbor, just east of Port Jefferson on Long Island's North Shore, couldn't be more dissimilar from the grizzled, gruff, khaki-clad ancient mariners who stalked the coastal wharves of my youth. This 40-year-old mother of two regularly surprises clients with her intimate knowledge of the ocean and the habits and whereabouts of her two favorite targets—fluke and striped bass. In her five years as a Coast Guard-licensed charter captain, Fusco has become one

of the more successful guides on Long Island, not to mention a regular speaker at many fishing and outdoors shows.

My daughters and I recently fished with Fusco aboard her 23-foot Grady-White walkaround, Luv2Fish. After leaving Mt. Sinai Harbor at the top of the tide on a day that promised light winds and plenty of sunshine, we sped across the glassy water of Long Island Sound, headed west toward Smithtown Bay, where the generally sandy bottom is pockmarked with structure and deep holes favored by fluke. As soon as we rounded the Setauket headlands and turned southwest into the bay, we could see small flocks of terns diving on baitfish—a good sign.

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Fusco set us up with light spinning gear and one of her favorite fluke rigs: a white bucktail jig tied to a four-foot monofilament leader, with a second hook coming off a dropper loop about 18 inches above that. The bucktail was "sweetened" with a peanut bunker, while the upper hook was adorned with a spearing or a live killifish. Fusco catches her own bait in the marshes and salt ponds inside Mt. Sinai Harbor. Her twin 14-year-old boys often help her out, but only if she promises to take them fishing, too. Between being a mother to two teenagers and chartering full-time, Fusco has her hands full, but her parenting skills also serve her well on the water.

As one of the few female charter captains in the area, many of Fusco's clients

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are women and families who appreciate her patient, sensitive approach to customers who may have spent little time on the water and even less time fishing. She enjoys teaching a youngster how to cast a lure or reel in whatever it is tugging on the end of the line. My daughters Allie and Emily have spent a lot of time cruising, but not much time fishing. Yet Fusco soon had them throwing lures 60 feet into schools of small bluefish.

Fusco's goal is not just to put her clients on fish, but to help them enjoy the whole experience of being on the water. "I want families to spend quality time together in a setting away from the everyday stresses of life and work," she says. That philosophy has helped her build a client base that

includes families and even single women. "I have a lot of patience," she says. "I'm down to earth, easy to talk to, not intimidating. Kind of the girl next door. Women feel comfortable with me because I explain fishing to them in a simple way. They don't have to worry about what knot to use or feel embarrassed asking questions about what to do next."

Lauretta Sauer of Lake Grove, New York, is one of Fusco repeat customers. "I was initially attracted to Barb by the statement on her website that she was family-friendly," says Sauer, who has been fishing all her life. "When I told her I had a three- and four-year-old, she said 'Great!' She's amazing with the kids. You can really see how much she enjoys bringing the fun to

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Left: Capt. Barb Fusco at the helm of Luv2Fish, the 23-foot Grady-White she keeps in Mt. Sinai Harbor.

Left inset: Fusco displays a keeper fluke taken by angler _____.

Below, top: Fusco's standard fluke rig is a white bucktail tipped with spearing.

Below, bottom: Fusco nets much of her bait herself in the back bays and marshes of eastern Long Island.



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other people.” Sauer says Fusco shows her kids how to work with the bait and will sometimes let them sit on her lap while she steers the boat. “She gets them involved, and she’s so patient.”

Dr. Allan Mohr, a physician from Merrick, Long Island, hired Fusco for a shallow-water raft trip to hunt stripers. “It was unbelievable. She knew exactly where they were. And she’s a good teacher. She’ll tell you why you went over there, why you didn’t go over there, why she did what she just did.”

The “raft trip” is a specialty of Fusco’s. She and a single client take her eight-foot raft and paddle quietly through the grass-lined estuaries behind the North Shore bays and harbors, stalking big striped bass in just a few feet of water. “Sometimes when the water is shallow enough, you can even see them stirring up the mud as they chase schools of silversides into the grass,” says Fusco, who reports that she decided to try hunting stripers in the shallows when a school of big fish swam past her one day while she was netting bait in the marshes. “The most important thing to remember when fishing in the marsh is to be quiet. The fish spook easily. Also, keep your tackle simple. Don’t use any hardware; tie direct.”

Fusco and I talked about some of her earliest fishing memories while drifting across Smithtown Bay during a lunch break. She started fishing at age two with her father and was the only one of her siblings who stuck with it over the years. She says she clearly remembers a day when she was four, fishing next to her dad on the Shinnecock Canal on Long Island’s South Shore with a Snoopy rod and a push-button spincast reel made by Zebco. They were fishing for snapper blues when the little Snoopy rod doubled over and nearly pulled her into the canal. As a crowd gathered to watch the battle, her dad coached her through her struggle to land what turned out to be a massive fluke. Fusco remembers the line breaking just as he lifted the fish over the seawall.

Fusco spent most of her teens and early adulthood fishing from shore. When

her boys were a couple of years old, she was able to buy a boat. However, raising twins and working various part-time jobs didn’t give her much opportunity to get out on the water. Then one day in 2003, while book-keeping for a software company, she realized she was thinking more about working a bucktail than working on reconciling the checking account and decided to make the jump to full-time chartering.

She went to captain’s school the following year, and in 2005 opened Luv2fish-charters. In 2006 she doubled her number of charters, and today she is on the water nearly every day that the weather, and parenting duties, permit.

After lunch we resumed our fishing adventure in Smithtown Bay. The blues were feeding sporadically under diving terns, but there were other creatures to keep thing interesting, including searobins—those toothless, orange wonders that always make me think Audubon-meets-Jurassic Park. There wasn’t much of a breeze to help the drift, and the doormats were apparently imitating, well, doormats. So Fusco cranked the Yamaha and headed east to a creek that emptied into the Sound.

The rocks and sandbars made for a tricky approach, but Fusco was able to set up a drift across the mouth of the creek. A couple of small fluke and several more searobins later, we headed for Buoy 11, where the rest of the fleet seemed to have gathered.

While Allie and Emily plumbed the depths, Fusco and I talked about her burgeoning software business, which began with a need to keep her fishing logs more organized. “My reports, pictures and log-books were a mess,” says Fusco. “I had them in so many different files that I decided I had to design something to organize them.” So Fusco created a computer program for anglers called Fishalog. “It’s a database for storing your fishing records, plus a calendar to get moon phases, tides and links to weather in your local area,” she explains. “Fishermen know how important it is to keep logs to see what



Crew of one: Capt. Fusco prepares to scoop up a big fluke taken off eastern Long Island.

consistently works. Now they can maintain a computerized log instead of storing piles of papers.”

Given her ambition and drive, a simple database wasn’t enough for Fusco, who created an entire company, Luv2fishsoftware. She plans to expand the software offerings to include an entire suite of products intended to better organize the lives of fishermen everywhere.

Of course, even the most organized log-book can’t always produce fish, so after a few fruitless drifts past Buoy 11 we decided to head for Fusco’s mooring. Even if we didn’t bag a huge fluke, the girls had a blast with the blues and searobins, while I got to enjoy some great conversation about fishing, family and the sea. We also brought home some dinner and had the kind of father-daughter bonding experience that’s hard to come by these days. Capt. Barb helped make that happen. She’s a good example of the best kind of charter captain, one who not only knows how to connect you with fish, but also how to connect with something even more important. ▀

Tom Tripp is a freelance boating writer based on Long Island, New York.

To book a trip with Capt. Barb Fusco or to learn more about her Fishalog database, visit www.luv2fishcharters.com or call 631-736-0470.