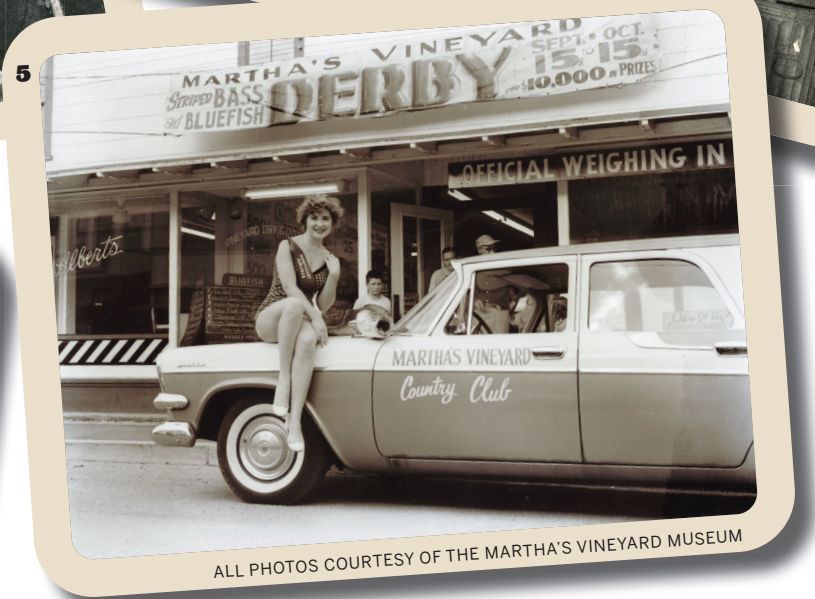
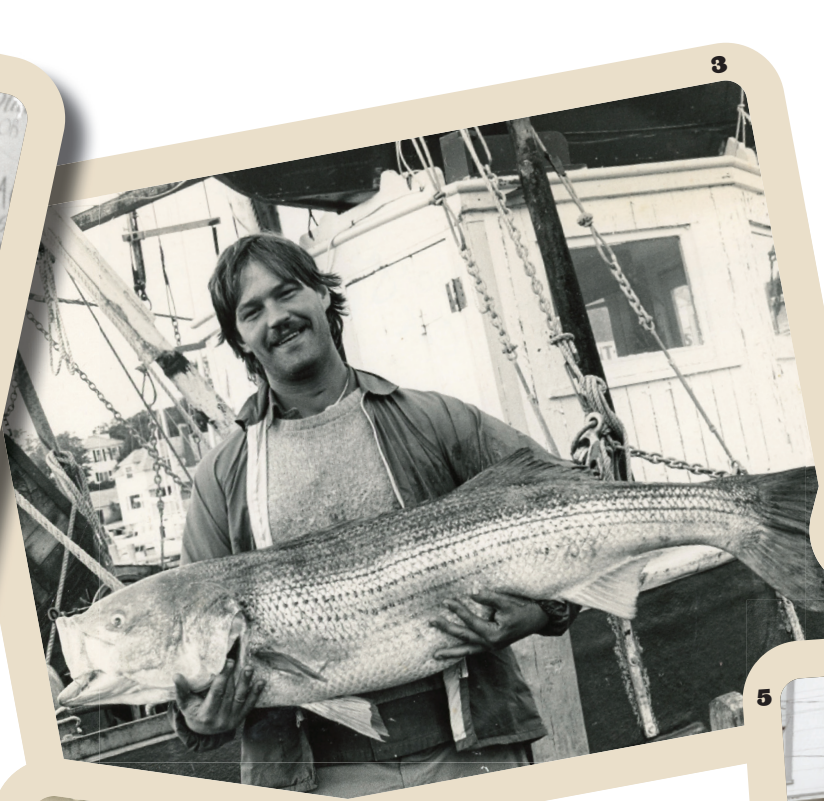




The Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby. **BY LISA BELCASTRO**

EIGHTY YEARS OF FIN-TASTIC FUN

It's 1946.

Two brothers, Ed, 10, and Steve, 9, Amaral, joined by their parents and younger siblings (Leo, 8, and Eleanor, 7) enter the first Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass Derby. Their dad, Gus, weighs in the first bass of the first-ever Derby. Approximately 1,000 fishermen from 29 states compete for the \$1,000 grand prize. It is won by Gordon Pitman of New York with a 47-pound bass. Fast-forward to 2025.

Those same two brothers, Ed Amaral, 90, and Steve Amaral, 89, both inducted into the Derby Hall of Fame, will be competing with thousands of fishermen from around the world to win the Eastern Boats 22-foot Sisu Hardtop in the 80th Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby.

Much has changed in 80 years, including the name of the event, while some things, such as hoping to catch a winning fish, will never change.

When I asked Ed, who won the Grand Leader Derby truck in 2016, what his goal was for the 80th Derby, he replied instantly, "To win. I'm out there trying just like the other 4,000 people. I fish as much as the weather and my health allow. You have to be thankful and grateful, and I am."

Since Islanders will have just exhaled a collective breath of relaxation after nearly 100,000 visitors exited in August, it is mildly ironic to mention that the Derby began as a means to draw tourists to the Island after Labor Day. There was no shoulder season in the '40s. The sidewalks rolled up in September, and the tourist money dried up.

Until ...

Nat Sperber, a public relations specialist working for the new ferry service owned by Russell Stearns and Ralph Hornblower, approached the Martha's Vineyard Rod and Gun Club with a promotion idea: a fall fishing competition. The M.V. Rod and Gun Club managed the

Derby through 1951, when the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce took over the greatest event of all time.

"What's so great?" you ask. How much time do you have?

I love when someone, anyone, asks me about the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby.



The Derby is my favorite annual event, and my favorite time of year: Derby Days. I could say it's a fishing competition and leave it at that, but that would be erroneous ... on so many levels.

Don't get me wrong — fish are everywhere you look during the Derby, though sometimes not on the end of your line. The Derby began as solely a striped bass derby. Over the years, bluefish, weakfish, false albacore, and bonito were introduced, and sadly, striped bass have been removed multiple times.

"Bluefish were introduced as an eligible species in 1948," said Phil Horton, Derby director-at-large.

For 32 years, bass and blues were the only fish in the Derby. In 1981, the Derby became a five-fish competition when weakfish, false albacore, and bonito were introduced. Competitors had four years when they could fish every day, all day, for any of the five fish.

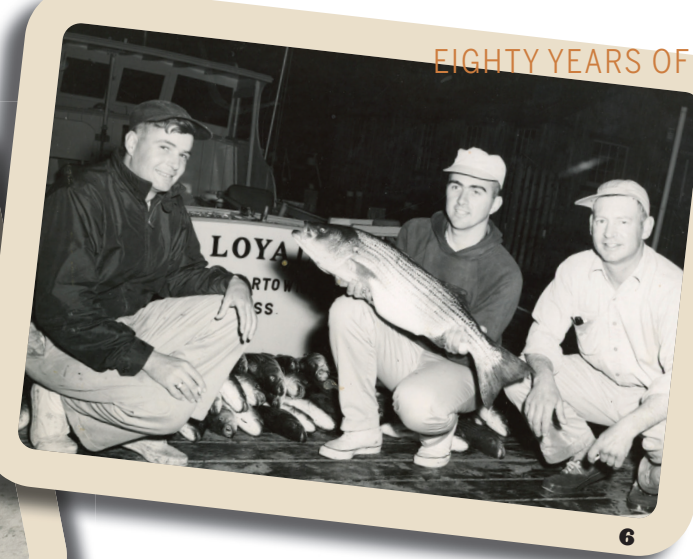
When striper populations declined in the '80s, the Derby committee voted to remove striped bass from the event. "Bass were not eligible 1985 to 1992. They were reintroduced to the Derby with restrictions (size and prizes) for the next couple of years, and fully eligible in 1995," said Phil, who also noted that weakfish were removed permanently in 1987, and stripers were removed again in 2020.

This year, for the 80th Derby, surfcasters, fly fishermen, and boaters will be hoping to earn a Triple Crown, weighing in an albie, bonito, and bluefish. There will be little nighttime fishing, unless folks are chunking for bluefish. What you will see is shorelines, jetties, and boats filled with fishermen, casting in daylight for the speedy hardtails and head-shaking blues that are so much fun to reel in.

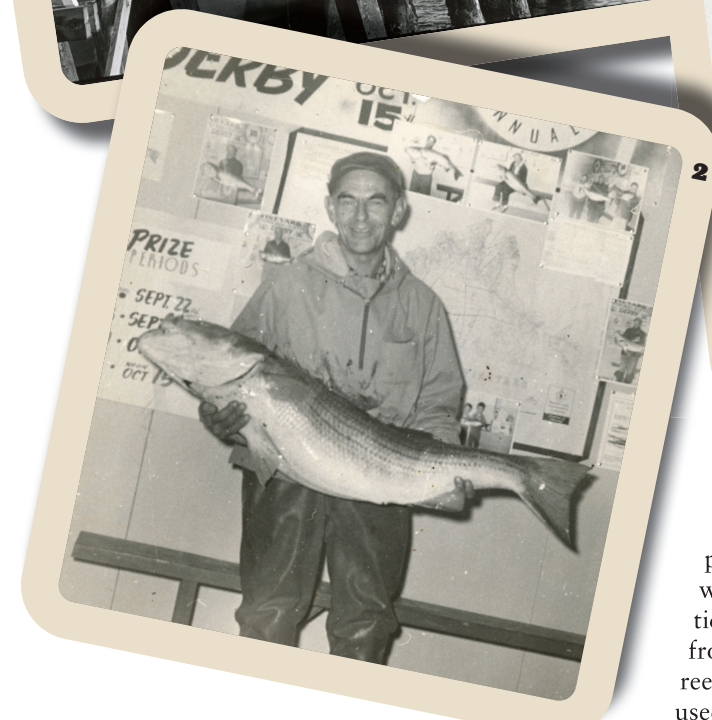
Through all the changes in fish species, fish sizes, and fish eligibility, attendance in the Derby grows and popularity increases.

It's not about the fish.

Fishing is the reason for the Derby; family and friendship are the heart.



1. Young fishermen crowd Oak Bluffs Wharf on Kids' Day, 1980s or 1990s.
2. Four-time grand-prize winner Serge de Somov, affectionately nicknamed "The Count" and "The Mad Russian," shows off a bass at Derby headquarters in the 1960s
3. Man fishing from a rocky beach with a baby in a backpack carrier, 1980s or 1990s.
4. Winthrop B. "Sonny" Norton relaxes beside his beach buggy while waiting for a bite, early 1960s.
5. Three fishermen take a break from the beach to share a tailgate lunch, early 1960s.
6. (L to R) Steve Gentle, Leo Convery, and Nelson Smith show off the results of a night's fishing on the dock at Edgartown, 1950s or 1960s.
7. Clayton Hoyle with an old-school surfcasting rod and reel he designed and built himself, 1940s-50s.



For many fishermen, Islanders, and visitors, the 35 days of the Derby are sacred. Families and friends plan their vacations, their work schedules, and their lives around those five weeks. It's Derby Fever, and once you catch it, you don't ever want to lose it.

"It's the people," said Ed Amaral. "It was instilled in me by my parents. The Derby is the most important thing in my life other than Lois and the birth of my kids. You meet some great people, and it stays with you for a lifetime."

Steve Morris, owner of Dick's Bait and Tackle Shop in Oak Bluffs, knows what Ed means by a lifetime of Derby memories and family time. Steve grew up fishing with his dad and brothers, and his grandfather, Dick Morris, originally owned Dick's Bait and Tackle Shop.

Steve fished his first Derby in 1978. Five years later, at 20 years old, Steve landed a 49.96-pound striper on his friend's boat. At



all-day fisherman. These days, I tend to get up early, fish for bonito and albacore, and go to

work. I stay close to home to maximize my fishing time over driving time."

While Steve has won numerous and various prizes over the years, he was not one of the fortunate people who won a buildable lot in Aquinnah. Yes, you read that correctly. Eighty years ago, when land was cheaper than dirt, the Derby committee had lots to give as prizes. Can you imagine if an acre of land in Aquinnah were among the Derby prizes now? Talk about a winning lottery ticket!

If you're a fan of those one-dollar Lotto tickets, did you know that at one point in time you could have bought the Derby for a dollar? OK, maybe not you or me, but in 1987 the Der-



by was sold for \$1. Yes, you read that correctly.

"Ben [Morton, Derby chairman] called Ed Jerome. The Chamber was losing too much money. They wanted to sell the Derby. We had a lot of meetings in our kitchen," said Cooper Gilkes, legendary fisherman and owner of Coop's Bait and Tackle in Edgartown.

When the deal was done, and a dollar had changed hands, the Derby was waiting to become the nonprofit it is today. The three amigos — Coop, Ed Jerome, and Eddie Medeiros — sat around Coop's table drinking coffee. "Eddie looks up and says, 'What have we dumb?'" Coop remembers with a chuckle.

"That's how we started. Ed was our leader. We were a group of guys who really worked hard and had fun. That was part of it. We had to have fun."

I love listening to stories about Coop's Derby fun, and one of my favorite stories involves my favorite vehicle: a Jeep CJ.

"We got our first Jeep, a CJ, through Bill Hawkins, a customer at the tackle shop," said Coop. "We had to raffle it off, we couldn't give it away. We — Arthur Winters, Ed, Gordon Ditchfield, Porky Francis, Eddie, and me — took it to the Worcester Fishing Expo. I went to check in, and the guy said, 'I don't have you on the list. You don't have a booth.' I'm thinking, 'Oh my goodness.' I had the paperwork, so the guy says, 'What about if you park the Jeep by the front door?'"

"Ed had brought two rolls of raffle tickets. That first night, we sold both rolls of tickets. We went back to the hotel so excited." Coop pauses, and grins. "I see Arthur sitting in the corner thinking. I ask him what's up. He tells me he thinks Ed left the money in the Jeep in the back seat. Arthur takes a walk, but doesn't say anything to Ed."

"The next morning, we're having breakfast, and Ed jumps up and runs down to the Jeep.

We're all on the balcony watching. Ed's searching through the Jeep, panicking. He looks up. Arthur goes, 'Hey Ed, April Fool's.' We laughed so hard."

The guys bought two more rolls of tickets, and made a bundle of money off that first Jeep, which they used to fund the Derby and the Derby prizes. During the growing years, they bought prizes, they begged for prizes, and they borrowed for prizes. And the Derby grew. Ed Jerome, an Island teacher and principal, initiated a scholarship fund for graduating MVRHS students. To date, the Derby has donated more than \$1 million in scholarships.

Like his best friend Ed, Coop also wanted

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to focus on children. For all the awards that Coop has won and all the fish that he has caught, and all the fishermen he has taught, Coop and his wife Lela's greatest Derby legacy will have to be the free Kid's Derby. If you're on-Island on Sunday, Sept. 21, wake up early and get down to the O.B. Steamship dock by 6 am to watch children of all ages fishing for top prizes. It's a shot of joy you don't want to miss!

Honestly, you don't want to miss any of the Derby. Stop by Derby Headquarters any morning between 8 and 10 am, or any evening between 7 and 9 pm, and take in some of the magic. You'll see friends cheering as their fishing buddy weighs in a first fish; you'll hear the shouts when a new leader tips the scales; you'll watch as lucky fishermen pick up their daily pins and attach them to their Derby hat.

If you're fishing the Derby, I'll see you on the beach. I'll be soaking up every moment, and hoping you're having as much fun as I am.

When we've fished all that we can and the

35 days have come to a close on Saturday, October 18, at 9 pm, let's meet at the Awards Ceremony and watch the final six casts.

The key ceremony is the last catch of the Derby. The 80th Derby will see six fishermen on-stage, each holding a coveted, well-earned key for their Grand Leader fish. Ed Amaral, Coop Gilkes, Phil Horton, Steve Morris, or Steve Amaral might be onstage. You and I and my teammate Dave Balon might be up there with them.

We'll all be holding keys.

The scene will be intense. The tension will be palpable. Our hands and knees will be shaking.

One of the six keys will open a lock to the Grand Leader Eastern Boats Sisú.

After 35 days of fishing, it all comes down to one last cast. Everyone waits, breath held, for the telltale sound of a lock clicking open.

When a fish hits and the excitement shoots through our veins as we listen to our reel peel, we hope it's a Derby winner.

When the sound of the lock clicking open echoes throughout the tent and across the grounds of Farm Neck Golf Club, everyone knows it's a Derby winner. Shouts erupt, tears of joy flow, hugs and clapping abound. Another Derby in the books. Priceless memories to relive throughout the cold winter.

When the afterparties end, and I'm home with a full heart and dirty fishing gear, Dave will once again text me: "328 days, 3 hours, 37 minutes #justsaying."

Some things never change.

Derby Fever counts the minutes until the next opening bell goes off.

I hope to see you on the beach during the 80th Derby, or at Derby headquarters, where I'm weighing in a fish a couple of ounces bigger than yours.

For more information on the 80th Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby, or to register online, go to myderby.com. 