

Jeff Kolodzinski: The “Marathon Man”

By Kari Iverson

Michael Phelps has broken his own world record in the 200-meter butterfly seven times since 2001. From his first record to his last, his time improved nearly three percent. Imagine the headlines if he surpassed his fastest time by 23.6 percent. The men’s world record in the marathon is 2:03:59 and the women’s record is 2:15:25. Imagine what the headlines would say if these records were shattered by 23.6 percent. Jeff Kolodzinski, the “Marathon Man,” did just that on Saturday, July 30. He beat his own Guinness Book World Record for the most fish caught in a 24-hour period by 23.6 percent when he caught 2,649 fish. That was 506 more fish than the record he set in 2010 at the same location, Maynard’s Restaurant in Excelsior, Minn.

Reminiscing about his childhood Kolodzinski said he did not want to learn to read when he was five-years-old. The only thing he would read, without complaining, was a fishing magazine. Kolodzinski discovered his childhood hero, angler Al Lindner, in the fishing magazines his mother bought him. At age five, Kolodzinski dreamed of growing up to be a professional fisherman.

Kolodzinski read an article in the early ‘90s about a Jr. Olympic Fishing Team. Chasing his dreams, he went to meet the coach of the American National Fishing Team. He secured himself a spot on the five-man team, participating in his first of seven world championships.

Kolodzinski has reeled in once-in-a-lifetime opportunities throughout his fishing career. In 1993, two years after the end of the Gulf War, Kolodzinski participated in the Fishing World Championship in Caruche, Portugal. As he walked across the city center to raise the American flag at the opening ceremony, he was nervous the international audience would not be receptive toward him due to the United States’ recent political turmoil. “I remember holding my breath when he said, ‘U.S.A.,’ wondering, am I going to get shot?”

When the audience politely accepted him as a competitor, Kolodzinski said he knew it would be a good experience. He proudly states, “Fishing goes above every other verbal barrier and creates a common bond.”

Kolodzinski moved to Lakeville, Minn., in 2003. He gave a presentation at a fishing seminar and met Tom Goodrich, the Executive Director of Fishing For Life. Kolodzinski was impressed with the organization established to minister to urban youth in the Minneapolis and St. Paul area and quickly became involved with it.

Kolodzinski finds satisfaction participating in Fishing For Life’s events. He was excited when he claimed the title for the most fish caught in a 24-hour period, he said. However, he finds the most joy at the Reel ‘Em In Kids event where he helps children find the excitement of fishing. In one hour he helped nine-year-old Allison catch 120 fish. Kolodzinski said Allison could not stop exclaiming, “I’ve never caught that many fish!”

The docks at Maynard's were filled with children watching with awe as Kolodzinski baited small barbless hooks, caught and released approximately 1.84 fish a minute.

Kolodzinski said one of the most frequent questions he is asked is, "How many times do you think you catch the same fish?" He always responds, "Maybe three or four times, every time I see a fish with a hook mark, I throw it back into the lake without counting it."

Many speak highly of Kolodzinski and admire his dedication to the Fishin' For Life organization. A bystander at Maynard's commented on how Kolodzinski has returned to the docks at Maynard's for years and how he appreciates the positive message Kolodzinski portrays to the community.

Goodrich accredits the great success of the Fishing For Life organization to his and Kolodzinski's collaborated efforts. Goodrich said their creative minds were able to create fun events, such as the Marathon Man, to help raise necessities for underprivileged children in the community.

"Jeff [Kolodzinski] has a natural ability to connect with fishing kids. They are drawn to him by virtue of his position in the industry. He is very personable and would rather be dirty and catching fish with the kids than anything else," Goodrich said.

Goodrich said Kolodzinski is not like anyone he has ever met and he has a unique ability to form an emotional bond with someone who is nine years old or 90 years old.

Although Kolodzinski's goals and the way he measures success have changed since he was a five-year-old boy dreaming of becoming a professional fisherman, his passion and enthusiasm for fishing as a sport have not.

Residing in Wisconsin, Kolodzinski is a loving husband and father to his wife and daughters. To others, he is the Marathon Man and to at least one five-year-old boy who watched him reel in hundreds of fish, he is a hero.