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Lake Michigan charter captains donate trip to disabled athletes

By The Grand Rapids Press September 20, 2009, 7:30AM



Photos by Howard Meyerson | The Grand Rapids Press

Alan Pomranka, top, reels in a salmon as Captain Chris Redding brings in line.

Howard Meyerson | The Grand Rapids Press

MUSKEGON — Alan Pomranka was all smiles when he reeled the Lake Michigan Chinook salmon into the boat.



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The 13-pound female gave him a run for his money. It had hit a seven-color plug that imitated a bait fish and took off toward Wisconsin.

10/17/2009
10:21 p.m.

The 36-year-old Muskegon angler had wheeled his chair to the stern of the boat and started reeling. He and his wife, Bev, were aboard Addiction 2, a 9-meter Trojan owned by Captain Brian Hietala.

"I do more bass fishing and panfishing," said Pomranka, who is paralyzed from the waist down from an automobile accident 19 years ago. "This is my first time out salmon fishing in a lot of years."

Pomranka is one of several Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association members who showed up at the dock before dawn at Bluffton Bay Marina on Muskegon Lake. The group met with charter fishing captains from the Muskegon Charter Boat Association. The captains agreed to introduce them to big lake salmon fishing and, even better, to cover most of the costs.

The lake cooperated, staying flat, but the fish proved elusive at first. Two hit the lures and had been lost. Pomranka was jazzed as he reeled in one with excitement.

"Oh yeah," he said several times as Hietala coached him on the fine art of keeping the rod tip up so as to not create slack and lose the fish.

When it got close, Chris Redding was ready with a net. Redding, the MCBA president, agreed to work the deck as first mate for Hietala.

A chorus of whoops went up in unison as the fish was boated.

"Can you feel the love?" Redding shouted with a big smile.

Bev Pomranka was tickled to see it. She moved in close with her camera to shoot photos for their scrapbook.

"This is something I would love to see more of," she said.

Bev, a GRWSA board member, got involved with the 29-year-old organization four years ago after watching a wheelchair basketball game.

"I got hooked," she said. "I'd never seen anything like it before and wanted to get involved."

The GRWSA organizes activities such as wheelchair basketball, racing, golf, tennis, sled hockey and skiing for disabled athletes. Between 200 to 300 people are enrolled in the programs. Most participants have spinal cord injuries, she said.



Captain Brian Hietala, left, and Alan Pomranka show off a 12-pound salmon Pomranka reeled in during a Wheelchair Sports Association outing on Lake Michigan.

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outdoor activities, whether it's fishing or kayaking, stuff that the average Joe could enjoy. Not everyone can do wheelchair tennis."

Elsewhere on the lake, other wheelchair anglers were having a good time. They were out further in the lake in about 300 feet of water, where Tyler Anderson, an 18-year-old college student from Jenison, landed a 20-pound lake trout.

It was one of five fish, including a salmon and three steelhead, that he and John Kamsieckas, of Grand Rapids, landed while fishing on Reel Action, owned by Captain Tom Manthei. Fish the anglers didn't want were donated to the Helping Hands Ministry in Muskegon.

"This was great," Anderson said back at the dock. "I do a lot of inland fishing, but I've never caught a fish that big. It can't be beat."

Redding said the charter association members agreed to the trip because they wanted to give something back. He initially was approached by Alan Pomranka with the idea, but found it would take a bit of selling to get other captains to bite.

"We were initially concerned about how to get the guys on the boat and we don't have handicap accessible bathrooms," Redding said. "The captains had some reservations, but it all turned out nicely."

It helped, of course, that the weather had cooperated. Captain Greg Wehler, the owner of Code Blue Charters, said the day couldn't have gone more smoothly. Dennis Barton, of Hastings, and Suzi Egeler, of Belmont, joined him for the outing. Captain Paul Kick, of north Muskegon, volunteered to be the first mate.

The pair landed a brown trout, two steelhead and a king salmon.

"Even over catching fish, it was just a nice day for them," Wehler said. "I had my concerns about loading, but they obviously had been around boats. They had a way of sliding over the gunwales just fine."

Egeler, an avid wheelchair tennis player who was paralyzed 11 years ago in an accident, said she enjoyed the trip even though fishing is not something she generally enjoys.

"My dad used to drag me out on the family fishing trip, but my husband opened my e-mail and said, 'Honey, you have to do this,' " she said laughing. "I was at a tennis tournament and he was checking my e-mail for me. It was my decision to come, and it was a lot of fun."

Pomranka, who landed a salmon and steelhead, said he would like to see the GRWSA fishing program continue. He golfs and plays wheelchair basketball and hunts deer in the fall.



Tyler Anderson, above, wheels to shore after a morning fishing charter aboard Reel Action.

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Unlike competitive sports, fishing is an activity that a GRWSA member can do with his or her family, he said.

E-mail Howard Meyerson: hmeyerson@grpress.com

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Posted by **nhrapilot**

September 20, 2009, 10:04AM

What a great deal, it would be nice to see even more people do things like that for the disabled. People don't think about the every day things we do, that are a challenge to them. Thank You MCBA

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