

NATIONAL FISHERMAN'S 2001

Being a highliner is as much about who you are as it is what you do: Look at it this way: On a given day, most anyone can stumble onto a set of fish; with a highliner, it's expected.

In selecting highliners at *National Fisherman*, we seek fishermen who have exceeded expectations, not just with what they put on

the dock, but with what they give to their industry.

Tim Thomas of Edmonds, Wash., who is captain of one of the world's most modern fishing vessels, learned reverence for the sea and its fish from the old fishermen who were his mentors, and it is reflected in the low bycatch rate aboard his command,

GINNY GOBLIRSCH — 'No' is not an option

ACTIVIST
Otter Rock, Ore.



PHOTOS COURTESY GINNY GOBLIRSCH

GINNY GOBLIRSCH got her start on her family's boat, the EZC, fishing for albacore, crab, salmon and halibut.

Ginny Goblirsch doesn't take no for an answer. Fishermen and their families up and down the West Coast benefit from her refusal to be turned down, as well as by Goblirsch's work as an Oregon Sea Grant marine extension agent and a fisherman's wife.

"To this day I'm extremely proud of the fact that I am a fisherman's wife. These guys take an enormous risk, so when I see misinformation out there, whether it's in my local community or statewide, I like to try and clarify issues," Goblirsch explains.

Goblirsch works as a liaison for the Oregon Sea Grant to open communication between the commercial fishing industry and various agencies. She presents information and gives advice about issues of importance to fishermen, and encourages the agencies to understand and actively respond to these concerns.

"The more I got to know the industry, the more I respected and admired the people in it. These guys have their Ph.D. on the ocean, and I think the scientists and others

lose a lot by not incorporating fishermen's knowledge in their research," Goblirsch says.

Goblirsch's husband, Herb, a veteran of the South Pacific albacore fishery, now fishes closer to home in Newport, Ore. Initially impressed by Ginny's love and knowledge of the fisheries, he remains dazzled by her ability to work with people and get things done.

"This leadership ability is in her genes," Herb says. "Ginny would make a success at whatever she did, but here she is in Newport as a fisherman's wife. She's very diplomatic and the most ethical person I know."

Goblirsch began her 30-year career in the industry in the usual way: as a deckhand. She helped catch, clean and ice

fish on the Goblirsch family boat, the EZC, which works the albacore, crab, salmon and halibut fisheries. After their first daughter was born, she devoted her efforts to supporting the family business from home, raising the children and working for Sea Grant.

The former deckhand helped establish one of the first fisherman-approved Sea Safety and Survival training courses in the country, in spite of balking from industry insiders. Warned she'd never get a fisherman to sit down for one day of safety training, much less three or four, Goblirsch took a different approach and made it a success; since 1991, over 900 fishermen have completed the workshop.

"I can't say that the fishermen were asking for safety training, but their wives were," she says. "When survival suits first started coming out, they started getting them as Christmas presents from their wives. And that's something I've advised people in other states. When they have trouble getting safety classes going, I say, 'Work with fishermen's wives.'"

"I disagree with the notion that fishermen aren't safety conscious," Goblirsch

Guard refused the request. But Goblirsch got the community on board, and within six months, Newport had its own Coast Guard helicopter station.

"Watching the helicopters fly over still brings a tear to my eye. It has saved many people in the years it has been here. It's probably the thing I'm most proud of," Goblirsch says.

She secured funding for the "Fishing Families Project," a collaboration with the Women's Coalition for Pacific Fishing, which offers information and advice for fishing families on topics ranging from budgeting to issues of separation. The project offers support to and recognition of the fishermen's wives who play an integral role in the family business by doing the books, running errands, raising children and holding the home together while their husbands are at sea.

Goblirsch is keenly aware of the bleak situation facing West Coast fishing families, but refuses to succumb to it.

"The industry is now going through a transition. It doesn't mean the industry is dying, it means it's changing. It's a very important difference. It means a lot of pain

for some people who are put out of business. They need enough information to make a decision, sooner rather than later, about whether they're going to stay in or get out."

Herb and Ginny Goblirsch led the pack in adjusting to this shift 18 years ago when they experienced a significant decline in tuna prices. By changing their focus from mass volume to a narrow market appreciative of quality and nutrition, they leveled off the fishery's peaks and valleys. They created their own label,

"Oregon's Choice Gourmet Albacore," which now also offers salmon and crab. Herb Goblirsch designed the label. The successful mom-and-pop operation includes help from daughters Sueanna and Samantha.

Goblirsch's faith in the industry and tireless work on behalf of its participants has created legions of gains for grateful West Coast fishermen. Her biggest support, however, remains her husband.

"She just doesn't stop," says Herb Goblirsch, laughing. "Oh, that Ginny. She's always off helping fishermen somewhere."

— Jennifer Karuza



HIGHLINERS

the Northern Jaeger, and other factory trawlers.

Jamie Ross is a true believer in wild-caught Alaska salmon. Described as “intelligent and progressive” by Gov. Tony Knowles, Ross of Homer, Alaska, is involved with numerous fishing groups and serves on the board of the Alaska Salmon Marketing Institute.

For Ginny Goblirsch, family matters. And for her, all fishermen are family. Goblirsch keeps herself going full time in support of her family’s albacore boat, the EZC, and as an extension agent with Oregon Sea Grant, and has been a leader of safety, insurance and other initiatives.

MARKETER
Homer, Alaska



JOEL GAY PHOTOS

JAMIE ROSS - Market control is the goal

Run into Jamie Ross along the docks and chances are good he’ll open with a story about a storm. “You should have seen the blow we got caught in at Chignik last summer,” he begins, or maybe he’ll describe a memorable trip from his home port of Homer, Alaska, to Sitka, where he fishes for herring each spring: “I was only a couple hundred feet off the beach running in 10 feet of water, but it was blowing so hard that there was a 3-foot chop and lots of spray — perfect icing conditions.”

But sit down with Ross long enough and he’ll segue into the yarn about a bigger storm brewing along the Alaska coastline, one whose waves have rocked the economic viability of Alaska’s commercial fisheries past their righting arms and left fishermen treading in financial woes.

Markets. Everything rides on the health of markets these days, says Ross, who has watched ex-vessel prices for herring, crab and salmon slip into the tanks since the 1990s. What irks him most is he believes Alaska’s seafood is the world’s finest —

and that a populace educated and introduced to new product forms will consume and propagate a healthy demand for seafood. Which would bring stability to ex-vessel prices.

Born in Tarrytown, N.Y., Ross, 39, moved to Montana with his parents when he was 10. He came to Alaska in 1982 after high school in the hope that a summer job on a fishing boat would defray his college expenses. He found work at McDonald’s in Anchorage, but hounded folks at the local job service until he landed a job processing herring at Port Moller, on the north shore of the Alaska Peninsula. It wasn’t exactly a job on a fishing boat, but it was a critical first step, Ross says, “because I thought that was the best way to meet fishermen.”

His strategy succeeded. He worked at the Peter Pan Seafoods plant through the summer, then landed a three-week stint aboard a salmon gillnetter near the end of the season. The fish-picking brought the revelation of a dream: that he wanted to become a life-long commercial fisherman

instead of an astronaut or a fighter pilot.

“I swore to my skipper that this was what I wanted to do and would have my own boat someday,” Ross says. “My skipper laughed hysterically.”

A year later, Ross found work aboard

his boat. At the same time, Ross had become involved in a half dozen state and local fishing organizations, from the ubiquitous United Fishermen of Alaska to the Alaska Herring Seiners Association, which he founded.

Earlier this year, Alaska Gov. Tony Knowles appointed Ross to the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute’s board. Since then Ross has met with Lt. Gov. Fran Ulmer and spoken at the Governor’s Salmon Forum, a think tank formed in the hope of restoring the economy of the state’s salmon fisheries.

“Jamie Ross has impressed me over the years as an intelligent and progressive fisherman with a keen interest

in the marketing side of the business,” Knowles says, “which is just what the commercial fishing industry needs to meet the challenges of today.”

Last summer, Ross and a few of his fellow seiners founded the Chignik Seafood Producers Alliance, which will attempt to organize the 100-member seine fishery into a cooperative, which would eventually purchase its own processing plant. The plans in winter were to garner sales commitments for flash-frozen, boneless sockeye fillets from retailers targeting high-end domestic markets.

“The co-op and community of Chignik gains power and control,” Ross says, “not the fish farmers or the processors.”

If the venture flies, Ross believes it could provide the template to fisheries in other communities around Alaska. “We’re trying to create a high-end, niche market product that we can feel proud of again,” Ross says. “We need to get back to where we should be, creating a quality product instead of cat food.”

Though turning the markets around will take time, Ross is convinced it’s worth the effort in the long run, that the fisheries and the lifestyle are worthy of the trouble.

“To me, it is not a job, but a way of life,” he says. “I see so many people bored to tears at their jobs, living miserable lives, hating their jobs, living in places they can’t stand.” — *Charlie Ess*



JAMIE ROSS has invested his life in commercial fishing, including his 53-foot combination boat, the Shadowfax.

an 80-foot trawler. He gillnetted as a deckhand the following two summers, then bought a bowpicker of his own and began fishing sockeye salmon near Cordova. The following year, he bought a bigger boat and a salmon permit to fish the areas on both sides of the Alaska Peninsula.

A streak of good years followed. Alaska’s waters yielded record catches for Ross and other Alaska fishermen, and demand for salmon and herring products in Japanese markets commanded ex-vessel prices that would become legendary.

It could have been Ross’ turn to laugh, if not for a dark squall building on the horizon. The fisheries had entered the 1990s. Fishermen watched the threat of farmed salmon become reality; the Japanese economy began to flutter; and Alaska’s salmon and herring industries found themselves in a delicate predicament.

By then, Ross had tied up his life’s savings in various salmon and herring permits and in the construction of his 53-foot aluminum combination boat, the Shadowfax. “I have invested my entire life in commercial fishing,” he says, adding that he personally spent eight months working on the construction of

TRADITIONALIST
Edmonds, Wash.



TIM THOMAS is the only skipper the 340-foot pollock and whiting catcher-processor Northern Jaeger has known.

JOHN VAN AMERONGEN PHOTOS

TIM THOMAS - A pollock pioneer

At 44, Tim Thomas is hardly old enough to be called an old-timer. But from his vantage point at the top of his profession, as captain of the 340-foot pollock and whiting catcher-processor Northern Jaeger, he can look back over a tenure in the fishery that goes back all the way to its birth.

A fair number of Thomas' current crew of 125 might not even know what the term "Americanization" meant to their fishery. But 15 years ago, Thomas put himself in the thick of the transition from foreign to domestic access to fish stocks inside the U.S. 200-mile limit. Attracted to Alaska by the quality of vessels he saw being built for its fisheries, he started out there working

on a king crabber. Then, a period of recuperation following an encounter on deck with a heavy pot gave him the opportunity to earn his master's license. After that, it was trawling all the way.

Starting with a season aboard the Half Moon Bay at the beginning of the joint-venture period, in which American catcher boats delivered their catch offshore to foreign processing ships, Thomas moved on to one of the first American factory trawlers, the Arctic Trawler. Next came a stint on the Mark 1; and then, with the catcher-processor fleet rapidly expanding, he signed on with American Seafoods. A shift during pollock roe season on that company's Northern Eagle led to an offer

to run the Northern Jaeger in the spring of 1990. This makes Thomas one of the few original skippers remaining in the fleet. "I took her on her maiden voyage," he says, "and I'm still here."

Thomas has been a strong advocate for his fishery, and he's particularly proud of its low bycatch rate: 6/10 of one percent for the 2000 season, according to his figures. Further, the utilization rate — the amount of the catch that stays on board for processing — is up to 99.4 percent.

One of the ways the catcher-processor fleet has been able to reach this low level of wastage has been the move to cooperative harvesting arrangements. By eliminating the competitive race for fish, co-ops give participating fishermen the time to fish selectively — to move to other areas when they encounter non-target species.

Thomas and the Northern Jaeger divide their time between fishing for Alaska pollock and for whiting along the lower coast. He was quick to see the advantages when the whiting fleet formed the first cooperative in 1997. "That's when I first saw the horizon, the maturity of the fishery," he says. "Under that arrangement, you could take the time to move, and avoid catching other species over their suggested cap levels." Subsequently, he was a solid supporter of the move to replicate the cooperative process for the Alaska pollock fleet,

which went into effect in 2000.

Though the time he's spent testifying before the management councils counts for a lot, Thomas cites another tool that's helped in the drive to make his fishery all that it can be: the fishing knowledge that's passed on from one generation to the next. Beginning with the old

timers he knew when he first started out at age 15 as a skiff fisherman in the nearshore area around Cape Cod, Mass., Thomas developed a profound respect for the expertise accumulated by those who had preceded him. That respect only grew when he first traveled to the West Coast and began working with an established group of trawlers from Anacortes, Wash. The local knowledge of the habits of various fish stocks which he learned from those fishermen, he says, turned out to be transferable to the larger-scale fisheries he's now involved in. "I found we could bridge the gap between the old guys and what we were doing," he says. "A lot of our success on the Northern Jaeger in avoiding rockfish derives from those relationships with the old draggers."

Given his respect for the wisdom that's gained on the grounds, it's no surprise that Thomas believes fishermen's reports should be given much more credence in the management process, and he welcomes recent moves by the National Marine Fisheries Service to do just that.

Thomas returns with his family each year to the estuaries and marshes off Cape Cod. There, many of the men he knew in his first summers as a teenager, gathering clams and bay scallops and working a small skiff trawl for flounder, are still fishing. "We try to go back every year," Thomas says, "and take the children out on the flats, just to see what the old fishermen have to say." — Richard Bard



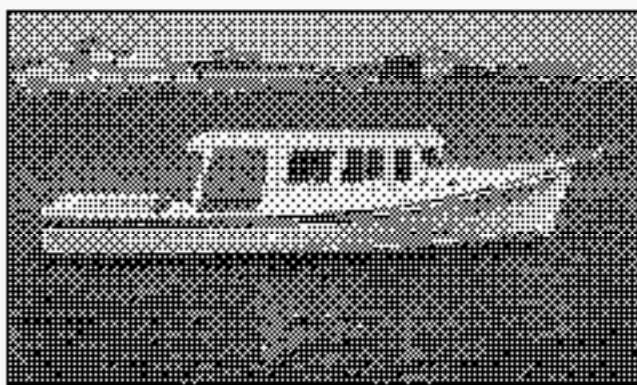
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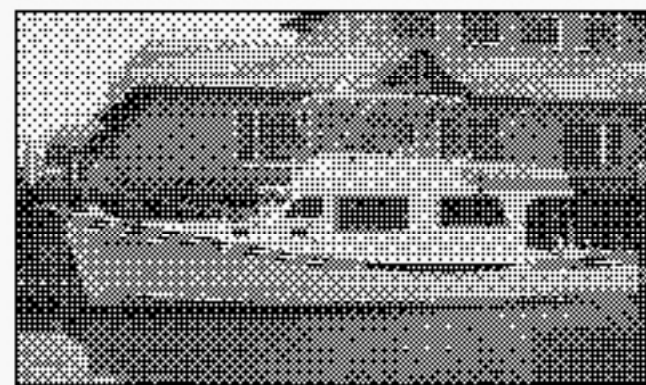
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