

Those who have fished Lake Vermillion know how the 40-mile-long, island-filled jewel in northeast Minnesota can produce life-long memories on any given cast, but for Jeff Kolodzinski, his first trip to Vermillion produced a career. He was 13 years old and the 12-hour drive from his home in Gary, Indiana, with his uncle was a rite of passage. "Kolo," as his friends know him, had caught various species of fish from the ponds and streams around Gary, but at Vermillion his fishing found a different gear. Walleye, muskie, pike, and smallmouth were new to him, and from that moment on, the steel mills in Gary lost a potential employee.

This was 1983, and everyone in Kolodzinski's family, from his great grandparents who had immigrated from Poland to his father, had been a steelworker. Kolo might have followed the same path had his mother not helped him learn to read by giving



him copies of Fishing Facts, In Fisherman, and even the Bass Pro Shops catalog. In 2019, Kolo turned 50 and will complete his ninth year as a Brand Manager for Johnson Outdoors. He has fished throughout the world and is one of the best-known personalities in fishing, primarily because of his unquenchable passion for the sport.

"I remember the first largemouth bass I caught," he begins. "I was six or seven years old and was fishing a worm under a bobber at night. The bobber went down and when I set the hook, I felt the fish jump and heard the splash, but I couldn't see it. After what seemed forever, I pulled the fish into the lantern light. When I saw it, my heart went through the roof and my knees started knocking and shaking because I knew it was the biggest fish I'd ever caught.

"I landed the bass and took it straight to the old-timer who gave me the nightcrawlers. I was never so proud to show off a four-pound fish."

Sometime later, while fishing from the steel mill pier on Lake Michigan, Kolodzinski saw another fisherman far down the pier catch and land a steelhead. He'd heard steelhead jumped and fought hard, but he'd never seen one, so he walked down the pier just to look at the fish.

"I asked to see it," continues Kolodzinski, "and when I lifted the stringer, the sun glistened off the silvery scales like a strobe light. That did something to me, just like that first bass, or later, like the trip to Lake Vermillion. It was a pivotal moment in my life. That fish represented a whole new frontier of fishing for me, and I wanted to catch one. It not only re-fueled my passion for fishing, but sent it in a new direction for a totally different species."

Surprisingly, Kolodzinski did not study biology or fisheries management while attending Indiana University. Instead, he majored in geology, because of his love of the earth sciences. Nevertheless, fishing was not far away; he was guiding for steelhead to help make ends meet. That's when he read a story about the World Freshwater Angling Championships, an annual competition in Europe that began in 1952. By chance, he met the American coach, Mick Thill, at a Chicago sports show, and Thill took him under wing. In 1991, as a 21-year old college student, Kolodzinski was named a member of the five-man United States team that competed in Szeged, Hungary.

Over the next 13 years, he represented the United States in seven World Championships, and while he never won a gold medal, he did come home and share what he learned in speeches and seminars, particularly to young anglers, always educating his audience on how to catch more fish...and he loved every moment of it.







1996 Peschiera del Garda, Italy

1997 Velence, Hungary

1998 Zagreb, Croatia

1998 Toledo, Spain

Szeged, Hungary

Coruche, Portugal

2004 Willebroek, Belgium

Fishing is a language that unites people. I'm so grateful and honored to have represented the United States in 7 Freshwater Fishing World Championships. Each nation added a unique life experience. I love my country and I never thought a Polish kid from Gary, IN could do anything like that.

Q&A

FTR: I understand that one of your speaking engagements led to meeting a person who's been instrumental to your career.

Kolo: It sure did. I was speaking at a fish fry one night and was introduced to United States Army Major Tom Goodrich, the founder of "Fishing for Life," a charitable organization that, among its numerous programs, finds mentors for children of families of our veterans who have lost loved ones while serving our nation.

I told him I had this crazy gift for catching a lot of fish. I offered to fish for a day to kick-off a fundraiser that would appeal to local companies that might donate \$1 for each fish I caught. My vison of the event took the form of a relaxing afternoon on the water, but Tom had a different idea. He convinced me to make it 24 hours. That was 2004, and the Marathon Man event was born. We were able to raise about \$10,000 for the organization.

FTR: Where did it go from there?

Kolo: One of the Fishing For Life board members asked if there was a world record for the number of fish caught in 24 hours. Guinness had none, so we set out to establish the record. In 2011, I set the Guinness World Record for catching 2,143 fish in 24 hours. Always trying to improve, I've been able to beat that record a handful of times and will try again on September 11, 2020.

FTR: That's just short 90 fish an hour!

Is that how you became known as the "Marathon Man"?

Kolo: Yes. We broadcast live online and on Facebook for all 24 hours. I try to break the record each year. I think 3,000 fish can be caught, but it's going take a lot to get there. Most importantly though, the program has introduced tens of thousands of families to the incredible sport of fishing, and the 24 hour "marathons" have helped families of fallen veterans. I'm very proud to be part of this effort, and it all stems from catching fish.

FTR: How do you catch that many fish?

Kolo: The best combination I have found is to use a 10-foot pole, with 10 feet of fluorocarbon line, a barbless hook, a small Thill float, and live bait. The majority of fish I catch are panfish, so I don't spend much time actually playing them.

FTR: Let's back up a little, now. You graduated from Indiana University in 1993. Were you ever a geologist?

Kolo: Not really. Geology requires a strong background in math, and I hated math. Just as I was graduating from college, Gander Mountain built a retail store not far from where I was living in northwest Indiana, and in October 1994 they hired me to be the manager of the fishing department.

FTR: Where did that lead?

Kolo: I served in quite a few roles to fuel the growth of the new stores, interviewing potential employees, setting up the stores, and training staff. Over time, I was involved in some capacity in 60 different Gander Mountain stores. The company

grew quickly, and at the same time, I started getting job offers from other companies. In early 2007, I accepted an offer from one of my business mentors, Jeff Marble of Frabill.

FTR: The company that made the little yellow and white minnow bucket?

Kolo: Yes, the same company. They had hit a sales ceiling and couldn't break through, so they wanted to add a marketing component to what they were doing. I initiated some new ideas, updated the logo, and we re-branded the company and re-energized an already solid team. We increased consumer confidence so that we went from selling \$6 minnow buckets to offering a set of \$600 performance outerwear that's still a standard among hardcore ice anglers. Over the next four or five years we grew the company 35%. We made fishing with live bait and ice fishing cool...no pun intended.

FTR: When did you begin working with Johnson Outdoors?

Kolo: I was hired on October 31, 2011. They had a position open as brand manager for Humminbird depthfinders. I bought my own Humminbird in 1989 for a trip to Lake Vermillion so I could find crappies, smallmouth, and walleyes. Instantly, I became a better angler, so stewarding the Humminbird brand was a great honor. Over the next several years, we introduced some great new products that changed what anglers could see and how they fished. We won Best of Show awards in the marine electronics division at ICAST for eight straight years.

FTR: To what do you attribute that kind of success?

Kolo: Throughout our assembly lines, engineering, and even throughout the marketing department, we have people who love fishing. When you have that, you inherently build better products because everyone understands the needs and problems anglers face. I am truly blessed, not only to have a job I love but also to be able to work with passionate anglers who also happen to be really skilled at their jobs.

FTR: What is the biggest development you've seen in depthfinders? **Kolo:** Overall, the advances in digital technology have had the greatest impact. Incorporating GPS in sonar has been a

huge difference-maker, too. Before my time, anglers had to line up two pine trees, a cabin, and an island to get on the right fishing spot, but now they just push a waypoint button.

Side-Imaging, which Humminbird brought to market in 2006, has also been a huge difference-maker. Since then, we have continued to make the images cleaner and sharper, because our whole purpose at Humminbird is to reveal the unknown of the sub-surface world.

Today anglers can see a full 360 degrees under their boat. The detail in MEGA Imaging lets anglers distinguish the head and tail of a fish and see which direction it's swimming.

FTR: Are Humminbird units still made in Eufaula, Alabama, where the company was started by Tom Mann more than 50 years ago?

Kolo: Yes, they are, and our Minn Kota trolling motors are still made in Mankato, Minnesota. This allows us to have much better control of our products but also to hire people who know and love fishing. When you do that, it shows in the product, and consumers can see the difference. The Minn Kota brand has sold nearly 11 million trolling motors now and has created an incredible brand following initiating dozens of innovations in trolling motors over the years.

FTR: How are new products developed at Johnson Outdoors?

Molo: Improving boat control has been one of our big passions for the past 10 years. We integrated the trolling motor and depthfinder so an angler can follow a breakline or stay in a certain depth—a type of autopilot chauffeur. That kind of innovation comes from all of us. We don't say "It's impossible." We say, "Let's figure it out."

On the Minn Kota side, we know not everyone is born with a sea captain's experience, so we put a GPS in the trolling motor so anglers can keep their boats wherever they want in any kind of water. "Spot-Lock" has been revolutionary and has enabled anglers to fish with greater ease and freedom than ever before.

FTR: It seems you travel quite a bit for work. What do you accomplish on the road?

Kolo: It's important to get away from the office to understand

I never served in our military. I sure wish I had. None the less I'm compelled to help those who make our great nation possible. The Marathon Man Event is the way to express my gratitude for all those who serve past, present, and future.





"I've been a part of 11 Best in category awards in hardlines and soft goods. Bringing recognition back to the factory in the way of awards lets us celebrate the teamwork between the engineering, sales and customer service groups. I'm just the guy who gets to market the great stuff they turn out."





regional angling, get angler data, and to find ways to build that into products.

I recently got back from testing our new 87-inch trolling motor for offshore sailfish and snapper fishing. We landed nine sailfish and a handful of other species, validating the hunch of several top captains who felt that a trolling motor could positively impact offshore saltwater fishing.

FTR: At Frabill, you helped to develop a number of categories, including ice fishing. How large is ice fishing in your planning at Johnson Outdoors?

Kolo: Ice fishing is really growing. It's leaps and bounds bigger this year over last year, and we're devoting a lot of energy to it. We have a unique product, the Vexilar, that ice fishermen everywhere are using. We tweaked our unit with GPS, so an angler can mark waypoints in the summer, then fish those same places in the winter. We have great LakeMaster maps, too, that we put into our Helix 7 model, which won Best Electronics at ICAST 2019.

From my days at Frabill, and now with Johnson Outdoors, I've been blessed to be recognized with more than 10 industry Best in Show awards over the years. It's really gratifying to bring those awards back to the factory and celebrate the accomplishments with everyone who had a hand in it.

FTR: As the Brand Manager for the Johnson Outdoors Fishing Division, what do you see as the company's greatest challenge?

Kolo: Our single greatest challenge is to never be satisfied with our yesterdays. We fiercely protect our team culture because without each other, we're nothing. On the practical side, keeping the sport of fishing going from generation to genera-

tion and sharing the excitement of catching a fish any species and any size—is a challenge. The easier we can make the fishing experience successful, the better we'll be.

FTR: What challenges do you see for the industry?

Kolo: Historically, independent dealers built the fishing industry. If you went into a tackle store and asked which lure the fish were biting, the guy behind the counter actually knew and would sell you the right product. Today, so many people behind the counter don't have that knowledge or experience, and that's a challenge everyone in the industry faces.

FTR: What is your favorite type of fishing?

Kolo: I'm still a six-year-old at heart. I can be perfectly happy catching anything, from bluegills to billfish, but if you want to pin me down, I really love to catch tarpon because of their acrobatics, and redfish because they're so tasty.

FTR: Any parting thoughts?

Kolo: The fishing industry is known for healthy cultures and strong teams. I never—I mean never—would have come this far without the grace of God and the scores of incredibly talented people with whom I collaborated. I'm grateful to each of them and remain as passionate as ever to journey together to reach the next milestone.

You can find Jeff Kolodzinski on the water or sitting on a bank trying to set a new world record this September 11.

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From sunfish to swordfish, I enjoy catching every specie. Every bite and every experience are unique, producing an altogether new memory that only gets better when shared with friends and loved ones.





