

“Plug Builder’s of the Jersey Shore: Profile of Lefty Carr”

By DJ Muller

When it comes to Freehold New Jersey, two things come to mind, Bruce Springsteen’s home town and the hometown of the mighty “Lefty” swimming plug. I visited Lefty Carr a couple weeks back to learn a little bit about a man, whose name alone strikes fear into the striped bass. As I stood in line at the Asbury Park Fishing Club Flea Market last year waiting to get in, I noticed that another line had formed as well. “What is that line for?” I asked. “Oh that’s the line for Lefty’s,” some one fired back. I suddenly had this very funny feeling inside me that I might be missing something. I may have slept a little too long on this day. Needless to say I was too late for a Lefty; they don’t last long at the market especially when there is a line like there was. If it wasn’t for my fiancé’s debonair style and smooth mannerly, “Can I cut in front of you?” I would have never got one.

Lefty grew up in Philadelphia, his father would bring the family to the Long Branch every weekend and they would fish for fluke off the pier. As Lefty got older he would take his 11 foot Calcutta rod on the subway, then the bus, then the train to Long Branch where he would fish the entire weekend and then go home “smelling like a fish.” From fishing the pier Lefty evolved to the surf, where the fire still burns today. His plug building roots are deep...and long. They stretch all the way back to when he was a young man in his 30’s fishing the back side of Island Beach State park in the spring. He recalls the only lure that the bass were hitting was a “two dollar pencil popper,” stated Lefty, and “I was working with three or four kids at the time and I couldn’t afford a two dollar popper. I said this is ridiculous, I have to do something different.” So he started making bucktail jigs to help make the two ends meet. This was the beginning of his lure making hobby. Shortly after that time they started catching a lot of bass on the Creek Chub Swimmers. “That was a good plug,” said Lefty. They went out of business and Lefty had the idea that maybe he could make his own plugs. He had his own boat, so he started messing around with trolling plugs. He would “shave them to the way he wanted them to swim.” This led him to cutting his own, down in his basement. He did not have the high tech ventilation equipment which is used now, so he would just put a curtain around himself and started cutting away. He said he would just cover himself with saw dust, “it was just tremendous” he remembers. After seven or eight years of fooling around with wood and carving plugs that he finally came up with the plug that he has today. The plugs he made, he made out of necessity, he made plugs to use for himself and a few friends. The plugs then began catching on with other surfcasters so he began to make more when he had the free time.

As far as influences are concerned, Lefty claims that “necessity was the mother of invention.” Trial and error led the way to what he now produces today. His first wood plug was a popper, probably the easiest of the woods to make, then he ended up getting some steel lips from Tony Spina, and he started making wood steel-lipped swimmers. One day Tony was trolling one of Lefty’s trolling plugs when he caught a healthy 53 pound bass. Lefty’s plugs were proven! Tony Spina, as many know, was a plug builder himself and owned Lex Lures for a while before selling the company a few years back.

Lefty takes great pride in his plugs, and he should. His plugs are unique. When Lefty started making his plugs, there were no others like his, they were trend setters. The difference being, his contemporaries drill holes for the through-wire and where the swivels attach the through-wire to the hooks. Lefty seals these holes with epoxy, the plugs have no openings in which water can enter the plug thus water logging it. The plug stays the same weight throughout the plugging session. The other Danny-type plugs have a tendency to get heavier the longer they are in the water and then the plugs' action changes. It then needs to be adjusted mid-session. During the day this is not a big deal, but at night this can be frustrating not being able to see the action of the plug.

The process of making these plugs is time consuming. Each plug gets handled "probably around 60 to 70 times," during the construction process, says Lefty. Turned from 2" X 2" cedar spindle, the wood then goes through a tenuous and rigorous transformation that results in a beautiful final product, one that is almost too nice to throw at a measly fish, especially if a bluefish gets hold of one. This has to be a surfcasters greatest fear: having your Lefty mangled by a blue. Lefty will have a few of his plugs available at the upcoming Asbury Park Fishing Flea Market, in Asbury, on March 13. He does them in the standard colors of yellow, white, black, and chartreuse, and in five and six inch. Lefty swears by the "chartreuse top and bottom with pearl sides." He says this color pattern will catch when all else fails. He says that throwing this color to the outskirts of a peanut bunker school when bass are feeding will certainly draw a strike. I look forward to giving one the test next fall. Lefty is a man who's call to the surf is still heard loud and clear. He would much rather be working his swimmer on the beach in Asbury or Sea Bright rather than turning plugs down in his basement. He doesn't sacrifice fishing time to make plugs, "I like to fish too much, to make them any other time. So when there is nothing to do, as a hobby, I play around and I take care of it that way. It keeps me busy." He has, in his day, beached a 38 pounder on one of his plugs. One afternoon a couple of years ago he was plugging a jetty when he reminded himself, "you dummy cast along the beach," he did and sure enough a 25 pounder took it to his liking. "Always take a couple casts...along the beach," Lefty reminded me. Typical surfcaster cleverly disguised as a plug builder.