

Plug Builders of the Jersey Shore: Profile of Gene Amato

By DJ Muller

I have absolutely no idea what the Asbury Park Fishing Club does behind closed doors, but one thing I do know for sure, that club has a collection of custom plug makers that produce some of the best plugs that I have ever seen...they fall second to no one! Last year I had the good fortune of interviewing two of their top dogs, Billy McFadden and Lefty Carr. I was able to see first hand the plug making process and the time and quality that goes into the plugs they make...perhaps there is some strange form of osmosis going on there.

This year I ran up to the small blue collar town of Keansburg, a town that keeps a watchful eye on the mighty Raritan Bay and I caught up with another APFC plug master "Big" Gene Amato. Big Gene has come up with one of the hot pencil poppers of the last couple years, and his timing could not be better! Jersey surfcasters have had the good fortune of having adult bunker back along the beach during the spring run, something that has been sorely missed for a good number of years. When big schools of big fatbacks run tight to the beach, so do big stripers...so do good fishermen. Big bass require big offerings, and this is just what Big Gene is producing right now, top quality, BIG pencil poppers.

Gene started flirting with plug-making back in the mid-80's, doing it mainly just to quell his own curiosities. "I wanted to see if I could do it. I primarily made them for me and then a couple of my buddies...in the last three years their popularity has really taken off."

Big Gene will have his "Fish On" plugs for sale again this year at the Asbury Park Fishing Club Annual Fishing Flea Market in March. The same place I bought my first two Fish On pencil poppers a couple years ago.

Gene started building his plugs in a small, uninsulated shed beside his house. As he got more into it, the shed grew as did the popularity of his plugs. Now it is a comfortable and impressive little work shop, with heat, air conditioning, vacuum system, cable TV, phone, it's no wonder he spends so much time in the shed, thus it is no wonder he is getting so good at what he does. In his early plug-making days his main plug was, as it is today, the pencil popper. Pencils and Polaris poppers are his specialty. But the shed must be better than one might think because he has now come up with an absolutely deadly-looking 11" needlefish, which has 'big bass' written all over it.

I have always ascertained that how a plug produces is much more important than what it looks like, or how it is marketed. Fish On plugs are big producers, just ask Brian Biedinger about that. Brian is no stranger to monster bass, as he tamed a 60 pounder two years ago. It was last June when Brian snapped one of Gene's pencil and he proceeded to launch it towards one of the huge bunker schools; his efforts paid off and he was rewarded with a trophy 43 pound bass that apparently also liked Big Gene's pencil poppers.

Gene told me of a guy that he met on the beach a short time back, his name was Joe, after a short discussion, Gene gave Joe a pencil to try out. Joe took him up on the offer and quickly fell in love with the lure and its result. They have since forged a good working

relationship. As a Cape Cod regular Joe found the pencils super-productive. Last year alone he bought over a hundred of them from Big Gene. What does that tell you?? It tells me that there is no doubt in this man's mind about what he wants. Having seen some of the pictures that Joe gave Gene of good days he had and his sons had on the Cape, I can see why he would buy so many. You have to have confidence in the lure you are using.

On one visit Gene showed Joe one of his new projects, one of several new needlefish that he was working on. Upon close examination, Joe said, "Sweet, I'll take them all!" Gene had to slam the brakes on and only give up a couple. He was not quite ready to part with the lot yet. All in all the actions of Joe speaks volumes. Some sort of a lunatic? Maybe, but doubtful, more so a man that knows the ropes of bassdom and a man that knows what he wants. Hey what can I say?

On a personal note, as soon as I set my eyes on the 11" needle hanging there in the workshop, before I could catch myself, the words fell from my mouth, "Hey you got any more of these? Are you going have them for sale at the show?" Need I say more?

For the flea market Gene will have 7 different plugs on his table. The large pencil which hits the ruler at 9" and the scale at 3 ounces, a medium sized 7" pencil, 2 ounces, and a small 6" pencil that goes 1.5 ounces.

He will also have two Polaris poppers, the large one that weighs 2.5 ounces and the smaller one at 1.5 ounces. Last but not least, he will offer two needlefish lures; the large one which goes 11 inches and weighs over 4 ounces, and a smaller needle that goes 8" and weighs 2 ounces. The big needle may not be a big producer here in Jersey but when you move north to Montauk, Rhode Island, the Islands, or the Cape, the needle's stock will rise substantially. Also, it is not a bad thought by any means, to throw it to the spring bunker schools and see what exactly finds interest in it.

Besides the ability to catch fish, one of the things that I really like about Amato's plugs is that he puts a single tail hook on the back hook of his plugs. The hook sizes are relative to the size of the lures, but the big needles and pencils sport a 6/0 Siwash salmon hook, dressed in bucktail, all of which he ties himself.

A man that loves the pull of a striper on his line, a man that pursues the mighty lineside pretty darn hard, has found a gratifying substitute for the cold winter months in the absence of the bass. When bass can not be found, he is still getting it done in another way, by building beautiful plugs for others to use and enjoy as much as he does.