

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

Aboard the Dumper Dan

It was 5 a.m. on Lake Michigan and number one son Vinnie and I were aboard the Dumper Dan trolling for salmon north of Sheboygan. Dumper Dan is a 26-foot charter boat owned and skippered by Capt. Dan Welsch, whose father started him fishing these waters when Dan was seven.

His father, who was not a charter captain and fished for pleasure, ran only six lines off his boat. Captain Welsch, who fishes for pleasure and business, has rigged his highlines, downriggers, skis and dipsey-divers in such a pattern that he can run 17 lines off Dumper Dan.

With his blond, sun-bleached hair, his blond mustache and his deep tan, the slender, agile Welsch, who is a Sheboygan native, could pass for a California surfer.

He resembles Robin Yount when Robin first came up with the Brewers, fresh from high school in California. Robin was 18 then; Capt. Dan Welsch just turned 20 this year. He passed the Coast Guard charter captain's test when he was 18 and was licensed then, making him one of the youngest captains around. He paid his dues out on Lake Michigan, learning the charter boat business from the water up.

He says that it's not all that unusual. Sheboygan, like many port cities, is full of youngsters who grow up in a hurry serving as mates on charter boats.

"When I was 12," he recalls, "I got on the Schrimpf Boat for a year, fishing with Capt. Gary Schrimpf. Then, when I was 13, I started with Capt. George Gahagan and I fished with him for four years as a mate. He's a real good charter captain and he got me going pretty good." Good enough to win the Salmon Super Derby in 1984 and 1986 against the best salmon stalkers in the business.

There are two other captains in Sheboygan who are younger than Dan Welsch, but they don't own their own boats yet and are still working as first mates. A boat can be a huge investment. Welsch has "about \$25,000" invested in Dumper Dan, a 26-foot Stamis, which he purchased from a private owner in Milwaukee after a long search. It's an I/O—an inboard outboard—with more space than you'd think there would be when everybody is yelling "FISH ON!"

When Vinnie and I were fighting salmon simultaneously, it seemed like we had all the room in the world on the boat. We never once crowded each other or got in the way of Joey, the mate. Joey isn't old enough to be in high school yet, but he's already built like a college lineman, or as Steady Eddy likes to say: "Like a brick smokehouse."

We trolled up the coast past the misty mouth of the Pigeon River. There were a dozen fishermen in waders, standing in the water, casting. One fisherman

was walking along the beach dragging a huge silver king.

"The kings have been in shallow," Capt. Dan had told us on the telephone. "Right offshore in 10 to 15 feet of water."

It's cheaper to fish Lake Michigan from shore, but fishing with a good charter captain can be a real bargain, too. On the Dumper Dan, that can work out to \$50 for a half-day's fishing. They call it a "half-day" but as Steady says, their clocks run on "salmon time."



"For morning charters," Capt. Dan says, "we leave the dock at 4:30 a.m. and we come back in at 11 a.m. For afternoon charters, we leave at 1:30 and come back in at 8 p.m. If you go out with a party of four people, that's \$200 for the charter, so you're paying \$50 each. Of course, that can be morning or afternoon.

"I can carry eight people on my boat, including the mate and myself, so if you have a party of five people, that's \$225 for the charter. If you have a party of six, that's \$250. A whole-day charter is just double the half-day."

The Dumper Dan also runs special mini-charters—"a half of a half-day charter"—of three hours duration. This season, Capt. Dan has had more than 75 charters of all types and has

booked 40 more. As I watched Capt. Dan move like a halfback, putting out highlines, downriggers and outriggers, changing baits, setting hooks, setting drags, netting fish and giving Joey commands when Joey sat at the wheel, I realized that an astounding amount of energy was required for the job. Being young in this game can be a blessing. Being young and experienced can be the best of all possible worlds.

"Customers can see you're young," Capt. Dan admits, "but they can also see that you know what you're doing and that you're working hard to get them fish. I change baits. I change depths. I don't just sit there. There's about 75-80 charter boats working out of Sheboygan and of that number, there are about a dozen boats that come in with a *consistent* catch every day. We're definitely in that dozen."

The captain says that's why so he has so many repeat customers. They're from Chicago, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota, Kansas City—and they tell their friends about him.

"People see the fish," Capt. Dan says, "and they ask, 'Where did you get those?' That's the best advertising you can have."

That's true. Vinnie caught five king salmon—15-, 16-pounders. I caught four and a lake trout. You can contact the captain at 414-457-2940 or 414-457-7024. If the line is busy, it's probably just Steady. ■