

I may not be cut out for ice fishing. Or ice drinking

Two days inside the gong show that is the massive ice fishing derby on Lake Winnepesaukee

By [Billy Baker](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 19, 2021, 12:09 p.m.



Bob Tonkin coaxed a white perch out of a hole after it came loose off the line during the Lake Winnepesaukee ice fishing derby in Moultonborough, N.H. Nathan Klima for The Boston Globe

“No. I float because I’m fat,” he said with a huge laugh.

I’d been pointed toward Bob Tonkin, a 40-year-old from Canterbury, N.H., because I was looking for a colorful character to guide me through the frostbite bacchanal that is the Great Meredith Rotary Ice Fishing Derby. If you are one of those indoor people who does not enjoy freezing to death while

watching pickup trucks fall to the bottom of a lake, allow me to explain.

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A scene of Lake Winnepesaukee during the last day of the ice fishing derby in Meredith, N.H. Nathan Klima/For the Boston Globe

One of the largest events on the New Hampshire winter calendar, the derby is a two-day ice fishing competition that is centered on Lake Winnepesaukee but encompasses the entire state. Competitors can catch fish through the ice on any public lake or river in New Hampshire, as long as they can deliver their catch to derby headquarters on Meredith Bay by 3 p.m. on Sunday to be weighed. Thousands of anglers target seven different species of fish, and there is big money at stake, including a \$15,000 grand prize.



A smelt used for bait. Nathan Klima for The Boston Globe/The Boston Globe

Now in its 42nd year, the derby is famous for raising lots of money for scholarships and local programs, and infamous for just about everything else: raucous parties; snowmobiles, ATVs, and pickup trucks ripping across the ice; allegations of cheating (who's to say when that giant frozen fish was caught?); and, unfortunately, tragedy. In 2017, three snowmobilers died on the first day of the derby after crashing through thin ice on Winnepesaukee.

And so it was that I found myself staring out at the lake from the end of Moltonborough Neck on a frigid Saturday morning, dressed for the worst. I was wearing, in no particular order: every piece of clothing I own; an emergency whistle; two retractable ice picks, purchased the previous day at Cabela's, which were dangling on a string around my neck so I could claw myself back onto the ice if I went through; a backpack containing a length of sturdy rope; and, on top of it all, a bright red life jacket. In my mittens I was carrying a \$14 insulated bucket full of \$30 worth of smelt — Captain Bob had told me to pick up three dozen for bait — and a teeny tiny fishing rod that belongs to one of my kids.



Roddy Urquhart (back center), a friend of Bob Tonkin, gathered supplies from outside the bob house during the Lake Winnepesaukee ice fishing derby. Nathan Klima/For the Boston Globe

I survived the half-mile walk across the ice to the Bob Mahal, where Captain Bob met me on a massive ATV, wearing only a sweatshirt and a facial expression that said, in the nicest possible way, "You look like a dork."

Tonkin is a big ol' guy with a beard and personality to match, and I liked him immediately. In the summers, he runs Captain Bob's Lobster Tours & Fishing Charters out of Hampton Beach, taking tourists out to pull pots and catch stripers, and he has a natural patience with landlubbers. He told me they'd been having a good morning of fishing — his father and sister and some friends were with him, and they'd already landed a few white perch — but he took a break to give me an in-depth tutorial on how to set a cusk line and a tip line (a contraption where a flag pops up when you hook a fish). I took notes until my pen froze, then just nodded along like I understood.

"It's primitive," he said. "You just cut a hole in the ice and drop a line down."

Then he handed me a giant metal auger attached to a high-powered drill, just like our hunter-gatherer ancestors before us.

Behind him was the Bob Mahal, a homemade wooden shack he had towed onto the ice with the ATV, and from the outside it looked like one of those tiny houses that people on Instagram seem to want to live in. Inside were a couple of beds, a wood stove, all sorts of fishing gear, and, of course, two TVs, including one that was connected to a camera he lowered to the bottom of the lake so he could spy on the fish while lying in bed.

We went back outside and drilled a hole for me, and I was relieved to see the ice was at least 14 inches thick, which was good news for me and the two pickup trucks parked at a nearby bob house.

Captain Bob put a spinner on my line and a smelt on my hook; I lowered my line into the hole; and just like that, for the first time in my life, I was ice fishing.

Two minutes later, as I was nearly overcome with boredom and hypothermia, Tonkin came over to suggest I try jigging. (Jigging is a technical fishing term for "moving a line up and down for some reason.")



The inside of a bob house owned by Kevin and Greg DeCarteret adorned with news clippings and records of every fish caught since 1998 during the Lake Winnepesaukee ice fishing derby in Moultonborough, N.H. Nathan Klima/For the Boston Globe

"You have to try to think like a fish," he told me. Which I did, for the next five hours, as I stared at a hole in a frozen lake and questioned my life choices. I caught exactly as many fish as toes I could feel.

The only real interruption to my dutiful jigging was when Bob's sister, Jeanne Bailey, offered to cook up some of the smelt we were using for bait.

"They're like fries with eyes," she kept insisting as I politely dry-heaved.

Captain Bob's crew is no longer the all-night party sort, so as the sun was setting they called it a day and took off in a convoy of ATVs across three miles of ice toward the beach where they'd parked their trucks. As I watched them drive off, I felt a little guilty that I hadn't offered them my life jacket.

I was alone on the ice now, and feeling kind of left out. Part of the derby experience was the late night party, after all. So as I was walking back across the ice, I detoured to a large festive crew I could see at a bob house about a quarter-mile away.

The moment I walked up on them, I knew I had made a huge mistake. They looked like a professional crowd in their 50s, and they had clearly been celebrating derby day for some time. The host had those swirly eyes that indicate you're about to be punched or aggressively hugged, and another guy grabbed me and asked if I knew Dan Shaughnessy, which every Globe reporter recognizes as the signal that things could get messy. Swirly-eyes kept insisting I stay awhile, which was very nice. But as soon as I saw an opening, I made a quiet getaway.

After a warm night in a hotel, I stopped at Meredith Bay just before dawn on Sunday to survey the scene. That's the hub of the derby, with at least 100 bob houses on the bay. Fishermen love to get up early to "chase the bite," but there was not a soul stirring. And it wasn't hard to figure out why.

Picture the contents of the street sweepers that clean up the parking lot after a Patriots game. Now picture it all dumped out on a sheet of ice. Now you've been to Meredith Bay on derby Sunday.

It was still early when I arrived at the Bob Mahal, and I was feeling strangely optimistic. I had dreamt of fish, and believed I had come up with a plan to jig successfully: I would move the rod up and down, but with pizzazz.

Five hours later, with zero bites and tendinitis developing in my wrist, I was pretty sure I knew what the fish were thinking: That moron up there doesn't

know how to jig.

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