

Meet “The Duke of Fluke”

An Unforgettable Character Fondly Remembered

by George S. Nammack

Some of the tristate area’s most accomplished boaters and anglers feel that the waters surrounding Fire Island are tops for cruising, waterborne picnicking and catching fish. Many call marinas on Long Island their home ports and surfcast off the Island’s miles of fine, sandy beaches, seek their finny quarry in its beautiful bays or run out its several inlets to fish the offshore canyons. World records have been set in these waters, and others who have nailed a real biggie usually rush to the local taxidermist. I have known many top anglers in my time running out Debs, Jones, Fire Island and Shinnecock Inlets, fishing the surf off Kismet, Davis Park, Long Beach, Atlantic Beach and the Rockaways, and drifting the ever-promising waters of Great South Bay, the preferred domain of the late Roy Kneisel. Roy was known by some as “Golden Arm,” but by most as the one-and-only “Duke of Fluke.”

Though good friends and expert anglers like Jerry Hazelton and George Baxter, among others, knew and fished with Roy for more years than I, few had more fun in his company. If Winston Churchill was permitted to characterize his first meeting with President Roosevelt as being similar to opening a bottle of champagne, then I would describe the Duke’s effervescence as popping the corks from an entire case of it. Applied to Roy, the word irrepressible would be a serious understatement. He had the ability to make people feel better just by showing up on a dock, waving from his Garvey, or holding forth in a favored watering hole like Flynn’s in Ocean Beach, or closer to home in Amityville, Toomey’s Tavern on the Crik, the Bay Village Inn or the lively old Chatterbox, where hooks were not so much baited as thrown.

As ongoing tribute to Roy, whenever his name comes up, it brings smiles to many faces. Some remember wiry, weathered Roy as a bit of a rascal with his tall tales, fantastic fibs and outrageous pranks, but he was a charming rascal, one who was forgiven easily and quickly by his many victims. By trade he was a master tile man, who commanded top dollar for his exacting wizardry doing baths, kitchens and patios, but was known to mend a saloonkeeper’s cracked floor for an evening of free drinks. His meticulous approach to his livelihood carried into fishing. You had only to watch him out on the bay, sniffing the wind, gauging the current, watching the birds, to realize that The Duke left little to chance.

He knew how to catch fish and would tell a friend how and when. As to where, forget about it. His standard reply when asked for location was “out there,” always delivered with a small smile. When he didn’t exactly care for the cut of the inquirer’s jib, or if pressed, the answer would be more elaborate and thoroughly confusing. More about that later. Let me recall the late September afternoon in Toomey’s when Roy decided to take the late Charlie Who and me to his most hush-hush fluke spot. This was special. I was delighted.

Equipped with tackle, bait and a cooler of you-know-what, we eased down Narrasketuck Creek into the bay. Charlie Who – no one could pronounce his actual surname which, when spoken, would elicit the puzzled “Who?” that permanently replaced it – had been to the secret spot before with Roy and enjoyed top security clearance. I had known Roy only 15 years at the time, so I had to suffer the embarrassment of being blindfolded by Charlie at The Duke’s straight-faced direction. Yes, blindfolded, as an additional security measure, just in case I shared somehow with Clark Kent the gift of x-ray vision. Roy described with the boat a series of tight circles and dizzying figure-eights and then sped to his destination, finally cutting the outboard in a narrow creek

that my only-then-liberated eyes did not recognize.

Roy’s rig hit the water just as the boat achieved a steady drift. While joking about the absurdity of his precautions, Roy’s rod tip dipped. His left arm, the golden one, raised the rod smoothly as he began to reel. “Here he comes, Georgie Boy! Tell anyone where we were and you die!” In less than three minutes on station, he’d hooked, played and boated a four-pound fluke, picked it up, kissed its glistening side and cracked a Bud. Before finishing the beer, he boated another fluke almost as large as the first. Charlie got one about two pounds, and my live killie bait remained unmolested, a shunned leper drowning in my unexplainably fishless zone.

The action quit as suddenly as it had started. I was unnecessarily blindfolded for the return trip, and we headed in. “Some action, eh, Georgie Boy?”

“Yeah, Roy, some action,” I managed to smile. As we tied up at Toomey’s, The Duke offered to tell everyone inside that I had caught one of the fish, even the biggest, if I would stand drinks. I declined, as you, dear reader, would expect, preferring to remain in my usual pristine state of grace. Months after this adventure, I was on Fire Island and visited both the Inn and the Out in Kismet. I met several guys, and after chatting about fishing and exchanging names, one said, “Wait a minute! You’re the guy who The Duke blindfolded!” There is no mercy.

Some years back, again at Toomey’s, the Friday afternoon crowd had gathered for meditation and debate. It was mid-July and the place was buzzing when a stranger walked in. It gets like Hollywood’s version of a Tombstone saloon when this happens. The regulars stopped chatting and took the man’s measure. He was wearing a business suit (minus two points), a dress shirt (minus another two points), and a necktie (minus five points). His shoes were brightly shined (off the scoreboard) and he was middle-aged (O.K.). Roy, in his self-appointed capacity as Toomey’s Public Relations Director, greeted the man while making room at the bar. “Hiya, pal! Whaddya sellin’?”

The newcomer smiled back and, taking in the legend on Roy’s faded green cap, asked, “How did you know, Duke?”

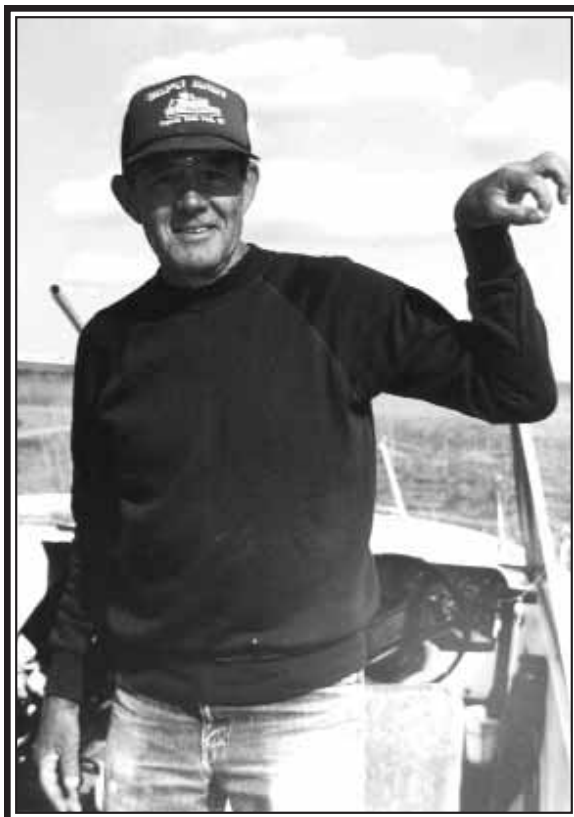
Roy replied, “Your shoes. Spit-shined.”

“Well, damned if they ain’t,” says the guy, and he orders a beer. Within two minutes, they are engaged in heavy-duty fishspeak, the salesman wanting to know what kind we caught, how we caught them and, of course, where.

His name was Joseph and he was from New Brunswick, New Jersey, which to the group he’d just joined may as well have been Saturn. Roy told him that with a boat one could fish up and down Fire Island, out to Montauk or right here in Amityville, where the fishing was fabulous. “As a matter of fact,” states The Duke “...we pull nice bluefish right outta this here creek!” This was a new and daring high in RoyCon. I looked over to the north end of the bar, the short section near the window that we’d dubbed “Murderer’s Row,” where sat the Princes of Good Natured Insult, John Wiswall, Billy “Hacksaw” Stevens and Guy Bekac. All three had been tuned in to The Duke’s every word, nodding in nonverbal agreement, as if adding their personal amens to his prayer-meeting sincerity. It looked like the 9 a.m. Children’s Mass, the Princes having frozen their faces into utter solemnity, their collective gaze studying the ceiling.

The new guy said, “Aw, c’mon, Duke, yer kiddin’ me!”

“I don’t kid about fishin’, Joseph,” says Roy. “Just



wait here a second and I’ll show ya.”

Roy was gone for a couple of minutes, then reappeared at the dockside sliding window and passed a light rod through it to Hacksaw, who passed it to me. The attached line trailed over Roy’s shoulder and into roughly four feet of water in a mooring slip between two pilings. All held their breath; no one thought that he’d make it through this bit and would surely collapse in uncontrollable laughter. Then I remembered that we were watching a master at work. Roy came in and propped the rod out the window, reeling in the slack. He said to Joseph, “It’s baited with a whole squid. Blues love squid. Especially Delaware squid like this one. Just give it a minute.” People who never whispered were doing so. Most had their shaking backs to Joseph, who in amazed gratitude was buying Roy a drink. Then, it happened as hastily scripted.

The Duke’s outside confederate pulled the line and the rod’s tip bent like a horseshoe and Roy grabbed the rod and heaved, yelling, “I tole ya; I tole ya, Joseph!” The visitor was bug-eyed and the entire audience was on its feet, cheering its champion. Then comes, in an advanced state of rigor mortis, a four- to five-pound cocktail bluefish cadaver through the window. Murderer’s Row parts to let it through and it lands splat on the floor, plank-like, dull-eyed, the entire “Delaware squid” (via Combs Bait & Tackle) with its gaping maw. This was center-ring stuff. The place went nuts. We learned later that a guy Roy knew had several dead blues in a tub near Toomey’s to use for shark bait.

Joseph looked like he’d just watched Lazarus rise. Roy explained the fish’s stiffness. “He’s in shock, ya see. He battled himself into shock. It’s a post-fight trauma thing, I seen it a hundred times!” That did it. The crowd exploded. Joseph produced a real Las Vegas wad, stood the house, laughed his head off and left for New Brunswick, New Jersey with the fish wrapped in plastic. The Duke’s legend grew.

He took his leave near the end of April, 1993. His demise was untimely and widely mourned. His brother sprinkled Roy’s ashes upon the welcoming face of our beautiful bay. So, you see, he’s still with us, running out with the tides to the Fire Island he loved, slipping past the buoys he’d memorized, the lighthouse, the casters and drifters.

The 9th Annual Duke of Fluke Tournament in loving memory of Roy Kneisel took place on Saturday, June 7. The 15th will take place on Saturday, June 13, 2009. I promise you that more tales of The Duke will be recalled to fill the air with bluebirds of mirth, an angelic sound that we can all surely use during these somewhat pressing, pouty, iffy days.