



A Fly Fishing Journey

BEGINNER TO BROWN BOWL

ENGLAND INTERNATIONAL **GWYNETH MOONEY** SHARES HER FLY FISHING JOURNEY, WHICH HAS SEEN HER FISH FOR ENGLAND LADIES AND BE CROWNED INTERNATIONAL CHAMPION IN 2019.

I have always fished, and on holiday six years ago I tried fly fishing. My excellent guide Lewis took me on Devon's River Taw to catch small brownies using the Duo method. I learned Lewis was in the England Rivers Fly Fishing team; until then I didn't know you could represent your country at fly fishing.

Back home, I joined the North West Lady Fly Fishers, a lovely bunch who gently explained what I needed to do. Soon I was fishing independently and

discovered my local Barnsfold Water. I couldn't cast far but catching from the margins of the reservoir was a great relaxation from my busy job as a project manager.

I wanted to learn more, so I started fly tying with the Bolton Fly Tyers and started going to shows. At the British Fly Fair International I discovered an England Ladies Fly Fishing stand. In fact, they tried to persuade me to fish the Ladies National. I couldn't though, because the match was fished from drifting boats which I had never done.



I finished fifth with Jane sixth. Well, the top eight qualify automatically for the team, I was in! I was going to fish for England in 2017 on Ireland's Lough Melvin!

STOCKS, MASK AND COMPETITION BOAT FISHING

In 2016 I became the only lady member of my local club, the Preston Working Men's Angling Association. They made me feel very welcome and invited me on a bank-fishing trip to Stocks Reservoir where I first saw two-man loch-style fishing.

On holiday that summer in Ireland I fished from a boat for the first time on the famous Lough Mask. I caught a fat, buttery wild brownie. It rose from the depths to roll over my short lined black Deer Hair Sedge and it was me that was hooked. Guide Michael took a quick photo and it was released. I soon arranged a guided day on Stocks and ranger Pete showed me competitive loch-style fishing. I decided that the best way to find out how a boat fishing competition worked was to enter one - the England Ladies National.

Top left: North West Lady Fly Fishers - Fishing, Fun and Cake. Left: Captain's Team Talk at Lough Melvin. That's me, back view.

FIRST BOAT MATCH - DRAYCOTE 2016

Off I went in September 2016 for a guided day with fishery ranger Tom Bird to find out as much as I could about Draycote Reservoir and how to fish it. Tom is himself an England International and with his help I caught 10, mostly casting big red dries to rising fish as we drifted on a steady breeze.

However, match day dawned, and it was very windy. I couldn't fish dries! My boat partner was experienced cap Jane and I decided to learn as much as I could by watching her. We each caught three rainbows on Blobs fished just under the surface and, much to my surprise, I finished fifth with Jane sixth. Well, the top eight qualify automatically for the team, I was in! I was going to fish for England in 2017 on Ireland's Lough Melvin! I had better get practising.

I took more casting lessons and fished loch-style as often as I could, mostly at Stocks. I also met the



squad several times for practice and fund-raising. I asked my personal trainer to put together a gym workout for a fly fisher – a first for her!

FIRST INTERNATIONAL - LOUGH MELVIN 2017

There is a great camaraderie and banter amongst lady fly fishers across the four nations. Scotland had won for the previous three years and home team Ireland were confident because we would be fishing Irish loch-style for wild brown trout.

Match day brought typical Irish weather – wet and blowing a gale straight off the Atlantic. Still, I was determined to enjoy my first match in the red cap. After the piper-led procession to the jetty, we huddled for an inspiring captain's team talk.

The match was based on total length of trout over 23.5cm (10"). The two anglers take turns to 'captain' the boat. My boat partner Michelle from Galway asked our boatman Joe to take us to the windward side of an island.

I spent much of that first hour in a tangle! It was nerves – and battling with the 20mph wind and three-foot waves. On my turn I took us to a sheltered point where we had found fish in practice. Joe skillfully used the oars to keep us just off the

England Ladies team at Lough Melvin in 2017.

Gwyneth's First International Medal – Gold!



Draycote Water.

rocks and I was casting a team of three flies into the shallows. There was a splash and I tightened instinctively. The lively brownie was on! In fact, they were on. A second fish had taken the dropper fly. With Joe's help I managed to land the twins but were they big enough to count? My heart sank when Joe announced that the first was 23.0cm, 5mm too short. But his twin was 24.0cm, so I had my first fish.

It was then Michelle's turn, and I hung on while Joe's powerful engine crashed us over the waves to a calmer bay the top of the lough. Michelle caught one "measurer" there and I got three that were too small, making it one apiece with an hour to go. Then I remembered that during practice my team-mates had risen fish near the sheltered reeds by the jetty.

We were first boat back down the drift towards the four national flags waving on the flagpoles. I had been short-line fan casting all day, but adrenalin – and the gym work – spurred me on. I spotted a rising fish and cast to it. Instantly it engulfed my Gosling fly on the point, and I knew it was a "measurer". I leapt to my feet to steer it into Joe's net. A cheer went up from the jetty – now fly fishing was a spectator sport! Joe announced "33cm". Time was up. I was shattered yet elated.

The results were announced in reverse order: "Wales five fish", "Scotland nine fish", "Ireland 14 fish for 409cm". We had won Gold! "England 15 fish for 436cm". We had won Gold by 27cm. My 33cm fish had made all the difference! I was congratulated for catching "the winning fish". But it was only the winning fish because my teammates had caught their thirteen fish first! It's a team competition.

That night we celebrated at the awards dinner and captain Lianne picked up the trophy. The other England new cap, Andrea, took England top rod with three fish from that bay at the top of the Lough. I was fifth out of 48 competitors.





Commonwealth Fly Fishers 2018: "Fishing in Friendship"



Picture courtesy of Paul Baker

Left to right: Mark MacLeod (Fly Tyer), Sue Kidby, Heather Lamacraft, Lisa Isles, Jess Tweddle, Lianne Frost, Maggie Curtis, Louise Callow (Captain), Jane Robinson (Reserve), Sam Edmunds, Eileen Chatwin, Rosemary Gunn, Gwyneth Mooney, Sheena Goode, Chris Bobby (Manager)

SECOND INTERNATIONAL - CLYWEDOG 2018

By 2018 I was fishing every match possible, and I re-joined the England Ladies for the International at the beautiful Llyn Clywedog in Wales.

It was a fantastic event in the middle of the blazing summer. During practice we found fish feeding firstly on the famed Coch y Bonddhu beetle, then just subsurface and then in the cool deep water by the dam.

After a very hot match day hauling fish up from the depths on sinking lines, the Welsh deservedly took gold and England silver. I came twelfth out of 48 with six fish. England's Maggie Curtis, who has over twenty caps, caught eleven fish and was thrilled to win her first Brown Bowl. It is the top accolade in International ladies fly fishing, awarded to the overall top rod. The whole team were pleased for Maggie. And determined to win back Gold in 2019 at home on Draycote.

In September 2018 I returned to Northern Ireland for the Commonwealth Fly Fishing Championships, a competition for both men and



Picture courtesy of Paul Baker

Bung Fishing with Sioned Davies and Nigel Harris

women that lives up to its motto of "Fishing in Friendship". As well as boat and bank fishing, the Championships included two river sessions. This was my first time competing on a river and I needed to learn quickly the skills that really take years to master. Guides Stuart and John from the England Mens team gave me a crash course and I surprised myself by finishing as third lady overall and England Lady Top Rod.

But it was not all medals and trophies. There were many disappointing matches. One was the 2018 Ladies National at Eyebrook. The fishing in September was superb and in practice I caught many fish. However, on match day there were tangles and dropped fish. I finished tenth, just outside the eight automatic qualifiers for the 2019 team. However, my previous efforts paid off and I was selected based on recent performances.

THIRD INTERNATIONAL - DRAYCOTE 2019

During practice at Draycote we again had fun and found the fish and what methods worked. Manager Chris Bobby, who had patiently coached us all year,



made sure that we each knew what we had to do on match day. Fly tyer Mark MacLeod again stayed up late into the night so we each had the flies we needed.

In the team huddle captain Louise Callow told us emotionally in no uncertain terms to keep focused. We knew what we had to do.

The piper played a haunting lament across the water in honour of the 75th D-Day anniversary. Then 24 boats sped off across Draycote.

I motored my boat partner, Sioned from Wales, straight to Rainbow Corner only to find that the fish were no longer responding to our pulled foam Blobs or our twiddled nymphs! But then I found team-mate Heather tucked away by the dam catching fish.

She signalled that she had caught two on our standard bung setup. I quickly changed to my bung rig and took us to Dunn's Bay where there were lots of fish. We fished the rest of the match along that Tower bank and I finished with eight fish and Sioned two.

England had convincingly won Gold: Wales

Gwyneth with Brown Bowl for Ladies International Top Rod 2019

17 fish, Scotland 18, Ireland 28, England 54. I felt privileged to be part of this team of skillful lady anglers. More amazingly, with eight fish I was overall top rod. I hadn't thought at all about top rod; I had just focused on catching as many as possible for my team. Team-mate Heather had gone on to catch six fish on the bung and was equal second overall with Scot Jane Wright. Lianne had biggest fish.

So we celebrated again and I received the Brown Bowl. It now sits on my sideboard with "Gwyneth Mooney Draycote Water 2019" engraved right alongside "Maggie Curtis Llyn Clywedog 2018". Less than three years after my first loch-style match I had won the Brown Bowl.

I am now looking forward to fishing lots more friendly competitions, and I hope in 2020 to help England defend Gold in Scotland.

I would like to thank everyone who has helped and supported me along this journey. I have mentioned some of you; the rest know who you are. And if you know any lady who might enjoy competing, please encourage her.