Cave Run Lake is calm and cold. Fog hovers over the distant hills like a translucent veil, but the water is rimmed by bold October color. Every tree smolders in its own hue.

Sarah Terry pulls her hood up against the morning chill as her stepfather Scott Salchli powers his fishing boat on plane. Normally he’s taking out clients this time of year, helping them hunt the elusive muskellunge in the lake’s deep waters. But today is only for Sarah, the 15-year-old girl who set the Kentucky fishing world on fire when she landed a 54-inch, 47-pound muskie a year ago.

It was the fish of a lifetime and a new state record. Terry became a star overnight. She fielded requests for autographs, interviews, pictures taken as mothers handed her babies and then crowded in beside her. A photo of her holding the muskie with Salchli, who helped her net the fish, appeared on the cover of the 2009-10 Kentucky Fishing and Boating Guide. At the Kentucky State Fair she signed dozens of guides, the newly mounted fish hanging behind her like a giant sidekick.

“People were asking me to sign this, sign that,” remembers Terry. “One guy came up to Scott and said, ‘Sign this, net boy!’” It was enough to go to any teenager’s head. Except with Terry, it didn’t.

Terry chooses a green Double Cowgirl with number 10 copper blades, an in-line spinner similar to the purple-skirted version that caught her record fish. She clips the lure onto the leader of an 8 1/2-foot medium-heavy rod spooled with 65-pound line. Tipping the heavy rig behind her and then snapping it towards the waiting water, she makes her first cast of the day.

The hunt begins

“That’s mine. He stole it from me,” Terry says wryly, pointing to the sucker-colored Believer lure Salchli is getting ready to throw. “He’ll go in my room and start going through my baits and lures.” The good-natured ribbing gives way for a moment to serious business.

“Do you want me to do like a slow retrieve?” Terry asks as she reels in her own lure.

“Slow to moderate,” Salchli replies. “Twenty feet from the boat. They’re coming in deep.”

The two are casting to milfoil, an aquatic plant loved by shad and muskie alike. After a few minutes of cast and retrieve, they throw in unison and watch as their lures land in the same splash of water.

“Great minds cast alike,” says Terry, not missing a beat as she deftly switches her rod from right to left hand, bringing it back under her elbow and thumbing the reel. She studies the water as she works the lure invisibly underneath, a green flash nearing the surface as it approaches the boat. Terry dips her rod tip into the water, turning it in a wide circle to the right, bringing it back toward her and then crossing it into another circle to the left.
Sarah Terry with the mount of her record 54-inch muskie.

“I was speechless when I saw the fish,” says Terry. “I was figure-eighting just like this. I thought both of the fish up against the boat and I was like, ‘Oh! Mom asked what happened, and I couldn’t answer her.’

The fish made a 20- to 30-foot run, Salchli says, but then came right to Terry.

“We had no intention of keeping this fish — but there was really nothing we could do,” she says. “One of the treble hooks was lodged in its gullet. We cut it and kept going belly up, belly up. That’s when we made the decision to go ahead and get it weighed.”

Raised on the ethic of catch-and-release, Terry had been up against the boat and rolled it, fishless, from her leader. Speckled with silver strands and glistening in muskie fishing’s signature figure-eight, Salchli explains, adding with a grin: “That’s what Sarah caught her little fish with.”

Tuesday makes one last cast as Salchli gets the boat ready to switch fishing locations. It’s a short trip around Ziplo point, upriver toward the Clay Lick area.

“Are we coming up on my spot?” Terry asks, back to the wind again as Salchli steers the boat.

“Yes, we are,” he answers.

The boat approaches the Clay Lick boat-in-campground, near the place where Terry caught the state record muskie. This is Sarah Cove, Sarah Lane,” Terry says with a smile. “This is where the big fish was brought up from the depths.”

Salchli explains that around town, the spot is known only by its reference to Terry and her fish. It had no other name prior to the November 2, 2008 record catch. “That’s the most muskie everyone calls it now — Sarah Terry Cove or Sarah Terry Point,” he said. “There used to be a series of slough ponds here, made when the old river channel flooded.”

The boat slows and Terry gets ready to cast, clipping a purple Double Cowgirl to her leader. Speckled with silver strands and fitted with number 10 gold blades, it’s just like her record-catching lure. “We were about to go in, and I said let’s cast for a while,” Terry remembers of the day she caught the fish, as she cast her lure to the same spot. Salchli had a fishing trip cancellation and had taken his wife, Mary Kay, Terry and his other daughter Carli out on the water. “I said, ‘Come on, 20 more casts,’ and Mom said five,” Terry remembers. “I think we compromised at like 15.”

“And then all hell broke loose,” Salchli adds.

In Ashland when I caught the fish. I was freaking out and I had to tell somebody. So I started texting people. I thought, the kids at my school, they’ll just be like, ‘Great, you caught a fish.’ So I called Lance.”

Season was so excited that he beat Terry and Salchli to the local Food Lion, where the fish bottomed out the scales.

“Through no small busness at the Morehead Food Lion on a Sunday night,” Salchli says. “But the parking lot was full.”

The crowd followed Terry to the town’s Southern States, a store with feed scales. According to parents, the average teenager’s attention span is quite a bit shorter. But Terry is anything but average.

“I’ve been fishing for fun, I’ll goof off,” she admits. “I said, ‘This is ESPN here — it’s the last cast of the tournament. Let’s see if they can get something’ We sing a lot.

Terry puts on a pair of polarized glasses as the first bright glints of sun emerge from the morning’s steady cloud cover. Salchli teases her, calling them her Tom Cruise sunglasses. They look just like the ones the movie “Top Gun,” he insists.

“A lot of people have this stereotyped idea that fishing is all about just sitting there with your pole in the water,” Terry says, looking at her lure again. “I just think it’s a great hobby. I think the more girls that get into it, the better. Girls are just as good fishermen as guys are.”

Salchli nods, throwing his own rig again, this time in a different direction from Terry’s. “Sarah can go out and fish with anyone,” he agrees. As he retrieves his lure, he begins to sing: “Highway to the danger zone...”

SARAH TERRY POINT

“Hey Sarah, I just wanted to know if I could borrow some eyeliner!” calls a man from an approaching boat.

“Sorry!” Terry replies. “I left mine at home.”

Terry smiles, explaining that the man is muskie guide Lance Season. “He’s one of our family’s best friends,” she says. “He was fishing in distress, says Terry, guiding the lure into a running water pattern. She lifts her rod out of the water, switching it back to her right hand and casting again in one fluid motion. Water sprays from the lure onto Salchli as it sails back toward the lake.

“Hey, now!” Salchli protests. “I already took a shower this morning!”

Muskie anglers can do this all day. Cast, retrieve, figure-eight, cast, make fun of fishing partners, retrieve, figure-eight, cast again. And again. And again. According to anglers, the muskie is the fish of 10,000 casts. According to parents, the average teenager’s attention span is quite a bit shorter. But Terry is anything but average.

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