

## KID FISH Event offers tips and fun for family

By: Ron Maloney

SEGUIN — A few years back, Jeep Kiel had breakfast with another fishing fan after fishing Lake Amistad over near Del Rio.

Kiel didn't say Saturday who'd had the best luck or caught the biggest fish, but if it wasn't him — at least that time — it would be understandable.

Because the other fisherman wasn't just any fishing fan — she's fishing pro Debra Hengst, who competes on the national Women's Bassmasters Tour.

"We were both fishing Lake Amistad and we got to talking about fishing, and she said she wished she could get more youngsters involved in fishing," said Kiel, "I told her she needed to check this out."

Kiel, who is about to retire from his post as Texas Lutheran University's Associate Vice President for Development and Alumni Relations did more than that. He called the Seguin Outdoor Learning Center and told them about Hengst, and got them together.

So Saturday was the fishing pro's second trip to Seguin and to KID FISH, to talk about fishing, offer advice and encouragement, and give away lots of autographs, hats and stuff to little kids and lots of free fishing advice to some of the bigger kids — including an awful lot of them who looked suspiciously like grown ups.

She was also showing off her Skeeter bass boat with its Yamaha outboard and its wild Firefox Alarm Systems custom "Foxy" vinyl wrap, the decked-out Chevy Tahoe she tows it with and all kinds of toys and fishing doo-dads provided by her sponsor, Academy.

"That's my whole rig, right there!" she told the kids.

The boat is impressive. Its 230-hp outboard will move it more than 70 mph. But it's much more than transportation to a good fishing spot. It gets towed across the country, so it's a moving billboard, and, at a tournament, it becomes a TV set.

Hengst made her first KID FISH stop in 2006. In 2007, a tournament conflicted with KID FISH, so Hengst couldn't make it.

"I'm between tournaments this weekend, so I was able to come here," said Hengst, who lives in the San Antonio area.

Saturday, she made up for it with more than two hours of signing autographs for what was often a long line in front of her table, and by taking time to show her boat to some of the dads who brought kids by.



Photo by Ron Maloney

Women's Bassmaster Tour Fishing Pro Debra Hengst signed autographs and gave out hats, fishing tips and other goodies at KID FISH Saturday, April 29, 2008.

"You need to take us fishing in this!" exclaimed John Taylor, while he looked at the boat with his son, Dylan. "You never even touch a bush with this, do you?"

"I do, but I know how to take care of it," Hengst said, explaining that a vinyl wrap, which is heat-shrunk onto a boat, is more durable than mere paint.

There was a long discussion about the intricacies of boats, trailers, trolling motors, lines and leaders — one of many Hengst would have Saturday.

Grace and Edith Bennette, out fishing with their father, Kenneth, had kept one bass for weigh-in, and it, caught by Edith, 4-1/2, ran about a pound and a quarter, thank you very much.

"We like catching fish," Grace told Hengst as she signed an autograph.

For dad, it's about the same as it is for Hengst — about getting the girls out in the country to enjoy nature.

"We do a lot of things outdoors and I enjoy getting them out in the woods," Kenneth said of his daughters. "We hiked a mile at least up Geronimo Creek this morning."

Grace, 7, got three fish, but none of them were "keepers." Edith's fish, while big enough for the weigh-in, was being kept in a bucket of water and was going back in the creek right afterward.

"That's a great fish!" Hengst exclaimed, holding it up for the toddler like it was a tournament-winning lunger.

Hengst said she was interested in KID FISH the moment she heard about it.

"At an event like this, we can get children out from in front of the TV, get them outdoors and get them involved in a family oriented sport," Hengst said. "It's a great way to get out on a Saturday!"

Hengst has been fishing much of her life. She got to the big time with a lot of help — and credits one person in particular, who she says was her fishing mentor — fishing pro and partner Tommy Jenkins, who she met in 1988 and who died of pancreatic cancer in 2002.

"We were together 12 years," Hengst said. "I'm in this business, basically, because of Tommy. I have a passion and a love for this and it's something I want to do forever, but I could never be this far along in my career without the help he gave me."

And one never knows, but she hopes she'll be fishing again with Jenkins one day — fishing forever, working heaven's best holes, which Jenkins got there in time to scout out for both of them.

"I think he's in the boat with me. Sometimes, I cast toward a bush, and say to myself, 'C'mon, I need a fish.'"

There are times when it happens — just the way that Jenkins always told her it would.

She knows that while she misses him, he's not far away.

"I know he's right there, by my side," Hengst said.