



**Shocked at her first double-digit bass, Powell would catch one even bigger the following day.**

# Healing Hands, Tight Lines & Strange Tides

How hand-lining in the Middle East translated into a world-record largemouth in Texas



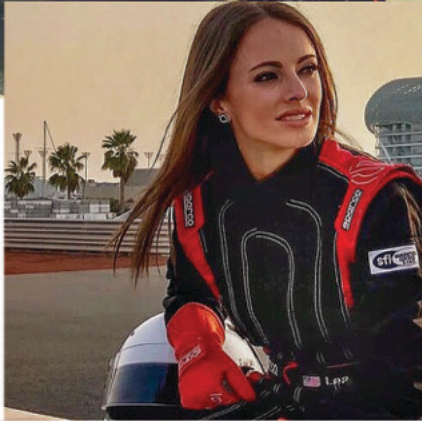
**After a series of devastating personal losses, Powell traveled halfway around the world to find inner peace.** Photos: Courtesy of Lea Anne Powell

**LEA ANNE POWELL** sat beside an open flame in Dubai, memories floating like a gray cloud over her mind. Cancer took her mother. Sepsis took her father. A diabetic coma took her best friend. Linda. Alex. Brooke. Powell lost all three in the span of six months. Now, she was rolling a grilled barracuda in her fingertips — one she helped catch moments earlier in the Persian Gulf.

Powell pressed the warm barracuda into a ball of rice. The aroma of hot sauce and oil stuck to her hands. She took a bite, watched the afternoon light flicker over the ocean and felt a ray of hope illuminate her pain 7,600 miles from her Georgia childhood home.

A few weeks prior, Powell says she was at a crossroads. The relentless back-to-back-to-back losses of loved ones had compounded with a toxic domestic relationship. “Everything hit rock bottom,” she said of her American life. “I had a choice to make. Either I kept going down or I pulled myself out.”

# Healing & Hands, Tight Lines Strange Tides



Some folks are still surprised when they see a woman on the front deck of a bass boat. Even more are shocked when a woman is behind the wheel of a Formula One racecar. Powell does both. Photos: Courtesy of Lea Anne Powell



But, she was already an ace behind the wheel of the FR-S after spending three seasons racing its identical twin, the Subaru BRZ, across California and Nevada. And her expertise spoke for itself. Within three weeks of landing in Dubai, Powell had secured a job as a driving instructor on one of Formula One's most meticulously manicured tracks.

On the track, Powell was able to channel her mother's spirit. The laps. The focus. The competitor's zone she entered behind the visor connected her back to the life she used to know. But her healing journey would soon take an unexpected turn.

As Powell settled into her new world at the racetrack, she found herself spending weekends at the Dubai Harbor, a place where aquamarine waters and opulent man-made resort islands like The Palm and Anantara create an atmosphere that feels like Disney World mixed with Miami Beach.

Powell had an in to the scene thanks to her cousin's captain's license. She was busy soaking in the scene when three men dressed like ninjas sprayed her boat with wakes from their Jet Skis.

The men were covered head-to-toe in an effort to bely the onslaught of the scorching sun. And as Powell soon found out, one of them held the keys to a burgeoning lifelong passion at just the right time. They responded to Powell's hailing. That's when she met Ahmad, a local angler well-versed in traditional methods of catching fish from a hand line in the Persian Gulf. In addition to a Jet Ski, Ahmad had access to a small yacht and a fishing boat housed at the marina, which served as a platform from which to harvest grouper, barracuda, sheri and other native saltwater fish.

On the cerulean and teal waters of the gulf, Ahmad and Powell began casting Sabiki rigs on 35-pound monofilament at depths of up to 200 feet. "I would actually use what I would call a trigger finger glove," she describes. "It's literally a glove that goes on your index finger and your thumb. It's the only real protection you have."

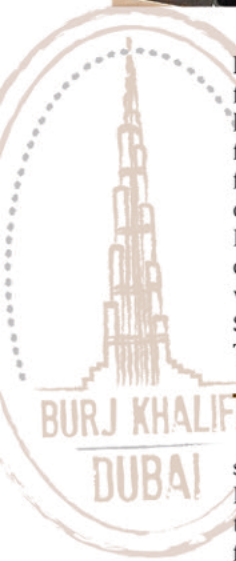
Today, Powell is the owner of a new IGFA-certified line class world-record largemouth bass hoisted from the waters of O.H. Ivie Lake in central Texas last February. She's a regular fixture on pro-am bass fishing circuits around the country, complete with fishing jersey and dreams. She's got her sights set on one day qualifying for the Bassmaster Classic. But Powell's journey into bass fishing is almost certainly unlike any other on the planet. Its pages wind their way beneath the towering skylines of Saudi Arabia through port calls in Egypt and Thailand before tying up on Uncle Sam's shores.

## The Dubai Boat Club

The spire of the world's tallest building can be seen striking into the sky from the racetrack at the Dubai Autodrome. Nobody on the viewing deck of the Burj Khalifa would have noticed Powell as she flung the brand-new Scion FR-S sports car around the track nearly 3,000 feet below. Her hair and Southern accent concealed beneath a helmet, her identity would have been known only to the men who brought her there to test her mettle in an ad-lib audition for a driving job at nearby Abu Dhabi's renowned Formula One track, Yas Marina Circuit.

Three weeks after landing in Dubai to accept a lifeline working at her cousin's beer distribution business, Powell was back in an old haunt. Was she any good behind the wheel? Powell told the men she was "OK."

The daughter of one of racing's pioneering women drivers had too much of her mother in her to boast.





**“ Within three weeks of landing in Dubai, Powell had secured a job as a driving instructor on a Formula One track.”**

The fights were exhausting. Dogtooth tuna the size of a refrigerator. Barracuda bristling with razor-sharp teeth. The occasional oven-size grouper sticking stubbornly to the bottom. For nearly two months, Powell, Ahmad and friends battled the delicious denizens of the Persian Gulf’s depths using hooks ranging from the miniature to monolithic 20/0s. Surrounded by a wild scene of boat traffic ranging from superyachts to luxury Jet Skis, party boats and other anglers — all under the dazzling reflection of Dubai’s menagerie of ultra-modern skyscrapers — Powell began to fall in love with fishing.

Hesh El-Brollosy operated KBE Anglers Hub not far from The Palm Jumeirah, a man-made seaside luxury housing development resembling a giant date palm from the air. The Emirati tackle store owner had heard about the American woman making herself a constant presence at the Dubai Boat Club. And when what was supposed to be a 15-minute introduction between El-Brollosy and Powell turned into a three-hour conversation on fishing, El-Brollosy offered Powell a spot on his store-sponsored fishing team.



**After finding a passion for fishing through hand-lining tuna and barracuda in the Persian Gulf, Powell accepted a spot on an international fishing team.**

## Healing Hands, Tight Lines & Strange Tides



Not one to back down from a fight, Powell eagerly took up the challenge of casting for and catching fish that were bigger than her.

Photos: Courtesy of Lea Anne Powell

The opportunity came with a catch, though. Powell wouldn't only be fishing local derbies. Instead, she'd be globe-trotting the fringes of the Indian Ocean from Australia to Thailand to Fujairah. All the while, she'd have to juggle an ongoing racing career back in the United States while maintaining her gig as an instructor at Yas Marina Circuit. She said yes.

### Overboard In Egypt

Powell landed in Cairo just before midnight. After 32 hours of travel, she, El-Brollosy and fellow team member Sam were in a car headed for a tackle shop. They were bound for a morning rendezvous with a dock five more hours away in Hurghada, on the shores of the Red Sea. As the trio drove through the dark, desert night, Powell nodded between the world of dreams and reality.

Winter in Egypt is surprisingly chilly, and Powell was clad head-to-toe in cold-weather fishing gear before their 32-foot center console set off over the lapping, biblical seascape before them. She wore two pairs of pants and three shirts to battle the coastal wind. The plan was simple: Powell, El-Brollosy and Sam would spend several days at sea, plying shallow reefs for trevally and spending nights anchored beneath the mountains, protected from the wind while sleeping on deck in beanbags.

"Morning came, and straight away we went fishing," Powell says. "We were getting yellow spot trevally and blue spot trevally. I hooked into what felt like the equivalent of a freight train that was probably a dogtooth tuna." The trip was going well. But after the first flurries of fighting, Powell's rigorous travel schedule began to catch up with her. Already prone to motion sickness, the weary

American began to teeter on deck.

Hungry for more fish, she steeled herself, walked toward the front of the boat, grabbed a rod from El-Brollosy and slung a 10-inch topwater plug for what felt like a mile. "I did the most spectacular cast of my life," Powell says. Transfixed by a kaleidoscopic combination of swirling seas, sparkling sunlight and sleep deprivation, Powell says she seemed to fall into a trance staring at the beauty of the cast. "I mean, it was the most beautiful cast I've ever done — and my follow-up was so good that I kept going right off of the front of the boat."

Overboard. "My thought process was, 'Sh\*t. That's a beautiful cast. Sh\*t. I'm actually under the water.'"

"And that was the last thing I remember seeing until the hull of the boat knocked me out."

Unconscious and without a life vest, Powell's limp body slowly plummeted toward the bottom of the Red Sea reef. Topside, El-Brollosy was busy processing the scene when a splash broke through the frozen second-hands of time. It was Sam — diving alone through the depths, feverishly pursuing the helpless Powell.

"The next thing I remember was waking up on deck," she says. "I was laying there, soaking wet, and I remember putting both hands down flat on the deck and kissing the boat. I was thanking God that I was still alive. If somebody hadn't jumped in, I was 100% done."

Powell, El-Brollosy and Sam spent three more days fishing on that trip. On takeout, they spent several more days touring through the sepia-toned wonders of ancient Egypt. The pyramids at Giza, the temples of Luxor and the pulsating heart of Cairo went by in a blur. And just before the trio parted ways, Sam approached Powell with a surprising tale.

At an Egyptian restaurant — hovered over plates of kofta, rice and flatbread — Sam made a confession. “I have a lot of respect for you. You traveled so far, and you went straight to the boat and fished your face off. When you went overboard, you kept going. Most women will not do that.”

Afterward, Powell learned that Sam was a member of a religious brotherhood whose belief system strongly abhors women. He likely violated a personal creed to rescue her from a watery death.

“To be able to help open his mind a little bit, regardless of how the situation was for me, I think that was pretty spectacular,” Powell adds.

During her time with KBE’s team, Powell’s angling prowess grew from curiously plunging hand lines into the depths to tactfully placing casts along delicate reefs brimming with ways to lose a line. As the world flew by in a blur of spices, flavors and flags, her skill with a rod and reel grew to a point where the tools of bass fishing’s trade became second nature.

When she finally came home from the Middle East in 2020, an introduction to tournament bass fishing was not far away. That introduction came via three stateside fishing buddies: Nick Frantz, Kelly “The Bass Wizard” Puppo and Foster “Cletus” Dubroc, owner of Chattahoochee Jig Co. Each saw potential in Powell’s passion for angling. None was surprised when she dove headfirst into co-angling and placed 56th out of around 250 competitors during her first season.

## The Healing Heart Of Texas

On Feb. 28, 2023, Powell walked past a pair of faded blue campground fuel pumps in Voss, Texas. Breakfast burrito in hand, Powell set out onto O.H. Ivie Lake with local guide Dalton Smith, almost five years to the date after she’d nearly drowned in the Red Sea. Her chest was still thumping from catching her first double-digit bass the day before.

Together, Powell and Smith set out on the reigning “Best Bass Lake in America,” according to *Bassmaster Magazine*, to hunt for giants. Though they’d spent the previous day deep cranking for lunkers with telescoping 10-foot poles, Powell and Smith wielded only the humble Damiki rig — a finesse fishing setup still new to many bass anglers that requires a sensitive rod, jighead and light line.

As a low winter sun burned through the misty Texas air, the first prime fishing hours of their adventure day passed without drama. Around 9:30 a.m., Powell felt a telltale tremor on the other end of the 10-pound Seaguar Red Label fluorocarbon tethered to her spinning reel as the Damiki rig descended through submerged timber. Smith told her to be careful. Watching via live sonar, he could see that Powell’s bait was among giants.

A novice angler might have missed the light double tap that Powell picked up on seconds later. But Powell is no novice. In the years since her first fishing sponsorship in Dubai, she’s become a cheerful, enthusiastic fixture at weigh-in stages in



Powell’s international angling pursuits fueled her competitive drive to fish bass tournaments when she returned to the States.

“Eventually, we get her in the net, and when I go to take the hook out, it just falls out!”



the central and southeast reservoirs of America, fishing dozens of tournaments with both aspiring and present pros.

Powell knew exactly what to do. If she had a fish, it was 45 feet away from the boat surrounded by 15 feet full of trees. She leaned slightly, applied pressure and let the fish hook itself.

Sweat pouring, Powell artfully battled the bass for a nearly 10-minute time span that she says felt like an hour. Her mind slipped into its familiar zone behind the racing helmet of the sports cars in Dubai. Like firm hands on a steering wheel, she traced her line to the water's surface, dialing her drag with the finesse of a driver feathering the clutch through a turn.

"Then the fight was on," Powell says. "[Smith] is looking at the scope telling me to watch, and I'm telling him I'm not taking my eye off of the rod tip. I was having to loosen and tighten the drag the entire way through the fight, because every time she got close to the boat, she would take back off.

"Eventually, we get her in the net, and when I go to take the hook out, it just falls out," she recalls. "The pressure was the only thing holding that hook in place."

An admitted talker, Powell fell mute at the sight of the monster before her. It was a beast by any measure, a Formula One largemouth straight out of the Texas ShareLunker playbook. And Smith wanted to know precisely how big it was. The duo carefully placed the bass in Smith's livewell and made a run to Elm Creek Campground for an official weight.

12 pounds, 3 ounces. That number qualified Powell for an International Game Fish Association world record.

As of June 23, 2023, she holds the world record for a largemouth bass caught on 12-pound line. "There is no 10-pound line class," she explains, "so it scales up to 12."

In the world of bass fishing, tournament wins are often considered the ultimate crown. The largest events, like the Bassmaster Classic and the Bassmaster Elite Series, come with six-figure paydays and accolades across the industry. Lower-level tournaments can still net winners tens of thousands of dollars. Admittedly early in her career, Powell says her highest finish at the co-angler level has been a 17th-place performance on Toledo Bend. But her O.H. Ivie bass may have come with something unequaled on the tournament level: She is likely the only active tournament bass angler with a current IGFA world record. Her name now belongs in conversations alongside milestones of the sport like George Perry's mysterious 22-pound record from 1932, Manabu Kurita's precise tie with Perry's record in 2009 and record-chaser Robert Crupi's pair of 20-plus-pounders from the 1990s.

The Texas state-record bass weighs in at 18-18, a 1992 Lake Fork giant hauled in by Barry St. Clair. But for Powell, the new line class record is as sweet as them all.

When news of her record began to spread, Powell found herself a cross-platform media star at



**Powell currently fishes bass tournaments throughout the Southeast. Her goal is to qualify for the Bassmaster Classic. Nobody is betting against her.** Photos: Courtesy of Lea Anne Powell

publications like *USA Today*, the *Houston Chronicle*, *Field & Stream*, *Outdoor Life* and *Sport Fishing Magazine*.

"Everybody says those double-digit bass will come to you at the right time," Powell reflects. "I had lost double-digit fish before, but for me as a tournament angler, this was huge. I know how to handle that fish. I know what it feels like to have a fish of that capacity on the line."

Like most co-anglers, Powell says her eventual goal is to fish the Bassmaster Classic. She wants to feel the energy of a capacity crowd at weigh-in. And she wants to reach the pinnacle of our sport.

But Powell also wants to leverage her experiences to inspire bass anglers to go out and experience fishing around the world like she did — in places like Africa, the Middle East and South and Central America. "Everybody thinks the Middle East is not safe," she says. "But I actually felt a lot safer in the United Arab Emirates than I do most of the time in the United States."

Right now, the IGFA record is a thrilling chapter in what she sees as a longer journey. Fueled by the pain of loss, Powell says she has no plans of slowing down. She's still in touch with the fishing friends she first met on Jet Skis and her friends at the tackle shop near The Palm. If she ever fishes the Bassmaster Classic, she's planning for them all to be there. But for now, she's putting in the hours. "I'm out using co-angling as a way to get my seat time, and I'm channeling that pain," she says.

"My mom would be super-proud. My dad, I think, would be shocked."