

Gone Fishing

“If you push me far enough, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman.”
from, *A River Runs Through It*, by Norman Maclean

Regardless of which sport you choose to play, sooner or later you’ll have to go fishing. It’s not a fact of life but a fact of sport. And if you don’t already have your own fish story, you will.

For years I’d retained a functional disenchantment with fishing. I could take my kid to an over-stocked pond or choose the blackened sea bass from the menu but the activity seemed tedious to me, not cerebral or meditative. I’d read the great fish tales of our times, drawing heavily from Maclean and Hemingway. I tried in vein to equate fly fishing with Zen but all I got was the Art of the Snagged Lure. For me, the purity of the activity had failed to situate itself firmly in my center. It just wasn’t that much fun.

Of course, when you fail to actually catch a fish for years on end, it’s easy to unhinge yourself from any tendencies toward enjoyment. My use of Power Bait on a simple hook for both rainbow trout and albacore, in shallow mud holes and offshore reefs was equal parts naiveté and rebellion.

But oceans and rivers are my home. And I share it with fish and fisherman alike. I’m still a guy with guy-traits—the innate need to be a hunter/gatherer, to bring home the family’s food. That’s what hooked me, so to speak. That’s where this fish story begins.

It was an isolated spot up on the Central Pacific Coast, with a wide and windy danger to the channel that lay between the warm sand and the coastal islands to the southwest. We were sitting on that beach, just a few of us, digging our toes, looking out at the possibilities.

“Hey, check out all the sea birds.”

“Yeah, and the porpoise whipping the water into a meringue. Must be a ‘bait ball,’ has to be tons of bass and corbina in that mix.”

They looked at me, knew I had the kayak and the pole. What could I do?

“Go, ST,” Johnny Mac said, “Go get us something to cue up tonight.”

Jimmy rigged a heavy, treble-hook lure with razor barbs. “This is what you need. Go get a fish and be done with it. You’re overdue.”

Fifteen minutes later I was a mile out in the channel and had already hooked a couple of top-layer bait fish that couldn’t hang on the heavy lure. And something was shifting inside of me, some primal instinct rising up and making its presence felt if not known. I was wrestling with an animal, fighting the good fight, and having fun. I was fishing. Then I hooked a *keeper* and everything changed.

He was a foot long (okay, ten inches) and was doing his best to jump off the barbed hook, swimming under my boat, throwing his shiny skin into the air. He was a pretty fish, marbled brown skin, a mackerel in a state of escape. Neither the fish nor I knew that he wouldn’t taste good, that mackerel usually end up as bait for larger, better tasting fish or ground into cat food. And when I raked him over the side and into my shallow kayak, all I could think of was that I’d won—man over beast. The guys would think highly of me, the women and children safer for my prowess.

Paddling in across the rough chop, the little bugger kept waking up and trying to jump out my shallow, unstable craft. So I’d whack him with the blade of my paddle,

nearly flipping the boat each time. He was getting his slimy body all over my legs. Why couldn't he just be a nice, good dead fish? Weren't their rules to this game?

It seems that in sport we are often beset with the ironies of our lives. It is in the quest for victory and excellence that we find the confluences in our selves. And it is in the hunt, the desire for domination that we find the rents and the seams in our veneer. What I found when I finally brought my tired catch back to the beach was a small fish refusing to roll over. Even on the wet sand he was writhing and handscrabbling back to where I had plucked him. And as I reached down in some cathartic pity to pull the large hook from his mouth, his lips opening in a mimed silent plea, I was caught somewhere between the falsity of alpha-male bravado and the truth of a killing. With my little prey pinned down with the oar blade, the thrill had gone out of the hunt, the joy left sleeping with the truth.

In a final gasp, he flung his head from side to side and managed to bury one of the treble hooks deep into my left index finger, the barb firmly lodged next to a nerve ending. My fish went limp and the pain rolled in with a searing smirk.

Somehow, I thought, this tasteless creature had simultaneously mutated the pecking order and reminded us that, as Maclean wrote, "Eventually, all things merge into one." Jimmy said it didn't look good, that I'd have to push the hook all the way through and went to his truck for pliers and cutters. Johnny Mac just shook his head and handed me a towel to bite down on.

And when it was done and the drops of blood soaked up by the sand, I picked up the fish and threw him back into the sea, only to watch an aggressive gull dive hard and then carry his fleshy skeleton away in its talons.

By most definitions, fishing is a sport. It carries elements of strategy, goal-orientation and competition. There are rules, though. And I'd broken them all. I should've disqualified myself and gone back to the safety of racing bikes down steep mountain trials.

I'll never be able to drink, fight or write like Hemingway. And I don't aspire to it. But through a sporting experience, I understand better the mind of the Old Man and maybe the narrative of my own life.

I am haunted by fishing.

Scott Tinley