

THE WINNER

I was ready thirty minutes ahead of time with all my stuff by the door, waiting for my ride. You'd have thought I was a kid again, I was so excited. To fuel my energy even more, I decided to have a second cup of coffee while I waited on Al. This was going to be my year.

My dad had won the 1973 Gulf Coast Cobia championship for the 4'5" long monster he wooed from under a massive loggerhead and then wrestled with for hours before easing over the side of our boat. Again in 1981, he caught the winning billfish at the Emerald Coast Charity tournament.

I'd been fishing all my life and hadn't caught anything big enough to even hang up at the weigh-in. He kept saying he'd outsmarted them. I was hoping I had what it took to be a winner, too, like my dad. But I wasn't sure. Dad had been a businessman. I had arms like Stretch Armstrong compared to him, for God's sake. Strength should be good enough to do the job.

My son wanted to go real bad, but we only took real fishermen on the boat, not wives or kids. He was only seven! He could stay with his momma and come to the weigh-in.

It was always hilarious when the guys got together. I wore my lucky Alabama hat and Al wore his Auburn one. But we weren't thinking of football that morning. John wore camo pants that looked like they were made for the woods. Tony, always the comedian, had a different t-shirt on every single time I saw him. That day's shirt said, "I see dumb people".

So off we went in Al's truck before dawn, already cutting up, and drinking coffee from stainless steel mugs.

"Shoot, Starbucks isn't open yet," Tony roared with laughter.

"Hey, shut up," I said. "I like Starbucks."

"I can just see you sipping oat milk lattes out in the sunshine after work, bud," John, my long-haired co-worker said, as he nudged me in the back seat.

We arrived at the dock and were so excited that we virtually threw our crap on the boat while Tony powered up his 40ft Bertram. Al and John hoisted the bait chest into place then released the back ropes as I balanced on the bow and shoved us off.

We were not the only ones out there. There must've been ten or twelve boats leaving the pass at the same time. Normally, we would wave and greet people as we made our way through the choppy water, but not that day. Determination lined every face as the saltwater gently splashed around us.

"Let's troll the beach first since it's early," Tony suggested.

So we put out a couple of trolling lines with surface dusters and waited until later to employ the deep cigar minnows.

It was a really lovely morning. We caught a few sizable kings before we headed out to deep waters. After a lunch of Vienna sausage, crackers, and Mountain Dew, we decided to try our luck near the diving area, so we headed towards the sunken battleship. Near the number two buoy, we spotted this gargantuan mother-of-a-fish and were lucky enough to be the only ones out there. Tony cut the engines and we began casting in her direction. She flicked Al's duster with her tail. On my fifth cast, I snagged what felt like a rock.

Whatever it was, it didn't move at all. I pulled for several minutes while everyone else kept casting. I was about to give up and cut my line when all of a sudden my rod was almost snatched from my hands. My line went flying out with a high-pitched whistle. I stopped it with my hand on the reel and slowly began to reel in and that's when I felt her. She twisted and turned and felt mighty strong. I reeled in a little more. She must have taken my line way down deep. I knew I had a long way to go. I reeled in little by little, with the end of the rod in the gutbucket that they'd strapped onto me. With the big gal fighting on the other end, my hands and arms were really aching. Finally, we saw her up close, swimming in the dusky grey water, hitting the boat with her powerful tail, this huge prize-winning fish, the one that could make me a winner.

"Get the gaff," I yelled. Tony's job was to steer the boat in the direction the fish was going, engines on idle. When any of us became engaged in catching, the others put their rods up and assisted with the capture.

"Got it," John said. It was protocol; everyone confirmed that they were on the job. That meant Al would be manning the fish chest. He had to be ready to open it and receive the catch at just the right moment, trapping the fish's mouth in the door, so that the hook could be removed with pliers and the fish dropped into the ice in the bottom of the chest.

Standing, but leaning back with my rod, I saw the muscles of my forearm rippling; sweat was pouring in my eyes, and I noticed my hat was off, hopefully not into the gulf. Then the dang fish pulled so hard that it pulled me forward and I hit my right shoulder on the sharp edge of the bimini top. I decided that I'd better sit down. The floor of the boat

had gotten slippery anyway. Fish blood, salt water, and spilled drink were washing around my feet.

“Come on, buddy, you got this!” Al yelled at me when I sat down.

That big fish darted away, made my line scream again, and now was nowhere near the boat.

“Dangit,” was all I could say. Here we go again.

“COME ON!” John yelled with all his might in my face, his hair wild and loose, and with the gaff in his hand, he looked like a crazed serial killer.

“My hat,” I must have said because Al fetched it and put it backwards on my head.

“Roll tide,” he said without conviction.

My right hand cranked, and my left arm pulled up and down mechanically with all the power I could muster. Heat and searing pain filled my back and spread like a fire through my shoulders and down my arms to the rod that was bent like an upside-down J pointing to my prize-winning fish.

“Here she is!” John finally screamed, virtually hanging off the boat by his feet, ready to gaff the sucker as soon as it came near enough.

I couldn't look. I was down on one knee with all the muck, salt stinging my bloody leg. I was a machine, cranking and cranking, my buddies cheering me on.

“Holy cow,” I heard Tony say, and, at the same time, in an instant, I felt the line ease up.

John had gaffed her! The victory was in my hands! I stood, weak and spent, and looked over the side at the biggest cobia known to man. It was a good gaff too, right

through the middle, under the spine, probably through vital organs. I hit the lock button on my reel. My hands were shaking but I knew we were almost done. She was pouring blood from her mouth and her side. John was smiling big. He was still smiling big when that bloody mother-of-a-fish drew back her mammoth tail and slapped the crap out of John's arm so hard that he dropped the damn gaff. That horrific shock, coupled with the sudden jerk against my weak hands, pulled the rod, my expensive rod and reel, into the water, as I stood there like a moron.

"Grab it!" Al reacted and lunged himself almost into the water trying to grab my sinking rod. We all watched in horror as that fish, as battered as she was, swam away into the grey depths with a gaff sticking from her side, trailing a cloud of blood and my fishing gear in her aftermath.

All I could do was sink down in the chair and stare at Tony's t-shirt.

"It's okay, man, really, it's okay," Tony said with sincere conviction, contradicting his shirt, as he turned around and revved up the engines.

Of course, we fished some more, only catching ordinary, unremarkably-sized fish. None of us said much of anything. I think I remained in my stupor.

When we reached the dock, I hopped out and promised to be back to help clean the boat. As I was sprawled out on the grass, my son spotted me and ran up to tackle me like he always does when we are horsing around.

"Hi, Dad," he exclaimed excitedly. "I've been waiting all day for you to get back."

"I know, son," was all I could manage.

“Going to the weigh-in?” He asked. His mom was waiting in the distance.

“Naw, not this year.”

“Me neither. I just wanna hang out with you.” His mom went on without us. “Dad, you’re gonna have a cool scar!” He said, upon seeing my bloody shoulder.

“You think so?” I remembered when scars were a badge of greatness, a sign that you’d survived something significant. And it still smarted.

“Hey, wanna help me clean the boat?”

“Yeah!” He was so happy about it too.

I walked towards the dock, my son skipping along beside me, my mood improving with each step. His small hand in mine suddenly felt better than a huge trophy.

“Dad, next year, will I be big enough to go with you?”

“Yes, son. Next year, you are definitely going with me! It’s a promise.”

Later, as we walked away through the marina with the sun inching down towards the horizon, I picked up my little guy and whispered in his ear. We gazed back out over the water through the cluster of boats and I asked, “Hey, son, how ‘bout we go fishin’ tomorrow?”

