

Fishing

There are people in this world who are natural fishermen. My father wanted to be - spent some of the happiest hours of his life trying - but Henry Duque was the knock-down, drag-out, heavyweight surf fisherman champion in our neck of the woods if not the whole world.

I was (and am) the antithesis. I couldn't catch a fish if your life depended on it. You'd have to be content with sea weed, jellyfish, inner tubes (tires used to have these when I was growing up) and an occasional bathing suit traveling southward on the Japanese current.

What I could do with some success was catch soft-shelled sand crabs for the big people who would transform these at a ratio of 1-to-50 into corbina, a wonderful surf fish with soft flesh and few bones. At about the same ratio, my crabs would turn into perch that cannot be counted as fish since there is not a true mouthful in the largest unless you are a bone freak...which I'm not.

Catching soft-shelled sand crabs is a black art requiring stealth, a killer instinct, quick feet, and a sand-crab scoop. Of the lot, the scoop lodges at the 95th percentile. It is a two-handed affair with a wire mesh dredge set at such an angle that the intrepid sand crab collector has merely to face the ocean at ankle depth on the incoming wave and allow the ebb to bring his prey into the screen. Veteran sand crab harvesters add to the yield by shimmying back and forth as the wave withdraws. At least that was what I was led to believe by Mr. Duque though I always suspected that this was a little like my mother's insistence that hot water froze faster than cold or that you had to unplug a lamp for a respectful period of time before changing a bulb in order for the electricity to run out.

Soft-shelled sand crabs exist in nature at something on the order of 1 in 20, which is rather amazing as they seem to be the only of their sort the fish will bother with. Just why a crab who makes a very good living burrowing in the wet sand at water's edge, safe from the predators of the deep would want to venture into the hostile environs of four-foot water is a mystery to me, but presumably they do so without coaxing, or how else would a wandering corbina know enough to gobble one up.

It could not have been man who introduced the soft-shelled sand crab into the corbina's food chain and imprinted it in his DNA, there simply hasn't been that much time. The affinity has to

have been there long before the first fisherman found corbina more delectable than sand crabs, but I still don't think that soft-shells should make a practice of getting in the face of corbina, unless they're on a hook of course.

Another way to catch soft-shells, and one that is a lot more fun, is to wait until a wave recedes and watch for small depressions with darker sand trails pointing to the ocean. If you get there quick enough and dig down about an inch, you will generally find a sand crab and very often one of the soft-shell kind. I assumed at the time that their soft shell inhibited their burrowing ability, preventing them from achieving the same depth as their harder shelled brethren, but maybe it's just that they aren't as bright, or more likely it's something altogether different.

In any event, there's nothing I could teach anyone about fishing, and in that, and that alone, I rivalled Mr. Duque. I could stand right next to him and cast my line so that my sinker splash was indistinguishable from his. His line would go taut as would mine. He'd jerk back to sink the hook and so would I, and then begin the laborious, eager job of reeling the catch in. Invariably his line would lead to a wriggling, shimmering three-pound corbina, mine a bunch of kelp.

I tried everything. I could out-cast my father or Mr. Duque for that matter. Dude Waycott could toss his sinker out farther than anyone in the area, but it didn't seem to help him much as his yield was mediocre even by my father's standards. I tried fishing next to anyone who had the knack, but none of it ever rubbed off. As a business, it was a disaster. Hooks and lead sinkers and nylon leader were expensive items which I contributed with great regularity to the surf-monster. You'd have thought I had paid my dues. But no. My reward was tangled line when the drag on my casting reel failed, or having to cut loose when I got hung up in a particularly large batch of kelp.

I tried. Lord knows I tried. But the result was always the same. For a while, my father tried to bolster my spirits, but in the end he grumbled about the number of hooks and sinkers I managed to lose, and that's when I decided to confine my predatory endeavors to soft-shelled sand crabs. It was a wise choice because Al Doerr decided to take up clay target shooting at about the same time, and he allowed me to participate. I'd throw 20 targets for him and he'd throw five for me. It beat fishing all to hell.