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Left with a Broken Hook

by John 'Afishinado' King

The title to this piece sounds like a bad country song, and true enough, we were in bad company when the events unfolded, so I guess it is appropriate. I had a tourist charter out of Avalon on Catalina Island for three hours from 8 to 11 am on a Sunday morning. These are notoriously difficult charters. The customers are usually newbies who just want to get out and experience the thrill of fishing...in a three hour time frame. Finding fish, then putting inexperienced anglers into the position of actually catching fish within a three hour period is pretty tricky, but I have made a business of doing this so I was cautiously optimistic as we left the harbor. I had a good mix in the bait tank, some squid, a few Spanish Macs, some left over Sardines and a few Greenbacks. Unfortunately, the squid boats were not out front and so we had to go with what we had in the tank.

I decided to play the sightseeing card early which would give me a little time to check out conditions. As we pulled up to the East End, there, majestically perched on a rocky outcropping, was one of the islands most sought after photo opportunities, the Bald Eagle. We got some nice pics when the eagle decided to swoop down and pluck a small bait fish that had been injured by another predator. Nearby, there is a colony of sea lions, another good photo op. The fishing conditions looked poor. There was absolutely no water moving. The island works on current and tides. If there is good water movement, there is usually a way to set up and get a bite going. But, during those periods where there is no current running and there is no tides to shake things up, the island is as dead as King Tut. I told my customer that it might be better for us to head offshore and find a paddy that was holding Yellowtail. They agreed so off we went.

The island is a great place for a tourist fishing charter business. There is always a calm cove off the lee side of the island to fish. When you head off shore, things can get a bit bouncy. The East End provides excellent protection, however, as we worked out way off shore the well was building. This is not a problem for us, but when I saw my charter customer hunker down into a fetal position and utter "I do not like this!", I knew we needed to go to plan C. I whipped around and headed into a calm cove and started a close-in drift. We got lucky and pulled a couple of short White Sea Bass and some Calico bass. As we headed back in (remember, this is a 3 hour charter) I stopped at my "Tripsaver" spot and gave my customers a shot at some ling cod. We got lucky as they both hooked up and pulled on a couple of nice lings. One of these fish exceeded the limit at 30", so we were able to head in with food for the barbie. This worked out well, we got a nice tip as we dropped off our customers. I looked at my deckhand Eddie and asked if he wanted to fish. "I got the full day pass", he said, so we headed back out of the harbor to go off shore and fish.

This was our first look off shore. The idea was to head out and look at some water to see if we could find some paddies that were holding either Yellowtail or bait. Since Eddie was now off work, he could fish and his fish would qualify in the Capture the Flag Tournament. A fat Yellowtail could win Eddie some money, so we were very happy to spot a paddy that was loaded with perfect mini-macs. We filled the bait tank and moved off the paddy. As we were heading out I told Eddie to bring up the heavy equipment. As I suggested this, I remembered that I had a dream the night before. It was such a real dream that I felt we needed to find the fish the I saw in my dream. Weird how dreams can seem so real. It did not occur to me that the dream was not real until I went to put up the numbers on my chart. Seems as though I had not recorded the numbers in my dream, so I was not sure what to put into my auto-pilot. Eddie came up with the marlin caster, a 30# outfit with a 90# leader and a 10/0 stainless steel Southern Tuna style hook. I told him we also needed to get the bigger stuff out, after he set up the bait on the rig. Unfortunately, we never got the chance.

As Eddie was selecting a bait and prepping the caster, I spotted a swordfish up and finning at our 3 o'clock. Eddie immediately picked up the fish and confirmed that it was a swordie. He grabbed the caster and tried to put the mac into the path of the swordie. Swordfish are at the top of the food chain for sport anglers. To capture a swordie on rod and reel in Southern California waters is the ultimate fishing challenge. Many have tried and very few have succeeded. Zane Grey suggested the odds were something near 1 out of 100 tries. We had one on for over six hours a couple years back and we finally broke it off. That one was just too big for the gear we had him on. This fish looked smaller, maybe 250 pounds, 300 max. The first pass had no impact. the fish did not seem interested in the bait. This is how it usually happens. You see a Swordie, then try baiting him for a half hour and he finally tires of you and sinks out.

On the second pass, I tried to position the boat in his path and I shut down the engines. He turned wide of our bait and continued on his way. By now I had a pretty good idea of the direction that the fish wanted to go, and I remembered that the last fish seemed to bite out of anger. So, I decided to piss him off. I started up the boat and Eddie dropped back the bait. "This time I am going to cut him off Eddie. Hold the bait high so I can see it and we will rub it across him." Eddie did exactly the right thing and sure enough, the fish bit.

In retrospect, we might have had enough time to change out the gear and pull up the real heavy stuff, 80# line with 150# leader, however, we were so intent on keeping the fish in sight and getting him to bite that we did not think to try heavier gear. The word is that a Swordie will bite anything once they choose to bite. As this one made his first run, I thought to myself "we are going to be here for a long time." The fish was peeling off line and Eddie wanted to strike him up. "Not yet," I yelled, "count him off to 45". Counting to forty five seems crazy when a fish is steaming away with you bait, however, I wanted this fish to swallow the bait deep and get gut hooked. Too many times these fish will t-bbone your bait and then when you go to strike him you just pull the bait. Eddie counted it out. "Forty Five", he yelled. "Is he still there?" I asked. Eddie's answer was to hold up the reel and show me a fish pulling line, "OK, let's strike him up."

I put the boat inot gear and Eddie wound and struck. "I'm on, we'er on!", Eddie yelled. This is always a very exciting moment. To see a Swordie is kind of rare, to bait a Swordie is even more rare, but to set the hook in a Swordie, now that is a thrill. The fish immediately peeled out, then Eddie yelled "I'm off!" "He is heading to the boat, wind, wind", I yelled. Eddie wound hard and fast, but the line never came tight. as the line came in we could not believe what we saw. the hook had broken in half, right at the bottom of the J. "I have never seen that before", I said to Eddie. He was too bummed to even speak.

We made a half hearted attempt to spot the fish, but we both knew this fish had felt the sting and was headed for the depths. I called in a buddy who has a Sword boat named Faith and gave him the info. He had a fish on board, but he would check out the area for us and let us know. It is hard to share the feeling of losing a fish. There is something in all of us that drives us to succeed in everything we do. Fishing starts out as a nice hobby, a fun pastime. as you progress and improve, fishing turns into a passion. The process of becoming a better fisherman is a process of continually learning and working hard to eliminate mistakes. Was it a mistake we made that lost the fish. Maybe. Probably. I don't know. I can only guarantee that I will continue working to find the fish and to improve my success at landing the fish. that is what drives

me to get out on the water...again...and again.

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