

TYLER'S FIRST FISH
By Charles Novotny

It was a hot, sunny mid-July Saturday, and Chris' (my son) best friend Tyler was visiting for the day. After a full morning of doing the kid stuff that 7 year-olds do best, their enthusiastic play faded quickly into boredom. I suggested the beach – but was voted down, too many Greenheads on Plum Island. I offered up fishing for some schoolie stripers, a radical idea given the audience, but both boys were ready to go in record time.

We grabbed a dusty 6' spinning rod from the junkpile corner of the garage. The reel was of questionable quality, not serviced since the VP's name was Bush, but that really didn't matter, as the frayed and salt stiff line was of indeterminate age and test anyway. After a quick stop at Surfland for a half-dozen seaworms, we headed down Route 1A to the Oldtown CC dock on the Parker River, an easy platform for the kids to fish from. I figured that after the worms ran out, or (more likely) the schoolies didn't cooperate, the cool saltwater pool at the Club would be a welcome relief.

Tyler had never been fishing before, so a quick lesson on my part was necessary. I showed him how to hold the rod, work the reel, and then had him carefully thread a worm onto the somewhat rusty hook. (Tyler was rapidly losing interest at this point). After checking for incoming boat traffic, (this was a Saturday afternoon on the narrow confines of the Parker) I made a short, exploratory cast to the edge of the mooring lane and handed the rod to Tyler. I left him with a few words, carefully chosen to instill some hope in catching a fish. "Hold the rod tight, don't let go, and if you feel something tug on the line, pull back, you probably have a fish".

I sat down with Chris on one of the overturned dinghies that were stored on the float and we quietly joked about what Tyler would do when (and if) he actually got a fish. Before we could figure this out, Tyler was calling for help – he had a fish on, or at least he thought he did. The small rod was bent in a ridiculous angle, and Tyler was grimly holding on, fearing that the rod would be pulled from his white knuckled grasp. Not thinking that he had actually hooked a fish, I pried the rod from his hands and gave it a good yank, expecting to feel someone's mooring line. The sticky, abused drag started to give out line in a herky-jerk but forceful manner, and it was obvious this was no mooring cable that Tyler had hooked into. It had the heft and feel of a good sized bass. I quickly handed the rod back to Tyler, and started to coach the kid on what to do next, hoping that the bass wouldn't wrap the line around the nearest channel marker or have the drag freeze up on him.

After 5 minutes, Tyler was beat and the tackle straining, but the fish wasn't beat, not by a long shot. At Tyler's suggestion (make that plea) we decided to tag team the fish with Chris taking over for his arm weary, cramp fingered friend. But after another 5 minutes with Chris at the controls, he also begged for mercy and thrust the rod at me, half in pain, half in fear of losing the fish and everything with it.

A few moments later, the fish changed tactics and came to the surface, it's broad, dark back glistening in the sun, finning ever so slowly, making it's own little wake in the rushing incoming tidal flow. It was surely a keeper, and my thoughts turned pious - God don't let me lose this fish. As if on cue, between us and the bass, comes a sweet old couple in a restored Chris Craft (looking all the world like Norman and Ethel Thayer, just down from Golden Pond) completely oblivious to the epic battle being played out in front of them. I thrust the rod, reel and all of my arm down into the cool, brown river water, hoping that the line would clear the prop and rudder of their approaching boat. As the Thayers glided slowly past us, I could only guess what they were thinking as they looked at the fellow lying down on the dock with his face in the water and the two kids jumping up and down yelling at them to stop, go, anything but run over our fish.

It seemed that this was the turning point in the battle, as the fish seemed resigned to its fate and came in the rest of the way fairly easily. Norman added a postscript by waving good-bye to us, glad to get away from the nitwits on the Club dock. As the bass slowly rose from the murky river, I slid a hand carefully under the gill plate and eased the fish up onto the float. A chorus of cheers erupted behind us, as the early cocktail crowd on the screened porch of the Oldtown Club, had watched the drama and witnessed our victory. The

tale of the tape said 37” but it was a fat 37, and the Chatillon confirmed my earlier hunch at 22.5 pounds. I asked Tyler if he wanted to keep his fish for dinner. He looked astonished at first, (similar to the look on the bass’ face), then thoughtfully and solemnly asked if it would be OK to let the fish go. I gladly obliged him and gently lowered the fish into the water, moved him back and forth a few times and we all watched him swim strongly away, minus a bit of his dignity. Chris tossed the rest of the worms into the Parker, we congratulated each other on our vast skill, superior knowledge and unparalleled sportsmanship, and ran to the pool to celebrate the perfect afternoon.

Now at the ripe old age of 15, Tyler and Chris are no longer close friends, as will happen to kids as they get older, they go down different paths and eventually grow apart. But the three of us have a shared and unique common ground, remembering that hot, summer afternoon of Tyler’s First Fish, and we will probably remember it forever. It is strange how vivid and important these images become, and how much they contribute to what we call “Life Experience”. For only the price of a few hours, a few worms, some old, neglected tackle we have a great memory of that day, but truly owe it all to a fish we had no reason to expect would be there for us.

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