

Hooked On Recovery

May 13, 2005

One Whale of a Story

I have a life long friend I've known since kindergarten. Matt and I spent many days of our youth playing baseball, soccer and fishing together. Today, he's a biology teacher at a middle school and he owns a beautiful 21' center console Seacraft fishing machine. That's a boat. Matt has learned that owning a boat has increased his popularity, but once in awhile I can talk him into taking me fishing. He keeps his boat on Cape Cod and usually launches in Pleasant Bay and goes out to the Atlantic through the Chatham cut.

On this particular day, we were headed several miles out in search of cod. To fish for cod, you use a beefy boat rod, 60 pound monofilament, a heavy jig anywhere from 8 – 14 ounces and a couple teasers above the jig. Several miles out, the water is deep in the 150 – 250 foot range. The cod are on the bottom. You let the jig all the way down to the ocean floor and then as the boat drifts you bounce the jig off the bottom. It's strenuous fishing and when you hook a good one, it's a long hard crank to get that fish all the way to the boat. It's worth it though; cod are great fish to eat. Plus, the sights you see several miles out are really cool. Matt and I have seen whales, blue sharks, basking sharks, ocean sunfish and other exotic sea life. On another day, it was one of those triple H New England days - hazy, hot and humid. The temperature was over 90 degrees and the seas were dead calm making it easy to see several whales off in the distance spouting. Fishing for cod was a little slow, so I decided to put the jigging rod in the holder and cast a surface lure. Not expecting to catch anything (I just like working the popper across the surface). I started the retrieve and "POW!!" a monster bluefish slammed it! That fish broke me off after a few minutes. Both of us cast for several minutes after with no other takers. What the heck was that single fish doing out there?

Back to the story: we were fishing in about 200 feet of water, the wind was up, the sky overcast and there was a good chop and drift going. I was sitting on the seat in the back jigging rhythmically. We had boated a few fish but the action was light. I was day dreaming and enjoying being out on the water when I was jolted awake by a very loud "POOOOOOSsssSsSsHhhhhh!!". I turned to see a humpback whale five feet off our stern. The sound was the whale spouting. Scared the poosh out of me. Matt, who has many, many hours on the open ocean quietly says, "Well, hello." This whale is a lot bigger than our boat. A lot bigger. "Uh, Matt. You ever seen one this close?" "No." "Oh."

So now the whale eases below the surface and turns to us. I'm in the back and as he dips under the boat, my fishing line rubs against his back and gets snagged. The whale starts to pull the line, and me, up to the bow of the boat. I'm struggling not to let go of the rod and yelling at Matt that I can't get the line off his back. He wasn't hooked, the hooks were 200 feet below him, but he was definitely causing havoc on our vessel. I could see him under the boat, and I'm thinking "I have a whale on! Who would believe it?" Fearing that I might get pulled over, or the whale might get tangled, Matt with one hand holding a fishing rod and another unsheathing a knife, touched the line with the blade and parted the monofilament. I sat down trembling a little. Matt said something, I can't remember what, but we were pretty quiet. I was just calming down and thinking about re-rigging when the water exploded fifteen feet from the boat and a giant humpback whale soared full breach, up over our heads, and came crashing down. The noise, the spray and the power of that jump was frightening. Good thing he was jumping away from us.

Matt and I looked at each other. “Ever seen that before?” “Uh, no.” Then he burst out of the water again. And then a third time! That’s when Matt started the engine and said, “Maybe we better move.” He always understates things. I thought that was a good idea. After the engine started the whale did not breach again.

Was that humpback angry? Or was he just being friendly? Was he thankful for us rubbing his back? Was he showing off? Sometimes you just don’t know. If that whale decided to land on the boat... well, you wouldn’t be reading this right now. The incident reminds me how quickly a day can turn: sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad and sometimes for the spectacular.

That’s why it’s so important to live one day at a time. You never know what might happen next.

“One day at a time- this is enough. Do not look back and grieve over the past, for it is gone; and do not be troubled about the future, for it has not yet come. Live in the present, and make it so beautiful that it will be worth remembering.” –Ida Scott Taylor

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and one more in a long line of surf fishermen. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.