

Hooked On Recovery

September 1, 2006

Tangled Lines

Every time I set my alarm, I can't sleep. I take cat naps all night long waiting for that stupid alarm to go off. I don't know why. So I had hardly slept at all waiting for the 3:45 am bell. I finally turned the alarm off at 3:40, quickly got dressed in grimy clothes, drank my phytofoods, slipped out of the house without waking anyone and headed to Hartford to pick up a couple guys. The streets were quiet. I was thinking about how light the traffic was, when I realized I had been sitting at the same red light for 8 minutes without another car in sight. My serenity quickly broken, I got more and more anxious waiting for the light that finally I just ran the red light. As I drove off, I waited for flashing lights and a siren blast. Nothing...phew. I slowly returned to my reverie, anticipation and excitement about what lay ahead. We were going fishing and going fishing on the Mijoy!

The Mijoy is known as a party boat or head boat. From their literature: "The Mijoy 747 is an 85-foot aluminum fishing vessel. Coast Guard inspected and approved, it is equipped with the latest in electronic for safety and fishing pleasure. The courteous and helpful crew will be there to help the seasoned angler and the beginner enjoy a day on the water." Sounds impressive. What they don't tell you is that when the bluefish are running, and the boat is full, you can expect fishing at its chaotic best, or worst, depending on your perspective.

We were going on a Wednesday morning with the idea that the boat would be less crowded. Wrong. The other boat in Niantic, the Black Hawk, was not going out. All those people that were supposed to fish on the Black Hawk came over to the Mijoy. We had a full boat, a very full boat. It would be shoulder to shoulder fishing, about 60 of us or so. I was explaining this to our guests and Cheryle, Normajean and Laurie (from the CCAR staff) as we wrestled with other patrons for prime fishing spots. Disregarding the occasional lungful of diesel fumes, we jostled until we realized that all 6 of us wouldn't be lined up together. We let that go. My spot was between our two friends, Cheryle moved up closer to the bow, Normajean and Laurie settled in on the other side. Since we were all fine, upstanding, completely tolerant and patient people in recovery, we were all very open to this experience.

The cruise out to the fishing grounds was spectacular because of the warm, calm morning and the sunrise. The crew passed out the rods and Cheryle bought me a diamond jig. I only had three dollars cash on me, what kind of a guy goes fishing with only three bucks in his pocket? We were headed out to the Race, the body of water between the islands Fisher and Long where all the water from Long Island sound moves rapidly in and out according to the tides. It can be a very wild and dangerous place with vicious currents, ferocious riptides, and choppy, spiky wave action. I know this first hand. I'll never forget the time as a young adolescent when the bowrider boat I was in with my family, filled up with water. If it wasn't for the quick reaction of my dad who grabbed a big plastic trashcan and bailed the water out, we might have all ended up in the water. My mom wasn't too happy. On the long, long, long ride back she sat in the bottom of the boat and dumped cupfuls of water over the side. My sister and I didn't say anything. So foregoing an essay on my childhood family dynamics, it's safe to say that the bigger the boat the better. The good thing about the Race is that it almost always holds fish, a lot of fish.

On this day, the water was calm, flat calm. Fish were feeding on the surface. Where the water flowed over an underwater ridge, a riptide (rip for short) formed, but nothing daunting or intimidating, especially on an 85 foot boat. The mate showed us how to rig our bait. Clip a swivel through the lips of a whole bait fish about a foot long and embed a chained hook in the fish body keeping the fish straight. The hook, chain and fish dangled under a 10 ounce weight. That's a lot of weight. When the captain stopped the boat, you sent the heavy rig to the bottom and as soon as you hit bottom, cranked the reel 10 turns and held on. Seemed simple enough. I knew better.

The first time the horn sounded, I tried to beat everyone to the bottom. I did and a fish hit right away, but I missed the hook set. With about 60 lines in the water, the aforementioned chaos struck. Fish were hitting other baits, and leave it to bluefish to not cooperate. As they fought for their lives, they crossed many other lines. As I reeled my rig back up, I knew there was no way I was going to get it through all those other lines. I tried any way. Sure enough I got caught up in a seventeen person snarl. A party boat crew is awesome at keeping everyone fishing. They cut lines and tie rigs back on. They gaff fish and give suggestions.

So after I got my rig back, I tied on a diamond jig. That way I wouldn't have to handle the smelly bait fish and I'd have a little more flexibility. After completing a drift and moving uptide, the boat horn sounded and I waited until everyone else had their lines in. This time the boat hadn't stopped completely, so all the lines on our side were drifting under the boat and toward the back. One yahoo (my term of affection for an inexperienced fisherman) decides to reel in his bait for no apparent reason and hooks about seven people on the way up. Now was my opportunity. The snarl was below me and a little to the left so I flipped my jig over the mess, let it hit the bottom and started to move the lure quickly up and down. BAM!!! Fish on. I brought the bluefish to the side and yelled, "Gaff!" A crew member nailed it and we had a fish in the burlap bag. Cheryle came walking down the rail, big smile on her face, and a bluefish in her hand. Another fish in the bag. Laurie caught her first fish and the biggest fish of our crew. I learned it was a toss up who was going to win the battle, but Laurie triumphed. Normajean nailed her first bluefish too. Our guests were satisfied; they had a blast. As we returned to port around noon we all had time to stretch out on the top deck and relax.

I uncovered some "lessons of recovery" from our mini-adventure. On the way to the boat, we remarked that even to get up at 3 something was noteworthy. We used to see that time only from the other end. I cracked up thinking that we were going out on a "party" boat to actually fish. Fishing used to be another facade to get high. I got more enjoyment watching them catch fish than catching one myself (of course, I caught more than anyone else being a "seasoned" angler). But the real lesson came from observing all the tangled lines and how people responded and how I responded. One of the fish I caught torpedoed under the boat. Abruptly, my line stayed taut but stopped moving. I just waited. After awhile the line went limp and I reeled in a cut line. After a few minutes, a crew member from the other side of the boat carried over a bluefish with a diamond jig in its throat – my fish! Another one for the bag and my jig reclaimed. All this reminded me that if I do get tangled up in a mess the best thing for me to do is be patient and wait for help.

And sometimes, the best way is to avoid the tangled mess altogether.

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 just another surf fisherman. 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.