

Setting the Hook

by

Andrew Johnson

Lake Alexander is always calm at 6:30 in the morning. Although a gentle breeze usually sweeps around the lake, the massive pine trees seem to protect the water like a British guard in front of the Birmingham palace. This is the perfect time to catch a fish, at least according to Grandpa Johnson who would consider himself one of the greatest fishermen ever.

Fishing is the popular early morning activity at the lake cabin. Grandpa Johnson and I spent hours and hours together in the boat attempting to hook the biggest fish ever. The two of us were great partners, even though I did not ever totally know how to properly fish. Grandpa never really fished himself while I was along, as he was kept busy taking my tiny sunfish off the hook and replacing it with a fresh, squirmy leech. He just loved to try and give me tips and laugh at my little mishaps. One morning, I was lucky enough to again wake up to Grandpa's low voice whistling his favorite fishing tune, a sound that acted as a fishing alarm clock. It appeared to be far too early for the rest of the family, so the two of us sped away in the boat alone. It was a sleepy Tuesday morning and so there was not a single boat on the lake that day. Nobody else in their right mind would have ever been awake yet. We drove for ten minutes before finding the "perfect" spot. It happened to be a small bay right around a point that was thick with massive pines. There was a huge brown eagle soaring above, so Grandpa was convinced there was life beneath the water. The eagle was not quite enough proof for me, so I turned on the fish finder and it immediately began beeping with excitement. That was all the proof I

needed. I instantly threw my line out into the water.

Since the lake was so calm that morning, Grandpa decided he would throw a line out as well. Lunch was on our shoulders, and I don't think he had much confidence in me catching enough for everyone to have a share. We sat with our lines in the water for a good while, impatiently waiting as I do while sitting in the doctor's office, while the sun began to poke its head out from behind the marshmallow clouds.

"I got one!" I exclaimed as I nearly jumped out of the boat with excitement.

"Set the hook!" Grandpa yelled. "You won't get it in if you don't set the hook!"

I was never very good at dealing with instructions while in times of panic. Naturally, I didn't listen to a word Grandpa had said and I just continued on struggling with the fish. To his surprise, I somehow managed to get that fish on the boat.

"You're lucky," Grandpa said with a smile. "But it's a keeper." He threw the fish into the live well.

I had no idea why grandpa told me I was lucky. I was the best six year old fisherman there was. There was no doubt about that in my mind. However, six year olds do not generally ponder things for too long, so I threw my line back into the bluish gray water and waited for more excitement to come.

"I got another one! I got another one!" I yelled. This one was bigger than the first. "Set the hook!" Grandpa yelled again. "You're not gonna get lucky again!"

I now knew what he meant when he told me that I got lucky. I didn't know how to set the hook; I didn't really even know what that meant. It was no time for learning. All I knew was that I had a fish biting at my line and I had to get it in the boat somehow. I began thrashing about in the boat in attempt to catch the green monster. With Grandpa

screaming directions at me from the back, I ran about in the front fighting with all my might. Once again, to his amazement, the bass ended up right in his lap for him to take off of the hook. He glanced at me with the most quizzical look on his face. I glanced at him with an “I know what I’m doing” look and I smiled back at him.

“What’s with the setting the hook stuff?” I asked sarcastically.

Grandpa’s answer surprised me a little bit. He told me that setting the hook is the key to successfully catching a fish on a regular basis. However, setting the hook is not just necessary for fishing; it must be done for every activity a person takes part in. This wisdom was a tad over my head at the time, so I listened but did not think too much of it.

The morning went on and I continued to reel in the lunker fish. I had no idea what I was doing, but it appeared to be working. Grandpa, however, was having an awful day. By 9:00, he had not caught a single thing while my count was up to twelve without even setting the hook. He sat slumped in his chair, upset that “The Master” was out fished by a six year old boy. He had had about enough. The live well was plump full with beautiful sun fish and bass and Grandpa decided it was time for us to head back in.

As I began to reel my line in for the final time, I felt a strong tug. I kept reeling and the tug came again. This time with much more force as my bobber was pulled deep beneath the surface of the water and I was nearly pulled directly over the side of the boat.

“Grandpa, Grandpa!” I bellowed again. “It’s another one!”

Naturally, he again yelled back, “Set the hook, Andy!”

I had been doing much better than him all day so I again paid no attention to him. All I wanted was that fish. I could feel this one more than any of the others and I knew that it was huge. The excitement was almost too much. I reeled and reeled for what felt

like days. The fish got close enough for us to see in the water, and I could almost not believe what I was seeing. On the end of my line was a northern longer than my entire body. The massive teeth on the fish glittered in the sunlight as it rolled over in the water. I reeled as if my life depended on it and I put my entire body into the fight as if I were dragging a boulder up a mountain. After a long struggle, I got the end of my line into the boat. To my surprise, there was nothing hanging there but my silver hook with a few bloody leech remains stuck to the point. I began to search the entire boat in panic, convinced that the fish had gone and hid somewhere.

“It’s gone!” I yelled nervously. “Where did it go!?” I wanted to cry.

Grandpa just let out a monstrous laugh. He really seemed to enjoy the fact that I did not catch that fish. He hooted to himself for a number of minutes as I sat in my misery like a grounded child on a hot, summer day. Finally, he came to my side of the boat and sat me on his knee as he could see that I was obviously upset and confused.

“Look,” he said calmly, “you didn’t get that fish because you didn’t set the hook.”

“Well how did I get all the others? I never set any hook.” I said back to him.

Grandpa’s answer was again not what I expected. He told me that I got terribly lucky all morning. Fishing takes patience and skill; the fish will not always let you catch them. Setting the hook is an essential step in securing the fish on the line.

“Like I said earlier, Andy, setting the hook is not just something you do while fishing,” Grandpa said again. “Just like it is necessary to take the time to set the hook in order to catch a fish, it is also necessary to take extra time with anything else that I want to make sure that I keep. It is never good to regret how something was handled after it is over. Something will come along someday that you will want with all your heart, whether

it is a job, a girl, or even a friend. You might be lucky enough to have it for a while, but you will not keep it if you take it for granted and just hope that it ‘stays on your line’ until you need it to. Life will not always just jump on your hook and let you control it.”

I now understood what Grandpa meant by “set the hook.” He did not just want me to catch the fish; he wanted me to be successful in everything that I will ever do.

Although I was only six, I felt like I had lived a lifetime because of my new found wisdom.

Looking up, the scorching summer sun was directly overhead and it was time to head back in. As we pulled up to the dock, I was hoping Dad would notice a hair on my chest as I felt like I had matured by twenty years in the past few hours.

The phone rang in the early afternoon one month later. Grandpa had passed away earlier that morning at our lake cabin. The drive back up to the funeral felt longer than ever. Looking out the car window, the trees on the shoulder of the barren highway were almost appearing to be passing us by. The funeral ended, and everybody went off their own separate way to grieve alone. Not knowing what else to do, I grabbed my fishing pole and a few leeches and hiked down to the dock. The leech was a struggle to put on as it twisted and flipped about in my palm. I cast the line out into the deep blue water gracefully. The bobber and leech made a loud “plop” sound as they struck the water. I sat and watched in awe as the bobber created ripples that moved outward in slow motion.

Suddenly, there was a massive pull on the line as I began to doze off. I jumped up, almost having no idea what I was even doing. I had a fish. The creature on the line instantly turned and headed back out to deeper water. I knew this fish was huge and I had no idea what to do. The fish was almost too strong for my little body. The panic began

spreading throughout my entire body and I could feel my limbs tense up. As the pole nearly slid right out of my sweaty hands, I jerked it back over my head as hard as my arms would let me. The fish stopped right in its tracks as if it were suddenly paralyzed. I turned the reel as fast and as hard as I could. Sweat from my forehead began to drip down onto the reel. The fish got closer and closer to the dock where I was standing and the excitement built as it continued to inch forward. The fish jumped and the fins sprayed water in every direction. Its tail fluttered back and forth creating the highest jump I have ever seen a fish make. Before I knew it, the pointy teeth of the fish were sitting directly at my feet where I stood.

Almost too shocked to speak, I just let the fish lie there for a minute. There was not a lot of motivation to take the fish off the hook because the fish appeared to eat hands like mine for lunch. I felt fine about letting it flop around right there. After a few minutes of a staring contest, I grew the courage to deal with the monster on my line. The fish came off the hook without a fuss. Before letting the slimy creature back into its underwater world, I took one last glance at it. As I stood alone, nose to nose with the fish, I surprisingly did not feel any fear. The fish had a warm look in its eye and the corners of its mouth pursed as if to try to smile. I gently dropped the fish back into the water and watched it glide on the surface back to its home. Not far from the dock, the fish jumped happily as if to say “Well done, my boy.”