

Fish Stories

Once upon a time, I set out to sea with my brother in a little skiff from Miramar Beach. We were nine- and ten-year-old kids with big plans: we would bring back so many fish that our mother would feed the family for a week. We had with us the ultimate gear and tackle: a spool of twine and a big safety pin. We were going to use hot dogs, cut up in little pieces, for bait.

Once we got settled offshore, the first cut-up hot dog went onto the safety pin and the fun began almost immediately.

"A bite, a BITE!" I shrieked.

"Pull it in!" Craig commanded.

I yanked, and up came a saltwater-soaked, whitened hot dog.

"Aww, you don't know whatcher doin'," said Craig. "Here, gimme that."

He stabbed the safety pin into a rosy new piece of hot dog, and over the side went the line again. A half-hour later he yelled triumphantly, "EUREKA!"

Into the boat came some sort of perch, maybe six inches long.

"A WHALE!" I said, pleased as anything. This was simple stuff: trade a hot dog for a fish, all we had to do was wait and wish. We had

hit the big time—Zane Grey and Hemingway, move over.

Craig's perch was the only fish we caught that day, and Mother didn't use it to feed the family for a week. Another rude dose of reality came when we had to eat, fifty-fifty, our one puny little perch—our first lesson in never wasting anything we took from the sea. As I poked around at the perch on my plate, I wished the fish were still swimming around and that we could have just eaten the half package of hot dogs instead.

But at school the next day, I told all my buddies that my brother and I had caught a monster whale that had nearly capsized the boat when we pulled it in with our bare hands.

I had entered the world of the fish story, otherwise known as B.S.

Although telling about "the one that got away" dominates much of the fishing



the end. A year ago, my fiancé and I were fishing off Tavarua, Fiji in a small outboard boat with six other people along. At one point, Jim had a bite that indicated something huge on the other end of his line. He pulled and pulled until the muscles stood out on his back.

Dennis, the boatman, wrapped a leather rod-belt around Jim's waist so that Jim could anchor the end of the pole on his hip. Then Dennis held onto Jim by the back of the belt while Jim continued to pull in the fish.

The pulling went on for a good half-hour.

Finally, I got curious about what was on the other end of the line, so I jumped over the side of the boat with a mask and snorkel to look.

Jim's fish was an enormous shark—a bronze whaler about nine feet long. It swam lazily around about ten feet under the surface, completely unconcerned about the hook in its mouth. It rolled its eye up at me as if to say, "What a joke."

I was back in the boat in three seconds. "You've got a BIG FAT SHARK on your line!" I announced.

Jim kept pulling, and finally he managed to get the shark to the side of the boat. Someone then tried to gaff the shark, and with that, the big fish flipped its tail and Jim's pole instantly snapped in half.

We went back to shore with a big story for the rest of the people in camp, and they all reacted with appropriate oohs and aahs. And when they looked at the half-pole, they didn't ask us whether, in reality, some beefy person had sat on it by mistake.

That's the way it is with a fish story—who's to know the difference? For an audience that wasn't there, The One That Got Away can always be a nine-foot shark that snapped a pole in half, and The One That Didn't Get Away can be a monstrous perch that took a hot dog for bait. ■

Author Hillary Hauser never lets the truth stand in the way of a good fish story.

lore, it is the quiet, solitary side of fishing that appeals to most anglers. Perched on a rugged rock at the edge of the sea, or sitting on the beach, in a dinghy or along the rail of a pier, someone with a rod and reel can be totally content with the company of his or her own thoughts. It is a meditation interrupted only by a rough nibble at the end of a line. The up-and-down, on-off nature of the fishing game makes each nibble, each bite, a good-natured bet with oneself. Will I or won't I get the big one this time?

It is roller-coaster recreation, sea battles mixed with dreaming—with one's fate cast to the winds, the tides and the whims of the fish. The nibbles cause the heart to leap into high speed; a good, solid catch makes the soul soar.

A good, solid catch can provide the biggest fish story of all, especially if there's no product by which to prove it in