

## Bones, Ditches and Bass



"Jim, watch out for the ditch."

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"Jim, watch out for the ditch!!!"

I didn't hear Bob until it was too late.

My friend Bob DeBlois and I had come to this island in the Great Lakes in search of smallmouth bass. Big smallmouth, that is. It was in the middle of autumn, when the bass begin to put on the feed bag to fill their bellies with suckers, chubs, gobies, tulabees and anything else they can eat.

Down I went, left foot slipping off the edge of a 10 inch drain pipe, my body crumpling to the bottom of the deep ditch with a loud cracking, popping noise coming from my left ankle.

The pain was instant and excruciating. I couldn't get up because my right leg was under my body and left leg useless to push myself up.

We came armed to catch a mess of big smallies. In a big, aerated cooler were 20 dozen suckers ranging in size from four to eight inches. There was plenty of tender, succulent bait for a long weekend of angling.

I reached down to feel my ankle, fully expecting to find bones sticking out of my skin and blood pouring everywhere. What I found was a swollen softball instead.

This was Bob's first trip in a couple of years for smallmouth and I wanted to guide him to some really big fish. We have been friends and co-workers for ten years. He really wanted to nail a huge bronzeback and I wanted to put him on big fish, as the expression goes.

The night was pitch black and the motel parking lot unlit. As I walked to the driveway, I had missed the paved part and plunged into the drainage ditch landing on the outward side of the foot with my full body weight compressed on the ankle and the pipe lacerating my calf in a semi-circle matching its radius.

"Jim, are you okay?" came from Bob.

"No."

All I could think about was a broken ankle, heading back home to a hospital, and spoiling the fishing trip.

With all his might he pulled me up enough so I could push with my right foot. After a minute of struggle, I stood up, on one leg, Bob holding me from further collapse.

With me holding on to Bob for dear life, I hopped back to the motel room where he immediately put a bag of ice on the softball. The pain seemed commensurate with the size of the softball.

"I think you rolled on it," the former basketball player said.

"Did you hear the popping and cracking?" I retorted.

"No."

"It hurts. A lot."

While I lay in bed contemplating what to do, Bob nonchalantly spooled some new line on his reel.

We were both thinking fishing, not the ER. I really wanted Bob to bag a six pounder, a trophy by any standard, anywhere. We would be using long, limber spinning rods with very soft actions called "dead sticks". The weather report for the weekend was excellent and the fishing promised to be good. I wasn't going to let some little leg injury get in the way. Orthopedic repairs to it would simply have to wait. I can have surgery anytime; the window of opportunity for really big fish is limited.

After a while, some of the swelling diminished, thanks to the ice, only to be replaced by some truly frightening blacks and blues from just below the knee all the way down to and including the five toes.

I stood up to see if any pressure could be put on the left foot. I could stand. I could even walk a little, albeit with screaming pain. There were no hospitals anywhere nearby, so I spent the night in the motel, leg iced and elevated, waiting for morning.

Morning came after a completely sleepless night on my part, and the decision was made: "We're goin'" fishing. The leg will simply have to wait." I thought about calling Dr. Jerry Goshgarian, my friend and longtime Lake County orthopedic surgeon for advice. But I knew what he'd say: "Go get those big bass. We'll fix it later."

So, I didn't bother calling him. Heck, I was with 53 of my fishing club buddies, most of whom had all kinds of advice and pain meds to share. I was good to go with all that help.

A few hours later that morning, we launched the boat as I hobbled around, using one of the boat cover poles as a makeshift cane.

"Jim, I've got a good one!" shouted Bob just a short time after we started fishing. I hobbled from the bow of the boat to the stern with blinding speed to net the fish, and a beauty it was. 5 pounds of raw power, leaping out of the water and doing a little tail dancing. Bob's biggest smallie ever.

A short time later, he bagged one that went 5 pounds. Then I got a fat 6 pounder. And then together we landed a bunch of fish five pounds and over. It was incredible smallmouth fishing.

The next day brought Bob three more 5 pounders and I got one that went 6 4#. After three days of angling for Billie Westmoreland's "brown bass" all our fish were five pounds and over, except for two. I had the audacity to bag a four pound fish (oh, what a shame) and a dinky two pounder.

In most places of the world, a dinky two pound smallie is something to talk about.

For the record, all the fish were weighed on a scale that had been calibrated just days earlier by Koehler Scale, Inc., of Waukegan, a company that specializes in close tolerance weighing devices.

And all the bass were released to swim and fight again. Not one was kept; not one perished, as best we could tell.

And the post mortem on my leg? When I got home Sunday evening, Janet Carlson, an R.N. as well as my significant other, took me to the Vista East E.R. The leg looked awful from knee to toes, red, black, blue, yellow, swollen, and complete with blisters from "walking funny" in boots tall enough to support my ankles. It still hurt. A lot.



The triage nurse wasted no time getting me in. Four x-rays of the foot were taken and a Doppler done on the entire lower leg where a blood clot had occurred a year ago. The laceration and contusions caused by the pipe wound were cleaned and attended to. When the E.R. doc came back with the summary of all the tests, I fully expected to be told I'd need a leg cast.

In two days, I would be leaving for Colorado for my annual elk hunt in the Rocky Mountains. If I had to tramp around the mountains, boulders, blowdowns and deadfalls in a cast, then so be it. The pursuit of the majestic elk is no less important than pursuit of giant smallies.

What would you rather me do? Stay home and watch the "Outdoor Channel" on television? Read fishin' and huntin' magazines instead?

I don't think so. I didn't need a cast, so I went elk hunting, pain and all.

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