



The Smartest Fish I Ever.....By Dave Youngblood

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It was a postcard day out of Homer. We had been trolling for Kings and had hooked a couple. It was my turn up and one of the rods doubled over with the drag screaming. I picked it up and held on. Steve kept the boat moving while his deck hand cleared the other rods. That done, he started backing Cruiser VI down to help me fight the fish. Good thing too, because there was a moment there that I thought I might get spooled.

This was the fish I had come to Alaska for. But it quickly became apparent that it had other plans. After nearly spooling the reel, the line went slack and my frantic reeling to the tune of Steve barking “don’t let the line go slack” didn’t seem to make a difference. The fish had doubled back straight at the boat and was running in just as fast as it had run out. It was clear this wasn’t going to be a routine battle. All the more reason to digress to properly “frame” the moment/.

This was my fourth trip to Alaska in the past seven years. All fishing with Steve on Cruiser VI and staying at his wonderful Emerald Pines Lodge. Problem was, during those trips I’d caught lots of fish. More Halibut than I could afford to ship home, plenty of Silver’s, Pink’s, and smaller Kings. But I’d managed to avoid catching a truly big “Kenai King”. Actually I’d had two chances with fish on but both time mistakes had cost dearly.

The first mistake was on my first trip. Steve had briefed us repeatedly about the proper way to fight a King. The first and most important “instruction” was “do not set the hook”. After rotating through the other fishermen, my turn came. A hard strike and “a screaming King” was followed by my picking up the rod and reverting to my instincts. Instincts learned on King Mackerel in the Gulf of Mexico. I jerked the rod up and proceeded to set the hook...and break the line. What followed wasn’t that pretty. I was crushed and to make matters worse Steve made clear his displeasure at the amateurish mistake. That particular year wasn’t a bountiful one for Kings and I didn’t get another chance during my week of fishing. All-the-while my host periodically grumbled about that wasted opportunity.

It was clear that Steve really liked fishing for and having his customers catch Kings. He’d fish for Halibut if you wanted, and Silvers and even Pinks when they were around., but he really liked catching Kings. His focus would intensify and he’d be down right serious when the occasional King would hit.

My next trip didn’t provide the opportunity for another King. Instead, an engine failure as we returned from the first day fishing took Steve’s boat out of the water for the week. Instead of giving up, he arranged with his friend Marty Guth for us to fly over for some fly fishing. That diversion created a most memorable experience and a trip on “The Road” in Iliamna...but no King.

Which brings me to my third and second opportunity for a really big King. We had caught plenty of Halibut the first couple of days so when the weather made going outside too hard, we chose to fish inside Kachemak Bay. Steve had a special spot and would only use it when he could get away from the other boats so as not to have too much company. We’d fished for a while without much happening. But, my friends Dan and Dolores Weis who were accompanying us on this trip were having a good time watching Whales, Bears, Eagles, and Otters. Suddenly a rod went over and Dolores hooked into a screamer. That fish was a powerful King and just about wore her out, but she held on with the coaching from Steve and managed to land a sixty plus pounder. The picture of her holding that fish probably still hangs on Steve’s memory wall. What a thrill that was. We got the boat reorganized to resume trolling and continued to marvel about the monster. Now comes the second verse of my King song. We trolled for a long time and it looked like the day would end uneventfully. However, a sudden hit and a screaming reel put me up for another attempt. I truly thought I’d be spooled before the other rods were cleared and Steve could maneuver to help. But, everyone hustled and shortly Cruiser VI began backing down. Suddenly I couldn’t keep a tight line. I reeled frantically but soon realized there was no fish. I could already hear tonight’s dinner conversation. Another amateur mistake and another missed King. However, as I reeled in the rig it became clear that the mistake this time wasn’t mine! Closer examination showed equipment failure-the swivel had separated at the barrel.

I was almost happy. Sure I had lost another chance at a big King, but it wasn’t my fault. Now, every time Steve was inclined to bring up the “hook setting” incident, I had a comeback. You must know that the value of that comeback is even greater because of Steve’s obsession with good equipment. He is one of the most meticulous people I know when it comes to fishing gear. So a swivel failure on such a big fish

was so unexplainable that it was indeed valuable to me.

All this brings me back to the present. Here I am hooked up to another screamer and this fish is probably the smartest fish I've ever had on a line. He blisters out to the point of almost spooling me, doubles back, zips here and there and does it all with so much power and speed that it is really hard to hang on. One moment I'm losing line, the next second, I'm struggling to keep it from going completely slack, then back out again, and so it went. After a while, we began to close the distance, and I started to hope, only to have another searing run and another long struggle to regain the line I'd lost. This went on and on and on. Finally we could see the planer, and then the fish. Steve did a masterful job of keeping the boat positioned and when I finally brought the fish along side, the mate made a perfect pass with the net-this, now was my fish. We lifted it into the boat and went to remove the hook. It was barely attached to a small filament of skin inside the top of the King's mouth-one more run would have surely broken it free, and I'd still be thinking about all those missed chances. But, not this time. This time, I had something that all fishermen need-besides skill, good equipment, and in Alaska, a good boat driver. This time I had luck! And, I had my big King.

I have so many memories of Alaska, Homer, Emerald Pines Lodge, and Cruiser VI. For sheer grand adventure nothing will top "The Road" in Iliamna, or hiking along the bear trails and fishing in Kachemak State Park, but this is my "Big Fish" tail.