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Losing it

The way you fish reveals the way you handle the other sex. Or so claimed a friend of mine who's never resorted to marriage, probably because he's been practising Catch and Release for too long.

One evening on Uist I recalled that same friend asking – is it better to have hooked and lost than never to have hooked at all? Yes of course, we thought at the time. Being able to hook them, even if they get away, is surely better than not being able to hook them at all. But what about the pain when they stop pulling – that sudden ache when they escape you and you're left alone? Well, yes, that's bad, but surely worthwhile...

It was an evening in late May. I'd spent several days trying to cast through a near-unfishable gale and felt as battered as the bushes. But now the wind had steadied into a sweet southwesterly. Marion's dinner had made everything feel possible again. And there were still some hours before sunset.

I pondered where to head. For no particular reason I thought of Cille Bhanain, a loch I did not know well. 'Watch out,' said Billy, 'there are some big fish in there.' Good, I thought, it's about time for me to catch something decent.

Two chums had departed the day before, smiles on their cheeks and the whiff of several three pounders upon their landing nets. I, on the other hand, had had an embarrassing run of losing fish. One solid brownie had profited from a poorly tied knot, my inadequacy evident from the pigtail end of the returning dropper. Another got away when the hook split straight through the shank, though I won't blame myself for that as I was testing, during teabreak, a friend's fancy Sage set-up.

The third great escape was entirely my own fault. I was wading East Bee by the small causeway. I cast into the slack pocket behind a protruding rock. There was a vicious boil at my muddler. The line broke straightaway. It was

only four pound line, foolishly left on after an untypical tiddler session earlier that day. For years Billy had told me never to go less than six pound on Uist. Why do we always have to suffer before we learn?

So, mindful of these failures and my friends' successes, but buoyed by the good conditions, I headed for Cille Bhanain. It's an unlikely spot for leviathans, being little more than a large puddle. Even when the water's high you seldom go out of depth, though be careful testing this as the bottom's often sticky.

I got there just before nine and spent longer than usual on knots. I set up my standard Uist rig of Soldier Palmer Muddler on the point and a ginked up Loch Ordie on the bob. The wind was angled perfectly for covering good water. I started by the well preserved building on the dun – another oddity of this loch – and made my way back along the deepest channel of the loch.

Evening is my favourite time to fish, especially if I've already fished all day. It feels like bonus time. Somehow this releases me from the humming expectation that lines my daytime effort. I cover water more methodically. I expect less.

By now I had worked my way round the rocks beside the dun and was casting out into mid stream between them and the far shore. No fish were making their presence known on the loch, certainly not near my fly, and I sensed nothing to support Billy's claim of big fish. But then again, you seldom see Uist fish before catching them.

And then, quite out of the blue, I hooked the largest trout I'd ever seen alive. I knew this because it immediately jumped high above the water. In case I hadn't seen it clearly enough, it jumped again, and again, six times indeed. And each time my heart jumped with it, for so often I'd lost fish during just such leaps.

But the fish stayed on. And now it shot over to the reeds on the other side of the loch, some forty yards away and well into my backing line. Again my heart went with it, for so often I'd lost fish during just such runs.

And as my heart lurched, my head reeled from the mental cocktail of playing a good fish – a measure of nerves, a glug of glee and a dash of machismo, all laced with two fingers of imminent doom. Yet the fish stayed on.

I played it off the reel, twisting fast the handle, frightened I could not retrieve swiftly enough to maintain pressure when it swam towards me. And I saw it again, once as it jumped, then for longer as it patrolled the water just beyond my reach. And I was thinking the myriad thoughts you do. Why aren't my mates here to see it? Thank God they're not. Will those knots hold? Will the hooking survive another jump? Will the loose bobfly snag on a reed? Can I handle losing another fish? Does my future fishing depend on this moment? Will success mean I'm a hero? Will failure mean I should give up?

The tragic thoughts we cram into those moments.

By now the fish had taken three runs and still I had control. It was idling closer than before, almost within reach, perhaps even tired. For the first



One day Matthew will learn how to hold a fish when being photographed.

time I felt confident enough to reach behind my neck for the net, releasing it with the same blind fumble that always finally works, while my rod hand stretched ever higher above my head. And at this point, for the first time in the fight, my mood swung from doom to hope. Okay, his head's not yet up so I'll keep the net away from the water, but surely he's safely hooked, knackered and soon will be mine. And then, sweet Jesus, I'll have

beaten my bad luck. I'll be one of the boys. I'll be a proper fisherman.

The trout must have read my thoughts. He turned slowly, well within reach, then ran once again. This time he ran more fiercely than before, and within seconds the leader had snapped. It was over.

I retrieved the line and consoled myself it wasn't my tying that had lost the fish. I sat down on the rocks, lay down the rod, and wept. The loss felt very great. More than simply the loss of one fish, albeit a magnificent one, it sealed a run of luck so foul – so hopeless – that surely I should quit this painful pastime.

Just then the sun peeped out for one last, low glint. I looked around and felt the full recuperative blast of a Hebridean sunset. Maybe it was the light, maybe the tears, but I suddenly felt better than I had in days. Of course it was better to lose fish than not fish at all. What's important is not catching fish, or even hooking them, but the steady, repeated returning to the water. Whatever the conditions, whatever your recent record of failure, just keep putting the hours in. And if you're really cut out for this painful pastime, then you'll find strange reserves of hope coming to meet you at the start of each day's fishing.