

# OFF THE DOCK

WITH D. A. MANN

## ~ Big Time Pucker ~

It only took two hurricanes in two weeks to accomplish a miracle that no one ever believed would happen. Once it was closed and the ocean would no longer share water with the Bay, most thought it was a done deal. From a viable Pass, it had been reduced to a tourist attraction. With boats anchored on the small clearing, they would make the short walk over the dune and step on the beach and stare at the Gulf. Now, amid massive devastation on Casey and Siesta Keys, the Pass is once again open separating the two. It is the only good thing to come from this tragedy. The waters are free. The swift currents that flow with the tides tell the truth; and the truth is Mother Nature wanted it reopened.

With the current comes the fish. Midnight Pass had come alive. Fishermen from up and down the coast were casting lines in the Bay catching fish that haven't ventured into the Intracoastal in over 40 years. Big fish. I mean *really* big fish. Fish that are far beyond what I'm rigged to catch. I'm the Pompano guy. I'm the trout guy. I'm the guy that can catch Reds and Snook all day long if the mood moves me. I'm not the guy equipped to catch *large* fish. They are not on my bucket list. Never have been. Give me a 20 inch Permit, and you can keep your Tarpon. Give me a bigger-than-slot Trout, and you can have all the Grouper you can find. That's just me. That's my style and that's my finesse range.

Knowing those facts, imagine me watching my drag unfold uncontrollably as a fish hit my little jig and took off for parts unknown. Holding my rod out to the side, I cranked the outboard and dropped it

in gear. The chase was on. Up the Intracoastal we went. My first thought was Tarpon; my second thought was Cobia; my final thought was Shark. Now I'm at Turtle Beach and still losing line. Cut and run? Not a chance. Marker #50 is coming into view and I'm gaining a little ground. Throttle up and reel in. Over and over and over. I'm in the middle of Little Sarasota Bay with several boats shadowing me wanting to know what-the-Hell I've hooked. They didn't have to wait long.

Holy shit! I've got a five foot baby Great White beside the boat. This is absolutely the most surreal moment of my 50 years of fishing the Bays. The phones were snapping pictures; the Freedom Boat Clubbers had forgotten about that dolphin they saw playing with a Ladyfish; and the two fishermen in a Jon Boat that had been behind me for a mile were looking for something to wipe their ass. This was indeed a "big time pucker". It was my first *pucker* and hopefully my last. Puckers are painful. Puckers force your eyes to close and your brain to shut down. Anyone watching while you are "puckering" will think you are having a seizure. Not pretty. A Great White is a Great White even if it is a baby. Their smile is the same. Their attitude is the same. The *pucker* is the same. After the hurricanes, I was hoping for something normal. Maybe a Pompano would chase my Silly Willy. I desperately needed a little "Zen" time on the water. Be careful what you wish for. Sharks are devoid of "Zen".

I let him keep my little pink binky.

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## ~ Fish in a Barrel ~

If it happens once in a fisherman's life, he has had a good life on the water. If it happens twice, he is indeed a blessed individual. If it happens frequently, then you need to beg to go fishing on his boat.

The elusive *Barrel*. You'll never see it floating in the Bay or bobbing in the swells offshore. It's invisible to the naked eye. If you are that fisherman who frequents its mystic, then you know how elusive it can be. Some cannot see the chameleon; but, you can sense it. You can feel its presence. And then, you see it. Every cast produces a fish. The fish you have been looking for all day. The sound of your drag pulling is music to your ears. That Pompano circles the boat; not once but twice. You can't muscle them for they'll pull free every time. Finesse. That's the key. A very patient, gradual retrieve until they are too exhausted to fight makes netting them easy. Yeah, it took you ten minutes. Ten minutes of bliss. You're a junky and need another fix.

The next cast is directly in the barrel. One pop of the jig and the race is on. You limit-out in no time with six on ice; but, you can't quit. You catch and release until happy hour calls you back to the dock. Hey, every good fisherman has his priorities. You're feeling pretty lucky when you are at the table for an hour cleaning your catch. If you let yourself feel smart, you're doomed. Good fishermen are *always* lucky when they catch fish. They follow their instincts, their knowledge, and add in a little finesse for good measure; but, if they catch fish, it's luck.

Seek and ye shall find.

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## ~ Can't Buy a Fish ~

“Are you serious? *This* is your boat? When was the last time you cleaned it?” And, it only got worse.

I had been invited to go fishing by a friend who owned a 2001 Hewes Red Fisher 21” bay boat set up for inshore fishing with everything you could imagine to make a fishing trip a wonderful experience. It was a fisherman’s wet dream. It was an older boat that had been completely redone with insulated bait and ice wells, new seats and cushions, plenty of rod holders, and ample storage for gear. It simply was the perfect boat.

Rarely do I accept offers to go fishing with others, especially on their boat. I like my own boat, my own company, and being with my own thoughts. It’s my nature. I don’t fish to make friends, create memories, or feed the masses. I fish because it keeps my head screwed on straight and my thoughts clear. I fish for the pure joy of fishing. Do I make a lot of friends? You bet. Am I creating some wonderful memories? I am. Do I feed the masses? Every chance I get. It’s what I do. Although I love to share information, I don’t like playing “Charter Captain”. So for me to accept an invitation to go on someone else’s boat was huge. And then, the plans changed.

Due to the prospect that a hurricane was forming in the Gulf and was predicted to veer towards the west coast, my friend pulled his boat and trailered it to his brother’s house in Orlando. Sitting instead at his dock was his neighbor’s piece of shit 19’ Trophy center console that he purchased from Goodwill in 1989. The console was cracked, the seats

had no cushions, the anchor had found a home on the front deck, and the transom well was full of crushed baby-Coors cans. Calling this tub a “piece of shit” was paying it a compliment. The entire interior was a shade of green not found in Nature. Leaves, sand, and mud carpeted the decks. Not only did it look horrible, it stunk. Nowhere to sit down, nowhere to store your gear, and nowhere to stand to fish. His cast net was thrown in the back with a few bait fish still in it - dead. The live well was anything but “live” and was already drawing flies. If all of this wasn’t bad enough, his friend (with a cigarette hanging off his lower lip) was waving us onboard smelling like he had a load in his shorts.

My friend carefully stepped on; I could not. Both men looked at me totally puzzled as I backed away. “Thanks but no thanks” I said. “Not quite my style. I’ll pass.” “Not good enough for you?” was his reply as he was pissing over the side. “Not even on a bad day, Captain.”

Your boat is butt ugly.

Your bait only catches flies.

And your mama says you stink.