

50 Minute Fight

by Matt DeVirgiliis

Dylan stepped out of his small, black pickup truck and walked around to the bed. He picked up both ends of his collapsed fishing rod, lined up the guides, and pushed the two pieces together, making a ten-foot surf rod. He then picked up his tackle box - a soft, black fabric satchel-like container that slung over his shoulder and across his chest - and he popped it open. Skimming through his rig options, he chose a two ounce silver and brown eel spinner with a feathered teaser.

A few months before, Dylan had no idea what an eel lure was. He didn't know how to rig a teaser. He barely knew how to tie a secure knot to a hook. He'd only been fishing for less than a year and this past summer he only rigged for fluke. Today, even though it was March, he was after the Northeast trophy fish - striped bass.

Dylan grabbed a plastic shopping bag from the passenger seat of his truck. The bag held two cold hot dog sandwiches and a bottled water. He secured all three items — rod, tackle bag, and lunch bag — closed his truck doors and walked to the boardwalk, toward the beach.

The sun shone bright, but a chilling breeze blew strong from the southeast, pushing the current to the northwest. Dylan looked at the terrain and picked his spot. To his left, large rocks forming the Manasquan inlet wall jutted out a good forty feet off the beach and into the crashing waves. To his right was nothing but sand. Dylan had done some research: with this current, stripers follow bait fish into the rocky shallows, so he knew he wouldn't have to cast too far. He looked at his black and silver diver's watch. Exactly noon. He had an hour.

This was a nice respite from his situation just twenty minutes before. It had been his fifth conference call of the day. Something was wrong with the communication between the finance and production systems. Everyone could see the problem, but no one seemed willing to fix it. Voices rose, respectfully, but by the end of

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the call, nothing was resolved. Most calls were like this. As the new guy, he was expected to clean up past messes. As the new guy he was expected to keep his mind to himself. Don't step on toes. Some were already upset that he'd pushed too much. Who? Dylan was unsure, but he was pulled in too many directions, sometimes by friends and other times by foes. He just couldn't tell which was which. A good hour of fishing would clear things up. His head would be calm.

Dylan plopped down his lunch bag and walked toward the water and the hard sand. He swung his hips, arms, and rod to the right, letting the rod fall behind his right shoulder, and then he quickly spun forward, guiding the rod toward the ocean. The eel lure plopped with a small splash just past the rocks. He'd spin and drag the lure right through his target area, close to the rocks where large fish wait to catch bait.

As his mind drifted away from the office and into his fishing, he began his reeling method — reel three times, settle, and pop to the left. Reel three times, settle, and pop right. He did this a few times without thought and as he got into his rhythm, he looked at the sun and at the gulls. A forty-foot fishing boat, with its side rigging up, shoved toward the inlet, gulls swarming and squawking, waiting for pieces of the cleaned catch to be thrown overboard.

Snap!

Dylan's arms flung forward as the rod bent toward the ocean. "Holy God! What did I snag?" The line ran out quickly but Dylan let it go. He'd read that stripers like to run and many times the hook won't set unless you let them go a bit. He watched as the line sped away from the spool. Ten yards. Twenty yards. Thirty yards. "When do I start reeling back in?"

He tightened the drag on the spool and started reeling with his left hand, steadying the rod with his right hand and occasionally pulling the entire rod and reel toward himself. The reel was stiff and fought him, like grinding coffee, but with pebbles instead of coffee beans. Slowly and painfully he reeled and then pulled back, over and over, feeling like he was getting nowhere.

It was ten after twelve. He'd made one cast and landed something, something large and stubborn. After five more minutes, his arms and back started to cramp. The fish pulled harder and now moved against the current, heading south and parallel to the beach. Dylan walked the same way. "No sense in fighting you. I'll just let you tire." Ten paces down the beach, the fish stopped and turned out to sea, stronger than ever before. The rod's arch bent dangerously toward the ground. "I can't lose him." So Dylan loosened the line and let him run more, reeling every few seconds to keep the fish from swimming to Portugal.

Twelve-thirty. Dylan looked at his watch. *I had better end this soon.* "I'm hungry and thirsty." His lunch sat about fifty feet away. Out of reach. "I'll eat when this is done. How will I hold up the fish and take a picture at the same time? Worry about that when you have to." Dylan tightened the line again and started reeling, against the fish's wishes.

One revolution at a time, Dylan let his left and right hands alternate — reel and pull. Reel and pull. Each time the tension in the rod increased. He pushed on. Sweat built up underneath his sweatshirt, despite the cooling wind. Closer and closer he pulled in the elusive fish. "What does it look like?" Dylan followed the line with his eyes and saw his green feather teaser poking up out of the water right in front of a silver-white breaking wave. "It's so close. I'm hungry, thirsty, and sore. Maybe I can grab the line and drop the rod. Then I'll run into the surf and just jump on the fish and bring it in with my hands. The water isn't too cold. I've been in colder."

He laughed at his idea. He reeled, loosened the tension, tightened it again, and reeled again. At one point, with the drag as tight as possible, the fish still pulled out line. "How is this fish strong enough to pull through this?" The rod was bending and almost touching the sand.

Quarter to one.

"I just need some water. I'm so thirsty." Dylan looked around and saw a middle-aged, barefoot couple walking toward him, their shoes by their sides. So he let go of the rod with his right hand and

signaled to them with a friendly wave. The gentleman waved back, acknowledging Dylan's call for assistance.

Snap!

This time the sound was less than exciting. Dylan looked away from the approaching couple and up at the end of his rod. His line was frayed and loose. The tension was gone. The eel lure was gone. The fish was gone. Exhilarated and dejected, Dylan walked to his lunch bag, gathered his gear, and headed for his truck.

At one o'clock, he was back on a call. Back to uncertainty.

During down time, he stopped by the bait shop and told the owner his story. "Sounds like you lost a big striper. They never left because the water temperature stayed warm enough. May have been a blue, but probably a striper." Dylan thought about natural hazards. Maybe he hadn't hooked a fish, but a crab trap or just snagged some submerged rocks. *It ran with the line against the current, though.* Day after day, he got on his calls.

Three weeks later, Dylan needed another detox session, so he went back to the same spot. He cast and got into his pattern — reel three times, settle, and pop. Nothing. Again. Nothing. After thirty minutes, Dylan noticed an old man walking toward him. "Catch anything?" the old man asked as he got close. The man's face was permanently sun-burned. Deep wrinkles around his eyes closed tight. He was smiling and sincere.

"Nothing yet."

"Well steer clear of the rocks. There's a net about twenty-feet off them to the right and I lost a good lure to it last week," he said.

Dylan's mouth dropped. "If I hooked it, would it pull my line?"

"It might if the tide and current are strong enough."

Dylan quickly told the man his story. The man laughed. "Part of the fun. Sometimes you never know what you have on the end of your line. You don't know what's fighting you. You know what I do?"

"What?" asked Dylan.

"Put on a new rig and keep fishing."

The old fisherman turned away and headed toward the rocks, climbed them, and then followed them away from the crashing

waves and onto the boardwalk. He disappeared into a small crowd of mother's walking their strollers, couples holding hands, and kids on bicycles.

Dylan cast and reeled for another hour or so, never getting even a bite. He didn't mind.

