Rev it Up

A fish is a fish except when it's something more. I chartered with a guide in Miami this winter specifically to catch a big tarpon, both as a reminder of the difficult year just passed and to serve as a signal flag for an aspirational future, one where I didn't simply settle but drove myself to be better.

As I sat down to write this column, a homecoming photo on my Facebook feed reminded me I've reached the one-year anniversary of my release from the hospital after a ruptured brain aneurism. A few weeks after I'd come home, I walked to the stop sign at the end of my street and back with the help of a cane and a physical therapist. Round trip is 248 steps.

Speeding through Miami that night in February was like the good old days. Rushing to meet a boat and catch a tide. It felt good. I was eager to hook a hefty fish to put an exclamation mark on a topsy-turvy year.

The outboard on Capt. Fraser Simpson's 18-foot Parker center console was idling when my friend Dean and I raced into the launch area in North Miami after 9 p.m. We exchanged brief niceties as we hurried aboard. Little time for small talk.

Fraser is a nighttime tarpon guide who'd been working a good bunch of big fish for more than a month. He was dialed in, and he knew we needed to get moving to catch the end of the flood.

We got on plane and sped north toward a dark, mangrove-rimmed basin that looked like dozens of others in the vicinity, only this one held fish. The exact location is the captain's secret. He says only a few other boats know the spot, and he'd like to keep it that way. Even the background of his night photos are blurred before being shared on social media to hide potential clues. He asked if we'd do the same with our shots.

We turned off the outboard, and the trolling motor moved us toward an empty mangrove island, where Simpson set up four spinning rods, two baited with live shrimp, two with live crabs. The first drift showed fish on the side-scan sonar, but no takers.

I was excited. It had been a long time since I'd caught a big tarpon. I wanted to tussle with a fish that looked like a dinosaur with fins and scales, and because, as my friend Pat Ford once told me, "They're just crazy and crazy-looking. If there's a jump that a fish can possibly make, a tarpon will make it. They swim through the air, upside down and right side up."

On the second drift, we marked five or six fish, and a moment later one of them grabbed the shrimp on the rod next to my left shoulder. We were in business. The fish ran and jumped and lunged across the surface. I whooped and hollered like an island castaway spotting a distant ship.

It was a gorgeous night to fight a good fish. We were three days off the full moon of February, which rose around 10 p.m., flooding us with light. A slight breeze blew. And the water and air temperatures were both about 75. Not a boat or a human in sight.

I had fished plenty, post-illness, through spring, summer and fall, mostly for small striped bass. In October, I released more than 50 cookie-cutter schoolies in two nights standing on the same wrack-covered rock. It was like shooting fish in a barrel, but I never felt my engine had fully revved. I hadn't put the car on the track and driven it hard.

I was lucky tonight to have hooked a large, ornery fish with what Dean called a "bad-ass attitude." The fight on 60-pound braid lasted an hour and 20 minutes. The tarpon jumped and lunged half out of the water about eight times. It was one of those back-and-forth bulldog affairs.

After an hour, Dean asked, "Do you want me to take the rod, you know, given your head thing and all?"

In response, I revved the engine higher by tightening the drag. When we finally got her alongside, Fraser exclaimed, "Look at the size of that fish! Look at the girth."

The fish and I were both tired. I was happy to release my grip on her jaw after removing the 9/0 circle hook, and she seemed pleased to slip off into the moonlight.

"That was 150 pounds easy," said Simpson, who also co-captains a 92-foot sportfish for a private owner. "The girth is what really makes the fish, the shoulders."

I got to bed at 3 a.m. and woke at 6 o'clock to hit the Miami boat show. Felt just like the old days, only better.

JODY DOLE (TOP)

Here and Now

You forget the magic that comes from being so engrossed in something that your mind thinks only of the here and now — in this case, a bunch of fish way up on the mud flats, breaking water with their tails and backs.

Spring had been late, and the water was colder than normal. And you knew that if you were to find fish, they would likely be in the shallows, where the sun had warmed the dark mud and skinny water. I nudged the kayak a stroke closer and let the wind and current pull me off the spot as I cast. *Bang.* I fought and released a nice striper. Release, return and repeat.

None of us is free from the clinches of time, but for a couple of hours that morning, I felt as unfettered as the terns working the falling tide. My cellphone was turned off. No one was expecting me. I was self-contained. Quiet. And having found fish, I was intensely focused on the moment.

"You must live in the present … find your eternity in each moment," Henry David Thoreau advised. All we have are these moments. For now, that's all I need.

After several months of being stalked by a virus — a predator that you can't see or hear or smell — it was nice to again feel like the hunter. Even if it was just the illusion of being in control. We live in a predictably unpredictable world. Spend time on the water chasing fish, and you learn that early. Nature is flexible, shifting, inexact.

The fish arrive a week or two early or late, depending. Same goes for the birds, forage fish, insects, the leafing trees, flowering plants, and on and on. The osprey that nest on tiny No Name Island were late this year by two weeks. I'd given up on their return and then heard the welcome *cheep cheep cheep* one morning as I drifted past, firing casts at submerged boulders.

Sometimes you can set your clock by the fish and birds — other years, not so much.

I was thumbing through an old fishing journal from a long-ago spring when I found where I'd written of getting chased off the water twice in nine days. Each time, the pursuer was an intense thunderstorm; both knocked out power for thousands of people. On the last occasion, my oldest daughter, her boyfriend and I had hiked out in a little gap between fronts to a spot that had been loaded with fish two nights earlier. I had foolishly hoped the forecast, which called for the storms to pass by 8 p.m., would hold up — I wanted the 17-year-olds to experience a good night of fishing.

Even before the storms rolled over us, the air was charged with electricity. On the walk out, I passed my daughter a gull feather I'd picked up off the sand and felt a static shock between our fingers as they lightly touched. I should have known better, but fish will do that to you. And now we lay in a low cut between the dunes, the rods flat, as thunderstorms sniffed us out like a pack of dogs.

There was too much lightning to think of fishing. We lay there and took the pummeling from the rain and marveled at the noisy pyrotechnics, the gusty downdrafts and the crazy spider-web lightning. It was a show that I didn't need a log to remember; the strikes were cloud to cloud, cloud to water, cloud to ground. The stray electricity wandering about made you feel part of nature's electrical grid.

If creation is a pink dawn, then surely this blitzkrieg of lightning, rain and mutant thunder cells was a glimpse of the end. We waited for a break and hightailed it off the beach. I knew I'd foolishly made ourselves a target that night and felt fortunate when we finally moved out of the crosshairs.

Another morning on the grounds, and a silly earworm was playing on a short loop in my head. To lose it, I started humming the old classic *Willin'* by Little Feat. I made my way to the last cove on the river before it opens to a bay and the broad, briny beyond. This spot had been good this year.

The wind was out of the west, and the young tide was flooding; the fish can be spooky here, and I was determined to fish the shallow cove correctly, casting my way in by degrees.

The first fish came quickly. Then another. And like that, Lowell George went back to sleeping the big sleep. That story I had been writing in my head would have to wait until another day. All extraneous thoughts vanished. The song of the drag carried me into the sun-drenched here and now.

I thought of something an old friend told me one year after we got off the water. "It's amazing what a few floppy fish will do for your spirits," said the late Capt. Al Anderson. "Everything is suddenly right with the world."

JODY DOLE

Never Enough

Fall is the hungriest season. Migrations are in full swing, and creatures by the score are on the move and feeding intensely — from the 11 sanderlings scurrying up and down the steep beach face as I walk with surf rod in hand, to shoals of fish trailed by hundreds of gulls just a few miles offshore.

Fishing this time of year is often feast or famine. When it's good, it can be crazy good. Can you have too much of a good thing?

I fished obsessively through my 30s and 40s; looking back, if I suffered one sin, it wasn't greed or pride or envy. My fishing partners and I didn't covet the fishing boats or catches of others. We were satisfied with our little boats and lives. My sin was gluttony. As many fish as I caught, I wanted more or larger or both. I was a less annoying version of Augustus Gloop, the chubby kid in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* who was looking for a chocolate river without end.

I was fishing for silver salmon in Cordova, Alaska, five years ago as the season sped to a close. The first snow fell on the high peaks the day after I arrived. The locals call it "termination dust," meaning the end of summer. A few days later, I flew 42 miles east of Cordova in a Cessna 185 floatplane to a remote, clear-flowing stream chockablock with migrating silver salmon. There, I fished with a family of four from Pennsylvania.

I walked downstream to a quiet back eddy, where I tossed a pink floating salmon fly known as a wog. It was a memorable morning. The water was clear, and as the foam-rubber fly walked and talked, you'd see the vee wakes left by amped-up silvers closing in on it like mad. Right away I caught a half-dozen fish. My pulse raced. I thought, *This just might be paradise.*

Then I rushed a feisty salmon that hit almost at my feet and was still green. I pinched the line against the rod as I reached for the leader. The fish turned, spurted, and the 8-weight fly rod broke in two places. My time catching salmon on a surface fly — which some consider the holy grail of coho fishing — was over too soon. I retreated upstream, rigged my light spinning rod and joined the Pennsylvania spin contingent.

One of the anglers had a method of keeping score that I didn't notice until we were waiting for the floatplane to return. For each fish he landed, the young man put a small pebble in his wading jacket. He counted out more than 50 stones. Between us, we probably caught about 200 silvers that day. Too many?

Fast forward to last fall. I was running late, and the last bit of light was disappearing behind the horizon. I walked up a steep dune and met a stoked surfman coming off the beach who tried to tell me where to find the fish. "Look for the nervous water," he kept saying. "Just look for the nervous water."

I understood what he was saying, but it was getting too dark to spot fish. At every place I'd found fish in the past, I stopped and made a couple of casts, then frantically kept moving. Where was the nervous water? In the end, I found the fish where I thought they would be all along — in a jumble of rocks that marks the end of the sand.

The tide was low enough to reach a large, flat rock covered with wrack weed. I laid my rod horizontal, threw one leg up and boosted myself aboard. It was a familiar perch and a great place to cast. And it was low and flat enough to easily slide a fish onto it with the help of a breaking wave.

The first 15 minutes produced nothing. Then came a bump, followed by a good hit, and soon it was fish after fish — and like that, the fall striper run bloomed for several hours under the stars. I had it to myself. The fish ranged from 20 to 30 inches, a lot of fun on a light 12-foot rod. The surf built with the tide, and it wasn't long before I'd gotten pretty wet, despite waders.

I caught around 35 fish — maybe more. My hands were chafed and cut. I was wet, cold and sandy, and I wanted to leave, but I had the free will of a barnacle.

I gave myself a familiar talk: *In three weeks or three months, you'll look back on the night and berate yourself for not staying longer. Why did you leave when the fish were still there?*

I made myself a deal. If I went five consecutive casts without a fish or a hit, I'd pack it in. The action was slowing, and I finally got my wish. I sloshed ashore and staggered off the beach, feeling like Jethro Tull's Aqualung.

The next night, I was back on that same rock and took another 20, give or take.

JODY DOLE