

It's Not The Despair

I suspect many of you have found yourself in the same place I am currently – staring at a blinking cursor on a computer screen. A mild anxiety in my fingertips and a fog between the ears.

The fault firmly sits with Frank... You see I was asked to write something for The Carp, as Frank Larner put it, "to introduce yourself to the membership". This started a period of anxious reflection as I'd not written anything carp related for some time. Ten years in fact! I suspect like many of you I'd found myself relating less and less with what was being printed and as such my interest in the written side of our had sport faded (with the exception of a book or two). Also, as someone famous once said "you only get one chance to make a first impression" I felt a very strong need to do a good job.

I flipped through a few back issues and pondered for a while. I thought that it might be a little too predictable to write about a time I caught something significant, or about a campaign which paid out with the prime target following months (or years) of graft. I promise you I do have those stories in my back pocket and may write those down at some point, but I made a decision to be different, which is always a risk. Time will tell if this decision, and my subsequent effort to introduce myself, is a swing and a miss.

During this period of contemplation, I found myself pondering about the lakes which taught me the most lessons and then, just a few weeks ago (my first session after acceptance into the BCSG), I caught a gorgeous 20lb fully scaled mirror. It got me thinking "when was the last time I caught a large fully scaled carp?". This seemingly small and harmless question took me back through the memory rolodex 17 years to an intense period of fishing, where, like a bus, two arrived within a week. Despite their beauty, in themselves neither were remarkable tales, but in the context of the wider story playing out in that period they were undoubtedly neon moments in an otherwise dark period. In the real world, as we all know, the lake doesn't always pay its dues....

So, let's go back to June 2006 to a couple of lakes in the backwater that is Norfolk and to a time when big fish were rare. Back then, a 30lb carp would likely have been the largest in the lake and the fishery would have a full membership as a result. It's against this backdrop that I managed to secure a ticket for a small lake imaginatively called no.3. It is set in the Wensum Valley and stands (on the surface at least) quite unremarkably in amongst a group of mature neighbouring pits of different sizes and shapes. The pit is surrounded by tall oaks, willow, beech and sycamore on all sides and is maybe 5 or 6 acres in size with a lakebed like the proverbial egg box.

No.3 is one of, if not THE original carp water in the county. History and pedigree trace back to the earliest roots of carp angling and over the years the odd fish was added whilst many more passed away or were moved on to other lakes in the valley. It was a different time. But as the 90s moved to the noughties the stocks dwindled and a mere handful remained.



What really made this place special of course was the stock where a huge mirror called 'Single' (around 39/41lb) was the King of the lake. There had been a couple of 30s which perished due to old age before I joined but from these ashes a new Queen was emerging in the shape of The Fully which looked set to breach 30lbs in the near future. Apart from these two characters we had perhaps half a dozen fish, mainly commons in the low 20 class. This assortment of carp made for a unique collection of characters. Each different to the other. A real Car Park type vibe. In the years before my ticket I would walk its banks and stare down the steep marginal shelf, hoping for the merest glimpse of something astounding. Occasionally the lake repaid me for the effort.

Despite the relatively low stock, as with any lake, familiarity makes the challenge feel much less daunting as certain areas are ruled out and the better spots located. With the water being crystal clear it wasn't uncommon to see a fish or two on every visit, particularly behind their favourite snag tree.

In June 2006, after a large amount of watching, and very little angling I found one of these favoured areas which was covered by a small corner swim. It looked incredibly neglected. It was very tight and one rod was all that it could take, and hopefully all that was needed.

It was a lovely spot, surrounded by towering oaks and beech trees, a large wall of earth behind the swim made it feel like



"stories for other days"

a little haven from the busy road which lay just a few feet behind it. Branches of leafy canopy overhung the steep, clear, gravelly margins. Each stick and stone could be easily seen in the tap clear water and the bank had a multi-generational deep pile carpet of leaves and twigs which provided the perfect surface to ghost carefully over whilst peering deep into the edges for any sign of the jewels.

At this point the lake was no more than 50ft across and directly in front of this little neglected swim (well it was more a gap in the trees than a swim) was a dense bed of Canadian pond weed about the size of a mini bus, behind which was a rather large and tasty set of snags. One warm evening, as we neared July, I dropped in on the way home from work to have a look around. Not seeing anything interesting I made my way to this intimate little corner and ascended the nearest tree. Very quickly I could see the unmistakable and menacing form of 'Single' slowly cruising along the back edge of the weed bed before going out into the open water in the main body of the lake beyond. Not a hint of anxiety and brim full of confidence, Single was the King of the lake without a doubt.

At this stage I'd not realised how nomadic this carp was and the sight of her in this area had me excitedly making plans to return the next day with some bait and the floater gear.

An early departure the following morning saw me back in the corner with an assortment of bits and pieces including floater kit. It was one of those June days that you know is going to be a scorcher, so I was anxious to grasp a few of the cooler hours and watch the lake come to life. As I rolled into the car park I was pleased to see I was the only angler

present and as I opened the door my lungs were filled with that evocative misty, slightly damp air which immediately reaffirms why our past time is so satisfying.

Arriving at that time and with the lake to myself I strode straight to the corner with purpose, ducking underneath the lowest branches along the path which were heavy with dew. After scaling the tree I could see that 'nothing was doing' so whilst I waited/hoped for a carp to turn up I scattered a few mixers over the back edge of the weed bed. The plan was to hide the thick line on the weed as it was right up to the surface. I overshot a couple of baits into the snags as well to see if that might illicit a response. There was no ripple so they could sit there for as long as it took.

As I paced the banks and climbed various trees nearby I decided it might be prudent to introduce some bottom baits onto a likely looking spot as well - just to keep my options open. From up the tree I could see a small patch of gravel which emerged from it on my side. It was only about 6" out from the weed forest canopy but with careful placement I was able to throw 4 halved baits onto the spot (8 bits). Some on it, some just off - luck rather than judgement!

I returned to my tackle and retrieved the water bottle for some much needed refreshment. To kill some time I tied up a bottom bait rig and ate an apple before going back to check the baited spots. Looking over at the floaters it was clear nothing had occurred, it all looked the same as I'd left it.

When I checked the bottom baited spot I suddenly froze. There, 10ft away, hanging half an inch off the bottom directly over the bait was the most perfect carp I had ever seen. The Fully. Tail up and wafting



Stalked on a freeline bait

rhythmically, curling at the ends as she tantalisingly hung in space, hovering all the crumbs of bait away. I was repeatedly given jaw dropping glimpses of her armour clad flanks. As she twisted and continued to scour the spot, I could see her flashing the 'whites' from underneath her big dark burnished scales and my mouth was suddenly dry again. I backed carefully away from the gap and crept back to the gear. My head was thumping and I could hardly swallow. This was one fish I just had to catch. I took a handful of bait back to the spot again in time to see her slowly fade away around the big weed bed to the right of the swim (in a clockwise direction), back towards the snags. All the bait had gone. I put another 8 halves back out and retreated once more to put a plan into action, exactly what plan I wasn't sure!

Its times like this that you dig into your memory banks for similar experiences and I'd had a bit of an experience the week before which got me thinking. I'd managed to stalk a lovely 19lb mirror out of the edge on a freeline bait from another water. On that occasion I'd used a short hooklink in a solid pva bag. This I filled with crumbed bait and a stone to weigh it down so I could swing it out the required distance (and also to ensure the bag sunk). No lead core or anything, just simple free-lining. I decided that the same tactic could do the trick here. I put the components together and went back over to the spot. She was just arriving back again, this time from the left. All my nerve endings were standing on end. My brain was racing and I was desperately trying to calm myself down so I didn't fluff it.

The Fully ate all the bait again without any hesitation and I sat on my hands waiting for her to move off. After a few minutes she'd had the lot and was off again to the right for her lap of the weed bed/snags. I slowly lowered myself into the edge so I could swing the rig directly onto the spot. Quickly I plopped the bag on the surface. It was sinking much slower than I had anticipated, it was critically balanced in fact! The bag was sinking so slowly that it was still only halfway down to the bottom when I saw The Fully watching it like a statue from 6ft away. I did my best to melt back into the tree line and sink the line. She was totally still and continued to watch as the bag fell slowly to the bottom. She must have bolted round the bus sized weedberg to get back that quick....

I couldn't believe it. One bite a year on this lake was considered a result and to F*** up my first chance like this

was just gutting. Once the bait had landed and the bag had melted The Fully very slowly drifted past, looking exactly like a fish who had just clocked a very clumsy attempt at trying to catch it!

With the rod in position I decided that there was no point in moving it straight away so left it in situ and went back to the kit for some more water and to repeatedly strike my forehead against a sharp and spiky tree trunk. A minute or two later I returned to the gap in the trees to re-enact the failure and assure myself the chance had gone but to my surprise The Fully was back. Even more amazing was that she was head down on the spot and there was no bait left including the hookbait. Her gills were flaring as she chewed up the baits so I quickly lifted the rod. She had to have it in her mouth....

But there was nothing. Not even the faintest piece of resistance.

I looked back to the fish and she was exactly as she had been. No movement. She remained casually chewing away without a care in the world. Accusingly, I repeatedly looked at the hookbait now in my hand, and then the fish - I couldn't understand the sum of the parts before me. She had the bait in her mouth? Didn't she? I took the rod back to the path and scratched my head. After a few minutes some form of composure returned.

Resistance. A lead. That was what it needed. The weight would hook her and she'd flee the swim firmly hooked.... Yeah right.

Plan B was put into action. I slipped on a small in-line lead. The rig remained the same. I returned to the gap once more. All was quiet. No bait left, no fish either. I recalled earlier experiences of how hard it can be to hook carp on small items like crumb and dispensed

with the bag this time. I carefully placed the hookbait and lobbed in a couple of half baits around it before sinking the line down nicely and slackening off the clutch. I hoped the larger items would get her moving and tighten the hooklink. Only the tip peered over the edge and with the line hanging directly downwards I hoped this time I'd done it right!

Previously each lap of the weed bed had been quite prompt so I watched the clock and paced the banks hoping she'd come back. 10 minutes turned to 20. 20 minutes turned to half an hour. Each of those minutes felt like an hour. She'd sussed me. Done the off and warned all her pals about the Noddy over in the corner swim.

I decided to give it another 5 minutes and retreated back to the path to put all my bits and bobs away in readiness for an early return home with my tail between my legs. I was gutted to have messed up such a prime opportunity at the most stunning fish I could ever hope to catch. With everything sorted I took one last look over the bushes (to the left of the gap) and out of the corner of my eye I saw a flash of silver, followed a split second later by the sound of a fizzing Tourny clutch (probably the nicest noise in carp fishing). I leapt over the bush, with all the speed and grace I could muster (i.e. I flattened it!) quickly grabbed the rod and clamped down hard on the spool.

Whatever was on the end (I assumed it was probably The Fully but obviously I couldn't be sure) had dived as deep as she could into the weedbed. I slowly pilled on the pressure and she slowed down. I was on a heavy line at the time and pushed it to the limits. I hoped there was still something hanging on the end. Slowly the tip inched back, grating and groaning, little by little I gained some line and after a couple of minutes had a massive ball of weed at my feet with a black tail hanging out the back of it. What a relief. I managed to get all of it into the net and as I peeled back all the foliage I was greeted by the most breathtaking sight imaginable.

A truly armoured carp. Black, brown, gold - amazing. Let the pictures do the talking. I called another regular who worked nearby to do the pics and whilst I waited I unhooked her and weighed her in at 30lb 10oz - her first time over

30lb's. Cherry on the cake.

Whilst I waited I stood in the margins with the fish in the sling and took the moment in. In the blink of an eye the pics were done and with one last adoring glance, the Queen of the pond was returned home. As I watched her fade from sight I hoped that she'd forget her experience quickly, but I knew I never would.

A week later I saw her from up a tree, casually cruising about amongst the weeds without a care in the world. I smiled and felt a warm glow inside.

Just a few days later, and to celebrate the capture of the Fully I joined my good friend Birdy on the banks of Colney Lake, one I'd joined to escape from the intensity of No.3. As the sun set, Birdy and I sat in the long grass for an evening, eating pizza and drinking cold beers, it was a lovely way to round off the capture. Unbelievably, the following morning, one of my pub chucked choddies signalled a first light bite. Following some tense drama with some heavy weed I found myself peering into a net full of a very heavily scaled carp





not far off thirty pounds. I showed Birdy the contents of the net and the moment became complete as we smiled and laughed at the serendipity of the occasion.

Less than a week later I was back at Colney again, to see if I could catch another (which I did) but I realised that as much fun as this was, I needed to get back to No.3 and keep chasing Single. The distraction could prove fatal.

Despite my best efforts to develop the spot on No.3 into something regular it would seem that it was simply a piece of opportunist angling rather than a regular spot to feed and sadly wasn't the key to unlocking the lake.

As the summer progressed I watched and learned and began to understand their habits and preferred areas and decided that nights were almost a waste of time. Time spent watching was as much as I could achieve most of the time so this suited me fine. I was working 9-5 and the fish were rarely in the edge at the weekends with the increased bankside traffic. My time to visit was therefore evenings or early in the day.

I managed to get my second bite late Summer from a different spot in the edge during a period of intense three hour morning sessions. This time I was on the opposite bank in a swim called the Gravelly which had vast canopies of overhanging trees either side. I was fishing a little way down the marginal shelf and I could see the fish approach the areas but initially with extreme



caution. Before long I had the fish feeding there every day, but it was still about a fortnight before I got a bite. The spot was 'prime!' Gone were the cautious feeding fish, their confidence had been built over a period of regular feeding. Not volumes of bait but good food in small but regular quantities of maybe 20 baits a day.

Over this period I had each of the 6 definite alive carp regularly feeding there and over that time my hair undoubtedly greyed with much chewing of nails. On at least 3 occasions over that fortnight I had the big girl pick up my hookbait, shake her head (jecting a previously 'proven' rig with ease) and casually swim away. At that time I was fishing one rod half way up the shelf but before deciding to throw it all in and take up golf I decided to try a 2nd rod a little further down the ledge. Two lines was a gamble but with the fish approaching the area half way up the shelf I thought I could get away with a pop up fished further down the shelf.

My thinking at the time was that the fish were naturally

half way up the shelf due to the water temps and where they expected the bait to be so it had to be a bottom bait due to the height the fish were approaching the rig.

A single pop up fished a couple of feet further down the ledge would hopefully get the fish tilting downwards, hiding the fact it was 2" off the deck and 'in theory' nail my prize. Oh, plans!

First trip over with the two rods was on another rare day off. The day got off to a rocky start when I arrived to find another angler fishing close to the Gravelly in an area called 'Back of the Hump'. When I arrived it was 10am and p'ing down. That'll teach me for having a lie in. As I passed the bivy the door was zipped firmly down and beer cans were scattered around outside. Looks like he had a good night!

I quickly glanced at the line angles and luckily for me he wasn't remotely near the spots so when I arrived in my plot I dropped in a couple of dozen halved baits and sat back from the edge to bait up the rods ready for action.

I wasn't going to fish until I



saw Single. No point blowing the spot for a 20lb common.

With the rods rigged up I leant them against a tree and adopted my favourite position hiding behind the marginal shrubs. The rain backed off a little and the visibility improved because of the reduction in surface ripple. After about 15 minutes of waiting a long, lean, low 20 common moved past over the deeper water, from right to left, just scouting.

Two minutes later he was back from the left, this time patrolling the edge, dead on line with the bait. He moved with a well oiled confidence



which suggested he was extremely catchable and had probably made this same journey many times in the past week or two.

He took a mouthful of the bait and slowly headed back to the right, off towards the biggest set of snags in the lake where the others were likely to be hiding. I had no doubt the smell of the bait in his gills/mouth would have alerted his friends to the small snack he'd just had. I imagine this to be a communal sharing of food. On another day it would be a different fish doing the finding and sharing the love.

Five minutes later he was back with his friend the fully scaled (Hello old mate - how have you been? Sorry about the other week). They worked the spot from one side to the other until they'd had a nice little munch before they faded away again. Time for a top up. Another handful of chops spread over a wide area. At this stage I was waiting for the big girl, no rush, sit on hands time.

The common and fully returned once more, nice and confident. I got the distinct feeling that today would be the day. I had more time today, no rushing anything. A little more bait was applied and then she turned up. Like a spectre from the deeps, she ghosted past well wide of the spot. Lurking



on the edges she cautiously approached the bait before very quickly throwing caution to the wind and taking a few samples. The three fish ate their fill (of chopped bollices) and wandered back off up the margin. I made a guess that they were visiting the snags between feeds and took a gamble. Further up the bank was another marginal spot with potential.

When the fish left I baited the original spot and introduced my rigs. The swim is so gravelly I couldn't get the banksticks in without making a racket so they were laid onto the stones with the clutches unwound. Nothing more than the tips peeping over the ledge, lines hanging limp and nicely pinned down with a short length of leadcore and putty mouse droppings. I awaited the return of the King.

Eventually she came back into view and I nipped down to the other spot and threw in a few baits. Hoping it'd slow or stop any others coming back up. I got back to the first spot and she was nowhere to be seen. S***. I nipped back to the second spot (they're only about 60ft apart) and there was the fully and a common head down over the bait. Magic! As I watched they faded back into the snags and I put another handful of bait back under the tree. The rain had stopped and the shrubbery had that magic fresh smell of rejuvenation. An aroma that can only be improved by carp slime!

I got back to my original swim and I could see her. She was there. But not on her own. There was a common with her in the twenties. I watched for a moment and decided I should just let things happen and sit on my bait bucket to have a drink.

As I sat staring at the back of the shrubbery picturing what was occurring just beyond them, the rod on the chod rig swung to the right and the clutch began to purr. Magic! I dashed to the rod, lifted the tip and.....

Nothing. The rod had begun to bend round as the pressure increased and then the tip just shot back. The line had parted. I looked accusingly at the end of the line as it entered the water. The swim now devoid of carp. I looked at the end of the line between my fingers and saw a flat spot. I'd zipped it in my rod sleeve and not noticed the damage. What a tw*t.

Having suffered the loss with all the grace and dignity I could muster (not a great deal it has to be said) I tried to keep the spot alive. There were occasions where I could have fished for one of the smaller fish in the lake but I just didn't want to hook anything and ruin the spot, I wanted HER.

After a few weeks one of the regulars had clearly seen these fish and decided that he wanted to have a go for them. In his opinion he was unable to do so without hacking

back some of the marginal cover I had 'cultivated' and in doing so destroyed the 'veil of secrecy' which had encouraged them in so close. Spot ruined.

With no more real opportunities to speak of I decided that as it was now almost September I should start baiting an open water mark with the intentions of establishing a deeper water spot as the weather turned.

I wanted it to be in an area I knew the big girl frequented so I spent a few days with the marker rod plotting the right area. I also wanted it to be a spot that I could fish from two (or more) swims and for it to be a little un-usual (i.e. NOT the most obvious spot in line with the tallest tree on the horizon at catapult range!)

Having located such a spot I set about a regular campaign of introducing a kilo of 18mm'ers every other day for two weeks before fishing. One morning in early September I saw a long golden common leap clear of the water within 30ft of the spots and hoped that they were in the area. It looked to be the one called the Spikey common - normally a mid-20.

The chosen area was at the foot of a plateau, a foot or so into the silt. Just a few days later I saw some intense bubbling over this silty area. Time to get fishing! Over the course of the next

couple of weeks I trundled in half a dozen nights but ended up with just tench to show for my efforts. Some 4 or 5 around the 6lb mark. Most mornings I would see the bubbling but invariably I would get a tench instead of a carp. Very annoying!

In retrospect this was all useful information as it became apparent over the time I spent there that I would catch tench in the silt but the carp takes would all come from gravel. Neither would cross over. I know this flies in the face of some thinking but I can only speak as I find and on this venue (despite spending lots of time fishing the silt) the carp only fell to baits fished on the gravel. Another headache was the lack of competition for food. Most of the time it would be single carp

approaching the bait at any given time and they would simply eat half a dozen baits before moving on. The big girl was particularly adept at that. She'd know where every baited spot was on the lake and take a mouthful or two from each in turn before going back to the snags and digesting her meal. This was often visible from the tops of the trees as she had a tendency to top and grab a mouthful of bubbles before plunging back down to the bottom and slowly letting out the air a little at a time. It couldn't help but make you laugh to see it! Even though she was clearly tucking us all up.

The remaining Autumn and Winter months were spent largely in reflection. When I closed my eyes I could see Single shaking her head and getting away with it time and again. I had to change things! So I chatted with some friends and we discussed the problems, they all tossed in a few ideas and I sat on them for a couple of months before coming up with a plan, drawing (what I hoped would



be) the best and most suitable conclusions.

Sometimes inspiration arrives at an unlikely moment and it was whilst watching the Korda underwater DVDs that it really dawned on me what the solution was. So over the coming weeks I came up with a combination of materials which would suit the style of fishing I was doing (i.e. lowering it in the edge). The new thinking also influenced the way I would be approaching the rigs I slung further out into the pond as well.

A group of friends decided to hire (what was) Cemex Sandhurst during the January and I managed a lovely 26lb common (and a double) on the new rig and bait combination which helped to crystallise my thoughts and give me a nice lump of confidence in the new presentation.

In my enthusiasm I returned far too early on and began to gently bait last years areas. I should have known better but I was itching to put my thoughts and creations into practice. The inevitable blanks mounted.

When you're desperate for things to happen you see anything as a possible sign of conditions improving and after many false dawns things eventually seemed to really be waking up. A few tench were rolling over their favourite spots and the trees were beginning to show signs of renewing themselves once again.

As we were now just into April I decided to do a two night trip in the hope that I might see something and move on it. My preferred approach on there of stalking wasn't that ideal to undertake when the water was just warming up. They weren't showing in the edge yet, but they had been sticking their heads out occasionally very close to a couple of gravel humps in the Beach swim. So, it was with this swim in mind that I arrived and loaded up the barrow.

The path round to that swim is one of the longest on the lake and very rutted so I stopped half way round to survey the scene, have a little drink and catch my breath before pushing on the final few hundred metres.

I was in no rush so I positioned myself on a little bit of raised ground and leaned against a tree so that I could take in the

panoramic view in front of me. The water was quite cloudy as we'd had a little rain which had been fed in via a side stream. As I stood there I could see a nice stiff breeze pushing some good sized ripples into the bushes beneath my feet. It was all quite hypnotic.

I could only have been there 10 seconds when just 10ft in front of me (just 2 ft out from the bank) Single head and shouldered silently. Poking her big grey head out up to the gills and quietly slipping back in again with barely a mark left in the ripple. I nearly choked on my drink. To see 40lb of carp nut out so close to the bank was an image that will stay with me forever.

With all my gear beside me it was a very simple case of chucking a rod together with a new rig on and gently lowering it down next to the bush where she had emerged. I was stalking after all!

I sat the rod on the buzzer (leaving it switched off) with the clutch nice and loose and with loads of slack line to make things

as inconspicuous as possible. After setting the landing net up I decided to sit down and tie up a couple of spare rigs so that I remained off the skyline and kept nice and quiet. I just knew she was there. I could feel her in my bones.

The bait couldn't have been in position for more than about 15 minutes before the spool simply fizzed away. Hooking a fish directly beneath the rod tip was always going to be a lively affair and despite the lack of weed I still expected a big battle. On lifting the rod the fish had covered an amazing amount of ground in next to no time and I applied all the pressure I dared to stop the fish reaching some rather nasty branches.

In the back of my mind I was a little surprised at how easily I'd managed to turn the fish when in full flight but I just concentrated on the battle and did my best to bring her to the bank as easily and quickly as possible. Despite my best efforts to control her she still managed to take in a lap of the entire bay so I guessed that any further chances of a bite from the area were somewhat slim!

Eventually she surfaced just three rod lengths out and despite the cloudy water I could immediately see she had the regular scale pattern of a common. The fight had already given me enough of an indication to suggest it wasn't one of the biggies so I wasn't really that surprised to see what was hanging on the end. I can't lie, I was disappointed. But only for a few moments. In many ways she was much more sought after. At a few ounces below 15lb's she was the smallest resident of the lake by some margin and definitely the least caught. This was the lakes oldest fish – a true vintage 'cricket bat'. I named her Botham.

As I was all alone over

there I decided that the best thing to do was to quickly rattle off a couple of self takes and slip her back. Just looking at her you could see the age, the carp was probably over 50 years old, she didn't need to suffer any more than she had already.

I decided to keep the capture to myself so rolled up the unhooking mat again and tucked the wet sling back in the rod bag. There was nothing to be gained from telling the other regulars and I 'might' have been onto a nice little spot which I didn't want to jeopardise either.

It was an odd mix of feelings, truthfully I was more than a little bit disappointed not to have stuck a hook in the big girl but then again that was two fish caught with the best yet to come. Birdy popped down with a couple of cans for a little toast to the first carp out since the previous August. We talked it over and decided it was only a matter of time. She'd be mine. The bait and rig had worked exactly as planned.

It was June before much else happened and the weed growth was reaching the surface in many areas of the lake and their favourite little spot at that time of year was the snags in the roadside corner. This area received the lions share of the sunshine and as June slid by they were making their presence known. Sadly one of the syndicate was camped in the main snags swim every weekend of the year and at least 2 nights a week, often baiting in between trips as well. Being such a small lake this was the only real swim covering the area but there was no way I wanted to fish the swim/spots that another angler was putting so much time/money/effort into. The last thing I wanted to do was catch her from this swim and be accused of 'hawking' in on someone else's work so I left the area alone.



This style of fishing really isn't for me, each to their own but this left only one very small 'nook' in which to try and target the area. This plot was known at one time as a swim in its own right, but over time bushes and trees had encroached making it much smaller – a one rod swim really. With a number of snags nearby it wouldn't be the easiest place to land a carp from but with heavy weed about I felt confident it would provide a nice buffer before the fish got to the nasty stuff!

About 10am on a weekday (quietest time on the lake for other anglers) in late June I slipped on my chest waders and took my garden rake for a walk! I assumed (correctly) that the area I intended to fish would be covered with all manner of crap having not been angled on for many years. Half an hours work and a small pile of twigs and leaves left me feeling much happier and with a handful of tigers and chopped boilie freebies left scattered on the spot I was confident I'd get a visit or two from the carps over the coming days.

This year I was experimenting with self employment which meant that I could whip over for an hour each day to bait and watch but as I was working until 7pm most nights this would rule out angling until it was 'ripe' for the picking. Within a couple of weeks I was seeing fish in the 'area' and





the handful of bait that was going in every day was definitely being taken. Slowly but surely I could feel the momentum building. I was seeing the Fully and the Spike common there every day but knew that if I angled for them I'd scupper the spot for the big girl. I wasn't sure what to do so I did nothing – simply keep baiting and await the arrival of the big girl (hopefully). The chap who was fishing the main swim was sitting just 40 yards away from my margin spot but had so far yet to see these fish. I was sure that if he saw them he'd naturally want to angle for them so I decided that I needed to up the ante a little. Splashing out on a baiting pole I pulled a little of the surface weed which was gathered nearby so that it covered the spot which by now was glowing nicely. I could still see the spot from up a tree and bait up with the pole over the weed (giving the green stuff a little shake

with the pole afterwards to make sure it had all dropped through!) but I hoped it would keep the area covert for the time being.

After 3 weeks of the baiting I got a rather nice text. Over the course of the weekend the fella in the neighbouring swim had just caught the Fully and the Spike common. Awesome! That'd done me a massive favour as it'd spook them from the area for a little while. I just hoped he didn't get the biggun as well though as I was seeing her nearby and guessed she had to be joining in on the feeding.

Come Monday I was straight over there to bait the spot again. Immediately Single was in view wandering about deep down the shelf on the far margin. I got the bait in quickly before collapsing the pole back down again and stashing it away from sight.

Within minutes She was on the bait. Quick as a flash I was back at the

car and getting my tackle which was already rigged up. I chose a nice big tiger out of the bucket and threaded it onto the hair and waited for the big girl to wander off again. Whilst I waited the pole was retrieved and put back together and left on the bank alongside me.

Back up the tree (for what felt like ages) I could see that she had eaten enough and waddled back off down the slope and back round the weed towards the snags. Now was my chance.

Within minutes I'd parted a little slot in the weed with the pole, inserted the rig with a couple more freebies, sunk the line and placed the rod on the buzzer, line nice and slack, weed curtain pulled back across again as if nothing had happened!

Back up the tree and I waited, and waited. After half an hour she returned on her own once more - just to make sure she hadn't missed anything. I retreated back down to the ground and stood watching. Without hesitancy she dropped over the spot and began to eat. I could see the light reflecting off her flank as she twisted and turned. Her nose pressed on the lakebed. My view was shrouded slightly by the thin veil of surface weed that I'd pulled back over the spot but I could see her clear as day, just 30ft from me. Words cannot



describe that feeling. Her gills were flaring as she chewed and crunched her way through the baits and I could see in her behaviour that she was high and reckless on food.

My mouth was dry, my heart was thumping. This was to be the moment when the new rig nailed her, the trips to bait up paid dividends and all the stress was finally rewarded. I pulled out my phone and texted Dave. "She's on my bait". Dave's response was a concise "you'll have her". Within minutes I saw the line twitch where it entered the weedy water and the rod top knocked once. The delkim let out a single bleep and I heaved into it wanting to slow things down from the off.

As the rod took on the curve and the clutch began to fizz I felt the world close in around me. Tunnel vision. This was the moment. I was Stuart Pearce standing at the penalty spot - but which tournament was it!

I had about 10 seconds of a brutally bucking rod in my hands and then I was left with the answer as the rod shot backwards. This was no Euro 96. Tears stung the back of my eyes. I wound the rod back in and held the end tackle in my hands – on the end was a large scale firmly impaled on an opened up hook. My senses overwhelmed and useless I stared back and forth at the lead and rig, then at the bite spot, then the snags. My jaw agape. All of the hard work and I'd been kicked firmly and squarely in the plums. Again. I rang Birdy and simply said "I just lost her". He did his best to console me and perk me up. Thankfully a couple of things he said pulled me from my state of shock.

The fish was called Single, yet I had a scale on the hook. Had I pulled off the only scale she had? And the initial run just didn't feel right. It wasn't slow and powerful like most biggies – it felt explosive and very fast.

Yet I knew she'd been there on her own. I'd seen her there with my own eyes. She had been just 30ft away in clear water. No-one else. My instincts were telling me that it hadn't been her yet I knew what I'd seen. Had my eyes deceived me?

I packed up disconsolate. Unable to process what had happened. Had I lost her? Hadn't I? I headed home contemplating the future. Part of me wanted to sell the gear and forget the whole sorry episode. But a much larger part wanted to even the score. Within days I was back and bait was once more put on the old spot again before having a mooch round.

Whilst up a tree on the other bank from the snags swims the final piece of the puzzle was concluded. As I stood surveying the main body of the lake the smallest of the 20lb commons emerged from under a weedbed, and there, on her flank was a long scratch and a missing scale. I managed a smile. Just. Now it made some sort of sense. How that carp managed to get herself into the equation I'll never know – she could only have taken one or two baits as I could see the spot. 'Understanding is life's booby prize'.

That experience really knocked the stuffing out of me and I wasn't able to get the spot going again. Meanwhile, a month down the line in the swim next door the other angler realised his dreams and got the payback for all his hard work and commitment. Well done J.

Shortly after this the land owners, Anglian Water decided to lift a barrier between this pit and her neighbour to better equalise the levels. This had a knock on effect in that suddenly there were large numbers of small bream and roach in the water which could get through the grate increasing the biomass significantly. Suddenly under every tree were shoals of sprats basking in the sun. The water quality next door was also poorer (murkier) than that in Single's home and with

water skiers on it as well came the possibility of pollution.

When the following Spring arrived the lake was incredibly slow to react. The mirror known as Plumbers (very visible due to its spectre like colouration) had simply disappeared and Tench were dying with worrying regularity. A new crop of anglers arrived and started applying large amounts of bait, far more than the stock could consume. It was like a new water. 2 feet lower, cloudy and with barely any weed. Old bait was popping up all over and with the fish being very shy to show themselves it just felt all wrong.

Sadly, that Spring, Single was found dead and was buried behind the car park swim. In some ways it seemed inevitable but it was still a heart-breaking experience and I've never been the same since. I'd committed too much to the chase to leave with just stories of loss and pain.

There were large periods of time where I felt that I would never catch her, that I wasn't deserving enough, but then there were the times when I got close – REALLY CLOSE. Times I thought that just maybe it could happen. There were close encounters when I'd seen her eject the rig with a shake of her head and times I'd seen her bubbling over my open water spots but in the end she proved to be the winner.

Eventually I moved onto other local waters and struggled to settle. That year I caught a lovely new PB common and a gorgeous dark mirror from Colney - which in reality wasn't much smaller than old Single. I learned a lot on the banks of that pond – skills and methods that I have since used elsewhere and been very successful with. But despite my subsequent successes none of could come close to that place, and to her. ■

