

A Very Big Fish Story

*[This is a letter I sent to my sister Connie on March 1, 1997.
Its veracity has come under question in some quarters. –S.H.]*

Dear Con,

Congratulations on your recent magnificent piscatorial accomplishment! An 84-inch Atlantic sailfish, my, my! So it took 25 minutes to haul it in, though. That's not quite so impressive, since I once caught an 11-inch fish and it took me 5 minutes to haul that one in. Extrapolating from 11 inches to 84 inches, you can easily see that had I been pulling in your sailfish it would have taken me $5 \times 84/11 =$ about 38 minutes. (Who said mathematics would never be of any use in the real world?!)

Isn't it strange that the goal in fishing is to catch the *biggest* fish and to take the *longest* time in doing it? It seems unfair that taking a very long time to catch a *small* fish doesn't count for something!

I suggested to Sara that once you get your prize catch stuffed you should put a sign up on the entry way to your house, with a big arrow and the words: "**This way to the fish.**" Then when people come to the door, even if they are salesmen or something, you could catch them looking at the sign and grab them by the collar and take them off to see your fish!

I can see it all in my mind's eye:

Salesman: "I'm not really a fisherman myself, but let me show you this wonderful Acme model 100-B vacuum cleaner..."

You (grabbing hold of his ear as well as his collar): "*I know you'll want to see this fish!*"

Salesman (struggling vainly to get loose): "Geez, Lady! I've got a lot of vacuum cleaners to sell today, you know..."

You: "It will only be a few minutes; less than an hour for sure... I think. Let me tell you the whole story about how I hauled in the Big Fellow. It was a great day out there on the billowing blue sea, and it wasn't all that far from the Bermuda Triangle you understand. The winds were precisely at 90 degrees to the Gulf Stream, you see, ideal for fishing sailfish. But even so, catching a sailfish is by no means an easy thing. Now the Captain says to me, ..."

A couple hours later, an exhausted looking salesman emerges from your home, sadder but wiser, gently touching his red and swollen ear, and still carrying his Acme model 100-B vacuum. "I wonder if it is too late in life for me to become a skid-row wino," he mutters to himself as he heads off to the nearest bar.

* * *

I must confess that I've been feeling very troubled in some vague, indefinable way ever since word of your Big Catch arrived. I can't help but think how envious deep down to his bones Dad would have been to have been trumped in his prime pursuit by a *mere daughter!* And, dare I say it, *humiliated!* The more I thought about this, the more some mysteriously repressed memory struggled to rise to my surface consciousness. And then it came to me! It wouldn't be so bad if a *son* had out-fished Dad, and held the family fishing trophy; in fact it would have been the sort of thing he might even have bragged about. How very convenient, then, that this repressed memory came to the fore just at this time.

However, before proceeding, I must insist that you do not demean the following solemn account by calling it a mere "fish story"! I swear by Beezlebub that this is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. (More or less.)

Back when I was about 12 I went off to Boy Scout camp at Green Lake, Wisconsin for a week. There I met my friend Louis from Peoria who introduced me to fishing, Illinois style. The camp had a contest to see which scout could catch the biggest fish that week, and Louis from Peoria was determined to win the prize. So each day we got in a row boat, rowed out on the lake, and fished for Muskies and such. But we didn't catch a thing (except for an old boot which Louis from Peoria told me we had to throw back because it was under the 12-inch size limit). As the days went by, Louis from Peoria was getting more and more glum and kept mumbling something about there being a lot more fish in Illinois than there were in stupid old Wisconsin.

Then on the evening before the contest deadline, I finally hooked a fish. I was just about to pull it into the boat when Louis from Peoria grabbed the middle of my pole and shouted, "You fool! You've got to *play him* before you try to pull him in, or he might pull the whole boat under the water!" Now we had already seen this fish above water, and I knew that it was at most a foot long, so I really doubted that it was going to pull our boat under. But I wanted to do things right, so I said to Louis from Peoria, "Louis", I said ...

I must digress at this point and mention that when I spoke to Louis from Peoria I usually did not call him "Louis from Peoria," but just Louis, because I figured that he would understand which Louis I was talking to, especially when there were only the two of us in the boat. Moreover there were no other Louises in the camp; in fact I have never met another person named Louis in my entire life, though I did meet a guy named Henry once. (I'm not sure why I mentioned that here.)

Anyway, back to the boat with me and Louis from Peoria. "Louis," I said, "I do not want to *play* with the fish, I want to *catch* him."

Louis from Peoria laughed at my pathetic naiveté, and replied, "No, no, not *play with* him, but *play him*, wear him out so he's too tired to break the line or sink the boat when we are pulling him in."

Thus edified, I led the fish around the perimeter of the boat while he was still in the water. And again. And again. After 17 times around the boat, Louis from Peoria said to me, "I think you can pull him in now; all the spirit seems to have gone out of him."

Indeed it had; when I pulled him in I found he was deader than a mackerel. However the fish was not a mackerel, but a pike according to Louis from Peoria. And this presented a problem when we measured him and found that he was only 11 inches long.

"The size limit is 12 inches," said Louis from Peoria dejectedly.

At first I thought to myself, "No problem, he's definitely under 12 inches." But before I said anything rash, I remembered what I had learned the previous day when I had to throw back the undersized boot. So I said sagely, "Gee, it's just a little bit too short."

"You know," said Louis from Peoria to me, "one time I told my stupid older sister that she had to throw back a fish because of the 12-inch size limit and she said 'But it *is* under 12 inches!' She was so dumb she thought you had to throw back a fish if was *over* the size limit!" And he guffawed and guffawed. I shifted a little nervously, recognizing my very close escape from ridicule, and then politely joined the guffawing at the stupid girls.

But suddenly Louis from Peoria sobered up, and said "Tomorrow is the contest deadline. We're not even going to have an entry!"

"We could still win," I suggested. "What if *nobody* catches a fish? Then they would have to draw straws or something." But Louis from Peoria did not think our chances were good in that direction.

"I've got it" said my friend (Louis from Peoria). "What we have to do is stretch the fish just a little bit so that he is a legal catch. Considering how bad the fishing has been, this fish might be the very last fish to ever be caught in Wisconsin, so if we can make him legal we are bound to win the contest."

"Can you stretch a fish?" I asked in my utter ignorance.

"Why not?" asked Louis from Peoria, "Fishermen do it all the time."

"Just in their stories, don't they?" I asked.

"No, no, when they measure them too!" said Louis from Peoria knowingly. "Think about it. When fishermen measure their catches they never measure them horizontally. Instead, they hang them from a pole so that gravity can stretch them out a little bit more. All we are going to do is help out the natural force of gravity a little bit."

"It must be OK to help out nature," I said enthusiastically. So Louis from Peoria grabbed the tail of the pike, and I grabbed the head, and we stood up in the boat and started pulling with all our might. Now one little problem with this scenario that we were quickly reminded of is that fish tend to be slippery

customers. As I climbed back into the boat from my side, and Louis from Peoria climbed back into the boat from his side, we did not look each other in the eye. But we were happy to see that our fish had not been lost; it was laying there in the boat looking very sad in its present deadness. We decided that it might be better to continue the stretching process back on land.

But even on terra firma, and despite all our efforts, our pike only gained a quarter inch or so. Finally we decided that we had to hang a weight from the fish overnight to eke out the full extra inch we needed. Louis from Peoria ran to the gym and brought back a heavy barbell which we attached to the pike through its gills and then we tied a rope to its tail and hoisted the fish and barbell combination high up into the air over a tree branch to keep bears and moose from getting to it during the night. (It is always good to think of everything.)

Imagine our surprise the next morning when we returned to find that our fish had gained not just one little inch, but a whole, *whole* lot more. In fact the fish was stretched all the way out, and the barbell was resting on the ground. We lowered the tail end down, and laying the fish out in a straight line horizontally (because we did not wish to cheat on our measurement) we found that it was now—guess what!—85 inches long!

Isn't it curious, Connie, that this breaks your record by 1 inch? You may say that my fish should only be counted as 11 inches, since that is what the first measurement showed. But that was only a rough preliminary *vertical* measurement. Our much more careful, accurate, and unbiased final *horizontal* measurement came out to exactly 85 inches, and this was later verified by a professional ichthyologist. So clearly that is the measurement I am entitled to go by in determining our family record catch. (You may rest easy, Dad.)

When I first saw our stretched-out fish I exclaimed, "Oh no, it's ruined!" But Louis from Peoria was not ready to admit defeat. "Don't be silly," he said. "Now we are certain to win the contest. Nobody else is going to have a fish this long!"

"But it doesn't even look like a fish anymore," I lamented. "Look, it is only a quarter of an inch in diameter. It looks more like a fish *line* than it does a fish! People might think it is a tapeworm!"

"Have you never heard of the Green Lake Needlefish Pike?" Louis from Peoria asked me. I hadn't. "It is a very rare fish, indeed," said Louis from Peoria, "but I think I may remember hearing of it before, perhaps."

"But Louis," I said to Louis of Peoria, "will this be entirely honest to win the fishing contest in this fashion? After all we are Boy Scouts and we must always be honest."

But Louis from Peoria explained things to me this way: "Remember," he said, "that part of fishing is stretching things somewhat. In fact that is the way you are *supposed* to do it if you are a real fisherman. When you see a fisherman tell other fishermen how big the fish he catches is, he will always stretch his arms way out like this. But the other fishermen will take that into account, and realize that the fish really was only about this long," bringing his hands close together. "But suppose the first fisherman tries to be

very honest and says his fish is only this long to begin with,” he continued, keeping his hands close together. “Then the other fishermen will think he only caught a minnow. So in order to *really* be truthful in this matter and not give other fishermen the wrong idea, you *must* stretch things out quite a bit. It would be dishonest if you did not do this.”

The logic was impeccable, and I am sure that most fishermen must reason along these same lines. And by the way, something reminds me to say that when Louis from Peoria grows up, he becomes a very respected corporate lawyer.

Well to cut a long story short, we did win the fishing contest. Louis from Peoria shared in the prize because as he was quick to point out to everybody, he had helped land the remarkable fish. At first the camp director did not recognize our fish *as a fish*, but when he looked more closely he had to admit that it had some similarities to a fish. But since it was so strange looking, he called up the department of ichthyology at the University of Wisconsin who sent out a scientist to look it over.

Professor Hentzelbugger was much impressed by our fish. He stood looking at it speechless for a very long time. Finally he said, “It seems quite elongated doesn’t it; even somewhat stretched out.” Somewhat reluctantly, I mentioned to Professor Hentzelbugger that we had hung it up from a limb over night and it may have gotten stretched out somewhat at that time. Louis from Peoria glared at me ferociously. But Professor Hentzelbugger then said that this could not have made much of a difference; clearly this was quite a “longitudinally expressed fish” to begin with. The Professor was the expert in these matters, and since I was not quite sure just what those words meant, I did not think it was my place to say anything more.

After extensive study lasting almost a year, Professor Hentzelbugger wrote up a whole article about our fish since it was, he said, a new species previously unknown to science. He gave it the Latin name *Ipsofacto hocuspocus* and even mentioned my name and that of Louis from Peoria in the article. (But for some reason I do not understand he called Louis from Peoria “Louis Jones” instead of Louis from Peoria. If you don’t believe me about this you may consult the *Journal of Scientific Homologic Ichthyology (New Genera)*, vol. XLIV, p. 771.)

One feature of our prize fish that seemed especially noteworthy to Professor Hentzelbugger was that it had only one scale every 3 inches or so, with lots of bare fish skin in between. This is now known as the Hentzelbugger Scale Attenuation in his honor. The cause of the phenomenon is still unexplained.

I understand that our fish made Professor Hentzelbugger famous, and both Louis from Peoria and I have been very pleased about that. Oh some doubts about our fish were raised by the nabobs of nattering negativism that abound in the scientific community, and because of that Professor Hentzelbugger has spent most of the past 41 years out on Green Lake hoping to catch a second specimen. So far without success. He is 93 now, but he still has that “never-say-die” spirit in him.

Your repressed-memory-ridden brother,
Scott