

Fish Stories

BUGS

By Rob Tillitz

"Dad... why do fisherman risk their lives every winter just to catch crabs?" My daughter, Andriana, the thirteen year-old would-be Marine Biologist asked me.

I looked at her thoughtfully, and then said, "Some say crabbing is all about money."

But is it? Was I telling her the truth?

I believe it is just as much about the team. The level at which a crew can operate together and accomplish more than other boats. The rivalry, perhaps. Ask a crabber what he remembers most about seasons past, and he'll likely not be completely clear on the amount of his paychecks. He will, however, remember his fellow crew, their compatibility, and the pounds of crab they caught.

The people and the Bugs.

Of course everyone knows crab are fondly called "Bugs." That's because they're nothing more than bottom-dwelling seawater insects. An entomologist might quibble about it, but one look at one of them will tell you that they are bugs.

The days leading up to the opening of the season are electrifying. The boats are stacked high with traps. Guys are driving madly and endlessly up and down the waterfront watching for the first sign someone is about to leave to set pots. The talk of price is on everyone's lips. And the thought that

maybe this will be that perfect season — the team, the weather, the price, the Bugs — to forever remember hangs thick in the cold winter air.

It's a time equal to those days of eager anticipation before Christmas that kids everywhere remember. Or Superbowl Sunday morning before kick-off. Maybe it's like the feeling a performer gets when the lights come up, and the curtains open apart, and the fans begin to cheer.

I got so excited one year that I backed my boat into my Crescent City berth so we could pull straight out and save about ninety seconds not having to back out then go forward. And I had slip knots on the lines so the crew could just pull the loose end, thus saving another thirty seconds.

Then after the season opens, the gear is set, and you start hauling pots, that is when the anticipation reaches an excruciating peak. Waiting for that first trap to break the surface and praying it's full is almost more than a heart can stand.

It's an overwhelming experience, similar to nothing else. And if the traps come up fell, the jubilation is almost too much to bear. Years later, a crabber will remember everything about that day: the smells, the sounds, the smiles on faces, and the condition of the ocean. Even how much and what kind of bait was used, what songs were playing on the stereo and who

was telling lies about what on the radio deck speakers.

Enticing crabs with fresh bait to crawl into a trap is the same as luring a fish to bite a hook shrouded with a split-tailed herring (or a flashy lure). It is a challenge of elemental but profound proportions. It sounds simple, but it's not. It comes down to a matter of intelligence and mastery over one facet of the universe. And this is what captures a person about fishing. Indeed the challenge of this seemingly simple task will rule one's soul. It is why we risk bad weather, fish again after losing money time after time, and endure long intervals away from loved ones.

"Men who come from the sea will tell you there is no finer profession than fishing; none more honest," my grandfather the theologian once told me. And he went on to iterate the long and significant history that fishing has in every culture known to man. There's a crackling sound the polypropylene crab line makes as it rolls through the sheaves of the power block. It sounds sort of like one of those "creaky door" special effects in a scary movie, where the creak extends for minutes at a time.

It's that sound that links captain to crew during crab season. A skipper can understand every move his blockman makes based on nuances of that



Rob Tillitz and his daughter, Andriana.

sound. And by listening to the blockman, the skipper can keep the buoys coming alongside at precisely timed and spaced intervals. And the blockman, by the engine pitch, can understand where the boat's at in relation to the next buoy in the string of pots. I think often about that sound, like, for example, when I'm watching a scary movie.

"Crabbing is no doubt about the money. For without the money a fisherman cannot live to crab yet another year," I explained to Andriana. "But for me, it's always been about the Bugs." .41