

CAPTAIN NAT

by

Bob Tracz

“*Sure!* I’d love to go fishing with you! ‘ Haven’t gone out for Sunfish since I was a young whippersnapper. Hand me a cane pole, a hook, and I nice juicy worm. Hey, I could use a stress less fishing trip before I’m off for the Argentine.”

The Argentine! How can I top that? Let’s see. I jumped out of my chair, and let my voice energetically crack in the mode of a schoolboy trying to impress an adult: “Bass, Nat! Big Bass! There’s a secret cove—Bass Central USA—where you can catch 30 or more fish in about an hour. Is that too much for you, *old timer*? And by the way, things could a bit rough. You could be attacked by an overly aggressive Mallard.”

“Very funny *Kid*.”

“Thanks. Seriously, why not come up for a day of fishing. We’re not getting any younger—as they say.”

For years I’ve bee asking him to come upstate and fish my secret spot. But he was always too busy: running off to some exotic corner of the world, returning to publish the next true-to-life story. His syndicated column, *Adventurer’s Inn* runs in magazines throughout the world. Wannabee thrill-seekers vicariously revel in our hero’s exploits as he photographs big game, climbs challenging mountain, or fishes for huge Sailfish. Would this larger-than-life adventurer really enjoy local Bass fishing?

“Hey kid! *Good idea! I could use a rest before I try my hand at being a gaucho.* Hymm...a boat load of fish, you say: big Bass? Could be fun at that! If you’re telling this old guy the truth...”

Haughtily, I responded. “If you don’t catch at least 20 fish, I’ll eat that old beat-up Yankee hat of yours. Still got it?”

“No! ‘Lost it while being chased by a water buffalo in Kenya. But I got I new one. Jetter gave me one of his.”

“J-e-t-t-r?” I answered incredulously.

“Yeah, the ball player; a friend of mine. We go duck hunting all the time. With a little salt and pepper, the hat should go down just fine. What time should I be up there? Is 5am too early?”

Being a dye-hard Bass fisherman, the early hour did not upset me at all. But then my euphoria suddenly turned sour, being replaced by high anxiety caused by my bragging ways. What if we didn’t catch anything? And how could a world-class adventurer really enjoy himself on a little 12-foot row boat? Maybe he wouldn’t come if I told him...

“A little row boat,” he answered slowly, enunciating every syllable, “I was rowing champion of my class two years straight back in college. I’ll row your little dingy for yah. Oh! By the way, eggs, once-over-lightly *pour favor. Buenos Dias, me Amigo.*” With that, I sighed. Argentina, not Bass fishing, was his very much on his mind.

There was nothing *little* about Captain Nathaniel Little. This old geezer stood six-foot-five. Knotted on to his lanky, well-defined frame were sinuously muscular arms

featuring an array of faded tattoos, each a visual trophy historically recalling a time in his life: The US Navy, Coast Guard Auxiliary, *America's Cup* racing team Captain. There was enough spring left in his lanky legs to either dunk a basket ball (his college nickname was *Stork*) or run from a pursuing alligator. A recent quadruple by-pass slowed him down a shade—just a shade.

He lived in a posh apartment on New York City's upper-west-side. The surrounding hues of gray and silver towers caught his gaze and found a permanent home in his deep-set eyes. An aquiline nose placed firmly between jutting cheek bones was redder than the rest of his rosy face. Wrinkles, like strings of knotted baker's twine, garlanded his brow creating a sagacious pattern that radiated experience and authority. Rarely seen, always covered with that withered Yankee cap, stood a balding dome as smooth as the palm of my hand. Not one strand of disorderly solitary hair dared to violate the surrounding fluff that circled his skull like a ring of fine cotton.

Once I teased him about his baldness. His thin pale lips slowly elongated displaying an arsenal of gold-crowed teeth. His huge hand grabbed my shoulder and he brought my face so close to his, I could smell the odor of a just-smoked cigar. My heart skipped a beat as I waited for his reaction. His perfectly groomed trapezoidal moustache was so close to my face I could count individual hairs. Finally he resounded, "Do you expect hair to grow on top of a *furnace*?" Together we laughed hysterically. His moustache danced, under the long twitching nostrils, a syncopated tarantella, moving up and down, side to side.

I slid the last egg off the sizzling frying pan; on the dot, 5am, *Shadow*, my Black Lab started to bark. No time for the usual pleasantries, we both attacked the dozen eggs and the dog greedily devoured the leftovers. We let the dishes sit, got in the van and took off.

Our headlights punctured a hole through the morning gloom. Patches of thick, white morning fog slowed our progress to a crawl. We arrived at the dock at *Sunspot Lake* later than I would have liked. Over the tree-strutted eastern horizon, a purple disc invaded the rows of pines that guarded the lake like distant sentinels. Colors of many hues materialized, obeying the timeless power of the master star, in full regalia, a perfect crimson disk not yet too harsh to stare at and pay homage to. Turquoise blue, as pure as if it came from an artist's brush, back dropped the sun, announcing the breaking day. Not one cloud could be spotted in the eastern sky.

Silhouetted to the rear of my friend's huge frame, the 14-foot aluminum skiff looked like a child's toy. Would there be room for fishing rods, tackle boxes, assorted food and drink, and one canine companion—the whole kit and caboodle? After staring at our craft, Nat slowly turned his head, bent his knees and started to pet my eager dog, its tail waving like a car's windshield wiper. "How does your dog do in the boat, Bob? She could be extra weight and get in the way."

"She's a Lab, Cap! Worth her salt! She always goes with me. She has a sixth sense. ' Barks when the fish are ready to bit."

"That I'd like to see, my boy." he answered, his head nodding up and down like a huge derrick.

"Oh, you will. You will." I hoped.

The row boat was now completely outfitted and beckoned to adventure, Catskill Mountain lake style. I forgot to bring a life preserver for my friend, so we borrowed one from a nearby boat. I didn't think they'd mind.

Barefoot, wearing denim shorts, I easily maneuvered myself from the dark shallow water to the aluminum seat. I told our lanky sea captain to remove his high-topped basketball sneakers, role-up his khakis and follow my lead. He just grunted and growled at the suggestion and then in one giant step, leaped from the sand to the bow. *Whoosh!* His bolt caused the shallow craft to cantilever deeply to one side. He grabbed my shoulders to steady his fall, but the entire port side of the boat was now filled with water deep enough to cover his shoes and float our tackle boxes.

"Hey Bob, I think you need a bigger boat." Nat cried out with a voice that combined the petulant wine of a schoolboy and the arrogant shouting of an experienced mariner.

"Ah, Captain," I answered back, trying to suppress an ear-to-ear grin. "That's a line from *Jaws*. You can do better than that. Let's bail her out and get out there. Take a look! The sun is up. The Bass are waiting!"

I didn't say more. Nat must have been embarrassed and I wouldn't rub it in. But really, a sea Captain-adventure-writer carelessly sinking a little row boat...Unbelievable!

Our tête-à-tête dramatically stopped. He turned stone silent. If the face is truly the mirror of the soul, you could almost feel the embarrassment etched in the deepening furrows of his aging brow. The rock-hard angles of his confident visage feel apart and rearranged themselves into the drooping flabby continence of a Basset Hound. His

towering body appeared to hunch into what appeared to be a partially deflated balloon. I had to snap him out of it! “No big deal. Nothing ruined. My boat needed a good wash, Cap. Get your ass in gear, *kid*. Row!” I said with some aplomb. He forced a returning smile, though the usually lively moustache seemed to offer none of the usual animation. I smiled back, but doubts about my partner’s competence surfaced. Was he a *real* Captain, or *papier-mâché*?

We reloaded the craft. The water line was just up to the limit. We were heavy, but safe, at least on this small lake. Nat, true to his word, got ready to row, his now bare feet’s heels jammed firmly against the forward seat, his knees stuffed against his chest, took a breathe so deep I swear the ducks and geese on a nearby raft, stopped their gabble as to say, “What’s that?” We were off. He rowed with the speed of a demon, making up for the time lost. We passed close enough to the geese-laden raft that I was able to put Nat’s huge size fifteen basketball sneakers on the platform. Never missing a chance for humor, I said, “There! That’ll lighten her for sure.” He nodded with a brighter smile.

A patch of thick white fog, resembling a mound of cotton candy, hid our destination from view. Underneath the mist, silent water the color of green marble, not yet touched by the sun’s first illumination beckoned us on. As the Bard said, “The game’s afoot!”

By now the first of the schooling shad should be falling prey to the awaiting Bass. The deep water, fallen boulders, and derelict trees combined to make what’s called a “Honey hole.” I already prepared our weapons: two brightly-colored *Excalibur* crank baits knotted to monofilament leaders and braided line spun on Shimano reels attached to

six-and-a-half-foot graphite rods. The lures swayed to and fro, seeming almost alive in response to the Captain's long steady strokes.

Shadow, poised on the bow like a large ship's figurehead didn't move a muscle as if transfixed, and waiting...waiting. Finally our boat pierced the fog. Nat lifted the oars, and we glided into the cool deep shadows of the cove. I pushed saliva down my dry throat while I slowly grabbed my rod, opened the bail, and with one flick of the wrist sent my deadly lure into the abyss. Its flight was true, on target. It landed just shy of a massive moss-covered boulder and just over a partially submerged log. Nat's jaw dropped and his moustache did a little dance. I shrugged my shoulders, as if to say, "I can cast like that in my sleep! Beat that!" Now before Nat could follow my cast, a few ripples broke the mirror-like surface of the cove. Like a pointing bird dog, *Shadow's* head dropped below her legs and she let loose a long deep growl. And then a sudden splash, a breaching tail and my spontaneous cry of triumph, "What did I tell yah," came forth in ecstatic glee. A good four- pond Largemouth finds its way into our net, expertly handled by our rejuvenated Captain. I let him cast next. The water is literally exploding with jumping minnows. He nails one even bigger. The debacle on the beach forgotten, Nat and I are a team again. I bet he's not thinking about Argentina now!

After five minutes we caught and released ten good-sized fish. Neither of us took note to what was happening in the morning sky. From the north, an immense darkness stretched from the top of the trees reaching to the zenith of the sky just above our heads. A thunderstorm was brewing. All hell was going to break loose.

Then resonating from the depths of the jet-black massive cumulonimbus, a low-pitched growl of thunder echoed through the dead-still lake. The shadows in the cove

started to resemble the foreboding mouth of some huge cave. My stoic hound reduced now to a winning puppy. Nat's eyes and mine locked in a stare. "God damn," I shouted, "Let's get out of here!"

"It's not doing anything yet kid. We'll high tail out of here when we see the first drops. Look at these fish! I got another one!"

True, it wasn't raining *yet*. But then....

....suddenly and out of nowhere a blistering gale spun our little boat like a toy caught in a bathtub's drain. The tops of pine trees, minutes ago, stiff as wooden Indians, started to bend and reel, obeying Dervish-like gusts of swirling wind. Nat's hat (Derrick Jetter's hat) flew off his head like it was picked up by a giant invisible hand. And then the worst yet: lightening! Flashes, spiked and jagged, like pieces of torn paper, circled the lake resembling a painful crown of thorns. Now thunder so loud it seemed to come from the bottom of the lake destroyed what was ever left of our confidence. *My god, we could really die out here!* The Capitan turned to me saying nothing, nothing at all. His facial expression was somewhat in between the prideful and the worried, typical of someone who has been through danger before. He would get us out of this.

Usually mountain storms announce their coming by distant rumbles followed by a steady increase in rain. But not this monster! Torrents of wind-driven rain suddenly burst out of the sky. Sheet upon sheet of pelting rain confined our vision to just a few blurry feet. Nat's soaked withered visage, complete with balding head and white moustache, was barely visible, blocked by the inexorable sheets of violent spray. We were taking on water dangerously fast. We had nothing to bail the boat out with—not one can! With

lifejackets, we would not drown; it was the lightening that could get us, in the water or on the boat—the metal boat!

In between the winding rain, I heard Nat shout, “We can make that raft over there! Ditch the boat and take our chances under its timbers.” Just when I was going to answer, I saw one of Nat’s oars crack right in half! Oh my God, we’re done for now!

He keep his cool, saying, “It’s not too far now. I’ll paddle. Just keep bailing!”

Bailing? With what? Tackle boxes? Yes! I had to empty *tons* of valuable lures into the water-filled boat. It worked! The rain and I fought to a draw. We where not sinking.

The raft was in sight. The letters spelling *Sunspot Lake, Private* painted red in uppercase caps became the only tangible reality in our topsy-turvy world. I had no time to appreciate the irony in the writing. I keep saying to myself, *My Captain, my Captain...* as if that incantation could further motivate the old man who now held my life in his hands. We reached the raft. I could smell the clear sol-soaked timbers. Our water-logged boat rammed the raft so violently, my poor dog, Shadow, went right into the water. Nat managed to just grab the raft’s ladder, preventing us from ricocheting back from where we started. His strength, the strength he mustered to paddle a sinking boat half-way across a lake, was there at the end too. He pulled me by the arm, out of the dismal craft, on to the slippery, but stable platform of the raft. I have shaken hands with many a man, but his sinewy grip, tight as a vice, will forever be recalled as a milestone in my life. We both pointed at his old pair of sneakers, now fill to the brim and overflowing. I tried to mimic his self-assured grin, but my dog’s plight prevented any serious revelry. Together we shouted the dog’s name to no avail.

As we circled the platform that saved us from the abyss, the smell of ozone made itself present. It turned my stomach; on the verge of nausea, I fought the impulse to vomit.

An ominous buzz and hellish illumination radiated from my little boat, now drifting about ten yards away. It was like a thousand flashbulbs going off at the same time. Simultaneously, a giant crash of thunder—thunder so loud, it made all the previous strikes seem like ladyfinger firecrackers in comparison—pushed my body off its feet and I fell into the void of unconsciousness.

I woke up to the life-asserting geometry of an indoor environment. That “hospital smell,” and the rustle of clean sheets underneath me, told me where I was alright and not dead. Bandaged, my head throbbed like a drum; the memories of recent events were organizing a ping-pong game inside my splitting skull. *Ohmygod! Nat? Shadow?*

“Relax kid. We’re *all* alright! You were out for a few hours, but all the scans show no brain damage, except that which you were born with?” My vision wasn’t clear yet, but I knew whose voice that was alright! I mustered enough energy to give my usual reply to one of my friend’s endless witticisms: “Very funny, very funny...”

“Yeah, just as funny as your line about aggressive geese. One almost tore off my index finger. Just relax. I’ll tell you about it.

“The lightning bolt threw me for a loop too. I landed in the water, just besides the raft. Your dog was under there alright. That’s why we couldn’t see her. There was also a gaggle of geese hiding there too. You never heard such a ruckus. They were fighting like geese and dog! The birds were killing poor Shadow, so I had to go under the

raft and get her out. They cut me up pretty good, and one almost got my finger.” He slowly raised his bandaged hand, confirming his narration. He continued, talking, almost breathless, and then he stood up and offered a visual pantomime to his verbal text. “You wouldn’t believe it. Just then the rain stopped and the sun came out like nothing happened. There was already an EMS van waiting for us when a boat out from shore. It was the same boat we borrowed the life jacket from.

“We were not the only victims, Bob. Two other people hit by lightening and two roofs torn-up. They’re talking twister, twister my boy. Would you believe it?

“Not unheard of up here.” I answered soberly.

“No, but not my idea of a restful vacation. Argentina’s off. I’m going to write this up for my next column. Stick around. We’ll need you and the mutt for a photo shoot. And, by the way, you’re famous now too! They’re sending reporters up here.”

“And my boat?” I answered, sitting up, rubbing my head.

“I’ll get you a bigger boat. On me, kid. And by the way, ask the nurse for some salt and pepper. You may need it. Remember you promised to eat my Yankee hat if I didn’t catch 20 bass.”

“That’s not fair. I didn’t count on a tornado messing things up.”

“Well, I’ll let you slide on this one. I only have one *chapeaux* left -- the one I’m wearing. Here! Take it as a souvenir.”

We both laughed, hard and deeply, forever bonded by the danger we both conquered.

Yes, he did publish a rib-roaring account of our fight against the twister. He just managed to leave out the part about how he accidentally sunk the boat. Editorial discretion he called it. No matter.

He lived a number of years longer, till his patched-together heart finally gave out. I was there, in the hospital. His last handshake was as stout and firm as the one he gave me on the raft. I fort back the tears as I recited, "My Captain, My Captain."

The end