

Unlikely lad wins a thundering Inter county angling wash out. By Roy Webster

“You lads from the Norfolk Broads are clueless when it comes to competition fishing these Fenland Drains”

The Boy Roy swivelled his focus towards the source of the raucous laughter that followed this callous critique of North Norfolk’s up and coming match fishing fraternity.

It was the summer of 1973. The weigh in at the conclusion of The Great Ouse Relief Channel Angling Championship was well under way and The Boy had recorded a very average single figure net of skimmer bream.

So, who was this guy lurking 30 yards away in the bankside vegetation making fun of and casting disparaging aspersions on the rod and line abilities of Broadland match men? The North Walsham Canal rodman decided he would make his acquaintance and crushed through the undergrowth to be greeted by a happy face grinning from ear to ear.

It was Leicester’s Likely Lad, Ivan Marks, on the verge of winning the West Norfolk Relief Channel Great Ouse Championship for the third time in four years with a catch of more than 30 lbs of bumper bream.

So, how did he do it; a secret substance in his bait that fish could not resist, perhaps?

“The bream shoal was out in front of me. All I had to do was rig a leger set up, bait a size 16 fine wire hook with a couple of home grown gozzer maggots (larva of the fly *Calliphora Erythrocephala*) and cast into the swim ground baited with cereal laced with squats (larva of the fly *Musca Domestica*).” Marks explained with friendly smiling candour.

“But you have won this competition twice before today” murmured Boy Roy, still brimming with doubt whether the Midland lad’s triumphs were entirely dependent on luck of the draw.

“I repeat, the fish were there, willing to feed and that is why I caught them” insisted the cheerful Leicester champion. “What about you: Are you a member of an angling club?”

“Yeah: the White Horse pub club. We fish the North Walsham, Dilham Canal. Why do you ask?”

“Well, my mates in the Leicester Likely Lads Match Angling club love fishing new venues. They would relish a team challenge on your canal” declared Marks. Could you arrange it?”

“You bet we could. I am club secretary. Give me your ‘phone number and I’ll get back to you in the week” promised an excited Boy Roy. The famous Likely Lads visiting the NWD Canal to take on the local anglers! Wow, Headline news!

The response of the most experienced White Horse club members was unanimous. Bring it on; any Saturday or Sunday, they declared. And the enthusiastic canal bank owner and people pleaser Jack Williams gave instant go ahead to stage the event on the stretch of the south west bank he owned between Honing Lock and the ancient Tonnage Bridge. “You can park your vehicles on the sugar beet concrete pad” he advised

Eager telephone conversations resulted in a Saturday date being agreed with the Midland travellers, urged to drop in at the Webster domain for early morning cups of tea, coffee and bacon butties en route to the venue. Four vehicles, each with three sets of fishing gear strapped on the roof racks, duly arrived at 8.30 am, the bright summer sun already rising to clear the eastern tree tops.

Perfect weather was the unanimous hope for the coming battle for inter county match angling supremacy. But the two teams comprising a sum total of twenty four keen rodmen were in for a stunning disappointment when they arrived at the chosen venue. The canal was carrying bank high coffee coloured flood water racing downstream at twice human walking pace. It was later revealed that a fierce overnight thunderstorm over the upper reaches had rained down more than an inch of water much of which had drained into the ancient waterway causing flood conditions facing the angered anglers.

Thus it was now a case of making the best of a bad job selecting fishing bays of water eddies out of the main flows.

During the five hours of arduous angling all competitors save one managed to catch a few small roach and the odd make weight bream. The exception was home squad member Joe Annison who fished a blinder and weighed in more than 35 lbs of team winning quality bream caught on ideal flood condition garden worm bait from the slack water wides where the East Ruston Cut enters the canal straight running downstream to the ancient Tonnage Bridge.

The day’s general disappointment was duly diluted at the local hostelry where even the visiting drivers seemed to perk up on alcohol free beverages or perhaps some stronger fluids could have “accidentally” been slipped into their drinks during the course of the evening revelry.

However, a call from Ivan Marks next day confirmed all had arrived home safely and it was agreed an autumn return match would be arranged on a fenland venue. Needless to say that return challenge staged on the River Nene was dominated by the Likely Lads while some of the gloomy North Norfolk competitors actually ended the five hour stint with dry keep nets.

For the White Horse travellers it was a long, dreary drive home on the A47. And they vowed to limit their future angling activities to the venue they knew best – The North Walsham Dilham Canal.

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Footnote: In 1973 the number anglers in Britain based on rod licences sales totalled more than four million, of which one million were match anglers, many of them in teams of twelve were competing in a system of promotion and relegation comprising four divisions in the Annual National Freshwater Championship organised by the National Federation of Anglers.

The National Federation of Anglers and the National league set up no longer exists, freshwater licence sales by The Environment Agency reportedly plunged to less than one million in 2018/19 season and junior recreational interest in the sport has fallen to a post war low.

On the up side the Environment Agency underwater surveys this century revealed course fish populations in the Norfolk Broads and tidal rivers were thriving at record levels but on the down side climate change scientists warn that global warming if not successfully controlled will inevitably result in serious sea flood saline pollution and serious loss of vital course fish stock.

However, a study of the ancient Roman map of Norfolk which indicates much of the low country of the county was then inundated by the sea is encouraging. It suggests similar encroachment will not affect higher areas of the North Walsham Canal above Ebridge Lock. Thus, for TRUST MEMBERS and CANAL LOVERS it is at least good news for the present and immediate future.

Picture: Winner Ivan Marks all smiles at the waterside. Ivan who dominated many events during the last century sadly passed away aged 68 on December 5th, 2004.

