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By CRAIG MEDRED

## Helping hands snatch away world record for shark

422 POUNDS: Assistance after rod breaks nullifies status, but not thrill of catch.



An 8 foot 4-inch, 422 pound salmon shark hangs from a davit on the stern of the charter vessel Miss Brizz in eastern Prince William Sound earlier this month. The monster shark, caught by Dan Toomey of Anchorage, took 45 minutes to land, said skipper Tom Konop of Alaska Wilderness Voyages. From left to right: deckhand Scott Fleming, Cody and Tom Konop, and angler Dan Toomey.

Given the difficulties of the catch, an unbiased observer might think Alaskan Dan Toomey's 422-pound salmon shark even more deserving of a world record it's not going to get.

After all, what are the odds of success when the fishing rod breaks mid-battle, forcing angler and friends to slash the line, knot it to the line on another rod and continue the struggle?

Toomey admits he thought his catch of a lifetime had ended with one loud snap.

"And it hurt," he added. "The rod came back at me and hit me in the arm."

Fortunately, he said, Tom Konop, skipper and owner of the charter vessel Miss Brizz of Alaska Wilderness Voyages, and Tom Robertson, manager of BandJ Commercial in Anchorage, took the calamity as just another challenge.

"The real heroes in this are Tom Konop and Tom Robertson," Toomey said. Konop grabbed the line coming off the end of Toomey's broken rod and wrapped it around a gloved hand. Then he yelled at Robertson to cut it and tie the end off to the line on another already rigged rod.

"When the rod let go, it let everyone know," Robertson said. "It was a pretty loud crack. It was looking pretty bad."

By then, Toomey had already been playing the fish for more than half an hour, and everyone on board the 54-foot Miss Brizz knew he was into a big shark. They just didn't know how big.

Over the course of three days fishing in Prince William Sound, the Konop-led hunt for a new world record had already resulted in six or eight sharks smaller than the 365-pound record. Several big fish were lost.

"We probably lost twice as many as we brought to the boat," Konop said.

Some shook free. Some pulled off. And a bunch broke gear -- snaps, swivels, line and leaders.

"They bit through stainless steel cable" used for leaders, Konop said. "You get them on. There's no guarantee they're coming up."

So by the time Toomey's experimental, light-tackle shark rod broke, the gang aboard the Miss Brizz was used to gear-busting disasters. The good part about this failure was that it left them the option of trying to salvage the situation.

"We were lucky," Konop said. "The line didn't break, and I had on leather gloves."

Not to mention that Robertson, who works in a store that sells fishing gear, is good at knots.

"Magic fingers" is how Toomey refers to his shark-fishing companion, who managed to connect the lines in a matter of seconds.

"It was a uni-knot to uni-knot splice," said Robertson, and it held even though tied with slippery, 100-pound-test Spectra fishing line.

"It was a zippy knot," Robertson added. "It was very exciting."

Given the haste with which the knot was tied, he wasn't confident it would hold, but it was the best he could do in the least amount of time.

By that point, Toomey said, "Tom (Konop) had a single wrap of line on his hand, and he was ready to abandon the glove," the alternative being to sacrifice his hand to the shark.

It was then Robertson yelled that the knot was tied.

Konop shook free from the line. And the shark zipped away from the boat.

"The shark took one good run on the knot," Konop said. "Whatever (the knot) was held fast."

Everyone on board breathed a little easier minutes later when a quickly tiring Toomey managed to recover enough line to get the knot back through the guides, onto the reel and safely tucked under a couple of loops of unblemished line. By that time, Toomey was just about done in too.

"Let me give you a heads-up if you ever decide to do this yourself," he said. "Dress lightly. I must have lost almost eight pounds of water."

Going a few rounds with a 422-pound shark, it would seem, is not unlike going a few rounds in the ring.

Brian Roberts, another angler aboard Miss Brizz, said he was good for a battle with about two sharks per day. After that, he was spent. And Roberts is a guy who works out regularly.

Toomey, who isn't quite as fit, had others aboard the Miss Brizz questioning whether he was up to doing battle with a world-class shark. He'd already lost a couple, Konop said, and when he hooked the fish destined to prove itself a woulda-been, coulda-been world record, "one of the guys didn't think he was fighting it hard enough.

"You never know how strong your fisherman is. But I looked at the drag, and it was pretty obvious he was giving it all you could."

The broken rod might even have indicated he gave it more than he should have, although Konop and Robertson -- who'd been working with the rod manufacturer -- think there were design problems. They've sent the prototype back with some suggestions on where they think it needs to be beefed up. Konop did note that two sharks had been landed on the rod before it broke, and other sharks had been lost on the same rod.

It was just unfortunate that when it broke it cost Toomey a world record.

The International Game Fish Association, the main organization certifying world records, bans anglers from switching rods or gaining other assistance in playing the fish. Toomey needed both.

Unfair?

"That," he said, "sounds like my wife: 'It's not fair.' "

Toomey thinks otherwise. The rules exist to make sure the playing field remains level, he said. And besides, he added, his hooking the fish that would have broken the record was such a random event that it's hard to think he should own the title anyway.

There's a lot of luck -- good and bad -- involved here, everyone agrees.

"On the one hand," Konop added, "the line could have broken without us ever seeing it at all."

Not only did they get to see this fish, they landed it, confirming that it is possible to do so within IGFA rules that prohibit shooting or harpooning fish to facilitate hauling them aboard a boat. These restrictions on how the fish can be landed might explain why the existing world record is a shark less than 8 feet long.

"A 365-pounder is not a super- big shark," Konop said. "They get a lot bigger." But as they do, they also get harder to land.

He remembers bringing a 10-footer to the boat years ago -- before he bought the aluminum-hulled, 61-ton Miss Brizz -- and having no choice but to let it go.

"I've got a vessel now that can take the pounding" of a shark being tied off to the side, he added.

The current world record, it should be noted, measured 7 feet, 10 inches. Toomey's catch measured 8 feet, 4 inches.

Konop couldn't even hazard a guess at what a 10-foot shark might weigh, and he believe sharks significantly bigger swim the Sound each summer.

Finding them wasn't much of a problem, he added. Roberts said the anglers were working a bay so full of sharks that it was almost like having schools of pink salmon around the boat. There were sharks rolling, tailing, splashing, even jumping, he said.

"You saw some of them come out (of the water) with salmon in their mouths," Konop said. "It's a kick in the pants to be out there.

"It's a long run (from Seward), but it was worth it. I've been thinking about this for years."

The Miss Brizz, he added, is now back in its home port of Seward, and he expects that his shark fishing is over for the year. But as word of the coulda-been world record gets out, Konop has already heard from a number of anglers looking to set up trips next year.

Nobody doubts that there's a world record out there just waiting to be caught.

If, of course, the rod doesn't break.

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