

Intrepid reporter boards fishing boat— whatever happened to beginner's luck?

By Hillary Hauser
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Until the other day, I'd never been sportfishing — I mean the oceangoing, party-boat kind of fishing where a lot of anglers get together and whoop it up with rods and reels.

I tried to hide my inexperience, but by the time Fred Benko anchored the Hornet on Horseshoe Reef, about two miles off Summerland, I knew the truth was going to get out. There were about two dozen good fishermen on board (and a couple of fisherwomen), and they had been ready to get started from the time the boat left the harbor at 5:30 p.m.

Once he put the anchor down, Benko came around, put a fishing pole in my hand and told me some things about the ways of bait and tackle. The race was on.

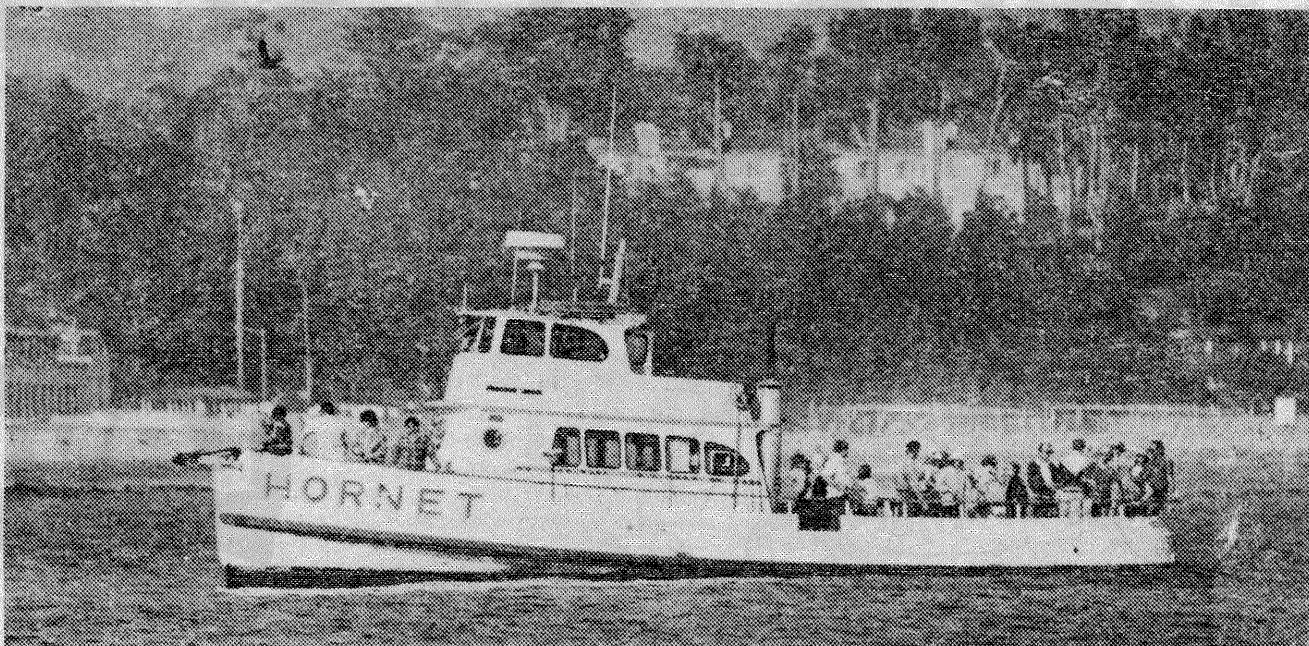
But it wasn't much of a contest. I had this wiggling anchovy in my hand for the longest time, trying to figure out the least painful place to put the hook into it, while about two dozen eager fishermen began to cast off. Hooks, lines and sinkers were flying every which way. All of the action defied the laws of nature: no one hooked anyone else by the seat of the pants.

The fish began to bite instantly. That was because the deckhand, Greg, had chummed the water with handfuls of anchovies thrown over the side.

Smack. An anchovy hit me in the head. (When anchovies get thrown around like that they sometimes don't go where they're intended to land.)

"Yellowtail!" someone yelled.

The fisherman who had hooked it began to follow the fish in its underwater flight by walking his rod around the rail of the boat. That meant that the other fishermen had to let him pass



News-Press photo by Steve Malone

The Hornet cruises near East Beach. Some passengers succeeded in adding to the load of the sportfishing boat; others lost bait and tackle.

under, around or over themselves and their tackle, and I was astonished that all those lines didn't mingle into a huge mess of monofilament.

Except one fisherman didn't get out of the way. When their lines tangled, Benko, who was following the action, handled the problem quickly: he cut the line of the fisherman who didn't get out of the way.

The guy with the fish gets priority, said Fred.

Meanwhile, the guy with the snapped line scratched his head (putting a few fish scales in his hair) and then began to work up a new hook-and-sinker arrangement.

I still hadn't gotten my line in, so I didn't have to worry about getting out of the way of the guy with the yellow-

tail. I went back to the problem of baiting my hook.

I noticed that the anchovy in my hand was now not wiggling very much. In fact, it was nearly dead. When Benko saw this, he threw my anchovy over the side, saying something like live bait must resemble live bait.

"Stick it here, right next to the eye," he said, hooking on two jumping anchovies.

He showed me how to cast off: turn your back to the rail, make a big arc in the air with the pole, and when the sinker hits the water, clamp your thumb down on the spool so that the line stops reeling out.

He did this, then put the pole in my hand and set out to do his own fishing.

In just minutes there was a big yank on the other end of my line, and I began to wind the crank furiously. Except the thing wasn't engaged and I wound up the air for a full minute or two.

The fisherman next to me, Aldo, reached over, flipped the switch on my reel, and in about a half a minute my fish was on the surface.

"A big mack," said Aldo.

My mackerel jumped off the hook, however, and swam away. I turned and went to the gurgling well of live bait to get another anchovy.

Benko, meanwhile, had stuck a large tomcod on his line for bait, and compared to my new anchovy, it looked like a whale. I figured he was going for something big. I also noticed that someone else fishing off the bow had put a squid on his hook, and I wondered what that was going to catch.

The squid-fisherman cast off, making a big, wide arc with his pole. The squid went flying off the hook. It sailed through the air with all 10 tentacles spread out, looking like a big, rubbery falling star.

I laughed as another anchovy hit me in the head.

Someone then caught a big barracuda. Barbecued, they're great, someone else said. Up came some calico bass, some more barracuda, some bonito, and lots of big macks. Fred, with the tomcod, caught an enormous calico bass.

Meanwhile, I got ready to cast off, using the style Benko had shown me, but something went wrong. When everything hit the water, I didn't clamp down on the spool soon enough and instantly there was a tangled mess of monofilament line.

"Uh oh," said Aldo. "You'd better walk home."

I was considering doing just that because by the time I realized I was never going to get the mess untangled, a fish had attached itself to the other end of the line. I couldn't reel it in and I couldn't work out the snaris, and so I stood there and waited. That fish got away too.

Fred Benko is really a nice guy. He said he didn't mind it at all as he untangled the whole thing in about five minutes, baited my hook with another anchovy, cast off and handed the fishing pole back to me.

By this time it was just after sunset. The sky and sea were awash in a glow of subtle mauves and pinks on one side of the boat, and on the other, the nearly full moon was hanging in a curtain of ever-darkening purple. All that beauty made me lose track of what I was doing.

The fishermen, however, were going wild. The moments after sunset are the "witching hour," said Benko, the time when the fish really begin to bite. More anchovies than ever before went out on hooks, to be traded for bigger fish coming in.

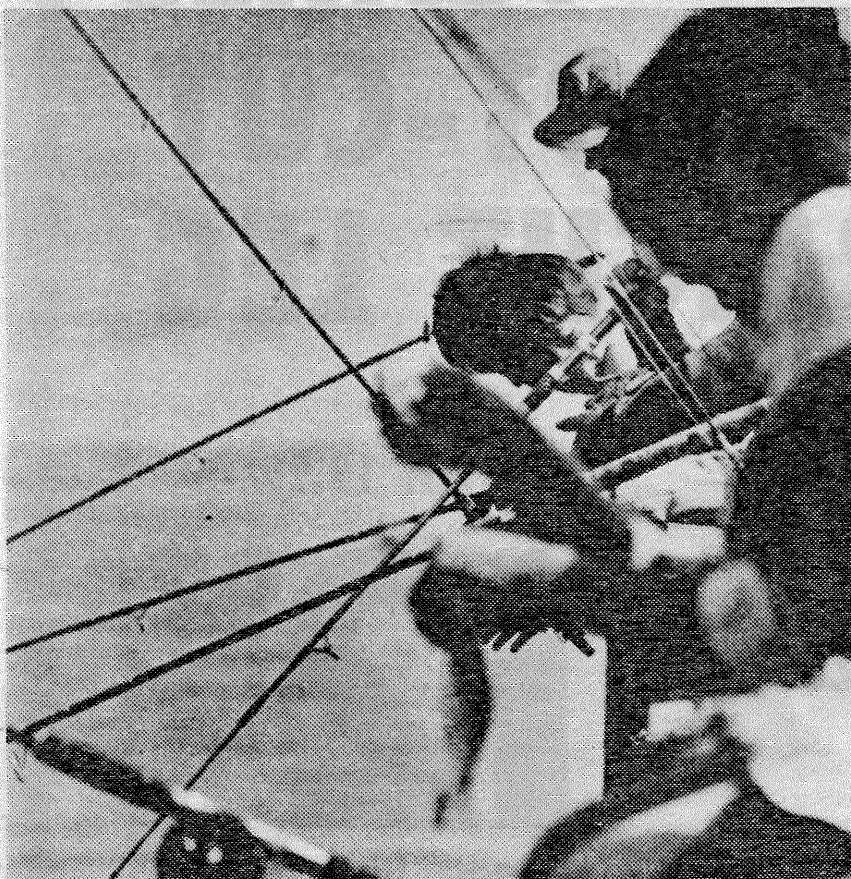
We had a big swap meet at sea.

It was almost completely dark when I realized I had something enormously heavy on the end of my line.

Aldo said "uh oh" again, and muttered something about my line being stuck under a rock or wrapped around kelp.

Finally, the line broke, and when I returned the rod and reel to Benko for the final time, it was without the hook or sinker.

Benko thought it was all very funny and told everyone that we were going home. So, with the moon to port and purple mountains to starboard, we headed for the harbor with our load of fish — a cargo I must confess I added to not at all.



News-Press photo by Len Wood

Fishing rods make an interesting pattern — but it's not very wonderful if the lines get tangled in a mess.