

This is a very fish(y) story about steelhead

by Douglas Gantenbein
sports editor

This is a story about fishing.

Not necessarily about catching them, at least not by me, but about trying to.

The quarry was what half the male population of Sandy seems to have forsaken every other topic of conversation and recreation for—steelhead.

My guides for this expedition, my first try at getting a hook wet since I used to fall asleep in the bow of the boat while trolling for salmon, were Lynn Harris and Randy Hutchinson, Sandy High faculty members.

They could, they said, make me a steelheader.

So with borrowed waders, borrowed pole, borrowed hooks and a newly purchased license, I slipped and slid down a high bank to the Sandy River on a cold, misty, primeval morning to learn the Art of Steelheading.

That I was with the best guides available I did not question, as while driving to the fishing hole Hutchinson had assured me he knew the fishing was hot.

"Whenever you have a fish on, that's when the fishing's good," he said sagely, and I was far too ignorant to argue.

So there we were, at the famed Teacher's Hole, whose location I am sworn to secrecy, as are the other hundred or so folks who were there, I suppose.

Hutchinson moved downstream to try his luck and I stayed with Harris, watching him hook up.

"There's a yarn about yarn," he says, attaching a tuft of bright pink material to his hook. "Some people swear it gets caught in their teeth." The fish's, that is.

With the yarn went a bright pink "corky," one of the more popular lures, and a short length of lead weight.

He eyed the water and commented that it might be so shallow the fish can see us, then cast his hook into the swift waters.

"Come on there, fish," he said. I was to learn that "come on there, fish" and "this cast" were the words most commonly spoken by fishermen. I assume they work on the same principle as duck calls.

We worked that spot for about an

hour, and while he fished Harris explained what to look for in water depth and height, guessing that in Saturday's relatively low water the steelhead would tend to be in the middle of the stream, rather than on the sides where the resistance is less during higher waters.

At one point he pointed to a spot about 15 feet out and said "there's a boulder right there, where the fish will rest."

I couldn't see a thing.

Harris had spent the prior evening scouting McMinnville for Sandy basketball coach Dennis Warren. If the Grizzlies were as well scouted as that fishing hole they didn't stand a chance.

But apparently the fish weren't pausing in that spot, as we scarcely got a bump. I walked down to check on Hutchinson, who was in water to his waist casting into a swift riffle. Nestle, his brown labrador retriever, galloped merrily back and forth on the shore, occasionally splashing out to check on us and shake water all over as a sign of affection.

He pointed to a place upstream where a half dozen fishermen were clustered and said that he'd never seen anything caught there.

Apparently the steelhead they pulled out 60 seconds later didn't know that.

"Whenever you have a fish on."

Our luck failed to improve, so we hopped onto the truck and drove down to another alleged hot spot, this one off a steep bank on a former Sandy High faculty member's property.

We nearly all fell in while clambering down a greasy clay bank but soon we were all enthusiastically flailing the river with our lines. I was giving it a try myself by this time.

After a dozen faltering attempts I felt I had gotten the hang of the reel, so I picked a likely spot far out in the stream and flung a long, hard, accurate cast—directly into a tree.

Not wishing to try hanging on to the pole while climbing the slick bank, I laid it down and worked my way towards the hook.

It was just about then that Hutchinson's vacant-headed labrador decided he couldn't live another minute without seeing what I was doing.

Over he trotted, only to get tangled in my line and pull the pole off the ledge into the stream just as I got the hook off the limb and skidded down the bank.

So there I stood, hook in hand, trolling with the pole.

"That's good, Doug," Hutchinson hooted. "You've got the right idea, but you're a little backwards."

Our luck finally changed for the better a minute later when Harris hooked into a big steelhead.

The only problem was, he was standing at the time on a sheer 20-foot bluff, with no way to haul the fish in. Clambering down and along the bank, passing the pole around and through tree limbs, performing the most amazing acrobatics, he finally got the beast into a position where it could be netted. So at least we weren't entirely skunked.

The balance of the morning we spent trying various combinations of corkies, spinners and salmon eggs while taking turns catching "rock fish."

Oh yes, Hutchinson hooked an old sheet, too.

Back in the office Monday, I decided that possibly hadn't gotten the full and definitive story on steelheading, so I called Ken Durbin of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Department, author of the column that frequently appears in this section.

"It's been a good year for steelhead, from the reports we've had," Durbin told me, backing up claims made by some local anglers of three fish landed in an evening. "December was kind of a tough month because of the weather but since Christmas it's been good."

Durbin said that the ideal conditions depend on how and where you fish, but that in general the fishing was best when the streams were fairly high but falling.

"The high water brings new fish into the stream and gets them moving," he said.

The game expert added that "steelhead are hooked on just about any kind of lure," and named corkies, salmon eggs, spin globes or yarn as some of the perennial favorites.

Durbin said that the object of all the fuss is really kind of a mysterious creature. A steelhead, quite simply, is an ordinary trout, which for reasons known only to the fish takes it upon itself to leave its native freshwater streams and head for the ocean.

The cycle begins when the eggs hatch in gravel bars in the cold, clear streams that tumble out of the Cascades. The



LYNN HARRIS patiently waits for a steelhead to strike.

tiny fry spend about two years in their home waters, growing to a size of six to eight inches.

At that time the young fish undergoes a transformation that Durbin said is really understood to become a "smolt."

The smolts lose their rainbow coloring to become a silvery grey, and as they move downstream they undergo a physiological change, becoming less dense to compensate for the more dense saltwater they are headed for.

The fish linger awhile in the salty coastal estuaries, "fine tuning" their systems to the new environment, then head for the open seas, where they usually spend the next three years of their life.

The steelhead return to their home stream to spawn in two groups. The summer steelhead begin their run during the early fall, while the winter variety leaves the ocean sometime after Thanksgiving. Both groups spawn during the early part of the year, and the cycle begins over again.

It is on the spawning run that the steelhead is assailed by legions of

Northwest fisherman, who know the steelhead as one of the finest game fishes available.

Fishermen use three basic ploys to hook the migrating fish: still fishing, drift fishing and spin casting. Most anglers we saw on the Sandy were casting.

While bait preferences vary, most fishermen agree with Durbin that a steelhead will bite at almost anything, provided you get it in front of his nose.

The important thing is to recognize the kind of water the fish frequent.

"Ideally a steelhead run would consist of a stretch of river 50 to 100 feet in length, with a strong even flow of water and a depth from four feet to eight or nine feet," says Oregon Wildlife Commission steelhead expert Milt Guymon.

In these runs, Guymon continues, fishermen should look for "slots" where the fish will pause. Above or behind sunken boulders, in a slight bend in the channel or alongside an underwater ledge are places most self-

respecting steelhead like, Guymon says.

Once you've found your spot, the key is to get the bait near the bottom where the fish are. Steelhead rarely approach the surface.

For beginners, it might be best to give the rod a jerk every time you feel a bump but an experienced steelheader can differentiate between a fish and the lure striking a rock.

Myself, I about wore my arm off.

"They all feel pretty good," Lynn Harris said of the little tugs and pulls a river will give a lure. "But once you've gotten a fish there's no comparison."

This is especially true in the case of lures, which steelhead will strike hard instead of just mouth, like they do eggs.

But either way, once a steelhead is on "there's nothing else quite like it," to again quote Harris.

I wouldn't know. Like I said before, this is a story about fishing, not catching.

But I admit, I'm hooked.
See you at the river . . .



THE PAYOFF: A bright, silvery steelhead.

But lose to Estacada, Sweet Home

Sandy girls nip Foxes in OT

A tough schedule of three games in five days proved to be too much as the Sandy High girls basketball team played Sweet Home on Thursday, even beat Silverton on Saturday then collapsed in the second half against Estacada Monday.

Nonetheless, the girls picked up their second win of the season in the string by defeating the Foxes 48-39 in overtime.

Sweet Home staved off the

Pioneers 33-25, while the Rangers unloaded on the tired hoopers in a 51-30 rout.

But the good news first. Saturday's extra inning win showed just how far the inexperienced girls have come since the start of the season. They handled the pressure of a close game well, and sunk some key shots when they had to.

One of the keys to the win was the manner in which the Sandy guards, led by Colleen Flach, was able to break down the Silverton press.

Forced into man-to-man (person-to-person?) play by the smooth Sandy ball handling, Silverton couldn't cope with drives to the hoop by Esme Jensen and Sue Veley and was forced to foul.

By the end of regulation play four Foxes were on the bench with five fouls, including star center Karen Roth. Roth finished with nine points, far below her average.

"We tried to front her and play her tough," coach Darrel Glover said of his team's strategy against Roth. "Nancy Perkins did a super defensive job on her."

But despite having most of their offensive punch off the court late in the game, Silverton grimly hung on through a close fourth quarter, tying the game at 39-all on a three point play with just a minute to go.

But that was their last hurrah. In the overtime set, Perkins bagged a quick lay-in then Jensen came up with a big steal, racing the length of the court for an easy bucket.

After another Sandy score,

Sue Veley split a pair of free throws and Gwen Wallis followed her missed charity shot in for a rebound and a score to put the game on ice.

Glover credited fine defensive play and some good free throw shooting as being major factors in the game and was especially pleased with the way his girls switched from a zone press to a man-to-man defense to hold Silverton scoreless in overtime.

Esme Jensen continued to develop as one of the team's on-court leaders, scoring 12 points and getting 10 boards. Nancy Perkins contributed 10 points while vacuuming the boards for 22 rebounds, 16 on the offensive end.

After just a day's rest, the Pioneers visited Estacada Monday, and for a while it looked like they might hammer out something of a win streak as they overcame some lapses to earn a 17-17 halftime with the Rangers.

But then Estacada came out in a full court press, completely destroying the Sandy offensive plan and forcing numerous turnovers.

Estacada scored 14 third quarter points to Sandy's five, and 20 against eight in the fourth frame.

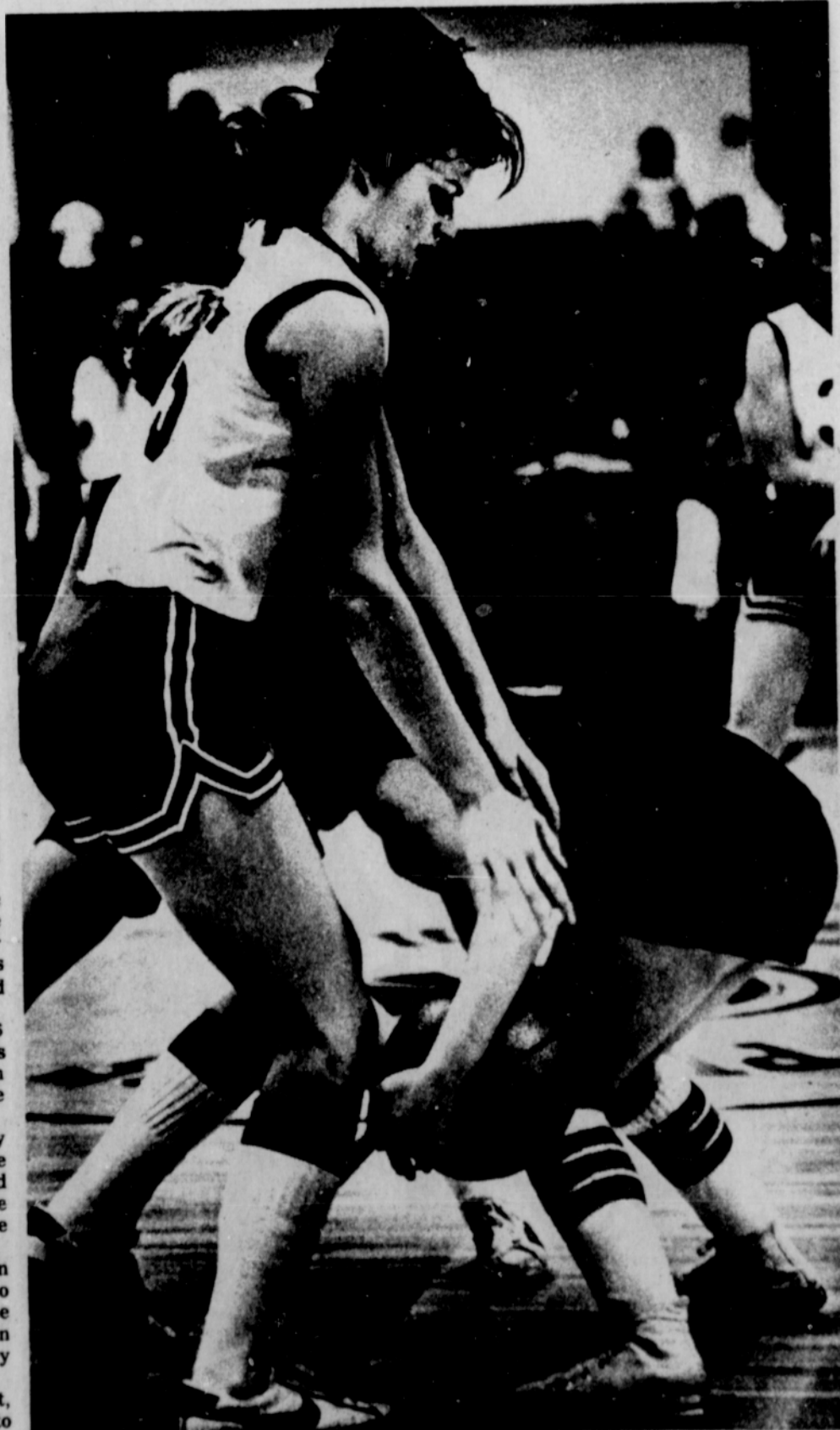
Ranger Lori Eads was one of the prime villains in the tragedy, getting most of her 14 points from easy lay-ins off steals as she prowled Sandy's passing lanes.

Nancy Perkins got 16 rebounds for the Pioneers but was held to just seven points by an aggressive Estacada defense.

Last Thursday Sandy turned in a more impressive performance as they stayed close to a strong Sweet Home team much of the game before succumbing 33-25.

The Pioneers were down by just five points with two minutes to go, but despite forcing seven turnovers in those last few minutes they couldn't close the gap.

With a full three days rest, the Pioneer girls travel to Molalla Thursday, then return home for game against Canby next Tuesday. Both contests are slated to start at 7:30 p.m.



SUE VELEY of Sandy (right) grapples with a Silverton opponent for possession of a loose ball during last Saturday's 48-39 win over the Foxes. It was the girls second victory of the season. (Douglas Gantenbein photo)

39 win over the Foxes. It was the girls second victory of the season. (Douglas Gantenbein photo)

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