

Three Men in a Boat – A Devlin Lake Adventure

By Bruce Masterman

The Cessna 185 taxied away from the dock, picked up speed along the water and lifted effortlessly into the bright blue northern Ontario sky.

Soon it was out of sight. In a few seconds even the drone of the motor was swallowed by the wilderness. Silence returned to Devlin Lake.

“Well, here we are,” my brother Rick Masterman said to nobody in particular.

“Yeah, we sure are,” I responded, rather lamely.

But, in reality, our simple verbal exchange had a much deeper meaning that would have escaped any strangers overhearing it.

The truth of it was that neither Rick or I could really believe that we were indeed *here*, miles away from civilization, standing on a dock while waves lapped against the wood.

Rick and I had dreamed of doing a trip like this together for more than 30 years. We’d talked about it, we’d agreed it would be fun to do but we never got around to doing it.

Several years ago, the plan expanded to include Rick’s son, Danny, and our dad, Robert. An all-guys getaway to catch a few fish, tell some lies and try to bridge the gap created by leading busy lives separated by three provinces.

I think we’d had hopes of perhaps recapturing some of that old magic from our youth when our stepmother Marnie and Dad had a cottage at Malachai in northwestern Ontario. We’d spend weekends and holidays there as kids, mainly fishing, swimming and doing chores but having a whale of a time no matter what we were doing. Rick, four years younger, and I had never been so close as when we’d fished together at Malachai.

Going to a fishing lodge together as adults many years later sounded great, but that’s as far as it ever went. Talk.

Events in recent years made it seem like it would never happen. Dan developed into a young man, grew some wings (literally, he earned his pilot’s licence), moved out of the house and started a successful and busy career in computers.

Getting him away for a fishing trip seemed increasingly unlikely.

Then, two years ago, Dad died in a car accident at the age of 82. One key person in the trip that seemed destined not to happen was gone but never forgotten.

However, both Rick and I underestimated the fourth part of this equation: Dan.

Dan, who at 24 knew more about motivation than Rick and I ever will, made this trip happen.

Thanks to his vision and determination, Dan had arranged for the three of us to be together here at Devlin Lake, finally doing the trip of our dreams. The trip in August 2005 was a gift for Rick’s 49th birthday, and I was graciously invited to come along.

Dan had been at Devlin Lake the summer before, with a friend from work. He enjoyed the best fishing he’s ever had, almost non-stop action for walleye and northern pike. A photo of Dan with a 39-inch pike graces the website of Wilderness Air, the company that operates the Devlin Lake outpost as part of a string of fly-in fishing operations out of Vermillion Bay.

Although he hadn't fished much as a kid, the fishing he had done convinced Dan that he loved to fish. Like Rick and I, he savors the beauty of the places where fishing happens, embraces the challenge of trying to outsmart fish, and thrills at the tug on the line and the excitement it generates.

After the plane was gone, we carried all our gear into the log cabin, a rustic but spacious building with every comfort you could expect for backcountry accommodation.

A propane-powered fridge and stove was in the kitchen, along with a sink with running water. A wood-burning stove centrally located outside the bedrooms promised that we'd never be cold as long as somebody got up in the night to feed it.

A couple of 14-foot boats with six-horsepower motors were pulled up on shore. The boathouse contained lifejackets and a sauna, a luxury that somehow we never got around to indulging in during our three-day stay.

Devlin Lake is relatively small, just 230 acres, making it particularly boater friendly even when the wind blows. Another productive fishing lake with a stashed boat and motor can be reached by an easy portage of five to 10 minutes.

The bonus was that we were the only three anglers on Devlin Lake. We had the whole area to ourselves. Talk about paradise.

Like many outposts operated by Vermillion Air, Devlin Lake is designated a catch-and-release lake. That doesn't mean you can't eat a few fish, but it does mean you can't take any home. Anglers also must use single hooks on their lures, and pinch down the barb. Use of live bait is prohibited.

Thanks to the rules, fishing in Devlin Lake and the portage lake is nothing short of incredible.

Dan, of course, already knew that from his experience last year. It didn't take long before Rick and I also were convinced.

As soon as we unpacked, we headed for the boat with tackle boxes, rods, nets and lifejackets in tow. Dan piloted us over to a favorite spot about 10 minutes away. It was a relatively shallow area with a white plastic buoy marking the location of a giant rock that's probably crunched a few propellers.

We started off using bottom bouncers and spinners, baited with dead minnows. We were drifting with the motor turned off for about five minutes when Dan said, "I've got one."

And he did, a chunky walleye of about a pound. Soon the rods that Rick and I were using also started bouncing under the weight of hefty walleye. For several exciting and entertaining minutes, it seemed one or another of us had a fish on. The walleye ranged from one to three pounds. Every now and then somebody would catch a pike just to liven things up. No matter how large or small the pike were, they fought like terriers with fins, diving under the boat, ripping off line and biting off the odd jig head with razor-sharp teeth. When the action started to slow, we just moved to another spot.

Sure enough, we'd start catching fish and then that place too eventually would turn cold. But we always knew all we had to do was relocate, or perhaps change the speed of a retrieve, or drift instead of troll, or switch from bottom bouncers to jigs of varying colours, and we'd be onto fish again. Sometimes all the walleye seemed to bite off one side of the boat and ignore the rod on the other. And sometimes it didn't matter which side we were on.

Before we knew it, it was late afternoon and our stomachs were telling us it had been a long time since lunch. We reeled in our lines and motored back to camp.

I volunteered to clean the few walleye we'd kept for supper. When I'd packed for the trip, I couldn't for the life of me find my favorite filleting knife. So at a stopover at Marnie's house in Gimli, Manitoba, I'd asked to borrow Dad's old knife. I'd seen him clean hundreds of fish with it, and I considered it an honour to have it with us.

It felt so right to be using Dad's favorite finely honed filleting knife on a trip of a lifetime that he should have been on if only we'd done it sooner. But as I used the knife to slice off the fillets and remove the skin and cheeks from each walleye, it almost felt as if Dad's hand was guiding me. In a way, he was part of this trip after all.

Up at the cabin, we decided to cook the fillets using a recipe recommended by my friend Shel Zolkewich in Winnipeg. A fanatical angler, Shel had discovered the recipe on a trip to a remote fishing lodge in northern Manitoba. Shel said it had two things going for it: It was absolutely to-die-for delicious, and it didn't involve deep-frying, batter or other cholesterol boosters.

Dan got busy slicing onions and fresh peppers while I rinsed the fillets. Then Dan placed each fillet on a sheet of heavy duty tinfoil. After laying on pads of butter, he layered each fillet with onions and peppers, then spooned on a couple of healthy dollops of salsa. Salt and pepper and a few generous shakes of hot pepper sauce completed the job.

Meanwhile, the barbeque on the front porch had already warmed to medium heat. Dan finished enclosing the walleye in tinfoil packages, then placed them on the grill. Fifteen minutes later, we opened the packages. As each one was opened, it released a delicious burst of spicy steam that almost had us salivating.

Within minutes, we were chowing down on the best walleye I've ever eaten. The meat was white and flaky, the flavor absolutely tantalizing thanks to the salsa and hot sauce. Every fishing camp's mandatory "three B" staples – bread, beans and beer – finished the meal off with style.

After supper, we headed back out in the boat. With Dan again at the helm, we motored over to a different shoreline across from the camp. He and his buddy had enjoyed good fishing there the year before. Sure enough, it wasn't long before we started catching walleye. We fished until almost dark, talking, joking, admiring the sunset, cursing line tangles and aging eyes (not Dan's!) – and catching more fish than we really deserved. We finally called it a night.

The next morning, we got the coffee perking and started preparing a big breakfast of pancakes, bacon, eggs and toast. We planned to go into the portage lake and wanted our bodies to be well fueled. The sky looked a little threatening, so we packed raingear.

This time I was on the motor as we made our way through the narrows toward the trailhead to the hidden portage lake. We missed the trail marker the first time past, and had to backtrack before Dan spotted it. After pulling the boat onto shore enough to ensure it was there when we returned, the three of us grabbed our gear and started hiking. The trail was overgrown in places, and a little slick from the rain, but was easy to follow.

Sure enough, a boat, motor and extra gas waited in a little bay at the other end. The portage lake was even smaller than Devlin, with a mirror-like surface and lots of structure along the shoreline that promised good fishing. I pulled the boat away from the

shore and we started to troll. We were only a few hundred yards from the put-in spot when suddenly Dan's rod turned into an upside-down U. Very calmly, he said "Whoa."

The line started zig-zagging wildly and we knew he was onto a good pike. Dan doesn't get excited too easily, but the look on his face suggested he was having quite a bit of fun. He reeled frantically trying to keep the line tight, while the pike alternated between pulling away and swimming toward the boat.

After a few minutes, it appeared Dan was winning the battle. The fish was coming toward the boat. Finally we caught a glimpse of the pike and almost in unison we commented on its size. Somebody – I think it was Rick – said "what a luncker." Dan was in the bow of the boat, and Rick in the middle. Rick reached for the pike for the net and scooped it in one clean swoop.

But then the unthinkable happened. The net's mesh tore wide open and the pike ripped through the opening. On its way out, the pike somehow hooked Dan's lure on the ragged mesh. The pike was free. It disappeared into the dark depths of the lake.

We all sat there a few seconds without speaking.

"That was a big fish," Rick said.

"You're telling me," Dan replied.

"What's with the net?" I asked, not very helpfully considering what had just transpired.

We're not sure exactly how big the pike was, but I'm guessing 45-48 inches. It dwarfed the 39-incher that Dan had caught the year before, earning him a spot on Wilderness Air's website. We sat there a few minutes while Dan rerigged. I kept looking down at the water, as if I expected the pike to suddenly reappear, perhaps grinning.

What a start to the day.

As it turned out, that was the biggest fish we saw all day, although I'm sure the lake has larger pike in it. We fished steadily, catching walleye after walleye and the occasional pike as the weather alternated between rainy and sunny. Whenever the action slowed, somebody would say something like, "Boy, I sure wish we'd landed that pike." We just couldn't stop thinking about it. We later spent some time chucking big spoons in weedy bays in the hope we'd catch one like it, or maybe even its big brother. We hooked several smaller pike, but nothing that came close to Dan's fish.

That was probably the most magical day of lake fishing I've ever enjoyed. The walleye were numerous, hefty and eager. The setting was gorgeous. And we were fully enjoying each other's company, more like old friends than relatives. The only thing missing was lunch. Somehow, we'd forgotten to pack any.

Our appetites finally chased us off the lake. We were all ready for supper. Back at the cabin, we whipped up another mouth-watering round of salsa walleye and stoked the wood stove. After a few rounds of cribbage and a beer (maybe two), we were ready for bed. I'm not sure if Dan and Rick thought about that lost pike while lying in their bunks, but I sure did.

Rain was pounding down when we awoke the next morning. Our plane was due sometime later that afternoon, but the ceiling was so low we knew nobody would be flying until it cleared. Frankly, it looked like the weather was socked in for the day.

Fortunately, by the time we'd had breakfast and packed up, the weather had cleared enough for us to head out for our last round of fishing. By this time, our frozen

minnows weren't frozen any more and they were in short supply. But we had a good stock of Mr. Twisters and figured they'd do the job without minnows.

We were right. The walleye started cooperating almost as soon as we returned to the shallow area we'd fished our first day. Over the next few hours, we moved around to a few other spots, slowly making our way back to the dock. We fished casually, no pressure at all. We each caught several walleye, carefully releasing each one. The weather cleared and we knew we'd be flying out later that afternoon.

We joked and chatted, or sat in silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I've never seen Rick so relaxed, his mind and body far from the rigors of long-haul trucking. It seemed the last thing on Dan's mind were gigabytes and websites. And all I was worrying about was whether I could adequately capture this special time in words. I know I also thought about Dad on that final morning, and gave silent thanks that we'd been able to share other fishing adventures like this one in years past.

When we returned to the dock, we carried down all our gear and waited for the plane. We shared a final beer and sat on lawnchairs, basking in the sun like contented seals. After a while, Dan and Rick uncased their rods and started casting. They caught a few small pike, before the sound of an approaching aircraft broke the silence.

Wilderness Air owner Bob Huitikka pulled his big de Havilland Otter up to the dock. His daughter and son-in-law hopped off, carrying fishing rods and duffles, eager for a little R and R in the peak of their busy season.

En route to the base at Vermilion, Rick got to spend the last part of the flight in Bob's co-pilot seat. I watched as he and Bob conversed via headsets, no doubt comparing the respective challenges of flying a plane in all kinds of weather with maneuvering a fully-loaded 18-wheeler along an icy highway.

After landing, Rick, Dan and I loaded our gear into Dan's Pathfinder. I offered to take the wheel for the first leg, but Dan insisted on driving us home, just as he'd driven us here. I wasn't surprised. This trip was Dan's gift to Rick – and to me. He'd made it happen and he was determined to see it through to the end. To him, it only seemed right.

Sitting in the back seat on the way home, my mind rewound and replayed our Devlin Lake adventure many times over. We had truly shared a wonderful experience, one we could never duplicate no matter how many times we did it. It had taken years to make it happen, but it had happened. That was the important part. There was no point in regretting it hadn't happened sooner. The right time had been now. Period.

I couldn't help but reflect that the relationship between Rick, Dan and I was different than before Devlin Lake. We were closer, more at ease with each other, more ready to smile, and to praise. The miles and years had been bridged. We had stories to tell, some of them even true. That is the beauty of fishing. A trip like this may only be a few days, but it provides a lifetime of lasting memories.

Seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong once wrote a book called *It Isn't About the Bike*.

If I were to write a book about our Devlin Lake experience, an apt title would be *It Isn't About the Fish*.

It really isn't.

The Best Walleye Recipe Ever

You'll need:

Walleye fillets and cheeks
Salsa (mild, medium or hot – your choice)
Green, red and yellow peppers
Onions
Hot pepper sauce
Butter
Heavy duty tinfoil
Salt and pepper

Pre-heat barbeque to medium heat. Rinse fillets well and place on tinfoil. Place slices of butter on top of fillets, followed by layers of chopped onion and peppers. Spoon two or three large spoonfuls of salsa onto each fillet. Spread it evenly. Shake on hot pepper sauce, according to your personal taste. Add salt and pepper. Seal tightly in foil. Place directly on grill. Open beer. Drink beer. Maybe open another. After 10-15 minutes, remove foil packages and open carefully, as the released steam can burn. Serve on plates, along with beans, bread and maybe a fresh green salad if you're really health-conscious (although there are healthy ingredients with the fish already). Enjoy!

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT DEVLIN LAKE AND WILDERNESS AIR:

Contact Bob or Kelsey Huitikka
P.O. Box 83
Vermilion Bay, ON
P0V 2V0
Toll free: 1-800-760-0924
Summer: 807-227-5473
E-mail: info@great-fishing.com
Website: www.great-fishing.com