

**“I WANT TO catch a catfish Daddy!”**

The declaration surfaced as Noah compared his fishing photographs, impressive for a six-year-old, to his trove of books about fishing. The boy’s tackle box was rivaled only by his bookshelf. He noticed one glaring discrepancy. My young angler had never landed himself a catfish.

How could I be so bullheaded? I had taken my lil’ fishing buddy for trout along scenic streams, pursued panfish in local parks, and casted to bass in dozens of farm ponds. However, I had never offered my son the chance to stay up late for the whiskered critters of the night. Stubbornly, I allowed bedtimes and routines to get in the way of cherished memories. I had not fished for bullheads since my college days nearly twenty years ago. It became a personal mission to get my son a catfish.

Ironically, boy and bullhead have much in common. Both are lured in by promises of hot dogs and bubble gum. Also, the pair are equally enamored by wriggly worms. This September night, we opted for the latter. Noah had likely eaten all of the former. Nightcrawlers would be on tonight’s menu.

I carefully reversed the vehicle to the stillness of the farm pond. Overlooking the tailgate, Noah comfortably waited for a strike. I strategically set the rods upright, an angle somewhere between 45 and 90 degrees. This September night too was in the mid-sixties, just about ideal for temperature and rod angle. As a pair of rods rested on the tailgate, a young angler rested in the truck bed. I had placed a sundry of cushions, flashlights, snacks, and drinks.

While Noah nestled into the promises of an adventurous night, I prepped the campfire. Every true catfishing adventure, particularly a son’s first, requires a good fire. As to avoid confusing snacks for bait or, far worse, bait for a snack, I had set out all edibles on the bench near the crackling campfire. Its coals reddened preemptively and glowed in hopes to commemorate a future success with s’mores.

Experience reminded me the pinnacle would occur below the cloak of darkness.



# Bullheaded



I could sense Noah nervously pondering why he had not yet seen the rod bounce. Normally, when we fished, more often than not, he caught fish. I explained things the best I could while offering sweet peace treaties and entertaining Noah with family fishing stories.

With time, day surrendered to dusk and dusk gracefully slipped into nightfall. The instant nature’s lights went out, the fishing immediately turned on with a switch. The rod nearest Noah jumped. Since we were using circle hooks, I advised young Noah to calmly pick up the rod and slowly reel in, as to hook the bullhead in the corner of its mouth. Nodding with my instruction, Noah promptly grabbed the rod and thrust it like a sword, stabbing with gusto into the September sky. I could only smile as his way worked.

The fish were cooperative. My son’s first catfish did not let go. On light tackle with line strength mirroring my son’s age, Noah excitedly pumped the rod and reeled with everything he had.

Noah heaved the prize into the grass. Able to hear the bullhead flopping along the bank, my son shouted, “I got him! I got my first catfish Daddy!” As I carefully handled Noah’s prize, I first shared his fish’s unique beauty.

Noah was in awe, as if he discovered a new species. In a way, he had. I then showed him the sharp spines on the pectoral and dorsal fins. I was the designated handler on this night. There would be plenty of future trips for Noah to work on his fish handling. I wasn’t going to let anything taint his first catfishing trip or his celebratory s’mores!

Following a priceless photo op, where a boy and a bullhead wiggled proudly before the glow of a campfire in the background, I detected a song from my joyous son. I always admired

how Noah sang when he was happy, drawing, or fishing. “When the sky turns gray, the catfish come out to play!” my son cleverly hummed. He repeated

the chorus he had coined, one he was quite proud of, countless times to each of his many catfish.

Before I knew it, Noah’s thoughts of his first catfish were temporarily distracted by his first bullhead double. Watching my budding fishing buddy juggle two rods was something a father will never forget. I hadn’t chuckled that hard since I was but a boy his age fighting fish.

The late summer night offered more than a dozen feisty bullheads. A delightful problem to endure, father and son had run out of bait.

Though it was getting late, I led Noah to the campfire. As if a rite of passage for young anglers who caught their first catfish, he roasted a marshmallow as I prepared the graham crackers and chocolate. Smiles and s’more, after several healthy servings of each, gave way to sleepy eyes.

As I tucked in my tuckered angler just prior to late night became early morning, I could not personally recall such a content happiness at the end of a fishing trip. Noah was now a catfish fisherman. I would stubbornly strive to, at times, bend bedtimes and curve curfews. Never had I been so proud to be so bullheaded. ☺

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