

An Irish Wobble

BRITISH PIKE SQUAD



The beginning of October has for decades spelt the start of the pike angling season, and for the past 16 years has also been the signal for the annual International Pike Championships between Britain v Ireland to be held. After a year of planning and waiting, the time had come for the top 10 anglers from Britain and Ireland selected at their respective nations Selection Finals to pack their bags and head off to do battle on the Somerset Levels around Bridgwater. Ireland came full of thoughts of retaining the trophy they had won the previous year at Roscommon in Ireland with the smallest ever winning margin of just 1 ½ lbs, whilst Britain were eager to show the Irish that the old adage of “The

luck of the Irish” had held sway at Roscommon, and this time round we were out with a vengeance to gain revenge for that slender defeat. Thursday saw both squads travel to Somerset and our chosen base of the Laburnum House Lodge Hotel at East Huntspill; just 5 miles away from Bridgwater and close to both waters chosen to stage the event. With enough accommodation to hold both squads, whilst providing a high degree of comfort and a large helping of excellent food. Once again the camaraderie that has grown up over the years between the nations shone through, as old friends got together over a few beers in the bar that evening, and many new friends were made by those making their International debut.

The following morning after a hale and hearty breakfast that would have satisfied even the stoutest angler, everybody piled into the local tackle shops and made for items they had forgotten in the rush to pack, to purchase day tickets, whilst the Irish popped into the post office for their rod licences. Clear bright skies and not a ripple on the water made fishing hard, though quite a number of pike were caught, ranging from jacks in the 5 to 6 lb class through to the best Pike of the day of just over 13 lbs. This was caught by British Team member Mark Groom from the far end of the drain. With most of the Irish opting to wear Neoprene waders throughout the day, they found the heat getting to them and there were some very sweaty anglers and stewards arriving back at the hotel. The day had also taken a toll on tackle, as Paul Higginson snapped a rod tip and I myself had a reel seat snap on a brand new Maver reel.

In the bar that evening, the tales of the day’s fishing were doing the rounds, and keeping pace with the flow of the Guinness and Cider were tales of the fish that had been caught and lost. The size of these pike were quickly growing in size to a leviathan size. Once again, the Northern Irish contingent of the Irish party firmly countered the traditional Irish quiet approach to an evening’s entertainment, and were quickly into full party mode. One thing for certain is that you can never keep Marty & Sam Lawlor quiet for long!

There were quite a few sore heads on the Saturday morning amongst both the British and Irish stewards, whilst the bulk of those anglers actually taking part had made a wise decision to at least attempt to get a reasonable amount of sleep before the exertions of the day’s competition. For those making their debuts, nerves were an ever present factor especially for one of the British team. Due to work commitments and the setting up of a new business venture, the British had lost a very good angler in Frank Scott who had to pull out just a week before the International, and had been replaced by 1st reserve Mark Lloyd. However this had not affected British spirits and after a last minute team briefing we were off to do battle. In the car park before departing, we went through the list of rules, checked scales for accuracy, applying + or – stickers where necessary, before handing out unhooking mats to every steward.

In convoy we set off for the venue start off point, which was to be at one of the bridges over the River Huntspill. After allowing time for the competitors and stewards to get themselves ready, Skip blew the whistle and we were off! It was clear from the start that both teams had done their homework on the water, as Mark Lloyd headed down stream followed closely by John Woods the Irish squad Captain along with their stewards. Virtually everyone else headed upstream where they would be able to fish from both banks.

The British knew parts of this water reasonably well, having fished a couple of practice days on there prior to our Selection Final on the Levels two years previously. The Irish however had also

done their homework, and had sent out a party of senior stewards the day before to look for signs of feeding pike and prey fish. Three of their team were told to head for a small tributary off the main river which was to produce a great many jacks for all the anglers including our lone British angler who had gone the same way. In fact it was Carl Melbourne who ended up top rod on day one from this area with 12 fish for 39.15; whilst Joe Coleman of the Irish managed a total of 14 fish for 39.09.

Early on, our stewards started to tell us that the Irish were taking a steady stream of fish and at one point we estimated that they were nearly 50 pounds ahead of us. However we knew that the parts of the river where our British team members were concentrated would produce later on in the day for us. Slowly but surely the British fought back, with British first timer Alan Hickson at the sluice on the main river catching steadily on lures throughout the afternoon to end the day with 6 fish for 32.10. By the time the Irish had managed to get one of their anglers across to cover the area the two other British anglers also in the area had also managed a few fish. Michael McKinney of Ireland did however land the one pike of 9.09 to match exactly the best fish caught by Alan Hickson. Two entirely different fish of the same weight.

Eventually after 6 gruelling hours of hard work the final whistle was blown, and as the weigh cards were handed in it still looked like the Irish were in the lead. That was until the cards of Paul Higginson and Andy Waller were received! Paul had managed 10 pike for 36.11, whilst Andy Waller the British Captain had landed 6 fish for 20.13. Both had fished the South Drain which had been briefly visited by some of the Irish before abandoning the water for other stretches of the main river.

In the car park, Big Pat had a barbecue set up with a steady stream of burgers sizzling away to feed the hungry and tired as they came in, whilst Skip had a bottle of 15 year old single malt making its rounds along with a gallon of local cider to also warm and rejuvenate the spirits of one and all. (Drivers excepted)

Back at the Hotel both Skip and I (he with his trusty laptop and I with the decrepit old brain) double and treble checked each and every competitors weigh card; cross referencing each of these with the stewards cards. The result was a lead of 7.15 lbs in favour of the British Squad. After a quick wash and freshen up we headed for the bar where the squads were waiting for news on the day's outcome. The Irish were I must admit a little shocked to find that the British had not only pulled the deficit back but had even squeezed into the lead. There was a satisfied feeling within the British camp that we had a lead to take into day 2, whilst we all knew that the following day was wide open and the International could swing either way very easily. After a good meal and just a couple of drinks, both teams made a conscious decision to hit the sack early with so much at stake. Not only would luck have its part to play in the proceedings but we would have to get our team tactics exactly right if we were to get our hands on the prized trophy.

Sunday saw us set to fish a venue that most of the British squad had fished previously in 2005, so most of the squad were on tenterhooks for the off. The Kings Sedgemoor Drain which had previously produced a great many pike for us is a cracking bit of water with a large head of pike in the 3 to 6 lb range. This was the water that our Captain Andy Waller and Vice Captain, Colin (Toad) Telfer were chomping at the bit to have a go at. Andy was desperate for a Gold Medal as in all the time he had qualified for the team; he had only managed Team silvers. This was also the case for Stu Parker who wanted that Gold medal so badly to make up for 3 Silvers.

The weather report for the day had promised slightly better conditions with a slight overcast with light winds which should help the fishing. As usual the typical British weather produced glorious clear skies, warm sun and no b****y breeze. Perfect weather for shorts and T-Shirts!

Plus with some of the known areas requiring waders to get through the mud and reeds in places, it was going to be hot day's work for us.

Once again from the whistle it was immediately clear that both teams had clearly set out their plan of attack for the Straight off 6 British anglers went left on the river with 4 of the Irish in tow, whilst the remainder went the other way. Roughly half of these slowly and methodically working their way up the river in search of fish, whilst the others headed off as fast as they could for the far end of the venue where both sides knew there were a great many features to be found; and hopefully a good few fish as well.

Those who turned right at the bridge faced a very long walk to encounter those fish that were caught on the day, with a nightmare scenario of steep banks and dense backside growth offering very few vantage points to fish from. Those who'd gone the other way found better conditioned banks and less undergrowth ahead of them, although the bank immediately next to the water proved to be very soft underfoot. A variety of reed beds in mid river offered plenty of ambush points for the pike to lie next to, and some very 'pikey' looking beds of reeds next to the near bank produced throughout the day a fair few pike to those lucky anglers. Both Joe Coleman & John Woods of Ireland who were working the area both had early success, whilst the 2 British anglers with them had seen follows but had taken no fish.

I was Stewarding for Irish team member John Chambers, who had started off well with the odd fish around the 3 to 4 pound mark, whilst Alan Hickson of Britain had also a couple of jacks early on leaving just British angler Mark Lloyd still awaiting his first fish of the day. Mark's luck was soon to change however after I had spotted fish



movement whilst Stewarding J.C. A bait was flicked into the areas suggested by myself, and very soon three fish had graced his net and more importantly his weigh card. Even better was to follow in the shape of a lovely 10.02 which was the best pike caught during the two days of competition. This was much to JC's annoyance, as felt he should have had these fish and had allowed Mark to get ahead of him to get his bait in the particular swim first where the 10.02 had come from.

News soon starting to filter through on both the radio and mobile from both ends of the river of pike being caught and from what areas. David Young of the Irish had been guided to an area of the river by two of the Irish Stewards and he was starting to bag up, News of this was quickly sent by Skip to Stuart Parker and Derek Lowe, and they were soon covering the stretch he was fishing. With the match nearing its end, more and more news was still filtering though to myself and Skip of roughly equal bags of fish being caught by the Irish and British. This was of course good news for the competitors, but un-nerving for the management of both sides as we all struggled to work out who was leading.

As the final whistle sounded, Big Pat was already hard at work with the barbecue again ready to greet the returning teams along with yet another bottle of single malt and another gallon of cool cider on hand to moisten the palette. As the cards were being handed in Skip's confidence was growing by the minute as he became more and more convinced that the British had not only matched the Irish on the day but had pulled away from them even further.

Back at the Hotel, Skip and I again locked ourselves away in the room to work through the cards to find out who had won the Trophies. Going over everything three times to make absolutely sure we were greeted with the absolute fact that not only had we regained the International title, but had won by a larger margin than we had thought possible. After two days of intense effort from both squads the British had won by a magnificent margin of 50lb 02ozs.

Once the calculations were finished, there was very little time left to prepare for the Superb Presentation Meal that had been booked, so after a quick shower and brush up we headed for the bar. Maybe it was my fist in the air as I rushed to the accommodation to get showered which gave it away, but by the time we entered the bar most of those present had already guessed or knew the result.

After what can only be described as a very substantial meal the presentations began. Both Skip and John Chambers spoke about how close and intense the match had been and both thanked the stewards, teams and squad's management teams for all the hard work that they had put in to ensure that the International had gone ahead without any hick-ups; and then to the prize giving. First up were the Irish, and in turn each team member were presented with their runners-up Silver medals, not the Gold's they had hoped and prayed they would have been taking home; but till gladly accepted after the tremendous effort that each angler had given over the two days. Then it was the turn of the British Squad, and as they each came up to the table to get their Gold medals the smiles said it all with the biggest grin being on Stu Parker's face. Lastly, Andy Waller the British Team Captain was called forward and awarded the Gold medal he had craved for so long. And with the feel of the medal still fresh in his hands, John Chamber's handed over the International Challenge trophy which he gratefully accepted and held aloft for all to see.

Vengeance was ours.

Individual awards in the shape of specially commissioned Crystal Rose Bowls were awarded to Mark Lloyd for the best pike of the International, with David Young of Ireland also more importantly that for the Top Individual Angler. He was also awarded the Kevin D'arcy memorial shield which he keeps for a year.

Further prizes albeit 'jokey' ones were given to a couple of others present as well as our normal "Golden trophy". This is awarded to the person nominated for achieving some special PB, or out fishing everybody, or just for being a Jammy B****d. (I had won this twice previously for the last example). However there was a change in plans this year as the person nominated did not have any Golden Ba**s. Instead this year it was renamed the Golden T**s award and awarded to Louise Hunns who had set a new PB of 19 lbs+, and had also won the women's section of the ACA's Championship the previous year.

This was not the end of the proceedings as Big Pat had offered a weekend for two in Ireland as a raffle prize at the start of the night. A total of over £300 had been raised by all present and the prize was drawn by Andy's son Jack our 'Official Team Mascot'. The gods must have been smiling on Andy that weekend as not only did he get to lift the cup but he also had the winning ticket.

Finally with the speeches over, photographs taken, and after a few goodbye's from those heading home immediately, we headed to the bar for a well earned celebratory drink. The Irish who were still up for a few drinks to celebrate our victory remarked on how subdued we were. It was only after we got back that Skip penned it up exactly for us. It was down to a strong feeling throughout the entire British Squad of an overall quiet satisfaction of a job well done. We had done our homework, worked to a plan, and more importantly had worked tirelessly as a team to achieve our aims. From the efforts put in by the team members, to the great support from our stewards, and not forgetting the work put in by all of the British committee in planning the event from start to finish. Luck had also played its part, but we had deserved every little chunk we got. The luck of the Irish? Not





this time!

Lastly I must pay a special mention to our bait suppliers Baits Direct, who once again managed to supply us with a superb range of top quality baits and also at a great price. Delivered to the hotel perfectly in time for the International and in great condition.

This also played its part in our victory.

I'm sure that the Irish are already plotting and planning for next years International and getting revenge on us. So far all we know is its somewhere in Ireland and the 4th & 5th of October! Talk about keeping it close to your chest!

Representing Great Britain in Ireland at the 17th International Pike Championship's will be Gary Edwards ©, Paul Danby, Andy Waller, Richard Harvey, Glenn Neave, Mario Reho, Carl Street, Alan

Hickson, Peter Timmis & Colin Telfer with Kevan Cowie and myself as reserves. Roll on October.

Article written by Wayne Gorringe and appeared in Pikelines.