

I come from an era of specimen groups, specialist anglers, big fish anglers, specimen hunters and the like.

In those days specimen hunters were very seasonal, i.e. certain fish at certain times of the year, we then went through a period of the single species groups where individuals started to specialise in a particular fish, and gave these anglers

a sense of belonging, empathy and a level of exclusivity within their mutual and shared thought process.

It would be unfair to call it a fashion thing, it was definitely a natural progression and development of specimen hunting and allowed the individual to liaise and

communicate with similar enthusiasts and specialists. I suppose Dick Walker started it all with the Carp Catchers club, it encouraged analysis (sometimes over analysis), the sharing of knowledge and encouraged a feeling of mutual success, so even if you didn't catch the big one and a mate did, it was classed as a joint success. The strength of all this was the sharing of information, the detailed documentation and recording of results, which is still evident today. Look at the Barbel Catchers club, the National Anguilla Club and the Chub Study group, all these organisations are creations of that period I am talking

about and old habits stick around.

This process encouraged me to become very analytical in my approach as a young specimen hunter and this carried on throughout my angling career and still does, though not all fish respond to this approach, but it's a mind-set that is always with you. Barbel respond to this approach more than any other fish I have fished for. Yes, the discipline of this approach can be helpful when fishing for other species, but barbel and their habits lend themselves to be analysed and their ways predicted. I did this on the Teme, middle Severn and the lower Severn in the 80's and



One of the 9 pound Barbel that was almost a double

Hunt For a Se

90's and had great success with many double figure barbel being caught between friends and myself.

It's a natural process in some respects, all anglers do it, mostly subconsciously and by what many call a sixth sense process, basically it's just a storing of knowledge that we subconsciously draw off every time we go fishing, but I took it a little bit further and the results spoke for themselves.

The 2014 /2015 season was going to be an analytical approach by myself and a few mates in searching out big barbel on the middle Severn and maybe the lower river. Whilst barbel numbers are down on the Severn,

what remains is a nucleus of bigger fish, with the possibility of a monster on the lower Severn or a series of big doubles and back up fish from the middle river, so that was the target, and due to the geographic location of

us all that would take part, the middle part of the river would be our initial focus and concentration.

The analytical process started in choosing the areas we would concentrate on, we would fish hard fished

areas that historically produced barbel of all sizes, with stories and legends of bigger fish. Whether they were substantiated and witnessed was irrelevant, because if someone said they or others had caught

13lb 10oz Barbel



Severn Monster

doubles, twelve or thirteen pounders etc., it was enough to go on. No smoke without fire type stuff, we wanted heavily fished areas that had a lot of bait going in, we wanted to hear of lots of fish being caught, especially the mythical monsters.

I knew from previous experience, that the bigger more experienced older barbel soon developed evasive habits that lessened the probability of being caught. This was done by the barbel purely out of instinct and not a human like thought process, though I often took on in my mind a thought process that maybe if a barbel could think, it would in the way I was doing it.

Rich Frampton, Gregg Dobson, Dean Aston and I would initially target the areas on the middle river and we would get feedback from Lee Wilkes and Mark Rogers on the lower river. For the whole thing to be successful we all agreed that there must be total openness and honesty between the

team, especially on the middle river, there would be no ambiguity regarding swim location, methods and bait. I knew that for the total success of this venture this was paramount, especially with regard to swims my old theory of the 80/20 rule had served me well in past and I knew that the areas we elected to concentrate on would confirm it, i.e. 20% of the swims would produce 80% of the barbel and if we could spend 80% of our time in those swims, our chances would increase, always remembering that the big barbel always had the upper hand and could throw our theories out at any time, but it was a structure we could all adhere to and be as one.

Our approach would be simple, barbel rods, centre pins, robust tackle to deal with the biggest of the fish and huge baits. We all agreed that we would shy away from the pellet and boilie approach, I had to convince the lads this was the right thing to do, bearing in mind they were very much barbel

anglers of the modern day and had achieved a level of success in this approach as others use, the modern day approach of bolt rigs, hair rigs and particle type mass baits. The big bait method would require them to strike the hook home because of no self hooking rigs, a learning curve in itself.

I would be a fool to 'poo hoo' this modern approach, so I didn't, but what that approach would do would be taking away any selection process we might have in just catching fish over nine pounds. Experience proved to me that using extra-large baits was very selective in sorting out the bigger fish. Time was critical as the season would move on, the feeding times would become very narrow, and invariably during the first

few hours of darkness. This made it difficult for some of the guys because of work and family commitments, but the process of sharing information would help them to make the most of their limited available time.

The learning curve for the for the big bait virgins was soon over, they soon learned the approach, rod low to the water and pointing at the bait, thirty inches of braid to lessen the risk of liners, combined with size two hooks to accommodate the baits and no more than two ounces of lead. Runs and bite indication on this approach are varied, but most times a nod of the rod top shows an initial interest from a barbel, followed by either the 'click-click' of the centre pin or the screaming run of a scalded cat. Centre pins were

*13lb 12oz Lower
Severn Barbel*



*Gregg with a
13 pounder*



Rich Frampton's 13lb 02oz



ideal because long casts were not needed as I believed the barbel developed a habit of coming in close during the hours of darkness and mopping up freebies that had been discarded by anglers who fished the swims during daylight hours. The huge pieces of meat would have a double attraction of allowing a big barbel to zone in and dissuade lesser fish to attempt to take the bait. The most free offerings we would put in would be some broken up pieces of meat via a dropper. We were not really interested in any barbel, we only wanted fish in excess of nine pounds, with the ultimate target being double figure fish, although even using a third of a tin of meat we still picked up eight pounders. Now don't get me wrong an eight pounder was a lovely fish and a worthy barbel, but a scrappy 'eight' was the easiest way to scare a double from the swim. So, whilst the method wasn't totally eight pound proof and we proved that, because there is little difference between an 8lb 13oz barbel and a 9lb 6oz barbel, on the whole, it was working as it always did in sorting out the better fish. We couldn't spot fish where we were concentrating on, we had to fish blind, at best using our minds eye and knowledge, it was about understanding the barbels instincts in a pressurised hard fished environment, this then

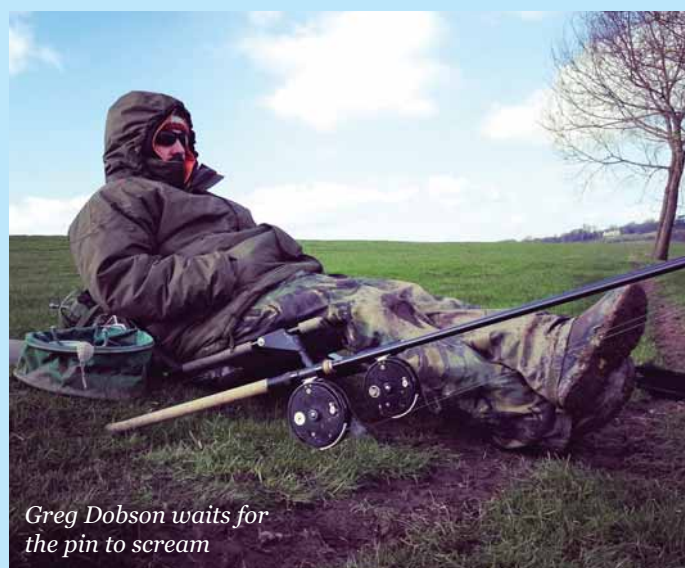
worked in our favour.

As the season progressed, the fish landed started to increase and a pattern started to develop allowing us to be able to predict the barbel's feeding times. I would fish the area or swim one night, Gregg would fish another, Dean and Rich would be given information of conditions and what swims were producing, they then would feed information back to the rest. It was working well and as the season progressed news was coming through of good fish being caught from

"We were catching enough ten and eleven pound plus fish to keep us well focused, knowing that the big fish was getting nearer, it was just a matter of time"

our syndicate stretch on the lower part of the river by Mark and Lee. Mark had adopted the big bait approach and started to get into some very large fish, including a monster of 15lbs 8oz later in the season. We all started to rack up some impressive results, with numerous big nine pounders and the ubiquitous eight pounders, myself and Gregg (because we fished the most) had something like seventy fish over nine pounds, many were in the 9lb 12oz and 9lb 14oz size range, most welcome, but very frustrating at times to be so close to the magical ten pound mark, but we were catching enough

12lb 02oz Barbel Pixham



Greg Dobson waits for the pin to scream

ten and eleven pound plus fish to keep us well focused, knowing that the big fish was getting nearer, it was just a matter of time.

In October I agreed to meet an old mate of mine from the seventies down on the bank, in the most productive swim, as the autumn developed and the day trip anglers started to fade and disappear I knew the big fish would become more vulnerable as the free food dried up. I knew they would drop their guard as they hunted and searched for freebies that now were not there.

As soon as I got into the swim, I started to get

the mother of all liners, huge bangs on the rod top, twelve inch pulls off the pin, this went on for two hours without any serious development in the interest shown. Kelvin was amazed at the activity, extra-large baits, three inches square were being hammered as soon as they hit the bottom, but nothing developed, I knew something was going to happen. Kelvin left as the sun disappeared behind the west bank, ten minutes passed since Kelvin had left, I noticed some movement on the line, the rod nodded and six inches of line was taken in a sharp pull. My hand hovered over the reel, again



Lee Wilkes with a
12lb 5oz winter Barbel



Deano 11lb 6oz

Rogers would fish as soon as the weather broke.

With numerous five pound chub to our credit, great as they were, we soon began to look towards the barbel, our obsession was growing and our anticipation was great. By the time the last week of the season had arrived, it had brought the best weather, with the river falling, with a healthy colour and a water temp of 6.5 degrees C and rising, for once things were on our side.

Gregg was the first to report Barbel of eleven and thirteen pounds within a few days of the last week starting. We had changed our approach somewhat, scaling baits down for a start off and limited any freebies. We baited up with sweet corn and fished over the top of it, a bait that would pass through the barbel fairly quickly we thought, Gregg had proven our plan had worked.

I joined Gregg on the third day of the final week and was bubbling with confidence, the conditions had got better and the water temp was near to 8 degrees C. I followed the plan and droppered a can of corn on the second shelf and cast out a couple of baits, one fairly small 1.5 inches square, and the lower downstream bait was somewhat bigger.

My mobile rang and it was Steve Pope checking in to see how it was going. As we chatted, the downstream

rod walloped over as the reel screamed off. "I've got to go Steve", I screamed down the phone. Well it was a spirited fight that lasted about thirty minutes with the fish getting snagged a couple times, but the uprated gear won the day. This fish was a lump and a half, I quickly weighed it in the net with the pole attached and she went over sixteen pounds, this maybe a fourteen pounder I thought. Gregg came down immediately to witness, photograph and weigh the fish and at 13lb 12oz, it was much appreciated, I mean two thirteens off the Severn in one season, I am old enough to still recognise how much a ten pounder is worth, so I was happy.

Lee joined the fun the next day and had a pair of beautiful twelve pounders, two twelves in one session, needless to say Lee was well chuffed as we all were, and rewarded him as I said it would, for missing some prime time fishing earlier because of his wife about to give birth.

Could it get any better? Surely not?

With just two days left I decided to hang up the barbel gear for the season. I was happy and felt well blessed and shattered, but Richard was determined to get out for the last throw of the dice, despite the weather being atrocious. His work had really reduced his barbel time, we swapped



11lb 2oz for
Rich Frampton

ideas and how he should approach the day. Apart from keeping warm and dry, a near impossibility, he decided on one rod and a cautious approach. We kept in contact via mobiles whilst he braved the day, it was looking bleak to say the least, but at midday, they say fortune favours the brave, I got the call I hoped for, Richard had got his "big one" and at thirteen pounds on the nose, it certainly was, I congratulated him for his effort and his fish.

Three thirteens, two twelves and an eleven pounder in one week, what a way to end the season and a rubber stamp on our approach of sharing information and ideas.

Whilst I have had bigger barbel from the lower Severn and a similar weight fish from the Teme, those fish I considered to be my best fish in fishing for barbel for over forty years. My

previous middle Severn best was just over twelve pounds, caught many years previous, my best lower fish was 15lb 3oz, but do you know these two thirteens I caught were very special to me during the 2014/2015 season. I was and am still elated and it proved to me that our approach had paid off, with everyone who was part of the plan catching their target of river Severn double figure barbel. It was great also to see the other lads benefit from the approach; their faith in the approach proved what can be done.

Our next plan for the 2015/2016 season is to fish the lower river on the syndicate waters and adopt the same process of sharing information and tactics, just like those old specimen groups of the sixties and seventies. Who knows we just may get a real monster and we can all enjoy and experience the 'Severn's Heaven.'