

Barely Beating the Ice

My nephew Tom Byrnes is more alive than most Penn State undergraduates you're likely to meet, which is particularly remarkable if you consider that after falling on his head from a moving vehicle two years ago, he received the last rites. His Pittsburgh doctors expected him to die from his traumatic injuries, and when he somehow survived them, few of his therapists at the Harmerville Rehabilitation Center expected him to lead a normal life.

When you're with Tom and you know about his fight to rejoin the mainstream, you're two people: the person in awe of his vitality, and the person joining his current adventure.

The year before his accident, I took Tom trout fishing in Stone Valley one May morning before an afternoon exam. His academic record at the time was dragging a little, and I allowed him only a couple hours on the water. In that time, however, we filled two limits and set several trout free. Tom never forgot his uncle's outdoor prowess and repeatedly urged me this fall to accompany him after grouse and pheasant in the Somerset County fields he and his friends hunt. Tom Byrnes remains a fine wing-shot.

Unfortunately, our schedules never quite meshed. One weekend I had reports to grade. The next weekend he had to study for mid-terms or attend a Head Injury Support Group meeting. And so it went.

"I'll tell you what," he said over the phone one night in his ingratiating, lazy-tongue drawl after canceling yet another hunt, "let's take the canoe up to Black Moshannon next Sunday."

I agreed. The weather had held mild through much of November, and the bass might still be hitting.

A couple weeks earlier, Tom had chained his 14-foot Starcraft to our clothesline post for safe-keeping, and early Sunday morn-

ing, November 24, his fire-engine red Isuzu truck pulled into our back lot. Tom hopped out, unlocked the canoe, and while his border collie Sam raced in circles through the contiguous yards, he shouldered the boat and with a nifty slide, positioned it on his roof rack.

I watched all this from the upstairs bedroom window, reminding myself that the doctors had expected him to die and the therapists never thought he would walk again.

A clammy mist turned to snow flurries as we created the mountain and settled the canoe in the water. We eased up the lake's main fork toward the airport, the steady "wump wump" of the National Guard helicopters in the distance and a small transport plane coming in across our bow for a landing.

I took stern paddle, and as I dipped it to larboard, a nice bass broke the surface right beside me, almost as though I'd shoveled it up from the water. Here was a good sign. We anchored and worked surface lures—a Jitterbug and a Hula Popper—over and through the thick, brown dead lilies and spatterdock.

But nothing struck except the wind, which gusted smartly and drove frigid air through our life vests and sweatshirts. I suggested we move into the smaller south fork of the Y-shaped lake, hoping a line of trees there would block the wind. But it quartered to our backs as we paddled, and we found ourselves pushed almost helplessly along over foot-high waves.

Fingers stiff with cold casting and paddling, Tom and I slid in against the shoreline cedar

stumps, angled obliquely into the wind, and paddled furiously back across the lake to where Sam, the border collie, awaited us in the red truck.

We warmed our hands first at the exhaust pipe and then in the cab. Then, mostly restored, we watched the sun peek from behind the scudding clouds and decide to cast off again and fish some more. Our resolve, however, produced only one chain pickerel, a 15-incher Tom took on a black-and-yellow Mepps spinner and the released.

We hugged the shoreline. The gusty wind turned to a steady breeze. The sun blinked on and off. Occasional flurries passed over the mountain dusting our tackle and clothing. Deer rifles boomed softly in the woods: the late November sighting-in ritual. Crusty ice formed in our red guides. Finally my resilient nephew suggested it was time for us to pack it in.

I scanned the frigid lake as we remounted and lashed the canoe. That night, I guessed, the first clear film of ice would form. In a couple of weeks I'd be back, ice fishing. Tom Byrnes thinks he'd like to try ice fishing with me this season.

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Snow flurries blur the chain pickerel Tom Byrnes is about to return to Black Moshannon lake