

Is your fishing going backwards? Get out of that tube and into a boat

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An introduction to Loch Style boat fishing - Part One

'Loch Style' boat fishing is venerable in its origins but a close look at its history and its methods reveal one overriding truth. It was practised on large bodies of water, the Irish and Scottish lochs, where the primary problem was to cover enough water to find where the fish were. These waters are so big that, if you were wrong, you could find yourself without a fish within rifle range never mind the limited distances covered by a moderate cast. Although aimed at 'raising' fish to the surface, the basic method of drift boating hasn't changed, although the advent of different lines and modern flies has changed things a bit.

So, although the methods have changed with time, the basic premise of Loch Style is to drift in a boat and to cover water. The mantra of all Loch Style anglers is the same, 'First find the fish, then find their depth, and finally find the fly'.

Of course finding the fish without finding the right depth or fly seems something of an impossibility but to misquote Brian Clarke in his excellent book on stillwater bank fishing, *The Pursuit of Stillwater Trout*, it is much the same as looking up a word in a dictionary to check the spelling. If you don't know how to spell it, how do you find it?

In fishing terms, the metaphorical thumbing through the pages is drifting, covering water and trying to locate the fish. By drifting over wide expanses of water and fishing your fly at varied depths, you will luck into some fish and, if fortunate, you will hit the mother lode. It stands to reason then, that the nemesis of the drift boater is a flat calm. What you want is a nice breeze that the Scots refer to as 'A good crust on the water'.

The South African context

Until now the method of choice for most South African stillwater anglers has been to use a float tube or what the Americans frequently refer to as a 'Belly Boat'. I have personally never liked these contraptions and have, until the advent of boat fishing locally, always focused on bank techniques instead.

Float tubes have a number of disadvantages and if you have, up to now, been a confirmed belly boater it will take some adaption to get used to classic loch style fishing. The biggest disadvantage of float tubes, after their radical lack of creature comforts and the onerous complexity of taking a pee, is that you are forced to go backwards. Even when trying hard not to, the necessity of stabilising the contraption with the occasional kick means that you are always paddling over the fish that you wish to catch. Worse, there is a tendency to get into the habit of trolling. Some people even regard this as the entire point of float tube fishing and only make about half a dozen casts a day as they paddle about the place with lines dangling. One might be tempted to argue about the ethics of such methods - and trolling is definitely against the rules in competitive angling but, truth be told, it isn't that effective.

The biggest difficulty is monitoring the depth of your flies as you fish. Most float tubers end up fishing fast-sinking DI5 or DI7 lines and thinking that the fish are deep. But, if you are paddling backwards all the time, the flies are fishing a lot shallower than you think. The differences between sink rates of lines on float tubes going backwards and boats going with the wind is one of the sticking points and, if you make the switch to drift boating, you will need to relearn the way that you control depth. More on that later.

A brief history of local drift boating

I frequently tell people that we don't comprehend or appreciate the many positive contributions that competitive angling has made to our sport and the benefits that have accrued to recreational fly fishing. Even if you have a confirmed 'anti competition' outlook, and I am a fence sitter at best, you cannot discount the enormous growth in methodology that has come from the competitive scene. The truth is that many innovations have come from the competitive lot getting out there, experimenting with new things then bringing them home, adapting them to local conditions and making their knowledge available to the general fly fishing public.

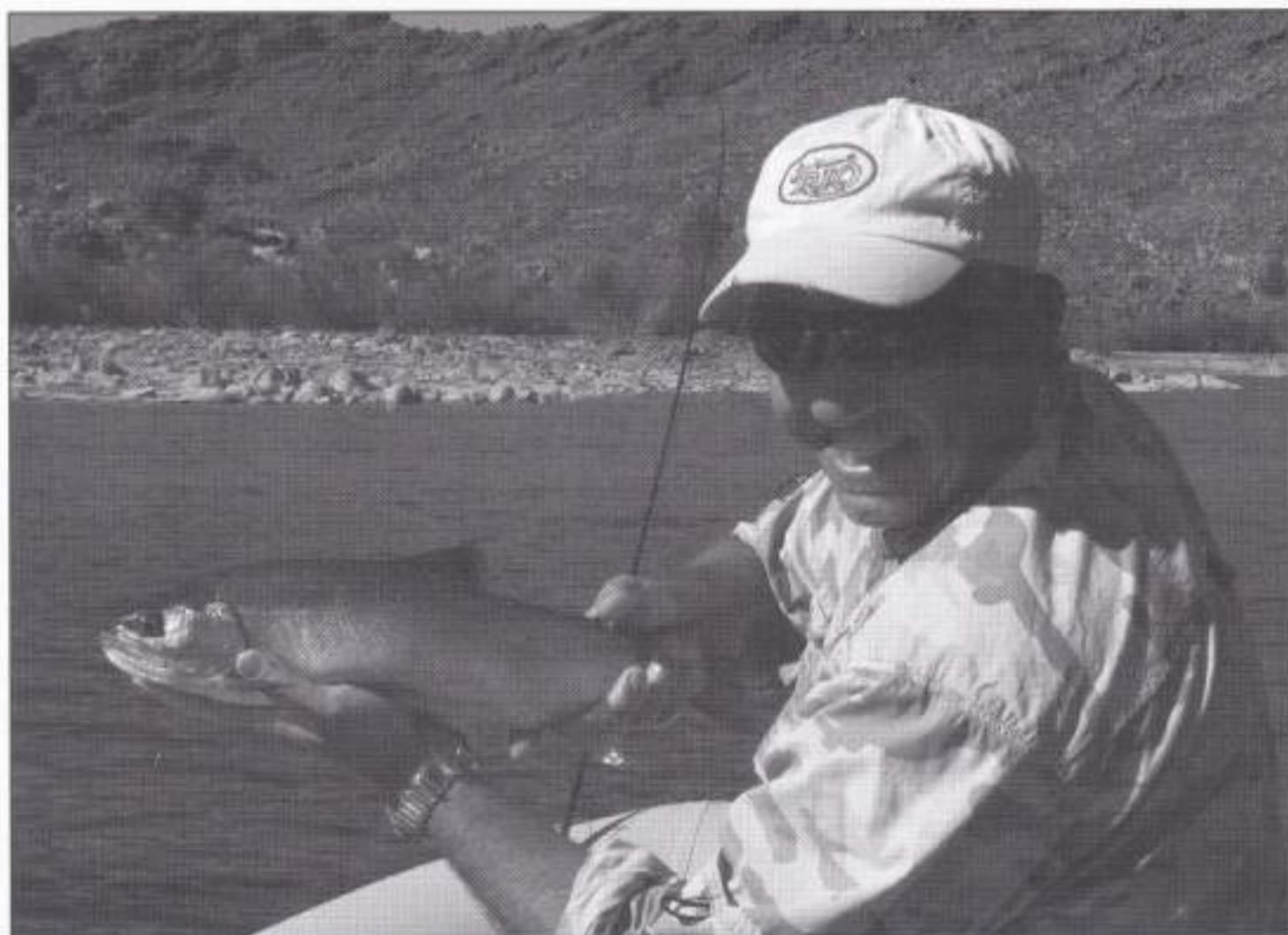
The Vaal/Orange River yellowfish fishery is almost entirely based on the upstream nymph and Czech style techniques brought back from international competition by anglers like Garth Wellman, Armand Flies and MC Coetzer. Before then, and you can check in the local books, yellowfish were considered near uncatchable on fly.

The same holds true of loch style boat fishing. Before the competitive input, most local anglers fished from the bank, got in a float tube or, if they had a boat, anchored it at a likely spot and fished. The concepts of drift boat fishing and an understanding of how the process works was almost unheard of but for a few expats who quietly went about fishing the way that they had learned back on home waters.

However, with the local competitive scene aligning with FIPS Mouche international rules, boat fishing was the way to do things in stillwater competition and, with that, anglers were forced to fish this style in the National Championships. The first attempts were less than effective, boats supplied at these competitions frequently varied tremendously in size, often lacked drogues, and, frequently, even decent oars. Bits of plank nailed together do not make for effective propulsion and I have fished more than one event where the duration of your fishing was determined by how long it took for you to get pinned against the windward bank with no hope of recovery.

South African teams in overseas competition fished with some of the best stillwater anglers in the world. These guys fish loch style in their sleep and have adapted the methods over decades into highly efficient and effective strategies for almost any circumstance. The one advantage of competitive boat fishing is that you are sitting next to someone from another team and you can learn from them. Maybe not fast enough to help you in that particular event but the knowledge base was growing and the South Africans were understanding more and getting better at it.

After the World Championships in France in 2002 I was fortunate enough to get to fish with Iain Barr (the current World Champion) on Grafham water in England and although he beat me to death and at one point I was ten fish to nil down, I was able to learn a lot.



Mike Spinola with a good fish off our new boat.



Liam Surridge with a nice trout caught at Ceres Arch Dam from his drogue-equipped boat.

Over time local anglers started to use the drift boat methods more, firstly simply as practice for events and then adapted to using the style more frequently on a social basis. I am not sure who first started doing this at Lakensvlei, but probably members of the SA and Western Province teams, people such as MC Coetzer, Leonard Burochowitz, myself, Peter van der Westhuizen, Korrie Broos and others.