
BIG TROUT OF THE RIVERS OF THE WESTERN CAPE THE JUNCTION POOL

BY MARK ANDERSON

The old Junction Pool was the most famous pool in the Cape and it may very well still be regarded as such even though it is no more. The pool as it was, was large with the premier feature being the run in of the tributary the Dwars River into the Berg River, and this cool inflow was the reason for the pool harbouring a large number of large Brown trout (up to 40 in the Cab Rank) from the end of November to the end of February or early March. The Dwars inflow, flowing between bushed banks over its last 5 to 6 miles was usually 10°F cooler than the main Berg flow; this cool water being mostly seepage which eventually reached Junction Pool as a small surface flow and the greater

part coming in under the rocky bed. It was where the Dwars flowed in that the Cab Rank of Brown trout was to be found.

On my visit to it in January 1979, I saw the devastation caused by the floods of 1941 which destroyed Junction Pool, when 24 inches of rain fell at Wemmershoek and 7 inches at Simondium in one day. Where the pool was there is now an orchard, the river-bed having shifted 150 yards to the north. The river in this area is open and unexciting and there is no new Junction Pool of any kind. Col. Larmuth of Pickstones, whose best personal Junction Pool fish was 4¼ lbs., showed me around and pointed out the bank where the Dwars used to meet the Berg. But it was utterly high and dry with the small trickle of the Dwars running underneath it.

The pool as it was had Rainbows (which rarely exceeded 1½ lbs.) as well as Browns, Cape Kurpers (*Sandelia Capensis*) (of which the trout were very fond), Rooivlerkies (*Barbus Burchelli*), Galaxias and Witvis (*Barbus Andrewi*) which attained a weight of up to 5 lbs. To get to the pool in those days—the heyday was the 1930's—was quite an undertaking and usually entailed an overnight camp as the best time to fish was just as the sun left the water. The pool was controlled by the Groot Drakenstein Angling Society and as A.C.H. was Secretary of this, he actively fished the pool, his best fish being a 24-inch Brown of 6 lbs.; a cast of which hangs in the Club Rooms. He recalled the Cab Rank shoal as being quite incredible—the majority of fish ranging from 1 to 2 lbs., but the larger ones attaining sizes in excess of 8 lbs. A slight digression is called for here, namely to the middle reaches of the Dwars, where on April Fool's Day, 1932, Donald Swan caught the then South African record river Brown of 27 inches, 8 lbs. 8 ozs., on a medium-sized wet-fly, a cast of which fish is also in the Club Rooms. But A.C.H. regarded this as a Dwars born and bred fish.

The history of large Browns recorded is this: The first record for the Berg I found was of the 21-inch stuffed Rainbow now in the Club Room, caught by F. J. Mayo of the farm Meerlust on the Berg River at Groot Drakenstein on 17th November 1905. This fish possibly came from the first stocking of "5 000 mixed Brown and Rainbow fry" in the Dwars River, Banhoek, on 17th October 1901; or more probably from the 14th October 1902 stocking of Rainbows, as its scale reading was 3+ years. The scales were taken from the stuffed fish, in the Club Room, by A.C.H. and read in about 1969. It is notable that within two weeks of this capture the Groot Drakenstein Angling Association was formed! This association continued until May 1931 (the last entry in their Minute Book).

On 25th January 1919 a large Brown was reported to have been killed by Mr. David Beyers's young son—a fish of 7¾ lbs. The Beyers farm came down to the left bank of Junction Pool so it is likely the beast was captured there. Chris Burgers remembers seeing a 16 lb., 36-inch fish being netted with chicken wire, also by the Beyers children, in 1942. This must have been the next generation of Beyers, or cousins of the aforesaid. Then in the minutes of the G.D.A.A. Annual General Meeting of September 1924, J. C. Hopkins, who was the most persistent and best angler in this area, submitted his catches over the preceding 11 years. These were 837 Rainbows, 183 Browns, including 40 from 3 lbs.—7½ lbs. It can be fairly assumed that as he was a regular Junction Pool man, the majority of the big Browns came from there.

A.C.H. in his diary 17/12/27 records that he was present when Eric Woolley who was fishing from the top stand of palmiet hooked into a large Brown at 7.05 p.m. The tackle consisted of a very light green-heart rod and 3 x cast, so the fish was played very carefully, and it stayed out and deep, swimming in small circles. Eventually it came in and after some half-hearted leaps A.C.H. made ready to net it, and the fish almost escaped as it gave a powerful kick with its tail which caught the net rim. Anyway it was eventually landed at 10.30 p.m. A fight lasting 3 hrs. 25 mins.! The weight, etc., were not recorded.

18th January 1930, A.C.H. went down, after lunch, to the Pool by mule buggy with Hubert Hill who was a manager of Pickstone's Fruit Farm and a relation of A.C.H.'s. He heard from Hill that Tom Micklen had taken a five-pounder earlier that week. Then at 3.45 p.m. A.C.H. hooked a fish on a No. 10 Dwars Invicta fished deep on a 3X cast. This fish gave a powerful fight and A.C.H. had to do quite a lot of running before the fish was landed. The fight lasted 30 minutes and during it the whole Cab Rank took fright when the hooked fish floundered on the surface. Hubert Hill who was standing at the head of the pool on the stand saw this, and saw a very large fish come up alongside the hooked fish. This looked to be half again as large as the hooked fish. Anyway the hooked trout was landed — a 24 inch 6 lb. hen CF44,5.

2nd February 1936, Jack Dendy captured a 6½ lb. 24½ inch hen CF44,5, 5+ years, after A.C.H. and company had left due to the unfavourable conditions. At this time Hopkins's record fish of 7½ lbs. was the target of fishermen. There were visibly larger trout than that swimming in Junction Pool that year, and on 16th March 1930 Jack Dendy got another large Brown hen 24 inch 5½ lb. with a CF of 44.

In Lt. Col. Henry Birch Reynardson's *Early Recollections* one finds a record of "an angler, quite a beginner" — long dead now, so no names — who captured seven fish weighing 42 lbs., the best being a Brown of 8¾ lbs. in 1931. He notes that there were "dark hints of dirty work". The Colonel notes that he never got anything over 3 lbs. in the Junction Pool, but notes that "You could stand there and see within ten yards of you rank on rank of real whoppers — from 2 lbs. to at least 8 lbs.; Brown and Rainbow, and an occasional socking great witvis. And could you — or I — or anyone catch the blighters? No — or very, very rarely".

19th January 1931, John Bertram "angled" the second largest Brown that has been known to have come out of the Junction Pool. When others of the overnight camping group were fishing up and down the river, he decided that although not a fisherman, he would have a try at the Cab Rank. Apparently he fashioned a rod of sorts from a poplar branch with a piece of trout line, and he baited this rudimentary tackle with a large fly and a "taster" which was a spider! This bait was promptly seized by a large Brown which soon went to ground in the boulders below him. So he sat down and waited for one of the party to return. When someone came the fish was dislodged with a few well aimed stones and after a bit of tug-of-war the behemoth was landed and taken up by Col. Larmuth to the farmhouse and put in a bath! The fish weighed 8¼ lbs.

On 29th January 1933 — in a generally bad season — a long and thin Brown of 5 lbs. was taken by Tom Micklen. In November 1936 a resident angler took a 5¾ lb. 21 inch fish CF.42, and on 3rd January 1937 a fairly fresh dead hen fish floated up and was retrieved by A.C.H. — it was a 23 inch 5 lbs. CF.41,5, 4+ years. A.C.H.'s last diary entry was in December 1937 when he had three fish prior to leaving before nightfall as he was expecting that some other anglers were coming. These fish were a 16 inch 1 lb. 10 oz., 17 inch 2 lbs., 20¼ inch 3½ lbs. CF.42. He expected that on the strength of these fish that the evening would herald excellent sport. In January 1938 a 12-year-old angler by the name of Alan Hill caught a 23 inch hen of 5½ lbs. CF.45,5 5+ years.

Junction Pool was not the only pool harbouring large Browns. Swingbridge Pool in the Upper Water of the Berg River, had a record of a "relay" of large fish inhabiting the pool. The most famous of these was Henry VIII, a really huge fish, which legend has it on one of the few occasions it was hooked, by a young pregnant lady, it had little regard for the fair sex and after a short and savage fight, regained its freedom. This experience so unnerved the fair angler that she lost her baby. This pool gave Harry Stodel two remarkable fish caught almost 20 years apart. On the 24th January 1954 he noted two big Browns cruising near the bottom of the pool, and he hooked one of these on an Invicta. This was 23 inch 5 lbs. 5 ozs., CF.44, 5+ years. Then on 9th January 1971 he captured

another by deep wading up the pool, also on an Invicta, this fish being 24 inch 5 lbs. 10 ozs., CF.41,5 and contained a large Kurper. It gave a good fight.

Both Swingbridge and Junction Pools are no more, and a golden era of dramatically large pools and fish has passed into eternity. The Junction Pool concentration of summering fish in a state of semi-hibernation — they very seldom had anything in their stomachs — had either found a new sanctuary or else there are no more. But, have no fear, large fish still summer in the other big pools of the Berg, Dwars and Witte.

Chris Burgers points out that apart from the floods of the early 40's and late 50's, which radically altered the bed of the Berg, there are three other extraneous factors which have altered the river. The first is the incursion of wattle in the 40's. This exotic has spread along our rivers extremely quickly, and its incursion has been aided by fire, as its seeds are not burnt in bushfires. The second is bulldozing. It is shocking to see stretches of the Berg, even in the Franschhoek Valley, which some regard as one of the most beautiful valleys in the world, being turned into a barren canal. Bulldozing of river beds has occurred particularly in the Wemmer, Dwars and Berg systems and is a sore sight to behold. Possibly a better idea would be to creatively "restore" rivers such as these by the planting of indigenous trees on the banks. This would keep the river bed intact and provide security, shade and protection to farmers, trout and people who use these beautiful areas for recreation and living. The last factor is the opening of the Theewaterskloof tunnel. This supplies water from the Sonderend River system and Theewaterkloof Dam into the Berg system, disgorging into the upper forestry area. Some say the water is extremely peaty and acid, and has low fertility, others say it has improved the trout fishing. The argument is a moot one, and is still to be finalised.

With respect to Junction Pool, it is no more. But rivers have their ways and only concrete can extinguish their ability to regenerate. Thus in the next decades or generations a new Junction Pool may be scoured out and add lustre to the Cape fishing scene as the centre-piece and bench-mark of our wonderful trout river pools.

Mary Honoré, in her article *Reflections on the Junction Pool* in PISCATOR No. 33 said about the trout there: "Always they faced up the Dwars, but any sudden movement would send them at once downstream into the Berg, and after a few minutes they would come back one by one and take up their previous positions.

Some of these fish had spots on them the size of two-shilling pieces, and their tails were eight to ten inches across." She also said that the only big fish she actually saw landed there was a five-pounder taken by a Mr. A. E. Manley of Klawer, on a dry Blue-Winged Olive.

(The late Mr. Donald Swan's 8½-pounder taken from the Junction Pool had a natural tail spread of seven inches; which when taken could no doubt have been extended to 10 inches.

There is a plaster cast of this fish in the Club Room. Hon. Ed.)