

Finally, I hear some stirring down at the boatyards. The covers are coming off and the sounds of Skil saws and sanders are music to our ears. You can't knock this winter for weather and speed of passage. It feels like the boats were just getting winterized and it's already time to start getting wet all over again. Sort of like the circle of life on the waterfront. Open the boat, fish the boat, and cover the boat...over and over again.

And, another flounder season is upon us in the endless cycle of seasons and migrations. A funny thing about fish and fishermen, every year anglers will run countless gallons of fuel through their cylinders, chasing some goal like a mako or a marlin, but they pass up on the cheap challenge of flounder fishing. Flounder have become so scarce in our parts that some will run all the way to Jersey or opt to skip the season totally. I have a different idea. Think of flounder as a game fish and challenge yourself to find them. Sounds a bit "out there," but give it some consideration. What does it take to leave the dock and actually return with some winter flatfish from your local waters? I'm saying, plan a trip, gather some die-hard friends, study the bay charts, currents, tides, moon phases and actually go out and test yourself against a fish that is in limited quantities right in your own backyard. See if you have what it takes to pattern what few fish are there and score. This is going to take some work and preparation. The spots that produced 30 years ago are not yielding the catches of old. Sure, the Sore Thumb and a few other spots are best bets, but see if you can find your own pods of flatties. The rewards in fillets will still be light, but the personal satisfaction is priceless. And if you don't have a boat or it's not ready, try one of the boat liveries like Ted's, Scotty's, Smitty's, Silly Lily or Uihlein's.

When I still had my boat, every spring I would set my challenges for the season. My personal task every year was to research LORAN-C numbers and go find the pieces. Some days it was a bust and I'd run search grids for hours without any joy. Other times I'd run right over a new piece. Half the time I didn't have a rod or bait in the boat; it was just a self-serving, ego-building wreck hunt.

My challenge this year is to build a boat, not full-sized, but to scale. I picked a photo of an Alton Wallace West Pointer and laid plans to

build one to a 19-foot scale model. Not some slap together job, but actual framing and planking. The keel was laid in January, and piece by piece I started the framing, fairing and fitting of the ribs in February. Tough, detail work with only an Xacto knife set and balsa, with no plans, all by eye and measurement. Hey, if the Price Brothers could build 50-footers by eye, I can manage a 19-inch. If it comes out decently, I'll post the finished pictures. If not, it goes in the fire and I'll start over.

Assuming that you have already stocked up on tackle over the winter and that you took advantage of the mild winter and prepped your boat in March, it's time to get some early season fishing in.

First off, in April you can count on the fact that the local municipalities haven't laid the summer buoys. Also, expect that channels have shifted and the drains that you followed across the flats have silted in. Early spring is the time for no-thrills running. Stick to the main channels, run half speed and watch the machine. You don't want to make your first run of the season into a pile of mud, sand or bog. This is also a good time to give the boat a good shake-down. A shake-down run will only give you the satisfaction that the boat started and ran well and that all of the gauges and idiot lights were reporting back "in-tolerance" operations. A shake-down fishing trip will tell you whether

repeated stops and starts, bilge pump use, lights, winch and electronics have any bugs that did not show up in that first 15-minute cruise of the year. That said, your first trip needs to be kept close to home and flounder are the ticket. See how things work out. I have known of quite a few boaters who got wet late and used the shark tournaments as their shake-down, only to get offshore and have something go south on them. Be smart; stay local for a few trips.

Here are your options for fishing.

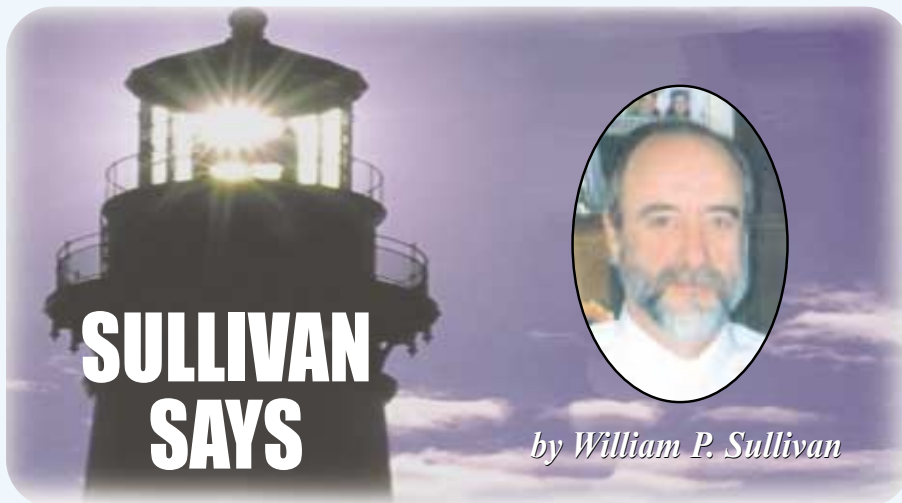
As I said, stay local for flounder. Watch the water temps, tides and moon, and you should be able to outsmart a few. Best bets for bait...sandworms and mussels early. Clams will work better later as the water warms some. On the ebb tide, the warm water is running off the edges into the channels, so expect to fish the deeper sides of those edges. On the flood on a sunny day, the fish will move up onto the flats and take advantage of the few degree increase that the sun gives. You are going to have to find them and move with them, no easy task. Hooks can be Mustad Sproats, Carlisles, Aberdeens and the like in freshwater sizes like #4 or #6. Short-shank Chestertowns with a corn bead are the mainstay. In any event, some kind of bead or grub in yellow, pink or glow will improve your chances, so will yellow sinkers; you can dip your own. Rigs should be experimented with. The normal Sea Bright tandem tied an inch above the sinker works 99% of the time. I have seen days where fishfinder rigs were the better choice. Rapid bouncing to stir the mud is normal, but dead-sticking has its days too. The answer is having your crew rig differently and

fish differently until you figure the fish out.

Chumming is a must with crushed mussel and/or ground clam. Stirring the bottom is also not to be overlooked. Clam rakes, sash weights, plungers, you name it, flounder fishermen have used it. Pound the bottom around the boat, repeated often, and set the chum pot up-tide.

I have seen days where the fish were active only when the pounding was going on. If you anchor bow and stern, cross-tide, you may have to fish up-tide, under the boat. Don't ask me why, but I've seen days where up-tide fished better than down-tide. In essence, don't get stuck in a rut. Experiment.

Stripers are not ready yet; give them until late May. Fluke may open early, but they will be so skinny you can see through them. Give them another month.



7 year old James with a Captain Mike flounder April 2005.



Tautogo captain Mik Lotiti with a Sea Otter V Montauk codfish



White hake, Ling's big cousin on the Marlin VI

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