

Fishing Memories 2

by Kenneth Kross

"Dare's a shark down dare!" Nils said as he jumped back into the boat. We were on the *Sea Belle* heading out Fire Island Inlet on that hot summer day. Just a couple of miles offshore, on our way to 100 feet of water, the boat came to an abrupt stop. Dad knew we'd hit something submerged, fouling the prop. *Sea Belle* was a single screw 28-foot wooden Luhrs. We had to try clearing the prop. Nils was Dad's Norwegian friend who had no problem diving in with his knife to try fixing the problem. Fortunately, it was a calm day and the water was in the 70's. I was also tempted to jump in but Dad thought otherwise. Nils was in the water for a few minutes, diving several times under the boat. After the third dive he seemed to climb the ladder back into the boat quicker than he dove in! With his thick accent he described what sounded like a rather large mako shark waiting for him on the dive. "He was lookin' right at me... He must have been vatching me all de time! I tugged at de rope on de prop and got out of dare!" He was scared... I could see it on his face. He was so happy to be back on the boat. Dad hit the starter... "Yes", the motor started. He put it in gear and we heard "thump, thump, thump". Nils didn't get all of the rope. But all of a sudden, the thumping stopped. Great, the prop shook off the rest of it.

How ironic this was. We're going shark fishing! Now that the boat's running well, time to go back to catch that mako. We turned around and headed back to the area. Dad grabs the 6.0 and puts a mackerel on the big hook. As he puts that one in the water, Nils puts another in. They seemed to be frenzied as they scramble for the other rods. Now with four lines in the water, Dad opens a big metal can of chum. I almost vomited with the unavoidable wretched stench. Why do they need that God awful stuff? How could anything alive have been like that? Maybe it's used to shock or paralyze the fish! Yeah, that's it. This chum will make the shark come up for air! I was wrong of course. "Now Kenny, your job is to be the chummer," Dad said. No way am I going to deal with that stuff. But I couldn't let him down. I took the ladle and began the most horrible job of my 13 years! As much as I hated it, I made sure the chum line continued.

"Vere's dat mako?" Nils asked. We were there for more than an hour and still no shark. Dad was convinced he was long gone. "Nils scared him away!" he said. We had a good laugh. "Let's pull up the lines and go deeper". With all lines up we were again on our way. There were a lot of shark caught over the last several weeks southeast of the inlet at 100 feet. As land continued to disappear behind us, I wondered when we'd be stopping. Still a calm day with little wind, Dad says it's a perfect day to catch shark. The boat stops and the routine begins again. The lines are cast. I'm the chummer again? I argued that we should rotate the chore but to no avail. I'm it! OK... this time I'm using gloves. Dad says, "time for lunch". How am I, the chummer, going to eat anything with this stench lingering in the cockpit? "No thanks, maybe later Dad". As Nils and Dad eat their lunch, I relax in the open air cockpit trying to breath untarnished AIR! The sun is hot, the air and seas are calm. I went into a daze looking at the ocean, daydreaming. What were all my friends doing today? They were probably at the beach...watching all the pretty girls walking by. My daydreaming and dazing deepens as I watch a large hammerhead shark swim within 10 feet of the boat. I watch him lazily pass by and don't even flinch.

After he's gone I realize what just happened and begin shouting "hammerhead, a big hammerhead!". They come out of the cabin questioning me. I explained what I saw and they smiled and laughed. "Told you they're here" Dad chuckled. "Let's get serious... Kenny more chum!" Ugh! I started ladling the broth into the sea. Compared to the quick action of blue or tuna fishing, I found this slow and somewhat boring...but also relaxing.



It was about 1:00 p.m., and there's a tug on one of the rods. The rod bends and line starts unreeling, not like tuna or blues, but slow and steady. Dad takes the rod, tightens the drag and begins reeling in the fish. He's muttering "it's a blue, it's a blue". I thought we were shark fishing. "It's a blue shark" he clarifies. He continues to pull in the fish. It takes about ten minutes and we see the shadow of a shark next to the boat. Looks like a 6-footer. Nils, with the gaff in his hand, pushes me aside and bends over the side. I can see some struggling and splashing and a minute later there's a shark on the deck. It's thrashing on the deck now. Dad takes a bat and whacks it on the head a couple of times. Its lifeless body lying there, I can appreciate the beautiful lines of this successful ocean predator. I think it was that day that encouraged me to take marine biology courses when I was older. With a smile and a nod of accomplishment, Dad and Nils put fresh bait on the hook and the waiting game continued along with the chumming.

There were two more catches of blue sharks around the same size over the next few hours. They let me reel one in some of the way. It felt like a heavy barbell tugging on the line. Nils was discussing the ways of marinating the fish and how to grill the steaks for the best flavor when one of the rods bent at almost a 90 degree angle! I never saw two guys jump up so fast. Nils pulled the rod from the holder and almost went overboard. Dad grabbed him around the waist to keep him in the boat! This was a big fish. Was it the mako? I don't think so. He couldn't have swum all those miles, could he? Nils settled into the fighting chair and began the battle. "Yah, vee got him now" Nils bragged, thinking he caught the same mako that eyed him up for breakfast a few hours earlier. With the drag tightened as much as needed to fight the fish but not break the line, Nils continued to struggle with the shark. The fish appeared to be pulling the boat, but that didn't seem possible. Twenty minutes into the

fight, I couldn't believe my eyes. The shark jumped out of the water about 100 yards behind the boat! Our eyes and mouths all wide open, Dad confirms "It's a mako!" It seemed so appropriate, the hunter now the hunted. The consensus was the Mako was a 10-footer. The fish jumped a couple of more times before going under. Nils was sweating and obviously exhausted. "Pull up the other lines, Ken" commanded Dad. He poured some water on Nils to cool him down and had me give him some Coke through a straw. If he was exhausted, was the fish also getting tired? I wondered who would outlast the other. The wind was now blowing from the south and the waves were starting to rock the boat. Dad and I felt somewhat helpless. It was all about Nils and the shark. "Dis fish don't vant me now or he come to me" said Nils. Ninety minutes into the fight and the shark is getting near. He's fighting for his life and now at the surface trying to shake the hook from his jaw. I noticed several boats in the area all watching *Sea Belle*. They see the epic battle and I can tell they're rooting for Nils. I'm excited, but scared. The shark is close enough that I can see his mouth...full of sharp teeth. What's going to happen when we pull him in? Will Nils have enough energy to help Dad control him? Will I be expected to pitch in? Is the boat big enough?

The shark is now 10 feet from the boat and Dad puts on the heavy gloves, gets the gaff and tells me to get in the cabin. He'd seen what large sharks can do and heard stories of horrific shark events. He wanted me out of the way. I went into the cabin for a minute, but when he turned around, I stepped out to watch the action. I wouldn't miss it for the world. I ran up the flybridge to get the best view. The shark was huge! The mouth looked big enough to swallow me whole. Dad got the bat, boat hook and a long rope with a large loop at the end. The idea was to get the shark to the boat, gaff him, get a rope around the tail and drag him from the stern to drown him. Seeing me on the bridge now he shouted to start the motor and stay in neutral. Nils got the shark closer now and Dad grabbed the leader. Nils dropped the pole and ran to the stern with the hook and rope. There was all kinds of splashes back there. Dad and Nils were shouting out trying to coordinate the effort. I heard the guys from the other boat yelling and whistling with encouragement. Just then Dad swatted the gaff at the fish and as quick as it hit the target, the fish swung its tail around. The tail hit the gaff and with a huge splash the shark was free! He snapped the leader! How could this be? I was in shock! "Dad, what happened?" He replied "That's fishing, son!". The mako seemed to look back at us as if to say "I won!". Nils fell to his knees and Dad put his hand on his shoulder. No words were spoken. The other boats began blowing their horns and I heard a few on the radio saying "sorry *Sea Belle*". Dad reeled in the remaining line and saw there was a kink in the leader that broke. As the mako made his jumps he must have created the kink.

At 4:00 p.m., the battle was over and we were all tired. Time to go home. We headed home with a few blue sharks that Nils said can be tasty when prepared and cooked properly. We discussed the day's events and how a different kind of leader may have yielded different results. But Nils was convinced that shark was after him and wanted to show him whose ocean this really was. "I will be back again to catch him."

Nils went fishing with Dad many more times over the years, but never did catch another mako... They often spoke of the "one that got away"!