

GOFISHING GREAT NEW SECTION

ALL NEW

DELICATELY a small dibber pole float inched among the far-bank brambles of a Midlands canal, the tip settling down to a tiny orange speck that sat precariously close to an infestation of scraggy, trailing branches. Simon Fry had entered the lion's den.

Deep in the snags, something stirred. A small pack of wise old chub patrolled the border, occasionally dodging the wash of a passing narrowboat and picking off the odd insect that had drifted too close.

Two sizeable perch held court as officers, still sporting the scars of previous clashes amid the armoury of tiger-like stripes. And right in the centre of the lair, a giant carp sat lurking next to a sunken tree trunk of a throne, waiting to give the word for the moment when its mini-army would strike. The field was well and truly set for battle.

In the blue corner, aptly kitted out in a bright robe of Garbolino clothing, Simon sat poised and ready to strike. He had taken up position directly in front of a line of fishy-looking features on a stretch of his local Stratford Canal in the charismatic town of Stratford-upon-Avon, the home to William Shakespeare, the greatest poet and playwright in English history.

Simon is definitely among the elite of the country's top match anglers, winning the Angling Times Team Championship with Kamasan Starlets and regularly featuring in the top 10 in White Acres festivals. A more pleasant man in angling you will be hard pressed to meet, but today the gloves were off – this was no place for Mr Nice Guy. Simon was hoping to hook the population of big fish which inhabit this tasty stretch of day-ticket waterway, fishable in the closed season. And once he hooked one, he didn't intend losing it. He'd tackled up with extra-heavy pole gear that was sure to be tested to the limit.

USE THE CORRECT GEAR

"You have to fish tight across and in the cover to get a bite, and when that happens, all hell breaks loose. It's like trying to extract a conger eel from a World War II wreck 150ft below you. You give these crafty canal fish an inch and they'll take a mile. If you don't use the correct gear you can forget it – you'll lose every single one," revealed Simon.

Over the past decade, the fish populations of the canals in the UK have changed dramatically, to the point where the current big-fish cult dominates many venues. Cormorants, pollution and illegal fishing have all taken their toll on the vast numbers of roach, gudgeon, rudd and bleak, and on some venues putting a good net of silverfish together is high on impossible.

The Stratford Canal is one such venue, although its reputation as a fishery is a somewhat unknown quantity. With its roots in the bustling suburbs of Birmingham, it runs for just 25 miles, negotiating 54 locks and emptying out into the basin of the River Avon in Stratford town centre. It doesn't hold

matches and it isn't even permanently pegged, but this doesn't mean it isn't prolific.

"I've been told that the odd rogue carp to 18lb has been taken from this area of the canal, which is mostly noted for its chub. These run up to 5lb, in addition to decent bream and perch. The fishing is pretty much big fish or bust, with very few silverfish, and to prove it I'm going to feed a swim in the main boat channel and on the shelf away from the snags. Realistically, though, I only expect to catch over the feed I'll put in tight across to the brambles," said Simon.

Like any good angler, Simon spent time plumbing the peg and discovered just 12ins of water tight across. Such a lack of depth would undoubtedly put many off fishing this far over the canal, but the Starlets rod is adamant that the presence of brambles is of far more importance. The fish live right under them, and Simon was about to prove it!

The meticulous task of chopping up dendrobaena worms into an unpleasant soup was next on the agenda, to which a good helping of casters was added – a main course for a big canal fish if ever there was one. Simon filled up his big pole cup and potted the mixture into his two far-bank swims, one at 10 o'clock and another at 2 o'clock, either side of a large trailing bush. He then let this settle while trying swims in the deeper water, but, as expected, the float sat lifelessly in protest, refusing to show any signs of the presence of silver fish.

JUNGLE WARFARE

Forty-five minutes of inactivity was enough for Simon. It was time to begin jungle warfare. One fat lobworm wriggled far more irritably than its neighbours in the bait box – an unwise move that led to a thumb and forefinger grabbing it and pushing it on to a beefy size 14 hook. The rig was swung out, the flagship Garbolino

Gro pole put together and shipped purposely further and further over the canal. As the final battle guns were wheeled into place, passing spectators – an elderly lady, a labrador, a swan and a mallard – seemed to stop in anticipation of witnessing an epic clash of the titans. They didn't have to wait long.

Opting for the right-hand flank as an opening strategy of attack, Simon pushed his zoo creature rig into a tiny gap between a mass of brambles and held it there in a swirling wind, a manoeuvre that requires a lot of skill, even to the seasoned pole angler.

No sooner had the worm hit the bottom than the float registered the merest dip. Had his eyes not been focused like a hawk's he would have been none the wiser, but Simon had played this game before. In a split-second flash he threw the pole backwards, quickly pushing it to one side to avoid an expensive carbon collision with a concrete wall. As thick

orange elastic streaked from the pole-tip, battle was well and truly engaged.

Something on the other end made a bid for freedom in the confines of the bush, but the sheer speed at which the angler operated meant this encounter was over quickly. Quicker than 15 seconds, to be precise.

OPENING EIGHT SECONDS

It's the opening eight seconds of conflict that are the most important, according to Simon, because as soon as a fish has been pulled away from its snag-infested sanctuary, there's no going back. The trademark wide white mouth of a 2lb chub was soon gaping out of the surface and getting a tour of its conqueror's landing net. One-nil to Simon.

"A standard strike upwards with the pole is pretty pointless in a swim like this. You're giving the fish a chance to make the safety of the branches just inches away, and more often than not they do.

The best ploy is the element of surprise – pull the pole straight back, getting as much of it behind you as quickly as you can," advised Simon.

What happened in the next 20 minutes had to be seen to be believed. Simon went straight back out to the same spot and, once again, the float cocked and instantly buried. A repeat performance saw another chub join his friend in the keepnet, and Simon cheekily offered odds of getting a third on the trot – but the float didn't move at all.

"The best regime is to feed for one fish at a time, so I'm going to put another pot of chopped worm and caster in and try my other swim," said Simon.

His left-hand line required the pole to be pushed into a 'rat hole' between two offending branches. This time the bristle settled before being dragged purposely several inches to the right, heading bang into the centre of the lion's den. Simon reacted by throwing the pole to the left

and another short tussle brought a third chub to the net, then a fourth, in a hectic 10-minute spell.

Resting this part of the far bank, Simon switched back to his original right-hand swim, again expecting an instant response. But an eerie quiet descended on the battlefield, the calm before the great storm. Then, without warning, Simon's float flew under at speed. This was no shy chub bite.

HEFTY CUSTOMER

Mounting his usual defence, he managed to ship back quickly, but this hefty customer had other ideas. It veered left, ripping yards of elastic aggressively out of the pole before boiling smack bang in the centre of the bush.

"If this is a chub it's very big one, but I think I'm into a carp," said Simon, as he grimaced trying to gain the upper hand. For a few seconds, a gridlock ensued and the outcome was hanging in the

balance. But remarkably, Simon's gear was holding its own, and with one last heave, the elastic gradually retracted and the fish was in open water. A delighted angler scooped up a 6lb fully-scaled mirror carp, a beautiful specimen that may never have been caught before.

After this manic period, Simon managed a couple more chub at intervals, but his day was pretty much over by noon.

"The fish here tend to swim in small groups on the far bank, so you have to take full advantage when they turn up. I probably won't get another bite now, but six chub and a carp is a good catch on any canal. It's exciting stuff – just tackle up sensibly with at least 6lb line (0.18mm), a heavy 18-20 hollow elastic and a strong hook!" said Simon.

In the end the human triumphed 7-0 over the aquatic inhabitants of the Stratford Canal. But on another day things could be very different. The fish are out for revenge...

ENTER THE LION'S DEN! ...OF THE STRATFORD CANAL

The fishing is pretty much big fish or bust, as reporter Ben Fisk meets up with match ace **Simon Fry**...



FROM open water this chub would have been a doddle to land – but Simon's 'eight-second rule' means the battle must be won early or not at all.



THE snaggy far-bank 'rat hole', the more likely it is to hold fish.



PREMIER LEAGUE Simon's six chub and a 6lb carp made it 7-0 in his favour.

FACTFILE – STRATFORD CANAL

The Stratford Canal was saved from dereliction by the efforts of waterway pioneers and runs from Birmingham's suburbia to Shakespeare's Stratford for 25 miles.

The canal is usually considered as having a northern and a southern section. The northern section runs from Kings Norton to Kingswood Junction, and the especially attractive southern half continues until it meets the River Avon at Stratford.

Directions: From either direction, take the A46 to Stratford-upon-Avon. At the roundabout with the A3400, take the turn signposted Bishopton and Industrial Estate. Turn right at the roundabout and cross the canal bridge. There is space for two cars immediately after on the right-hand side. Walk back over the bridge and turn right, heading back towards Stratford town centre.

Day Tickets: £2 from Stuart's Angling Centre: 01789 293950