

Chapter 3

Gar

By Ty Goodwin

One of my earliest childhood memories is a pathetic affair involving a local bass tournament and a dead gar. At least it was dead after we got through with it. The small longnose, maybe a few feet in length and gills still flaring, was stretched out under a big plastic banner announcing the name of the tournament as well as a handful of sponsors. My guess is that it was probably by-catch for one of the competitors, who tossed it under the banner in a weak attempt at humor. Or

maybe he was just a dick. Either way the dying fish was an easy and attractive mark for a pack of young boys set loose by their fathers, who were no doubt glad to be rid of us so they could watch the weigh-in in relative peace.

My friends and I free to roam the venue as we pleased, discovered the gar in short order and gave it our undying attention. To make matters worse, at least for the gar, a large pile of rocks lay nearby, residue from a recent paving of an adjacent parking lot.

That poor fish never had a chance. We pelted it into oblivion to the approval and chuckles of the passersby. I can still hear the sickening thunk every time rock met flesh and, writing this now some 40-odd years later, I'm still embarrassed by my actions that day. I'm tempted to cut myself a little slack since I was just a dumb kid at the time, maybe five or six years old. Bullshit. I knew better even then. I participated in torturing a living animal to death. It's entirely possible that I'm sharing this as some sort cathartic confession to make me feel a little better about the whole thing, but I think this episode from my early years also aptly illustrates the general opinion of anglers toward gar - mainly that they are "trash fish."

Now, as an older and—I hope—more enlightened angler, I can honestly say that I don't get it. Trash fish? Gar are



aggressive predators that readily chase down a fly or lure and destroy it with often astonishing viciousness. They then typically follow that up immediately with a protracted battle complete with tail-walks and all sorts of aerial acrobatics. A gar isn't scared when it finds itself on the business end of a 2 aught. It's pissed. The outcome of the fight is often in doubt right up to the moment you slip the net under the fish. If it's a small one, that is. If it's one of the four- or five-foot monsters, you can pretty much forget the net.

A big gar is subdued with a thick pair of gloves and a strong back, the standard modus operandi being to lift it into the boat using a long sling or cradle made for big fish. Barring that, the next option is to simply grab it by the snout and lift it into the boat. And good luck with that. These fish, essentially thick tubes of solid muscle loaded with a thousand needle-sharp daggers at one end, do not take this sort of handling lightly. Sling or no sling, lifting 50 plus inches of angry gar into your boat is a sketchy business indeed and a hell of a lot more memorable than slipping a net under an 18-inch trout. I can testify. Trash fish? Not in my book.