

[Wow. Wow. Wow....](#) I hooked it, and it seemed to be pretty good-sized. Both Francisco and my dad instantly start telling me what to do: “hold the rod up high...pull, but not too much...let out the line”.

As they both were frantically telling me directions, the fish turned our boat around and headed for the bridge that divides the river and the lake. We saw "El Gigante" leap out of the water somewhere around the bridge. I said, “There’s that big fish again, he’s been jumping around a lot for the past hour.”

Dad said, “That can’t be the fish Sam has on his line.” And I replied, “Yeah, it can’t be. I hope it’s not.” But then I started to wonder, what if it is? As the boat and my fish were coming closer to one another, the three-foot beast suddenly leaped out of the water only a couple meters from our boat. Everybody started screaming and laughing in utter surprise and disbelief.

Earlier that day I had caught nothing. In the morning I had a couple bites, but I couldn’t hook into anything. It was frustrating. Dad, on the other hand, was doing pretty well with two good-sized fish.

I was getting impatient. I was relieved when lunch came around, so I could lay down and take a nap. I didn’t want to leave the shore again; I just wanted to sleep for the rest of the day because I thought I wouldn’t catch anything. For some reason my mind began to change after the nap, and I really wanted to catch a fish - even if it would take until dark. I couldn’t go back to the cabin to tell Jose that I didn’t catch anything.

After lunch we took up our rods again, and for several hours everyone in the boat came up empty-handed. We motored back to the mouth of the river and spotted a foam line, so we decided to try our luck in that area.

After a couple minutes, I saw this 3-foot salmon explode out of the water (by far the biggest freshwater creature I had ever laid eyes on). Seeing him gave me hope that I could at least hook something before we left the lake. Did I think I would catch the monster salmon? No way. Not a chance in hell. But I wasn’t going to leave until I at least got something.

Besides dad landing another beautiful rainbow, we were mostly dry. Every once in a while the monster would jump out of the water, as if to tease us. After a half hour or so, everything seemed to slow down. Dad and I weren’t even getting any hits. We began joking about the whereabouts of the fish: “It must be dinnertime for them...maybe they’re watching TV.” And one cast later, BOOM.

The salmon shot out from the boat taking all the line with him. As the fish continued to pull into my backing, we realized that we had our work cut out for us. “Two hours to catch this one if you are lucky,” Francisco predicted.

For about an hour, the fish and I went back and forth like a chess match. I pulled, he pulled. Sometimes I would pull in just a little bit, very slowly, and then zingggg, he would take out the line and rocket away like a motorboat. The friction of the line burned my hands, and the reel handle knocks against me like a rock. [See the pictures.](#)

We followed the fish about 50 yards and were closing in on the bridge. All this time I was frantically asking for advice from Francisco and Dad, and they gave me as much help as possible without physically taking the rod from me. Suddenly, I realized that my line is tangled up in the reel, and I screamed at Dad, "Help!" as if he could wave his hand in the air and make the knot magically disappear. He replied simply "Figure it out!" which is probably what I should have done. Luckily Francisco came to the front of the boat and started untangling it, while dad leapt into Francisco's chair to keep us rowing towards the fish so it didn't break the line. Francisco took care of the knot, so I could get back to fighting the fish.

Every time the giant stopped running and I began pulling him while thinking "This time I'll get him!" only to see him once again take off. At one point while I was slowly reeling him in, Francisco remarked, "When he makes a run, he uses up energy and becomes tired, so he goes out less and less distance on each run until he is totally exhausted." Hearing our expert guide say this gave me the hope that at last I could catch the salmon, and my confidence swelled. But as if to contradict Francisco, the fish stubbornly sped off from our boat, and the reel made a high-pitched squeal as the line disappeared into the water, and once again the fish took me into the backing. The salmon still doesn't stop. Francisco turned to my father and said, "It is too big. It's not possible." Dad started to get worried at this point as well: "How much backing do you have left, Sam?" I saw that there wasn't much left, but I wanted to believe that there was more than enough. Dad remarked, "Well it's a good thing that you have a seven-weight rod, because if you had brought that five-weight today, it would have been impossible." Then Francisco turned around to look at my Dad and says, "...it is a five-weight rod." My dad thought he was joking.

Even though Francisco and Dad's remarks lead me to have some doubts as well, I was willing to spend the last two days and nights of our fishing trip with this damn salmon. I even asked my dad, "How long can he go without food?" I am planning on starving it. No matter what I am never going to give up, I just kept fighting because that's what fishing is all about. Back and forth the battle between man and fish continued. [See the pictures.](#)

Afterwards, Dad told me how he never thought I would catch it. He was thinking, "Something was going to go wrong." And several things did go wrong. The reel fell off at one point, and I was holding the reel in my right hand and the rod in my left. Again Francisco came to the rescue, putting them back together as I held the rod up. Another time, the knot connection between the regular fly line and the backing line got stuck on one of the guides. If the salmon decided to go on another run, I would be screwed. Francisco instructed me to reel the line in a little and then let it out again, and luckily the knot passed through the ring and the line was free again.

After the giant went on his run, we were getting worried that he might get into the current and then into the river, but I still wanted to believe that we could chase it, even if we had to go into the river all the way to the ocean. As the fight continued, Francisco got the novel idea of pulling into the shallows where the giant would run out of oxygen and be easier to catch. In the shallows, big fish give up.

Francisco slowly moved us towards the bank, and the fish and boat end up switching sides - boat on the riverside and fish on the lakeside. As we got into the shallows, the giant starts heading back towards the initial drop-off spot and my line was actually going over land. At this point Francisco suddenly yelled, "Jump off! Get into the water!" I nearly capsized us and everyone almost fell out, but somehow I kept my balance and got safely into the water.

Now El Gigante began to finally get tired. He came in so close now that I could see the yellow-colored line change to brown, which meant that he was very close. The only other time I had seen the brown line was the first time that I was pulling him in, when neither fish nor fisherman knew the fight that was ahead of them. When I saw that brown line for the second time, I knew I had him.

Francisco and I waded out to the bank, and that's when the monster surfaced for good. His dorsal fin stuck out of the water, and his giant fin was flopping over to the side like a cowlick. We all start hollering and laughing exactly as we did the first moment we that I had hooked the giant salmon. Francisco went up to him with the net because the giant was hardly moving now in the shallow water. I still had my rod high and ready in case the giant makes a last-ditch attempt to escape. Francisco could only fit the head of this fish into the net, and the rest of the enormous body awkwardly flops around in the water. My dad, the avid photographer, was scrambling to document this epic creature. We finally got a really good look at him. He had a fat body, and about a foot's length from dorsal to ventral, three feet from mouth to tail, around 35 pounds. His mouth was black and white-pinkish, like the inside of a dog's mouth.

Finally, I tried to pick it up myself, but it was too big. I could only manage to grab the front half of the salmon. I tried to pick it up in the middle, but its monstrous body slid out of my hands into the water. As usual, Francisco knew what to do; he grabbed the tail and I picked up the front with both hands, while dad took several pictures. Then we set it down, and Francisco let me release the beast. [See the pictures.](#)

It's hard for me to comprehend the unlikelihood of this catch, because I had only been truly fly-fishing for five days. I learned the single-haul cast on my second day, and the double-haul on my third day. I was still acquainting myself with all the terms "five-weight", "1x line", "tippet", "running" and I had relatively no experience. When I was fighting that fish I had no idea how improbable it was that I would actually be able to catch it, hold it in my hands. In my mind, it was inevitable that I would catch it. Inevitable. Ironically, my ignorant confidence was perhaps partly why we were able to catch it.

We started reminiscing, laughing at the improbability of the entire ordeal. I used a 5/6-weight rod, with 1x tippet, to catch a 35-pound salmon. Francisco thinks that might be an unofficial world record. Unfortunately, there is no way to prove the weight of the fish, so we probably won't get into the record books. All that really matters now is that now three men now have the fish story of a lifetime.

By Sam Mitchel