

## Sharks defeat fishermen at Wasque Point, 3-2

*Friday night on Chappy the shark action remained hot, and more often than not, the sharks won.*

By **Barry Stringfellow** - August 9, 2017

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*Coop does the heavy lifting before tagging and releasing a 65 pound brown shark. — Barry Stringfellow*

Wasque was packed with fishermen last Friday, and many of them were after big game. It's pretty easy to tell when surf fishermen are on a surf shark safari. They're the ones with the big, thick rods, heaving out half of a pot roast-size piece of mackerel on a hook.

The conditions were as benign as they get at Wasque Point. The light breeze was pleasantly cool, the ocean breathed in gentle swells. It was dusk, and the moon was just beginning to rise in a mother-of-pearl-colored sky.

I had the good fortune that night of fishing with Cooper "Coop" Gilkes. As we neared Wasque Point, we passed a fisherman who had already hooked up with a shark, his rod convulsing with the energy of an angry beast. His daughters cheered him on, but he could only watch the line run off his spool.

Minutes later, as Coop was setting a circle hook in a dinner-size piece of frozen mackerel, a snap came from down the beach.

Sharks 1, Fishermen 0.

"Second time tonight," the man from Connecticut told me.

Coop cast the chunk of bait about 30 yards into the rising tide, leaving the bail open, pinched the line in his fingers, like you would when striper fishing with an eel.

"It's not an easy game," he said. "It's one thing to hook up, but you just don't reel these things in."

Coop's reel was loaded with 600 yards of 50-pound test line. As daylight faded, the only bites he got were from small bluefish, chipping away at the thawing bait.

He hooked up a new bait, this time the front half of a mackerel, the circle hook entering under the chin and coming out of the nasal capsule.

"I wonder where my girls are," he said, surveying the beach.

Down the beach toward Norton Point, fisherman Rich Woolfson, also from Connecticut, hooked up with a shark. After a brief tussle, he realized the futility of trying to reel it in, and watched the line race off his spool.

Ten minutes later, a "snap" came from his direction.

Sharks 2, fishermen 0.

"We're done," he said, as he packed it in. "I need to get 80-pound test."

Coop was all smiles when "his girls" showed up. Evelyn Medeiros, Elizabeth O'Brien, and sister Katherine O'Brien, Islanders and MVRHS students, pulled up with McCole Oliveira, preparing for battle, carbo-loading on pizza.

"I've known all of these girls since they were this high," Coop said, reaching for his knees.

Elizabeth said she's known Coop since she was an infant, when her mother worked in Coop's store, and sometimes took her along.

Jeremy Mercier, recent MVRHS grad, headed to SUNY Cobleskill this fall, joined the group, and broke out a new 11-foot rod, a gift from Steve Purcell, former owner of Larry's Tackle.

It wasn't long until Coop hooked up with a shark. As the line went singing off the reel, he handed the rod to Elizabeth. She took it without hesitation.

"I'm here if you need me," Coop said.

A few minutes later, Jeremy hooked up with a shark big enough to make a Volkswagen-size splash before running for deeper water.

Over the next hour and 10 minutes, the three girls took turns at the rod, not an easy handoff when an angry shark that outweighed each one of them was fighting on the other end.

The shark took them around Wasque Point, where they navigated the fence posts, rope line, and rocks, and then made the turn to Leland Beach.

About a half-hour into the fight, a loud "crack" came from Jeremy's direction. His new 11-foot rod was now two 5½-foot rods.

Sharks 3. Fishermen 0.

Every time it looked like the girls were gaining ground, the shark made a run. But there was no talk of giving up, although there was talk about how sore they'd be at work the next day.

"Drop the rod and make one turn, then raise it a little, slowly," Coop told Evelyn. "He's not going to like it; you're the boss."

Night had fallen by the time the girls had the shark close to shore.

“Other young ladies would have given up by now,” Coop said as he put on his gloves to help pull the beast in.

Using the waves, Coop managed to hump the shark up the sharp slope, but not before it whipped its mighty tail and knocked his legs from under him.

Landing a shark in the surf is dangerous. The night before, a surf fisherman on the Cape ended up in the hospital after a shark much smaller than the one Coop was wrestling clamped down on his foot.

“You never turn your back on a shark,” Coop said.

After measuring the fish (64 inches) and few quick pictures with the girls and their quarry, Coop dragged the 130-pound beast back to the water. The long fight had taken its toll, and for a few minutes, it just rolled in the surf and looked like it might not make it.

More than once, Coop helped it upright. “Come on, buddy,” Elizabeth said.

Eventually, the shark rebounded, and darted off in a piqued froth.

The girls thanked Coop, who was all smiles.

Sharks 3, Fishermen 1.

“I’m getting too old for this,” Coop joked, walking back to his car.

Coop got me on a shark that night as well. It was half the size of the one the girls pulled in, but still the biggest and strongest fish I’ve pulled from the surf in 40 years of fishing. I had a nice saucer-size bruise on my thigh the next day to remember it by.

Final score: Sharks 3, Fishermen 2. Both sharks brought in under Coop’s guidance.

A thick fog had rolled in by the time we called it a night. Driving toward Norton Point, over the kidney-jarring ruts, Coop talked about “his girls” with paternal pride.

“That’s what Martha’s Vineyard is all about,” he said. “My part of it, anyway.”

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