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03 >



HEAVEN AND HELL

Simon Cooper comes to terms
with fishing failure



I **PLAY GOLF. YES, I'M SORRY BUT THERE,** I've said it — judge me if you will. In my defence I'm a) not very good and b) it is a pastime I reserve solely for holidays. I did once manage to combine a fishing and golf holiday, though more by accident than design.

Having travelled (literally) halfway around the world to bonefish on the islands of Kiribati that straddle the International Date Line in the Pacific Ocean I unexpectedly came across a golf course, of sorts, on Christmas Island, which became famous in the 1950s for live, in-person atomic bomb tests by the British and US. Remnants of our occupation remain; the capital is called London. Today, the highest tech activity is a NASA satellite-tracking station which, aside from Antarctica, must be one of the most isolated postings for any scientist. However, with not much to do, the scientists, a resourceful bunch, have created a five-hole golf course around the rocky sands and palms; the greens are browns, *ie* compacted dirt, and you carry your own fairway in the form of a square of Astroturf. It is no St Andrews but when the nearest entertainment is via a five-hour ride on a weekly freight plane, then most things look good. But I digress.

The one thing I have learnt about golf is that you can never be good enough. The course will always beat you. Others will be better. Today's great round is just a warm-up for tomorrow's disastrous round. But I have found a way to come to terms with this; it is my one third theory of happiness. Simply put: you have to surrender yourself to the fact all sport is as much about failure as success. With golf, I accept that six holes will be okay, six will be good and six will be an abject disaster. Once you know this, you can't have a bad round. Every outing will be, as with the curate's egg, good in parts, and that makes for contentment. I now apply this Damascene revelation to fishing.

In the famous parable, hell is a fish every cast; the angler condemned for eternity to never fail. And therein lies the paradox of fishing. We crave success but we don't want it all the time. The bad times are surely sometimes very bad. The sort of days that end with you intending to snap your rods rather than ever venture on to a riverbank again. Or the days when you do absolutely everything right. Conditions are ideal. Your casting is sublime. You're locked into the moment. But the fish? Not so much. They singularly fail to deliver on their side of the piscatorial bargain. For that, you cannot entirely blame them, so you leave frustrated. But it is good frustration. The sort that tells you that you'll return another time very soon to crack the code.

And then there are the amazing days. You cannot fail. Even the wrong fly is the right fly. You are the master of your chosen fishing universe. If this is hell, you think, bring it on! But eventually a contentment will creep over you. You will lay down your rod to watch the river. Fishing companions will pass by; you'll be modest about your success. You'll join in their success without a hint of jealousy. In fact, the fishing becomes a vicarious pleasure.

But with fishing, as with golf, you will never be good enough. There will be great days. Days that should have been great. And days best forgotten. As Rudyard Kipling beseeched us in his famous poem *If*, treat the impostors of Triumph and Disaster just the same. Fishing, until we are taken to that great river in the sky, is the thread of our lives. No day, however bad, should be allowed to snap that thread, so treat them all the same. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.