

# CANAL CONUNDRUM

by Fred Davis

**At a time of year when bites can be hard to come by on commercials some anglers are returning back to canals and are reaping the rewards,**

**Not a conundrum for these lads**

When Top Class anglers get together on the bank you can rest assured sparks will fly, In an effort to stay ahead of the game practice is vital if you want to be competitive in matches, in an age where most tackle is top drawer and advice is very easy to obtain, a good standard can be achieved by most anglers in most disciplines. However what gives the better anglers that little bit extra? Attention to detail? What separates the prime Donna's from those that actually cut the mustard? Its okay to Talk the Talk, but it's walking the walk that truly matters!

I catch up with two top class canal anglers on the banks of the Grand Union Canal who think hard work on the bank is more appropriate than chatting in the tackle shop, not decrying these sociable discussions which can be very informative, however most good anglers put in the leg work and get a feel for the venue they fish, getting to know the moods of the venue can be critical if you are to reap the rewards, these normally show themselves in the shape of brown envelopes filled with cash! When two top class anglers from London get together for a friendly Practice on the canal it was going to be a very lively but interesting day.

Lol Breach of Colmic Gerrards Cross has always been a canal nut and last year he was the top individual in the Luton League, a title he achieved in his second year of fishing the league, having won various canal team championships such as the wey navigation league, the Division three national team championships his pedigree on these boundaries is without question top drawer.

Phil Speakman of Oakwood Eurobaits needs no introduction as he is also another well known angler with many individual match wins and placings to his credit, Unfortunately although I was invited to fish with these two great anglers/friends I declined as someone after all has to take the photo's, I had already started practising on canals for a forthcoming event but with both anglers applying different methods on today's practice it was an opportunity to watch contrasting styles, I for one would rather watch than compete in the conditions we found ourselves when we arrived on the canal.

It was a wise choice for as I arrived on the canal with our intrepid duo I couldn't believe the choice of pegs that the lads had opted for, no comfortable 13

metre features like bushes to fish too, purely open water with the cold wind howling down the canal resulting in a steady drop in air and subsequently water temperature today had all the ingredients of being a really tough session, what better conditions to watch a practice in? As they would have to work at their fishing in these conditions, I always feel that watching top class canal anglers can be better than actually fishing as it helps to confirm thought patterns that you may have when it comes to feeding and sorting out the peg. I have always been an advocate of watching other anglers, although I don't recommend copying anyone's style, you can always incorporate different techniques into your own way of fishing to reap rewards, the loss of a days fishing for me was no big deal as I had been practising on a pound the week earlier taking advantage of the mild January conditions and had some very good bags of fish topped by a big 20lb+ at Boxmoor, however prior to this day we had a period of mild weather with lots of rain but today with the cold wind blowing on the Grand Union Canal pound the lads had chosen to fish which was situated at Hemel Hempstead just below the Sainsbury's superstore, not only was it brass monkey weather but the water had become very coloured due to the river Gade which flows in and out of the canal through most of these pounds the River Gade itself had become swollen with flood water due to the copious amounts of rain we have had in the days prior to this feature. Cold coloured canal water, I like to practice but in these conditions? The only comforting feature I could see was a cafe a few yards from the end of the houses that these lads were pegged, in actual fact first order of the day was a cuppa tea, I did not envy these anglers the task in hand however the days story was about to start to unfold.

Lol Breach was setting out his stall to fish with a variety of baits as his bait table included the full range of canal baits from bread punch, pinkies, squatts, maggots, casters and chopped worms, and seemed to be targeting everything that had fins, although Lol did comment that the bread punch might not be so productive due to the colour of the water which was on further, closer, examination very coloured, he still felt it was worth a try. His main attack was going to be chopped worm, squatt and big maggot over the squatt line, a close inspection of his rigs revealed he is obviously a big fan of Mick Bassett floats, setting up 3 top kits one with a dedicated MB chopped worm float, Lol was very

enthusiastic about this float, emphasizing how with the long cane bristle the worm hook bait could be worked by lifting and dropping the bristle on the rig, a split shot was placed at the top of the bristle as this helps to give better control on the float when performing this task, he felt it was a certainty for enticing bites even on the hardest of days, the shotting pattern consisted of a bulk of no 9 shot with 2 x 10 droppers, the other two rigs were both set up with MB London squatt floats, the first float, the larger of the two, was a 4x16 and would be used for fishing maggot over squatt and had a bulk of no 9 shot with 4 x 13 Preston stotz as droppers, where as the second London squatt float was a lighter rig comprising of a 4x12 float which had a spaced out bulk and again the stotz droppers to give a gentler drop for fishing lighter baits like squatt and pinkie, I noticed that a shot had been placed directly under the wire stem of the London squatt floats in order to achieve better stability in the rough, choppy, conditions, this would also double up as a depth marker. Lol did emphasize that although he uses these squatt floats on shallower pounds he does prefer to use Latimer floats on the deeper pounds of the canal. All Lol's rigs were made up using Ultima's high tec XT7 line, as he felt this line is ideally suited to canal work.

Phil's preferred rigs were tried and tested for the methods he was to employ for this practice session; he felt that by concentrating on caster as his main bait, even though he may have a slightly slower start, once the fish arrive the peg would get stronger and stronger, for the start of the session a lighter sensitive rig would be needed to capitalise on any fish until they arrive in force and a second heavier rig which could be used to combat the flow if it increased or used as a bagging rig if the fish really get their heads down, therefore he set up just two rigs, both floats were Tubertini delta's which have a cane tip and wire stem so offer very good stability, the first rig was extremely light 4 x10 and was shotted with a strung out shotting pattern of no10 shot, the second rig was exactly the same however with slightly larger shot spread again around an inch and half apart. Line was Prerton precision mainline .10 hooklength.07 hooks used would be the standard B511 or a Colmic S2001 both in a size 20, both rigs had a hook length of around 3 inches before the first shot, Phil would start on the light rig and only move to the heavier rig if either conditions worsened or the fish really got their heads down, one bit of kit that was noticeable was the custom made pole roller Phil was using costing around three times the price of a conventional roller there are only a few in the country and built of sturdy stuff the legs can be placed on the ground and the roller will never blow over, in fact both anglers were

obvious fans of Rive boxes and both anglers set ups looked top drawer, picking a winner was not going to be easy!

Lol started by feeding 3 large balls of groundbait, a 50/50 mix of gudgeon black and matchblend at 11metres with squatt, caster and hemp he was obviously in attack mode despite the conditions, his second line across was at 13 metres and this line was fed with chopped worm, casters and a few red maggots and it was switching between these two lines that was going to be Lol's main attack, however as they started it was a quick look on the punch by Lol that accounted for a few small roach on the lighter squatt rig, although the line died fairly quickly as the colour of the water seemed to suddenly intensify, Lol moved to his squatt line and proceeded to catch a few more small roach feeding regular pouches of squatt to build the peg, however he had to switch to the heavier rig as the canal was flowing more than he had anticipated in what was the main channel. The start of the practice was far better than expected with both anglers getting bites from the off, both anglers had feared the worst due to the conditions.

Phil's approach was completely different and was going to be mainly a caster based attack at 13 metres and a much less aggressive feeding pattern was his option, cupping in one ball of dark groundbait, which was a 50/50 mix of supermatch and supercup, which has very little feed content and loose feeding a few casters over the top was the way to go, Phil reasoned that due to the worsening weather conditions fish may be harder to come by, especially if the cold wind persisted as the session went on, so had opted to put as little feed into the peg as he thought fit, the groundbait was purely an attractor to pull fish without over feeding them, groundbait in coloured water can be very effective with little feed content, loose feeding caster and assessing the response would be a better way to gauge how the fish are responding without the risk of putting too much feed into the peg. However just as Phil had predicted fishing caster on the hook resulted in a much slower start, however as the match practice progressed it was obvious fish had arrived on Phil's caster line, however he was bumping to many fish and losing them, he reasoned that they were very small roach however being a true professional a hook change was also a requirement, with Phil beginning to up his catch rate it was a close call between the two anglers. Phil had stayed on his lighter float but was trotting through over depth which slowed the float down and enabled him to get very good presentation on the lighter rig with the added benefit that a lighter rig gives in terms of sensitivity, with regular bites now coming

to Phil's caster rig and a string of roach of all sizes falling to the caster Phil was obviously enjoying his session on the canal and was totally focused on the job in hand, the peg seemed full of fish, Phil was now feeding more regularly to keep the shoal happy and admitted that he had upped the rate of his feed slightly once the fish had arrived. Phil tried hooking the caster through the top instead of burying the hook inside the caster, once he had tried this and found it made no difference to his bite ratio's he stayed with this for the rest of the session as more bites are connected with.

What was noticeable was with both anglers once they got into their stride was how well the elastic systems were working on both anglers' top kits, both anglers had their kits cut well back and although Phil had suffered a few hook pulls initially until he changed his hook once he got into his stride everything operated perfectly, both anglers using a soft elastic with Phil opting for latex in 0.8 whilst Lol was using more conventional coloured elastics both anglers never at any time looked like ripping hooks from the soft mouth skimmers they caught, in actual fact virtually every fish hooked after the hook change by Phil was landed. It was indeed worth watching as even fish playing styles varied slightly although both very effective not rushed every fish played in the same smooth style born out by hours of practice.

As the practice continued things began to change Lol had switched to his chopped worm line at 13 metres which had been initially fed with worm, caster and a few red maggots via a small bait dropper, he felt due to the flow cupping in the bait would spread the feed too much and was looking to keep things tight within the peg, constantly looking and topping up this line as required had started to pay dividends in the sudden arrival of some skimmers on the chopped worm, hooking the worm through the head was Lol's preferred method and it was obviously working at this time Lol seemed to be racing away with the practice session however suddenly he hooked a leviathan and we were all guessing as to what could be the culprit when eventually a pike surfaced biting through the hook length, Lol's peg obviously suffered the consequences and the bites slowed, he hooked another pike (may have been the same one?) later in the practice, however with bites slowing down for Lol and the peg having slowed somewhat due to pike trouble the wheel had turned and now things were definitely picking up for Phil, who had been looking slightly concerned at not hooking any skimmers however with the caster line getting stronger and stronger a few skimmers beginning to show, Phil was again very upbeat the venue was beginning to fish much better than both anglers had anticipated, Phil went through

a bit of a purple patch, when Lol was struggling to catch however as the skimmers slowed both anglers connected with big perch within seconds of each other, lovely pound plus fish with brightly red coloured fins these fish look in pristine condition, both anglers had enjoyed some cracking sport with quality roach, perch, Skimmers as well as the odd gudgeon, Phil had even caught a small dace in the session! As we came to the end of the session both anglers were again catching fairly well and the outcome may have to be decided on the flip of a coin! On many pounds chublets and big chub are also making an appearance and it was surprising none were caught in this practice session, with pike also making an appearance canals are becoming well balanced fisheries and the fishing is superb.

With the conditions getting very bad due to the wind it was agreed that after only 4 hours both anglers would call it a day. It would be a very hard call on who had won the day as Lol had made the early running and Phil had pulled back later in the session just as Pike seemed to plague Lol's chopped worm line, but as the fish were pulled from the water and photographed it became readily apparent with some quality roach, perch, skimmer, bream that canals were indeed a winter wonderland, with quality bags of canal fish there is no conundrum between canals and commercials for these lads, at over 15lbs of silvers each and obvious that grams separated this intrepid duo, although scales were available it seemed a shame to spoil what had been a great day's fishing, having decided that the fish had played their part in this feature they were returned to the water having been photographed both agreed that the result was a draw, which seemed most appropriate for such good mates and two top canal anglers, two different styles of fishing yet both made their styles work on the day in what I can only call dire conditions. Both Phil and Lol said that practice fishing sessions amongst anglers of equal ability, were vital in their own development within the sport, to stay competitive and keep them on their toes, as well as learning from each other it kept them fine tuned and most of all helped to secure that vital edge which is needed to pick up the odd envelope or two. In the heat of the competition it is not surprising these lads have become good mates' different methods maybe but with the same end result!

As a footnote on passing a pleasure angler who had been fishing all day I asked him what he had caught he told me just one perch although not a match angler it shows how hard the fishing really was, the trouble is very good anglers make it look easier than it is.

With lots of anglers fishing only commercials

or putting away their fishing gear until the warmer weather arrives they are obviously missing some fabulous canal sport, having suffered the ravages of cormorant predation, minor pollutions, fish being taken for the pot etc, a lot of anglers have turned there back on the canals and rivers, however with

less angling pressure it could be the good times are fast returning, I for one intend to make the most of canals in these winter months it has to be better than struggling for a wrap round on a commercial, which at times can be all that you hope for!