

Dumbbells and Circles

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Those of you that have been keeping tabs on the CCG web site will have no doubt visited the catfish forum. It is good to see members really taking advantage of this new facility and we have seen some good discussions during the last few months, many group members have raised some really interesting points and enquiries. Last summer, one of our members posted a query about how to construct and fish a Dumbbell Rig I dutifully obliged and answered the question in a short and hopefully helpful manner. This reply was followed by several members contacting me to ask for more details, all of which is a rather convoluted way of explaining the reason for this brief article !

The first thing I should say is that I cannot in any way claim any recognition for the 'invention' of this rig. I understand that an original type of dumbbell float was used many years ago on the Norfolk Broads as a piking method. I believe at that time it was used as a drifting style float rather than the anchored rig we use today, (I am happy to be corrected on this point if I have got it wrong). A catfishing version of this method was shown to me by the CCG's previous Records officer, Paul Holroyd about twenty years ago when we first fished Whiskers Lake at Northey Park. Paul informed me that it had been developed in Scotland by pike anglers fishing in weedy lochs.

Anyway, the point is; although I am writing about it, and I regularly use it, I didn't originate it. The rig is constructed by sliding a large bore run ring onto the main line to which is attached a lead of at least two or three ounces - I prefer to attach the lead with a 'weak' link in case of snagging. Next slide a large rubber bead down the line, followed by a dumbbell float and then a decent quality swivel. The dumbbell itself can either be purchased (Catfish Pro and CatMaster Tackle both do their own versions) or easily constructed using a



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length of stiff boom tube between six and 20 inches long, with a poly or foam ball pushed on at either end. Some anglers super glue them in place but this isn't really necessary. The size of ball to use depends on the size of bait. Balsa float bodies or sunken pike floats can also be utilised, depending on the amount of buoyancy required by the live bait. Leave a short length (maybe half an inch or so) of stiff tube proud of the poly-balls at both ends of the float. On one end glue a large bore rubber bead so that it sits flush with the end of the tube, at the other end slide on a tight fitting piece of strong silicon sleeving about one - two inches long. The dumbbell is then slid down the reel line and 'locked' into place by sliding the silicon tightly over the swivel. Finally, the rig is completed by tying on a short hook link of stiff nylon. The length of the hook link determines the maximum depth that the bait will be presented at and should be shorter than the length of the float; usually between six and 12 inches. Hook length materials are obviously a personal choice, but any stiff mono or fluorocarbon of a suitable breaking strain should be suitable. Forget braided lines, they are far too supple for this rig.



Which hook ?

Well, if I may just refer back to the CCG web site forum that I mentioned earlier, some of you will know that for the past few seasons I have been using circle hooks on my surface live bait rigs. This revelation seems to have stirred up a few members ! One thought that they damaged catfish and another didn't like the look of them after viewing them on a web page. Fine, no problem, if anglers don't fancy using them, I am happy, all I can say is that I firmly believe that they give a far greater chance of a hook-up

than any other hook I have used. Let me explain; in 1999 I was invited by In-Fisherman magazine to speak at the International Catfish Symposium in Davenport, Iowa. As well as the meeting, I managed to arrange for a few days fishing on the Kansas River for blue, channel and flathead catfish. We camped at the river for a couple of days and I was introduced to one of the local experts who specialised in fishing with jug lines (dead lines) for flatheads. He didn't do this for food, it's just that he enjoyed catching cats in this way - it wouldn't do for me but then they do lots of things differently in the States. Anyway, rig wise, Gary's jug lines presented a live bait; which was usually a goldfish of about six inches in the upper layers of the current in much the same way as we would fish a poly-ball, or dumbbell rig. I closely examined his set-ups, which I must admit I found rather crude although they obviously worked well. When I inspected his hooks, I was amazed. I had never seen anything like it, they were the strangest shape that I had ever seen, the bend seemed to go round for ever and the point just looked to me like it had folded over on a rock or something, these, I was assured were 'circle hooks'.



As I recall they were Gamakatsus although I don't remember the pattern number. I sat and chatted with the Steve Hoffman the In-Fisherman Catfish Editor and a couple of other local catfish anglers about these weird looking hooks and they were unanimous in their opinions, the hook-up rate with these patterns far exceeded that of standard 'octopus' type or other live bait models. The circle hook had been developed specifically to deal with the problem of missed runs - or in this case missed hits when fishing for catfish with live baits. The beauty of them I was told was that due to their shape, the hook point just 'rolled' into the mouth (usually in

the corners too) when any kind of pressure was applied. This of course made them perfect for fishing with set lines that are only checked every twelve hours or so. They are about as close as you can get to a 'self-hooking' hook pattern. The interesting thing with this type of hook is that once you have got over the initial shock of their shape, you then have to throw all convention out the window and try not to strike when a run occurs ! The procedure is to just lift into the fish firmly whilst winding in - not easy after many years of whacking a cat run as hard as possible.

After 15 season's experience with circle hooks, I am 100% certain that I have improved my hooking to runs ratio as a result of using these hooks. There are many models of circle hook available some of much I admit do look pretty extreme and one wonders if they would ever hook anything but in the USA, they are now one of the most popular styles of hook for suspending a live bait from and I find them especially effective when combined with the dumbbell rig, which brings me back to where I started.



Regardless of which hook pattern you choose, the dumbbell float rig is a useful addition to any catfish anglers armoury, if only for the fact that on some waters it isn't widely used and on hard fished cat venues this can make all the

difference. My view is that this rig is most effective when presenting a bait close to surface weeds and lily beds. Casting along reeded banks can also be a productive method. The dumbbell can be fished in water of any depth although the very nature of weed bed fishing means that more often than not, it is used in shallow water of perhaps four to six feet. the rig casts well although for the health of the live bait, long range fishing is better achieved with either a winch rod or a bait boat. In position, the dumbbell float will lie flat on the surface occasionally dipping at the hook end as the bait swims around. A certain amount of movement also occurs in a circular motion as, although the bait is tethered to the bottom by the lead there is always going to be a degree of 'travel' between the lead and float depending on how tight your mainline is. Bites are either indicated by watching the float or by bite alarm. A Starlite can be inserted into the float for night time visibility, but make sure that it sits on the top of the float. I prefer to fish a tight line to a dumbbell with the bail arm closed and the Baitrunner engaged. Runs are usually an explosive affair and are often preceded by a burst of activity from the bait; they know what's coming !