



AIR
TEMPERATURE 4°C
WATER
TEMPERATURE 13°C
— Is this the best winter venue in the UK?

With most stillwater venues in the country frozen solid, Welsh wizard Andy Neal invited us to join him at a venue where skimmers – and no ice – were assured!

Port Talbot Docks, in the heart of South Wales, isn't your average skimmer venue. With its industrial surroundings and typical south-coast Welsh weather it does make you wonder... why go there at all?

Well, in short, it's stuffed with fish! With skimmers averaging 11lb and a good head of beautiful roach to go at, this place

really is a bit of an unknown quantity. But that's not all you're fishing for either, as being a dock and connected to the sea via a lock there are a few surprises that could turn up. As well as big pike and the odd rogue carp you could well find yourself in contact with mullet, sea trout, flounders and even bass (reported captures of fish approaching 10lb). The mullet go anything

from ounces up to 3lb and 4lb and are regularly caught in matches, and plenty of mysterious creatures have been hooked and 'never seen'.

Being such a huge expanse of water with the capability of docking some immense ships it will come as no surprise to hear that it's deep! Up to 30 feet deep in places, in fact, with steep slopes that drop off very



Andy Neal's rod choice for Port Talbot Docks.



Open-ended feeders are a must for big skimmer weights.

quickly. If you're fishing the pole there don't be surprised if you find 25 feet of water at 11 metres, and still going deeper the further out you go!

This obviously lends itself perfectly to the feeder and it's this I want to focus on today. During the winter this really is the only way to approach it under match conditions, with the slider playing a part on the odd occasion. The fish do tend to push further away from you the colder it gets, and although in the warmer months you can catch big weights of roach and skimmers on short poles to hand this really isn't an option at this time of year. Because of the depth of water, when I say further away from you I don't mean really far out, and for the most part the main catching area is at around 25 turns. When the weather gets really cold the fish will back off even more and the 35-turn line seems to produce a lot of fish, with the very odd occasion where you have to search for the fish and go longer, up to 50 to 60 turns.

Before I talk rigs and tactics I'd like to mention the reasons why the dock is so productive, and the reason why in the harshest of conditions (when everywhere else is under six inches of ice) you can still come here and expect 15lb to 20lb to win most matches. The simple answer is that the water is warm!

At the top end of the main arm there is a fully functional steelworks that pumps water out of the dock to use for cooling. It's not uncommon for the water level to drop by as much as a couple of feet during a match – think how much water that must be, given the size of the place! When this water is flushed back in it is obviously at a high temperature, which in turn warms the rest of the water. In such an environment it's no wonder that the place is thriving and full of fish.

That said, having fished it myself now for a couple of winters it never ceases to amaze me how the weather still affects it. With such a depth of water and with temperatures the way they are, you would never believe how much difference a ripple can make, or how a couple of cold frosty nights can send winning weights plummeting from as much as 55lb down to 15lb over the course of a few days. I suppose a degree or two of difference, although it still seems warm to us, can make a massive difference to the fish. Couple this with changes in air pressure and it always leaves you with a bit of working out to do as to how to approach it.

The match entries here are unfortunately limited to the low twenties, such is the layout of the place, but don't think you can just turn up and win! With the likes of Mike Towler, Mal Entwistle, Gary Martin and Steve Shaw present, along



By clipping up, Andy ensures total accuracy.

As with all other forms of fishing, he who works hardest reaps the rewards.

with plenty of the dock's other regulars, these guys know the place well and have a competitive thirst that is remarkable, given their age... ha ha! They have become brilliant feeder anglers and love nothing more than 'sticking one up you' from the next peg.

All this means I've just got to work harder to catch up and compete, and the fact that I'm learning something simply

Tackle used:

Frenzee Precision 10ft Bomb, Shimano Stradic 4000FA, 0.10mm braid. Distance – 25 reel turns.
Frenzee Precision 11ft Light Feeder, Shimano Stradic 4000FA, 0.10mm braid. Distance – 25 reel turns.
Frenzee Precision 13ft Waggler, Shimano Stradic 3000FC, 0.18mm prototype mono, slider float.

makes me eager to get back there. I can't get enough of it, as no two days are ever the same there and it's never predictable. It really does make you work for your fish.

Tackle for Port Talbot needs to be kept simple and confident. I've always stated there is no place in my gear for complex rigs. I need to know and have complete faith that the gear I'm using for the job is right and that it works. This applies to my whole setup, from rod to hook, as this

then means I can spend all my time on the important part – the fishing!

Working on feeding patterns and response to feeding patterns is constantly on my mind, even when feeder fishing. The days of 'chuck it and leave it' are long gone and, as with all other forms of fishing, he who works hardest reaps the rewards. I believe there is always a pattern to be formulated even when it's hard, and it's this pattern that, if spotted, can put vital extra fish in your net.

I take two feeder rods with me, one to fish the short line (25 turns) and one for the longer lines (35 to 50 turns). The rods are the new Frenzee Precision 10ft Bomb rod with a 3/4oz carbon tip for the short line and the Frenzee Precision 11ft Light Feeder, again with a 3/4oz carbon tip, for the longer lines. As I couple these

rods up with a braid main line I have no hesitation in stepping up the tip size should the tow get up, as with braid you see everything such is its direct nature. I use a conventional paternoster setup and don't bother using a shockleader, as I'm not chucking that far. While some may say you need the cushion of a shockleader so as not to bump fish, the soft through actions of these rods are so good that hook-pulls are very rare, and when they

do occur then it's generally down to the fact your hooklength is wrong and you're not hooking the fish properly.

Lots of people use mono for this style of fishing but, although there is nothing wrong with it, for me braid far outperforms mono for a number of reasons. The super low diameter of braid casts a lot easier than mono because there is less friction as the line comes off the spool; this means greater accuracy as there is less force needed to get the required distance. Also, the thin diameter of braid doesn't catch the wind or tow anywhere near as much as thicker mono does, again meaning that you can refine your casting and become very accurate with little effort.

The direct nature of braid also hooks the fish for me most of the time and no striking is needed to set the hook. As the fish moves off the tip pulls around and quite simply it's this that sets the hook, as there is no stretch in braid to buffer it. (This is why I have no problems using heavier tips for skimmers as it's the tip that hooks the fish for you!)

All of this means that you can feel every little head shake and nod on the way in, which feels dramatically different at first but is something you soon get use to. I like to play the fish with 'soft hands' and don't lock the rod butt against my forearm when reeling them in; this just gives me added cushion against any big head shakes and protects the light hooklengths.

Moving on to feeders and setups; as I mentioned, I use a fixed paternoster. All I

do is tie a 6in loop in the end of my main line, trim the tag and that's it. To attach the hooklength I simply lasso it around the main line above the loop knot and then slide the tightened lasso down onto the knot of the loop. Simple, effective, easy to change and, importantly for me, no use of any swivels or clips that the line could get caught around and kink up on.

The feeders themselves are the Frenzee Feed-Tek system 35g Plug feeders, although I trim the side wings off so they fall quicker in the very deep water. They fit the bill perfectly because they are designed so there is no lead to corrode or drop off, they plane up to the surface very quickly – meaning no problems with any

The reason the fish are there is that they are feeding, hence why you catch them on crude gear.

underwater obstacles in front of you – and best of all they lock onto the line without the use of any swivels and clips, again meaning less potential tangles and nothing to kink your hooklength.

Hooklengths are usually 0.12mm or 0.14mm with size 18 and 16 hooks. I mostly use Kamasan B560s but if I'm catching well I will put on a Drennan Red Maggot hook, which I find perfect for maggots and they also have a longer shank, which can give you something to get hold of when you're getting the hooks



Plenty of bait options!



Andy favours Drennan Red Maggot hooks for skimmers.

out quickly. Both patterns are microbarbed.

Lines of 0.12mm and 0.14mm probably seem quite heavy as hooklengths, as we normally associate skimmer fishing with tiny hooks and light lines to go with very shy bites, but having scaled down many times there, not once has it made a difference. While this does seem strange it definitely got me thinking as to why this was the case. Obviously the stronger lines would give me a much better chance of landing any bonus fish and hard-fighting mullet, should they turn up.

The answer, I think, is the depth! We all know fish don't live on the bottom and are usually swimming around or sitting in the warmer layers. In 25 to 30 feet of water this

is definitely the case, and the only reason the fish are there is that they are feeding, hence why you catch them on relatively crude gear – they want to eat. Cold water sinks so the warmer layers will definitely be away from the bottom. Add to that high pressure and cold nights and it's no wonder why a venue with so many fish in it fishes hard, even with warm water!

So how do you get them to feed on the bottom? By using the right consistency of groundbait and not squeezing it into the feeder too hard. You would naturally think

IS THIS THE BEST WINTER VENUE IN THE UK?

that you'd need to squeeze the feeder tight so the bait empties on the bottom and not on the way down, but this isn't the case. What I look for is a very fluffy mix that is quite light, so by just softly squeezing this it leaves a trail of bait going down through the water column, and it's this column of bait that the fish follow down to the bottom to where the main feed area is. A little bit like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow!

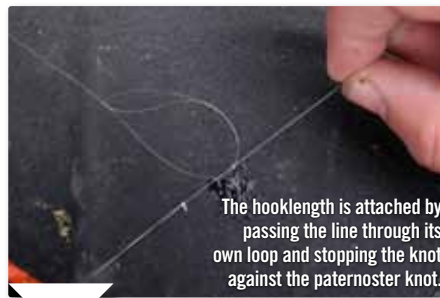
As for what groundbait to use, well this really is the \$64,000 question; ask the regulars and they will all say something different (although I don't think the buggers would tell me the truth anyway!). Most seem to opt for a 'sweet 'n' sour' mix of fishmeal and sweet groundbait. My mix is slightly different and use two parts Bait Tech Omen to one part Superlake and one part Special G. This I find gives me a lovely fluffy mix that the skimmers seem to love. It gives me confidence as I've used it elsewhere and caught well, and the key word again must be confidence!

There are a few things I will do to my groundbait before I mix it, and one of these is to put it through a flour sieve. This gets rid of all the large particles as I want the fish to ideally feed on my free offerings and hook bait rather than getting preoccupied with eating groundbait. Also, if it's fishing well I will add brown crumb to bulk out the food content, whereas if it's fishing hard I will add damp leam to lessen the food content. This will give maximum attractant without giving them too much to eat, hopefully giving you more bites on harder days.

Loose feed and hook baits vary and usually I'll take live and dead maggots, a couple of pints of casters to put through the feeder and some worms for hook bait and chopping. Corn is useful as a change bait, and along with a hair-rigged pellet can single out better-quality fish.

Something I never leave home without is softened micro pellets, as they are used to help hold the fish in the peg longer. Again, be careful how many you put in as too many will see the fish become preoccupied with them, and in the depths of winter the last thing you need for your hard work is fish in the peg eating your pellets and not your hook baits. Lastly pinkies, the winter wonders, can often inspire bites where others let you down, both as feed and hook baits.

How much to put in differs from day to day but I use everyone else as a guideline. I'll always start with no loose feed in the crumb and see what sort of response I get. If I'm catching well I'll gradually start to introduce bait until I see a response to it, good or bad. I also keep an eye on what is going on around me, because if everyone else is catching well this generally means



The hooklength is attached by passing the line through its own loop and stopping the knot against the paternoster knot.



The finished rig.



On a day when every other stillwater venue in the UK was frozen, Port Talbot Docks came up trumps again!

they are 'having a go', so I can then start to up the feed to try and attract more fish and push the peg to get the most from it.

I mentioned earlier about looking for patterns regarding bites; don't just think this is about introducing feed, though, it could be to do with regularity of casting. It could also cover how long you can wait before recasting, the size of feeder, twitching the feeder along the bottom, or changing hook baits. Try and keep a mental note of what you did each cast and see if you get bites doing a similar thing next chuck; if it works you have a platform to build from and a good chance of doing well. The key words are, keep working!

HOW THE SESSION WENT

With yet another freezing day upon us I did fear the worst. It was, though, a lovely morning so I thought we could at least get some nice pictures! How wrong I could be, as a blanket of cloud appeared from nowhere and started dumping what could only be described as slush on me. I was so cold that it was hard work trying to concentrate, and I had to dip my hands in the water to keep them warm. Having started fishing it became clear it was going to be a tough day, as in the first hour I had just three fish and, considering I was sitting in a decent area (Peg 12) with lots of room, this was a little strange. I altered hook baits and finally started to get signs by putting a tiny amount of chopped worms and a few casters through the feeder, with red maggot or worm head on the hook.

These bites didn't last long, though, and I soon cut the feed out again as the swim dried up. I continued to cast to try and draw some fish in and half an hour later a big slamming bite resulted in the biggest fish of the day – a 2½lb mullet! At that point I could see snow building on the hills behind me, and what with me living 'on top of the world' in Ebbw Vale I thought it might be better to have an early finish... not that I took much convincing!

A nice few hours' fishing was ruined by our winter weather (nothing new I know), but at least I caught a few fish and had a few bites, which is a lot more than we would have caught anywhere else today.

This really is proof that Port Talbot Docks really is an awesome place to come and fish! If it fishes like this in these conditions, imagine what the sport can be like when they're better!

VENUE FILE

Port Talbot Docks Dockside, Port Talbot, South Wales
Contact: 01656 744498