



FISHING WITH MY DAD

REELING IN INVESTMENT LESSONS FROM A LIFE ON THE LAKE

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As a child growing up in Minnesota, spring and summer were not two distinct seasons. They blended into one in The Land of 10,000 Lakes—fishing season. This was particularly true for my father. Fishing was not just a passion for Dad, it also was a bit of an endurance sport. He would be on the lake at the crack of dawn, only to return as the final rays of sunlight yielded to the horizon. Rain or shine, it did not matter. The only question was: “Where would we find the fish today?”

As a young child, this fanatical approach could feel like punishment for some unstated misdeed. But I enjoyed the outings more and more as the years went by and developed a deep appreciation of my father’s passion and dedication to his craft. I also started noticing how much his approach stood out from other anglers on the lake.

Unlike most fishing enthusiasts, my father was not easily distracted by fads. Experience and evidence taught Dad that there were no magic shortcuts. This was not the case for the other guys. They often embraced advice from the “expert of the day” or leaned on unproven technological crutches. They would regularly harangue the local bait shop owner for information on the latest hot spots. Dad would just chuckle and shake his head as they raced around the lake chasing yesterday’s hot tip.

In contrast, Dad honed his fishing discipline over decades. He employed an iterative process that involved analyzing his successes and failures, adapting carefully in the direction of proven results. As a consequence, he never wavered from the core fundamental techniques that served him well for more than five decades.

This is not to say that Dad turned a blind eye to innovation. In fact, he would regularly experiment with new techniques or technology. However, high-tech equipment or the latest “cannot fail” advice tempted him only if it could enhance his time-tested approach (at a reasonable cost, or course). For example, Dad never owned an expensive sonar unit; he would simply line up his spot by triangulating with three landmarks on the shore: a tree here, a cabin there, and the tip of the peninsula. Dad did not need to see the fish because experience and an understanding of the conditions taught him where they were likely to be.

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Dad also understood that knowing where the fish are matters little if you can’t coax them to bite. This is where Dad excelled. His years of patient experimentation and learning separated his methods from the rest. He recognized that technology could provide some efficiencies, but it could not teach someone how to actually catch the fish.



From an outsider's perspective, it is easy to see how Dad's techniques could appear dated. After all, he used the same badly weathered fishing rod for more than 30 years. His tiny fishing boat with its sputtering, underpowered motor conjured images of a bygone era. Those images, however, contrast sharply with the results—decades of unusual and consistent success.

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Of course, there were always times when Dad's fishing methods did not live up to his historical standards. This did not discourage him, though. His approach was grounded in a belief that the fundamentals of fishing hadn't changed, and that he would eventually "out-patience" the fish. And more often than not, my father would step off the dock at the end of the day with a stringer full of fish. Onlookers would scratch their heads in disbelief that the old guy in his primitive boat somehow managed to catch his limit, again.

I always found it amusing that when asked by astonished onlookers how he did it, Dad would offer a nondescript reply like, "You just have to understand the fish." These guys likely believed that he was trying to withhold his secrets to success when Dad was really revealing his fishing game plan.

My father is celebrating his 90th birthday this fall. While he is no longer casting off in his venerable little fishing boat at the crack of dawn each morning, the quiet yet potent lessons he conveyed are not forgotten.

As that young boy decades ago, I couldn't have imagined how those fishing trips with Dad highlighted a set of timeless principles that are just as true for investing as they are for fishing. Experience has allowed me to see the wisdom in Dad's unspoken lessons: understanding the fundamentals, developing a hardy process, and maintaining discipline even when the conditions on the lake (or in the market) seem to be temporarily working against you.

Even though I will never out-fish my dad, thanks to him I understand the fish—and investing—better now, too.

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