

The Tuna Toss

In 1979, a couple of locals from the Tunarama Committee decided the festival needed something unique that identified with Port Lincoln's already famous Tuna Fishing industry, in a way that could be enjoyed as a spectacle by anyone, entered by anyone fit enough to consider doing so, and that was a bit of fun.

There were many ideas put forth at the time, but none seemed to gel with the Festival's goal of celebrating the industry that gave it its name.

Until it was noticed by a couple of fellows that the primary method of unloading the overflowing boats that came into port, was a very manual, arduous task. Men would stand on the decks of the boats, and throw tuna up onto the waiting trucks. Well, those fish that were small enough to throw, that was.

Many local lads would line up in those uncertain economic times, looking for a few hours paid work. They had to pass a simple test. Throwing a fish as far as they could, or at least as far as was needed on the day, depending on tide and truck. The best throwers would get the work for the day. It was a prideful thing, a boast for the boys afterwards, as they spent part of their earnings at the nearest hotel to quench their hard earned thirst. Men being men, this had become a local bragging right, to see how many days work they gained, or how far their fish flew.

For the Festival Committee, this was a natural event to consider, as the Festival was also run at the time of year when most fish were being landed, and they were in plentiful supply.

So, it was decided to hit on a formula and method that would allow many people to enter and enjoy this local sport. A backyard test was conducted with a few fish of varying sizes, and different methods were tested, bearing in mind that many people might never handle such a fish at other times, so it had to be user friendly.

In the first year it ran, it proved to be an outstanding success, with hundreds of festival goers lining the local jetty and shoreline, to watch some of the bigger fishermen and fish workers as they lined up to throw a regular sized approx. 20Lb fish by means of a rope handle.

A bit of prior publicity had suggested that the event may well become an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records, prompting a thinner but more lithe man to enter, just to see if skill could win the day over brawn. Some very large and well muscled men worked in the industry, and had reputations for being able to handle fish with great panache. They stood on a line in the sand, facing along the beach near the town jetty, under the watchful gaze of hundreds, as they whirled the fish above their heads, or heaved them with a great under-arm lunge, glinting with perspiration, matched by the brilliant blue and silver of the flashing fish, just before launching it as hard as they possibly could, in an arc that would see the fish land some distance away. A long line of men stood on that line that day, before a school teacher stepped up to the mark.

John Penny was well-known around town as a man of education, with a well-spoken demeanour, but little was known about his sporting ability, other than a spot of casual cricket and the like. Well, turns out, John used to train for the Olympics, in his younger day, in a minor discipline, that of Hammer-Throw. He had seen the others throw in their various fashions, some ungainly, some mighty. Just a bit of a warm-up, and he grabbed the fish, and threw it way past where it had landed previously. Some were shocked, and cried foul. But, the judges saw nothing wrong with his skill, and the throw ended up winning the event.

Incredulous, many men vowed to learn more about how to throw it that far, and return next year. So, it has become an annual attempt, now including both genders, renowned around the world. Another Aussie Hammer Thrower came in 1998 to throw what still stands as the Record. Sean Carlin tossed a tuna 37.23m. In 2002, another Hammer Thrower, Brooke Krueger threw the female Record of 21.25m. So, these fish really can fly.

Even though none of the fish that have ever been thrown in competition have been intended for consumption by any person or animal, and have been classified as dead upon retrieval and too small for the market, a decision was made a few years ago to replace the fish used in the trials with rubberised versions. This was done for a number of reasons, mainly economic and convenience due to a reduced by-catch brought about by keener fishing methods. The finals do however still use the real fish, when we have some, as this remains the preferred method of all regular competitors, and more accurately reflects the balance of the actual animal for historic recording purposes. The donated fish that we use are not prime examples, by any means, they never were. As unusable by-catch, we merely hold them over for a while, until returning them to where they would have gone anyway.

The competition however, is a prime example of how a city interacts with its unique identity, and the industry which drives it forward. The people that began this tradition still live on with every toss, and even though the industry changes with technology and demand, this event definitively honours all those people that contributed to the beginnings of what is now arguably the best kept fishery in the Southern Hemisphere. For just a tiny taste of what it used to mean to work in this demanding industry, you are welcome to join us on the foreshore of Port Lincoln, every Australia Day weekend.