

# Getting In The ZONE!

Commercial mastermind, ex-UK Champion and England international **Andy Oldham** lets you in on his secrets behind successful preparation and practising!

**I**t was here at Sandbeck Lake that I caught my very first fish more than 40 years ago. Nowadays, this venue plays two very important roles in my angling... and that is for preparation and practice. These two key areas of angling go hand in hand with confidence. If I'm not fully prepared and haven't practised for a big event, I'm not confident. Having fished at all levels, from enjoying a pleasure day, to club fishing, open-match angling, and even competing internationally, I understand that it can be difficult to make sure everything is 100 per cent right. Like many of you reading this, I work full-time, five days a week, and I'm married with kids, so planning and carrying out my preparation and practice can often be tricky but here's how I do it.

## PREPARATION AT HOME

The three key aspects of preparation that I carry out at home are rig making, hook tying and elastication. Once you have these covered you can focus on gathering information and practising for a particular match. I have umpteen trays of rigs all made up and six hook boxes that are full to the brim. However, I don't have the amount of time on my hands that a full-time angler might. Instead, I pick a weekend or two out of my calendar



Little and often, Andy's secret behind building a big collection of rigs!



Having a variety of hook lengths prepared is a massive edge!

to build up the main bulk of gear. Then I'm very strict with myself to spend a small amount of time each week topping up and replenishing the stocks that I use when fishing at a weekend. If you can spend just an hour or two for three nights a week to re-tie the hooks and rigs that you've used, you'll keep a full stock. This is by far the best way of keeping on top of your kit.

## PREPARATION VENUE

There's nothing worse than turning up for a fishing match with a fuzzy head. We all go fishing because we enjoy it and if you're not in the right mind-set on the bank, it will definitely affect your results. I believe that it's vital to have a sentimental venue where you can go fishing, appreciate the sport, and do a little bit of preparation. I come here just half a dozen times a year, but each time it helps me clear my head and try out any new items of tackle. Often, I'll end up fishing for the day but I always enjoy it and I definitely believe that these few refreshing days' sport help me keep a clear head about fishing.

**To gather even more information, it pays to ring around fellow anglers to find out what they know about the venue.**

## USED AND ABUSED

Although I always like to keep my rigs and gear as fresh and clean as possible, I never use a new item of tackle or try a new tactic for the first time in a match. Far too often I see anglers go to a venue for the first time and try to fish in a way that they've never fished before. It very rarely works!

By the same token, if I haven't used a particular kind of float or grade of elastic before, the last thing I want to do is try it out in a match. I use my sessions here to try out any strange ideas that I have and to test certain items of tackle. For example, before last year's £50,000 Match This final, I made sure that I had fished with all my elastics at least once before, to bed them in and get them working correctly.

## GATHERING KNOWLEDGE

Another key part of my preparation involves getting the most up-to-date information

about the venue that I'm fishing. If a venue is local enough, then the best way is to go and have a look at it. This enables you to familiarise yourself with the pegs and features on particular lakes. If there are people fishing, you'll get some idea of what there is to be caught, too.

To gather even more information, it pays to ring around fellow anglers to find out what they know about the venue. Having as many contacts as possible is vital. I'm a big believer in sharing information; if you can give other anglers an idea about a certain venue, they can help you too. Fishing in a team is a huge help with this kind of preparation. Eight or 10 people discussing a venue and tactics will help you gain much more detailed information than chatting to one or two strangers.

However, although I listen to everything that people have to say when fishing a venue for the first time, I always target it in the way that I feel is right. If you simply try and copy a local expert or fish how somebody has told you to, you're likely

to be using a tactic that is outdated or one that they have already perfected. In these circumstances, you're only going to come second to them! I believe that the first match at a venue is often a learning curve. After that initial visit, you can return with your tactics tweaked and perfected.

## KNOW YOUR TARGET

One of the most important aspects of practising is working out which species to target. I'm a big believer in keeping fish going in the net and this often means targeting carp, FIs and silver fish such as skimmers at different stages during a match.

The chances are that most anglers on the bank will catch the mug fish early and late in the match, but suffer an hour or more in the middle where things are slow. A key part to my practising revolves around establishing how to put fish in the net during this period. It's an assault that

## PERFECTING YOUR PRACTICE!



Andy started the session feeding big pots of meat and hemp...



... before trying a loose-feed approach, which didn't work.



His final ploy of feeding balls of micros was by far the best attack!



Before any match, Andy likes to have fished with his elastics at least once.

### ANGLER FILE

**ANDY OLDHAM**  
Age: 49  
Lives: Maltby  
Sponsors: Frenzee, Bait-Tech  
Pole: Precision FXT 16m

### VENUE FILE

**SANDBECK LAKE**  
Location: Folds Lane, Tickhill  
Day tickets: £4 from Maltby Newsagents

Being able to relax and enjoy pleasure sessions is important. You can become frustrated if you're 100 per cent competition oriented!



has won me hundreds of matches over the years. Often, it can be catching small fish on casters short, while other times it might mean opening a new swim right out at 16 metres, or even taking a risk to catch one very large fish by really attacking the swim during the quiet period.

### BIG-MATCH PREPARATION

When preparing for a really important event, I take things to a different level altogether. When there's prestige and large sums of money up for grabs, I like to fish a venue at least five times. It's simply a case of planning your matches at the venue you'll be fishing.

When competing in last year's Match This final, I fished matches at Larford Lakes from six weeks before the event. Out of these, I probably threw away three trying different tactics and baits.

The Match Lake at Larford is a great example of why it's vital to practise a number of times. One bank is very shallow, while the other is much deeper, and then you have a number of corner swims and island swims that you could potentially draw, too. The more times you can practise

on the different swims, the more knowledge you will gain about the areas of the lake. If you go numerous times, the chances are that you'll also fish the venue while encountering different weather conditions. On my final session before a big match, I go and fish how I would do in the main match to try and discover any remaining faults in my attack.

### UNPREPARED SUCCESS

Most of us will know, or hear about, anglers who do very little preparation or practising but somehow seem to yield good results. This kind of mentality really doesn't work for me. If you're on a very good peg, you are likely to win the match whether you're prepared or not.

However, if I'm on an average peg and somebody much less prepared and practised is on the match winner, I'm very confident of beating them. By the same token, when you're really at the top of your game, you can even yield results from a below-average swim. There's nothing more satisfying than anglers patting you on the back and complimenting you for getting a good result off a bad peg.

### THE FINAL ZONE

A final focus of my fishing comes into play when I'm setting up and sat at the swim ready to fish. Alan Scotthorne taught me a key lesson many years ago and advised me to get to my swim as quickly as possible after drawing the peg. Then it's a case of working really hard to get set up promptly. You can then have the latter part of your setting-up time to relax, double-check everything, and watch the water for signs of fish that could be important later in the day. I always sit quietly on my box for at least 10 minutes preceding a match, particularly if I plan on starting on the short pole. The last thing you want to be doing is banging around on your platform and towering up over your swim just before you start fishing.

When you've prepared and practised for a session, getting into the zone at this final stage is the finishing touch and will definitely better your results. A final saying that is always in the back of my mind is something that everybody can apply to their fishing... fail to prepare, prepare to fail! ■



Try to establish how to catch for a full five hours. Silver fish can form a vital part of a plan.



Andy mixes all his groundbait at home to save his valuable setting-up time.



Good preparation and a clear mental attitude will make you very hard to beat!