



MARKING MILESTONES

You probably noticed that Tournament Talk in this issue is devoted primarily to the 50th annual White Marlin Invitational, hosted by the Beach Haven Marlin & Tuna Club out of Beach Haven, New Jersey.

There are dozens of tournaments these days, but few have lasted as long as the WMIT. It's a testament to persistence, of course. Tournament options have expanded, with big paydays and big party atmospheres. There have been weather challenges, most notably the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Sandy in October 2012, which destroyed the Beach Haven Marlin & Tuna Club's 50-year-old clubhouse.

But the very thing that brought the clubhouse back is what keeps this tournament going year after year: its sense of family. That was my first and my strongest impression the first time I set foot in the Beach Haven clubhouse, with its captains' chairs monogrammed in gold leaf and

paneled walls lined with photos capturing its history. Sitting with club members that afternoon in 2001, trying to capture the club's essence, I felt as welcomed as if my family had been members forever.

The Beach Haven tournament isn't the only thing marking a milestone this summer. For me, this summer marks 20 years of writing about fishing – primarily saltwater fishing – in New Jersey. Like the Beach Haven tournament, the path has been meandering. What started almost as a lark in the summer of 1999 – “I want to know what it's really like to be out there fishing,” my boss at the time, John Quinn, told me – turned into a winding path that has at times been a safe haven amid the storms of journalism and others a challenge in and of itself.

This 20th year anniversary is important to me for other reasons, however. For many of us, fishing is an activity we've done with our dads. I am no excep-

tion. My dad took me freshwater fishing when I was toddler in Virginia, and taught me how to catch trout so well that I practically ran home with the rainbow trout I pulled from a Pennsylvania creek when I was 12.

Saltwater fishing held an allure for me after we moved to New Jersey, but as teenagers activities were many and time was short, so we never dabbled in it. When John Quinn held up the flier for Mako Mania in the late spring of 1999, however, I jumped at the opportunity. We decided it would be a weekly column that summer.

I shared the news of my new fishing column with my dad in the car a couple days later. I was driving him to a doctor's appointment in Philadelphia. He'd spent Memorial Day weekend having a laryngectomy. Cancer claimed his voice box thanks to 30 years of smoking – and he was headed back for a post-op checkup. He was still not able to speak at that point, so a notepad and pen-

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cil were his constant companion.

The column needs a name, I told him. My dad has always had a penchant for a turn of phrase, and I knew he'd help me come up with something that was just the right fit. He scribbled on the notepad. I forget now how many ideas we tossed around and rejected, but we settled on one that fit the concept and my personality: Tails From The Deep – and yes, the pun was intentional.

That car ride has stayed with me all these years because those days surrounding his laryngectomy and my dad's recovery were some of the most frightening of my life. We were less than two years removed from the death of my mom and the love of his life. My parents had been married nearly 33 years when my mother passed at 53 due to sepsis caused by diverticulitis. When we learned Dad had throat cancer, my brother and I had barely begun to recover from the trauma of losing Mom.

That car ride was the first time I

remember really laughing in months.

Twenty years have passed, and I am fortunate to be able to say I still have my dad. He still freshwater fishes occasionally; he moved back to Virginia for a few years and we had a ball catching smallmouth bass in the Shenandoah River on one summer trip.

Due to the laryngectomy, boat fishing is off-limits, as is anything where he could find himself under water, so he never got into the saltwater scene. But he would cheer me on through my many excursions. He used to tease me occasionally because of the bait fishing aspect (he's a lures purist), but when the column with the name he conjured up turned into a job as the New Jersey editor of *The Fisherman*, and later, to my role here with the *Big Game Fishing Journal*, he couldn't have been more proud.

Now that he and my stepmom live in Florida, he sometimes jokes that I should come down there and write a fishing column

for the local paper in their community. I think he just wants me to come to Florida, but there's no doubt in my mind that we'd have fun with a pastime that's always been a bond.

Anniversaries give us the chance to reflect on where we've been and where we're going. The paths may take us in directions we'd never imagined – certainly, that's happened to me – but they can bring to you places that fill your life with a different joy and a new family.

Beach Haven's tournament is like a family reunion, whether you're attending for the first time or the 50th. And as I mark 20 years of writing about fishing, I'm grateful for the family that I've found along the way.

Thank you, readers, for being an important part of that family. 🐟



Karen Wall