

WMIT TURNS 50!

A NEXT GEN OFFSHORE CLASSIC

BY JIM HUTCHINSON, JR.

The longest running white marlin tournament in the country maintains its "Island" roots.

According to Beach Haven native and noted national fishing writer Karl Anderson, the White Marlin Invitational was founded in 1970 as the brainchild of Capt. Joe Bossard

who ran Beach Haven Marlin and Tuna Club (BHMTCC) member Bob Gaskill's *Bee Dee*.

"Bossard had been fishing up and down the coast, spending time from Manasquan to Florida and then coming to Beach Haven, so he had the connections to attract anglers from up and down the coast," Anderson noted in his 2017 write up on the tournament's fabled history.

Following Capt. Bossard's time at the helm, Don Leek took over tournament reins and was able to pull boats

from up and down the coast. "Leek was a long time white marlin aficionado, having fished offshore on the families Pacemaker and Egg Harbor company boats since the early sixties," Anderson noted, adding "He had also been written about in several magazines and books of the time about his quest fishing the offshore grounds for the cunning white marlin."

This month, the BHMTCC will celebrate the 50th year of the White Marlin Invitational (WMIT), what stands today as the longest running white marlin tournament in the United States. And while there have been some notable club member boats in this first class event - Piney Parker's *ABC*, Dick Ryon's *Anthracite*, Leek's *Wild Duck*, Walter Johnson's *J&T*, Patrick Healey's *Viking* tournament boats, and the very first WMIT winner in 1970, Nelson Barrington aboard *Vana*, to name but a few - what has often stood out most



The Melina crew celebrates during the weigh-in of their 356-pound blue marlin at the 49th annual White Marlin Invitational in 2018, with Capt. Nick Perello giving a front and center thumbs up. Photo by John DeBona.



over the years might be the underdogs and next generation of hardcore fishermen.

WHARF RATS

Capt. Nick Perello is 19 years old. A graduate of the Beach Haven Charter Fishing Association's "Junior Mates" program, Perello grew up on the docks in Beach Haven and has been a BHMTTC member since the age of 7. "My dad's been doing it since the early 2000s," he told me, thinking back to his early days before he was old enough to actually fish the White Marlin Invitational. "I'd get up every morning and watch the boats go out. And I remember always wanting to do it."

Having spent a relative lifetime watching tournament fish weighed in at the BHMTTC clubhouse, Capt. Perello manned the helm of Bill Burris's *Melina* for the first time last year at the age of 18 in the 49th White Marlin Invitational. On day two of the contest under somewhat sporty conditions, the *Melina* hooked up with a 356-pound blue marlin, the eventual tournament winner. "It's definitely in the top experiences of my life," the young skipper said.

The crew had satellite wi-fi onboard, which allowed them to text White Marlin Invitational director Dave Ridley back ashore to let him know they were coming home from the 100 Square with a good weigh-in. The buzz throughout Beach Haven brought scores of spectators out to the BHMTTC to watch. "When we brought the blue marlin and bigeye back to the scales, the club had the old feel again," Capt. Perello said, adding "There were a couple of hundred people there and everyone was cheering, it reminded me of the early days of the tournament."

Capt. Perello is running Eugene White's *Nora Angela* now, a 36-foot Bertram Express. He's known his fellow BHMTTC member and boat owner White a long time. "When I was 11 I saw some guy in AFTCO shorts carrying a striper and I asked if I could clean his fish," he recalled. "Next thing you know it was 'hey would you mind cleaning my boat once a week.'"

It's been a strong friendship and bond created through the 75-year old BHMTTC, which Perello hopes will be another successful run at the White Marlin Invitational chip this year aboard White's *Nora Angela*. "When you're in that tournament mindset it can be very stressful," Perello said. "But it's still fun in the long run, especially when you do get that fish."

COMMUNITY FEEL

Any club, business, organization, tournament or even relationship that reaches their golden anniversary will have had to endure some type of hardship and obstacles. In Beach Haven, the effects of Sandy and the follow-up shoaling at Little Egg Inlet was about as debilitating as it could get. But in 2018, nearly three-quarters of a million cubic yards of sand was dredged from the inlet, creating a navigable boat channel a mile long and 24 feet below mean sea level, ideal for easy in and out by large sportfishing vessels ideally suited to fish the canyons in summer.

"Now that we have a dredged inlet, I think it will really bring the crowds together again," Karl Anderson told me recently. Anderson and I grew up together, our fathers worked and occasionally fished together, and we both



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entered the recreational fishing industry (though Karl now runs, manages and has built boats out of Florida while continuing to write for publications and big game fishing the world over). "I'm at the point in my life where I do the things I want to do," he said, hoping to return in July for the 50th anniversary of the White Marlin Invitational.

Perhaps it's that community feel coming out of Beach Haven and the surrounding area that contributes to that mentoring nature so important to success in sportfishing. Local captains and crews who've fish the Beach Haven docks as kids, cut their teeth in the cockpit and moved on to captain boats around the world, or perhaps dropping out of the off-island corporate world to enter the recreational fishing industry.

"Geez, we were 17 then," said now 35-year-old Dante Soriente of Magic Tails Bucktails, who together with the then-teen crew of Mike Yocco, Will Kayhart, Jared Fout, and Joe Stefanelli turned heads at the White Marlin Invitational back in 2002 when they brought three bigeye back from the Spencer. It would be the first of several good years in the contest for the young MJ's crew.



The 2002 young guns from MJ's with Joe Stefanelli, Jared Fout, Dante Soriente, Michael Yocco, and Will Kayhart with their cash-winning bigeye. Photo courtesy of Dante Soriente.

"That was the first tournament we fished together," Soriente told me thinking back to that 2002 event that he fished with friends he'd had since the age of 6 or 7. "We just had enough money to enter the tournament and pay for gas, we couldn't afford the calcuttas."

Soriente felt as if he was about to get kicked out of the tournament before it even started after showing up at the captains meeting dressed down and with a doo rag on his head. "I was looking like some 17-year-old punk, and guys were looking at me a little funny at that captains meeting,"

Soriente said, recalling how he was told the event was only for fishermen. "I told them, I am fishing the tournament," he laughed as he thought back to that event. "I guess I got the last laugh."

After several top finishes in the tournament circuit, the MJ's team continues to fish some of the very biggest offshore tournaments along the coast, and quite successfully at that. And while the White Marlin Invitational remains the oldest and perhaps premier white marlin tournament in the U.S. with a first-class dockside experience, it continues to maintain a local flair. "That's why we always loved the Beach Haven tournament, it always felt like a blue collar offshore tournament, very local," Soriente added.

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THE BIG "FIVE OH"

In the early days of the White Marlin Invitational, Anderson said boats would stage in front of Morrison's Marina as crowds gathered along town bulkheads to watch them leave in darkness, parading down the ICW and out the inlet at Beach Haven. "It was the camaraderie, people came to hang out and be together. It was a real social deal. And the fishing caliber was incredible, with captains and crews coming from all over the place, Florida, the Carolinas, everywhere," he told me, while remarking how boats like *Anthracite*, one of the very first custom boats to fish the tournament, was one of the first boats to go to the canyon in 1959.

"Back in the '70s you didn't have a tournament every weekend, and the fleet was small with only about 30 boats fishing the canyon. Now there are hundreds," Anderson noted.

This year, tournament organizers out of Beach Haven are making a few changes for the 50th anniversary season. "After a successful two years having a weigh station at Hoffman's, we are hosting the 50th WMIT at the Beach Haven Marlin & Tuna Club, and BHMTTC will be the only weigh station," said Tournament Director Dave Ridley. "We'll see what happens in future years, and while Hoffman's has provided great support and a great partnership, the 50th is a special year and we want to return some of the excitement to boats docking at Morrison's Marina and surrounding marinas so tournament participants are participating in the excitement of the fishing and events at the club during tournament week."

Changes incorporated into the WMIT in recent years have also been well-received by participants, including

expanding to four days to provide better offshore weather windows. "This was very well received as it's not easy to run offshore back to back days which often happened under the old format," Ridley said. The club has also lowered the registration fee, reintroduced the Blue Marlin Calcutta, and added a new 29-foot and under calcutta for "smaller boats," while also simplifying the rules while opening up the BHMTTC to encourage more spectators at the weigh-in.

Ridley said they are also refocusing this year on their tournament namesake, the white marlin. "There is a skill and touch to catching marlin that is special and we want further challenge participants to target marlin," Ridley said, adding "you can still win a lot of money and awards with all allowed species - and tuna may be the biggest payout as it all depends on the calcuttas, but marlin will be elevated above all others for awards and certain calcutta categories."

For folks who've been involved in the White Marlin Invitational since the earlier days, the changes have been well-received. "I love what Dave Ridley and the crew are doing this year to put the emphasis on white marlin this year, I think what they're doing is a big deal," Anderson said while adding, "It's where it all started for me."

And for those just beginning to write the next 50 years of BHMTTC history, it's still all just about catching those fish and enjoying the traditions. "I don't know what my tactic is this year, I just want to go out and have fun," added Perello.

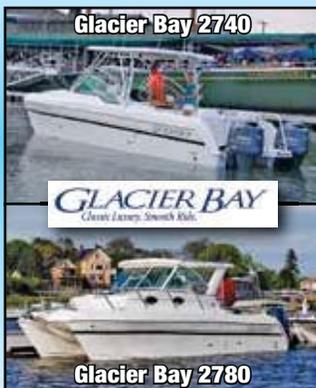
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