

# A Marlin Tournament Wachapreague Style

Story and Photos by John Shtogren

The Eastern Shore Marlin Club's home is in "the Little by the Sea," Wachapreague, Virginia, pop. 236. More specifically, it is headquartered in Captain Zed's Bait and Tackle Shop, which is slightly larger than a one-car garage. But there are times when quantity and quality are inversely proportional, when smaller may indeed be better. The ESMC's 26th Annual Billfish Release Tournament last July was a clear case in point. You can easily find tournaments with bigger purses, but it would be hard to find one with a bigger heart.

The ESMC describes itself as a dedicated group of sport fishermen who sail the Atlantic in search of game fish, especially marlin. When it holds a tournament, it is release-only when it comes to billfish. To bring a marlin alongside and briefly marvel at its awesome beauty is more than enough

for an ESMC fisherman. As said in the ESMC's tournament invitation, "There is no million dollar prize, just good fun and fellowship. Come join us."

## Tournament v. Tournament

A quick comparison with what happens out of Ocean City, Maryland, versus Wachapreague shows that there are very different kinds of marlin tournaments and marlin fishermen. While separated by less than 100 miles of shoreline, the two ports are worlds apart in terms of marlin fishing.

Each August Ocean City hosts the White Marlin Open, "The World's Largest Bill Fishing Tournament," an event that

draws 400 boats each paying upwards of \$15,000 to compete in the various categories. At the end of each fishing day, they hang their catch at dockside before masses of tourists and spectators. Last year an 82-lb. white marlin won \$1.5 million, while another white marlin weighing just a pound less brought \$151,000. A 736-lb. blue marlin took in \$660,000. With that much money on the table, it's no wonder that all fishermen winning over \$50,000—and there are more than a few—have to take a polygraph test to prove they followed tournament rules.

The ESMC's tournament is different in many obvious ways—30-some boats



A blue marlin close enough to be "caught" on *Bimini Twist*, Captain Gene Crockett.  
Photo courtesy of ESMC

pay \$20 each to enter, and winning is an honor, not a major source of income. There are real people onboard: family, friends and neighbors—not corporate-sponsored pros. They fish for the love of the sport and the joy of being out on blue water with land two hours back over the stern. They follow the rules as a matter of honesty and integrity.

And they don't kill marlin. ESMC members are acutely aware of the dwindling number of billfish, and none will hang on the dock at Wachapreague. Only tuna, wahoo, and dolphin, all sustainable species, come to the scales at the end of the day on their way to the table.

### A Banquet to Begin

The Lewis family has been at the heart of the ESMC since it began 26 years ago. Randy Lewis Sr., owner of Captain Zed's, was one of the founding fathers and is currently its president. His son Randy Jr., owner of the Island House Restaurant and Hotel Wachapreague, handled this year's opening banquet the night before the fishing started, and it was quickly apparent why he has been invited to provide the fare for Jimmy Buffet's Norfolk concerts for over 20 years

Over 200 captains, crew members, and guests dug into an Eastern Shore feast: steamed crabs, clams with drawn butter, potato salad, baked beans, fresh cucumbers and tomatoes, sweet corn steamed in its



**Raisin Nets, a 46-foot Hatteras Sport Fisherman**

husk, and mounds and mounds of just-barbecued pork. As you went through the food line you couldn't help but notice all the marlin accessories on both men and women: earrings, bracelets, necklaces and shoulder tattoos. They are serious about their marlin.

Everyone eating under the big tent seemed to know each other, kids were everywhere, and as soon as you sit down you become a part of it all. Between bites you're soon telling new acquaintances what you're all about and learning the same from them. Among other things you learn that children are not only welcomed but encouraged to attend the tournament functions as guests of the ESMC. As with all outdoor sports, the future of marlin fishing depends on the children, the ESMC's future captains, mates and anglers.

At the brief captain's meeting the tournament rules were reviewed, and as the meeting broke up captains and crews milled about wishing each other safe and enjoyable days on the water. You got the feeling that if something happened out on the water over the horizon, you'd not be alone for long; another boat would soon be there for you.

### Tournament Rules

The ESMC tournament follows International Game Fishing Association rules. It is strictly a trolling tournament—no chumming, no casting, no nets, no live bait. Each boat runs to its favorite fishing grounds before the 8 AM "lines in" time and slows to trolling speed until "lines out" at 3:30 PM. In between it is a matter of skill and luck.

If the two come together and a marlin hits, the captain must immediately call the committee boat with the hook-up time. Earliest fish caught trumps later fish, and size doesn't count. A marlin is "caught" at the moment the angler brings the fish in close enough to the boat for a crew member to touch the leader, the last 25 feet of line between the fish and fisherman. After the touch the marlin is released quickly without it ever being brought on board. No judges are watching; the ESMC runs on trust.

Tuna, wahoo and dolphin that are caught and kept will be weighed at dock-side, and the biggest will be declared the



**Randy Lewis, Jr. (center) with wife Haley and future ESMC member, son Charley. The author on the right**



A blue marlin release, up close and personal on *Bimini Twist*, Captain Gene Crockett  
Photo courtesy of ESMC

best no matter what time they were taken.

### A Day on the Big Blue

I was invited to tag along on the opening day aboard *Raisin Nets*, a beautiful 46-foot Hatteras Sport Fisherman owned by Larry Roost of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Larry asked Captain Nat Atkinson, a third-generation Wachapreague captain, to take her helm during the tournament so he could be off the bridge and down closer to the action in the cockpit.

I soon learned it was very much a family affair: the first mate, J.P., is Nat's brother, and Park, the young angler on board, is J.P.'s son; Suzie, another angler, is Captain Nat's wife and, as it turns out, is sister to Randy Lewis Jr.; Suzie's friend, Debbie Shrieves, rounded out the crew, and she works at Captain Zed's, Randy Lewis Sr.'s tackle shop. It sounds like a tight, closed group, but it wasn't. I was made to feel a regular part of the crew from the moment I set foot on board and had my first doughnut.

*Raisin Nets* left the dock at 5 AM and would not return for 13 hours. Out on the blue water time flows differently than it does on dry land. Whole periods drift away with the rumble of the engines and the roll

of the waves. But certain moments stay with you long after you've come ashore for reasons that at first are not always clear.

- *We're 10 miles off shore before the sun first crests the ocean's rim. A local version of an old Crosby, Stills and Nash song repeats in my head: "Got out of town on a boat goin' to the Norfolk Canyon...it's as big as the promise, the promise of the coming day."*

- *Larry, the boat owner and gracious host, owned a restaurant up in Williamsport—seafood, of course.*

- *It's 40 miles out to the Norfolk Canyon where the big fish feed. The water depth drops from 100 to 600 feet in a few turns of the screws. The Irish fisherman's prayer comes to me clearer than ever: "Oh Lord, how great is Thy ocean, how small is my boat."*

- *Captain Nat could have booked a charter on his own boat, Foxy Lady, but would rather be on the Raisin Nets with his family and friends. First mate J.P. could be at his NASA job but feels the same way.*

- *At 8 AM the six lines go out on outriggers and over the stern with a chorus line of pink rubber squid teasers dancing in between the lines. And now we wait and*

*wait and talk and wait.*

- *J.P. and Park are having a poignant father-son day. Park will leave for his first year at UVA in a few short weeks, and after that everything is bound to change.*

- *The radio up on the bridge murmurs all day long, connecting boats fanned out over hundreds of square miles of ocean. The Captains share the day: "Nope, not much here either." "Ah, man, you had it sooo close!" "Atta boy, you worked hard and deserved that one!"*

- *Captain Nat and Suzie are enduring every parent's worst nightmare. Last winter the most tragic car accident the Eastern Shore has ever seen claimed their son, their first mate. "Fair winds and following seas, Jarod."*

- *"Fish on!" hits you like a shot of adrenalin straight to the heart! Engines back down, lines are pulled, rods are handed off and anglers scramble to the fighting chairs. Captain Nat was right, big fish were hanging below the schools of feeding skipjacks. When it's over aunt Suzie and nephew Park have what looks like identical yellowfin tunas in the box, both a good 50 lbs. Later at the official scales Park's fish will take Suzie's by a pound, which somehow seems*

Park Atkinson with his yellowfin





As big as the promise of the coming day

right and proper.

- Raisin Nets has her tuna and dolphin flags flying as she slips into her berth. Family and friends line the dock and soon kids of all ages swarm aboard and peer wide-eyed into the fish box.

- That night at the Island House Restaurant the floor is still gently rolling when Chef Gary Sokaitis delivers grilled fillets of our yellowfin tuna to our waterside table. He's prepared them in two ways: some blackened, some with only grill marks and lime butter, both better than any fish that travels any distance from the sea. A fine bottle of New Zealand sauvignon blanc mysteriously appears. Outside on the dock a sailor with an accordion is singing Irish sea shanties to a small group as an almost-full moon climbs up out of the Atlantic. Oh my, this is very, very good.

#### Postscript

The next day Raisin Nets flew her marlin flag when she came in. Captain Atkinson accounted for one of the five white marlin and six blue marlin "caught" during the two days of fishing. The marlin didn't win a trophy, but then Captain Nat and his crew, like the others in the ESMC Tournament, were all winners. Those who took home trophies included:

Top Boat Overall: *Bimini Twist*, Captain Gene Crockett with two blue marlin releases  
 Largest Tuna: 63.2 lbs., *Teaser* with Captain Keith Neal and angler Allen

Barfield

Largest Wahoo: 57.6 lbs., *Teaser* with Captain Keith Neal and angler Kevin Menamin

Largest Dolphin: 16.6 lbs., *James Gang* with Captain B.W. James and angler H.D. Parker

To learn more about Wachapreague, check [www.wachapreague.com](http://www.wachapreague.com) (includes infor-

mation about the Island House Restaurant and Wachapreague Hotel, Captain Zed's, and fishing in the area).

*Raisin Nets* can be chartered through her owner Larry Roost at 570-322-7128.

Captain Nat Atkinson's *Foxy Lady* can be chartered at 757-787-2105.

If you would like to know more about the ESMC, contact Kate Evans, Secretary, at [ESMarlinclub@yahoo.com](mailto:ESMarlinclub@yahoo.com). For \$20 annual dues you can join the club. My check was in the mail a day after the July tournament.

John Shtogren is the senior editor for *The Virginia Sportsman*. He is also an outdoorsman, farmer and international management consultant whose travels often take him to the far edges and borderlands. He welcomes comments at [jshtogren@cs.com](mailto:jshtogren@cs.com).



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**27th Annual Eastern Shore Billfish Release Tournament July 24-27, 2008**

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