



Bang the Banana Drum

First Annual Virginia Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce Black Drum World Championship Fishing Tournament

by
Court Van Clief

“Come on! Get them, Detroit’s smokin’!” Capt. Neil Lessard barks over the VHS, offering good-natured encouragement to the sport fishing battlewagon leading us out of Bay Creek Marina. Capt. Neil eyes his throttles, eager to shove them down hard and bring *Top Dog* on step for a 30-minute run to the fishing grounds. “We gonna smoke ‘em in about two minutes,” crackles the reply.

An argosy of fishing boats is outward bound on lower Chesapeake Bay. The 1st Annual Virginia Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce Black Drum World Championship Fishing Tournament is off and running.

On the dock prior to departure, Capt. Neil bumps into fellow contestant Joe Haebel. Joe asks, “Where you going today?” Neil answers with a shrug and a grin, “I’m going to my spot.” Fishermen

tend to divulge information with a fair helping of ambiguity, especially on tournament day.

Capt. Neil turns to offer assistance to John Howard West and his group as they arrive boatside. John Howard’s prominent J.H. West Seafood Co. is a tournament sponsor. His daughter Cheli, along with Cindy Tatem and Chuck Tilghman, joins us on board forming a formidable and good-natured tournament fishing team. John Howard always comes well provisioned. His 120-quart Igloo cooler is packed with a variety of well-iced drinks and an array of grub rivaling Cape Charles’s local deli. The bananas won’t be revealed until we ride the anchor, lines in the water.

Top Dog bucks a moderate chop served up by an early morning 15-knot breeze out of the southwest. A total of 71 boats transporting 341 tournament anglers are charging hard toward GPS numbers selected by skippers based on earlier fishing sallies. A climbing sun melts the morning’s chill as tournament boats ride the hook on lower Chesapeake Bay shoals sporting monikers like Cabbage Patch and Latimer Shoal. Black drum forage the bottom like a fleet of submarines searching for hard-shelled clams burrowed in the Bay’s sandy floor. The thought of large schools boasting seniors over 100 pounds foraging across sand bars in the Bay’s green depths conjures up an impressive image.

A bright spring morning ebbs with the tide. Laughing gulls and royal terns swirl and dip through clear skies for morsels of bait cast off by the fleet of anglers. Conversation onboard is pleasant as we play the waiting game. Cockpit mate Daniel keeps a watchful eye on the tackle and baits, increasing our odds for success, when a black drum school crosses the bar. Capt. Neil suggests, “When the tide starts to flood, beware. That’s when it’ll happen. When *Top Dog*’s stern is aimed directly at Cape Charles. That’s



John Howard West fights a big black drum.

what we want to see.”

At 1130 hours *Top Dog* goes slack on her anchor line. Subtly, her stern swings east, then north. An air of anticipation permeates the cockpit.

As the anchor line begins to come tight, stern aiming directly at the Cape Charles water tower, John Howard West appears in the cockpit toting a bunch of bananas. I believe I hear Capt. Neil groan from the flying bridge. We look at each other in stunned silence. There is an old adage among anglers: Fish don't bite if bananas are on board. The origin of the curse is foggy, though I've heard fishermen from Martha's Vineyard to the Bahamas warn of its spell.

Seemingly enjoying our discomfort, John Howard prepares to launch into his high potassium snack when the left bridge rod goes down abruptly. Bananas are tossed aside making way for Cindy Tatem to join battle with the day's initial adversary. A determined fight takes place down deep, a series of short, dogged runs, head shakes and sheer weight resistance. Black drum!

Capt. Neil has matched well tackle to fish. A deeply bowed boat rod armed with reel and line appropriate to the quarry make for excellent sport. Cindy endures the pounding of the initial fight



Top Dog in her slip at Bay Creek Marina

with true grit and works her fish off the bottom determinately, bringing him alongside. Daniel slips the gaff to fish and a solid Black Drum lands in the cockpit--not a contender but one for the freezer..

Shortly after the first success, two rods go off simultaneously. No time for bananas; John Howard and Chuck Tilghman rush to take up the fight. Intensity in the cockpit is the same when big fish come to call, regardless of species. Capt. Neil bounds down the bridge ladder on a mission. He and Daniel hustle to haul in six lines and clear the cockpit for the fight.

Lines pour from spools as John Howard and Chuck hang on. The fight is down deep again but with a gusto not presented by the first fish. These are superior black drum. Anglers charge from one side of the cockpit to the other, adeptly crossing lines over or under, keeping up with the demands of large fish still in charge. Eventually the anglers manage to turn the fish toward the surface. One after another Daniel sinks the gaff, flexing to the task of landing heavy fish on the deck.

These two will have an appointment with tournament scales this evening.

John Howard joins the jubilation in the fish-covered cockpit. He exclaims with a wide grin, while peeling a ripe banana, “Man, that’s a good banana!” Enthusiasm is fine, but thumbing your nose at a well-known curse? It just takes attitude, I guess. I’m not taking any chances with bananas on my boat, and I doubt Capt. Neil will make them routine onboard. Today, though, aboard *Top Dog*, it’s black drum and bananas, and the nickname “Banana Drum” is born.

An afternoon flood tide is rushing past Cape Charles like a river when the decision is made to head for the beach. Feelings onboard are of pleasant satisfaction as two potential “tournament” fish are headed for the scales.

Capt. Neil guides *Top Dog* through the boat channel paralleling Cape Charles’s town beach and navigates the dog leg right into Bay Creek Marina’s entry channel. The boat channel runs close to shore and affords a good view of elegant Victorian homes lining Bay Avenue.

Back at the dock, a vibrant atmosphere surrounds Bay Creek Marina's fine facility as crews hustle dock carts laden with large silvery fish to the official weigh-in. Celebrations break out as victories are declared. Others simply celebrate an excellent day of camaraderie and time well spent on the water. A crew from Virginia Marine Recourses Commission dissects fish, documenting findings for science. Afterwards the fish are cleaned, and fillets not claimed by anglers are prepared for transportation to area food banks.

At the awards ceremony Betty Hall presented the victors with their spoils. Betty, a lifelong resident of Cape Charles, knows something about black drum fishing. Her IWGFA world record 111-pound black drum caught off Cape Charles has stood the test of time for 34 years, a stupendous angling achievement. She made the awards presentation truly special.

Congratulations were given to C. L. Marshall of Pocomoke City, Maryland, whose 81.13 pounder took first honors. Virginians Mike Hoke of Richmond and Ivan Claplinger of Mechanicsville nailed down place and show with fish weighing 78.1 and 77.03 pounds. Marty Bull captured a special sportsmanship award for the tag and release of three fish. Though *Top Dog's* entries fell only ounces short, satisfaction for a job well done by captain, crew and anglers prevailed.

During the awards ceremony, Bay Creek chefs rolled out covered carts to the marina's center pier T head. As an evening sun angled toward Chesapeake Bay, anglers gathered around a perfectly prepared meal of, fittingly, "drumfish" with all the trimmings. Tales of an excellent day on the water were shared against the backdrop of a picturesque Bay estuary bearing a name illustrating the rich history of an exceptional area, King's Creek.

A quick look at responses to the 1st Annual World Championship Black Drum Fishing Tournament and results attained make it clear: Virginia Eastern

Shore Chamber of Commerce president Jeff Davis and his crew have set the tone for a tournament worth looking forward to for years to come.

Bay Creek Resort and Club www.baycreek.net and the town of Cape Charles are definitely worth a visit. Bay Creek's championship golf courses were designed by Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus and are rated highly by *Golf Magazine*. It is a neighbor to Cape Charles, a quaint, peaceful Eastern Shore town of tree-lined streets with Victorian homes beautifully situated on Chesapeake Bay's sparkling shores.

Bay Creek Marina is truly world class, offering excellent docking facilities, fine dining with a relaxing lounge on the water, exciting shops, accommodations ashore and a well-stocked ship's store and tackle shop. Fishing in the area rivals the best you'll find anywhere.

When you come to Cape Charles and Bay Creek, be sure to look up Capt. Neil Lessard of Top Dog Charters (cell: 757-647-3017; 757-678-0966; www.topdogcharters.com). He can definitely put you on the fish, from blue water to the lower Chesapeake Bay.

Court Van Clief is a freelance writer and regular contributor to *The Virginia Sportsman*. He is a career thoroughbred horseman and an avid angler and conservationist residing on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay in Mathews, Virginia. He can be reached at SeaBoy50@aol.com.

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