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Bright Lights, Big Rock

BY BILL MORRIS :: PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT TAYLOR

“A million four,” a head-wagging bystander said with a whistle as he watched a blue marlin being weighed at the Big Rock tournament scales. “That’s a lot of money for a fish.”

The tourist’s figure was a little off. If it held up, the first marlin brought to the scales in the 46th Annual Big Rock Tournament – a 555-pounder caught by Donald Lane Jr.’s *Impulse* – could claim \$711,000 of the total \$1,476,175 purse. In spirit he was right on, though that is a lot of money for a fish.

But . . . the big marlin was weighed shortly after noon on Wednesday, along with two 400-pounders. The big question was, would it hold up all week? From Wednesday through Saturday, the tension at the bustling Morehead City, Beaufort, and Atlantic Beach docks grew with each passing hour. Every minute the lines were in the water the crew of the *Impulse*, their family and friends, held their collective breath.

So much money and prestige are on the line in the Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament that nearly 200 boats spare no expense or effort in pursuit of the prize-winning fish. And so, for a week every June, the marinas of Carteret County are home to a small navy of 58-foot Rybaviches, Jarrett Bays, Ricky Scarboroughs and custom Spencers. Then there are the truly big boys, like *Seaphoria* (61 Viking), *Reflection* (63 Ocean), *Megabite* (61 Blackwell), and the suggestively named *Topless*, a 61-foot Garlington from Baltimore. Boats with home ports from Connecticut to Florida come to town for the Big Rock, and the fishermen hail



Cutlines

from all over the world.

Along with every high-dollar boat comes a highly ambitious owner – who may or may not hire a marlin-savvy captain – and at least one, usually two, experienced mates. But if the Big Rock is part floating boat show and part intense competition, it is also equal parts legalized gambling and big-league frat party. For every professional captain who has caught dozens of tournament billfish, there are entire crews of Big Rock fishermen who put up their share of the entry fee and come to town ready to party at night and sleep it off in the salon the next morning.

Thanks to what one seasoned charterboat captain calls “rodeo rules” (as opposed to the strict IGFA rules), the skill level of the anglers who sit in the fighting chair and do the actual reeling covers the spectrum from novice to expert. Some entries are akin pickup basketball teams: they come to town, rent a condo, charter a boat, and collectively put up the \$11,500 entry fee. As the money at stake has risen above \$1 million, the pickup teams have increasingly found themselves competing against the fishing equivalent of the NBA All Stars. But, thanks to its rules and tradition, the Big Rock is still seen as a true free-for-all where a 36 Hatteras and a crew of competent, but not professional fishermen has a shot at claiming the big money.





Cutlines



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Ron Clemmons' *Steel Deal* did just that in 2002 with a 489-pound blue marlin that finished second but was worth \$471,000. (The Big Rock has a casino-style tiered entry system which sometimes rewards the more fearless gambler over the biggest fish.) Clemmons, who owns Apex Steel Company in the Triangle, says he used his share of the purse to put some new electronics on his boat and "buy my wife a big rock."

As the 46th tournament went into its final day, there were a number of eerie parallels to the 44th. Just like 2002, only a few blue marlin had been brought to the dock – the *Impulse's* 555, a 454-pounder caught by *Rumor Mill* from Kure Beach, and a 422 from Southern Exposure out of King George, Virginia. Mirroring the *Steel Deal*, the *Impulse* crew caught their big fish early and then had to suffer sleepless nights as 193 boats took direct aim at them.

"I was a nervous wreck all day," Donald Lane told an interviewer. "I've never been through anything like this."

While the leaders stewed and the rest of the field set its sites on a bigger marlin, the Big Rock kept up its tradition as the Crystal Coast's best-dressed, best-fed, best-refreshed weeklong party.

Appropriately, the fishing tournament always starts with an official Captain's Party at the Crystal Coast Civic Center. One longtime Big Rock observer called it "the biggest display of jewelry and [assets] in the history of Carteret County."

The enormity of The Big Rock can also be measured by the size and slickness of its program, which runs to 138 pages filled with event photos and advertising. The sponsors aren't just tackle manufacturers and boat builders, but also banks, jewelers, breweries, and realtors.

All week long, restaurants and bars were jammed. "Buy some stock in Stoly," was one bartender's recommendation. Grey Goose would not have made a bad investment, either. Tourists who came to the docks to gawk at big fish and big boats



wandered in and out of the same watering holes hoping to rub elbows with the outrigger set.

"Which boat are you on?" became the stock opening line for conversations that might lead anywhere. But, as the week wore on and the winds and seas picked up, those who had come mainly for the party saw their interest in going to sea diminish. It's not uncommon – or even frowned upon – for a Big Rock participant to spend only one of the allotted four days on board, and actual time in the fighting chair could accurately be measured in seconds-per-angler.

Meanwhile, the hardcore competitors sharpened their hooks, checked their wind-logs, and prepared to do anything that might raise a marlin bigger than 555 pounds.

"We rode four hours to fish the triple-zeroes up off Hatteras," said Gregg Penley, veteran tournament fisherman and mate for the week on *Reflection*. "My day started at four A.M. and ended after nine." After

their long trip to Hatteras and back the boat took on more than 500 gallons of diesel fuel. Multiply that by 194 boats, each fishing four days, and you get a glimpse into the huge amount of money the tournament pumps into the local economy.

According to Ken Kramer, captain of the *Bluewater* and a past tournament winner, "The Big Rock is long periods of boredom interrupted by seconds of complete panic. Just when you're about to fall asleep you see that bill come into the teasers and everything just busts loose."

Except for Wednesday's three blue marlin, not much was busting loose in the 46th Big Rock. Captains muttered about "blended water," meaning that the temperature breaks that attract billfish were hard to find. Chuck Tulevech, fishing on a 35 Carolina Classic named for his business, *Town Creek Marina*, believed the slow fishing could be blamed on a new moon. There was even some speculation that NATO training exercises being held just offshore

had driven the marlin away.

Everyone had a theory, or at least a story. After 46 years there's plenty of Big Rock lore. Just ask Ed Ward, who drives the "chase boat" ferrying tuna, dolphin, and wahoo to the official scales.

While trying not to bump into some of the most expensive transoms on earth, Ed told the story behind the largest blue marlin ever caught in the Big Rock, an 831-pounder caught by *Summertime Blues* in 2000.

"They had trouble getting the fish on board," he began. "So three of them went into the water and pushed it. This was after they fought the fish for over an hour. When they got back in the boat they were so beat they just flopped in the cockpit until one of them found the strength to



crawl to the ice chest and roll bottles of water out to the rest."

The Big Rock may be a boat show and a party, but it can very quickly turn into a survival test in 200 fathoms. And for those who pass that survival test, it quickly turns into a battle of nerves.

After they'd hung their fish, the crew of *Impulse* – owner Donald Lane, mates Cameron and Barry Guthrie, and angler Jay

Hughes – kept listening intently to the VHF radio traffic, their hearts skipping a beat every time a hookup was called in. Thursday they rushed to the radio three times, but all three were white marlin releases. Friday was busier, but both blue marlin caught that day were under the tournament's 400-pound (or 110 inch) cutoff and they were released.

Impulse lay in port on the final Saturday still in the lead. By noon the crew had gathered at the boat, one of the few still tied up at the Morehead City docks. All of the neighbors were out at sea, trying to snatch away their \$711,000. As lines went into the water at 9 A.M., the NOAA buoy at Frying Pan Shoals was reporting 19-knot gusts and waves just over 5 feet every 6 seconds. The

buoy 150 miles east of Cape Hatteras had 6-footers every 6 seconds. Seas that had built up over two windy days were giving the fleet what fishermen call, in technical terms, "an ass kickin'."

As the clock wound down to the 2 P.M. deadline, a crowd of TV cameramen and well-wishers collected on the dock. Donald Lane and his crew emerged from the salon carrying bottles of champagne. Finally, the radio crackled with, "Lines out of the water." *The Impulse* erupted. As bystanders applauded and one mate's mother shed a tear, the captain went around the cockpit hugging his crew.

But wait . . . had there been a different voice on the radio, just before the tournament was called? Bruce Paul, the Big



Rock's media director, delivered the bad news: another Morehead City boat, *Waverunner*, had reported a hookup in the final minute. Everyone surrounding the *Impulse* grew deathly silent as champagne bubbled in forgotten glasses. Nerves that were already frayed had to be somehow gathered for another fifteen minutes. Then Capt. Bruce Pollock of *Waverunner* report-

ed in from the Gulf Stream: "This fish is pretty marginal," he said. A release – in more ways than one. The winners, suddenly \$711,000 richer, erupted all over again, this time celebrating with cold beers instead of the warm champagne.

"Right now, I'm just glad it's over," was the best a worn-out Donald Lane could do.

After a week of parties and boat parades, of inshore pickups and offshore hookups, the 46th Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament ended with high drama. As the *Impulse* crew enjoyed their victory, the other boats pulled up their riggers and headed for the inlet with every man aboard thinking that next year, it would surely be their turn.