



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BROADBILL – BOOM TO BUST?

By Janet Adair Wilder

The First International Swordfish Tournament (FIST) on rod and reel at Cuttyhunk Island, MA was a sleeper until in five days, August 11-15 in 1960, it alerted the sports world to a broadbill boom in the Atlantic with a series of surprises that made headlines like these:

- 10 Swords on Rod and Reel highlight FIST
- College Soph's 472 Pound Swordfish Tops Tourney
- Swordfishing Royalty Taking Part in Unique Tournament

For centuries, the accepted method of catching swordfish had been the harpoon. Why not rod and reel? It was not a new idea. In fact, the first officially recorded rod and reel swordfish caught on the east coast was a modest 193 pounder taken by Oliver C. Grinnell in 1927 off Montauk, LI, in New York.

However, by the late 1950s, swordfish were so abundant that commercial harpooners, some from Martha's Vineyard and New Bedford, were taking a daily toll of several hundred, spring through fall. Rod and reel anglers were getting into the act in increasing numbers and all that was needed was a leader.

Ready for action was I. Winslow "Coot" Hall, veteran Cuttyhunk fishing guide, well known in piscatorial circles from Maine to Florida and with friends among the world's fishing elite. Coot, well aware of the success of rod and reel swordfishing in Pacific waters, was among New Englanders who had tried it. He not only liked it. He believed it had an exciting and rewarding future here.

In his booming, barrel-toned voice, he had been promoting the sport to a ready-made clientele that the First International Swordfish Tournament on rod and reel at Cuttyhunk was about to be born.

An organizational meeting for the proposed tournament took place in December 1959 at the Wamsutta Club in New Bedford. Coot was unanimously elected chairman, a position he held all 14 years of the tourney's existence.

Elected to the general committee were Henry Holcomb of South Dartmouth, assistant chairman, and John Curran, president of the Cuttyhunk Anglers Club which, as a

new member of the International Game Fish Association (IGFA), agreed to sponsor the initial tournament. Other committee members were Frank Mather, a leading oceanographer from Woods Hole; John Peterson, sport fisherman and owner of the Cape Codder Hotel in Falmouth; John Waldo, owner of the local Outdoorsman sports shop; and Bill Leahy of New Bedford. Bob Tilton, who held official ranking with the International Game Fish Association, was appointed weightmaster.

Elected committee chairmen were Alan Wilder, dock; George Moses and John Gage, Jr., publicity; Ralph Stuart, entertainment; Ronald Veeder, trophies; Bill Russell, maintenance; Gladys Snow (later Gage), housing; Al Little, rules; and John Waldo, bait. Janet Litzkow, later Bosworth, became secretary/treasurer, and doctors James Manley and Carl Pitta, fleet physicians. The Board of Selectmen of the Town of Gosnold were appointed honorary chairmen. They included Coot, David Jenkins, and Isaiah Tilton.

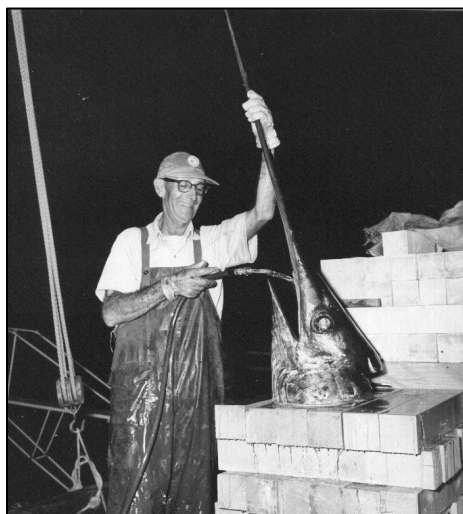
IGFA rules and regulations were to prevail and no harpoon equipment of any description was to be allowed on any boat participating. Tackle was defined as rod, reel, line, leader, hooks, and harness, and no heavier line than 130-pound class was permitted.

Logistics turned out to be formidable, chief among them being dock space. Eighty-one boats paid an entrance fee of \$75 apiece, plus \$10 for each angler registered aboard. When 81 contenders signed up, where 40 or 50 had been

anticipated, existing dockage had to be supplemented by bringing in two huge barges that were anchored in the inner harbor. Dockage was stretched by allowing local contestants to go from and return to home ports of Menemsha, Edgartown, Falmouth, Woods Hole, etc., as each day's fishing began and ended, coming into Cuttyhunk only if they had fish to be weighed on the official scales.

Two gasoline barges with four meters were also on hand so that four boats could be gassed simultaneously. Diesel users had a separate tank and pump.

Accommodations were strained to the utmost at the Bosworth and Allen



A smiling Coot Hall hoses down the head of one of the huge broadbills.

Houses, the Avalon, and at Scuttlebutt, the little coffee shop, but tournament spirit prevailed through it all, making the situation bearable. Each day's fishing would begin at 9 a.m. and end at 3 p.m. and it would be a good two hours offshore before the most likely grounds could be reached.

But early on the morning of August 11, 1960, as the boats streamed out of the mouth of the Cuttyhunk channel, the First International Swordfish Tournament on rod and reel was off and running. Surprises in store would make tales for many years to come.



The Cuttyhunk marina was jam-packed with some of the 81 sport fishing boats entered in the First International Swordfish Tournament in 1960. (Courtesy Janet A. Wilder)

The tourney itself was as dramatic as any Wylie fishing thriller. That 10 fish were taken in five days was a triumph in a sport that was once described to me as follows: There's an old saying that you have to score 100 to get a swordfish on rod and reel. You have to see the first 25; you have to bait the second 25; you have to hook the third 25; and you have to bring the next 25 up to the boat before you get one. While many frustrated anglers would agree with the old saying, 53 of them in the first FIST would hold up the trophies they won to prove otherwise.

On August 14, the fourth, most exciting day of the five day event, five swordfish were brought in as follows:

The first swordfish he'd ever caught - a 432 pounder - was landed by Sidney Mitchell, a retired New York banker, angler aboard Ferdinand Eberstadt's boat Target. It took Mitchell 4 hours and 20 minutes to subdue it on 80 pound test line. Carlie Veeder of Cuttyhunk was the boat's guide.

John Price of Brielle, NJ, a college sophomore and engineering major at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, NJ, landed a 472 pound swordfish, his first, on 39 pound test line after a two hour battle. He was angler on Bill Minder's Wawenock, an old Maine craft, as unpretentious as any in the tournament.

Russell Opderbeck of Orleans, MA, a Cape Cod

lumberyard manager and striped bass fisherman with no previous swordfishing experience, boated a 327-pound fish in one hour on 130-pound test line, angling from Richard Stevenson's Shirley L.

It took Ray Dackerman, auto dealer and owner/angler aboard Rose Marie out of Brielle, NJ, just 30 minutes on 80 pound test line to catch a 273 1/4 pound sword. In the past six years Dackerman had caught a dozen, the largest a 480 pounder of Cuttyhunk in 1958.

Paul McCusker, owner/angler on Holliday, out of Woods Hole, caught a 204-pound fish in 55 minutes on 130-pound best line. It was not his first. Four of the five winners used squid for bait.

That same day, the 236 1/4 pound body of a headless, tail-less swordfish, the victim of a mako shark attack in tournament waters off Cuttyhunk, shocked more than 100 spectators who were on hand when Bob Tilton weighed the remains. The body was brought in by the boat Pi'A whose crew witnessed the battle and estimated the victorious mako at 800 pounds to the loser's 500.

Though they didn't score in the tournament, the royal couple of the swordfishing world, Mr. and Mrs. Lou Marron of Brielle, NJ, were aboard their boat Eugenie VIII on their second visit in three years to New England waters. Previously they were here to participate in research at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, but this time it was for pleasure. The swordfishing reputations of Lou and his wife Eugenie had been made in the Pacific waters off the coast of Chile. In 1953 Lou had caught a 1,182-pound broadbill on rod and reel, using 130-pound test line. In 1960 his all-tackle world's record had not been beaten. In 1954 Mrs. Marron added to the family fishing laurels by catching a 772 pound swordfish on 80 pound test line, setting a women's world record untopped in 1960 by any woman or man.

In her book *Albacora*, Mrs. Marron described swordfish as "Those ferocious monsters that are infinitely hard to hook, but just as hard to hold once they have bitten." Though our Atlantic swordfish were smaller, they had the same characteristics and were just as hard to hook and hold.

The procedure is the same today. Whether it takes 15 minutes or 5 hours to boat a swordfish, first you have to get it on the hook. Once in a blue moon trolling blind from rod or outrigger will do it, but the biggest problem after sighting a fish is baiting it. It takes plenty of time and perfect teamwork. The captain maneuvers the boat in a wide circle around the fish to a point where the bait can be dropped in the water and trolled across the broadbill's line of vision. Braced in the fighting chair in the cockpit, the angler grips his rod and prays that the fish is hungry. If so, the fish will whack the bait with his bill to kill or stun it, then swim off.

Here begins the interminable period of delayed action until the fish returns to pick up his morsel in a mouth about a third the size of his bill. If he takes it, the angler counts to ten and jerks the rod upwards, setting the hooks with all the strength he can muster. At the same moment the captain guns the motor, adding power to the strike, and the battle is on.

Whether the chase takes minutes or hours and covers one mile or 10 or more, the angler is on his own in the hot seat. No one can touch him or his fishing equipment except to turn his fighting chair in one direction or another if needed. All the decisions are his, whether the fish takes to the air in one or a dozen magnificent leaps to shake the hook, or whether the fish heads for China underwater, staying out of sight with almost endless determination. Strict rules also apply to the mate in handling the fish when it's brought to the boat and hoisted aboard.

There's many a sad tale about fish lost or disqualified right at the boat when victory seemed assured, but sportsmen are a hardy breed whether they win or lose.

Docking facilities gradually improved with the advent of the Cuttyhunk marina which eventually provided about 80 slips for competitors whose numbers remained fairly steady. The Town of Gosnold became the tourney's sponsor and the FIST itself was chartered as a non-profit organization under Massachusetts laws.

During the first three years of the tourney's existence, rod and reel sportsmen landed a total of 28 swordfish, 10 the first year and 9 each for the second and third years. The largest, caught by James French Baldwin of Locust Valley, NY, on his boat Marlina, weighed 518 1/2 pounds and became the record holder for heaviest at the conclusion of all 14 tournaments. Close second to him overall was Maurice Meyer, Jr. of Elberon, NJ, who in the ninth event in 1968 on his boat Poseidon III, came up with a 501-pound broadbill.

Many, many contestants were not so lucky. Take, for instance, Cuttyhunk's Janet Bosworth who fished nine tourneys without scoring, as many other anglers had done. Yet they returned year after year because there was a fascination and challenge to swordfishing that exceeded any other type of angling. Former world champions who have fished for just about everything in the sea, agree that it takes more skill, more patience, and more daring than any other kind. In swordfishermen and women, the spirit of adventure is unquenchable, no matter what age.

As the years went on, tourney boats had to share the ocean with more and more commercial boats whose ace harpooners, in increasing instances, were aided by small spotter planes working with them from on high via short wave radio. Spotting swordfish on top of or under the waves, these planes dropped dye markers, presumably staking claim to the quarry and warning competitors to stay clear. Some did, some didn't and clashes were inevitable and usually won by the harpooner who simply moved in and took the fish away from the tournament competitors.

As I sit in my Cuttyhunk living room in early September of 2001, surrounded by the memorabilia of the 14 tournaments I covered for the *New Bedford Standard-Times*, I realize that the first FIST represented the apex of Coot's grand idea. With 10 winners to authenticate its initial success in 1960, it was impossible to imagine the impending decline of the swordfishery. But it happened, and the decline of the tournament was an early indicator.

No fish were taken in the 1965 tournament, followed by five in 1966, two in 1967, four in 1968, two in 1969 and then four years from 1970 to 1973 when the score was zero. The FIST was fini.

The absence of swordfish has been blamed on many factors. Russian trawler activity was one, but chief among them was the introduction of commercial long-lining whereby miles and miles of baited hooks are set out and relieved of their swordfish burden periodically. Long-lined hooks are non-judgmental. They take everything that will bite. Swordfishing stocks were decimated by the unregulated national and international long-lining fleet.



The fourth day of the first tournament saw this impressive catch. The first, second, and third prize winners were among them. (Courtesy Janet A. Wilder)

According to a July story in the *Vineyard Gazette*, "In the last several years, harpooning for swordfish has been abysmal for the few New England fishermen who have taken the chance to go out." But in July, Quitsa Strider, captained by Jonathan Mayhew of Chilmark, did so and hit the jackpot. He came in with 31 harpooned swordfish on ice aboard. Hours later his brother Gregory Mayhew and crew on the Unicorn brought in 16 of the same. The *Gazette* called them big fish with an average dressed weight of around 200 pounds. The largest weighed 306 pounds.

Has a turning point in the swordfishery been reached? Keep your fingers crossed.

Janet Wilder has been a professional photographer and journalist for many years.



FIRST INTERNATIONAL SWORDFISH TOURNAMENT 1960-1973 (53 FISH)

CUTTYHUNK ISLAND, MASSACHUSETTS

1960 TOURNAMENT – 10 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
George Blackwood Winchester MA	Ebony	309
Skip Kundahl Newington, CT	Loot Lam	245 ½
Nancy Wilder Needham MA	Surfmaster III	214 ¾
Dr. Frank R. Bussey Bay Shore (LI) NY	Sea Lark II	217
Jack Cleveland Greenwich CT	Mako	308 ¼
Sidney A. Mitchell Oyster Bay (LI) NY	Target	432
John Price Brielle NJ	Wawenock	472
Paul T. McCusker Woods Hole MA	Holiday	204
Russell Opderbeck Orleans MA	Shirley I	327
Ray Dackerman Manasquam NJ	Rose Marie	273 ½
1961 TOURNAMENT – 9 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
J. French Baldwin Locust Valley NY	Marlina	518 ½
J. French Baldwin Locust Valley NY	Marlina	203
Marshall Monroe Minneapolis MN	Madcap, Jr.	399
John Sutton Bay Shore (LI) NY	Martha E.	316
G. Newell Hurd Milton MA	Striper II	313
Mrs. Mundy Peale Garden City NY	Gifi II	310
Carl Knapp Greenwich CT	Sheila Ann	286
Edwin Coward Rumford RI	Almardon	212 ½
Dr. George Solas Fall River MA	Mako II	188
1962 TOURNAMENT – 9 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
Malcolm O. MacLean Lawrence (LI) NY	Honor M.	300
Dick Goodwin		103
Harry Gorrill No. Easton MA	Vega II	392 ½
Murray Cianciolo Cranston RI	Don Bojo	351
Charles B. Sanders Montclair NJ	Tomkat IV	268
Royal W. Knight Warwick RI	Finesse	260
Jack Rounick Montauk (LI) NY	Alligator	243
Dr. John Vallone Cranston RI	Mako II	221 ½
Maurice Meyer, Jr. Elberon NJ	Poseidon II	194
1963 TOURNAMENT – 5 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
Roberta Knight Warwick RI	Finesse	397

Roberta Knight Warwick RI	Finesse	69 ½
Dr. John Vallone Cranston RI	Mako II	153 ½
Carolyn Cohen New York City	Striper	324 ½
Nancy Wilder Needham MA	Surfmaster III	247
1964 TOURNAMENT – 7 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
Harry Hedison Cranston RI	Sheroha III	338
Jack Rounick Montauk (LI) NY	Alligator	335
Eileen Harrold Clarksburg WV	Eileen	265 ½
Arthur T. Lyman, Jr. Duxbury MA	Tide Rip II	265 ½
Susan Daly Yarmouth MA	Anytime	302
James French Baldwin Locust Valley NY	Marlina	201
Cameron MacKenzie Hingham MA	Widgeon	197
1965 TOURNAMENT – NO FISH TAKEN		
1966 TOURNAMENT – 5 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
N. Robert Melocarro Cranston RI	Sujo	447
Emile DuPont Wilmington DE	Malolo	189
Howard Brown Needham MA	Tide Rip II	390
Nancy Wilder Needham MA	Surfmaster III	349
James M. Hutton Cincinnati OH	Cara Mia	380
1967 TOURNAMENT – 2 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
Donald Merton Roslyn (LI) NY	Elldon	329 ½
James M. Hutton, Jr. Nantucket MA	Cara Mia	254
1968 TOURNAMENT – 4 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
Maurice Meyer, Jr. Elberon NJ	Poseidon III	501
Martin T. Tiernan Essex Fells NJ	Tomkat IV	360 ½
Donald Merten Roslyn (LI) NY	Elldon	244 ½
James M. Hutton III Nantucket MA	Cara Mia	338 ½
1969 TOURNAMENT – 2 FISH TAKEN		
Angler	Boat	Weight
Arthur V. Cote Harwichport MA	Trader V	338 ½
Ann Kunkel Palm Beach FL	Alligator	174
*Walter Bronston, Jr. Mamaroneck (LI) NY	Grumpa	455
1970-1973 TOURNAMENTS – NO FISH TAKEN		

*Bronston disqualified his fish, caught 10 minutes early.