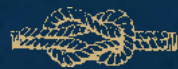


“If they keep exposing you to education, you might even realize some day that man becomes immortal only in what he writes on paper, or hacks into rock, or slabbers onto a canvas, or pulls out of a piano.”
—Robert Ruark, “The Old Man and the Boy”

A SON OF SOUTHPORT

JERRY DILSAVER
HAS SPENT DECADES TEACHING
TAR HEEL ANGLERS HOW TO FISH



WRITTEN BY MIKE ZLOTNICKI

PHOTOGRAPHED
BY
MELISSA
McGAW



(From left) Southport remains a quaint coastal town. Middle: Teaching anglers either one-on-one or in seminar settings is a part of Dilsaver's professional life. Right: Some of the hardware Dilsaver has collected over the years, including the award for Southern Kingfish Association National Champion in 2001.



Stop me if you've heard this one before. Boy's born in Southport, back when it was a sleepy fishing village. He's mentored by an Old Man in the ways of nature, hunting and fishing. Boy goes on to a career in the outdoors, teaching others and writing about his adventures afield.

Yeah, this sounds a lot like Robert Ruark's seminal collection of columns "The Old Man and the Boy." It also describes Jerry Dilsaver of Oak Island. Along with Joe Albea and the late Franc White, Dilsaver is the "face" of saltwater angling. Not surprising, with his experience and decades of seminar and fishing-school instruction. But there's more than mullet and mackerel to Dilsaver.

It was early April last year, and Dilsaver sat on the deck of a quaint condo facing Southport Marina. His buddy Tommy Rickman of Southport Angler Outfitters (and owner of the condo) had just left to go upriver to pick up some bait shrimp. Dilsaver nodded toward the docks in the distance, where commercial fish houses once stood on the Southport waterfront.

"Dad ran United Shrimp Company for Lewis Hardee," he said sipping a soda. "He worked his way off the boat. I grew up in that shrimp house. That was back when this place was a shrimp haven. Boats would catch 50 boxes a trip then."

He joked that he was "an only child with three sisters and a brother," due to his

mother dying and his father, Floyd Dilsaver, remarrying twice.

When Dilsaver was in fourth grade, his father quit the shrimp house, signed on at the Wilmington/Cape Fear River Pilots Association and ran boats that ferried local river pilots to and from the big boats headed upriver to Wilmington. At 14, Dilsaver started working as a mate on the pilot boats. You could say his life on the water started at age 5, though. He remembers going with his dad to fetch a repaired shrimp boat.

"I stood on a pile of fish boxes and steered from Wilmington to Southport while my dad checked around the boat."

In high school, Dilsaver played football, tennis, golf and basketball and ran track. He started at Southport High but graduated from the Frederick Military Academy in Portsmouth, Va., in 1969.



EDUCATION

Dilsaver started his college career at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1969 and graduated from East Carolina University in 1985. It was at ECU that he met his wife, donna Mooneyham (yes, she spells it with a lower case d.) In between his two college stints, he worked as a dockhand at Southport Marina, did maintenance work,

surfing up and down the East Coast and was a professional motocross racer, among other gigs.

"I damn near won the Texas Hare Scrambles on a Yamaha YZ 125," he said. "I crashed twice and broke a bone in my hand and one in my foot and lost the race by about a foot."

While at ECU, Dilsaver got a job at a True Value hardware store, where he met a farmer from Washington County who had some waterfowl on his property. So Dilsaver started a waterfowl guide service.

"I have always been drawn to ducks and geese," he said. "Since geese were scarce, I was always drawn to them. Joe Albea booked hunts for us because he worked at the outdoor store in Greenville."

That's the same Joe Albea who has been producing 18 years of the "Carolina Outdoor Journal" television show. He and Dilsaver stayed in touch over the years as their respective audiences and reputations grew. Albea recalls seeing Dilsaver at boat shows and fishing seminars before finally taping some shows with him.

"I've met quite a few people over the years, and you can tell who enjoys the outdoors and people who enjoy it and are willing to step up and speak up for it," Albea said from his home office in Winterville. "Jerry is one of those who is willing to speak out for it."

"We're basically doing the same thing," Albea said. "We've upped the education part of the show over the years. What he does in

seminars and schools—we complement each other. I think he's good as gold. He's had a passion at an early age. He's been able to share it with people. You don't get rich doing it. His passion is unique."

In the late '80s, Dilsaver was hired by George Hall as hunting editor for *Carolina Adventure* magazine. They worked together and built the magazine before selling it to The News & Observer Publishing Co. in 1991. At *Carolina Adventure*, Dilsaver helped develop the fishing school concept, eventually getting about 300 anglers to attend the annual event. Dilsaver left the magazine in 2002 to write for *North Carolina Sportsman* magazine and run its special events, such as fishing schools, but he was laid off in 2009.



TEACHING

Go to any boat show, and you can't swing a dead cat without hitting somebody who has attended a seminar or school where Dilsaver held forth. He started doing speaking engagements in 1987 and has done well over 500 seminars and classes. Does that make him a celebrity?

"Naw, I'm just a guy who got a few lucky breaks and was fortunate enough to take advantage of them," he said. "There was a

time from the early '90s to '04 or so when I was doing 60–70 appearances a year."

In addition to being paid to teach classes and seminars, Dilsaver does some "giving back," as he calls it. One Wednesday morning in March found him at Camp Lejeune talking to a small but attentive crowd clad in camo.

"How many of you think flounder is a good eating fish?" Dilsaver asked his audience at the base exchange. A couple of hands went up, and Dilsaver went on to explain about a new flounder jig on the market with a hook mounted sideways to accommodate a flounder's sideways mouth. An audience member asked about color.

"Everything I do with artificials, white is the color family in my bag," he said. "White, pearl and bone. Also, new penny and chartreuse. New penny is one of the gimmick colors that I think works."

One of the attendees was Staff Sgt. Tim Judd, who has been living (and fishing) around Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Station New River "off and on" since 1997.

"I picked up a lot of stuff," said Judd, a non-lethal-weapons instructor. "I'm not big on the jigs and artificial stuff, but he presented a different mindset. A lot of what he said validated what I've learned. He's a local, and we need to bring in more locals. He's giving his time and his knowledge. Give a man a fish and feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and feed him for life, ya know?"

IN ADDITION TO FREELANCE WRITING AND TEACHING, DILSAVER SERVES ON THE FOLLOWING:

- Southern Regional Advisory Committee for the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (ncdmf.net),
- Advisory Committee for the N.C. Saltwater Fishing Tournament for the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (ncdmf.net),
- board of directors for the Long Bay Artificial Reef Association (lbara.com),
- board of directors for the N.C. Public Access Foundation (ncpaf.com),
- board of directors for the N.C. Kayak Fishing Association (nckfa.com) and
- board of directors for Fishermen In Support of Heroes (fishheroes.org).





DILSAVER THE
MACKEREL MASTER
HAS MORPHED INTO
THE KAYAK KING.



After years of pounding across the ocean in speeding center consoles, Dilsaver now plies the skinny water of the marshes and sounds after flounder, drum and trout.

Dilsaver didn't tell me or the crowd, but he donates his time and travel expenses for these in-store seminars. George Blalock, associate manager of the exchange, mentioned it.

"It's special to us," he said. "We don't really promote that he donated his time, but it's special to us. It's special to us when anybody helps us help these guys when they're not out in the field."

From 2009 to 2011, Dilsaver ran the Wounded Warriors Fishing Club and made a weekly two-hour ride to take men from the Wounded Warrior Battalion-East on local fishing excursions.

"I appreciate, especially, an all-volunteer military," he said at the exchange food court in between classes. "These guys lay their lives on the line so we can enjoy our way of life. If I can take these guys fishing, it's a small price to pay."

Dilsaver said that the fishing and driving were therapeutic for him as well—times of peace and reflection among the travails of being a freelance outdoorsman, parsing together a living from various projects. The program also produced friendships that have lasted to this day, and he still hears from some of the Marines and even fishes with a few.



REMINISCING

Riding around Southport and Oak Island with Jerry, one gets an informal history lesson. As Dilsaver wheeled his Chevy Avalanche around, he talked of friends past and present. A Sandhills boat dealer owns that beach house. A Triad restaurateur owns this one. A carpet manufacturer owns the one over there. He's proud that Oak Island roads that run to the beach are deeded up to the high-tide line, giving much public access and parking. He wrangled a pass from the watchman at Fort Caswell and drove around that remarkable piece of property.

On to Southport for lunch, he drove about and showed how the roads were designed around the massive oak trees. He drove to Taylor Field, where high school and Little League teams used to play. He pointed out where scenes of the movie "I Know What You Did Last Summer" and the TV series "Dawson's Creek" were filmed.

"We'd ride bicycles with shotguns strapped to the handlebars down that road to hunt for squirrels," he said, shaking his head at the memory. "We'd bring .22s or shotguns to school and give them to the assistant principal to hold for us, then go hunting after school."



COMPETING

At a local Mexican restaurant, Dilsaver talked about competing in king mackerel tournaments from 1987 to 2008 and winning the Southern Kingfish Association's national championship in 2001 in the Class of 23 and Under, the smaller-boat division. Their winning king mackerel was actually bigger than that of the big-boat winner. It was angling icing on an outdoors cake decades in the making.

"We didn't win a bunch," he said with a laugh, "but we placed in the top five a lot. We were the Mark Martins of king fishing."

That ended in Fort Pierce, Fla., when Jerry and his crew landed two kings totaling 74 pounds to win by 8 pounds.

"It was neat," said Dilsaver, reminiscing about the homecoming. "The [congratulatory] signs started right out here on [highways] 211 and 133 and went all the way to the house, 10 or 11 miles scattered out along. There were family and close friends at the house. We didn't have champagne, but there were some beers."

Dilsaver, by his own admission, has a reputation for being stern when captaining a boat and pretty much set in his ways of doing things. Maybe not Capt. Bligh stern, but tough at times. Bob Black of Oak Island crewed with Dilsaver for years and was on the winning team in Florida.

"When it comes to competition, he worked hard," said Black. "He could be snippy on a boat, no doubt. He could be a pain in the ass sometimes, but it was good fishing. He had a way of doing things, smart. Our work didn't start in the morning when the flag dropped. I went to Florida four days before the tournament and then did several hundred miles going to tackle shops, commercial fishermen and piers to get information. That was quite a time—our 15 minutes of fame. He loves the outdoors, whether it's catching a marlin or

sitting in a duck blind at Lake Mattamuskeet in 0-degree weather."

Dilsaver quit fishing king tournaments regularly in 2007, the same year he was elected into the SKA Hall of Fame (on the "first ballot," he joked).

A combination of burnout, physical pounding, trying to keep a crew and finances together for 26 to 28 tournaments across the Southeast took a toll.

"I was so damn particular, I did everything myself," he said. "It was a full-time job. But I made some great friends and it was a great time, and I do not regret it. I started backing out when it was no longer prudent. I was fortunate to have had some very good people on my crews."



TODAY

Dilsaver the mackerel master has morphed into the kayak king. He's traded in dual outboards for paddles and is on the Hobie Cat pro staff. He does a number of kayak-fishing seminars and leads 'yak fishermen on salt marsh and sound trips. His Hobie Cat Pro Angler is just as tricked out as a king mackerel boat, with a GPS, fish finders, baitwells, rod holders and self-propulsion from pedals. Everything on his kayaks is either tied on or equipped with flotation. "It's not 'if' you're going to tip over, it's 'when,'" he said.

He's still writing for several newspapers and magazines, still fishes the occasional king tournament and inshore redfish event, and is still recognized wherever he goes by the scores of anglers who "know" him through his various endeavors, mostly seminars and classes.

"I probably could have been a good teacher if I could have put up with kids in a classroom," he said as he drove back to his home. "When you see that light come on in a person's head, it's rewarding. Most rewarding is when 10 years after you get an email or phone call to thank you for something you've forgotten about. It's all about passing it on."

Kind of like the Old Man and the Boy. ♦

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