

Cash of the Tight Lines

Written by Greg Jenkins



BERT WOODALL



JODY DUGGINS

The Cape Hatteras Anglers Club Annual Invitational Surf Fishing Tournament claims to be the biggest event of its kind in the world. It's so popular, teams wait for years just to get in.

Carol Dillon doesn't mind if people make fun of the latex surgical gloves she wears while surf fishing. Although her matching peach-colored shirt and shorts suggest a certain amount of girliness, Dillon is regarded as one of the toughest anglers on the Outer Banks. The 75-year-old native of the banks is one of the few surviving charter members of the Cape Hatteras Anglers Club, and the only one who participated in the club's 46th annual invitational surf fishing tournament. She doesn't need to smell fishy to earn anyone's respect.

"She's one tough lady for her age," said Rossie Jackson, a teammate of Dillon. "We were fishing with her in the Nags Head tournament a few weeks ago, and it was blowing 90 miles an hour. She stayed out and fished while we went inside."



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More often than not, wind, rain and cold are part of the Hatteras tournament, a two-day event held around the first weekend of November. But last year, foul weather was not an issue. Dillon and the 593 other surf anglers in the tournament enjoyed two brilliant, sunny days with temperatures in the high 70s. Unfortunately, they suffered through two days of lousy fishing, a rarity for autumn at Hatteras.

Usually, fall fishing is good on the Outer Banks, and the tournament competitors reel in lots of quality fish — red and black drum, bluefish, cobia, albacore, flounder and striped bass. That's how this event has become the world's largest surf fishing tournament for teams. The club has approached Guinness several times about certifying the event, but the world-record keepers refuse to separate surf fishing tournaments into sub-categories.

Apparently, there's a tournament in Norway for individuals that boasts 697 competitors.

The Cape Hatteras Anglers Club was founded in 1957, and the tournament began the following year. Every year since then except one, the club has held its tournament for competitive-minded surf fishermen. The exception was 1990, when the Bonner Bridge over Oregon Inlet collapsed, leaving Hatteras Island cut off from the mainland. Hurricanes have never stopped the event, even last year when Isabel damaged the island two months before the tourney. The club got a hand from the National Park Service in quickly repairing vehicle access ramps to the beach.

The surf fishing tournament grew every year until it reached its current allotment of 100 teams of six anglers each — the

Early each November, anglers haul jam-packed rod racks to the Cape Hatteras Anglers Club tournament. Bait, gear and techniques are important, so Carol Dillon (left) puts her bait on the hook, meat side first. Many teams put their logos on flags, hats and T-shirts.



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Top, a judge measures and scores a fish. Above, Rosemary Steiner's big bluefish was the largest blue caught by a female last year. Below, warm November weather makes for a pleasant day but mediocre fishing.

maximum that will fit in the space the Park Service permits the club to use. Because it has a waiting list of 58 teams, the Cape Hatteras Anglers Club would like to expand the event. But the Park Service has not yet granted the club the use of more beachfront.

The waiting list is epic in both size and length of wait. When a team dropped out in 2003, one new team was allowed in the tournament. It was the first time in four years that had happened. The new team had been on the waiting list for 12 years. "If you have gray hair when you sign up," said Larry Hardham, president of the anglers club, "forget it." The tournament usually offers such a good time and such excellent fishing, teams won't drop out until their members begin to die off. And sometimes, they just replace members and keep on fishing.

Serious fun

Many team members see each other only once or twice a year, so some teams take the entire week to hang out and practice for Thursday and Friday. They hone their techniques, rig tackle and decide on which baits to use. And any time anglers get together for several days, they tell stories and reminisce. When teams gather in the club's headquarters the night before the tourney, there is plenty of trash-talking and the occasional bet made between teams.

The jolly times are copious, but make no mistake: These teams take the tournament seriously and compete hard. The amount of gear some teams bring is mind-boggling. Each competitor may use only one rod and reel at a time, but most anglers bring half a dozen rods and reels to guarantee the proper setup for any condition. Most teams have a couple of pickups or SUVs rigged out with pipe-organ rod holders and massive tackle boxes. To be certain they have adequate bait, their dresser-sized ice chests are full of shrimp, mullet and squid. Some groups have paraphernalia emblazoned with their team name. Jonah & The Boys, a team that has fished in the event since 1992, has team jackets, T-shirts, baseball caps, flags to fly from their trucks, and even stencils used to paint their fishbone logo onto bait buckets and other equipment.

Teams have always come from all over the East Coast to fish the Hatteras tournament. The Eastern Shore Virginia Anglers Club won the tournament in 2002 thanks to the abilities of its members to throw their hooks out past the breakers. Three team members have won long-distance casting titles, and all of them can cast more than 300 feet—some of them way more. Team captain J. T. Bolding, a team member

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since 1964, can cast an 8-ounce weight 500 feet. Bolding said the secrets of doing well in the event are "fish hard, hustle and know your tackle."

The Outer Banks Sportfishers are 34-year tournament veterans and seven-time champs, including back-to-back wins in 2000 and 2001. "Luck beats skill any time," said Garry Oliver, a pier owner and a charter member of the team. "You've got to have a combination to win these things."

Brothers Bill and Joe Robinson and their buddies from the VFW, otherwise known as the Kannapolis Beachcombers, didn't think it was crazy to wait more than a decade to get in the tournament. "It's the largest one," Bill Robinson said, "and it's a good excuse to fish."

Follow the rules

The tournament rules give each team a fair shot at the best fishing sites. Stations are divided evenly between sites north of Cape Hatteras and those south of it. Because of the orientation of the shoreline, teams with northern sites face east and teams with southern sites face south. "Fishing is driven by wind, so switching positions is important," Hardham said. If a team draws a northern spot for the morning of the first day, it will fish the south that afternoon. The following day, the order will be reversed: south in the morning, north in the afternoon.

Competitors must use a cast-and-retrieve method. No gaffs or nets are allowed, so if an angler reels in a big red drum, black drum or cobia, he has to wrestle it onto the beach alone, with his own hands. Teammates are not allowed to help one another land fish.

To score fish and make sure anglers follow the rules, 34 pairs of judges, plus several roaming judges, are spread across the 100 fishing stations. Judges are generally watching just three or four teams, so they are often able to get to an angler by the time a fish is landed and measure it. Requirements are few for the volunteers who serve as judges: They must be able to identify fish species, and they need to know how to drive on the beach. The biggest challenge comes when bluefish blitz and judges have to scurry up and down the beach to score fish quickly for a dozen or more anglers. "It can turn on a dime," said Mike McMinn, a judge from New Bern.

Just as anglers come from all over to participate in the event, so do judges. McMinn and his wife, Melissa, are known as "the honeymooners" because they drove down from their former home in Virginia to judge the tournament two weeks after they were married in 2002. Another couple, Bonnie and Charles Dean, has flown in from California for many years to judge. David Gray of Hudson, Md., and Ray Fisher of Sterling, Va., are boyhood friends who meet at Hatteras each November to serve as judges.

The queen of judges is Outer Banks resident Mary Hughes, who joined the Cape Hatteras Anglers

Club in its second year, 1958. Hughes has judged 43 of the 46 tournaments, beginning in 1960. "How could I not? I enjoy it," she said. "You have to enjoy doing it. . . . You meet a lot of nice people." Hughes said that in all her years as a judge, there has been no unpleasantness, and all of the anglers she judged were good sportsmen. That's not always the case with every competition, and there is an occasional bribe extended to a judge. However, most of those are tongue-in-cheek offerings of beverages or fishing tackle.

Ladies first

Many fishing tournaments look like meetings of the Old Boys' Club, but the Cape Hatteras Anglers Club tournament has an impressive roster of ladies' teams that hold their own. There are separate categories for female anglers, and women compete hard against the men for the overall trophy as well. In 1991, a ladies' team called Sand Bunnies won the tournament. In 1966 and 1978, women's teams finished second overall, and on four other occasions, ladies' teams took third place.

The most visible difference between the men's and women's teams is that when the fishing is slow, like it was last year, the ladies don't sit around with long faces. They know how to have fun.

One colorful group, the Kinnakeet Luring Ladies, brings ornate, unusual decorations to liven up its fishing station. It's hard to miss the Ladies' portable palm tree, pink flamingos and fake skeleton wearing a purple lei around its bony neck—"The oldest member of our team," they explain while toasting the tournament with champagne in plastic flutes. But despite appearances, the Luring Ladies are hardcore anglers. Last year, team member Rosemary Steiner of Manteo caught an 18 1/2-inch bluefish on one of her homemade "Rosie's Rigs" during the first day's morning session, a fish that won her the award for biggest blue caught by a female.

And then there's Carol Dillon, who fished the 2003 tournament with her daughter's team, the Hatteraskals. Dillon took time to compete even though the motel she owns in Buxton had just been cleaned up after Isabel deposited 3 feet of sand and water there. "I like the competition," Dillon said. "I play to win."

Like the other men and women who cherish the few days each autumn they spend in pursuit of more fish than the other 99 teams, Dillon gets a lot of pleasure from the tournament. The camaraderie is a motivating factor for her; she enjoys visiting with the mainlanders who come down once a year for the big event. And of course, it's simply a blast to fish at Hatteras.

"I love to fish," Dillon said. "I love the ocean, except for hurricanes. This is the best place in the world." ♦



COURTESY OF THE CAPE HATTERAS ANGLERS CLUB

Anglers club members Lafayette Midgett (left) and Bert Dixon stand beside the leader board of the first tournament in 1958.

Tournament Trivia

2003 Team Results

1. The Rising Tides, Nags Head: 22 fish, 83 points
2. Slammin' Sammy's Hurricanes, Nags Head: 19 fish, 70 points
3. Outer Banks Sportfishers, Nags Head: 30 fish, 69 points

The Prize

Teams compete not for cash but for a 30-inch, handmade replica of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. Winners keep the trophy for one year unless they win the event three times or in consecutive years. Then they take permanent possession of the trophy, all other teams' wins toward that trophy are zeroed out, and the club's craftsman creates a new trophy.

Clever Team Names

Keepers of the Lite
Bait Wasters
Hatteraskals
Queen Mackerels
South Jersey Squid Hounds
Neptune's Nephews

2004 Tourney

Thursday-Friday, Nov. 4-5

Last Five Years at the Tourney

Year	Fish caught	Total points
2003	701	1,917
2002	5,262*	11,308*
2001	3,724	8,832
2000	1,176	2,679
1999	2,881	5,177

*tournament record