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TUNA TOWERS LOOK GREAT AND FISH BETTER!

BIMINI'S GIANT BLUEFIN FISHERY

THE ORIGIN OF HEAVY-TACKLE TACTICS

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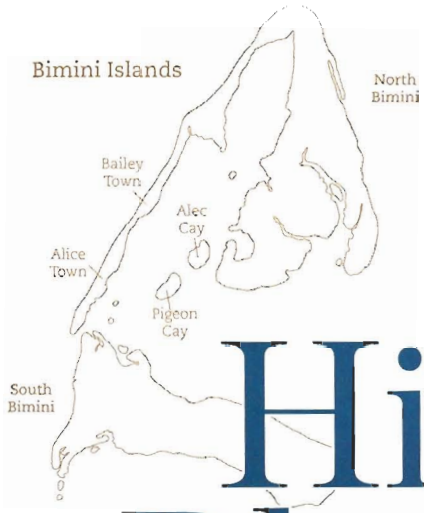
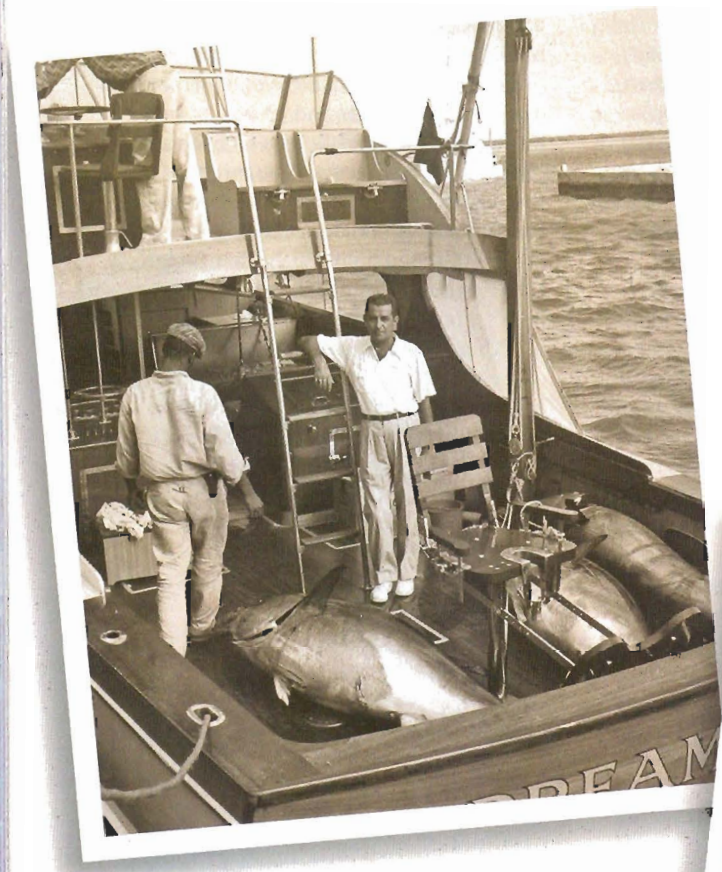


Bimini's Historic Giant Bluefin Fishery

TODAY'S HEAVY-TACKLE TACTICS BEGAN MORE THAN 50 YEARS AGO

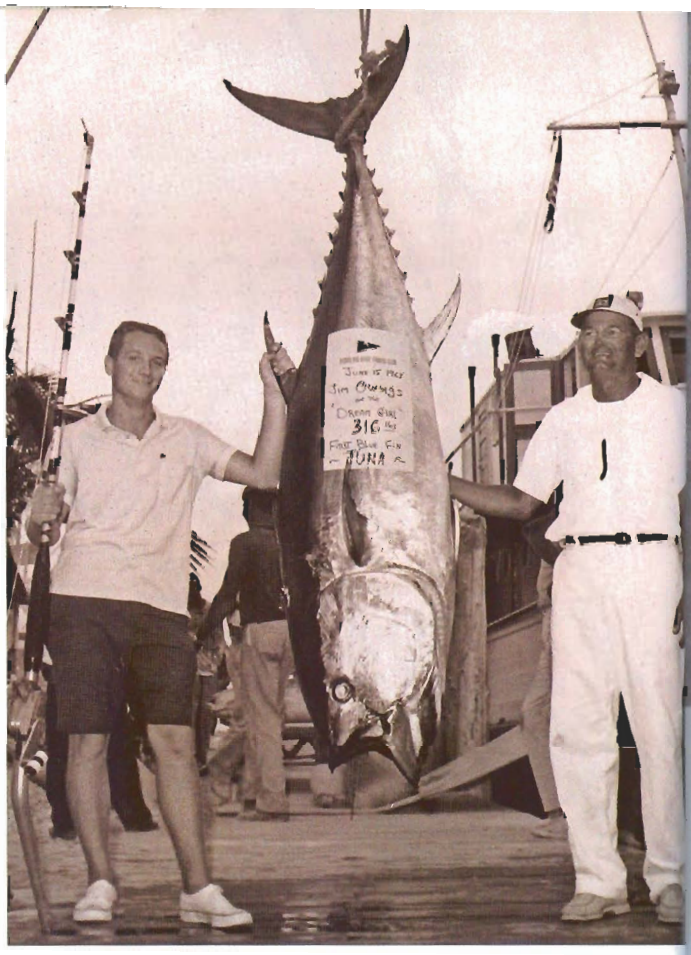
BY CAPT. PETER B. WRIGHT
PHOTOS COURTESY OF IGFA

AS A BOY, I THOUGHT, PROBABLY CORrectly, that the very best heavy-tackle anglers in the world, and the captains who worked for them, all had one thing in common: They fished for giant bluefin tuna in the Bahamas in the spring. To me, in those years, the men who fished for these greatest of fish were giants who walked the Earth and sailed its seas.



During the late '50s and '60s, sport fishing's best and brightest made their way to Bimini, Bahamas, to tangle with the giant bluefin tuna that migrated through the area each spring. A young Peter Wright (pictured in the middle photo with the white marlin) witnessed the tactics that these pioneering fishermen developed firsthand — methods that continue to shape our heavy-tackle fishing to this very day.


JUNE 12, 1963
DOROTHEA L. DEAN
on the
FINEST KIND
450 lbs
JUNE 12, 1963
DOROTHEA L. DEAN
on the
FINEST KIND
354 lbs
JUNE 12, 1963
DOROTHEA L. DEAN
on the
FINEST KIND
600 lbs



As a child, I voraciously read books about Yankee whalers and frontiersmen like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. I frequently exaggerated the severity of my childhood colds and bronchitis, so I could stay home from school and read stories about Robin Hood and King Arthur and his knights in armor. I always wished that I could have been a harpooner in the South Seas, back in the days of Melville's *Moby Dick*.

Fortunately, I later enjoyed the privilege of knowing and working for some of the tuna fishermen who became legendary heroes during those heady days of old. There were solid citizens and captains of commerce among the wealthy anglers and crews, and a fair share of womanizers, gamblers, alcoholics, cheats and liars as well.

I knew that I did not want to emulate some of them in many respects, but I yearned to learn how to catch the fish they caught in Bimini and Cat Cay while I sat in school. Later in the year, during summer vacation, I got to fish for sailfish and marlin — lesser fish, in my mind.

Many of these freewheeling, fish-catching characters became my mentors. Like the old man in Robert Ruark's *The Old Man and the Boy* stories, which I read fervently, they shared their knowledge with me. They taught me many basic skills, including how to tie knots, twist wire, handle a boat, operate a drag and much, much more. I learned to pull modest-size fish on steel wire leaders, and gaffed giant fish with a flying gaff before I reached my teens.

Honing these skills, tactics and techniques on bluefin tuna as a mate during my college years gave me a huge advantage when, as a young captain, I began to compete at the highest levels, capturing the biggest marlin and tuna.

Those who fished for lesser species could not, and still cannot, catch truly big fish the way those trained on tuna along the edge of the Bahama Banks could — unless they learned from someone who had been there, or worked for someone who had.

Today, long chains of knowledge connect those men who developed and passed on their heavy-tackle tuna techniques to many of today's great captains and their young, ambitious mates.

Many of today's greats may not even be aware that the first captain they worked for represents a direct link in a chain, going all the way back to the Bahamas tuna pioneers. Many generational links separate today's best from direct contact with bluefin tuna and the Bahamas, but the links are still there, reaching out to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, Latin America and just about anywhere that anglers pursue the biggest, strongest fish that swim in the seas.

> "Those who fished for lesser species could not, and still cannot, catch truly big fish the way those trained on tuna along the edge of the Bahama Banks could — unless they learned from someone who had been there, or worked for someone who had."

TRAINING GROUND

It was almost impossible to compete as a captain without first serving an apprenticeship on the deck of a tuna boat, fishing off Bimini or Cat Cay. There was less luck and more skill involved in this fishery than any other I've ever participated in.

Anyone — a dentist, say, or the owner of several midwestern convenience stores — can retire, buy a boat and some pre-rigged lures, and compete, with a decent chance of placing, in most big-money marlin tournaments — not so on Tuna Alley.

Tuna fishing in Bimini was sight-fishing — and you had to have good eyes. If your own eyes were less than superb, you hired a mate with both great vision and experience in the fishery. Some of the best captains (Walter Voss comes to mind) had average eyes, but made up for it by hiring mates with excellent vision. Most often, these mates were local Bahamian men, with surnames like Rolle, Brown, Ellis and Saunders. Highly prized for their skills, these sharp-eyed fishermen could make more money in the relatively short tuna season than they would the entire rest of the year. In the earliest years of the fishery, they climbed and clung to a mast mounted on a trunk cabin. Riding high above the flying bridge on this precarious perch allowed them to spot tuna from farther away.

Everyone wore polarized sunglasses. The "owl-eyed" or "raccoon" look was sported by all of the more fair-skinned men in the years before good sunblock came along. Skin cancer was a major occupational hazard.

The masts on boats from before World War II and just after morphed into a "tuna tower," complete with steering wheel, throttles and gear shifters. Tuna only poured through in uncountable numbers (and popped to the surface to surf downswell) on windy days. Captains designed the towers to hold two, or at most three men, safely and comfortably, on moderate days.

More sight-fishing than anything else, hunting giant tuna on the flats necessitated keen eyes and aggressive boat handling to keep the fish from running to the edge of the reef and sounding. The need to spot fast-moving fish from afar resulted in the first tuna towers.

Only two men could stay up top on the best, really rough days. The only time a tuna tournament was canceled on account of the weather was when it was too calm.

THE HUNT

Figuring out where to go to look for tuna on any given day, with that day's particular weather and current, was a skill that only came from experience and time spent "on the rip." You had to know how the wind and tide affected the tuna's patterns. Everyone knew that a wind blowing in the quadrant from southeast to southwest made the fish surf the wind-generated waves that formed along the edge of the drop-off between Cat Cay and Bimini. Knowing exactly where you needed to look along the 70-mile edge took more experience.

The incoming or outgoing tide also made a difference, and only with experience could you learn that fish could come along the edge off Cat Cay in a due-east wind, and on the edge farther north between Bimini's North Rock and Great Isaac's light, in a due-west wind. Up there you could also find tuna on a wind that was slightly north of west. A west wind could also cause fish to pop up way south of Cat Cay, from a little north of Riding Rock to (or even past) Orange Key.

Even small changes in the shape of the Bahama Banks could have boats in one area seeing hundreds of fish and other boats, only a few miles away but out of sight, seeing nothing.

When there was no wind at all, tuna could come if given a good, strong north current, sometimes staying on the surface and "pushing water" and creating a wake. Such conditions often had the fish moving in shallow water, way inside the edge of the drop-off. However, on calm days, the fish spooked more easily and it was harder to present bait to them.

Boats usually came out of the cut and turned south when they got to the drop-off. Faster boats should show courtesy when passing slower boats or boats that had turned and were moving back north, baiting a school. If you failed to move far enough inshore or offshore when going south past another boat, you would get called out on the dock, and fistfights were not unknown to happen.

The best captains all followed a strict etiquette. You did not interfere with a school another man was baiting. Only after the first boat hooked up, or gave up and left a school, could a second boat bait those fish.

Tournament days always started with a race. A cannon or radio call signaled the start, and that's how the "Bimini start" joined the lexicon of tournament angling. The fastest boat got to bait the first school of fish before anyone else could mess with it.

Slower boats might run north a few miles and then head south looking for a school that had already passed the cut. Hanging back and getting to bait *all* the schools, the leftovers already baited by another boat, was a good tactic on days when the schools were few and far between. Besides, the fish did not always pop up and show as well down south like they did farther north. The patterns changed from day to day, even hour by hour.

It didn't take long for a new captain to figure out that it was better to stay out a little wider, in the deeper water, during the morning, and move in shallower, inside "Tuna Alley," after noon. With the sun coming from the right direction, the crew could easily see the fish on the side of the boat that was least affected by the glare.

A new mate soon learned that it was necessary to spot the tuna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from afar, well before there was any chance of running into or over the school with the boat. As a mate, you looked way out to the side, on your side only. Your responsibility was to not miss any school on your side. If you looked at the water close to the boat, you never saw the more distant schools of fish.

If you scanned your eyes across the face of seas way out there, you might spot one big fish sliding down from high up the face of a wave. Looking out a few hundred yards, you would also see any fish swimming closer to the boat. You always tried to look farther out than you really thought you could see one. And when you saw one, you said there *they* are, even if you only saw one. And you never pointed at them if there was another boat nearby.

The captain pulled his throttles to idle and always turned *away* from where the fish was seen. A big school might be spread out over several hundred yards, and running over even a few stragglers, still unseen and in front of the boat, could put the entire school down, never to be seen again. If more fish came into view, close to the boat, a wise skipper pulled the boat into neutral and everyone held their breath and watched them swim past. The captain didn't put the clutches back in gear until he was sure the last fish had passed the boat. A smart skipper would then make a slow, quiet turn. A new skipper might "mash" the school by making a fast turn with a big wake before the whole school had gone by, thereby missing a valuable opportunity.

You never knew if the fish you spotted was truly alone (a "single"), but you always turned and ran back to the north looking hard for more fish. Sometimes, the one you saw was the last fish in a big bunch, and you had to run a long way north trying to stay wide of the fish before slowing and turning to position the boat well in front of the leading phalanx.

Running down and capturing large tunas proved that anglers using the right methods and tackle could subdue enormous fish with a rod and reel, paving the way for future marlin fishermen.

A novice skipper might call to put the bait out too soon. Letting the bait back too soon, before the tuna could see it, exposed your bait to the hordes of hungry barracuda living along the drop-off and among the deeper reefs. Even if you timed it perfectly, and when the bait had been let back to the mark on the line and was only a few feet in front of the lead fish, the odds were good that a 'cuda would get it first.

It was up to the angler to feel a cutoff from a barracuda or king mackerel. Dragging a cutoff bait for several perfect passes in front of a big school of tuna wasted more opportunities for a bite. It was much better for an angler to yell "Cutoff!" after feeling the tug of a passing wave, and start winding until the crew in the tower told him it was OK, than to drag a clipped bait around. You might get a bite out of a fish when winding up a whole bait to check it, but almost never if the bait is only a head.

The tuna did not always swim in straight lines, especially when the waves ran at an angle to the edge. They could surf down-sea and then drop out of sight, continuing to swim down deep, away from the drop-off, until once again coming to the surface and surfing into or along the edge, or over the shallow white-sand bottom of the Alley.

It took practice to adjust your course and speed to intercept the fish when they showed again. If you weren't far enough along the edge, the fish came straight toward the boat, never saw the bait and sounded when they got too close. If you were too far up the edge, the fish surfed in and then dropped down for their offshore tack before ever getting near your bait. Both of these scenarios increased the chance of either a cutoff or no tuna bite from the school.

Bad light further complicated the procedure. Windy days usually meant scattered clouds. When a cloud hid the sun, it also hid the fish you were trying to bait. A small cloud might only hide the light for a minute or two, but it still made you guess where the fish were by what you had seen before the light went out — how fast they were moving and what their pattern was that day, hour or minute. Making blind passes on a school, based on experience, and maybe getting the odd, tiny glimpse of a fish, was common practice. Getting a bite from a school you were able to stay with under these adverse conditions was wonderful. If you pulled this off with regularity, skill was definitely a bigger factor than luck.

A big cloud from a small squall or thunderstorm could last hours, and you might have to run 10 miles or more to get back into good light. If the fish were plentiful and "pouring" through outside the drop-off, away from barracudas, it might be worthwhile to blind-troll for fish you couldn't see.

"You always tried to look farther out than you really thought you could see one. And when you saw one, you said there *they* are, even if you only saw one. And you never pointed at them if there was another boat nearby."

The better skippers tacked back and forth while trolling south, but not north. They still kept their eyes peeled for fish while blind-trolling and would turn and tack north for a while if they got a mere glimpse of a fish.

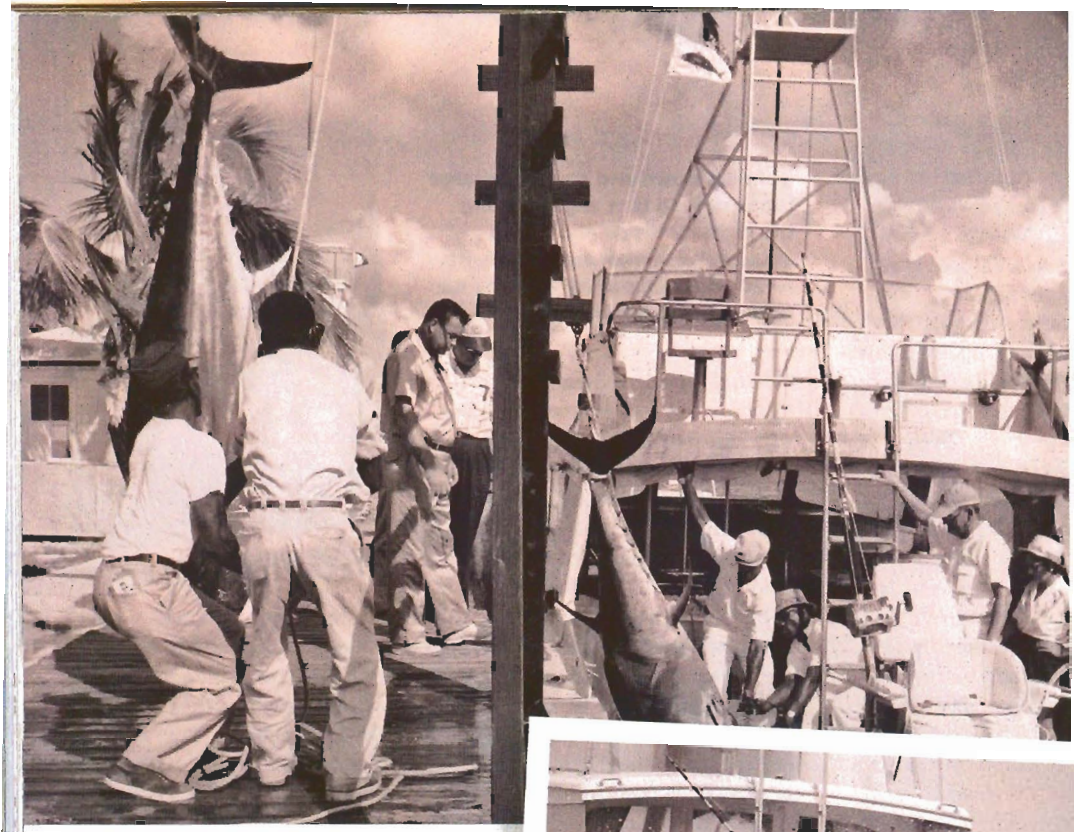
Crews only trolled one bait at a time, and rigging that bait was like rocket science compared to rigging a marlin lure. Dead baits — mainly mullet, mackerel and sometimes ballyhoo — were the mainstays. Small bluefish worked great, and a fresh dolphin made a good bait if you caught a small one and could make it swim.

There was no time to mess with a bait that swam less than perfectly. Mates had to know how to rig split-tail silver mullet and Spanish mackerel so they swam perfectly every time.

It was not uncommon to lose six or eight baits to 'cudas while baiting a single school of tuna. The seventh bait had better work as well as the first six or you had no chance of getting a bite on that school — maybe the only school all day. Several dozen baits might be cut off in a single day.

If no fish were being spotted, the angler could read, nap, or play backgammon or card games for most of the day. It could be monumentally boring.

On a good day, when the big schools were coming through but the bites were few and far between, an angler might sit in the chair for hours, hooked to a big 130-class rod and reel with a



bucket harness, winding in dozens of cutoff baits under the hot subtropical sun.

THE BITE

When the real bite finally came, all hell broke loose as the hooked tuna took off on a run, the ferocity of which author Philip Wylie once described in one of his *Crunch & Des* stories as like "being hooked to a greased coffin sliding down toward the gates of Hell."

When a fish bit, water might fly into the air in a veritable explosion of savage force. Or there might be no visual contact with the fish's attack if the fish came from deep down while the crew was scanning the school and planning the next pass.

Line would peel off the monster reel against a strike drag setting of 40 pounds or even more. The leverage generated by the heavy rod multiplied the strain on the fighting harness to a weight equal to that of a typical adult male. Such a strain would pull on the harness and against the angler's hips or back with a force capable of supporting the angler's weight.

With straightened knees and his feet pressed against the footrest of the fighting chair, the angler would stand, suspended in the harness, above the seat of the chair. A deckhand would keep the chair's seat turned so the rod always pointed straight toward the racing fish. At this stage, all the angler could do was hang on and watch line disappear off the reel.

On the bite, the skipper would instantly turn the boat offshore, while the mate who was helping spot the fish scrambled out of the tower down to the flying bridge and onto the cockpit deck.

If the hooked tuna immediately ran for deep water, no boat then or now could back up fast enough to avoid losing hundreds of yards of line. If the fish got too far away from the boat, you would lose both the fish and a large amount of line as the fish dove into the depths and cut the line on the sharp coral reefs that line the drop-off. To avoid the cut, the skipper had to turn the boat offshore and run past the drop-off in order to pull — the line, and any belly in the line — clear of the edge before the fish sounded.

The sizes and speeds of all fish tend to be greatly exaggerated, but even an average Bahamas bluefin tuna weighing 500 pounds could run at speeds of perhaps 18 to 20 mph, which seemed much faster.

How deep the fish got down on its first dive was a directly related to the angler's skill level. No angler without experience in this particular fishery could know when he needed to back off the drag to keep the increased tension of the reel's decreased diameter and the frictional pressure of the line being dragged through the water from breaking the line. Only with practice could an angler know, by the *feel* of the pressure against him, when he could safely increase the drag.

When the fish finally slowed down, in order to get much-needed oxygen back into its system, the hard part of the fight began. Using as much drag as possible, the angler pumped and wound, pulling the fish toward the surface a few feet at a time. A good angler with a developed sense of technique and rhythm could keep a fish's head turned toward the boat, and keep it coming up toward the surface.

If the fish ran in any direction other than toward the edge, the skipper stopped his turn toward the drop-off and chased rapidly after the fish, often with the boat on plane. The object: trying to close in on the running fish without ever letting it get offshore of the boat. The boat and its skipper maneuvered in a manner not unlike cowboys who round up wild cattle or rope young calves being weaned from their mothers. A great boat handles like a cutting horse — fast but not the fastest, and definitely among the most agile.

If the skipper could coerce the fish into staying in shallow water and the angler used maximum drag on a fish that could not dive deep, fight times could be amazingly short, and there may have never been as much as 200 yards of line taken out.

The techniques of pulling on a big fish while using heavy leader, and the requisite boat-handling skills with circles, spins and rapid changes of direction, all started here.

The dance that occurs between the angler, fish, wire man, captain and boat during the final stages of the fight — with the great fish either gaffed or tagged and released — has spread to marlin grounds all over the globe. Many great anglers and crew may not be aware that their skills were first developed and perfected in the Bahamas, on giant bluefin tuna.