

IN DEPTH

TRENDS, ANALYSIS, PERSPECTIVE

The big one that didn't get away

A trophy bonefish that guide Ansil Saunders helped a client land in 1971 remains a world record

By Jim Flannery

SENIOR WRITER

The Bimini Big Game Club planned to celebrate a bit of local fishing lore late last month with a ticker-tape parade for bonefish guide and boatbuilder Ansil Saunders, who 40 years ago scared up a 16-pound, 3-ounce bonefish for Jerry Lavenstein to hook and land, setting a world record that stands today.

Saunders, who at 77 still guides anglers and still handcrafts bonefish skiffs from a shed 300 yards from the Bimini Big Game Club, laughs about it now, but on that day in 1971, when he saw the tell-tale puff of mud on the flats and three monster bonefish, he was under the gun to deliver a trophy for Lavenstein to catch.

The Virginia Beach sportsman — a regular client of Saunders' — had just invested in a fishing-reel company and wanted to promote it by catching a world-record fish with one of its new reels. "I told him, 'Jerry, it doesn't work that way,'" Saunders says. Lavenstein insisted: He wanted a record.

Known on Bimini as "Bonefish Ansil" or simply "The Legend," Saunders is the island's "dean of bonefishing guides," says Mark Ellert, president of Guy Harvey Outposts, owner of the Bimini Big Game Club, from where the Bahamian often guides.

Saunders says hunting the prized gamefish and finding a decent number of them for his clients to hook and fight, day in and day out, is a skill honed by years of experience, but stumbling onto a world-record fish is mostly a matter of luck. On this outing, Saunders was blessed with a cap full of luck.

The first day out, Lavenstein landed six bonefish, the biggest 5 pounds — nowhere near the record-setting 15-pounder that golfing legend Sam Snead caught off Bimini in 1953. The next morning at 11, Lavenstein again set off with Saunders from the Big Game Club docks to hunt for a record. Saunders gunned the 16-foot skiff's engine, and six minutes later he spotted a small mud flat 200 feet away. He shut down the engine, baited two rods with live shrimp and poled the boat toward the flat.



their snouts for food — worms, mollusks, shrimp and crabs, crushing the morsels with the bony plates in their mouths and ingesting them.

Lavenstein knew what to do. He cast his shrimp a boat length ahead of the silvery fish to avoid scaring them. "It was the best cast of his life," Saunders



Bimini boatbuilder and fishing guide Ansil Saunders spotted the 16-pound, 3-ounce bonefish that Jerry Lavenstein boated 40 years ago. "It was the best cast of his life," Saunders says.

As they approached, Saunders says he saw a puff of mud — and three big bonefish — on the flat about 80 feet ahead. The fish were rooting around with

says. The smallest of the three — a female fat with eggs — pounced on the shrimp first. Saunders says their powerful quarry fought Lavenstein for an hour, running for the mangroves twice, each time stripping the 8-pound-test line — more than 200 yards of it — nearly down to the knot on the spool before Lavenstein finally boated it.

After verifying the catch as a world record, Lavenstein hired a calypso band, organized a parade and served free drinks for everyone on the island, an event that was to be celebrated — without the gratis drinks — Feb. 25.

In 1971, world-record citations recognized only

the angler, not the guide, a practice that has since changed so that both are now cited. At the celebration, Saunders was to receive a certificate from the International Game Fish Association retroactively recognizing his role in that world-record catch.

FAMOUS CLIENTS

Saunders can't think of any work half as much fun as going bonefishing. Guiding anglers across the flats off Bimini is a "good living," he says, but more than that it is just plain fun. Saunders has met a lot of famous and interesting people during the 50 years he has been guiding, sometimes to hunt fish, other times simply to seek a peaceful sanctuary in the mangroves.

Among his clients: civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., National Football League commissioner Pete Rozelle, quarterbacks Joe Namath and Johnny Unitas, former Atlanta Falcons owner Rankin Smith, U.S. Rep. Adam Clayton Powell and President Richard Nixon.

An avid fan of American football, Saunders says he lobbied Rozelle to create a title game between the champions of the NFL and American Football League — advice he believes was well taken when Rozelle shepherded the merger agreement between the two leagues in 1966. The first Super Bowl was played in 1967.

Yet his fondest memories are of King, who visited Bimini in 1964 to write his Pulitzer Peace Prize acceptance speech, and then four years later to write his speech in support of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, where he was shot and killed three days after returning from Bimini.

On both visits Saunders took King up into the mangroves on Bonefish Creek, where Saunders says King found peace and time to reflect, telling Saunders that the beauty and serenity of the place confirmed his belief in a God who created it all. Saunders wrote a psalm — a poem — that he recited to King during that second visit. It starts:

"Just look around you and see God in everything, his name written on every tiny raindrop."

Now Saunders takes visitors out to this place that he calls "holy ground" so they, too, can take in the tranquility and hear Saunders' reflection about the work of his maker's hands. "Who else but God, in his infinite wisdom, could create all this?" he asks.

Poet, spiritual mentor and bonefish guide, Saunders also has been a civil rights advocate, sitting in at lunch hour for 42 consecutive days at the Big Game Club during the 1960s when its restaurant served whites only.

Saunders says the club finally served him after he raised the specter of greater militancy, a la Malcolm X. "Then they had no problem serving us," he says.

Saunders' civil rights victory won him a special place in the hearts of his countrymen, so much so that when the Bahamas got its independence from Britain in 1973, he was sent to London with Prime Minister Lyden Pindling to meet with future Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Queen Elizabeth II.

BIMINI BONEFISHER

A fifth-generation Bimini boatbuilder, Saunders is descended from Scottish fishermen and boatbuilders who came to the island in the mid-19th century on a three-masted schooner and married local women. Saunders' father and uncle built boats. "My uncle used to build these skiffs for a fellow who owned land on the north end of Bimini," he says.

Saunders built a version of that skiff — his first

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A modern mission for a Hemingway-era resort

By Jim Flannery

SENIOR WRITER

Guy Harvey knows the water from many perspectives — as an artist, angler, diver, conservationist, biologist and entrepreneur — so it makes sense that his new Guy Harvey Outpost Resort & Marina on Bimini is as multifaceted as he is.

A \$3.5 million upgrade of the historic Bimini Big Game Club, which had been shuttered for two years under earlier owners, the Bimini Outpost is the first of what Harvey and his business partners envision as a network of small-scale, ecologically sustainable resorts catering to anglers, divers and eco-tourists.

"I'm a big diver," says Harvey, whose renderings of sea life — billfish, in particular — are world-famous. "My ideal for a day on the water is to do two or three dives and some fishing in between." But he says his Outposts have the broader mission of bringing families together with fun activities, offering entertaining and educational conservation programs and supporting marine research.

Fishing. Diving. Swimming. Beachcombing. Art. Photography. Science. "We have no golf, tennis, shopping or casinos," Harvey says. "If that's what you want, we ain't it."

What the Outpost is is a doorway to the sea. "You can immerse yourself in the environment's natural

beauty," he says. "We have service people there who are truly passionate about sharing their experience of that beauty."

The Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation helps support Hans Gruber's pioneering shark research at the Biological Field Station on Bimini. The Outpost also is offering its guests excursions to Gruber's shark lab, where they can see sharks in the wild and learn about



The Bimini Big Game Club, now a Guy Harvey Outpost Resort & Marina, has attracted hard-core anglers — and celebrities — since the 1930s.

them while helping to support the lab financially.

Harvey also envisions the revival of a catch-and-release tournament fishing out of the Big Game Club, which, drawing on the example of the Guy Harvey Ultimate Shark Challenge Series in Florida, can attract anglers, promote conservation and help gather scientific data through measuring and tagging catches.

Founded as a formal dinner club in 1936 in Alice Town on North Bimini island (there also is a South Bimini), the Big Game Club became tournament central for anglers from around the world — sportsmen such as author Zane Grey, writer Ernest Hemingway, recluse Howard Hughes and retailer-turned-naturalist Michael Lerner — who came for Bimini's renowned blue marlin and tuna fishing. The club, under a string of owners, had fallen on hard times and closed in 2008.

Reopened last July, the Bimini Big Game Club has retained its 75-slip marina and 51-room retreat, as well as its name, although it is known now as a Guy Harvey Outpost Marina & Resort. Its makeover includes guest rooms, a new Bimini Big Game Bar & Grill, an Outfitter Shop and a Guy Harvey sportswear and gift shop.

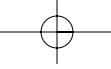
Marine artist, master fly fisherman and retired fishing guide Vaughn Cochran, of St. Augustine, Fla., has launched Black Fly Bimini from the Outfitter Shop. Black Fly organizes backcountry fishing trips, using local guides to hunt bonefish and permit. Scuba diving legend Neal Watson, who opened a dive operation in Bimini in 1975 and expanded through the Caribbean under the Neal Watson Undersea Adventures brand, has opened a dive center, Dive Bimini, at the Outpost.

Watson's crew began running a 60-foot, two-deck, glass-bottom boat called Bimini Blue out of the Out-

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Guy Harvey is a passionate angler, diver and painter. His renovated resort opened last July.



INDEPTH

SAUNDERS

bonefisher — when he was 15. Today, he builds a finely crafted 16-footer — the Bimini Bonefisher — that is as much a work of art as a fishboat. The hull sides are quarter-inch acme marine plywood from France — “the best plywood you can buy,” he says — and the bottom is 3/8-inch marine plywood, reinforced with epoxy, coated with fiberglass and varnished to a sheen.

The ribs are white oak, the seats and sole Honduras mahogany, the forward deck 3/8-inch marine plywood. The inside of the transom is made of a beautiful red-striped native hardwood called horseflesh. The console is horseflesh and Honduran mahogany. The bow stem and stern post are fashioned from the root of the horseflesh tree. Fastening is with bronze screws.

“She’s very strong,” he says, but also masterfully crafted. “People call them museum pieces. They say they’re too pretty to go in the water.”

But the Bonefisher is designed for hunting and catching bonefish. Powered by a 60-hp 4-stroke outboard, it tops out at 30 mph, runs in very skinny water — as little as 6 inches — and is strong enough to bang around in



Saunders, here with master flyfisherman Vaughn Cochran, is a fifth-generation boatbuilder who builds the 16-foot Bonefisher skiff.

shallow water. The cost is \$40,000.

Saunders finishes, at most, two a year. He has built 28 of them, turning out six early in his career, then halting building while he pursued his guide business. He resumed skiff-building 20 years ago.

“Bonefishing is my main living,” he says. “I build boats on the side.”

Bonefishing is still more fun. ■

HARVEY

post last fall for wreck-, reef- and coral wall-diving. “The visibility in Bimini is second to none,” Watson says. Gulf Stream eddies sweeping in a mile from shore work on the waters there like a giant pool cleaner, he says.

Anglers fish in the Gulf Stream, where they stalk blue marlin, tuna, wahoo and mahi-mahi (dolphin), or on the flats, where they catch bonefish and permit.

Still to come: a Guy Harvey Theater — a multimedia presentation with interactive educational and recreational programming; a fitness center/spa; more conference space; a full-service fuel dock; and seminars and presentations by on-island researchers, Harvey himself and scientists from the Guy Harvey Research Institute at Nova Southeastern Oceanographic Center.

Harvey’s partners in Guy Harvey Outposts Ltd. include Outpost president Mark Ellert, a Fort Lauderdale developer specializing in hospitality, resort and restaurant properties; conservationist Bill Shedd, president of the fishing tackle company Aftco, whose

family founded SeaWorld and the Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute; and Fort Lauderdale lawyer Charles Foreman, whose family helped found Nova Southeastern University and the Guy Harvey Research Institute.

Fifty miles from Miami, Bimini is one of the settings for Hemingway’s posthumously published book “Islands in the Stream” about an artist, adventurer — and angler — who seeks out the islands as a retreat.

Harvey can see a couple more Outpost-type retreats in his future, maybe in the Abacos or Exumas, the Florida Keys, or even in the Florida panhandle. Outpost president Ellert says the locations have to be special — on the water with good fishing and diving and boating nearby. “Beautiful properties, great destinations that can’t [or shouldn’t] accommodate large hotel developments,” he says.

He says Harvey — with diverse interests in all things marine — is the “crossover rock star” who makes an Outpost work as a business, as a vacation destination and as an avenue for conservation education and research.

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