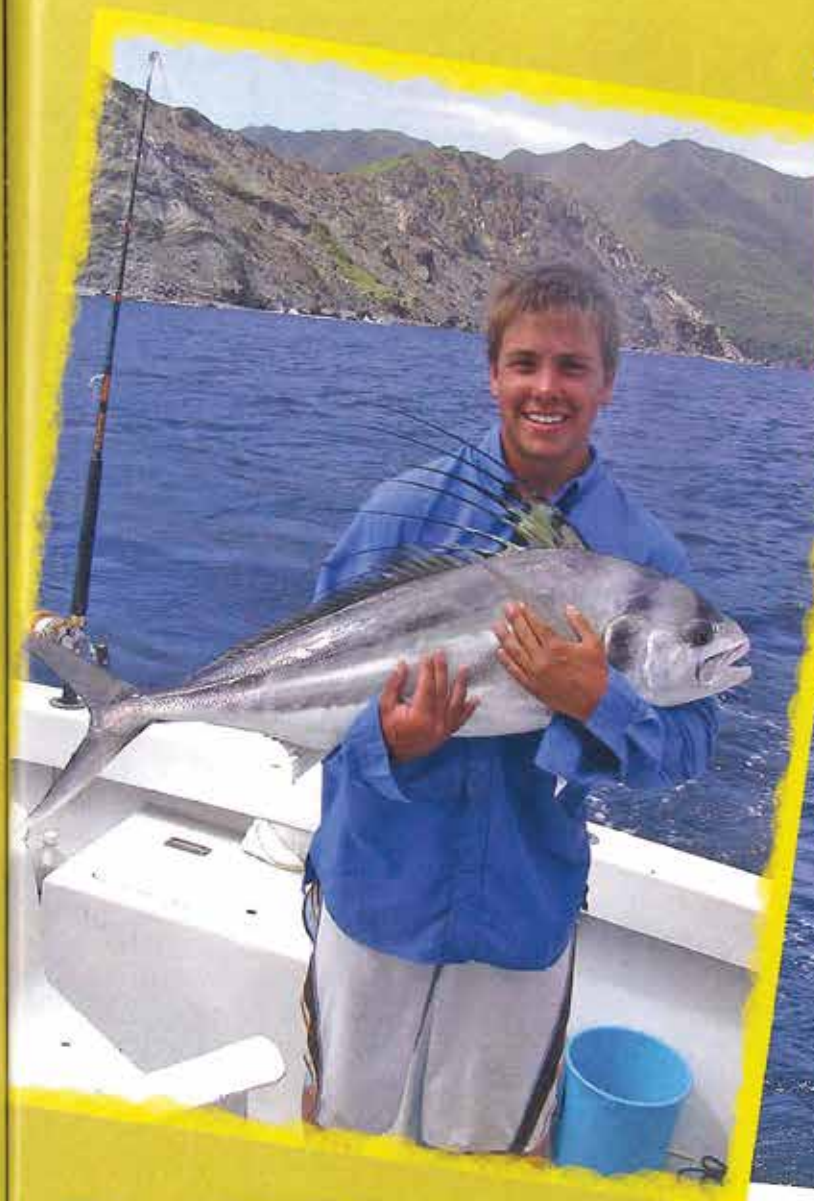
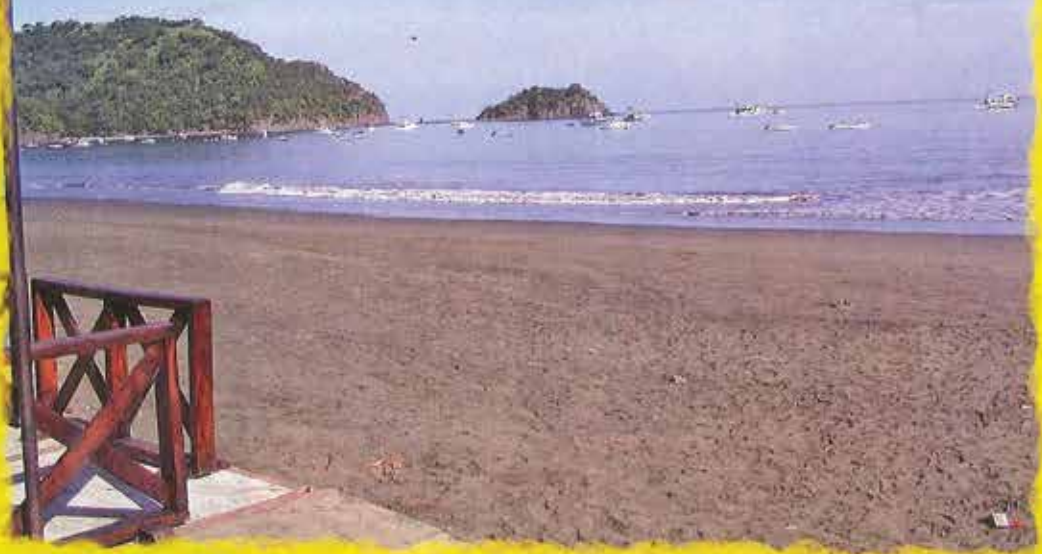
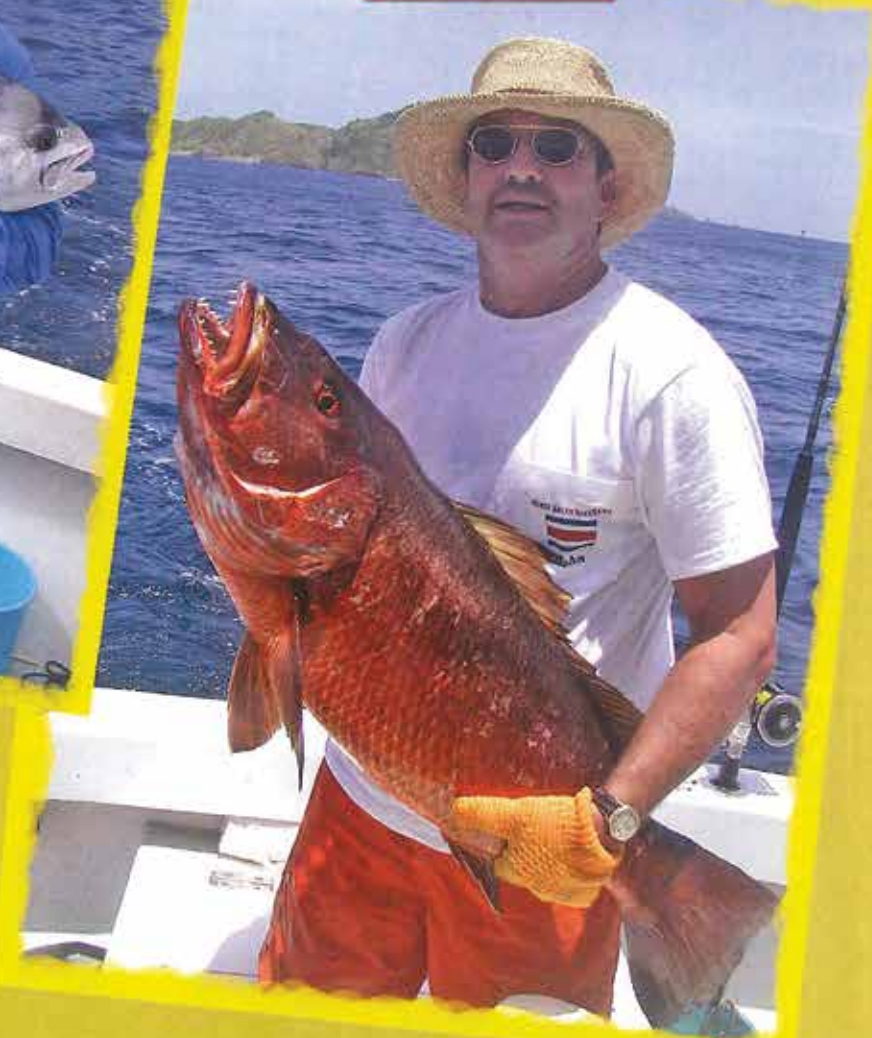


Extend Your Costa Rica

Fishing Season (or: what's happening down there?)



**Text & Photos
By Riley Love**



"Zzzrreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh." It will never cease to amaze, just how fast the line can scream off one of those big Penn Internationals when a heavy fish hits, and how high the sound's pitch can reach. You don't even need to look down at it to know what's happening. Sublime, finger tips touch the spool just enough to prevent a backlash, but light enough so the fish won't feel it, and to prevent the burn even an instant of indiscretion will cause human skin. The time is not yet right, he needs the chance to run further before the commitment is true. This is the time for patience and focus, but the panoramic backdrop of Pacific aquamarine surging against the rocks around us is so stunning, even now I drink it in.



Early Spanish explorers called this country "Rich Coast." Probably this was because of the gentle coastal plains of its eastern Atlantic shore. For the fisherman, this is fair enough land. The tarpon and snook, which are abundant there in their time, migrate up the rivers to mingle with the guapote and gar. In the highlands, rainbow trout from the United States have been introduced into cool water streams.

Like all of the Americas however, on the rugged Pacific coast the mountains fall off into the sea and the water becomes deep and blue. Here the fishing for the great game species of the open ocean becomes spectacular.

CENTRAL AMERICA OCEAN CURRENTS

To understand why the fishing on the west coast of Central America is so productive, one must understand the effect of the ocean currents. Water that became more saline from evaporation at the surface sinks and typically can spend one to two thousand years in the cold depths before resurfacing. This deep water is put into motion by the rotation of the

earth, south of the equator at the pole in a clockwise flow, counter-clockwise in the north. Deep water becomes more oxygenated by the degradation of sinking organic matter and has a greater content of both oxygen and nutrients.

The Peruvian Current (formerly the Humboldt Current) is the manifestation of the South Pacific Gyre. It

carries cold, deep water from near Antarctica out into the south Pacific. This force actually causes a rise in altitude of the water in this region relative to the general sea level; this is closely monitored by satellite. As it encounters the warm, languid waters of the western Pacific it runs back "downhill" toward Central and South America as the Equatorial Counter currents. They flow about four degrees south and north of the equator and are about 300 miles wide. The temperature difference between the east and western parts of the ocean also cause strong winds to blow the water in the easterly direction.

These currents continue around 150 meters under the surface until they encounter shelves of underwater structure and this causes massive upwellings towards the surface. This also occurs to replace warm surface water that is moved by wind. The seawater here, compared to the Atlantic side of the region is greater in content of oxygen and nutrients, and has less salinity. Each of these aspects of the ocean water are dynamics that power the course of events leading to the presence of many species that move both with and independent of



SEE THE ALL NEW POST 53 IN ACTION ON ESPN 2.

Series Airs February 19 Through April 2, 2006



ESPN 2
BILLFISHING XTREME
Release League
Visit www.PostYachts.com
for Air Times & Details.



42 47 50 **53** 56

Since 1957, the Post tradition has been one of quality, not quantity. Catering to the experienced yachtsman who values performance and exacting attention to detail, Post has thrived on comparison.

Designed to accommodate serious sport fishing enthusiasts, as well as sophisticated cruisers, the 53's rugged, yet beautiful exterior is handsomely matched to its



Fish or Cruise Without Compromise.

superbly finished interior. With its sleek unbroken sheer, the yacht maintains the classic Post aura of timeless elegance. And as you would expect from Post, the 53 reveals a fit and finish that remains the envy of the industry.

To discover the Post difference, call 609-625-2434 today for the name of your nearest Post Dealer.

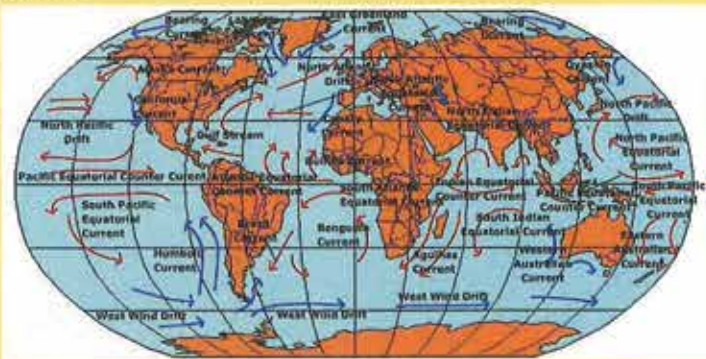
POST YACHTS
YACHTS OF QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY SINCE 1957

A Tradition Of Excellence For Nearly Half A Century

100 Post Road, Mays Landing, New Jersey 08330
Phone: 609-625-2434 (7:30AM to 3:30PM EST) • Fax: 609-625-2336
E-mail: Post@PostYachts.com • www.PostYachts.com

OCEANOGRAPHY 101

The oceans of the world are kept in motion by large gyres, caused by the rotation of the earth and the weather. This rotational force also deflects the air and between latitudes 30 and 60 degrees causes wind to turn horizontally as cyclones and anticyclones. This effect of the planet's rotation is called the Coriolis force, named for French engineer and mathematician Gustave-Gaspard Coriolis in 1835. This is strongest near the poles and less felt toward the equator. Winds come from the east between 0 and 30 degrees and are called the Trade Winds. They blow from the west between 30 and 60 degrees and are called the Westerly Winds. The prevailing winds contribute to the surface currents of the world forming their gyres and maintain a great global conveyor belt of movement. These surface currents occupy the upper 400 meters of the oceans and constitute about 10 percent of all ocean water. The movement of the very deep waters is primarily caused by the variations in density of the water of different regions and is called the thermohaline circulation.



NATIONAL PARKS AND RESERVES OF COSTA RICA

The nation has devoted about 20 percent of its land into protected areas. This includes areas of ocean as well as land. This is reputedly the largest proportion of area of any country in the world. At Canos Island this projects 15 kilometers out into the sea.

current. This oxygen and nutrient rich flow carries the basis for the lowest strata of the food chain, which then transfers this bounty up to the next levels of plankton and smaller fish, and so onward.

Thus, a path of migration of ocean animals, dictating their pattern of movement, feeding and reproduction is formed. Finally the pelagic species, including the giant predators, the gamefish that haunt our dreams are drawn along this ocean highway, toward the western shore of Central America. Here they hold on prominent features of underwater topography like the parking lots of supermarkets.

GAMEFISH MIGRATIONS

Near shore, wind and weather dominate the movement of the water. The calendar year is divided into the wet and dry seasons. Many gamefish make their appearance with reasonable predictability and lure fishermen who yearn for an encounter with a particular species. However, it is the migration northward along the Central American coast of huge numbers of sailfish that more than any other event defines the fishing season. This largely coincides with the presence of marlin, and other game species.

When the sailfish are present in good numbers there is an opportunity to see 20 to 30 fish in your bait spread in a single day. When it's happening, every captain who can find something that floats is headed out to the bite.

While the cold equations of physics dictate the movement of atoms within us and the great bodies in the heavens above us, there are other laws which govern our world of living things. There are rhythms that define the grand movements of all species and their interaction with the rest of nature. The billfish migrate away from the equator with the dry season as the water warms and moves. The south-



ern and central coasts experience this abundance of sails in our early spring, sometimes as early as December, but usually resolving in April or May. It is a season of about four months, ending as the wet season begins. Inshore fishing does persist year round.

Billfish and swordfish as well as tuna, dorado and sharks are designated "highly migratory species." This term comes from article 64 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. They typically have wide migration patterns and mostly live in the open ocean although they spend parts of their lives in near shore waters. Efforts at billfish tagging and tracking around the world goes back over 30 years, but in our modern times satellite information on surface temperature, measurement of chlorophyll quantities and nitrogen fixation in surface waters will take us over new horizons of understanding the rhythms of movement of ocean species.

The most exciting new tool of information gathering is the Pop-up Satellite Archival Tag [PSAT], which can be programmed to release from a tagged fish in a specific time frame,

measured in months. At that time the tag is released to the surface it downloads its stored information to a satellite, which e-mails the data to the parent scientists.

There are studies due to be released this year and next, but data already obtained shows some variability in sailfish movement with some fish heading back out to sea, a few staying in Costa Rican waters, but most moving north toward Nicaragua and Guatemala.

Water temperature near the surface largely dictates the seasonal movement of billfish. Unlike swordfish, which tag-

ging data suggests spend part of the day in very deep water, billfish spend very little time more than 50 meters below the surface and likely spend most of their time within 10 meters of the surface. There is some evidence as billfish experience water temperature at the extremes of their preferred range, the performance of their heart muscle is adversely affected and water temperature is of greater importance than oxygen content in this regard. This would likely dictate a "comfort zone."

POLITICAL CURRENTS

Traveling intermittently to Costa Rica over a period of 30 years, you can see a lot of changes. Decades past, boats for charter required real ingenuity to find, and accommodations likewise were sparse and lacking creature comforts. These days one new lodge after another blossoms in the south. Scores of offshore rides have become readily available up and

Costa Rica
A Sportfishing Paradise
Located at Los Suenos Resort and Marina, Costa Rica

1 World Record
and over 800 Billfish Logged in 2005

"Dream Catcher"
32' Albemarle Express

sailfish • roosterfish • marlin • shark
• jacks • snapper • tuna • more!

USA: 732-919-3264
Costa Rica: 011-506-637-8942

Visit all of our Dream Packages at:
erdreamcatcher.com

5% Discount with this ad!



bles a flock of bats. Besides blue water trolling, the modus operandi around these topographical features includes inshore fishing for big snapper and roosterfish as well as wahoo, dorado and tuna.

We booked this early in the year with Robert Hurlbert of Tranquilamar Sportsfishing at Playa de Coco. He can arrange as many boats as necessary and has developed a large repeat clientele from the States, Japan, Germany and Austria. He has an informative website at www.tranquilamar.com.

After booking our trip, other currents than those that move the waters of the Pacific came into play. On April 25th, the Costa Rican government enacted a law prohibiting all fishing in national park areas. This includes important areas surrounding the Bat Islands and notable others, such as Cano Negro and Barra del Colorado. Longline fishermen and gill-netters had routinely fished the park areas and although the new legislation seemed aimed at protection from commercial fishing, sport fishing was not excluded. Bob Hurlbert relates that an effort is underway to form a "Camera de Pesca Turista," to

down the coast and major marinas and resorts have been developed. Old plantations have been parceled up and sold, largely to Americans to build houses for sale.

But it is the end of the dry season which punctuates the movement of the best fishing in the south, and if you're interested in trying into the later summer and fall, the focus falls upon the Guanacaste Coast, north of the Nicoya Peninsula. This northern coast enjoys a protracted season and scant rainfall through August and September. The main centers here are the town of Tamarindo and the marina at Flamingo. Slightly above this is El Ocatal and our destination, Playa de Coco reputedly the oldest fishing village in Costa Rica. The occasion was an annual "Father-Son Fishing Tournament." This year it had been pushed back into August, too late for the season in the south, but right in the old wheelhouse for multiple game species this far north.

This would place us centrally located in the Gulf of Papagayo (papagayo means parrot in Spanish) within easy striking distance of the renowned fishing destination the Islas

Murcielagos, or Bat Islands. These islands jut out into the sea from the St. Elena peninsula creating the northern cusp of the gulf. The southern end is framed by the Catalina Islands, a familiar stop to anglers coming in and out from Flamingo. The bay has a consistent depth of about 300 meters. The Bat Islands got this name because their shape resem-



represent the interests of captains and owners in the country. Commercial fishermen already have a similar organization. The thrust is to pass a provision that separates a new category for tourist fishermen who would not sell their catch. One member of the new group is Ricardo Gutierrez Vargas, a marine biologist who is the head of INCOPECA, the Costa Rican department of fisheries. Currently the organization needs money to generate action, but many Costa Rican guides find the entry level \$650 too steep.

Bob Hurlbert feels the law defeats the welfare of the country where tourist dollars and sport fishing are huge. Additionally, he thinks the law is ineffectual. Commercial fishermen steal around the patrols, which are sporadic at best, often fishing at night and on the weekends.

CAPTAINS' CONSISTENCIES

Whether you're fishing all the way south of the Golfo Dulce or north to the Nicaraguan frontier, there are some real consistencies in the "how to" employed by local captains. One of these is the ubiquitous use of circle hooks instead of J hooks in all kinds of bait. The entire country has been completely committed to circle hooks for a number of years staunchly believing that both the hook up



rate is superior and it contributes to the conservation of the fishery with fewer gut hookups improving survival. There is consistent agreement that billfish taken on a circle hook when impaled in the mouth instead of deep in the throat or the stomach, go airborne more, sound less and thus come more quickly to the side of the boat for release. They are liberated in better condition and you're on to the next fish that much sooner. Whether your trolling with a dead ballyhoo, a live bonito or jack, you'll find them

tethered to a circle hook, including down rigged baits. This even holds true when dropping half of a four-pound bonito down as cuberra snapper bait; it will be tied with twine to a circle hook. The hook itself will not be passed through the bait.

Another consistency is the preferred trolling spread. Outriggers and perhaps a further back "mop up" line from the bridge are usually pulling baits, most often naked or chin weighted ballyhoo. Flat lines are usually plastic lures, usually medium to large heads that smoke or pop. Teasers are by and large trolled close in. These are most often very large heads, but frequently include birds and squid or fish chains.

The real show starts when a billfish presents itself in the near aspect of the bait spread, showing up behind one of the artificials. The captains of the whole west coast of the country seem to play this the same way; they pull the "bait and switch" routine.

Red hot and vibrant with their "either murder or adultery" instincts in hyper drive, sails or marlin will be drawn into the spread and wind up focused on a lure right behind the





boat. Two extra rods with circle hook rigged baits fresh and ready, usually on ice or in a bucket of seawater are stationed at the back transom. The mate pulls the plastic lure away from the turned-on fish as the angler simultaneously drops back the line with the bait fish preferably to the inside aspect of the withdrawing lure. The fish switches his attention to the new enticement and the ruse is complete. The fish gets a free spool for a six count then, as always when using the circle hook in any context, there is no violent hook set. The line is brought tight and the hook automatically rotates up into the side of the mouth. This technique works great here and is a wicked blast of fun.

In recent years there has been a tendency for some captains to bring very green billfish along side, cutting the leader just above the hook to release the fish as early as possible. This essentially involves chasing down the fish with the boat and employing very little rod play. The rationale for this is to improve survival rates, believing the theory that the fish will become dislodged of the hooks on their own over the next couple of days and are

never exhausted in battle. This certainly reflects the strong unity of viewpoint among Costa Rica's professional fishermen that they have a wonderful natural resource that should be protected. I have not seen evidence of this particular technique catching on more widely this year and personally question whether sufficient data supports it.



THE BAT ISLANDS

"Zreeeee, zreeeee, zzzr-reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeah." This was the moment. The Penn's drag lever moves to STRIKE, and the line was allowed to tighten on the end of the circle hook. It set itself automatically. This was the consummation of three days of staring across the 24-mile expanse of the Golfo de Papaguayo at the Bat Islands from Coco Beach. It was a moment to savor.

The rocky coastline along the way is gorgeous, and we pulled into a few coves to collect live baits. These were blue runners going above half a pound and very cooperative.

Upon arrival, the destination was idyllic not only in the natural beauty of the islands, but with all the signs of activity that paint on the fisherman's canvas a place alive with potential. Rocks jugged from clear water, pounded by current. Schools of bait marked the surface as Frigate birds spotted from above. Intermittently groups of hundreds of needlefish would rocket out of the water occupying the air for the length of a football field as predators hunted beneath. As if this were not enough entertainment, manta rays

The Buzz...

According to Robert McCullough of the Release Marine World Team, "The six teams out there are the best in the world. It's the cream of the crop. We're fishing some of the most fertile billfishing grounds at the right times. You can have a lead you think is insurmountable and the next moment, you're trying to catch up."

Norm Isaacs, ESPN 2's Show Analyst, says "the Billfishing Xtreme Release League takes competitive big game fishing to the next level. In the Xtreme League, skill level requirements are pushed past anything that has been seen to date on the tournament landscape."

In order to capitalize on the tournament's point structure, every member of the crew must perform flawlessly. Anything less, can result in costly point penalties. For example: points are deducted for broken lines, or fish tagged outside the specified tag zone. Even after properly tagging a fish, the leader must be cut short in order to obtain full point value.

In This League, Nobody Gets A Free Ride.

As a team member, you perform or your team suffers.

From the Producer: "This is the most difficult and physically demanding fishing a competitor can do," said Jerry Vaillancourt, senior producer, ESPN Outdoors. "Every member of the boat's crew has to be firing on all cylinders for a successful catch. It's also visually stunning to watch, meaning viewers will find their own hearts racing along with the anglers."

"Additionally, we're delighted to present a high-energy, deep sea fishing tournament where all the fish are released. We really respect the anglers and league organizers for their care of the ocean's resources."

ESPN 2 BILLFISHING XTREME Release League

For the serious offshore angler, this annual event has become must-see TV.

Aired Sunday mornings February 19th through April 2nd. All times are EST.

Episode 1 – Florida Keys

Held: March 1–3, 2005

Episode Airs: 10:00AM Sunday, February 19, 2006

The first leg of the five-event tournament series. The Xtreme teams make their way to the Southern tip of Florida as they hunt for Sailfish off the Florida Keys. With a 12 lb. test line requirement, anglers feel pressure with the risk of penalty if the line breaks.

Episode 2 – Punta Cana, Dominican Republic

Held: May 21–23, 2005

Episode Airs: 10:00AM Sunday, March 5, 2006

The Xtreme Billfishing tour moves on to Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic where teams target White Marlin and Sailfish.

Episode 3 – Antigua Barbuda, West Indies

Held: July 15–17, 2005

Episode Airs: 10:00AM Sunday, March 12, 2006

Re-airs: 6:00AM Monday, April 24, 2006

Reaching the midpoint, the teams head to the West Indies and catch Blue Marlin off the coast of Antigua Barbuda.

Episode 4 – Purple Heart Challenge

Held: Tournament dates unknown

Episode Airs: 10:00AM Sunday, March 19, 2006

Re-airs: 6:00AM Monday, April 17, 2006

Before the tension in the next tournament begins, the teams receive a competitive twist as they take part in the Purple Heart Challenge in St. Thomas. Each team hosts a first-time Marlin angler and recipient of the military's Purple Heart. Watch as these proud servicemen and team anglers hunt for the ultimate fight: the Blue Marlin.

Episode 5 – St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

Held: September 12–15, 2005

Episode Airs: 10:00AM Sunday, March 26, 2006

Re-airs: 6:00AM Monday, April 3, 2006

Competition heats up as teams enter the next to last event. Fishing on the legendary North Drop off the coasts of St. Thomas and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the teams battle Blue Marlin in shark-infested water.

Episode 6 – Venezuela

Held: October 13–15, 2005

Episode Airs: 10:00AM Sunday, April 2, 2006

Teams encounter Sailfish, White and Blue Marlin off the coast of Venezuela. The tournament winner walks away with \$50,000. cash, but consistency pays off as the BXRL team with the most overall points is awarded a \$250,000. top prize.

Note: Air times subject to change without notice. Please refer to your local TV listings for times in your area. Additional information can also be found online at www.billfishingxtreme.com or www.postyachts.com



took turns jetting skyward for acrobatic flips.

Live bait trolling was the style here, both free spool and with the poor man's down rigger, the ten pound lead ball. The blue runners

were tethered through the eye sockets to a circle hook. Bob Hurlbert had stated that record size roosterfish lived in these haunts. Over the years, I've had the chance to try them from Panama

to Mexico. Typically, they have run 15 to 35 pounds with a 50-pound fish considered real trophy grade. That day at the Bat Islands, the two 35-pound roosterfish that came over the side of our boat were dwarfed by the three 60-pounders that were landed and I became a believer that a new world record could be waiting here. Big cuberra and better jack had the boys arm-weary before the day was over. Only the snappers were not back swimming after the photos, having received an invitation to dinner.


WHAT'S NEXT?

So then, what will happen next on the Costa Rican political scene to affect the future of sport fishing? Local organizations are still in the formative stages although there seems to be a significant inertia growing.

International Game Fish Association representative Lance Glasser is also head of Goldon

Travel, which sends a lot of fishermen to northern Costa Rica. Michael Leech was IGFA Ambassador-at-Large at the time. I asked the two men for their take on the situation. They both feel special permits will likely resolve the situation that local guides will have to purchase, although this is not yet determined.

Another viewpoint is expressed by in-country Costa Rican IGFA rep Jose Manuel Lopez Pinto, who is also on the Rapala pro staff. He reflects that these regulations actually date back to 1958, but have just been reincorporated into the new law. Because of the extensive areas still open to fishermen he feels protection is a positive move and will help maintain the fisheries. Perhaps, he's right. Just south of the Bat Islands, Four Seasons hotels has recently completed a huge new luxury resort with a golf course. They are planning the addition of a 300-boat marina as the next phase. I would reflect however that the impact on the fishery by catch and release sport fishing compared to what I've witnessed from longlining and netting in Central America would likely be miniscule. The government may be better served by enforcing well laws similar to those that protect our own Pacific coast game fish in near shore waters.

What of Bob Hurlbert and Tranquilamar? Bob has just purchased land down on the lightly populated coast of the Nicoya Peninsula near Cabo Blanco. He showed me a map of the underwater topography of the area. It demonstrates two undersea mounts right offshore that rise from their bases at a depth of 1000 meters to within 20 meters of the surface. There are no large hotels and the fishing is barely touched. Stay tuned for this one. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



RILEY LOVE is a physician now residing in Kentucky. In early childhood he discovered fishing in the ponds, lakes, and streams of the Midwest then began a life-long love affair with the sea from the first time he saw it. He lived much of his adult life in San Francisco, Cal., and has a home in the Florida Keys where he fishes regularly and also scuba dives. Over the last 40 years, the trio of Dr. Love, his father, and his brother have fished not only the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of Panama, but most of Central and South America. They maintain a three generation family tradition of international travel for the purpose of sport fishing with an emphasis on new and less-traveled fishing destinations. He has written numerous professional articles and several short stories and is a member of the International Game Fish Association.

Tales From The Edge

We Print Amazing Fish Stories From Readers Like You!



Put your pen to paper and send us your tale. We'll pay you \$100.00 if we use your story.

big game
FISHING JOURNAL

Call 1-800-827-4468
And Tell Us Your Amazing Story!

