

Keys Tournament Fishing: *Holidays Made Happy*

by Riley Love

Wintertime brings many things to the residents of the hinterlands. These include winter weather and the holidays. In this season Jack Frost starts nipping at your nose, and Jack Daniels in the egg-nog can tickle the ol' liver. Both of these influences bring the mind to bear on heading down to South Florida for some fishing . . . just as all things should.

Concerned that the wife's viewpoint on arranging the holiday plans around your fishing trip may find you no longer standing under the mistletoe? Arguing that "three fourths of the earth's surface is covered by water is a sure sign that we were meant to spend three quarters of our time fishing" may not work.

Sharp planning can take the place of deception if you have a great destination and emphasis on family tournament fishing. Key Largo's beautiful Ocean Reef Club fits the bill nicely with its own airfield and a spectacular marina.

Their annual premier event is the Ocean Reef Cup held in January. However, even for members of the club, there is a waiting list for this great event. During Christmas week there is an offshore sailfish tournament on Dec. 26 and a reef fishing contest on Dec. 28.

Originally the creator of the Ocean Reef Rod & Gun Club, the Ocean Reef

Outfitter's office runs around 10 tournaments per year, essentially oriented around major holidays and with an emphasis on family events.

John Harrelson and Liz Goering are the "go-to" people at Ocean Reef Outfitters. Liz has been involved for many years. John was recently an angling guide on the Green River in Utah, but was drawn to the Keys for the fishing. He is obviously a man of fine judgment.

From December through February sailfish move into shallow water along the edge of the reef. Although evidence suggests that the population of Western Atlantic sailfish do not make the lengthy migrations of some of the rest of the globe's ocean pelagics, they do respond to subtle changes in water temperature and move away from the edges of the Gulf Stream.

This couples with the migration of bait into the area from the colder climate in the north to make the season for sails come alive. This would also prove to be a time of balmy weather; a sure sign the gods favored the ancient tradition of sneaking down to the creek, even if the tribe didn't need the fish.

"Eight boats booked early, and then it slowed until the weather proved out. Eleven more entered on December 23

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CAPTAIN TIM HICKS CASTS OUT his net (above) at the reef's edge in the early morning light, seeking the preferred bait for sailfishing in the Keys — live ballyhoo kept in a livewell and then attached to a skirted jig (bottom) or a heavy jig to drop down on deep structure. The Marine Max team speeds to the fishing grounds at 40 knots aboard their brand-new, 52-foot Cabo Express (left) powered by 2,700 turbo horses, making the sport fisher feel like a Ferrari.



Fishing with Marine Max

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when it looked good," John told me.

Jake Sanders is the manager at Ocean Reef's Marine Max sales office and is a name to remember. Jake heads up a team which will be "hot after coin of the realm" on the dolphin tournament trail this year. The team includes Capt.

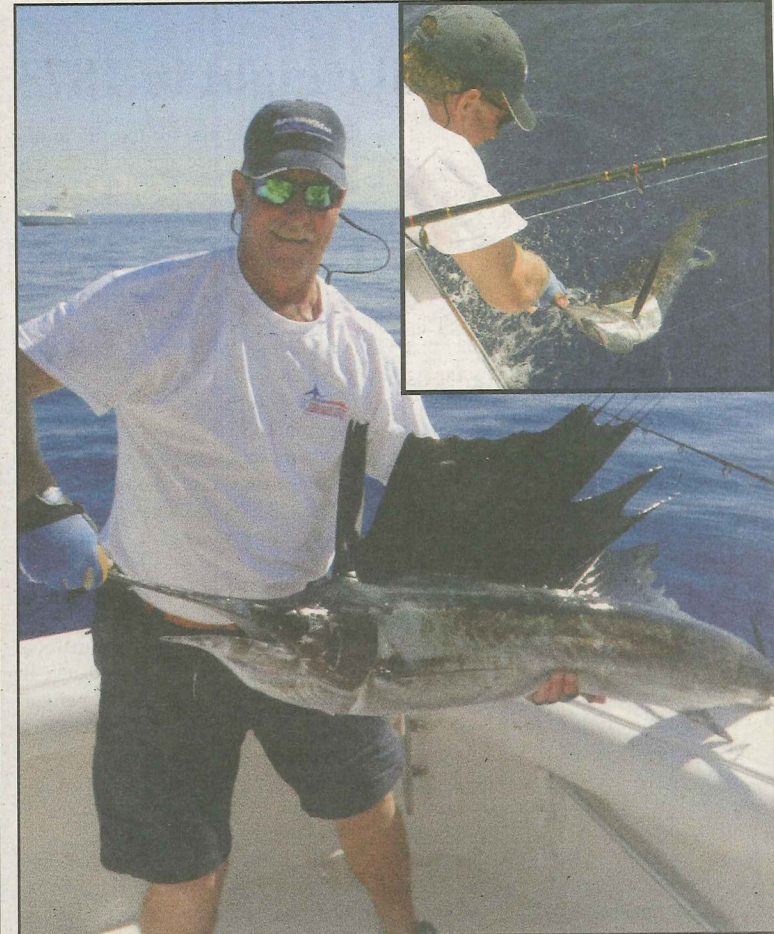
Tim Hicks and Marine Max teammates Gordon Hopkins and Mark Handwerker.

The brand-new 52-foot Cabo Express we boarded with Jake and the boys had everything you could think of, except maybe a putting green and a bowling alley. It took no time at all to get us

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PREDATORS FROM ABOVE, AS WELL AS BELOW, are hazards for live trolled ballyhoo. This frigate bird received a chiropractic adjustment when he discovered that the ballyhoo he snatched up was attached to an angler's line.



GORDON HOPKINS OF MARINE MAX bills and then boats an Atlantic sailfish to get on the board.

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In Key West:

First Florida sail caught in 1873

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offshore in the predawn light.

Its 2,700 turbo horses planed the boat instantly, and at 40 knots, it felt more like a Ferrari than a sports fisher. It was "smoke on the water," and nobody beat us to the bait patch.

It was easy to appreciate the opportunity to be here — and to remember that a lot of guys up north were just scraping the ice off their windshields about now.

"The jewel in the crown of America's saltwater fishing environments," is how I have described the Keys in previous writings. I've been fishing the Florida Keys for over 40 years now, but watching the rising sun on the open ocean here never loses its thrill.

The Western Atlantic sailfish was first described in Piso's *Historia Naturalis Braziliae*, published in 1648. After several reports from the Caribbean through the mid-19th century, one was caught off Rhode Island in 1872.

The first sailfish captured in Florida was in Key West in 1873 and was subsequently transported to New York where a cast was made of it. This was a matter of great attention at the time. I'm almost old enough to remember all of these events.

Always there are the issues of finding them and getting them to bite. There

is the heavy potential for tragedy in pitting your intelligence against something with a brain the size of your fingertip... and losing.

Then there came the issue of a plan. Seldom does a fishing strategy separate a man across that fine line between a fishing talent and an idiot standing on the back of the boat without the certain hand of providence.

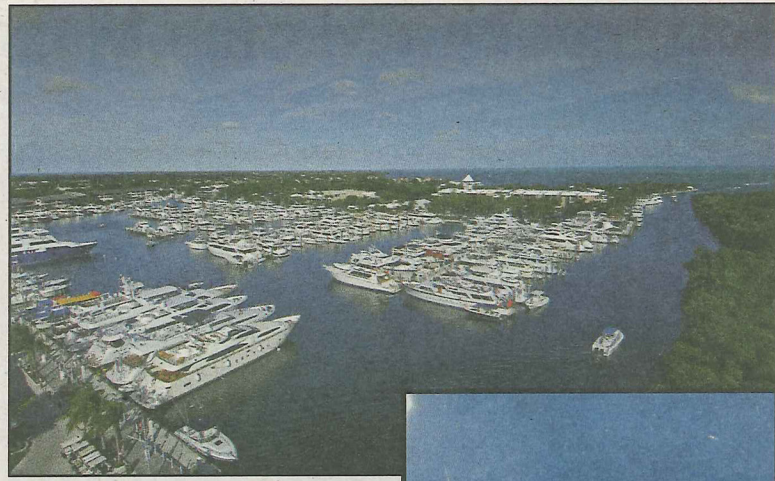
Live-bait fishing would be our *modus operandi*. Schools of ballyhoo were everywhere and cooperated with our hair hooks and nets. Team Marine Max naturally gelled. Even catching bait was a ball with our sons on board.

Kite fishing was allowed by the rules committee this year, but it seemed better to slowly troll.

The circle hook rule was in force for this tournament. An abundance of data from around the world, particularly Guatemala, and also research from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (NOAA), the University of Miami and the Florida Board of Conservation all support the use of circle hooks.

The Billfish Foundation has lobbied diligently to require circle hooks exclusively in all tournaments in the region. This rule was suspended for Atlantic

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AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE YACHT HARBOR at the beautiful Ocean Reef Resort Club in the Florida Keys (above) as seen from a helicopter. A small gag grouper (below) volunteered his services during the reef tournament, but was sent home to be caught another day.



THIS ATLANTIC SAILFISH can easily be admired through the crystal-clear azure waters off the Florida Keys.

A rocketing sailfish makes for happy holidays!

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billfish tournaments May 11 to Dec. 31, 2007, but was reinstated on Jan. 1, 2008.

Each of our volunteer ballyhoo were issued one circle hook attached to a 12-foot length of mono leader with instructions to utilize it as the situation dictated. They accepted their mission without complaint.

It was a friendly enough way to start a morning and to kick out the cobwebs from the pre-tournament party the night before. Just then a boat right next to us hooked, and then lost, a sailfish. The needle on the adrenalin meter kicked way up past the "espresso" level. Soon the ra-

dio crackled with reports from the tournament committee boat that sails were being taken along the drop-off.

The anglers spread out from 100 to 190 feet of water. Frigate birds dropped from above where underwater predators were slaying bait. An intermittent king mackerel went airborne with lust for its prey. The tranquility of fishing was a fine thing for Izaak Walton, but it was time for us to get a hit, and we did.

Getting it on with a rocketing sailfish makes a heck of a Christmas present, and it was "happy holidays" for sure.

We were on the board with our first sail, but for the rest of the day we would

see only some small dorado rise up in our bait spread. In the end, we were short of the needed points to finish in the Calcutta money. The "big enchilada" went to Frank McKee aboard his boat the "Off Key" with four sails to his credit.

This brings us to the ultimate point of this article: not winning the tournament creates a logical rationale for immediately planning another fishing tournament trip.

Sail Release Tips

It should be remembered that the sailfish neither shares our sense of romance for offshore fishing, nor is it able to increase its respiratory rate like we mammals can.

The importance of an adequate period of resuscitation at boat side to move water over its gills is not only to increase its oxygenation but to help it eliminate carbon dioxide (CO2) from its blood.

Although the sailfish is reportedly the world's champion speedster, with a swimming speed of 67 miles per hour, it is not accustomed to the sustained effort associated with an angler's hook-up. During this exertion anaerobic metabolism creates large amounts of CO2 and lactic acid. This increases "acidosis" in the blood and is the cause of fibrillation of the heart and resultant sudden death of billfish before release.

Many other animals, such as ourselves, can increase our rate of breathing and "blow off" the carbon dioxide and normalize its level and the acid in our system.

It is a good idea to leave the hook in the fish and cut the leader. The extended trauma of trying to dislodge the hook is that much more stress on the fish. This has become the mandatory practice in the sailfish mecca of Guatemala, where, during the peak of the season, literally hundreds of sailfish are caught in one day. The hooks are believed to corrode away or dislodge in about two days.

Last year, during the entire season no Guatemalan captain captured a single sailfish with a retained hook in its mouth. Guatemalan practices are a model for sailfish conservation and include the use of circle hooks by law. It is a pleasure to safely release such a majestic and noble creature back into the ocean unharmed and not spoil its yuletide. However there is a controversy inherent in this discussion.

With a life expectancy of just 3 or 4 years, how much help does it give the fishery to release mature sails which will likely die soon from natural causes?

Pregnant females are seen close inshore in the early spring in Southeast Florida, so certainly the winter and early springtime are the most critical periods to release sailfish.

With the holiday schedule on the desktop I found Easter, Halloween, Groundhog Day, April Fool's, Valentine's, Flag Day, Yom Kippur, Election Day (the bars are closed anyway) and Cinco de Mayo, to name a few.

To wrap up our Keys holiday tournament vacation trip, Team Marine Max would ride again. This time we threw our saddle on a brand-new 40-foot Cabo sports fisherman and pointed its bow at the blue horizon for the reef fishing tournament.

We tried double-hooked jigs baited with live ballyhoo from deep wrecks to patch reefs. But at the end of the day it was Barret Ersek aboard his boat the "Sharboz" who won out — doubtlessly due to his top-notch crew that included his wife, Kristina, nine-year-old Tucker and three-year-old Reef.

What better Christmas gift could a father plan than a fishing expedition with his children? Who among us does not remember the excitement of their first experiences on the sea?

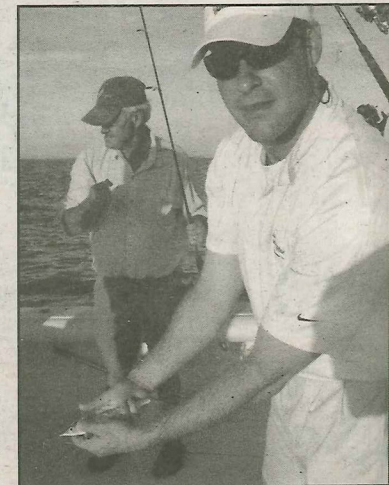
This is a gift which will stay in the heart for a lifetime and has been a touchstone for inspiration in the young minds for all of our generations.

Prominent filmmaker, the late Robert Altman, said, "I love fishing. You put that line in the water and you don't know what's on the other end. Your imagination is under there."

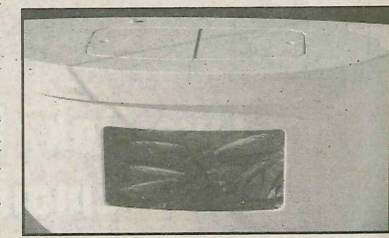
Riley Love lives in Paducah, Kentucky and has published over 20 articles in various outdoor magazines. He can be reached via email at: rjhc@bellsouth.net.



BARRET ERSEK GOT HELP FROM HIS SALTY CREW, wife, Kristina, and sons, nine-year-old Tucker and three-year-old Reef, to clinch the reef fishing tournament championship.



JAKE SANDERS OF THE MARINE MAX crew is shown with a fresh live ballyhoo (above) from the livewell (below) before lowering it into the spread.



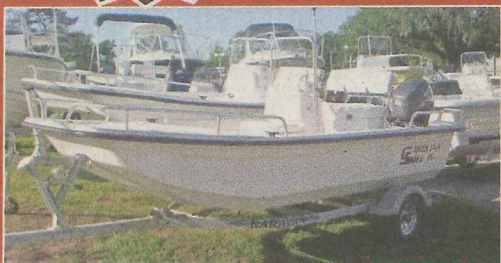
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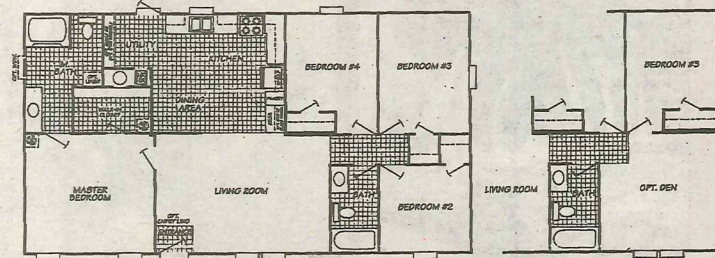
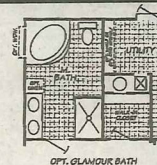
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