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Bill Monroe: Tuna Classic unleashes a frenzy on the ocean

Published: Friday, August 06, 2010, 5:45 PM Updated: Friday, August 06, 2010, 6:06 PM



Bill Monroe, Special to The Oregonian



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Dave Phillips of Milwaukie ties on a new hook after a line breaks while Scott Heusch of Eugene fights an albacore

tuna. Fishing for tuna, 30 to 60 miles offshore, requires careful preparation to withstand the controlled frenzy that erupts once the fish start landing.

ILWACO, Wash. -- Two boats peacefully trolling for salmon a week ago Saturday off the mouth of the Columbia River held the only calm souls as dawn tamed the world's most treacherous river bar.

We loomed from the gloom, leeward of the two, idling into the Pacific's gentle, 4-foot swell along with 60 other much larger boats poised for the second leg of the Oregon Tuna Classic.

Then a red flare shot skyward from a U.S. Coast Guard 47-footer, and the fleet bolted into action.

Powerful engines churned the sea into white-capped wakes as \$10 million of boats jockeyed for position in the maritime equivalent of a grand prix start. Several cavitated wildly, skipping across the swell, whining engines barking above the roar of the others, propellers eager to get back in the water.

No one stopped to ask the hapless salmon anglers what they thought about being stampeded.

"Calm" has never described tuna fishing.

"Chaos," "mayhem" and "bloody decks," for sure, but not calm.

And the best skippers plan for chaos, organize the mayhem and keep their bloody decks washed.

Offshore tuna fishing, Oregon style, is by its very nature a demanding sport. Success rewards preparation; careless skippers rarely venture that far from the sight of land -- 30 to 60 miles, where tuna ride warm "blue water" currents from as far as the equator and beyond.

As the 35-foot "Shake N Bake" sped westward, skipper Mike Colbach of Portland at the helm, his crew calmly prepared.

We'd already filled a re-circulating saltwater tank with small, live anchovies dipped from a bait dealer at the dock. It was dark in the tank with the lid closed, so two light sticks were activated and dropped into the water to help the baitfish see. Without light, they get frantic and die from colliding with one another.

On deck, two other buckets held dead anchovies, to be used for chumming once the tuna were found. Albacore eagerly rise to the surface to take bait, making heart-stopping boils close to the stopped boat. Trolling lures in the prop wash is fun, but tossing live bait into the middle of a boiling melee is the sport's top attraction.

John Cooney of Southwest Portland passed around a roll of tape for our fingers. Albacore hit trolled lures hard and fight in tearing runs requiring a lot of hands-on control. Just testing and re-testing the drags on reels can cause

nylon lines to cut into fingers.

We all donned rubberized rain pants, a hedge against splashing slime, seawater and blood. Tuna meet violent ends aboard sport and commercial boats alike. They typically bleed freely, either from the gaff or having their gills cut; blood is flung across the deck by the staccato of their thrashing.

Not all of the blood is always the tuna's. In 2009, while trying to remove a large double hook from the mouth of a thrashing albacore during the same event, I ripped a finger nearly to the bone. Clark Vonessen, a nurse from Eugene and Colbach's deck foreman, butterflyed it with tape, and the wound was closed and healing by the time we returned to port.

Saturday's only mishap was a minor cut in the finger of Dave Phillips of Milwaukie, easily covered with his first-aid kit. "That's just part of fishing," he said later. Most seasoned tuna anglers pack along bandages, ointments, sunscreen and, for some, seasick medication.

Monster insulated bags, stretched across the stern, held hundreds of pounds of shaved ice. Tuna flesh fades and softens quickly in warm summer temperatures, so as the fish bleed, they're iced. Blood filters to the bottom of the ice and is emptied into the sea through drain plugs.

Colbach was summoned to our best bite by a friend who was perched over a large school of feeding albacore. "There is no other fishing tournament where participants call each other in," he said.

It was a reference to the typical camaraderie of Oregon and Southwest Washington tuna fleets. Boats run together into the oft-testy Pacific, skippered by salty dogs whose motto, "No dog left behind," has gained national attention in magazines and outdoor television shows.

We were team No. 57 in Saturday's field and ended the day with 57 tuna, sixth in the event. The Classic weighs each boat's top five fish. Nearly 6,000 pounds of tuna and thousands of dollars were donated to local food banks from the Ilwaco tournament as the Oregon Tuna Classic heads for its third leg Saturday at Charleston.

Track the summer's uniquely Northwest event online at oregontunaclassic.org.

Colbach, circumspect about his team's results, has never been rabidly competitive, opting instead for simply participating and donating to the cause.

"That's the beauty of this thing," he said. "You can catch five fish and win or 57 and lose ... but still everyone wins."

Only in Oregon: At the other end of the competitive spectrum is this week's annual national fly-casting competition and trout festival, held at an 18-hole "casting course" next to the Orvis shop in the Old Mill District of

Bend.

Pros from across the nation will compete for prizes and money, testing their distance and accuracy on an unusual course. There's even a youth division.

There also will be casting instruction, booths and product displays and entertainment on Saturday.

Attendance is free.

Hours are 5-8 p.m. Thursday (casting instruction), 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday (amateur casting), 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday (professional and tournament competition) and 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday (team competitions).

-- **Bill Monroe**

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