



Junior Angler Tournament: From Innocent Roots to Venerable Institution

By ED KILLER
Veteran of JAT No. 1

It's funny to call something that's over 30 years old as "junior" but I guess some nicknames can never be shaken. At least the nickname for the Stuart Sailfish Club's Junior Angler Tournament isn't "bubba" or "sport" or "squirt."

For more than three decades now, the Junior Angler Tournament has demonstrated that the smile of a youngster is a very much desired form of green energy.

Sandsprit Park in Stuart is the scene every Labor Day weekend where scores of kids, from toddlers to teens, run and cavort and play in the waters of the Manatee Pocket and laugh. Although they never think of it this way, the kids and their families gather annually for a birthday celebration — one without cake or candles, but certainly loaded with party favors, prizes and trophies.

On Labor Day Weekend of 2007, the Junior Angler Tournament turned 30.

Each year, one of the most popular and perhaps beneficial traditions created by the Stuart Sailfish Club introduces another group of kids to the thrills of offshore fishing. And despite showing some age, this event is anything but over-the-hill. In fact, as it gets older, it gets better.

It all started in 1977. Stuart Sailfish Club members Dee Brown, Dr. Jack Schoppe and Bob Pelosi — themselves parents of young anglers — came up with the idea of an event just for kids. By then, the Small Boat Tournament (38 in 2008) had operated successfully for six years and its junior angler division already was very well received by young families. So why not have a tournament just for the kids?

The concept was simple — award trophies for sailfish releases and heaviest catches of dolphin, kingfish, wahoo, bonito and even barracuda. Teach kids how much fun offshore fishing can be and maybe one day, they themselves will grow into responsible ethical offshore anglers.

I'll never forget the first one. There was about 25 of us kids that included an 11-year-old yours truly, my brother Jason, 9 at the time, and my cousin Robert, who was about 4. The entire awards barbecue for the kids and all their families was easily contained at Schoppe's Sewall's Point house.

Instead of focusing on that sailfish or dolphin, I had a personal goal that was a little beyond that — I wanted to impress a beautiful girl on whom I had a crush who also fished the first couple of JATs. Her name was Janet Holder.

As luck would have it in the 3-kid fishing rotation aboard Rubob, my uncle's 17-foot Mako, my brother and Robert always caught all the "glamour fish." For some reason, whenever it was my turn on the rod, that was when the barracudas or bonitos or sharks or jack crevalles would take the bait.

Unfortunately, Janet wasn't very impressed with third place barracuda trophies. She was more the first place sailfish type. Oh, well.

These days, the JAT would never fit in Schoppe's yard. In 2007, 206 kids headed offshore.

Club members, such as A & J Boat Works' owner Art Cox, are excited about the growth the JAT and are eager to help it grow into an even better event for the kids.

"I'd love to see this be bigger than the Kids' Fishing Day they have in West Palm Beach," said Cox, who has paid for the Lady Stuart to take children fishing the past few years.

Cox was one of many club members who contributed boats, money, time and resources to the event in an effort to share their passion for fishing with young anglers . For many, it is the first and only time in their lives they enjoy a day on the ocean.

Many of those kids from the early years are now parents of young anglers themselves. In fact, this was the second year my oldest son fished in the JAT — one of more than a dozen kids — like Barattas, Mortells, Carrs, Hildreth (Clarks), Ponsoldts, Hendrys — who were second-generation JAT participants.

And like every smiling kid that runs around in the grass at Sandsprit Park those Saturday afternoons, a lot of us first generation-ers wear smiles just as big.

(Contributed by Ed Killer, June 2008)