

OUTDOORS

Gamefish 'hunters' rely on modern technology

Santiago, armed with a hand line and a harpoon, rowed his wooden skiff out to the Gulf Stream. The old Cuban fisherman had gone 84 days without a hookup. Running low on bait and self-respect, this was his last chance.

Day after day, hour after hour, he had fished and caught nothing. But today his luck would change.

Somewhere in the darkness below, a monster roamed. Eighteen feet long with eyes that burned like fire, it was a fish of dreams . . . a blue marlin.

The epic struggle that followed, brought to life in Ernest Hemingway's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, can be credited with making billfishers out of countless landlubbers.

Just imagine yourself strapped into a fighting chair, wind in your hair and salt spray on your face, linked by 50-pound test line to an angry 500-pound animal, which would like nothing more than to drag your puny human body along the ocean floor 1,000 feet below.

Hemingway was addicted. So was Zane Gray.

But unlike the humble Santiago, those literary anglers had the benefit of gasoline engines and fishing reels.

Today's big-gamefish hunters, like those venturing forth today in the 21st annual Old Salt Loop Billfish Tournament, have it even better. A 50-foot sportfishing boat makes the ride offshore a little more bearable. The \$1,200 rods and reels they use help increase the chance of landing a 1,000-pounder.

And up-to-date satellite information, faxed to the boat via a cellular phone, gives an added edge in pinpointing the prey.

To pursue the big three — blue marlin, white marlin and sailfish — anglers must travel more than 100 miles out into the Gulf of Mexico.

The migrating billfish follow their food along the Loop Current, which enters the Gulf through the Yucatan Channel and exits through the Straits of Florida.

This current, which eventually joins the Gulf Stream of Santiago's quest, is roughly 20 miles wide and varies in its distance from shore.

Because the exact location is unpredictable, the average billfisher can troll for more than 40 hours



OUTDOORS
TERRY TOMALIN

before a hookup.

But today's high-tech anglers have an advantage.

"A lot of people think that they should fish where they did last year or where their grandfathers caught fish," said Mitch Roffer, a Ph.D. "They don't realize that conditions change day to day."

After a career analyzing oceanographic data at the University of Miami, Roffer decided that today's high-stake billfish tournament anglers wanted the latest science had to offer. So for eight years, he's gathered information from U.S., Russian and European satellites. Roffer evaluates 20 oceanographic factors — including water temperature, bottom topography, water color, currents, rips and desired species — before issuing his analyses.

"The maps we produce tell you what areas to fish and what areas to avoid," Roffer said. "Our customers say we have an 85-percent success rate."

And with a \$15,000 first prize at stake, many anglers consider the \$50 investment worth it.

"It is often hours of boredom. One year, we trolled for 35 miles without a strike," tournament director Randy Keys said. "But there also are moments of sheer pandemonium . . . and that is what you are there for."

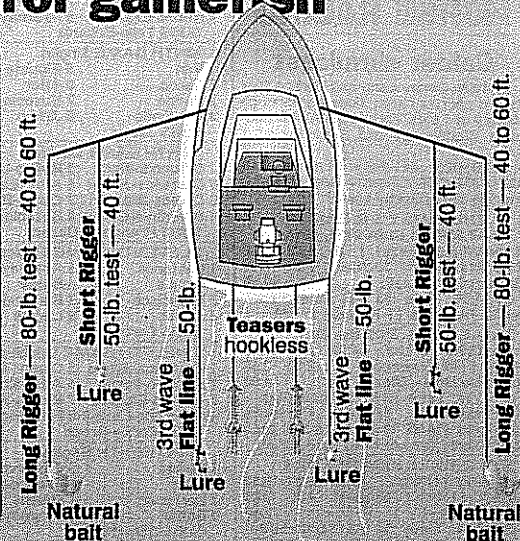
Since its inception, the Old Salt Loop Billfish Tournament has helped the National Marine Fisheries Service with billfish research. Fish brought to the dock this year will be examined by marine biologists to help document feeding habits and longevity.

Fish not kept by anglers will be donated to charity. Crabby Bill's restaurant on Indian Rocks Beach has volunteered to clean and transport the fish to reputable charities.

For more information, contact Al Autenrieth at 397-9835.

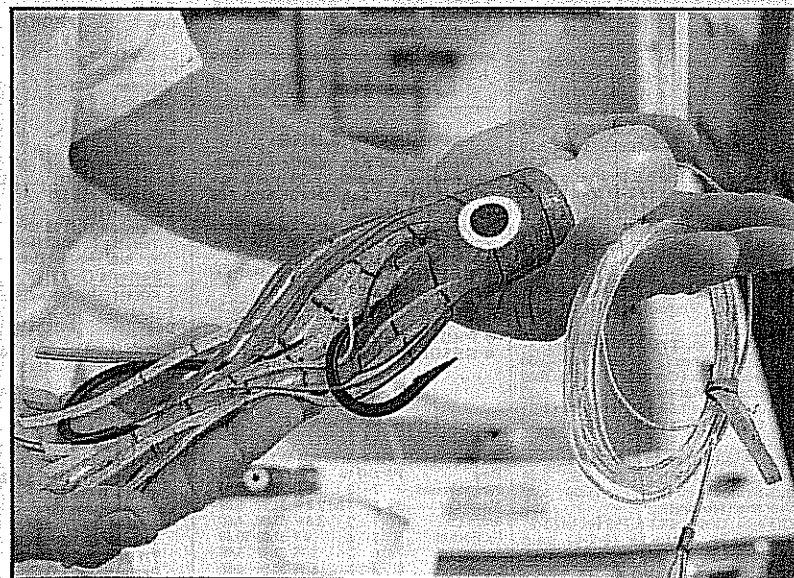
Trolling for gamefish

Multiple baits help even the odds when trolling for billfish. Some big gamefish hunters prefer artificial lures that allow higher trolling speeds and cover more water. Others swear by natural baits, such as silver mullet or Spanish mackerel, which they believe work best during the heat of the day. The technique shown here offers the best of both worlds.



Source: Old Salt Fishing Club

Times art — ANNE HAN



Times photo — MAURICE RIVENBARK

A Neon Munchie, a soft-headed lure with matching fluorescent skirt, will be the artificial bait of choice for many big-gamefish hunters heading offshore today in the 21st annual Old Salt Loop Billfish Tournament. The lures, manufactured by Area Rule Engineering of Dana Point, Calif., have a suggested retail price of \$24.95.