

My Fight With the Devilfish



GIANT DEVILFISH

Russell J. Coles tells how he killed one of the largest sea creatures after a dangerous fight with mad mating couple



AFTER several days of windy weather, which had made successful Manta hunting impossible, the morning of April 11, opened calm and hot.

To kill a Manta, which is the scientific name for devilfish, perfect handling of the boat is necessary and a proper crew is the first consideration in equipping an expedition. In my 20 years' experience of fishing off the coast of North Carolina, I have always made up my crew from the native market fishermen, in preference to the guides and boatmen usually employed by sportsmen. On this occasion, in addition to Capt. Charlie Willis, I was fortunate in securing the services of Capt. John McCann of Punta Gorda, Fla., beyond question the best-known and most efficient fisherman on the Florida coast, and he selected the three other members of the crew—all young men, trained, active, and without fear. Captain McCann also furnished the boat, which was a small 6-foot, open boat with an eight-horse power gasoline engine. The construction, however, of this little boat was extra strong, or it would have been wrecked by the terrific pounding it received.

The men were nearly perfect for the positions which they were to fill, knowing what to do no matter what condition might arise; therefore not much time was required in training the crew. On such an expedition it is necessary for every man to move instantly when the word is given, like part of a perfect machine, for I cannot turn my head when the fight is on.

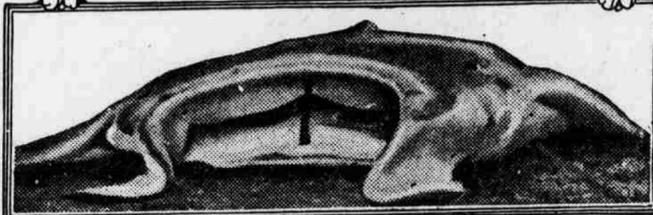
When the boat passed out through Captive Inlet into the Gulf of Mexico, the water was so thick that a Manta would have had to rise to the surface to be seen, and I posted three men to keep close watch, one on each side of the boat, and one behind us, while I watched in front.

We had run down the full length of the coast of Captive Island and were about a mile off the shore of Sanibel Island and in front of Blind Pass, when there came, suddenly and without warning, a most terrific shock, which threw the four of us who were standing to our hands and knees for a fraction of a second. The boat, which was running at full speed, had met the head of a Manta, rising to the surface and coming toward us at moderate speed. The shock of the collision was so great that it almost stopped the headway of the boat, and its bow was lifted more than a foot out of the water; but our speed carried the boat up over the high part of the back of the Manta just as the two great black fins were flung madly into the air, almost meeting over our heads and deluging us with many gallons of water. Then the two fins crashed down on the surface of the sea with a noise that could have been heard for miles, and the Manta instantly repeated the performance as I yelled to the engineer, "Keep her going." Just as the boat was sliding from the back of the creature, another huge Manta, rushed up from below, striking full on our port bow with sufficient force to spin the boat around until its direction was almost reversed. At one time all four of the great black pectoral fins were towering above us, and large quantities of water were flung into the boat. First the head and then the stern of the boat was highest as it was pitched from side to side, and then I heard the chug, chug, chug of the racing propeller blades as they gashed the tip of the pectoral fin of the first Manta. The engineer kept the engine going at full speed, but the propeller blades were not catching the water now, and for a short distance we were carried upon the broad backs of the two monster devils of the sea.

I fully realized the danger, as did every one of the men with me in that little boat, but every man filled his place perfectly and there was no out-



KILLED BY ONE STROKE



THE HORNS ARE UNFURLED

ward show either of fear or excitement, for I had a crew composed of men who show at their best only in time of danger. Scarcely a word was spoken until, in the midst of a wild upheaval of the two madly frightened Manta beneath us, the boat was flung from their backs and was turning over, when I shouted, "High side!" which order was instantly obeyed, two of the men, except for an arm and a leg, throwing themselves entirely out of the boat.

The boat struck head first and shipped a lot of water over her bow, but we were now clear of the two Manta, who raced together on the surface for a short distance.

These two Manta appeared to have lost all fear of the boat and its occupants; we were many times in touching distance of them and they both passed under the boat several times. The first was a female, well above 15 feet in width, and I was about to attack it, when I saw, nearly a mile away, the largest Manta that I have ever seen. It was on the surface so I ran the boat down to it, and never have I wanted to kill any one thing quite as badly as I wanted to kill that great fish, for it was fully 24 feet in width and must have weighed not less than 12,000 pounds. I was uncertain however, as to its gender, and a female was absolutely necessary.

She was now swimming on or near the surface with mate following, almost touching her all the time, and, with all ready, we moved to the attack. As she was passing, quartering across our bow, I gave the word. Charlie and I drove our harpoons deep into her broad back; then, with a great splash of her fins, she plunged below and ahead. As the drogue was snatched under, it threw water high in the air and the shock was so great that it brought the great ray to the surface in that awkward, wheeling, edgewise leap that Manta make, after the manner of a wheel turning over. Before its tail had reached the perpendicular, I and all of my crew saw an embryo, folded in cylindrical form, thrown high in the air, and I heard Captain Jack exclaim, "Did you see that? The young one has a tail longer than the old one!" The embryo quickly unfolded its fins and, catching the air horizontally, its descent was retarded until after the mother fish had disappeared beneath the surface.

When I had hurled my harpoon and reached behind me, the spade lance had been instantly placed in my hand, but as I saw this embryo feebly flapping on the surface, I passed back the spade lance and yelled "Give me an iron, quick!" (the harpoon is always called an iron) and while not five seconds were taken in the exchange, that was too long, for as I threw back my hand to strike, the male swept the embryo beneath the surface with one of its fins.

I passed back the harpoon and seized the spade lance, as I saw the wounded female, now on the surface, charging down on us at highest speed. I was forced to strike instantly and there was not sufficient time to clear up the line attached to the lance handle, so the point of the spade lance was slightly deflected, with the result that the

fatal spot was missed by a few inches. However, the force of the blow, which was delivered with both hands without releasing the handle, was so great, that it depressed the creature's head, and the head-on collision did not crash in the side of the boat as it probably would have done otherwise. The top of the head struck the bottom of the boat, breaking the lance handle short off against the side, and I was confronted with a very serious defect in my equipment. I had acquired, by years of work with the lance, such confidence in my ability to place it where I desired that I had not thought it necessary to provide more than one spade lance; but now my fish was very much alive and fighting mad and I was without a spade lance.

The water was so thick that the Manta could not be seen until very near the surface, but Charlie kept the slack of his hatpoon hauled in and the line showed the direction in which the fish was traveling under water. Captain Jack steered the boat, which was kept running, and that it was well handled is shown by the fact that not once in more than a dozen rushes did the devilfish reach the surface without finding our boat on her back. Each time I drove the lance through her heart or brain one or more times, and after the fight she showed 23 such wounds.

Through all this fight there was one uncertain and disturbing factor that we were not in a position to guard against—namely, that the great male mate of the wounded Manta kept near us until the fight was over and three times nearly capsized us by pushing the boat from the back of the female. Once, just after we had been nearly capsized by a heavy blow from the head of the male, and when the female was fighting most violently, when we were all covered with the blood of our victim and the boat was almost filled with water, the youngest member of the crew (Luther Dixon), thinking that the end for all of us was near, tried to force a harpoon into my hand as he screamed, "Iron the big bull and let's all go to h— in tow of a team of devils!" I quote this to show the temper of the men, for while Luther, and probably others of the crew, thought this our last fight, neither he nor any other man showed even a trace of fear. Then the dying Manta raised her head against the side of the boat and gave a loud harsh bark or cough, and as I exclaimed, "Watch her eyes looking two ways at once!", the stricken creature slowly rolled one of her eyes, until with that one only, she seemed to look at all of us behind her in the boat.

Before striking the Manta I had looked at my watch and called out the time, and as the big fish died, I again pulled it out and asked, "How long?" Not one of the crew placed the time of the fight at less than two hours and when I told them that it had taken only 22 minutes, they wanted to see if the watch had not stopped. The fight was now over, the great female Manta that we had come for was dead; but there was still a man-sized job in front of us and we at once made the fish fast to our stern and headed for Blind Pass, more than a mile away.

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