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MAZATLÁN

MAZATLÁN MEMORIES

BY JIM NIEMIEC

The 10th Annual Mazatlán Billfish Classic hosted by Marina El Cid, one of the premier resorts along mainland Mexico, was a tremendous success not only for anglers competing in the prestigious big-game fishing tournament, but more importantly for sustaining the billfish fishery along the Pacific Coast. One hundred seventy-four anglers competed on 29 deluxe sportfishers for over \$275,000 in cash and tackle prizes in this year's event.

The Mazatlán Billfish Classic traditionally boasts a release rate of over 98 percent for marlin and 100 percent for sailfish. The goal was to make the tournament extremely competitive and maintain a high release rate as tournament anglers become more aware of the importance of saving the west coast fishery while enjoying the competitiveness of a friendly event. Co-directors Geronimo Cevallos and Harvey Hunnicutt were confident they could establish a format that would further support conservation and after three days of intense fishing in the prolific waters off Mazatlán, one of the Mazatlán Billfish Classic's goals was realized when 100 percent of the billfish caught by anglers were released back into the warm seas to provide additional stock to sustain the excellent fishing off Mazatlán.

"We look at this Billfish Classic as one of the finest tournaments on the west coast and the productive waters off Mazatlán are home to huge blue and black marlin. Big-game anglers head out with an optimistic attitude about hooking into a 500-pound marlin and there were at least three giants hooked during this tournament, but unfortunately for those hoping to win the Billfish Classic with one big billfish, none were landed," stated Hunnicutt, as he summed up a very successful tournament.

Anglers look forward each year to the gala activities hosted by Marina El Cid and the competition that evolves as each team heads out in quest of releasing numerous Pacific sailfish or hopefully hooking into a blue or black marlin that exceeds the 250-pound minimum qualifying weight. The captain's meeting was held around the

Marina El Cid pool where Hunnicutt and Cevallos, who spoke in Spanish to the Mexican teams entered in the event, covered tournament rules in detail. That evening, anglers and their families were ferried across the marina to attend Casino Night where a huge Mexican fiesta dinner was served, followed by table games where crew members were able to win bundles of "funny money" that would be used later in the evening to bid on high-end Accurate reels and other quality tackle.

Day One of the Mazatlán Billfish Classic would begin at 6:30 a.m. by way of a shotgun start at the mouth



of the Marina El Cid harbor. After a final roll call was made from the radio control boat and cameras initialized by each team, the fast sportfishers pushed their throttles forward and headed to the fishing grounds. Just outside the small islands off the white sand of Mazatlán's famous beach, the seas began to build with a strong wind blowing out of the northwest. It was only a short run for most boats to where good numbers of billfish had been reported holding around a series of shark buoys, with a water temp between 82 and 83.5 degrees.

One of the first boats to report a hookup was *Gene's Machine*, as a team member baited a blue marlin about 14 miles off the Lighthouse. The fish was hooked on 40-pound mono, rigged to 100-pound leader and after its first series of jumps was deemed to be under the 250-pound minimum, but would earn the team 100 points upon a successful release. While the angler fought the fish, radio control was kept busy recording quick "catch and release" action on sailfish in an area about 31 miles from Marina El Cid where the bulk of the fleet were seeing lots of bait, birds and billfish.

The day progressed with many teams putting 100-point releases on the board as sailfish bit well on lures, slow-trolled live bait and drop-backs. The 120-foot sportfisher yacht *Seacall* had put together a pretty talented crew and under the direction of skipper Brian Bingham, working the scanning sonar to the limit from the flying bridge, making casting to metered fish more effective. The seas continued to grow, the wind picked up a couple of knots and there were concerns among the boats fishing the outer limits of the grid chart that it might be difficult to make the run back to the harbor entrance by 6 p.m. The *Seacall* continued to build a slight lead followed by the *El Vato*, *On Site* and the *Aries II*. When the call came from radio control for lines out of the water, the team on the *Seacall* stood alone in first place with five confirmed releases. Not only did this put them in first place on the tournament board, the team would also win the day-one daily jackpot of \$54,400.

Conditions improved on Day Two as calm seas allowed sportfishers to cruise at full speed to the shark buoy area where the sailfish bite started off as soon as throttles were pulled back. The 53-foot sportfisher *On Site* spotted a tailing marlin 10 miles short of the buoys and hooked into a tough striped marlin that chose to sulk when hooked on 40-pound mono. During the one hour and 25 minute battle, to at least get a 100 point release credit, the radio was again alive with multiple hook-ups by teams that were fishing the spot.

The *Seacall* was building a demanding lead, but the *Retriever*, *El*



Vato, and *Double Trouble* were also hooking and releasing sails. The *On Site* got to the buoys and immediately got bit and released its first sail of the day, but the *Seacall* seemed to be on fire again and ended up with a near Mazatlán Billfish Classic record when the team's final count at the end of the fishing period had added nine more released sailfish to their total, which moved the team very high on the dock side score board. Their score also won the *Seacall* team another daily in the amount of \$54,400 as they had bet across the board on all the daily jackpots.

Day Three saw flat seas prevail with hardly a breeze on the Pacific Ocean, but fishing conditions had changed and the area around the shark buoys wasn't holding many sailfish as the water temperature had dropped two degrees due to a change in the currents. The fleet spread out looking for more 83 degree water within the 25 to 30 mile range, while the Marina El Cid *Aries* fleet fished an area less than 15 miles from the harbor entrance, where there was plenty of bait, porpoise and birds. It would be the *Aries VIII* team that was hot on Day Three as they released five sailfish. The four-way tie for second place would be broken when the *Chupacabra* boated its eighth fish of the tournament early in the day to move ahead of the *Retriever*, *El Vato* and *On Site*. The *Seacall* had started the day with a tremendous lead and, when they released two more sailfish, the winner of the 10th Annual Mazatlán Billfish Classic was decided.

The tournament was not only one of competitiveness among some of the west coast's finest big-game anglers, but it also proved that a tournament based on a release format could provide a feeling of accomplishment among all participants. "Mazatlán has so much to offer fisherman and their families, and the facilities at Marina El Cid are second to none in all of Mexico. We are proud to be able to host such an enjoyable tournament and provide world-class fishing for big marlin and Pacific sailfish. The fishery off Mazatlán is healthy and those coming here have an excellent opportunity of catching a big marlin, acrobatic sailfish, swordfish, dorado, yellowfin tuna and wahoo," were the closing comments made by Geronimo Cevallos, general manager of Marina El Cid.

The *Seacall* team had a great weekend, winning the overall prize money as well as two of the three daily awards.

The team on the *Seacall* walked away with checks totaling \$164,460 for its first place tournament finish and winner of two across the board daily jackpots. Second place honors and a check for \$20,873 went to the *Double Trouble* and the hard-charging team from the *Chupacabra* took home a total of \$48,841 for its third place finish in the Mazatlán Billfish Classic and daily jackpot options in the \$750 and \$1,250 categories.

There was also an exotic species division that would pay big bucks for two teams catching the largest yellowfin tuna, dorado or wahoo weighing in excess of 25 pounds. In this division a cash pay out of \$6,162 was awarded to the team on *Aries I*, which weighed in a 56.4-pound wahoo. The team on the *Double Trouble* added another \$3,697 to their total winnings for weighing in a 40.8-pound dorado.

The 11th Annual Mazatlán Billfish Classic will be held at Marina El Cid Resort the second week of November 2005. For more information on entering this prestigious billfish tournament contact International Gamefish Tournaments at (714) 258-0445 or contact Marina El Cid in Mazatlán by way of their international number at 011 52 669 916 3468. ➤

