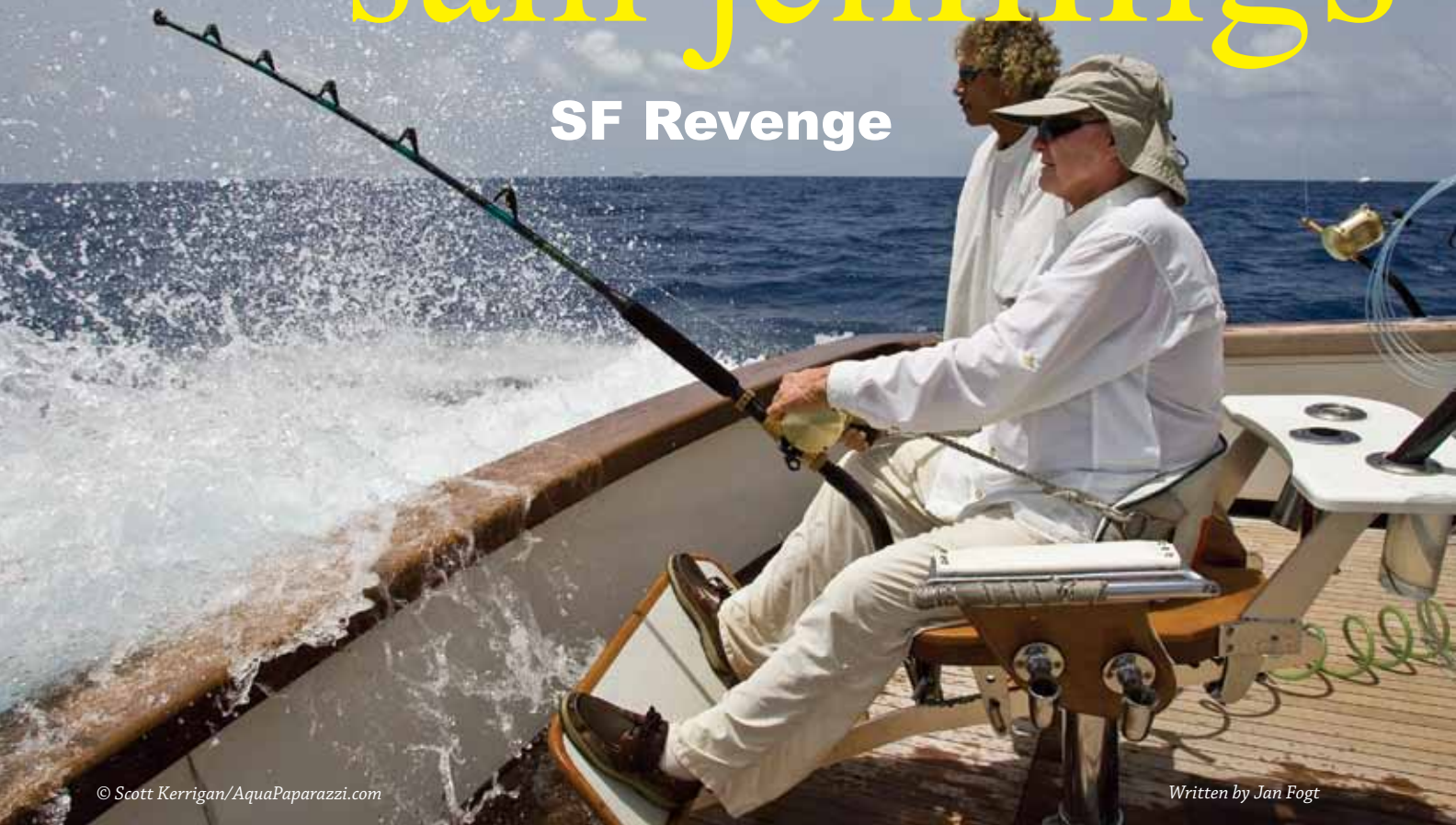


PROFILE

Sam Jennings

SF Revenge



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Written by Jan Fogt

Sam with mate Dean Dunham

Last summer Sam Jennings and Capt. Mike Lemon observed a milestone that probably no more than three or four owners and captains have ever achieved. On Sept. 9, 2008 they surpassed the 1000 mark. That's 1000 blue marlin caught by Jennings with Lemon on the custom built 58-foot Revenge. Certainly this would be an impressive feat for any team fishing together for a lifetime but the fact is Jennings and Lemon have only been together for 15 years, during which time they've averaged 67 marlin releases during the six months they fish every year.

No doubt, at 51 years of age, Mike Lemon has hit his stride. As for Jennings, well, he seems to have been in the zone for decades. The angler, who will soon celebrate his 82nd birthday celebrates another benchmark - the 30th anniversary of a record-setting catch at Bimini.

For three decades Sam Jennings literally has had a million dollar bounty on his back. In the Bahamas Billfish Championship and the International Billfish Series among others, he's been the one to beat since 1979 when he caught a 1060.5 pound Atlantic blue marlin off Bimini to win the BBC. The fish was the first grander ever caught in the Bahamas and at the time was only the third thousand pound blue ever caught in the Atlantic. Today, it is still the biggest ever caught in the Bahamas.

So is Sam Jennings one of the greatest blue marlin anglers ever to live? Mike Lemon sure thinks so.

What we and many others who know Jennings find most impressive about this two time BBC Champion and three time winner of the Boy Scout Tournament and the July Open here in the Virgin Islands, is that for

the past eight years Sam Jennings has been the one to beat in the contest for tagging and releasing the most Atlantic blue marlin. He's worn that title six times and was runner up twice.

Yes, he has all the problems of old age. Bad knees and hips and as he puts it, "it seems like I'm always having something burned off," pointing to a fresh scab on his balding head. But in a sport where burnout claims more victims to competitive fishing than cancer or heart disease we wondered what keeps him fishing and more importantly, how has Sam Jennings managed to stay at the top of his game all these years, whipping anglers half his age. What makes him go?

Seated at his desk in his home office overlooking the sea at Juno Beach, Florida, Jennings took a long time before answering. Eventually we saw a spark in the eyes and a

little curl of a smile. Ever the Southern gentleman, he responded: “Well, I’ve been lucky. I still have my original hips and have only had to replace my right knee, so that helps. Otherwise I’m not sure what keeps me fishing. I just know that as long as I physically can, I’ll keep marlin fishing. It’s what I enjoy.”

The Making of a Master Angler

Sam was born and raised in Central Florida in April, 1927, the same year Charles Lindberg crossed the Atlantic in 33 1/2 hours, the year that Gene Tunney became the World Champion and Zane Grey made his first fishing trip to New Zealand. The next year, Grey would catch the first thousand pound fish ever taken on rod and reel - a Pacific blue marlin off Tahiti.

One of three born into a working class family, Jennings’ fa-

ther worked as a laborer in local citrus groves and because these were tough economic times, his mother too worked in packing houses. Thanks to the GI bill however, he pursued a different path. After serving in the Navy during World War II, Jennings came home and went to the University of Florida. Following graduation in 1948, he attended the University of Miami School of Law where he earned his JD or doctor of jurisprudence.

As a boy Jennings fished for bream and speckled perch in nearby lakes never imagining one day he’d fish for blue marlin. His first time on the ocean was during the war where he saw dolphins, flying fish and other surface activity. After law school, he settled in post war Miami, which was booming. By 1952, he was practicing real estate and business law and was earning enough to charter a boat out of Pier 5 every few weeks or so.

Now long gone, Miami’s Pier 5 docks were the stuff of legend in those days. These were the docks where Tommy Gifford, Buddy Carey and On The Edge’s Captain Jimmy Loveland honed their skills. It’s also where Jennings first tried his hand catching a sail-

fish. His recollections of fishing there in the 50’s are still vivid. “There were captains and mates with good skills like Buddy Carey but overall it was pretty raucous. Like a fishing honky tonk.” Tourists used to pour onto the docks in the afternoons, he said, and a lot of the captains would be yelling at them either to buy fish or go fishing the next day, said Jennings.

Within a few years he’d managed to relocate to quieter surroundings at Dinner Key on Key Biscayne, where he kept a boat. The boat was not what you would call big. “It was about 30-feet and big enough to entertain friends, clients and my four kids fishing offshore.” Most of what they fished for in those days were bottom species and dolphin but every now and then they would catch sailfish.

Somewhere around 1960 Jennings had what might be called a defining “eureka” moment. “I’d been doing a good bit of legal work for developers when one day it occurred to me that they were making a lot more money building houses than I was practicing law.” So Jennings gave up law for the construction business. Specializing in high-end residential projects in Coral Gables and elsewhere, it’s a business he still enjoys; work that pays for his other passion - catching blue marlin.

Thanks to his success in construction, in 1978 Jennings bought the “big boat” he’d

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always longed for and had begun making plans to fish the Bahamas. His next stop was Tycoon Fin-Nor, where he outfitted the boat with tackle. The only thing missing, he realized, was a captain.

Up until then, Jennings had always maintained and run his own boat, hiring freelance captains and mates on those occasions he was fishing a tournament or had guests. He realized however with the 48-foot Pacemaker he named "JC" for his construction company, the boat needed someone maintaining it full time. So he ran an ad in the classifieds and Capt. Bill McMurray, who had just come off a five year job with two-time BBC winner Warren Schaeffer, answered it. Now retired, McMurray's first impression of Jennings was that he seemed very serious. "But on the boat, he was the opposite of that," said the 66-year-old captain. "Not once did Sam raise his voice in anger. To this day I'd say he was probably the best boss I ever had. We fished together 13 years."

McMurray, says Jennings, taught me to marlin fish. "When I hired him he already had the reputation of being a good marlin fisherman. And that's what I was looking for. I wanted to try marlin fishing." Jennings back then had the idea of making Bimini a weekend getaway, heading over after work Fridays and coming home on Sundays.

Both men describe those years as laced with luck.

I started my career working on charter boats, McMurray explained. Warren Schaeffer, who owned the Fisherman's Paradise, was my first private job. He and his wife were terrific anglers and although I'd been fishing a while I'd not done a lot of marlin fishing. Warren became my mentor. In those days we pulled whole mackerel and mullet and anglers had to be able to drop back and set up on a fish. Warren was not only good at hooking fish he was a master at using drag to beat them. That was something I learned from him and later was able to pass along to Sam.

Although Jennings had been

running his own boat for a while by then, he knew little about marlin fishing and was very eager to learn, McMurray said. "He was a great student but what I admired most about Sam was that he never left the cockpit once we started fishing. He was there if a fish came up. That's why we did as well as we did all those years, why we were able to win the BBC championship back to back in 1979 and in 1980."



Sam and his son Jon

Luck of course played a role, they say. Into the History Books

My first trip to Bimini was in 1978, said Jennings. "I had been anticipating catching my first blue marlin for months. I just never imagined it would happen that quick."

According to McMurray they had gotten an early start and made good time, arriving at Bimini with daylight to spare so he suggested they put out a few baits with the idea they would troll the last 10 miles into Bimini. On that inaugural trip there was only Jennings, his 8-year-old son Jonathan - who remains his number one fishing companion - and McMurray. To everyone's surprise they raised a blue and Jennings caught it. At just over 300-pounds, he put it in the boat.

That was a trial by fire, recalls Jennings. "Jon was so young it was up to Bill and me to handle the boat, catch the fish, wire and gaff it." Even today what he remembers most about that day was watching the fish bite. Seeing

it behind the teaser and then feeding a bait to it. That's still the best part of fishing for me."

Jennings probably was a bit jaded after his first trip. "Here we go to Bimini and right off the bat, catch one. The next day, we catch another. I figure, this is the way it always is."

After trips to Chub, Cat Cay and Walkers that year Jennings knew better. At McMurray's urging they signed up to fish the Bahamas Billfish Championship the following year. For McMurray, who at the time was the only captain to have won twice, there was a lot of pride on the line.

Jennings felt different. Not quite a tenderfoot, "I was close," he said. By then Jennings had caught a handful of blues but it still felt new.

In those days, BBC tournaments lasted five days with a mandatory lay day in between. As usual, fishing in the Bimini Championship was painfully slow. No big fish had been seen, much less caught. As for the JC, McMurray says without seeing a fish, I'd about given up on the fifth day. "We'd gone out that morning to our usual spot in 3000 feet north of the Pines and after working back and forth all day, we hadn't seen anything. At 2 p.m., I was thinking more about heading towards Bimini for fuel than catching a fish, he said. In those days fishing ended at 4 p.m."

"Around 3:30 that afternoon Capt. Billy Ridgeway called to say he'd seen a bunch of bonito feeding out front in 1600 feet and I was right there," said McMurray. "Pretty soon here comes this big fish on the blue teaser. Sam of course, sees it and is on his feet. Back then we fished a spread of a swimming mullet, splashing mullet, a horse ballyhoo and plain mackerel along with two mackerel teasers with skirts. When the fish came up on the teaser, Sam grabbed the rod with

the mackerel and reeled it to within two feet of the teaser. I know it was only seconds but it seemed like minutes before the fish came off the teaser to the bait. At first, it seemed like he wasn't gonna eat. He was just trailing it and then we saw the tip go. Sam set up on it and when the line came tight, it did this kind of half nelson jump. Right then we knew she was a big one. By the way," adds McMurray, "that was the only jump."

It was not an easy fight. With the fish staying deep, Sam was constantly working the drag to beat it, said McMurray. "We had to make it back by 7 p.m. or get disqualified. The battle lasted for two hours and 40 minutes; the clock ticking the whole time."

As usual, they had only one mate with them so Ridgeway dispatched Andy Anderson to assist after the fish became wedged in the tuna door. Eventually they did get the fish in the boat and landed at the Bimini Big Game Club with just seven min-



Sam with his 1979 Bahamas record

utes to spare. the fish." Having been awarded a point per pound, Jennings went on not just to win Bimini but the whole series.

with no single big fish to catapult him to the winner's circle, the then 53-year-old had to win the BBC title the old fashioned way – by catching fish in all four tournaments. Again he made history, becoming the first angler ever to win back to back titles.

By 1987 Jennings was fishing a 65-foot Hatteras not just in the Bahamas but in Mexico for the sailfish season. By this time he'd become interested in exploring marlin fishing around the world. He fished Australia, Venezuela, St. Thomas and Panama. For Jennings it was a time of discovery.

"I started fishing and traveling in 1980," Jennings said. "My first trip was to Australia and Bill came with me. After that I started going to St. Thomas, Panama and Venezuela seeking out the best people to fish with."

The roster reads like a who's who of big game fishing. Capt. Albert Johnston and Brad Simonds in St. Thomas, Capt. OB O'Brien, Barkey Garnsey and Stewart Campbell in Venezuela. Along the way he tried catching blue marlin on everything from 12-pound to 80-pound tackle. That said, "while I watched what guys like Stewart Campbell were doing, it wasn't for me. I enjoy matching the tackle to the fish and pretty much leave those decisions to my captain, Mike Lemon. He's very good on tackle."

Several things were going on in Sam Jennings life around 1991 when he made the decision to sell his boat and charter.

"We were in a major recession then. My business like many was suffering and needed my full attention." For the next few years what free time he had for fishing he spent chasing blue marlin on the July, August and



From left to right, Dean Dunham, Ryan Mertens, Sam Jennings and Captain Mike Lemon

September moons in his new favorite

utes to spare. "I guess the word had gotten out," adds Jennings, "because the whole town was there to see us weigh

The following year brought change. Jennings had traded up to a 55-foot Hatteras that he was breaking in during the 1980 BBC. This time

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fishing mecca of St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. There he fished with captains like Simonds and an eager “young kid” named Mike Lemon who was running Win Rockefeller’s Alchemist. Because Rockefeller owned Allied Marine in Miami, then the East Coast’s biggest Hatteras dealer, as a past Hatteras owner, Jennings was always welcome on the Alchemist.

Jenning’s Revenge

Jennings managed to weather the recession okay but Jon Sadowsky, a well known big game tuna fisherman who made a name for himself in the waning days of Cat Cay and Bimini fishing with the late Captain Dan Beare was not so lucky. Sadowsky had started a new business building high performance sportfishing boats. By 1993 he’d built three but had recently filed for bankruptcy. About this time Jennings had starting looking around for a boat he could fish out of St. Thomas. When he heard about Sadowsky’s personal boat being for sale at a good price he bought the 58-foot Revenge, a name the boat still bears today.

“I used to see Jon and Danny Beare fishing in the Bahamas and always admired their skill. Jon was a very

good angler. As for the boat, I cannot say enough about it. It’s just been an excellent fishing boat, a real pleasure to be on,” said Jennings. Overall what suits him about the boat is that at 58-foot it’s comfortable enough even in rough seas, he said. “It also has a very high tuna tower that’s been an advantage for spotting fish. The speed is an advantage as well but the best part to me is that this boat has a big comfortable cockpit to fish from.”

For Lemon and Jennings the Revenge has been a third partner in their fishing journey. From 1993 to Oct. 2008, she’s delivered 1452 blue marlin, says her owner. “I myself at the end of last October had caught 1,026 blues. The rest of those fish were mostly caught by my son Jon, who is an excellent angler in his own right,” adds Jennings.

Statistics have become sort of a hobby for Jennings. “I don’t fish for numbers but at my age, it’s fun to look back and remember some of the experiences. For instance, our best year was 1996, when we caught 182 blue marlin. Of those, I caught 126. Four times in 15 years,” he said, “we surpassed 100 blue marlin in a season. One day I caught 10 blues, all nice fish in the 250 to 500-pound range.” Another first: in four days they caught, tagged and released 27 fish. “That happened the year I tagged and re-

leased 108 blues.”

The statistic Jennings is most proud of is only one blue marlin of the 1450 odd blue marlin caught on Revenge was killed.

With a hint of sadness, he explains, “there was a time when we killed every fish we caught fishing blue marlin tournaments. That was such a waste. Today if you kill one, it’s like killing a friend. I’m just grateful to have lived long enough to see those days pass. It gives me hope that my son will be able to continue to enjoy the sport at this level for years to come.”

Both his longtime captains – McMurray and Lemon – remain in awe of his longevity. When told that, he smiles again. “For me, every time I see a fish strike it feels new again. And after all those years of lure fishing, the bait and switch fishing we’re doing in St. Thomas has reinvigorated the sport for me.” The slash and turn is something he finds himself anticipating, looking forward to every time the boat leaves the dock.

“I’m not a big goal setter like some anglers. I don’t begin the year with the idea I’m gonna fish for a grander or certain light tackle record. I keep it simple. My only goal all these years has been to catch every blue marlin that shows up behind the boat. Sometimes we don’t see fish but every time one shows up, that’s my motivation. That’s really my secret, why I keep fishing.”



Illustration by Carey Chen