

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

Fish Tales

Anglers Fish for Sport, Fun, Camaraderie



Ryan Lawler with white seabass caught near Newport pier: "People fish their entire life for a white sea bass and never catch one," dad Drew Lawler says

By Sherri Cruz
Sunday, June 6, 2010

Every angler has a big fish story.

The big fish that turned Drew Lawler and his son, Ryan Lawler, into avid anglers happened on the beach of White Cove on Catalina Island.

Ryan Lawler, now 20, was 7 at the time and eager to catch a fish. But cast after cast turned up nothing.

Drew Lawler was ready for dinner. His son pleaded for one more cast. With that, he got a bite.

"We got picked up by a big fish," Drew Lawler said.

The fish pulled Ryan Lawler into the water. Drew Lawler grabbed his waist, anchoring his son in the shallow water.

Together, they reeled in a 40-pound white seabass.

"People fish their entire lives for a white seabass and never catch one," he said.

Fishing is a passion for many in Orange County. As with surfing, the county's Pacific coastline makes fishing a natural hobby for the wealthy and everyday folks alike.

"You can have some guy fishing on a beach with a line tied to his toe talking to a millionaire," said John Doughty, owner of JD's Big Game Tackle in Newport Beach. "It's a common denominator for all of us."

Drew Lawler parlayed his passion for fishing into work. He's published a number of local magazines, including what now is OC Metro. These days, he's the publisher of Newport Beach-based Pacific Coast Sportfishing Magazine, which he bought in 2002.

Unlike golf or other sports, which usually require a lot of practice to be good enough to have fun, anglers say sportfishing—catching big game fish with a rod and reel—is easier.

"If you have someone showing you and you have decent equipment, you can catch the fish of your life," said Peter Berg, a sportfisher and senior vice president in the Irvine office of Los Angeles-based City National Bank.

Prized catches are heavy fish that put up a good fight.

They include marlin and swordfish, with their spear-like snouts, and dorado, better known as mahi-mahi.

"Marlin are an exciting species," said Brandon Birtcher, chief executive of Irvine-based Birtcher Development and Investment Co., a fourth-generation family real estate company.

Birtcher has been fishing since he was 4 years old. He fished in Newport Back Bay before it became a reserve.

He caught his first marlin when he was 13 during a fishing trip with his father, Ron Birtcher, in Cabo San Lucas. It weighed 123 pounds.

Birtcher said he once caught a 995-pound marlin in Australia. Marlins can weigh upward of 1,500 pounds.

Marlin are challenging because they "blind strike," which means they can eat bait without the angler noticing.

Marlin turned City National's Berg—who'd always fished in rivers and lakes—into a saltwater angler.

"I caught a couple of blue marlin and I got hooked," he said.

Lawler's favorite fish to catch—and eat—is the dorado.

It's a distinct yellow fish with blue-green speckles and an odd-shaped head.

They light up when they're caught, according to Lawler.

"They'll turn brilliant gold, as gold as a wedding band," he said.

Lawler has a giant dorado mounted above his office desk.

One of the strongest fish is the swordfish.

"It's the kind of fish where you probably catch one in a lifetime," Birtcher said. "They're extremely difficult to hook."

Birtcher's epic fish story is this: He said he once caught four swordfish in one day.

"I happened to be very lucky," he said.

Birtcher's mother once fought a swordfish for 12 hours and landed it.

"It takes wit and patience," he said.

Birtcher's mother, 78, and his dad, 80, still fish.

His children fish too. Daughter, Brooke, 25, and son Ryan, 27, both caught their first fish at 11.

Birtcher fishes on his 78-foot yacht.

His wife, Dorine Birtcher, prefers to cruise. She learned to fish after they married and has a beginner's luck story.

About three weeks after their honeymoon, nearly 30 years ago, Birtcher entered his wife in a fishing tournament.

She caught three marlin, including a 244-pounder, one of the biggest caught in Catalina that year.

"I'm not sure she appreciated the achievement she experienced, but it was an exciting weekend for me," Birtcher said.

Many of Birtcher's catches, including a great white shark, can be seen at the Ocean Institute in Dana Point, a marine science educational center. He mounted and donated the fish to the institute.

"It's important to share and teach people about these things," Birtcher said.

Birtcher is a member of the prestigious Tuna Club of Avalon, founded in 1898. So is City National's Berg.

The club, on Catalina Island, has about 200 members. Anglers must be invited to join.

Members are dedicated to passing on fishing history and culture. They also promote fish conservation.

Thrill of Hunt

Most anglers fish for the thrill of the hunt, as opposed to catching dinner.

“I do it for the sport and the fun and the challenge,” Berg said. “But there are those times when a nice tuna for dinner looks good.”

Catching game fish is all about the bait.

Anglers drop their lines where there are schools of fish that bigger fish like to eat. They use live bait, such as mackerel or sardines, or fake bait.

There are all sorts of fancy bait lures that are designed to mimic fish bait in the water.

“We’re human beings trying to create

what we think a marlin’s going to be interested in looking at,” said Lawler, who’s

hosting a Sportfishing Festival in Costa

Mesa this week. “Some of it is an art form, some of it is science. Some of it is just a wild guess.”

Over the marine radio, anglers will tell each other where they’ve found fish.

“You may be there first. You have the first crack,” Birtcher said. “But you call your buddies in and share that with them because you would hope they would do the same. That to me is the joy of fishing.”

Others echo the sentiment.

“Fishing isn’t about secrets,” Lawler said. “It’s about sharing information.”

“It’s a sport where people are willing to help you out,” Berg said. “Over the years you get advice from the seasoned veterans and you pass it on to the next generation.”

Of course, it can get competitive.

“If your buddy’s catching a fish, you’d sure like to catch two,” Berg said. “You don’t want to be outdone.”