

DEEP BLUE WONDER



MIKE ORTEGA

There was a full moon the afternoon we arrived in Key West, Florida—this makes for very aggressive nocturnal fishing. Unfortunately we got there too late to get in on the action.

Nevertheless, I found three other eager fishermen by asking around Garrison Bright Marina, waiting on a forth to split a fishing charter for the following day. Captain Monte Shifts was sitting at an outdoor local watering hole nearby enjoying a 32 oz. Circle-K drink and talking with a fella that turned out to be his first mate. The four of us walked over to his table.

“Captain Shifts, I think we’re ready.” One of the guys politely announced.

“Ok fellas, here’s the deal,” he declared in a raspy voice, “If you ain’t here by sev’n dirty in de mornin’—we ain’t waitin’ on ya. If ya-here when the boat gets back, I’ll give-ya half ya-money back. Fair-nuff?” His enormous right hand felt like an old sun dried baseball glove as we shook on it.

I reminded myself the night before as I tossed and turned—too excited to sleep, that what mattered the most on tomorrow’s trip was *the experience not the catch*. I was usually the one coming home empty-handed after fishing for red and black drum near the ship channel back home during the fall migration because I was just too damn impatient. My *Super Bowl of Fishing* was about to get underway in a few hours—I’m lucky to be part of it!



Captain Shifts was navigating the Wild Bill under the Palm Ave. Causeway by eight in the morning as promised. The tranquil turquoise waters of the Middle Keys turned a slate blue when we reached Ten-Fathom Ledge, then to midnight blue at Wood’s Wall—an underwater cliff where the depths reach thousands of feet into the Florida Strait.

The captain and his first mate were a seasoned pair with a lucky streak going judging by the dockside friendly ridicule.

Captain Shifts confidently explained from the helm, “Each one of ya is-gonna get a chance to sit in the fighting chair and bring home what the sea is gonna give ya.”

The first mate masterfully prepared trolling rigs the size of a woman’s running shoe on each of our lines while we all kept an eye out for circling gulls—indicating schools of plentiful bait fish below the surface. We had to work as a team to overcoming the challenges of last night’s full moon that typically results in slow fishing the following day.

As the Wild Bill trolled, we shared personal stories about our fishing havens back home. The first mate validated the dangers of deep sea fishing in the keys with the recent news of a fisherman, who had become entangled in his own line just last week and was unmercifully dragged overboard by a bluefin tuna. The thought of being in deep tow by a sea monster was sobering.



“We’ll call it a day once each of you has a fightin’ chance to land a fish. Catch or not, we divide today’s yield evenly.” The captain announced to which we all agreed with gratitude. The sun was now directly over head, casting hard shadows that danced on the deck with each swell. I whistled *Blow The Man Down* and *There Once Was a Ship That Put to Sea* to pass the time.

We were caught off guard when a matching pair of mahi-mahi—the fish so nice they named it twice, were spotted just off the starboard side—laser focused on our lures trailing behind. We took up the slack in our lines and sat on the edge of our chairs with anticipation of a strike, only to be disappointed when they passed us up like we didn’t even exist. How quickly we were reminded these fish were still hung over from moonshine.

My mind drifted back to those memorable fishing days with my buddies back home. We would tie off to a natural gas platform rig, climb up on a cross beam and enjoy a deep water fishing without all the rocking from the boat, watching hundreds of fish below as we lured them up with our lunch leftovers. I would make my own lures back then. I would give them names like *The Terminator*, or

Hidden Surprises—designed to snag and bag. We would exchange shameless jeer and jibe like, “It’s not the size of your lure that counts but the fish that sleeps inside your cooler.” Out there you never know what you are going to hook on to. I will never forget one particular clear day off the Texas City coast, we spotted a group of large sharks underneath us so I grabbed my fishing pole just in case. To make a short story long, when it was all said and done that 10 foot shark had me circling the boat for an hour. It felt like I was reeling in a tree trunk off the bottom. No dramatic splashing—just me mercifully reeling in something so large, we wouldn’t have been able to bring it aboard our 16 foot Mackie Craft. When that shark finally came up along side our boat it was half the length with a 38 inch girth. Luckily for us, my leader was snapped right off by its razor sharp teeth. Those kind of hour-long battles have a way of taking your mind off being sea sick and for bragging right.

Dad would have been proud. Having been born and raised on the island of Cuba, he fished both freshwater rivers and saltwater shorelines in his youth using simple hand reels, nets or cane poles. I’ll never forget the day he

took me down to Sears and Roebuck to buy new Ted Williams signature reels in stunning chrome and brown with matching rods. Along with a spool of crystal blue 20 pound test line, a tackle box, an assortment of weights, leaders and hooks, a plastic handle fillet knife—everything that salesman could think of! The look on my dad's face when the salesman explained we needed a license to fish in Texas was priceless.

On our first fishing trip we drove down to Galveston, Texas in his '75 Dodge pickup to the 61st. Fishing Pier before sunup. According to dad, rule #1 was, you had to be there and ready before the fish started biting—a rule I question to this day, at least when it comes to salt water fishing.

As we carried our pristine gear down the portion of the pier constructed of huge granite blocks called the jetty, we stopped to watch the local badass fisherman land what looked to be about a 20 pound silver metallic and yellow-fined fish, known as an Amber Jack. His pole was impressively long with the largest spinning reel I had ever seen, laden with ridiculously strong fishing line that glowed neon green under the street lights. We took all this

as a promising sign of things to come—boy were we wrong.

Once we made our way up to the elevated portion of the pier where the admission entrance and supply house stood, we purchased our one day pass and a pound of frozen shrimp to get our game on. I can still remember the glass counter with floats, hooks and weights, that contained what they claimed was a monkey fish—A dark, mummified creature the size of a new born puppy. I would study the horrified look on its eyeless face, knowing the whole time it was just a really shitty taxidermy attempt to create some kind of “mermaid” replica.

We would walk down to the far end of the pier to find a comfortable spot. Neither one of us had any idea what the hell we were doing other than taking a frozen shrimp and piercing it on to our hook. Within our first cast we were introduced to what’s known as a backlash or bird’s nest. This refers to the unsightly entanglement of fishing line from improper adjustment of the friction mechanism within the reel itself. My father’s tolerance for unexpected tedious setbacks was close to zero and his short temper

was always ready to rear it's ugly head and make things awkward.

We did occasionally manage to land a decent speckled trout or those hard to clean Sheepshead—a common pier dweller that provides plenty of bones to contend with. By the end of the day we spent more time untangling our reels than catching fish, but we were content with anything inside our cooler to make up for all our father and son escapades.



“Heads up, we got some action off the starboard side!” Announced Captain Shifts. Two golden dorado beauties leaped with streamline agility towards our trolling lures—it was game on!

That meant sit down, take up any loose slack in your already short-ass lines and get ready. However, it appeared these two fish were only out for a breath of fresh air because all our lures remained undisturbed. The whistle to start the first quarter ended up being another

time out from the home team and just like that, the action we anticipated never happened.

Fish don't care how far you traveled or how much you spent to get out in the middle of nowhere. Your parting gift may consist of enough fish to make a sandwich with a side order of sunburn. Our captain made the call to bring the lines in for a quick relocation. Too bad it was an alcohol free trip because I could sure use a beer.

I came out of my heat coma when the diesel engine's thrumming decreased to a low purr. Our first mate spotted two gulls, then four circling nearby. (*This is where experience kicked in*). Captain Shifts strategically maneuvered the lures in tow just ahead of the floating seagrass safe-haven, based on the direction of the current with stealth-like finesse in hopes of enticing a golden beauty.

"This is it boys!" The captain shouted from the overhead flybridge.



"Fish On!" The first mate abruptly announced off the bow, as the line to my lucky teammate went taut with a spray of seawater. We retracted our lines and cleared the way as he straddled the big chair like a bronco rider. His oversized rod and shinny brass reel clattered like a new year's eve party rattle. If you stepped away to take a wiz you would have missed all the action because within minutes we had landed our first golden dorado.

I had never seen such a beautiful fish in person. I studied her glistening shades of deep blue that blended into a rich golden amber—A twenty pound cow* designed for speed and agility! The first mate iced her down in a cooler large enough to fit an average adult as quickly as possible, to begin her ice coma transition. She never stood a fighting chance against gear designed to land a fish three times her weight. I silently apologized as I gazed into her fogged-over left eye.

We were once again slow trolling after a few high fives and a rehydration break. I was tempted to let out an extra 50 yards of line as soon as the first mate turned his back to prolong my experience and give my fish a fighting chance. It didn't take long for the waiting game to resume once all

the commotion settled down. Fish have ears and they know when it's time to skedaddle. The vast openness and intermittent rocking from the boat created a hypnotic mirage on the horizon as we complacently resumed our scouting for a seagrass drift.

Captain Shifts once again made the call to pull the lines in for another high speed relocation. The 30 knot cruising speed gave us a welcomed breeze. Now would be a good time for a nap so I once again took my position in the more comfortable fighting chair and let the others take turns sharing the narrow slither of shade provided by the flybridge. I would leave this oceanic game of hide and seek to the experts and let my mind return back home once again to indoor plumbing and air conditioning. My price of admission included a promise from our captain but fish don't care how much you paid to watch them swim. Your parting gift may only consist of a bad sunburn and enough fillet to make a sandwich. The truth was, out here we were an insignificant gang of six only concerned with our own wellbeing.



At one point the diesel engine ceased the pleasant mesmerizing hum, bringing me out of my rem nap.

“Ok boys, let’s try this again.” The captain announced. Our captain was spot on—It was well after mid day and according to his fish finder, the first round of hungry fish had recovered from their moonshine hangover. No sooner we took our assigned seats, did we fall into a school of dorados that kept us busy for the next hour. We felt no heat from the sun, no thirst—just the satisfaction of taking turns in the fighting chair until we met our proposed limit as promised.

When it was all said and done, the first mate wrapped duct tape around the opening of the cooler and secured the gear to ensure no cold would escape. With everything secured, he gave our Captain a thumbs up. The Wild Bill’s engines rumbled under our tired asses for the ride back that seemed like a blur.

Back at the marina Captain Shifts backed his boat into his designated slip with our bragging rights hung high on long spikes over the center console. His batting average would surely remain above 400 among his

contemporaries. Within minutes my equal portion of mahi-mahi was handed to me and that was it—almost. The taxidermy service strategically situated between the boat and the parking lot had a magnetic draw I could not resist. The whole experience was like Disneyland for fishermen and the gift shop could not be avoided. The sun had shamelessly baked away any common sense and willpower to avoid such a trap. *The desire to relive this amazing day through a fiberglass replica* was probably in the brochure somewhere.

They had me hooked, line and sinker. “What the hell!” my gullible conscience told me, “You will probably never get an opportunity like this again,” and so far that remains true. My fiberglass replica has hung for decades over the kitchen stove and still gives me a feeling of achievement just like the brochure said it would.

mahimahi (*Coryphaena hippurus*), species of open-ocean fishes known for its iridescent coloring and popularity in commercial and sport fishing. The mahimahi is one of two species classified in the genus *Coryphaena*, a single genus within the family Coryphaenidae, the other being the pompano dolphinfish (*C. equiselis*). The mahimahi inhabits tropical and subtropical ocean waters. It is a popular seafood that appears in restaurants and seafood markets worldwide.

The name mahimahi comes from Hawaiian language, meaning “very strong,” in reference to the fish’s strong swimming skills. Although the mahimahi is sometimes called dolphinfish or dolphin, it shares no relation to the marine mammal, and it is unclear why they share the same name. The mahimahi is also sometimes referred to as the dorado, which means “golden” in Spanish, referring to its golden coloring.

Source: Britannica

*The gender terminology for mahimahi: Bull (*male*) sports a tall, square forehead while the Cow (*female*) has a rounded, less prominent forehead.

Source: Belize Game Fish Association.



About the author:

Mike Ortega has a hard time paying attention in class, he is always talking to the other students and never turns in his homework on time. He lives and breathes in Houston, Texas and can't decide what he wants to be when he grows up.

©2026 Mike Ortega, any unauthorized publishing or distribution would be considered ok since he really could care less if you reprint his stories at your expense.