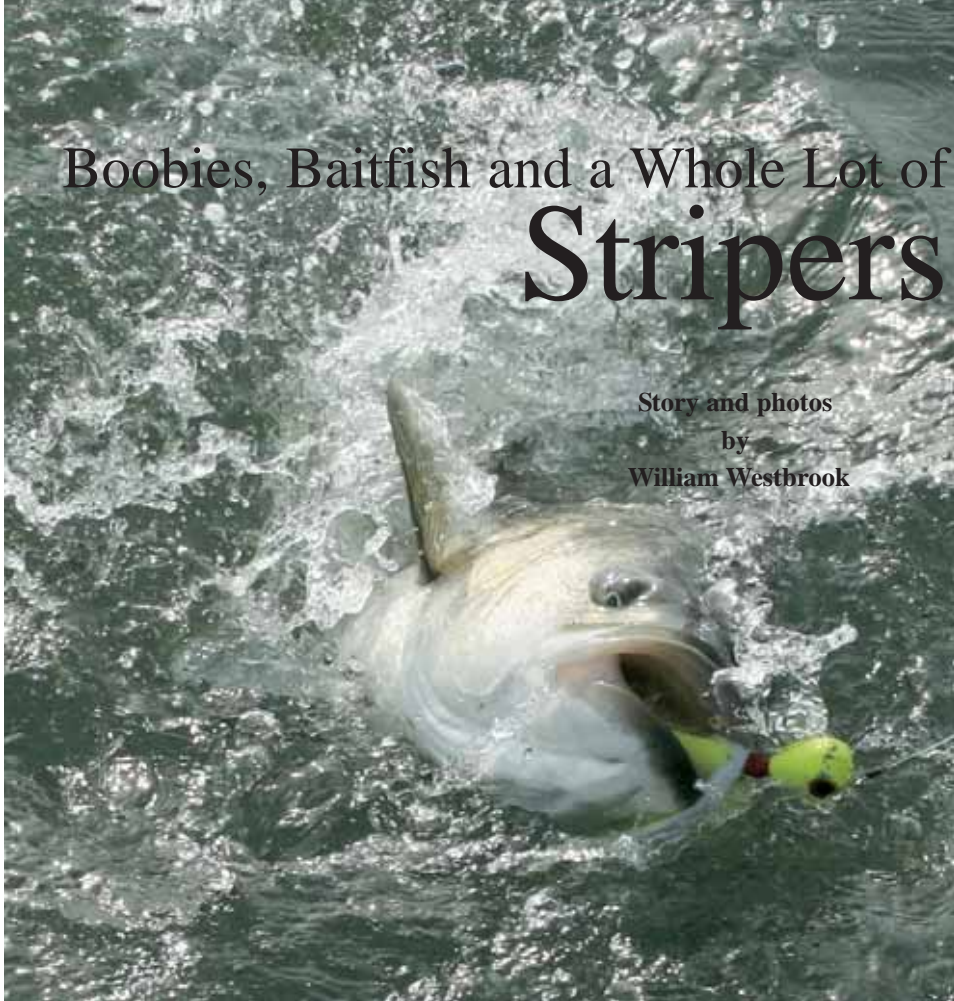


Boobies, Baitfish and a Whole Lot of Stripers

Story and photos
by
William Westbrook



Six-thirty in the morning on a Friday in January in Virginia Beach. The sun hasn't yet risen above the horizon and the air's cold, about 40 degrees. Thankfully, there's not much wind. In the darkness, the marina at Rudee Inlet is buzzing with activity. On the

docks, fisherman load gear and other provisions into their boats for a day on the water. In the channel just beyond, boat after boat motors by and heads out onto the ocean, bow lights from the ones behind almost merging with the stern lights of those ahead.

As they pass, the guys on the boats call back and forth to the guys still on the docks. "Gonna take the prize today, Billy?" "Where ya headed, north or south? The big ones yesterday were north." "Movin' a little slow this morning, fellas? Late night last night?" The camaraderie is evident. Most of these fishermen have known each other a long time, some their whole lives. They make their incomes from the charter business and on this day, they all either have clients onboard or they're out to fish for themselves.

Today is the second day of the three-day Mid-Atlantic Rockfish Shootout, the largest rockfish tournament in the country. The tournament was started four years ago by Mike Standing, a charter captain and restaurant owner born and raised in Virginia Beach. Though destinations like Cape Hatteras, Montauk and Martha's Vineyard may get more press, in Standing's opinion striped bass fishing in the waters off his hometown have always been as good as or better than anywhere else on the East Coast.

If a tournament's popularity can be used to measure the quality of its fishing, then Standing has certainly proven his point. This year, almost 150 boats have



Maniacal boobies perfect the art of missile fishing.



F/V Frogpile shadows the Backlash all afternoon.

entered the contest—approximately 750 anglers, some of whom have come from as far away as Texas and Washington state. And although he couldn't know the exact amount yet, Standing's calcutta-style shootout would award by Saturday night a total of \$202,545 in prizes, including a \$50,000, 21-foot Contender fishing boat. Hands down, the Mid-Atlantic Rockfish Shootout has become the heavyweight champion of striper tournaments in the United States.

Earlier in the week, I was told to be on the dock by 6:30. Knowing how much fishermen hate to start the day behind schedule, I made a point to arrive ten minutes early. But that was already too late. The boat I was supposed to board, Mike Standing's own *Waterman*, skippered today by somebody else, had five minutes before slipped her lines and dropped into the queue headed out of the inlet.

After some confusion, Standing walks me up and down the docks to locate another boat for me to join. A few minutes earlier, I had stopped at the dock of a sharp

looking, wide-beamed custom sportfisher to ask where I might find the tournament director. The guys on deck told me to check the breakfast place next door to the fishing center, which was 100 feet across the parking lot. I found Standing there, sitting in the first booth on the left. Now, as

he and I pace the docks, I motion to Standing to try getting me on that very same boat.

It's a fortuitous gesture. Of the boats in the tournament today, the *Backlash* is, at 53 feet, one of the biggest. It looks to be also one of the best



Navy diver Ed at work, this time above the surface of the ocean



Taken hook, line, and sinker...

equipped. Standing pulls aside the skipper, Billy Richardson, and he gives his okay provided the team chartering has no objections. They don't and in a few minutes, after all the gear's been stowed, I shake hands with the six team members now assembled in the cockpit and watch as we too slip our lines and drop into the queue.

This January, all along the Eastern Seaboard, winter has been decidedly mild. Ski resorts throughout New England were snowless over the New Year's holiday and the temperature in New York's Central Park hit 71 degrees just days prior to the tournament. As a result, schools of marauding rockfish had only recently migrated south to the warmer waters off the Virginia coast.

The rules of this fishing contest are simple. Boats can leave from any Virginia port. Each day, it's lines in at eight in the morning and lines out at two. Fishing is done as a team, so it makes no difference who catches what. The three biggest stripers count. Points are awarded by the pound: one pound, one point. To comply with existing federal law, all fish must be taken from state waters, inside the three-mile boundary. The final catch, so to speak: tournament victors must submit to a

polygraph before they can collect their winnings.

Out on the ocean, Captain Billy makes the decision to head north past Cape Charles. Our team will start by trolling the shallows off Smith, Myrtle, and Ship Shoal Islands. The day before, the team now in the lead fished the upper reaches of the Chesapeake. Their three-

fish tally stands at 147.96 points (two of their stripers tipped the scales well north of 50 pounds). Everyone on the *Backlash* knows this will be a hard score to beat.

It's a solid hour or more at 20 knots before we reach the fishing grounds. As we approach, Jimmy, the first mate, readies the tackle. We'll be fishing four rods today: two umbrella rigs to imitate

Just some of the rewards after a great day on the water





Silhouette at sunrise as we motor out to the Barrier Islands

small schools of baitfish, a white rubber storm swim shad, and a bucktail jig. These last two will be set in the outside rod gimbles and at a farther distance back in the water. It's a tactic to entice opportunistic stripers into thinking they've got slower swimming, weaker prey in their sights.

There is an intriguing dynamic between Captain Billy and first mate Jimmy. Neither one works full-time on the *Backlash*. In fact, Steve Richardson, no relation to Billy, is the boat's owner and registered captain. Over the years, however, he has become famous in fishing circles for his ability to pinpoint and land large tuna. At the moment, he's fishing in Mexico.

Although Billy and Jimmy are part-timers in the charter business, it's apparent that they've worked together for years. Whereas Billy appears youthful, almost fresh-faced, Jimmy's older and carries the look of a grizzled sage. On the fish finder, Billy spots what he thinks are schools of larger fish and throttles back the engines. As Jimmy lets out line, he speculates on how the big fish might take the bait today. Strung together, his comments equate to an impromptu dissertation on the

behaviors of aquatic predator and prey.

Some minutes pass and it becomes clear that the fish here aren't interested in the banquet we've laid for them, so we reel up and head back south, scanning the horizon for any sign of boobies, those magnificent kamikaze-like birds that hunt hand-in-glove with stripers. Find boobies and almost certainly you'll find stripers.

We locate a huge flock, easily a thousand birds. These particular ones are Northern Gannets, the largest in the booby family, and their plunge-diving antics on the water are astounding. Once these birds zero in on a school of baitfish, from some 60 feet up, they tuck their wings and shoot headfirst like missiles into the water. The size of this flock tells us that the school below must be massive, and the reason has got be stripers.

Billy drives the boat close, and Jimmy lets out the gear. In quick time, there's action on our rod tips. These first few strikes prove elusive, though. John and then Kevin, brothers from the Charlottesville area, tend the rods only to have their fish slip off after only minimal line has been taken back in.

The first one to score is Ed, a retired Navy diver from Virginia Beach. He keeps his rod tip up and his line taut. His reward is a good-sized fish, not a 50-pounder, but respectable all the same. Next up is the other John on the boat today. He too lands his fish, although it's smaller than Ed's.

More trolling and more strikes, but we fail to bring in our next four fish. By now, the boobies have gone, so we crank in the gear and set off for the next great swarm. On the way, Jimmy expounds on how some days stripers are ravenous and on others they're not. Yesterday they were ravenous. Today he calls them lazy, like guys who peruse the fridge during commercial breaks of a televised football game.

In due time, we spot more boobies and hook into more fish. By two o'clock, each team member has hauled in at least one fish, but in Jimmy's estimation, none in the hold weighs more than 42 or 43 pounds. It's obvious to everyone that we're not going to win the tournament, or even place for that matter. Regardless, it's been a glorious day thus far, so with plenty of food and drink still onboard, we decide to stay out and keep fishing. In the annals of tournament fishing, for this team there will always be 2008.

William Westbrook is a writer-photographer who lives in South Russell, Ohio. He has written on a diverse range of sports and outdoor pursuits. He has also translated from French several books on European professional cycling. When not writing or shooting, he typically can be found walking his black Lab in the woods, with a rod in his hand, on the deck of a sailboat, or on some distant road riding his bicycle.