

DRUMMING IT UP

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The boys of *Donovan's Reef* are on a fish-finding mission: to win the Black Drum World Championship Fishing Tournament



The other fishermen are keeping their eyes on *Donovan's Reef*. Looking at this big green Trophy 2503 Center Console, with seven rod holders on each side and a radar dome up top, it's clearly a fishing boat that means business. More than the boat itself, it's the crew aboard that draws a following. On the Eastern Shore, folks know that Rick Hylton and his team are legendary for finding fish. Having angled here all their lives, and nowadays marking the GPS coordinates of their most fruitful spots, they know precisely where the fish are bound to bite.

The scenic waters at the mouth of the Chesapeake are resplendent with all types of fish—speckled trout, rockfish, flounder, you name it. But today the quest is solely for black drum at the first-ever Black Drum World Championship Fishing Tournament held out of Bay Creek Marina in Cape Charles, Virginia. More than 300 anglers aboard 71 boats, from North Carolina to Pennsylvania, are competing for a top prize of \$3,000. Why a black drum tournament? “They’re known for being very big fish,” Rick says, noting that an 80-pound black drum can yield 40 pounds of flaky white meat. Moreover, reeling in a black drum is the kind of challenge that fishermen live for. “With an 80-pound black drum, you could fight it for an hour and twenty minutes. It knows how to use the currents against you. It’s known for being a world-class fighting fish.”

Rick, an amiable and burly man of 43, was nicknamed “Blue Whale” when he showed up fishing one day in a waterproof blue windbreaker and matching pants. He’s the team leader and speaks of his teammates with utmost respect, if not downright awe. “Between my cousins, George and Ivan

Caplinger, and my good friend W.T. Nottingham, their knowledge of fishing might be incomparable on the East Coast. I don’t think anyone can compete with them.” Before Rick bought his Trophy at Holly Acres Marine in March of last year, Ivan was known as the group’s captain; now he prefers to do more fishing while Rick takes the controls. W.T. is a longtime friend, farmer and clammer with a distinctive regional accent that seems to combine Elizabethan English with down-home country twang. “He’s the best fisherman I’ve ever seen, hands down,” Rick says. “I think he was born on a boat.”

Rounding out the team is Rick’s uncle, Curt Caplinger, who is quiet like his son, Ivan, but exerts a strong behind-the-scenes influence. “He is not the fishing leader, but he is the leader of the group,” Rick says. Collectively the team bears the same moniker as Rick’s boat, *Donovan's Reef*, named after a John Wayne buddy movie set in the South Pacific.

They’re off to a good start. Ivan boated a 77.03-pound black drum yesterday, already putting *Donovan's Reef* in the tournament’s lead. Today is a

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different story, however. Gusty west winds create choppy conditions, with waves approaching four feet. Rick raves about the way the deep-V hull slices through the rough waters: “We’ve been out in 10- to 12-footers, and it’s handled with ease.” But black drum fishing is done while anchored, not trolling, so the waves can’t be dodged. After bobbing all morning near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel without a significant catch, they decide to take a different approach. They head east to the ocean side of Virginia’s Barrier Islands, off of Oyster to seek a buffer from the westerly winds. They arrive to find waters smooth as glass.

Aside from the occasional oysterman or crabber, there are few people to be seen out this way. The islands are mostly uninhabited, set aside as nature preserves notable for their beaches, forests, salt marshes and abundant bird species. “Some people say it’s the most beautiful country in the world,” Rick says. It’s a wonderful place to escape to even when the fish aren’t biting, and as it turns out, they aren’t. They reel in a 50-pound black drum, but nothing to top yesterday’s 77-pounder. That’s OK. They still have that formidable fish to fall back on, and they enjoy each other’s company as always. George is the comedian of the group, and he and Rick banter back and forth all day with jokes and stories that have everyone rolling with laughter.

In the end, their 77-pounder gets inched out of the top prize. Word has it that as soon as *Donovan's Reef* ventured to the Atlantic side, the waves settled and the fish started biting on the shore side. Top honors go to the lucky anglers who landed an 81.13-pounder, and a 78.10-pounder takes second prize. “You know...it’s fishing,” Rick says. “You take your chances.” Still, third place is nothing to sneeze at. They’ll receive \$1,000—more than enough to pay for their trip—and a set of prints by watercolor artist Thelma Peterson. “Any time you can pay for your fishing trip, we look at it as good,” Rick adds. That leads him to rave about how economical his 2503 is: “It has a pair of 150-hp OptiMax two-strokes on it, and it gets incredible fuel mileage. We haven’t seen gas mileage like this. This boat is made for fishing.”

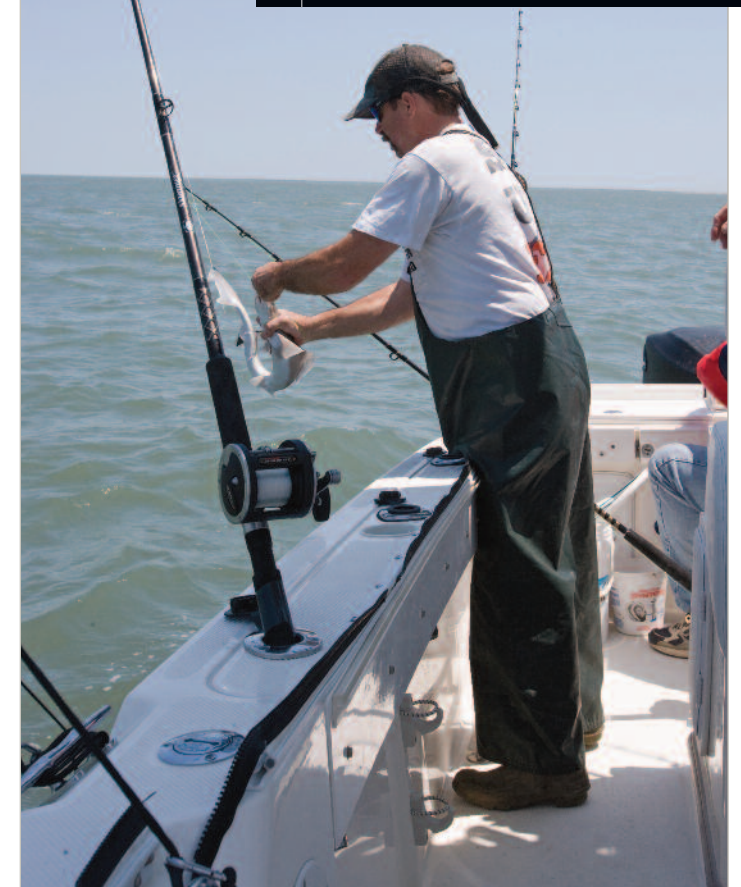
Not exactly a big-money tournament, the black drum event was more about pride, and the team has plenty of that to take home. Rick can also take pride in the other tournaments he’s won in the past year, like the World Striped Bass Championship and the Mid-Atlantic Rockfish Shootout. In the latter, he won both first and second prizes, earning him a boat. “Which we immediately sold, because I’m a Trophy guy!” Rick quickly explains.

Besides pride and a little cash, they also have lots of fish to take home. They’ll filet it, freeze it and share it with friends and family. But tonight, they’ll visit A.J.’s Meats, their favorite joint on the Eastern Shore, and celebrate their victory over steak and Corona.



>> INSIDE ANGLE

The key to catching black drum, Rick Hylton says, is to keep tension on the line no matter how long it takes to reel in the fish. “The second you let tension go, that fish is gone.” To avoid snapping the line, it’s important to check for frays. Rick uses clams for bait. “We anchor, toss them out as far as we can, put an 8- to 12-ounce weight on it, and let the clam free-line behind the weight about 5 to 10 feet. The weight keeps it anchored on the bottom, and that’s where the fish pick it up.”



Team *Donovan's Reef* heaves winning catches from the Atlantic on a 2503 Center Console. For more on this stellar tournament performer, turn to page 16 of the catalog section.