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THE WORLD BILLFISH SERIES



Best of the BVI

By Sam White

As the sport of billfishing continues to increase in popularity around the world, it seems that it's becoming harder and harder to find those secluded destinations that are close enough to yield excellent fishing yet far enough off the beaten path to offer true relaxation.

Fortunately, all is not lost. Joining the WBS World Tour this year was an event that held true promise—the A.H. Riise BVI Billfish Tournament. The event was hosted by the Bitter End Yacht Club, located on the island outpost of Virgin Gorda in the British Virgin Islands. While it's just a short 12-mile run to the world-class fishing grounds of the North Drop, the Bitter End is isolated enough to offer total solitude for the competing anglers and crews.

The tournament was formed with three goals in mind: to promote sportfishing in the British Virgin Islands (historically known as a winter sailing destination, not a summer marlin hotspot), to support several local charities and to offer the fishing world a tournament that's both competitive and yet as hassle-free as possible. Veteran tournament coordinators Al Behrendt and Brenda Fletcher of Bahamas Billfish Championship fame were brought aboard to assist tournament director Lawrence Wheatley in organizing the event—it's safe to say that their experience in operating Caribbean billfish events paid off in the end as the inaugural A.H. Riise BVI Billfish Tournament ran seamlessly from the opening kickoff until the final celebration.

One of the drawbacks previously expressed by teams visiting the BVIs was that of paperwork—the red tape seemed endless,

and often prevented boats from returning to these impossibly beautiful islands in search of blue marlin. The tournament staff researched the issues involved and came up with a magnificent solution whereby each team entering the tournament would be able to register for the event, complete all the necessary paperwork and receive their fishing licenses all during the opening afternoon's festivities. With the support of the government of the BVI's, it was a win/win situation for everyone.

The Bitter End Yacht Club served not only as the host facility for the event but also as a magnificent backdrop to the tournament. The resort stretches for over a mile along the beach and waterfront along the North Sound, the most protected and secluded deep-water harbor in the Caribbean. Its seclusion is further increased since it's accessible only by water, yet the Bitter End has a full-service marina with dockage, over 70 moorings in North Sound, a ship's store for provisions, shoreside packages for visiting mariners and much more.



Photos on this page provided by Sam White

One of the Bitter End's more unusual attractions is Saba Rock, which features a full-service restaurant and boat dockage.

The club's history dates back to 1964, when the Hokin family first visited nearby Little Dix Bay in their 24-foot sportfisherman, sampling the rich waters of the British Virgins along the way. They spent much of their time in the anchorage of North Sound, where it was as remote and quiet as it had been centuries before as a home to pirates like Sir Frances Drake and John Hawkins. A few years later, they learned that a determined Brit named Basil Symonette had built a seaside pub and a few cottages for visiting sailors and adventurers. The place was called the Bitter End, a nod to its location at the very tip of the island of Virgin Gorda.

As the Hokins made additional voyages to the islands each year, they decided they would like to buy an acre or two from Basil in order to build their own cottage. In the end Basil declined their offer but countered with an invitation to purchase the entire Bitter End facility, an offer that Myron Hokins found impossible to refuse.

From the earliest days, the resort was intended to be comfortable and beautiful yet rustic and within the framework of the BVI lifestyle. Even today, the Bitter End still generates its own electricity, collects and distills its own water, utilizes solar power and uses its treated shower water to irrigate the numerous hillside gardens. And while the simple seaside cottages may contrast with the multi-



The views are nothing short of stunning. Nearly every room offers breathtaking scenery of the surrounding waters and islands.

million dollar sportfishing fleet moored at its marina, the Bitter End served as a very admirable host throughout the tournament.

The tournament format followed that of other successful events in the Caribbean, with registration (including the aforementioned Customs, Immigration and Fisheries formalities) on Monday and Tuesday, fishing on Wednesday and Thursday, a lay day on Friday and a final fishing day on Saturday with awards to follow that evening. The all-release event would award 500 points for each blue marlin released and would use the popular time- and date-stamped image verification format along with a signed release affidavit to officially certify all releases.

As the fleet of 20 boats took to the waters off Virgin Gorda on Day One, they faced the ever-present 15- to 25-knot tradewinds and confused seas on the North Drop. While conditions like these make it a challenge for the anglers, the area's resident blue marlin really respond well to a bit of chop on the water so everyone made the best of the good fishing conditions. In fact, the fishing was so good that 16 of the 20 boats entered released at least one blue marlin during the tournament.

When the call finally came for lines out on Day One, four boats had tallied two blues apiece: WBS veteran Harry Sargeant and the *Black Gold* team, Edward's Brush's *Quiet Storm*, the *Liquid Gold* and *Marlin Darlin'*. Seven others scored one blue each, and fifteen billfish had been totaled by the fleet. During that evening's cocktail party and lavish dinner function, tales spread among the fleet of missed opportunities (one boat was rumored to have gone zero for seven!) as well as reports of even better fishing in the coming days. Dockside optimism abounded as the fleet departed the following morning.

On Day Two, Brush and company had another banner day with another two blue marlin officially released, bringing their total to 2000 points and the early lead. However, Capt. Keith Bokenhagen kept Harry Sargeant's *Black Gold* in the running as they also managed to let go two nice blues to reach the 2000-point mark. Two others, *Freebee* and *Follow Me*, each had two on Day Two and one from the first day to remain in striking distance of the leaders with 1500 points. Yet everyone knew of the unre-

dictable nature of blue marlin fishing on the North Drop—one boat could easily get on a hot streak and rack up three, four, five or more releases on the third and final day for a come-from-behind win. For the day, 15 blues had been released.

After two days of hardcore blue marlin fishing, a scheduled lay day represents a well-needed break for both the anglers and crews. While some chose to attend to routine maintenance and tackle prep, others elected to spend the day snorkeling or SCUBA diving in the crystalline waters surrounding the islands or taking a trip to Road Town (the capital of the British Virgin Islands) for some sightseeing and souvenir shopping.

Day Three, the deciding factor in this year's tournament, dawned clear and cool. The seabreeze had died a bit which



Pat Clement's *Liquid Gold* team brought home third place honors, falling just short of the second place mark based on time.

seemed to give the marlin a case of lockjaw though. But when you're on a roll in fishing, good things happen. When Capt. Bokenhagen radioed in yet another release for the *Black Gold* team, things suddenly got interesting. They now held the lead with five fish total and 2500 points. The *Quiet Storm* was just one behind with 2000 points. Then the skipper of the *Liquid Gold* called in a fish for Pete Clement's team, pushing them into third with 2000 points as well. The *Unbelievable* nailed a pair but due to the change in conditions, just five blues were released by the fleet on Day Three. The *Black Gold* would hold on through the end of the day to top the inaugural A.H. Riise BVI Blue Marlin tournament, taking home a custom Waterford crystal trophy and Rolex timepiece among other prizes. Harry Sargeant was also presented with an invitation to join the best bluewater anglers in the world at this year's WBS Grand Championships, to be held Dec. 5-8 in Los Sueños, Costa Rica.

While they fell just short of the mark set by the *Black Gold*, Edward Brush was understandably proud of his team's accomplishments as they accepted their second place Waterford crystal trophy. Pat Clement and the *Liquid Gold* had given the fleet a run for their money on Day Three as they moved up in the standings, although fate simply didn't smile quite enough on their team. For the tournament, 35 qualified blue marlin had been released.

Remember the three goals of the tournament organizers? Run a world-class event. Check. Show the fishing world that the British
Photos on this page provided by Yacht Shots Photography



The *Quiet Storm* placed second in the inaugural event with four blue marlin releases and 2000 points.

Virgin Islands has awesome marlin fishing. Check. Raise money for island charities. Big check. As in \$50,000 big. Prior to the winners being presented with their awards, Sebastiano Paiewonsky-Cassinelli of title sponsor A.H. Riise and tournament director Lawrence Wheatley presented Clyde Lettsome, Permanent Secretary of the British Virgin Islands with a check for \$50,000 for the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands. Accepting on behalf of the government, Lettsome commented, "I knew the plans were for the tournament proceeds to go to local charities but I never expected the amount to be this much! We'll certainly put it to good use."

A.H. Riise's Paiewonsky-Cassinelli said, "We were pleased with the turnout of 20 boats for our inaugural event, plus the entire staff of the Bitter End Yacht Club made everyone—sponsors, anglers and their guests—feel right at home. We're glad the fishing was so good and the North Sound provided a beautiful setting for the tournament. We were also proud to be able to donate these funds to charity and look forward to returning next year, as do our anglers."

As inaugural events go, this was one of the best. And certainly the best of the BVIs. 🐟



Harry Sargeant and the *Black Gold* team emerged victorious, posting a score of 2500 points based on their five blues released.