

# Reflections on Encounters with Broadbill Swordfish



# Contents & Acknowledgements

## Preface

What's in a name? And the literary buffs amongst you will recognised that as that oft-quoted line from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. So should it just be Swordfish, or Broadbill Swordfish? Or resorting to scientific nomenclature *Xiphias gladius* or perhaps more descriptively, the term penned by Zane Grey - his 'Gladiator of the Sea'?

Irrespective of that this creature is, to my mind, the most iconic of the billfish species. It is also the most widespread in terms of its distribution, being found throughout tropical and temperate parts of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. And it is tolerant of surface temperatures from 41 to 81°F (5 to 27°C) and can be found from the surface down to depths of, typically, 1800'. Although in exceptional circumstances it has been encountered down to over 9400 ft (2,878 m).

Also - in addition to Marlin, Tuna and certain species of Sharks - Broadbill have special organs next to their eyes to heat both them and its brain. This greatly improves vision, and consequently its ability to catch prey.

Then there is its legendary prowess in attacking its traditional 'enemy' - the Mako Shark - which, along with *Architeuthis* (the Giant Squid), is the only species known to consistently predate on it. But, and whilst the rationale is unclear, there are also documented instances of attacks on boats - bills being found driven through hulls - and even, back in 1967 off the coast of Florida at a depth of 2000', on a research submersible, the Alvin!

And historically Sicilian fishermen, targeting them from small boats, would traditionally sit on metal sheets in an attempt to prevent risk of serious injury from hooked specimens piercing the hulls of their craft.

This aggressive streak can though, very occasionally, result in human fatalities although, fortunately, they are relatively rare. The last, well publicised, instance was in May 2015 when a Hawaiian skipper, Randy Llanes, leaped into the harbour at Honokohau and speared one. The spear gun line tangled around an anchor rope and the fish powered towards him, impaling him in the chest. A big fish? No, it was a mere 40 pounder but with its lethal 3' bill!

So, all in all, quite a creature!

However in this chapter, as well as reflecting on some incredible captures by Club members, I wanted to include something about the development of sport fishing for Broadbill - you'll see which term I prefer using - from its inception in the early part of the 20th century off Southern California.

Initially, and for an extended period, it was all surface baiting for finning swordfish, and the limitations of this 'purist' form practiced by the 'well heeled' were reflected in incredibly low catch rates.

To my mind Kip Farrington Jnr put it in perspective: "Ten to one the day is not right for the fish to surface; ten to one that if the day is right you won't see the fish; fifteen to one that if you see him he will not strike and may even sound before you can present a bait; three to one that if he does strike he will not pick up the bait; five to one that if he picks it up you won't hook him; and eight to one you will lose if you do hook him." Long odds indeed!

Also reflecting that Ted Naftzger - a wealthy IGFA Trustee whom I once met in the Azores - who persevered with this surface baiting technique caught, in a long angling career, just 49 fish. And, despite his efforts and it certainly wasn't through lack of opportunity, nine years elapsed between the capture of his 47th and 48th specimen!

But come the last quarter of that century with sophistication in commercial techniques - harpooning being largely replaced by longlining - and its adaptation - particularly night-time drifting with light sticks - by anglers, catch rates improved significantly. This then reached a 'high' in Kenya where - having modified the technique slightly by slow trolling over structure - significant numbers - occasionally into 'double figures' - of mainly juveniles fish were being reported. And some were even captured on fly gear having been teased to the surface.

Then the next major innovation, and this brings us up to-date, occurred when Florida skippers - and in part helped by restrictions on commercial fishing activity in the Straits of Florida - started to experiment, targeting them during daylight hours close to the bottom, typically in 16 to 1800' of water. An extreme form of fishing if ever there was one! But very successful as you'll see from Jon Patten and Marc Towers' articles.

Finally may I just note that my initial intention had been to include a couple of Kenyan-based articles - reflecting the first Broadbill capture on fly, and Denis Froud's first - from earlier editions of the Club's Year Book. However, whilst we have the text to hand, we're currently struggling to find the original illustrative photographs. We'll persevere and hopefully they can be included in a subsequent update of this section.

### **Acknowledgements**

Firstly I would wish to express my thanks to Gail Morchower - the IGFA's Museum & Library Manager - for generously allowing us to reproduce historic images from their extensive archives; also to Nick Stanczyk, the skipper of **Catch 22** based in Islamorada, Florida. I particularly like those underwater shot on page 24.

Then there are all the Club members who have contributed their experiences, thoughts and knowledge in the following articles. Thanks you all so very much, it is much appreciated.

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### **Contents**

<b>Encounters with the Gladiator of the Sea - Xiphias gladius</b> by Dave West, with contributions by Barry Edwards, Trevor Gunning, Jon Patten, Jack Reece and Marc Towers	page 5
<b>Confessions of a billfisherman</b> a book review by ██████████	page 28
<b>Seventh Time - lucky or not?</b> by Jon Patten	page 29
<b>A Red Letter Morning targeting Swordfish</b> by Marc Towers	page 33

## Encounters with the Gladiator of the Sea - Xiphias gladius

by Dave West, with contributions by Barry Edwards, Trevor Gunning, Jon Patten, Jack Reece and Marc Towers

**Background & History** The basis of this article - coupled with personal recollections and anecdotes - reflects what have been evolving techniques for perhaps one of the most elusive and iconic of saltwater gamefish - the Broadbill Swordfish.

But, as a starting point and to put things into perspective, when was that first Broadbill captured using sporting tackle? From what I've been able to glean that took place, according to the annuals of the renowned Catalina Island Tuna Club, on 23rd August 1913 after a fight lasting 90 minutes. The successful angler was a William C. Boschen - subsequently credited with the concept of a star drag mechanism in reels - and the fish weighed 355lbs.

In those early days - the Club was founded in 1898 - its members, 'gentlemen anglers', comprised noted big game anglers of the day plus the influential and famous of Californian society - but definitely no ladies. So, whilst largely I suspect for social reasons, ladies were also perceived as being totally incapable of landing such 'monsters'. And, in part because of this stereotypical perception men then had of members of the 'fairer sex', one of its most revered members Pearl (yes, although subsequently dropped, that really was his Christian name) Zane Grey was effectively forced to resign from the prestigious Club.

The background? It appears that in 1926 a certain Mrs Keith Spalding caught a Broadbill weighing 426lbs. But Mrs Spalding was petite, 5' tall and weighing less than eight stone, and Grey was said to have scoffed on seeing a picture of her with the Broadbill "No way a woman that small could catch a fish that large". Well the Club's directors had no option but to instruct Grey either to apologise or resign. He apologised and immediately resigned.

The tackle in those very early days was of course, by today's standards, crude in the extreme. Reels still had no anti-reverse mechanisms and the brake, to provide resistance on the linen lines, was little more than thumb pressure exerted on a leather pad. However, Club members still caught occasional Broadbill whilst targeting the more commonly encountered species - the Bluefin Tuna and Striped Marlin.

But what techniques were employed? From what I can gather one of the more sophisticated techniques was slow trolling with a kite so as not to spook the (mainly) Tuna with a flying fish, its elongated pectoral fins having been wired out, suspended and skipping on the surface. The surface finning Broadbill and Striped Marlin though were mainly targeted by trolling deadbaits, just sub-surface, across their 'noses'.

Many of these leviathans, particularly the huge Horse Mackerel (Bluefin Tuna) they were encountering in the Bahamas and off the Atlantic maritime provinces of Canada, were proving virtually impossible to land on the tackle then available. And this finally led to - starting in the late 1920s / early 1930s - the development of reels capable of meeting the challenge; reels manufactured in the main by innovative machine shop engineers. Amongst the manufacturers there were the likes of Vom Hofe, Kovalovsky and our very own Hardy's of Alnwick, but perhaps the soon to be most well known came from an obscure Miami machine shop owned by Mr. Finley and Mr. Norwood. No prizes for guessing, it was marketed under the brand name Fin-Nor with their first reel being a 'monster', a double handled multiplier, a 15/0 weighing in at 35lbs! (Not the largest though. I understand Zane Grey before his 'love affair' with Hardy reels had a 20/0 Kovalovsky especially manufactured for him.)

So now such previously improbable captures started to become, in some cases, a reality.

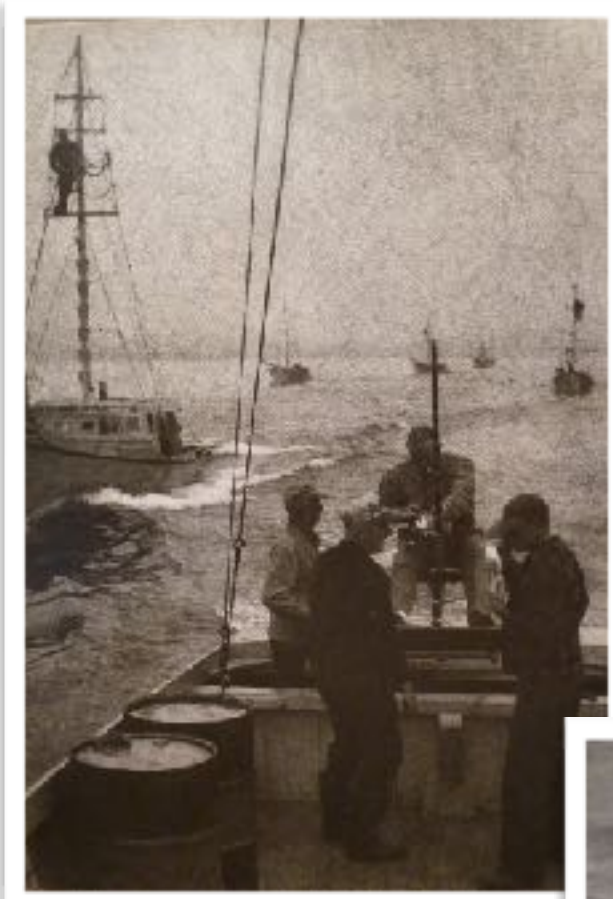
Skipping rapidly through history now and returning the focus solely to Broadbill, Michael Lerner, the founder of the International Game Fish Association, and others were, in the late 1930s and war years, successfully catching Broadbill from Peru, Chile and Canada's Cape Breton Islands. And of course, slightly later in the '50s, many of you will have read tales of that exclusive - by a 10,000\$US entry fee and then by invitation only - Cabo Blanco club in Northern Peru. There, together with its renowned Black Marlin and BigEye Tuna, they similarly caught huge Broadbill outside the coldwater Humboldt Current.

**Images from the Michael Lerner Expedition to Peru / Chile - 1940**



Images from the Michael Lerner Expedition to Peru / Chile - 1940 (continued)





Michael Lerner - Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia - 1941 (continued)





The largest Broadbill though, a specimen of 1182lbs, was caught by Lou Marron in May 1953, further North, from Iquique in Chile. (For those interested there is a fascinating account, written just five years later, of the encounter on the Internet. Google '*Sports Illustrated, Xiphias The Swordfish*' to find it. Something, reading the article, I hadn't previously appreciated was that the fish was foul-hooked, although not intentionally as that would have disqualified the catch for record purposes, in the base of its dorsal fin.)



Cable Address: "Museology New York"

### INTERNATIONAL GAME FISH ASSOCIATION

The American Museum of Natural History, New York 24, N. Y.

1951

#### FORM FOR RECORDING RECORD GAME FISH CATCHES

Must be signed before a notary and accompanied by a clear photograph showing full length of specimen. In case of sharks, photograph must show teeth and open jaws.

SPECIES *Swordfish* WEIGHT *1182 lbs*  
 LENGTH *14' 11 1/4" (bill broken)*  
 GIRTH *78"* (At thickest part of body, usually at shoulder.)  
 DATE CAUGHT *May 7<sup>th</sup> 1953* TIME REQUIRED *1 hr 55 mi*  
 WHERE CAUGHT *Iquique Chile*  
 NAME OF ANGLER (Print) *Louis F. Marron*  
 PERMANENT ADDRESS: (Street) *Crescent Drive*  
 (City) *Brielle, New Jersey*  
 (Country) *U.S.A.*  
 (State or Province)

If a member of an angling club, give club's name: *Miami Beach Rod & Reel Club - Brielle Tuna Marlin Club*  
 Name of Boatman or Guide *Capt. Eddie Wall* Boat *Flying Heart III*  
 Signature of Weighmaster *Charles G. Jamore*  
 Location of Scales *on board yacht Observer*  
 If verified by club, give name and location: *Certified by Dept. of weights L.A. Calif.*

#### TACKLE USED (Every item must be filled in.)

Make of rod *Black Palm* Tip weight *36 ounces*  
 Tip length *5' 2"*  
 Butt length *20"*  
 Make of reel *Fin-Nor* Size *12<sup>o</sup>*  
 Make of line *Costland Super Cutty* Thread size *39 thread*  
 Length of trace or leader *25'* Testing strength of line in pounds *11.7*  
 Number of hooks *two*  
 Lure or bait used *Bonito*  
 Method of catch (trolling, casting, etc.) *trolling*

A 10-yard sample of the actual line used must be sent in with affidavit.

(Digressing slightly here I actually met - a real chance encounter - a businessman, the son of Marron's skipper Edward Wall, in a Chinese restaurant in West Byfleet in Surrey 'many moons' ago. He was sitting on the next table and the conversation just happened, I'm sure at my instigation, to turn to big game fishing. Although he wasn't an avid angler he did have a copy of a privately circulated book, written by 'Uncle Lou', and presented to his dad that he promised to send to me. Unfortunately it never did arrive.)

Still back to Marron's fish, what technique was employed? Nothing really had changed, they were still scanning the ocean for the characteristic 'double' - the dorsal and tail fins - and presenting a slow trolled deadbait, in this case a 4lb Bonito, in front of the fish.

How effective was this method though? Here let me resort to quotes from two legendary game anglers. Firstly from Zane Grey, and an excerpt from his classic **Tales of Swordfish and Tuna**. "It (swordfishing) takes more time, patience, endurance, study, skill, nerve and strength, not to mention money, of any game known to me through experience or reading."

And then Kip Farrington Jr. "Ten to one the day is not right for the fish to surface; ten to one that if the day is right you won't see the fish; fifteen to one that if you see him he will not strike and may even sound before you can present a bait; three to one that if he does strike he will not pick up the bait; five to one that if he picks it up you won't hook him; and eight to one you will lose if you do hook him."

Long odds! And to put things into perspective perhaps as few as - quoting from that **Sports Illustrated** article - 750 Broadbill had, by the mid-50s, been landed by some 200 anglers.

But why? Especially when you consider that Broadbill are a relatively common species, found throughout the world's oceans in temperate and tropical zones.

Although to some extent this is speculation on my part perhaps there are two major, inter-linked reasons. Firstly, demographically, in the decades after World War 2, what was an explosive growth, in a new 'middle class' globally. Put simply many more people had more leisure time available coupled with disposable cash and this in turn led to the development of air travel for the masses and, linked, a growing sportfishing industry. So sportfishing was no longer solely the preserve of the very wealthy in society. Also some amongst this growing band of 'new' anglers recognised what were developments in the commercial fishing industry.

If we go back historically Broadbill had always been taken by harpooning fish sighted on the surface. Most of these fish though, which so frustrated anglers, were satiated having spent the night feeding and purely having surfaced to rest and digest their meals. Easy targets for the 'commercials', but the majority were simply not interested in eating anglers' baits.

Now I suspect, although I have no evidence to that effect, that the increased use of pelagic long lines targeting Tuna in that immediate post-war (WW2) period were starting to record significant by-catches of Broadbill. 'Commercials' were constantly refining their techniques as now were also anglers.

**Sesimbra, Portugal** Whilst I'm sure experimentation was happening at many places throughout the world the first I remember reading about, starting in the 1950s was out of Sesimbra in Portugal. There a mothercraft would tow a group of small rowing boats, traditional dories, up to 40 miles out to the edge of the drop-off where the angler, paired with an oarsman, would drift fish a live Rays Bream close to the bottom in 600' of water.

For those interested Geny Braz - the daughter of Jose Pinto Braz, who ran the then famous Hotel Espadarte - who some may remember from Madeira 'days' added a series of photographs to

YouTube- google 'YouTube, Sesimbra, Swordfish' to find the link entitled '*OS Espadartes de Sesimbra*'.

But anglers also started to experiment drifting at night, again a technique with its roots in commercial fishing, attracting fish to their baits with chemical light sticks meant to mimic the 'signature' of breeding Squid, one of the Swordfish's main food sources.

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Reproduced, an extract from a 40 page section in the Club's Journal. It is important to note that the historic images relate to a less enlightened period in the 1940s/50s when virtually all fish were routinely taken ashore to be displayed as 'sporting trophies'. Fortunately much has changed in the interim with the vast majority of fish being released.