



MONSTER MAN

& the brothers PAXTON

A TRUE-LIFE FISH TALE



THE BLACKTIP CHALLENGE

As the news chopper swirls overhead filming, a steady stream of sharks swim just a few hundred feet off of the beach on Florida's east coast. It's a familiar scene to Floridians. It tends to frighten visitors. It also conjures up images of Chief Brody running down the beach of Amity screaming "GET OUT OF THE WATER!" This "invasion" draws

IF YOU GO

What: The Blacktip Challenge, land-based shark fishing tournament.

When: Saturday through Feb. 13.

Where: From Vero Beach south to Ft. Lauderdale. All fishing must be conducted exclusively from the beach.

How: The tournament is open to the public with an entry fee of \$50.

Registration and entry fee must be received by 8 p.m. on Friday.

For more information and complete rules and regulations, or to register, visit www.blacktipchallenge.com

media attention and creates a stir among the public every year around this time.

But it's not an invasion. It's an annual northern migration that has taken place since long before humans themselves invaded Florida's beaches. And it's the perfect time to do a little land-based fishing.

For the second consecutive year, the Blacktip Challenge will take place Saturday through Feb. 13 from Vero Beach to Ft. Lauderdale.

Blacktip Challenge creator and director Josh Jorgensen, from Windsor, Canada, got the idea for the tournament after experiencing the way some other land-based tournaments were run.

"I was frustrated with other tournaments. I was frustrated with the way they were run, they were inefficient, so I decided to start my own tournament," Jorgensen said.

The inaugural event saw 14 anglers catch 156 sharks. The biggest brute was a 6'8" bull shark. The number of anglers competing this year has already doubled.

And this year, the Paxton brothers will be catching all the action. Literally. Sean and Brooks will ditch their rods and reels for video cameras to document the tournament.

Jorgensen enlisted the help of the Paxton brothers, experienced wildlife videographers, to capture this innovative event on film. While a majority of shark tournaments are boat-based "kill" tournaments, where anglers must haul their sharks back to the dock to be weighed, the Blacktip Challenge is catch-and-release — with a scientific twist.

That's where the "Pit Stop" comes in. "This tournament also requires the measuring of the girth, and the fork and the total length, as well as the tagging and releasing of these fish," Sean said.

Snap a quick photo afterward and you've just completed the "Pit Stop." Then, as Brooks pointed out, the best way to release the shark is to grab it by the tail and drag it back into the surf to swim away no worse for the wear. I don't even think Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s crew could do that in under 15 seconds.

The tagging process is what makes this tournament unique. The tags are part of the National Marine Fisheries Service Cooperative Shark Tagging Program. The program, initiated in 1962, relies on recreational and commercial fishermen to gather data from sharks. Since its inception, the CSTP has seen nearly 206,000 sharks of 52 species tagged and more than 12,400 sharks of 33 species have been recaptured.

"It's a volunteer tagging program, so the anglers and the volunteer commercial fishermen, they are the core of the program," Nancy Kohler, fishery biologist for the NMFS's Apex Predator Program said. "They are essential."

"Partnerships like this particular tournament, is a way of getting some tags out, educating fishermen in terms of some conservation and tag and release," Kohler added. "And from our perspective, it's a way of getting a lot of information into the program, which can then lead into successful management."

And it's just the kind of thing the Paxton brothers like to get involved with. In February of 2007, Sean and Brooks led a research expedition that tagged and released 22 sharks in 10 hours on Florida's east coast. Now that's a day of fishing to remember.

In taking a bite out of life, two North Port brothers have sharks on the brain

Standing in the back of a jam-packed movie theater in the summer of 1975, Sean Paxton was about to watch the movie that would forever change his life and that of his brother, Brooks Paxton II. That movie was "Jaws," and it would eventually lead them to the man who singlehandedly pioneered the sport of shark fishing. The real life Quint. The "Monster Man."

"Jaws" became the jump-off point that kickstarted a lifelong obsession with sharks for the brothers from North Port.

"It was so bombastically scary, and then that fear just turned into fascination after awhile," Sean said.

And that fascination led the brothers to a life of understanding and respecting sharks, as well as bringing together recreational fishermen and the scientific community through the International Land-Based Shark Fishing Association.

THE BROTHERS

Sean, 42, and Brooks, 38, are originally from Johnstown, Pa., about 45 minutes east of Pittsburgh. And you can bet they enjoyed watching the Steelers win their sixth Super Bowl.

They grew up running through the woods of Pennsylvania with their brothers, Tom and Scott, and shared a love of outdoor sports, exploring and adventure. But music and a very tight-knit family played pivotal roles in their lives. Their parents, Brooks and Diane Paxton, were in the entertainment industry and a huge influence on the brothers. Starting when Sean was eight and Brooks four, they spent the better part of 20 years on the road. In the beginning, they traveled with their father's band, "What U Need." Their mother was the musical director and also sang and performed.

"It's kind of a Partridge Family meets the Osbournes," Sean said.

Down the road, the brothers got involved with the band Swamp Boogie Queen. Brooks was the production manager and Sean was the touring drummer. The band toured with Lynyrd Skynyrd (yes, that

Lynyrd Skynyrd), Blue Oyster Cult and the Doobie Brothers among others. Sean and Brooks have been to all 50 states, hung out with the likes of Buddy Rich and Axl Rose (to name a few) and appeared on the final season of the TV show "Melrose Place." They jokingly refer to the 1990s as the "Forest Gump" years, the time when they found themselves.

"I kept saying, 'Where's Tom Hanks? He's gotta be around here somewhere man,'" Sean said.

They have had family in North Port since the 1970s, and have been neighbors there for 10 years. When they are not on the road, they like coming home to family and the quiet atmosphere North Port has to offer.

Oh, and of course, the fishing. "I love living on the water," Brooks said. "We catch anything back here (on the canal) from tarpon to snook to redfish. Even seen bull sharks cruising back there."

Their first adventures fishing for sharks were with their grandfathers, John Paxton and Jerome Larkin, in Chesapeake Bay off of Delaware. They got started angling at an early age, "As soon as we could walk and hold a pole," Brooks said.

THE ILSFA

To unify the sport and its anglers through the compilation and recognition of world records, while also promoting — through research, education and practice — responsible enjoyment and stewardship of our marine and coastal resources.

That is the mission statement of the ILSFA, and something the Paxton brothers, founding fathers, take to heart.

"In the sport of land-based shark fishing there's guys doing amazing things with very large specimens: 13 ft. hammerheads, tiger sharks, guys from South Africa catching great whites and releasing them in the surf," Sean said. "It's a sport that we fell in love with, and we just thought there should be a way to give credit to these angling accomplishments."

That is, without unnecessary harm to the fish.

The ILSFA currently recognizes three world records: a greater hammerhead with an estimated weight of 758 lbs. caught at Jensen Beach; a tiger shark with an estimated weight of 391 lbs. caught at Vero Beach; and a spinner shark with an estimated weight of 116 lbs. caught at Venice Beach. These records are determined by a formula that uses measurements of the shark's fork length and girth in inches.

While they have no issues with the legal harvesting of any fish, the Paxton brothers are part of an



Sean, left, and Brooks Paxton II with their beach shark-fishing setups on the dock of Sean's home in North Port. The brothers founded the International Land-Based Shark Fishing Association, and spent time with the "Monster Man" himself, Frank Mundus. Pictured at upper right: Brooks Paxton II holds a 20/0 circle hook given to him by Frank Mundus. Pictured at upper left, the Paxton Brothers (Brooks left, Sean right) documenting and research tagging a blacktip shark prior to release in Feb. 2007 during an expedition on the east coast of Florida near Fort Pierce where they successfully did so with 22 blacktip and bull sharks in 10 hours of land-based shark fishing. (photo provided by the Paxton Brothers). Above

increasing trend in catch-and-release fishing in regard to sharks. And a big part of that trend is the use of circle hooks.

When fished correctly, the circle hook consistently lodges in the side of a shark's mouth. This makes removing the hook easier and also reduces the risk of gut-hooking a shark, lowering the chance for mortality.

"A lot of people would be releasing sharks like, 'Well I released it you know, and if they weren't using circle hooks they cut the leader and let it go. Well sure, you can get shot in the stomach with a .22 and run down the street. But if it was gut-hooked and you release it, with a J-hook, they are done," Brooks said.

Another tool of the trade the

brothers rely on when it comes to the safe release of sharks is a dehooker. Consider it "Hand's Best Friend." The beauty of the dehooker is that it allows you to remove the hook from a shark's mouth at a safe distance. Simply slide it down the line to the hook, and pop it out with a little pressure. There is rather painful video footage floating around the Internet shot at Delray Beach about two years ago. An angler had caught a shark, but had no idea what to do with it when he got it up on the sand. He actually stuck his hand in the shark's mouth trying to retrieve the hook. Not the brightest idea. The result was a mangled hand.

"Respect the animal, respect the environment, also respect yourself,"

Sean said. "Don't be stupid." As scary as "Jaws" was to humans, life for sharks after the movie became even scarier. It sparked a reputation that sharks were cold-blooded killers that preyed on humans. A reputation that unfortunately still lingers today.

"People just started slaughtering them after that. It definitely didn't do them any good," Brooks said. But as the brothers pointed out, just as lions are a part of life in Africa, and bears are a part of life in Yosemite National Park, sharks are an important part of life in the marine ecosystem. And when an encounter with a human does occur, it is usually the result of someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like sunset at

the beach. "Just be aware of your environment, because you're going in to where they eat," Brooks said. "They're not villains, they're just doing what they do."

THE MONSTER MAN

The most famous shark of them all was not a mechanical one that made millions of Americans think twice about getting in the water when "Jaws" premiered. The real behemoth of the blue was caught by Frank Mundus off Montauk, N.Y., on Aug. 6, 1986. Imagine the biggest fish you have ever caught. Now picture a 3,427 lbs. great white shark. Mundus called it the "Big Boy." It stands to this day as the biggest fish

ever caught on rod and reel. Mundus, who passed away in September of 2008, is widely known as the inspiration for the character Quint in "Jaws."

The Paxton brothers' friendship with Mundus started out simple enough. Sean and Brooks wanted to honor the man who had inspired their passion for pursuing sharks in the All-Star Rod & Gun Club Hall of Fame. The club is a hunting and fishing group the brothers started. When they decided to give Mundus a call, they never knew how deep the rabbit hole was going to get.

Mundus, a charter captain, decided to return to shark fishing in 2005 for the 30th anniversary of "Jaws." While looking up some information about Mundus on the Internet,

Sean found out about his return. The brothers immediately booked a charter with him in June to fish aboard the Cricket II — a boat that, later on, they would eventually help restore and put back in Mundus' hands. But Tropical Storm Cindy snuck up the coast and altered the course of their time with Mundus — for the better.

"The real Capt. Quint, on the real 'Jaws' boat, in Montauk where it all started ... couldn't go," Sean said. "Best thing that ever could have happened."

While the storm put a damper on their outing after sharks, the brothers spent the next three days getting to know Mundus. Shark minds quickly blossomed on the common ground that Sean and Brooks shared with the "Monster Man." Later on in his career, Mundus became an advocate for the conservation of sharks, and encouraged the use of circle hooks.

"Great guy; great storyteller," Brooks said. "Always had a joke for you."

"One of the best. A man's man. Big heart," Sean added. "He reminded us of our grandfathers."

And just like their grandfathers showed them the ropes of angling, Mundus gave them a clinic in shark fishing. From how to fight a fish without tiring, to the importance of listening, Sean and Brooks soaked up all they could from the greatest there was.

"Too many things to even put into words," Brooks said.

Sean's most memorable shark-fishing moment came in 2006 while out with Mundus off Montauk 20 years to the day after Mundus caught the "Big Boy." To be a part of the anniversary of the "Greatest Catch Ever Made" is nothing short of amazing. The brothers each have a necklace with a tooth from the bottom jaw of that shark. Talk about a keepsake. Just to sit there and hold it, I was awestruck. I can only hope a little of the "Monster Man's" mojo rubbed off on me that day.

The memory that sticks out in Brooks' mind comes from the first opportunity he got to fish with Mundus. He remembers battling a 10 ft. blue shark that was freaking out by the side of the boat.

"The first mate was kind of hesitating," Brooks said. "And Frank kind of pushed him out of the way and he wrapped the leader up and he said 'You ain't gettin' away from me!'" Mundus was in his early 80s at the time.

The brothers are currently working on a documentary chronicling their time with Mundus, as well as the rebuilding of the Cricket II. They plan to release it in 2009.

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