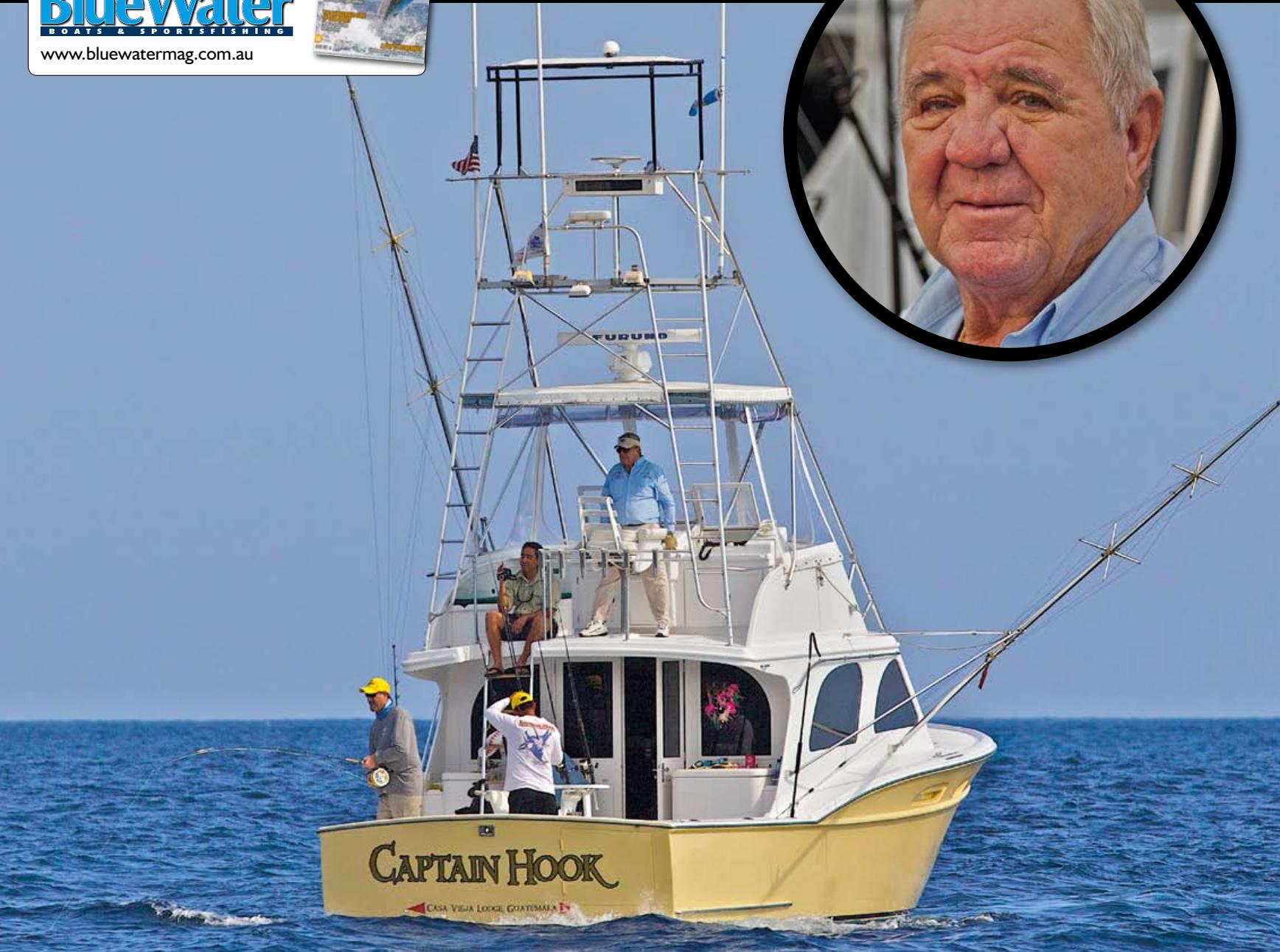


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'CAPTAIN HOOK'

— Capt Ron Hamlin

Capt Ron Hamlin is one of the most influential, highly regarded and successful skippers in the history of gamefishing. He has guided his clients to more than 27,000 billfish catches. Ron has enjoyed the highs of exceptional achievement, but he's also endured the lows of a disturbing period that almost claimed his life. Patrick Mansell profiles this extraordinary captain.

Ron Hamlin is known in gamefishing circles as 'Captain Hook', which is also the name of the boat he drives. He knows as much about finding and catching big game fish as just about anyone in the world. As a seasoned captain, he not only knows how it's done, but he very generously shares his knowledge with anyone eager to learn. Ron's greatest love has evolved from catching big fish and setting world records, to catching big fish and advocating for ocean conservation.

TECHNIQUE PERFECTED

An angler on board Ron's boat quickly notices that this will be no ordinary day on the water. This will be a day for learning new techniques, and perhaps a day to be remembered for ever. After all, that's why they come to Guatemala: to fish with 'Captain Hook' and to learn from the best.

Casting or pitching to a billfish in the spread is the kind of action Ron likes for his charters. "It's a very visual experience that involves the angler, the crewman and the captain," says Hamlin. The angler will test their casting and angling skill, and the captain will be challenged to keep the boat in the right place for the best chance at a hook-up.

Once the hook is set, Ron will circle around to get out in front of the fish. This not only increases the chances of landing the hooked fish, but it also increases the chances of hooking two or three fish at the same time.

Ron manoeuvres the boat to position the line at a side-angle to the fish. The fish has to fight much harder when pulling from the side and it makes it easier for the angler to fight it. Ron explains that he tries to keep the fish close to the boat and make the fight shorter, which makes for a healthier release so the fish can live to fight another day. He adds, "This avoids the violent action of backing-down". And then jokes, "Besides, the boat is designed so the pointy end goes through the water".

FISHING THE WORLD OVER

The best captains – the legendary ones who are household names among fishing enthusiasts – know this fact: the only way to rack up big numbers in fishing circles is to go where the fish are. In the early 1970s Capt Ron would be found in places like Cozumel, Mexico knocking down sailfish by the



score; in Australia experiencing the awesome Great Barrier Reef (GBR) teeming with black marlin; and in St Thomas fishing for its plentiful, and sizeable, blue marlin.

Then in the mid-1970s he spent his time in Venezuela where the blue marlin, white marlin and sailfish can be found year round. Since 1994 Ron has been based primarily in Guatemala. Here every day is an adventure for his charters, catching Pacific sails in world record numbers, with a respectable quantity of large tuna and blue marlin thrown into the mix.

IN THE FIGHTING CHAIR

Many, but not all, of Ron's greatest stories centre around catches that his clients have made. But some of his stories involve him in the fighting chair. One of his favourites is about his first trip to Australia in October 1972. Ron's boss at the time was Jerry Bos, who took him to the GBR to fish aboard *Kalimah* with Capt Keith Klaproth and his son Stan. Bos wanted his own crew on this trip, and as a general rule the captains in Australia did not mind charterers bringing their own team.

On the first morning, Ron was growing impatient after three hours of trying to catch bait and only coming up with eight of them. He



was used to the way things were done back home, where baits were caught very early in the day, or the day before, and the fishing began just after sun-up. By noon, Hamlin and Bos were anxious to get going and decided that they would just have to make do with the eight baits.

Many of Capt Hamlin's charter clients visit him in Guatemala to fish for the area's prolific sailfish with fly tackle.



Above: Ron Hamlin, crouching beside the bill, ran the Merritt Prowess for Joe Lopez (standing with capture board) when they caught this 546lb blue off St Thomas in 1974.

Above right: In 2010, Capt Joan Vernon and Elliot Stark from The Billfish Foundation presented Ron with this award in recognition of his conservation leadership.

Ron took the helm and found the first marlin after just five minutes of trolling. It was a black marlin in the 400lb range. They brought it to the boat and released it. Shortly thereafter came the second catch, a black in the neighbourhood of 600lb. They released that one too. The third bait caught an 845lb marlin that they put in the boat. At that stage, Jerry was in need of a rest so he called Ron down to take over in the fighting chair. Stan Klaproth took the helm and before long the fourth bait was engulfed by a 1098lb black marlin, Ron's first grander! All this on his first day fishing in Australia. Starting with eight baits at lunchtime, they released about 1000 pounds of marlin, put an 845 and 1098 in the boat, and returned to the mothership *Tropic Queen* with four unused baits. It was quite an afternoon!

FAVORITE WORLD RECORDS

Of the many world records that Ron has achieved through a half-century on the bridge, a more recent one stands out to him as the most memorable. In March of 2006 there was an exceptional bite, close inshore in Guatemala. Seven miles from the inlet *Captain Hook* had a triple-header before the teasers were even out. There were 20 boats fishing in the area, and everywhere they looked there were anglers fighting fish. For all their moving around to stay with the schools, they never got more than 15 miles



offshore. They didn't have to, the fish were everywhere.

On the first day the bite was furious. While *Captain Hook* was crushing sailfish, the captain who held the previous single-day record for sails happened to be listening to the action on single side-band from a position in Costa Rica. He called Ron to tell him that he had now tied the previous record of 121 sailfish in a single day. While this conversation was going on, *Captain Hook's* anglers broke that record with a triple-header. It was not late in the day, just mid-afternoon, when they called it quits. They had broken through the old record, and decided they should leave some for the other boats.

A fisherman who can conceive of that many sailfish in a single day can understand how exhausted the crew and anglers must have been. In the following two days they caught another 176 sails, which broke the previous three-day record as well. This amazing body of fish lasted for 13 days and produced never less than 30 sails per day, about half of which were caught by casting with fly fishing tackle.

INNOVATOR AND CONSERVATIONIST

Early on in the circle hook revolution, Ron could see their benefit to anglers and to the fish they caught. Any captain or angler will admit that seeing a billfish that has been gut-hooked with a J-hook, and swims weakly away trailing blood out of its gills after being released, will most likely die. If the bleeding doesn't kill it, the sharks will.

So, after observing a better percentage of catches with Mustad circle hooks, and seeing how nicely

the hook is positioned in the corner of the fish's mouth, as opposed to the gruesome bloody results of the J-hooks, Ron made a decision. He went to the two guys he worked for at the time, Tim Choate and Bill Gooch, and asked them if they would agree with him to take a stand for circle hooks.

It was a controversial move because it was revolutionary, and they all knew that for a while to come every time a fish got away it was going to be blamed on the circle hooks. But Ron said he would stake his very reputation on it. He felt so strongly about this that he would risk his career on this commitment. Choate and Gooch placed their faith in him, as did his crewmen in the cockpit, and thereafter circle hooks were incorporated as the only kind of hook he would use.

Many years later he was proved to have acted with great foresight, and on account of his action most captains and anglers who are serious about catching fish and releasing them healthy have also made the switch. The number of billfish lives saved on account of this daring commitment must be in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

SAGE ADVICE

Young captains seek Ron out for career advice related to the sport. He will always recommend the life of a charter captain, provided a few basic cautions are understood. First, remember that there are temptations to be avoided. Tournaments bring together tough men, characters who live hard and play hard. There's going to be an open bar at most gatherings, so discipline is key. No

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charterer or owner wants to spend a day fishing with a hung-over captain on the bridge or crewman in the cockpit.

Ron's personal demons throughout part of the 1970s and 1980s were booze and drugs. As a lesson to anyone who will listen, he will admit that he wasted nearly a decade and almost died from the self-abuse. His fishing went to zero, most of the people who knew him before now avoided him, and he didn't like himself much then either.

Capt Peter Wright remembers those days when Ron's friends had abandoned him and few people were left to help him along. Peter is one of the people who Hamlin credits with standing by him during this period of his life. Modestly, Peter would say that all he did was to visit Ron in the half-way house from time-to-time and perhaps take him out to lunch or just spend time with him. But Ron remembers Peter as being a great source of support during this darkest of times. And if it weren't for this kindness and for his good friend, Tim Choate, who put him in rehab and made him stay there until he was clean and cured, he doesn't want to think what might have come of him.

The life of a charter captain is also hard on families. To be successful at it requires a great deal of travel and often long periods of time away from home. While there is a romantic appeal to the notion of travelling to places like Australia, South Africa, Venezuela, the Hawaiian Islands, the Caribbean or dozens of other locations, this always requires time away from home. And it's not the kind of travel where you can take the wife and kids.

The work is sometimes hard, and a captain will need to remain focused on the job to do it right. All kinds of things can happen: weather conditions play a big part, boats can break down and sometimes the fish just don't show. All these things make the job a challenging one, but it's an ideal life for a world traveller, provided the family understands the demands of the job. Hamlin adds, "Bottom line, the life of a gameboat captain is fantastic. It gives you the opportunity to be a teacher, an entertainer, an innovator, an explorer, a fisherman, and it lets you see the world on someone else's dollar".

MANY AWARDS

Capt Hamlin's passion for preservation of fisheries, and his commitment to that effort, is

legendary. For decades he has been a champion of conservation in the planet's oceans and was an early recipient of the prestigious Environmental Hero Award from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association. This was accompanied by a congratulatory letter from then US Vice-President, Al Gore.

Ron lobbies for limitations on commercial fishing, particularly longlining where the bycatch is killing our limited resources. He talks about how it disgusts him to see sailfish being sold for eight cents a pound at the dock. That translates to about \$10 for a full-grown fish capable of reproducing thousands of offspring. He has loudly denounced the cruel and senseless finning of sharks and the wasteful bycatch of the longline commercial boats.

In 2006, the book *Living Legends of Big Game Fishing* was published, featuring Ron Hamlin as the first name to be recognised among the biggest names in the sportfishing world. The introduction to the section about Ron explains how the entire room at the Annual Award Presentation of The Billfish Foundation at the Miami Beach Rod and Reel Club in 2005 gave Ron a standing ovation as their Man of the Year.

In February 2011, Ron was the first captain ever to be recognised by the International Game Fish Association in the new category of 'Legendary Captains and Mates'. Upon hearing of this great honour

being bestowed upon him he wrote to Capt Skip Smith, who was one of the main organisers of the event, to thank him. To this Skip wrote the following reply: "You do not need to thank me. We need to thank you! You have had some personal struggles through this life. You never lied or covered it up. You faced it; you overcame it and even publicised it, to help others get through this. You have been an innovator and you have introduced so many people to the sport of fishing. This has helped each of us in this industry. So, you have earned it! Congratulations, proud to be your friend."

LOOKING FORWARDS...

Looking towards the future, Ron has created several goals for himself. He will continue to advocate for healthy oceans and fisheries at every opportunity. He looks forward to the imminent delivery of his new boat with Zeus Pod drives, and he says, "I'd like to catch another 3000 billfish so I can make it over the 30,000 mark while I can still climb the ladder. But," he adds, "I'm going to need a lot of help from my anglers and mates to get this done."

If you would like to join Ron on his quest, he fishes out of Casa Vieja Lodge, Guatemala. He can be booked through their main office by emailing: info@casavieja.com. For more information, visit their website: www.casaviejalodge.com

"I'd like to catch another 3000 billfish so I can make it over the 30,000 mark while I can still climb the ladder."
– Capt Ron Hamlin

On Captain Hook's maiden voyage, Ron (standing at right) skippered his team to a phenomenal, record catch of 181 billfish releases over four days in December 1996 off Guatemala.

