



WORLD &amp; NATION

# IN SEARCH OF A RECORD BLACK MARLIN : A Devoted Fisherman Returns to Great Barrier Reef With One Goal in Mind: Reeling in a Record Fish

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NOV. 9, 1987 12 AM PT



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CAIRNS, Australia — *Steve Zuckerman, a 46-year-old Pacific Palisades builder and developer, recently traveled to Australia's Great Barrier Reef in search of a world-record black marlin. The world record, set 34 years ago, is 1,560 pounds.*

*Zuckerman, one of the world's best big game fishermen, has set 12 world records for black marlin, blue marlin, swordfish and tuna. The Great Barrier Reef, a system of coral reefs 1,260 miles long off Australia's northeast coast, is the home of the giants.*

*Marlin fishing on the Great Barrier Reef costs about \$1,700 a day, making it*

*perhaps the most expensive sport anywhere. That includes the charter boat and a nightly stay in a nearby mother ship that avoids the long daily runs--15 to 35 miles--from the Queensland coast.*

*Earl Gustkey, Times outdoor writer, and Larry Armstrong, Times photographer, spent five days chronicling Zuckerman's marlin hunt.*

The wake-up lights flicked on in the first-class cabin of Qantas Flight 4, Honolulu to Cairns, Australia. Steve Zuckerman, at a window seat, awoke, yawned and rubbed the stubble of a day-old beard.

He raised his window shade, peered behind the plane and saw a soft, pink dawn. Below, the gray Coral Sea was quickly turning to soft blue. Gray humps, islands, arose from the sea near the Queensland coast. As the 747 began its descent, Zuckerman looked ahead and saw the twinkling lights of Cairns, just as the rising sun began to illuminate green, forested mountains behind the city.

Just before the plane passed over the Australian coast, Zuckerman looked back one more time, down upon the waters of the Great Barrier Reef. He wondered if the black marlin he'd dreamed of most of his life was down there.

When Zuckerman emerged from customs into the airport terminal, he was greeted by a short, smiling Australian named Jack Erskine, an old friend of marlin safaris past.

“Steve, you look like a man who’s been sleeping in his clothes,” he said, grinning and pointing to Zuckerman’s rumpled pants and shirt.

The two men carried Zuckerman’s luggage to the parking lot and filled Erskine’s trunk. Erskine also filled Zuckerman in on fishing news.

“The marlin had been very quiet until two days ago,” he said. “But it’s broken open over the last couple of days--there have been several granders (a thousand-pound fish) caught the last two days. The Esperance Star is at Ribbon No. 5 . . . I told them I’d have you out there by noon.”

“Great,” Zuckerman said. “Let’s go.”

Erskine drove Zuckerman through the quiet streets of Cairns--Aussie pronunciation: Cans--which is to big game fishing what Louisville is to horse racing. Every year, more thousand- pound-plus marlin are caught in Great Barrier Reef waters near here than anywhere else in the world.

Erskine pulled up in front of his salt-water tackle store, where for the next two hours he poured coffee for Zuckerman and brought him up to date on marlin developments. Some old friends stopped by. Zuckerman, a Southern California builder, has fished the Great Barrier Reef often, beginning in 1971, but because of recent Southern California and Hawaii building projects, this was his first visit in three years.

Finally, Erskine drove Zuckerman to a seaplane for a flight to a quiet, protected spot on the Great Barrier Reef, a lee, where a sportfishing boat and its crew awaited him.

As Zuckerman climbed aboard the seaplane at Marlin Marina, the pilot tied his rod

case onto the pontoons. When the 1930s de Havilland Beaver lifted off with a roar, a spectacular 65-minute flight over the reef began.

It was like viewing a marine kaleidoscope, where portions of the reef reached to just below the surface of the water, creating surf line colors of turquoise, deep and pale blue. But jet lag had descended upon Zuckerman and he saw little of it. In a rear seat, he slumped, chin on chest, asleep.

Almost every marlin season on the Great Barrier Reef, generally October through late November, the Ribbon Reef system--about 25 miles off the Queensland coast--produces more big black marlin than any other reef area. The reefs are numbered, 1 through 10, and vary in length, from 4 to 16 miles, and run roughly parallel to the coast.

The pilot circled quiet waters just inside Ribbon Reef No. 5, where three large yachts, mother ships, lay at anchor. The plane touched down, and the pilot taxied to the 56-foot Esperance Star, then tied up to its stern. On board, half a dozen marlin fishermen from Florida were departing and would ride the seaplane back to Cairns.

Tied up to the side of the Esperance Star, was a sportfishing boat belonging to one of the Great Barrier Reef's superstars, Capt. Laurie Woodbridge. His 40-foot Sea Baby II was being readied for Zuckerman's two-week quest for a record marlin, something on the order of 1,800 pounds.

The biggest marlin in the International Game Fish Assn. record book is a 1,560-pound black marlin caught at Cabo Blanco, Peru, by Alfred C. Glassell Jr. of Houston in 1953. That fish is the one seen jumping in the film, "The Old Man and the Sea."

In the International Market Place at Hawaii's Waikiki Beach, the largest marlin ever caught on rod and reel--a blue marlin weighing more than 1,800 pounds--is mounted and on display. It was never considered for world record status, however, since the

rod was handled by more than one fisherman.

Japanese commercial long-line fishermen say they've caught blue marlin in the central Pacific that weighed more than 2,000 pounds.

Woodbridge's two deckhands, David Beaudet and Ross McCubbin, were cleaning up the Sea Baby II for Zuckerman, and they waved greetings as he came aboard the Esperance Star.

As the Florida group's baggage was loaded onto the Beaver, one of the departing fishermen told Zuckerman: "We caught 17 blacks in two weeks, most of them the last three days. You'll catch lots of fish."

Zuckerman stowed his luggage, changed into shorts and T-shirt and grabbed a bottle of sun block. When he climbed aboard Sea Baby II, Woodbridge's twin diesel engines roared to life.

As the sportfishing boat pulled slowly away from the Esperance Star and began its 10-minute run to the nearest marlin-rich channel between the ribbon reefs, Zuckerman and the deckhands prepared to put Zuckerman's tackle through some stress tests.

"The boat looks good, Laurie," Zuckerman said to the skipper.

"Yeah, everything's working well," Woodbridge said. "I put a new transom on it. The old one had 58 bill holes in it. I'd been patching them over the years with glue, but they'd started to leak."

In the fighting chair and in his harness, Zuckerman pulled hard on the 130-pound test Dacron line, to assure himself that all connecting points (knots) were secure enough to tolerate the stress only a thousand-pound fish can generate.

Zuckerman, 46, doesn't look like much of an athlete, yet few have caught more granders--he caught his 23rd and 24th on this trip--than he has. He's been in the International Game Fish Assn. record book 12 times for marlin, swordfish and tuna. He talked about big game tackle.

"I'm no weightlifter, and not much of an athlete," he said. "But with this tackle, I can pick a 250-pound man up off the ground and dangle him in the air by the seat of his pants," he said.

"You fish with your legs on these big marlin. See, the rod butts are curved, so when you stand up on the footboard in the chair, you're generating tremendous power. With this tackle I can manhandle a 700- or 800-pound marlin. But anything over a thousand pounds, well, after that it can get very interesting."

After the short run from the Esperance Star, Woodbridge had the Sea Baby II in the channel, between Ribbon Reefs 5 and 4.

"The idea is that on a rising tide--about three hours from now--the water flows through these reef channels toward the coast, and the bait fish get thick in here," he said. "And that brings in the marlin."

Great Barrier Reef marlin fishing isn't the antiseptic brand of billfishing American fishermen experience off the Southern California coast or at Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. No shiny, clean plastic lures here. Instead, skippers troll dead, gutted baits, and the more they stink, they say, the better the black marlin like them.

With big sewing needles, deckhands spend almost half their time sewing waxed twine bridles and size 16 hooks--about the size of your hand--onto the heads of 1 1/2- to 3-foot-long scad and kawakawa, a tuna that Aussies call a bonito, although it's no relation to the bonito found off Southern California.

The deckhands also break the backs of the bait fish, to give them a more lifelike swimming action when trolled, in order to be more attractive to a grander, which in turn might possibly break a fisherman's back.

Preparing a bait for black marlin fishing is an exacting skill and baits are replaced countless times, whenever Woodbridge, who spends all day topside at the wheel, decides a bait isn't "swimming" just right.

The "short" bait is always the kawakawa or sometimes a big mackerel or rainbow runner, generally a 10-to-14-pound fish trolled on the left side, closest to the boat. The smaller scad is always on the right, and farthest from the boat, and is called the long bait.

Both trolling lines are run through 30-foot-long outrigger poles, high off the water, to keep the heads of the baits up, and as far apart as possible.

The sound of the line being jerked off an outrigger clip, a loud snap, is like a starting gun for a 100-meter race. Everyone shouts at once, and bodies fly through the air, to battle stations.

The baits were out, and it was hot--about 90 degrees. Zuckerman all but doused himself with sun block, in the event he would wind up in the unshaded fighting chair for an hour or so. There was a light chop on the blue water in the channel, and surf broke over both ribbon reefs.

Suddenly, the Sea Baby II dragged its two baits through an area where an intense odor of rotted fish filled the air.

"OK, we might have a fish (marlin) here," Woodbridge shouted down to the deckhands, Beaudet and McCubbin.

“That smell is from a lot of dead scad,” he explained. “Scad smell bad even when they’re freshly killed, and it could be that a marlin has killed a bunch of them right here under us,” he said, steering the boat into a big circle pattern where the smell was. “It’s either that or some tiger sharks are chewing on something.”

On his third loop around the circle, at 12:33 p.m., the scad line snapped off the outrigger pole and Zuckerman all but leaped to the chair.

“Right ‘riggah!” Woodbridge shouted. That’s Aussie for “right ‘rigger!”

The scad had disappeared, in a splash. As Beudet handed the rod to Zuckerman and secured it to the chair with two clips attached to a half-inch steel cable, the marlin jumped--and Woodbridge sneered.

Woodbridge sneers at any marlin under a grand. And to him, anything under 500 pounds is a “rat.”

“It’s a rat,” he shouted, derisively. “Two (hundred), at the most.”

The little marlin came off the hook anyway, and a new scad was quickly plucked out of the bait box and sent out.

12:42 p.m.: “Right ‘riggah!

“Another rat. Maybe three,” Woodbridge growled.

This fish, too, shook itself free of the hook.

Zuckerman looked up at Woodbridge and, grinning, said: “What is this, an all-day rat patrol? Can’t you find any big stuff?”



12:54 p.m.: “Right ‘riggah!” Woodbridge jammed the throttle ahead full for a few seconds, to set the hook, and a much bigger marlin jumped, about 80 yards behind the boat. But this one was foul-hooked, on the shoulder, and it too was gone soon.

3:54 p.m.: “Right ‘riggah!”

What would be the largest fish of the day, 600 to 700 pounds, according to Woodbridge--who, Zuckerman claims, always estimates 100 to 300 pounds shy of true weight, depending on his mood--leaped free of the water twice, sending off wide sprays of water as it shook its head, trying to expel the hook. It, too, was gone in an instant, leaving slack line.

Later, over rounds of beer at the mother ship, Zuckerman and Woodbridge had a 30-minute discussion on the relative merits of the two dominant reels manufactured for big game fishing, Penn Internationals and Fin-Nors. Top-of-the line big game reels can cost up to \$2,000. With some, you can even shift gears.

Both Zuckerman and Woodbridge agreed it was remarkable that an immense, powerful creature like a 1,000-pound black marlin, a product of millions of years of evolution, could take on a high-quality, machine-tooled fishing reel made of high-grade steel and, through pressure applied by its huge tail, reduce it to a sizzling hot, smoking pile of wrecked seals and gears.

Woodbridge said: “One time a client of mine had a big fish on and I smelled smoke. I thought I had an engine fire. I ran down to the deck with a fire extinguisher--and it was the guy’s reel, burning up.”

More beer. More stories.

Beudet and McCubbin talked about fear. Grabbing a wire leader and trying to release a thrashing, half-ton fish with a formidable bill that a marlin uses as a saber,

is not a walk in the park.

Since most marlin caught at the reef are released, deckhands properly fear getting whacked by a big marlin's bill. Even dreaming about it makes them wake up screaming.

"These are very dangerous animals," Woodbridge said. "One of the best-known deckies on the reef is a guy named Jim Byrnes, and that's because he got completely run through by a bill a few years back. The fish was big and it was too hot--he never should have tried to handle it. The fish got him completely through the right side of his chest, but it didn't kill him."

Beudet added that Byrnes is a superstar in Cairns pubs, where after a few beers Beudet will happily remove his shirt and show off his two bill scars, front and back.

"A friend of mine in Kona (Hawaii) was grabbing the wire on a big blue marlin one time, but the fish came out of the water and jumped across the transom. Its pectoral fin nicked him as it went by--and took out his eye," Beudet said.

Zuckerman said: "Sometimes I wonder what a 2,000-pound marlin could do, if anyone ever catches one. From the problems I've seen just with granders, a 2,000-pound marlin could tear apart a transom. It could sink you.

"On Laurie's boat several years ago, I had a 1,200-pounder on and it ran its bill right through the hull, below the water line.

"We started taking on a significant amount of water, until Laurie cut a mop handle in half, filed it into a dowel, and plugged it."

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