

Lakes Region

BOATING

They caught the fish, but the \$3.5 million prize got away

By BRANDON SNEED
THE NEW YORK TIMES

If you want to hear about the day the guys aboard the fishing boat Sensation landed a giant marlin and danced to Tina Turner because they were sure they had won \$3.5 million, only to find out they had not, first you need to know about Ashley Bleau and the Big Rock Blue Marlin tournament in Morehead City, North Carolina.

Bleau, 45, is a self-described “Down East redneck” for whom business attire is board shorts and bare feet. Like a lot of people on North Carolina’s Crystal Coast, he grew up hoping he would own a boat someday, and last year he bought a beaut: Sensation, a 52-foot custom fishing boat with a cabin for lounging and a downstairs bunk room. He has used the boat to build his charter company, Sensation Sport Fishing. In June, he entered it in the Big Rock

Tournament, joining 270 other vessels that set out to sea over six days in hopes of winning millions in prize money and having their achievement engraved in the Big Rock fountain at the Morehead City docks.

Since 1957, the Big Rock tournament, run by a nonprofit charity, has attracted sport fishermen from all over, including Michael Jordan, who competes on his fishing yacht Catch-23.

“If you grow up around here and care about fishing at all, Big Rock is your Super Bowl,” Bleau said.

Bleau’s captain was Greg McCoy, 56, who left his previous job partly because the boat he captained was owned by the woman he was divorcing. McCoy’s only dedicated crew member was Darrin Cox, a 21-year-old in a camo hat whom nobody calls Darrin. He goes by Scooter.

Bleau found fishermen willing to pay

for 24 shares in the boat at \$3,013 a share, with different anglers assigned to different days.

The shareholders on Sensation agreed that the people on board for any prize catches would divide 70% of the payout among themselves. Bleau, McCoy and Scooter would take 10% each.

The first boat to bring in a marlin weighing more than 500 pounds would win the Fabulous Fisherman prize, worth \$739,500. The prize for catching the biggest marlin overall was \$2,769,400. The potential haul, then, was \$3.5 million if you won both prizes.

The Sensation planned to leave Morehead City at 5 each morning of the tournament and look for a place to drop its lines by the 9 a.m. starting time. Under the rules, the fishermen would have until 3 p.m. each day to hook a fish, and they could fight it as long as it took to reel it in. Boats

had to radio in to tournament officials when they had a fish on the line. They also had to provide video of their battles with fish later to confirm the catch was legitimate and there was no cheating. Winners had to take polygraph tests.

On the first day of the Big Rock, the swells were 8 to 10 feet high, and four of the nine people aboard Sensation spent most of the morning vomiting. Jordan’s Catch-23 did not even go out.

Three boats managed to land blue marlin that day, though only one weighed more than the minimum 400 pounds. On Day 3, Sea Wolf brought in a 408.1-pounder and Predator a 459-pounder. On Day 5, two more big marlin came in, including one from the boat Sushi at 484.5 pounds.

Sensation had one day left — Saturday, June 17 — to catch a prizewinning fish.

see **PRIZE** page 29



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Winnisquam Watershed Network to hold annual meeting July 22

BELMONT — The Winnisquam Watershed Network will hold its annual meeting Saturday, July 22, at 10 a.m., at the Leslie Roberts Town Beach. Andrea LaMoreaux, president of New Hampshire Lakes, will serve as guest speaker. Rain date is Sunday, July 23.

All are welcome to attend and learn about what's being done to protect Lake Winnisquam and what homeowners can do on their own properties to help keep the lake clean.

Participants can also meet and socialize with others on the lake, share concerns and ideas and purchase Winnisquam-related apparel, artwork and holiday tree ornaments.

The WWN is a nonprofit, mostly volunteer-run lake association whose mission is to preserve and protect Lake Winnisquam. It works with state and federal agencies, the seven municipalities in the watershed, other environmental organizations and area residents to coordinate projects and advance the mission.

The organization also helps monitor eagle and loon populations on the lake.

In partnership with NH Lakes, the network coordinates and funds Lake Hosts at the Laconia boat ramp to educate the boating public about the damage aquatic invasive species have to the health and well-being of the lake and to inspect the boats and trailers for invasive plants and animals.

On busy weekends, they inspect over 300 boats and trailers. WWN also hires contractors to remove invasive milfoil from the lake and lines up funding for that program and coordinates a team of volunteer weed watchers to monitor the lake for invasive species.

During the summer months, the network manages the sampling of the lake waters for the NH DES and conducts water quality sampling of three deep spots and two near-shore locations in the lake. Tributary monitoring of nine streams that feed Lake Winnisquam is also conducted.

View water quality data at winnisquamwatershed.org.

Last year, the WWN completed a watershed management plan for the Winnisquam watershed and recently secured a \$125,000 federal grant to conduct remediation at three locations in the watershed that contribute sediment washoff into the lake. Sediment washoff has been identified as the primary source of phosphorus to the lake.

Phosphorus is a nutrient that fuels algae growth and can lead to cyanobacteria blooms. These toxic blooms are on the increase statewide and can make people very sick and be deadly to pets so it is important to limit the phosphorus getting into the lake.

To get involved with the network, email info@winnisquamwatershed.org.

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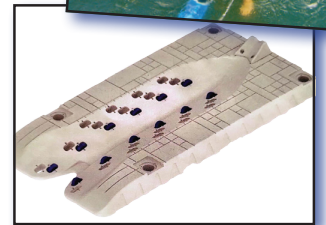
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PRIZE from page 26

As the boat headed out to sea that morning, Scooter, not normally one for bold statements, made a prophecy: "At 2:13 p.m., we're going to hook a marlin, and it's going to win."

The morning passed quietly. McCoy searched for "rips," locations where warm and cold water met. They can create lines of sea grass and trash where baitfish like to hide. That's where fish would be, he thought.

Sensation dropped the lines and trolled. At the end of one particular line was a Black Bart Super Plunger with a blue and silver head and streaks of red and purple.

Scooter's 2:13 p.m. came and went. Fish do not wear watches.

But two minutes later, the line with the Black Bart exploded off the reel. "A hit like you wouldn't believe," McCoy said later. Line raced from the rod with a scream-

ing whine. Something was on the line, and it was big.

After more than an hour of battle, the fish made one final dive, going down to 1,000 feet, trying to get away. Then the line went heavy and stopped moving. McCoy, who has caught about 15 blue marlin in his life, said the marlin probably had a heart attack and died. (Daniel Pauly, a marine biologist at the University of British Columbia, confirmed in an interview that a fish can die from overexertion during a fight.) Their task now was to haul the fish up without breaking the line. Hour after hour they winched it up.

Once they boated it, Bleau said, they knew they had won. The fish was a blue-black monster, its mouth frozen open in surprise.

McCoy set off for home, going 24 knots to cover the 55 miles back to shore. He cranked up Tina Turner and the crew danced and drank and took pictures with the fish. Bleau called his daughter. Scooter imagined the boat he would buy with his \$350,000 cut. McCoy told him he would introduce him to a financial planner so he could

See next page

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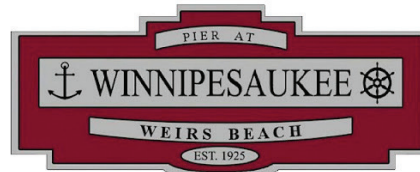
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from preceding page

make the right investments.

They pulled into the docks around 11:15 p.m. Word had spread about their big catch, and people packing the waterfront restaurants and bars cheered them as they motored into Morehead City. A huge crowd packed Big Rock Landing.

The tournament's weighmaster, Randy Gregory, who is a marine biologist, boarded the boat and inspected the fish. He quickly recognized a problem. The marlin had a bite on its tail, apparently from a shark, and was a missing chunk of flesh on its anal fin.

Under the rules, any fish that was mutilated during the battle would be disqualified. When a fish is hurt, the angler has an unfair advantage.

That night, tournament officials brought in additional biologists and experts to examine the fish. Their conclusion: It had indeed been bitten by a shark or some other predator during the time it was hooked on the line.

The next morning, they announced that Sensation's catch was disqualified.

Bleau has protested the decision and retained legal counsel. Neither he nor Ivey would discuss any possible litigation. Bleau's argument is that previous Big Rock marlin have come in with bites and still been counted as qualified results. Some people point to the 2019 winner, a 914-pound marlin caught by the fishing boat Top Dog, as an example. But Ivey said that fish was mutilated only after the fight was over, when the fisherman were hauling it into the boat.



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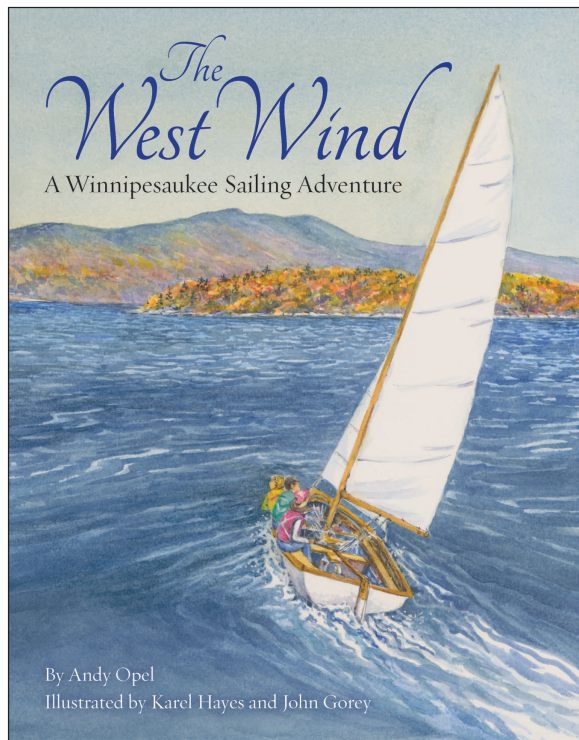
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"The West Wind: A Winnepesaukee Sailing Adventure," by Andy Opel. (Courtesy photo)

New book 'The West Wind' takes inspiration from Winnepesaukee

"The West Wind: A Winnepesaukee Sailing Adventure" is the fifth book in the Winnepesaukee Adventures series by Andy Opel, where Jack, Franny, and J.J. learn how to sail by going to sailing school. The new skills they learn come in handy when they are out sailing on a blustery day and they get the chance to return a favor to an old friend.

This book was inspired by Opel's experience having his children attend the Lake Winnepesaukee Sailing Association in Smith Cove on Lake Winnepesaukee. Both Opel's children attended the school for many years and eventually went on to work as sailing instructors.

When Opel's first book, "The Witches: A Winnepesaukee Adventure" came out in 2011, LWSA founding member Al Posnack said, "You should write a book about the sailing school." This seemed unlikely to Andy at the time, but 12 years later, Al's suggestion has come to be a reality.

With the same amazing watercolor artwork from Karel Hayes and line drawings from her son John Gorey, "The West Wind" continues the series with a subtle reminder about the power of sustainable boating and renewable energy.

Andy Opel, Ph.D., is a professor in the School of Communication at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida, where he teaches documentary film and immersive media production and environmental communication. He is a writer, filmmaker, musician and artist who has worked in a wide range of mediums, from giant puppets to gypsy jazz (andyopel.net).

Andy grew up spending summers on Lake Winnepesaukee and his grandmother, Alice Rainie, had a big influence on his time at the lake, inspiring the Grammy character that plays a key role in all the books.

Build a boat at New Hampshire Boat Museum and sail in it

WOLFEBORO — People interested in working for an adventure this summer can sign up for New Hampshire Boat Museum's Youth & Family Boat Building program. This opportunity to build the actual boat in which people will row, paddle or sail will launch Monday, July 24 to Wednesday, Aug. 2.

"We provide all the guidance and materials you need to build a craft that will enable you to explore the waterways of New Hampshire," said NHBM Executive Director Martha Cummings. "It's an incredible experience, and many of our volunteers are folks who took the class and loved it so much they want to help new participants."

During the program, participants take kits comprised of flat pieces of wood through construction, fiberglassing and finishing/painting. The launch into the lake



Those interested in building a boat and taking it out for a sail afterward can take part in the New Hampshire Boat Museum's Youth & Family Boat Building program, which begins July 24. (Courtesy photo)

is the final step in the process.

Boat building scholarships for 2023 are made possible by Wolfeboro Lions Club, New England Antique and Classic Boat

Society, Captain Raymond Thombs and Theodore Calpery Jr. Memorial Fund, New England Lyman Group, Tom and Rose McNamara, Edmund and Sara Dins-

more, and Dr. Jim Forbes Scholarship Fund.

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