

Sport [Fishing](#)

## They caught the fish, but the \$5.2 million prize got away

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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 \$US3.5 million (\$5.2 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 15-metre 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.



From left, Sensation boat owner Ashley Bleau and captain Greg McCoy stand on the dock in Morehead City, North Carolina, on June 30, 2023. MADELINE GRAY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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 \$US3013 (\$4500) a share, with different anglers assigned to different days.



The Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament store in Morehead City, North Carolina, on June 30, 2023. The tournament is a major civic event in Morehead City. MADELINE GRAY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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

The first boat to bring in a marlin weighing more than 500 pounds would win the Fabulous Fisherman prize, worth \$US739,500 (\$1.1 million). The prize for catching the biggest marlin overall was \$US2,769,400 (\$4.14 million). The potential haul, then, was \$US3.5 million (\$5.24 million) if you won both prizes.

The Sensation planned to leave Morehead City at 5am each morning of the tournament and look for a place to drop its lines by the 9am starting time. Under the rules, the fishermen would have until 3pm 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.



Darrin Cox, known as Scooter, unloading fish from the Sensation. On the last day of the tournament, he had a hunch Sensation would catch a marlin. MADELINE GRAY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Many of the boats heading out into the Atlantic had big, dedicated crews and fancy sonar technology that could find a fish in the water below and lock onto it and follow it around.

Bleau's boat had none of those things. To find marlin, McCoy relied on instincts and knowledge honed over 20 years at sea. Earlier this year, he and Scooter fought a 600-pound-plus bluefin tuna for 11 hours. They got it right up to the boat, but then the line snapped and the fish was gone. "Broke my heart," Scooter said.

On the first day of the Big Rock, the swells were 2.5 to 3 metres 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 (181 kilograms). On Day 3, Sea Wolf brought in a 408.1-pounder (185 kilograms) and Predator a 459-pounder (208 kilograms). On Day 5, two more big marlin came in, including one from the boat Sushi at 484.5 pounds (219 kilograms).

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

As the boat headed out to sea that morning, Scooter, not normally one for bold statements, made a prophecy: "At 2.13pm, 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 2.13pm 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 screaming whine. Something was on the line, and it was big.

Bleau got it all on video. Scooter brought the rod to the shareholder who was then taking his turn in the chair — Bailey Gore, who owns a basement waterproofing company in Boone, North Carolina. Bare-chested and wearing sunglasses, Gore braced himself in a low squat to let his legs and back do the work.

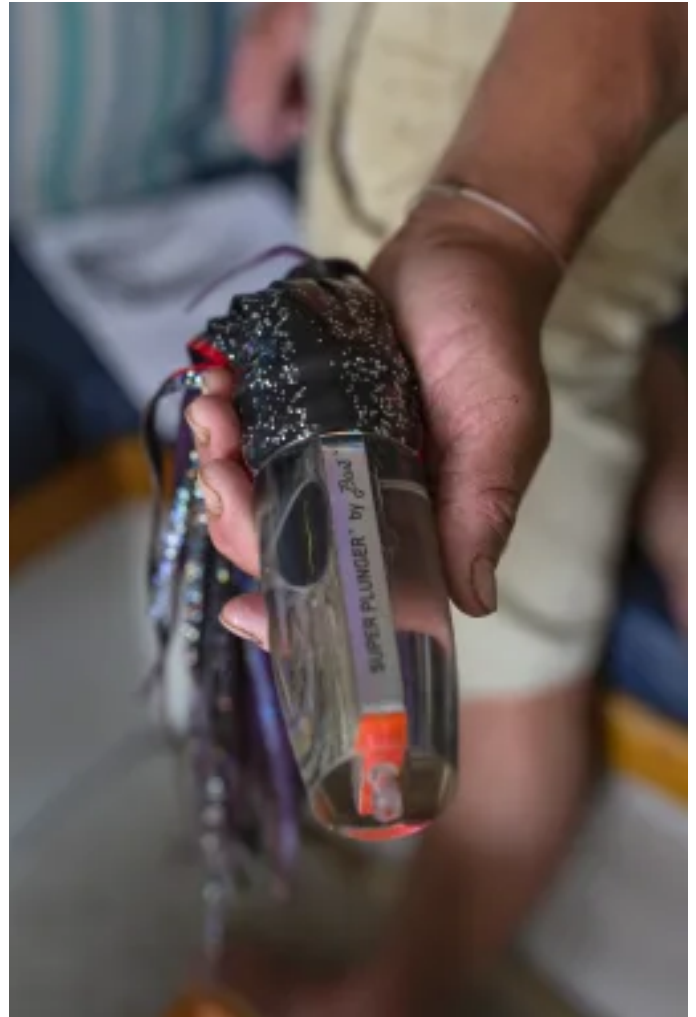
When the marlin jumped, they knew they had a good one. "If we can catch this fish," McCoy recalled saying, "we'll win the Big Rock."

After more than an hour of battle, the fish made one final dive, going down to 300 metres, 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 88 kilometres 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 \$US350,000 (\$523,000) cut. McCoy told him he would introduce him to a financial planner so he could make the right investments.

They pulled into the docks around 11.15pm. 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 "Super Plunger" marlin plug that was used to hook the big fish. MADELINE GRAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The tournament's weighmaster, Randy Gregory, who is a marine biologist, boarded the boat and inspected the fish. He quickly recognised 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.

Ideally, "when you fight and land this fish, you have fought 100 per cent of the fish," the Big Rock president, Emery Ivey, said in a Facebook video after the tournament. The guys on Sensation had fought 100 per cent of this marlin, minus a couple of chunks.

McCoy said that he had noticed "blemishes" on the fish, but that he had seen much worse in his career. "It never went through my mind that it would be disqualified," he said. "That might be me not reading the rules properly, but I've read them a hundred times."



The Sensation crew with their 600-plus-pound marlin and their dreams still intact. COURTESY GREG MCCOY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sensation's win was in doubt. But out of respect for the crew's efforts, Ivey said, officials chose to announce the weight: 619.4 pounds (280 kilograms). It was the first fish greater than 500 pounds (226 kilograms), and the largest overall by 135 pounds (61 kilograms). The crowd hooted in celebration, but tournament officials said they needed to deliberate further and sent everyone home.

That night, they 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.

"Nobody was pulling for those guys harder than we were on the Big Rock board," Ivey said in an interview. "You know, they're a hometown boat. Everybody knows who they are. But the rules are rules, and to keep up the integrity of the tournament, we have to enforce the rules as they're written in our rule book."

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 (414 kilogram) 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.

Bleau has plenty of support in Morehead City. His daughter made t-shirts identifying Sensation as the Big Rock People's Champion and sold more than 1000 of them.

It turns out that losing \$US3.5 million because of a poorly timed shark bite is the sort of thing that makes fishermen examine their real principles.

"I've never been about the money," McCoy said. "I wanted my name on that Big Rock fountain. I have ever since I started fishing down here. And I thought I'd done it."

The other day, Scooter was talking to a friend on another boat, saying he felt as if he had won the tournament.

"But you all didn't win," another guy on the boat said. He had been part of the crew on Sushi that caught the winning marlin.

Scooter shrugged and said, "We caught a bigger fish."

**This article originally appeared in [The New York Times](#).**

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