

They Landed a Majestic Marlin. Almost All of It, Anyway.

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Body

The guys aboard Sensation celebrated like lottery winners when they boated a monster marlin in the last hours of the fishing tournament. The party ended when they got back to shore.

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 hadn't, first you need to know about Ashley Bleau and the Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament in Morehead City, N.C.

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 forever 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 per share, with different guys assigned to different days.

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

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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.

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 on the sea. Earlier this year, he and Scooter fought a 600-plus-pound bluefin tuna for 11 hours. They got it right up to the boat, 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 eight to 10 feet high, and four of the nine people aboard Sensation spent most of the morning vomiting. Jordan's Catch-23 didn't even go out.

Three boats managed to land blue marlins 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 marlins 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.

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 don't 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. 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 1,000 feet, trying to get away. Then the line went heavy and stopped moving. McCoy, who has caught about 15 blue marlins 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 -- probably a white 28-foot center-console Contender, "something cool and fast," he said. McCoy told him he would introduce him to a financial planner so he could make the right investments.

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They pulled into the docks in darkness 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.

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

McCoy said he had noticed "blemishes" on the fish, but said 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."

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. It was the first fish over 500 pounds, and the largest overall by 135 pounds. 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 officially protested the decision and retained legal counsel. Neither he nor Ivey would discuss any possible litigation. Bleau's argument is that previous Big Rock marlins 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.

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 1,000 of them.

It turns out that losing \$3.5 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 like he had won the tournament.

"But y'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."

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Graphic

PHOTOS: Ashley Bleau, top left, the owner of the Sensation fishing boat, with its captain, Greg McCoy. The boat's crew, including Darrin Cox, above right, who is known as Scooter, joined 270 other vessels for the Big Rock Blue Marlin tournament. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY MADELINE GRAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

The crew, using a Black Bart Super Plunger, landed a marlin that weighed a tournamentbest 619.4 pounds and would have brought them \$3.5 million in prizes. But there was a twist. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY MADELINE GRAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

GREG McCOY) This article appeared in print on page D2.

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