



THE FISHIN' INSIDER

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Zihuatanejo Mexico- When the International Game Fish Association teamed with ROLEX to launch a series of offshore tournaments they set their sights high. What they now have is a series of qualifying tournaments that span the globe, 98 tournaments, 33 countries and 19 states for the year 2003. All the teams that enter are shootin' for one thing, a seat at the table for the 5th ROLEX/IGFA Championship in Cabo San Lucas next May. In order to get an invitation to the big circus, a team must win a qualifying tournament and then RSVP \$4800 bucks American to the IGFA. The dinero covers all the social events, which are prodigious, and four days of fishing for billfish. The qualifying tournaments range in size from the humongous White Marlin Open in Ocean City, Maryland to the small and intimate Fintastic Total Tag&Release fished last November in Zwhat which is a charter member of the qualifying series.

The Fintastic is the brainchild of one Paul Philips, a native of East Texas, late of the Louisiana Fish and Game Department as a field biologist and an ex-scourge of the Gulf Coast offshore tour of the late 80's and early 90's. He now splits his time between Zwhat and Westbank, British Columbia where he damn near got burned out in the fires of last summer.

Anyhow, I get an e-mail from Paul inquiring whether I'd be interested in being an observer on a boat in the Fintastic which is a semi-requirement for the series. Since it was October and I was seriously burned out on the lifestyle of the Sandspit, I immediately went about making the arrangements to attend.

Get to Zwhat and walk into Rick's Bar for the pre-tournament festivities and the first folks I run across are Captain Santiago Valdovinos and his brother Adan of the panga Gitana. I'd fished with these guys before, hell I'd been an observer on the boat during another tournament when his son Diego caught his first billfish and we pitched in the harbor, but that's another story. Santiago introduces me to his charter, Dr. John



Wilkinson from Marquette, Michigan fishing his first billfish tournament. Dr. John and I had met the previous evening at Rick's when I was scoping the place out.

In walks Paul and Ed Kunze with a box of T-shirts and other mementos. He walks up to Dr. John and Santiago and points at me and asks "Alright if I stick him on yall's boat?" Santiago is noncommittal and Dr. John waits for him to make a move since he is El Capitan.

He's rubbin' his chin and I know where this is leadin' so I look over at him and say, "Alright sport how much cervesa do ya want this time?" He says two cases of Corona for now and before he can change his mind I hand him a 500-peso note and ask him to do the provisioning. He chuckles and says no problema.

Down at the Municipal Pier the next morning everybody looks like hell; it was a damn good party. On the run out which ain't far, Paul and I go over the drill since he's the only angler and I'm ballast and there are four sizable men on this narrow beamed panga. It's very important to get the dance steps down lest we swamp the boat. The first fish eats around ten in the morning. It's a sail around 80 pounds. Paul does good crankin' her in, Adan grabs the bill and keeps the fish from joinin' us in the boat, we get a tag in her and it's high

fives all around. And so it goes with the next fish and the next until we run across a pod of pilot whales that commence to chow down on the back halves of the pilchards we're using for bait. Then five minutes before lines out a good fish hits, about 140 pounds at least but she's thrown up her stomach. We try to revive her at the side of the boat but she won't suck her stomach back in. At that point Santiago does something I've never seen before. I grab her bill and he grabs her tail, I let loose and he hauls her two thirds out of the water and with a grunt forces her down into the deep. Took three times but she finally sucked in her stomach and slowly swam off. When we hit the pier Team Gitana is tied for first.

To be continued...

We welcome your fishin' photos. Drop them by 2600 Padre Boulevard on the Island, or mail them to I.B. Hooked, c/o Coastal Current Weekly, P.O.Box 2429, South Padre Island, Texas 78597. Be sure to include the name of the angler, weight and type of fish, where caught, and name of boat if applicable. Photos with SASE will be returned.