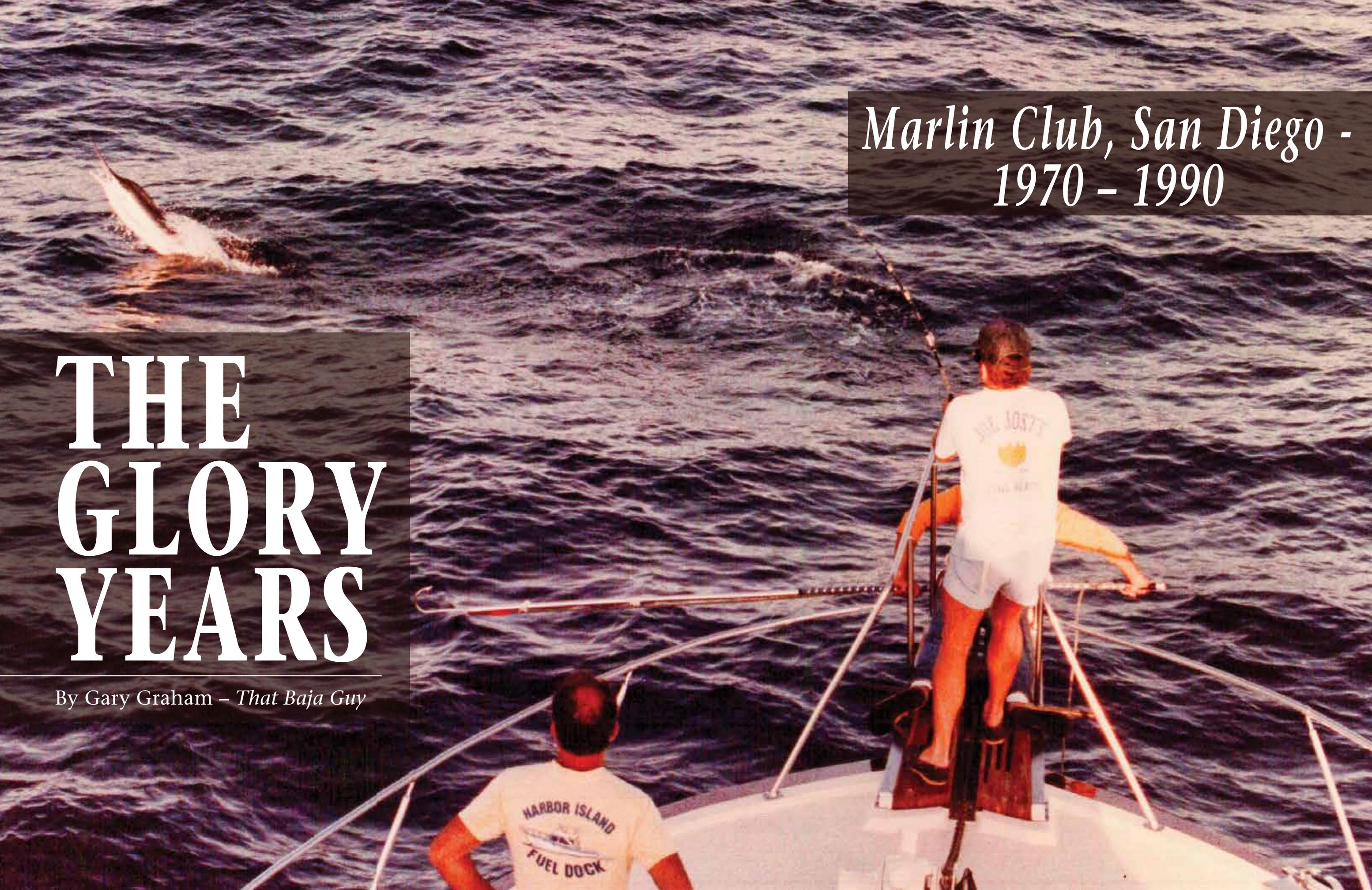


*Marlin Club, San Diego -
1970 - 1990*

THE GLORY YEARS

By Gary Graham - *That Baja Guy*





Gary Graham San Diego Marlin Club members and their boats have influenced offshore sportfishing, clubs and tournaments, both locally and down the West Coast of Baja, since the '70s. The club changed the lives of some of the anglers as well, as they broke records and made names for themselves as pioneers in sportfishing history – often making improvements to the sport.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, the Marlin Club (as it is recognized) enjoyed the largest membership participation in its 89-year history. Its International Light Tackle Tournament club-sponsored billfish tournament began in 1958, setting the bar for a variety of similar club tournaments throughout Southern California.

Long before the '70s, the Marlin Club in San Diego, located on Shelter Island, had established itself as a hangout for big-game offshore anglers and crews to gather and exchange information during the fishing season, generally July into November. But it was during the resurgence of the economy in San Diego during the '70s and '80s that new boat owners, as well as those who had owned their boats for years, had a renewed interest in fishing.

In 1971, the Los Angeles Billfish Club held its initial "Avalon Tournament," following modified rules of the Marlin Club ILTT with a three-day event using 30-pound line, plus the addition of a broadbill category. And it was the first club on the West Coast to allow women to fish as members of mixed teams – without a ladies category – as well as introducing a "release" category into tournament fishing, along with the 12-pound category. With the backdrop of the Avalon Harbor, the event was an instant success and enjoyed an 18-year run before the LABC ultimately discontinued it due to a lack of volunteers.

San Diego Marlin Club members and their boats became an essential part of the growing SoCal fleet. As they gathered a team of anglers to compete not only with the Marlin Club membership but with the entire Southern California offshore angling community, professional and skilled anglers rubbed shoulders with the inexperienced.

At that time, the principal method of communication was the VHF radio or the costly Marine Operator; cell service was just a line item on some developer's wish list. And many other present-day tools – GPS, internet navigation and sea temp charts, sophisticated sonar depth equipment and many more items – weren't developed until the 1980s, '90s and later. The best way to get the latest catch info was to listen to the VHF radio throughout the day or swing by the Marlin Club to check on what happened on the water.

For newcomers, hardcore profes-

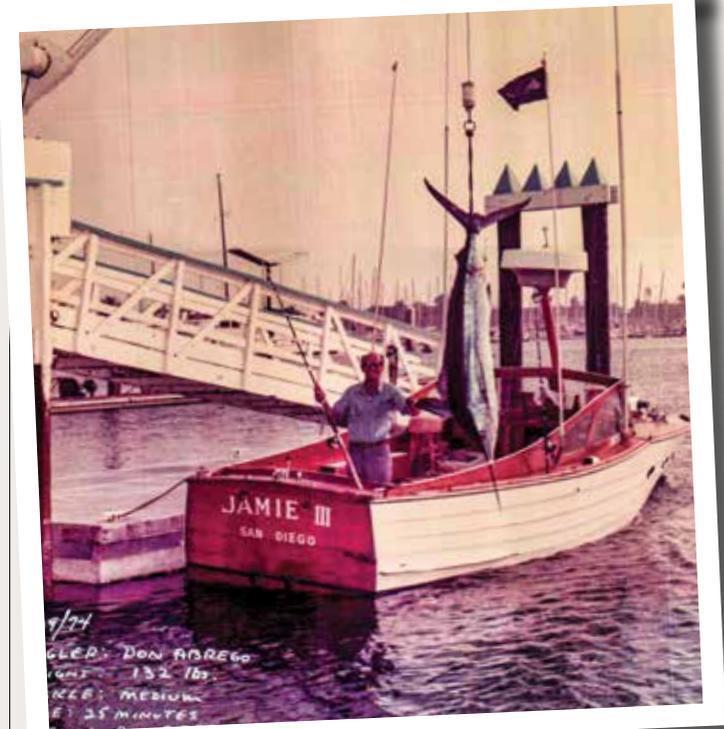
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sional captains and crews, or anglers in-between, stopping by the club provided an ideal way to secure intel about the where, when, how, lure color, bait availability, sea temps and anything else that might improve one's chances on their next fishing trip. It also helped to talk directly to the anglers, captains and crews bringing the fish to the scale. Nick Pattengill, the Marlin Club photographer, was always a good source of information. A fisherman himself, he interacted with the captains and crews, quizzing them on how and where they caught their fish and other details. Lois Ibey was the club secretary for several decades and could be counted on to run the club like clockwork. The club was her life. She would open at 1 p.m. sharp and remain open until the last fish was brought to the scale at 10 p.m., sometimes later. The tag and release of billfish was not popular then and most of the Southern California club's annual awards were based on

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weight. Over the next two decades, the cast of characters and the platforms they fished from changed continually. Members mingled with what would become some of the most legendary crews that considered San Diego their home port. They fished on tricked-out sport fishers ranging from 20 to 90 feet, built by some of the most iconic boat builders on the planet, and they were joined by family operations that shared their passion for big-game sport fishing.

There were also a growing number of small boaters who delighted in the challenge of being captain, crew and angler, fueled by their desire to join an elite, loose-knit club whose only membership requirement was to catch a striped marlin solo. That would earn them a commemorative silver dollar. This particular dollar always had to be on one's person, and if found without the coin, the member was required to foot the bar tab.

Some of the members who had gained entry into the club were Skelly Wilbur, "6 Pak," who fished his boat alone, bringing in many marlin unassisted. He was a typical "old man of the sea." Then there was Bill George, "Misty Bill," one of the kindest men in the fleet, who had a smile and cheerful word for everyone. Bob Newton, "Bob 'n Round," often fished with his son R.C., an International Game Fish Association World Record holder with his 146-pound Big Eye Tuna on 20-pound test line, a record that still stands. Bob Reid, "Sea Sprout," designed a line of popular marlin lures, Scooter Squids; and Don Abrego, "Ja-



mie III," owner of the Presidio Golf Course in Old Town, who earlier in his career as a professional golfer competed on the PGA Tour and remained in the organization as a club professional. Gary Graham, "Water Closet," a lifetime member, Marlin Club President, and highly competitive angler, won many tournaments before moving south to become "That Baja Guy."

Rosie Newton, Point Loma resident and Marlin Club member, along with her husband Bob joined the club in the '40s, and as tackle improved – becoming lighter and much easier to manage – she and other women found it to be more exciting and challenging. She had fond memories of her and Bob's fishing of local waters together.

She was most proud of hers and other women's catches on light tackle. They played a huge part in the evolution of light tackle angling in San Diego. She received many club awards as well as setting some world records, popularizing the swing to light tackle. Members never knew what to expect or who they might meet when they happened to stop by the club. It might be Dr. Marty Morris, "Ken Dan,"



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a prominent San Diego pediatrician and member of the Los Angeles Billfish Club, expounding on the necessity of tagging and releasing billfish – a battle that he finally won in the early '80s. He probably had one of the most well-documented West Coast sportfishing websites: www.ken-dan.com.

Another frequent visitor to the Marlin Club was Bruce Kessler, "Zopilote," previous Formula race car driver at Le Mans who directed movies and television series including "Knight Rider," "The Monkees," "B.J. and the Bear" and many others. He had a passion for big-game sport fishing. One season, he and his crew would leave early in the morning and return before noon with a marlin so they could have lunch at the Brigantine prior to weighing in their fish at 1 p.m. when the Marlin Club opened. That earned him the title of "Captain One a Day" in the early '80s. That stuck!

Capt. Gene Grimes was at the club regularly – he ran the Elliott sportfisher

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Legend, owned by the Birtchers of Birtcher Development LLC, a fifth generational family industrial real estate company. Grimes' billfishing skills were legendary, as was his passion for swordfish.

All of these well-known captains never failed to answer questions and supply tips for the newer anglers they met at the club or on the radio. An example was when I was fishing alone on a 23-foot Blackman center console skiff and hooked my first swordfish on 50-pound test line. After about six hours, Grimes, who I had never met, called on the VHF radio and walked me through the best way to handle the swordy. The fish weighed 230 pounds and took 13 hours, but that's another story. I would not have gotten my fish without the help of Grimes and others, and Gene and I became close friends from that day forward.

"In the '70s, marlin fishing was be-

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coming king of the private boaters on the West Coast," observed Captain Mike "Beak" Hurt, who is often considered one of the gurus of modern sport fishing in Southern California.

The Mission Bay Marlin Club established the Annual "Mission Bay Marlin Club Charity Heart Tournament" benefiting the American Heart Association in 1975 and has held it every September for the past 45 years. The Mission Bay Marlin Club was established in 1972 and is one of the older existing saltwater fishing clubs in San Diego.

National Coalition for Marine Conservation, Pacific Region, also started the North-South Tournament in 1981, pitting teams from San



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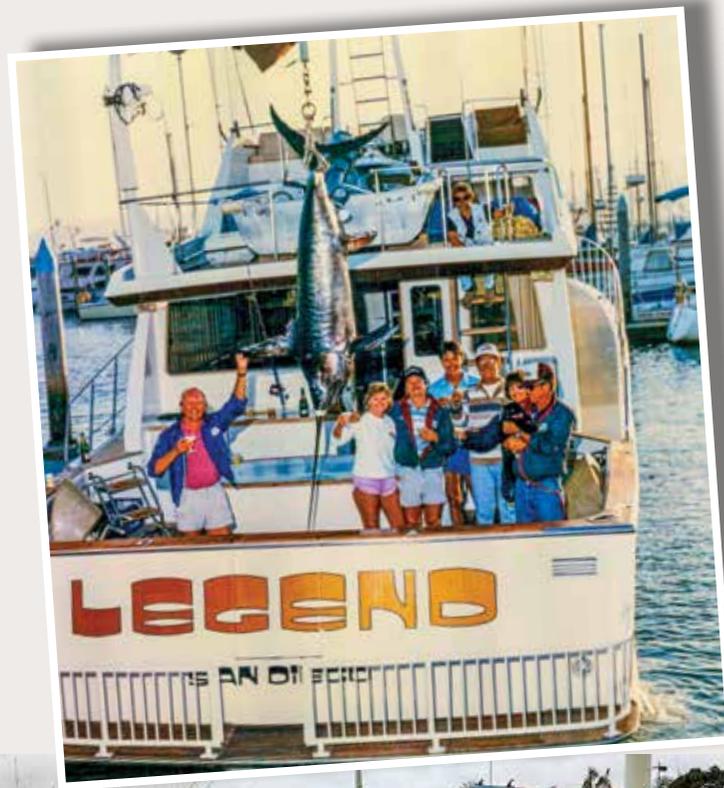
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Diego against teams from the Greater Los Angeles area to raise money for preventing gillnets and other West Coast conservation issues. Owners were asked to donate their boats for the one-day event, which were then auctioned off at a gala banquet held in Newport. The event was popular and thrived until being discontinued in the early '90s, according to Carl Nettleton, former executive director of the National Coalition for Marine Conservation, Pacific Region. He added that it was a fun period, and it raised a tremendous sum of money for California Fisheries Conservation.

While the formats, species and rules varied from club to club, they all carved their niche in popularity. Most clubs encouraged participation in other clubs' tournaments, which expanded the camaraderie.

The Marlin Club is the only designated IGFA Public Weigh Station in San Diego Bay, and thousands of fish have been weighed and recorded

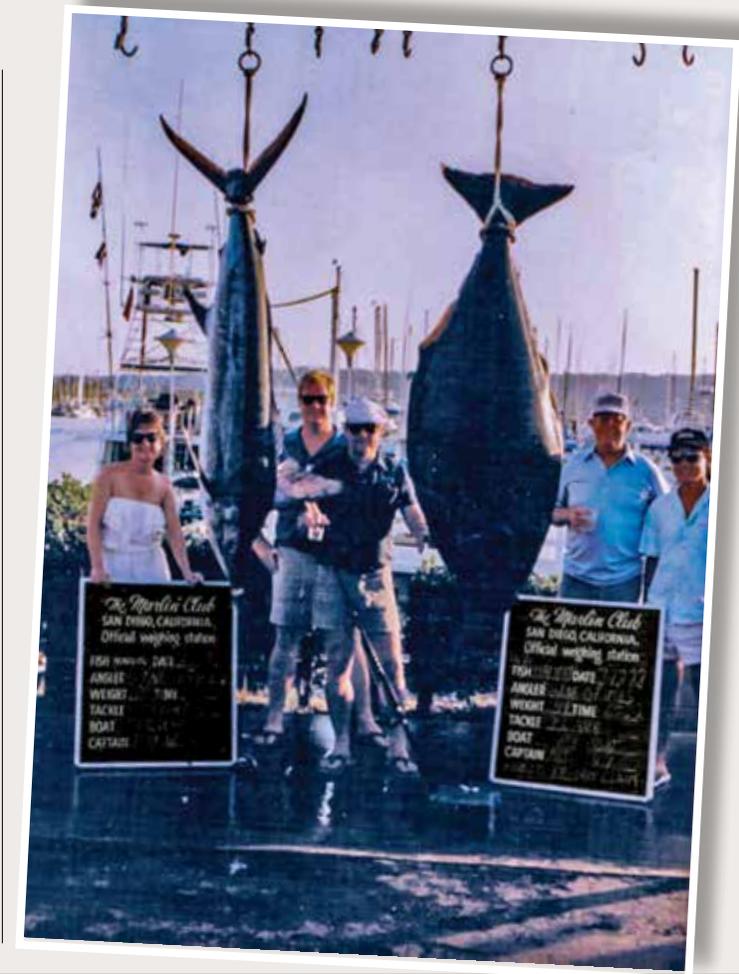


there. The club has been recognized by IGFA for its historical contributions to the sport of big-game fishing.

Some weigh-ins have been recognized as IGFA world records. Many remain in the IGFA World Record Game Fish records book, published annually, confirming and reinforcing the extraordinary sport fishing San Diegans enjoy in the nearby waters and drawing many world-record seekers to the area every year.

“Only a few angling organizations in Southern California have recorded their history as well as the Marlin Club of San Diego, fulfilling the requirements set forth by the Port of San Diego charter many years ago, and it could not have been done without their having this clubhouse to house the records,” said Michael Farrior, IGFA trustee and Tuna Club historian.

During the early '80s, striped marlin fishing exploded as more tournaments were added by different clubs, assisted by a flourishing economy, extraordinary yacht sales, cheap fuel and an influx of local striped marlin. In 1980 alone,



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525 billfish were reported released or caught, which was accomplished without all the electronics that are on boats today. By the end of the '80s, there were over 300 boats in the Marlin Club.

How those two decades seemed to fly! In 1970, there were only 130 member boats in the Marlin Club. However, the momentum and interest began to grow and by the end of the first decade, the membership had swelled by nearly 50% to 190 boats with considerably more trailers and boats under 35 feet in the mix.

Competition from money tournaments like the California Billfish Series that had quickly gained popularity with their high-dollar cash prizes began to have an impact on the success and revenue of the clubs' own tournaments.

The two decades are filled with moments in time that will be cherished forever. Stories of the fishing can go on and on, as can the stories of the friendships and the many kindnesses of that time. The people, the fish and the large yachts have mostly moved on. Goodbye to one fantastic era.

"The Marlin Club of San Diego's storied history over several generations of SoCal sports fishermen is significant, but despite its name, it's not an elitist and expensive facility; it offers free public weigh station services on San Diego Bay, caters to a wide range of boaters and anglers and is a trailer boater's best-kept secret"

... **PAT McDONELL/WON Staff Writer.**

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...and the beat goes on!

