



# Summertime SAILS

EVEN DURING THE RAINY SEASON, FLAMINGO, COSTA RICA,  
PROVIDES EXCELLENT BILLFISHING OPPORTUNITIES.

Story and Photography by Mark B. Hatter



After a protracted 20 minutes, the battle ended when the co-captain and deck mate, Junior Bustos, billed the thrashing 80-pound sailfish along the port gunwale. Over the throaty gurgle of *Gamefisher II*'s idling twin turbo-diesel engines, Capt. Richard Chellemi leaned over the bridge railing and hollered to the deck below, "Hey, Greg, you're a tarpon guy, aren't you?" Capt. Greg Dini, who'd just landed his first sailfish on fly within 30 minutes of the baits being set out on our first charter day, smiled broadly, fist-bumped the deck crew and turned to look up at Chellemi. "Yeah," he said. "How'd ya know?"

"Well ...," Chellemi began with a pause, as if looking for the right words to delicately coach an experienced fly-angler on something he should intuitively know, "I could see the way you were pullin' on that fish; it was very tarpon-like. You were pullin' against the fish, causing it to go deep in the endgame."

"OK," Dini conceded. "What should I have done?"

"Billfish can be steered by using pressure to pull in the direction the fish is swimming when it's near the boat. You can actually plane the fish up to where the mate can grab the bill. This method is what we've used for all billfish, and it could've saved you, oh, about 10 minutes on that fight."

Dini and I looked at each other, but I think I was more surprised than he was. With my own fair experience, I was not

aware of this nuance, which proved effective in reducing battle times for the balance of our trip. It's nice to know that there are still things to learn in the sport even when you are experienced, and Chellemi had several things to teach us in the days ahead. And why not gain new skills or techniques from a seasoned pro? After all, those like Capt. Chellemi, with more than 20 years and 42,000 hours of trolling experience along the Costa Rican Pacific coast, have a lot to offer.

## WHO'S THE BEST?

The selection of Chellemi and his crew was not happenstance. My personal quest to leader each of the billfish species on fly tackle (I still have a long way to go) has driven me to look

PLENTIFUL IN THE WATERS OFF COSTA RICA'S WEST COAST ■ CAPABLE OF LONG, →





for the best captains at the best locations. When it comes to marlin, great boats with great crews improve your chances in a game in which the odds are inherently low to begin with. So my continued pursuit for a Pacific blue marlin resulted in research with industry pros and expert anglers for the right captain at an optimal location along the western coast of Central America.

I fired off an e-mail to Capt. Bubba Carter, an expert Atlantic captain with whom I'd fished for Atlantic blues, for a Pacific-coast recommendation. His response was quick and succinct: "You want Capt. Richard Chellemi on the *Gamefisher II*. He is the best captain I know and operates out of Flamingo, Costa Rica, which is a great spot for fly-size blues." Not coincidentally, Chellemi also came highly recommended by my friend Jim Gallagher. He and veteran fly-angler Jeff McFadden had chartered Chellemi and his crew for more than a decade to fish the former Billy Pate sailfish tournaments out of Quepos, Costa Rica, events that they'd won more than a few times.



Having a cooler full of fresh, pre-rigged ballyhoo is the key to teasing Pacific sailfish into fly-casting range.

So the alignment of the stars began when I contacted Chellemi last July and found he was available the four days before the full moon in August (a perfect lunar cycle for blue marlin). When my longtime fishing buddy Capt. Greg Dini moved some of his Louisiana redfish charters around, the trip was set.

At this juncture, my only worry was the weather. Not having fished the summer months anywhere along the west coast of Central America, I was a little concerned about wet weather (my

numerous trips to the region, resulting in plenty of sailfish, had all occurred during the dry season between November and April). While rain in and of itself may be only a nuisance from a cosmetic perspective, it can and often does bring green water to coastal areas, pushing blue water and fish farther offshore. When I pressed Chellemi on the subject, I was surprised by his response: "Where we're located near Flamingo, we do not have major drainage from the interior of the country. So it can rain inland every day and not affect our offshore water quality, which remains excellent throughout the rainy season." Alignment complete!

Ironically, at the conclusion of our trip, Dini and I ran into another pair of anglers in San Jose, California, while awaiting our departing flight. The guys had fished the same days, but farther southeast, out of Quepos. Disappointment registered in their voices as we compared notes. "We had a hard time finding fish," one of them volunteered. "Although it was nice on the water, we had a lot of green water from

all the rain inland. We raised only a few sailfish over the course of four days and landed only two on conventional tackle."

Dini and I exchanged glances and silently agreed not to showcase our experience, which had been the polar opposite. So Dini offered a humble response, "Yeah, we had rain too and managed a couple of fish."

The truth was, it had rained every day, but the storm clouds always remained inland or nearshore, never impacting us offshore. Chellemi's claim of blue water was the truth as well; the water turned cobalt blue within a few miles of land. In general, we had chamber-of-commerce blue skies and calm seas each and every day. Most importantly, the *Gamefisher II* was a billfish magnet.

### COVERED UP IN SAILFISH

Amazingly, after significant weather-related delays getting out of the States, we caught all of our tight flight connections, and our transport driver was there at the Tamarindo airstrip to meet us as our Nature Air flight landed on time at 7 a.m. the following morning. In a 30-minute blur, we'd checked into the hotel, grabbed camera gear and fishing paraphernalia and made our way onto the deck of the *Gamefisher II*, where introductions were made all around.

With the push of a few buttons, the engines rumbled to life as Dini and I settled in with fresh-baked banana bread, courtesy of Chellemi's wife, Melissa. Crewmen Junior Bustos and Diego Lopez prepped the deck with rods,

teasers and hookless ballyhoo iced in a cooler on the deck.

It was a short 30-minute run to the fishing grounds; the deck crew had the spread of baits set almost before the engines spooled down to trolling speed. Over the din of the engines, Chellemi hollered, "All right, guys, I know we're targeting marlin, but I put in a mile short of the drop-off to give us a chance to work the bugs out." Meaning that this was a good time to test our tackle and fighting skills on the omnipresent sailfish he expected. In a subsequent lesson on tackle and technique, Chellemi lectured that a marlin will always find the flaw in your outfit, be it a weak knot or rotten backing. "Just as soon find the Achilles' heel on a sailfish than that 300-pound blue," he remarked.

Bustos hollered for Dini to grab his fly rod; a sailfish was already in the spread, looking for a meal. As I stated earlier, the best boats provide anglers the best opportunities in a game of low probability. This is where the crew of the *Gamefisher II* excelled.

For an inordinate amount of time, the sailfish tracked the left rigger teaser without committing. With precision, from above, where he had a visual advantage, Chellemi instructed Bustos in bait maneuvers to elicit a strike. With grace, Bustos manipulated the teaser 25 yards off the stern. The bait bounced in a carrot-stick-like manner until the sailfish could take no more; it lunged forward and ate the plastic offering.

"Get your fly out! Get it out!" Chellemi



### SAILFISH FOOD

While sailfish can certainly be caught on a variety of flies, Cam Sigler's Big Game Tube Flies are without a doubt a favorite of many. Sigler modeled this fly pattern off of the trolling lures used for billfish. They offer a wide profile, can be used with or without a popper head, and can be rigged with a single hook or with a tandem-hook setup. [camsigler.com](http://camsigler.com)

shouted. Dini obeyed and let the fly trail out as the *Gamefisher II* trolled on. Meanwhile, Bustos was working the fish, which was focused on the teaser it couldn't seem to grab, closer to the transom. And then the moment arrived: "Cast!" Chellemi ordered from the bridge. As the captain slipped the transmissions into neutral, Bustos plucked the teaser from the water, and Dini executed a water haul, placing the hot-pink fly right where the bait had been.

It was a solid bite from the side, very visual, but Dini set the hook in the direction the fish was moving, and the fly pulled. The fish came around for a second bite, and the same thing happened again! I understood Dini's frustration, as we had not really talked about what happens after a fish eats the fly. Chellemi barked an order, and Bustos pitched a spinner with a rigged ballyhoo long as the clutch plates engaged and the *Gamefisher II* began to move forward.

Before Dini and I could complete

During the fight, some sailfish spend just as much time out of the water as they do in it.



the debate about which way to set the hook, another fish was on the spinner, and the intricate dance began again. This time, everything fell into place, and the fish was tight to the reel after a well-choreographed set of moves.

## ELUSIVE BLUES

As it turned out, we did get a chance to test our tackle that day, as we raised 17 sailfish and got nine bites, which included a pair of double hookups! Incredulously, Chellemi was sincerely apologetic at the end of the day. “I know you wanted a shot at a marlin; I’m sorry we couldn’t find one today. I was hoping to lose the sailfish when we moved beyond the drop-off, but they seemed to be everywhere we looked.”

“Are you kidding, Richard?” I said. “Greg and I had an incredible day today! Nobody knows as well as I that it’s a crapshoot when it comes to marlin fishing, especially on fly tackle.”

But there was much more to the day than numbers of raised fish that enriched the experience. There were subtle nuances that added to the great fishing. For one, there was the family-like relationship Chellemi has with his crew. I could not help but notice the frequent complements he paid Bustos after successes in convincing reluctant fish to make a commitment. Then there was the homemade bean dip, plus the real tuna-salad



Watching a lit-up Pacific sailfish break the surface is one of the most rewarding aspects of hooking one.

sandwiches served on fresh bakery rolls (no grocery-store provisions for clients on the *Gamefisher II*). Chellemi might argue that his operation is a mom and pop business, but it’s the personal touches, like the banana bread, that enhance the charm of the tropical Central America blue-water fly-fishing experience.

Over the course of four prime moon days, the *Gamefisher II* crew pulled all the tricks from the book, attempting to find a blue marlin. Alas, none were raised, not only by our boat, but also by the small fleet of mostly private boats

fishing within radio range; if the marlin were indeed there, they were simply not in the mood to feed. Conversely, the sailfish bite remained strong, with the *Gamefisher II* raising over 40 fish, which resulted in over 25 bites and a dozen releases.

These strong numbers were in spite of not raising even a single sailfish on the last day until 3 p.m. — the result of our making a collective decision to steam northwest to a remote drop-off Chellemi accurately defined as “either red-hot or stone-cold” for that one shot at a blue. By 1 p.m., it was evident that *stone-cold* was the operative description, so we pulled baits and raced back to the south, where we once again found fish late in the day.

Within minutes of the mates deploying teasers, the bite was on, and we raised nine fish in only an hour, a most satisfying end to a great experience, even if the blue marlin were in hiding. I suppose this was karma; it means I’ll need to make at least one more trip to Flamingo to cross the Pacific blue marlin off my list. 🐟

Contact Capt. Richard Chellemi to book a Costa Rican fly-fishing experience of your own; 904-342-3913; [gamefisher2.com](http://gamefisher2.com)

## BACK TO SCHOOL: YUCATAN KNOT

CHELLEMI IS AN EXPERT in landing and losing blue marlin on fly tackle. Over two decades of blue-water fly-fishing, he has honed his rigging approach to minimize the mistakes that result in losing big fish.

When it comes to billfish leaders, Chellemi thinks that the fewer knots you have, the better. He showed us how to drop one full knot by employing a connection called the Yucatan knot. It is used to link the butt section of the leader directly to the double line of the Bimini twist, eliminating the double surgeon’s knot and the loop-to-loop connection.

➊ Pass the butt section of the leader through the Bimini loop.

➋ Wrap the tag of the leader around the loop strands five to seven times.

➌ Feed the tag end between the first wrap and the loop.

➍ Pull both strands of the loop and the leader material to tighten.

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