

# ON THE HUNT WITH MARK THE SHARK

By **Andrew Stern**, Editor-in-Chief   Photos by **Todd Guthrie**

**W**hen I was growing up in the Midwest in the 1960s, Florida was not just considered paradise; it was an adventure wilderness. In my estimation, every kid in Florida had a pet dolphin named Flipper and every house was on the water and equipped with a motorboat. Florida kids each had their own little outboard just like us northern kids had our own bicycles.

If you ever ran into a shark or boating mishap, you didn't have to worry; Flipper was always there to save you. That's pretty much as close as I came to marine wildlife or a shark until I met Mark the Shark.

Mark (the Shark) Quartiano grew up in the Northeast and always was fascinated with things that were hiding in the deep seas. As a young boy, Mark taught himself to fish off the canals on Coney Island and would pull in eels and sell them at the local fish market. Mark was almost entirely self-taught. Most kids learn to fish from their dad or grandfather, but Mark's dad never really cared for fishing or going out on the ocean.

In 1971, Mark's family moved to South Florida and it didn't take long for Mark to get reacquainted with the sea. He learned to catch conventional Florida fish – grouper, dolphin, snapper, etc. but was always looking for something bigger, something more challenging. In 1976, he got hired on as a deckhand and started fishing off Sebastian, Fla., where the sharks were plentiful. Mark knew this was his calling.

Meanwhile, up in the Midwest, I had never caught anything out of the water in my entire life. Even though we lived on the north side of Chicago, 15 minutes from the shores of Lake Michigan, city kids never really did much fishing. The first fish I ever caught in my life was a six-inch

perch in a small lake in Wisconsin. I was camping with family friends and must have been 11 years old. I felt bad for the fish and threw him back in the lake.

Mark, on the other hand, continued to refine his craft. Soon he became the captain of his own boat and was pulling in sharks from all over the world. Mark has caught sharks off the coast of Africa as far south as Cape Town, in Thailand, Indonesia, and even Viet Nam. He's probably seen every species of shark known to man and has participated in many scientific expeditions. While Mark's reputation is that of a shark assassin, the truth is that his first-hand knowledge of sharks and the various species is unparalleled. Even the most educated scientist could never match Mark's understanding of shark habits and how they live their daily lives as the most bloodthirsty predators of the deep.

Aside from scientists, celebrities from around the world have climbed aboard the world-famous *Striker 1*, Mark's boat, in search of "monster fish." Robert De Niro, Will Smith, Shaquille O'Neal, Clint Eastwood and Cris Carter are but a few of the celebrities who have ventured out in search of big game fish with Mark the Shark. Mark's reputation for delivering the big monster fish is legendary, and when big-name celebrities are in South Florida, they seek out Mark to experience the adventure of a lifetime. Once on board, even the most jaded celebrity surrenders his ego to listen to every command of Captain Mark, "King of Monster Fishing."

As Mark's fishing career continued to progress and his reputation for capturing monster sharks gradually brought him fame, my own fishing career continued to flounder. I was raising a son of my own here in South Florida, and though I have been here over 20 years, I still thought of



Landing  
the "big one"





Mark (The Shark)  
Quartiano, shark hunter  
and captain of The Striker 1

## Mark ... was always looking for something bigger, something more challenging.

Florida as the land of Flipper, where every kid should have his own boat and live in harmony with ocean and nature; and maybe even have a pet dolphin that comes by the back of the house every now and then.

Somehow things didn't quite work out the way I planned. I bought a house on the water and a boat to go with it. We never caught anything off the boat and eventually it sunk from disuse. My son and his friends did occasionally catch fish off the back seawall, but nothing worth bragging about and certainly nothing worth eating.

We would even go out on charters when vacationing in faraway places yet rarely caught anything. I recall fishing in an icy lake in the middle of South America where the limit was one fish. My son immediately reeled in a 14-inch trout. I advised him to toss it back. If one fish is our limit, I wanted a bigger one. So we tossed it back and moments later the prop on our motor became entangled with our wire line and we were stranded. Our captain was able to get us

going, using a small tender motor, but we never caught another fish. To this day, my son has not forgiven me for making him throw back our only catch of the day.

Since then, we have lost fish in Mexico, the Keys, the Caribbean, Europe and who remembers where else (actually my son remembers and no longer allows me to fish with him because I am bad luck). What my son failed to recognize was not that I was "bad luck," but just that I hadn't found the right boat captain... until now.

The *Cravings* crew assembled at our offices at 7 a.m. one day last month. The weather was in the fifties and had dropped into the forties just a few days earlier. We had no idea what to expect and were dressed in a variety of different gear in anticipation of who-knows-what kind of conditions.

As we approached the *Striker 1*, Mark and his first mate Tim O'Hare immediately identified us for what we were: googans. As I understand the

phraseology, googans are amateur fishermen who try to look like they know what they are doing, but truly do not have a clue as to what a real fisherman does.

Immediately, Mark and Tim sent us on our first task of the day. No, we were not put in charge of anything to do with setting ropes or baiting hooks or anything else having to do with seaworthiness.

We were, however, sent to the local canteen to purchase supplies. We were told to load up on snacks and not to forget the beer. Apparently beer was good luck to bring on the boat when hunting sharks and it didn't really matter whether you belonged to AA or that it was still not quite 8 a.m. in the morning; we needed to be drinking said beer.

Finally we were stocked with enough sandwiches, chips, cookies, muffins and beer to attempt the expedition and hopefully survive the ordeal. I am certain that when Ahab ordered

Ishmael to stock *The Pequod* with provisions, they also thought to bring along Pepperidge Farm cookies and Terra Vegetable Chips.

We were soon out under the bridges and into the open sea. The seas were still a little rough based on the weather we were having, but the *Striker 1* was more than up to the challenge. The 50-foot Hatteras yacht has been retrofitted to be the deadliest shark-killing machine ever devised by man. The peripheral rods and reels can easily run several thousand dollars each and the fittings and outriggers many times that; but the crown jewel of the shark-fighting equipment has to be the "chair."

The Lee's fighting chair is a contraption connected to the back of the *Striker 1* that hangs over the open water and provides for maximum mobility and range of motion when pursuing monster fish. It's basically a fish-fighting chair attached to a curved chrome pipe that extends out and is anchored to the stern of the boat. I have seen fighting chairs before. They all were firmly mounted inside the boat. This is the only one I have ever seen that hangs over the edge of the back of the boat and has nothing but air and water beneath it.

Before setting out for the Gulf Stream, we met up with some of the live bait guys who wake up at ungodly hours of the morning and bring in small bait fish. They have buckets of herring and goggle eyes ready for purchase. We buy a bucket of herring and head on our way.

As Mark explains it, the Gulf Stream is the superhighway of all major fishing. Every fish in the area is traveling in the fast lane looking for something to eat or is about to become some bigger fish's next meal. The shark is the king of the highway and is happy to devour anything that gets in its path.

On our way to the "edge" (the border of the Gulf Stream and the rest of the ocean that can actually be distinguished by its darker color), we see a whole fleet of small fishing boats all congregated in the same basic area. Mark explained to us that these were commercial fisherman all fishing the area where the Miami sewer system dumps out to the ocean. In case you never knew it, this is where all the sewage ends up; and the fish love it. Mark was quick to point out to us that he never eats fish in a restaurant and that the only fish he will eat are those he catches himself – and

only those far from the sewage output. Almost immediately as we enter the Gulf Stream, a number of fish hit on our smaller lines. Several of the *Cravings* team man the reels and begin to haul in kingfish. The kingfish are each about two-three feet long and weigh in at close to 10 lbs. While most of the "googans" out there would be happy with this haul, we were just collecting these as bait fish for the bigger game.

*Striker 1* into position. I am quickly rushed into the fighting chair and directed to take control of the reel. The problem was I had no idea what I was doing and was attempting to fight the fish before he was ready to get into the ring.

Tim calmed me down and directed me to take in line only when the fish would let me, and not to try to fight while the fish was taking out additional line. Had I bothered to reread

## Robert De Niro, Will Smith, Shaquille O'Neal, Clint Eastwood and Cris Carter are but a few of the celebrities who have ventured out in search of big game fish with Mark the Shark.

Soon Tim is at work preparing these kingfish to serve as live bait for our bigger prey. We continue moving into the Gulf Stream and pick a spot that will allow us to drift with the current along a trough approximately 400 ft. deep. Tim puts out the lines at varying depths in an attempt to capture all manner of wild sea beast.

An hour or so passes and I was beginning to believe my son. Maybe I am bad luck when it comes to fishing. Maybe ... "Fish on!" I heard Mark yelling out orders and maneuvering the

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, I would have remembered the need to be patient and let the fish determine the pace of the battle.

We had about 300 ft. of line out when we began the battle and after an hour of my best efforts, the "fish," whatever it was, had gained roughly 125 additional feet of line against me.

The idea was for me to reel line in every time the fish paused and allowed the tip of the rod to straighten out. When it was bent over, that



*The Striker 1: The world's most deadly shark killing machine*



The final remains of sharks who dared to cross paths with Mark Quartiano

meant that the fish was pulling and fighting and there was no way to gain any line against it. Whenever I saw the tip of the rod begin to straighten, I would attempt to reel in some line and use the boat and the motion of the waves to gain a few inches on the fish.

Just when I thought I had made a little headway, "Zzzzz," the fish would drag out another five or 10 ft. of line and I would be right back to square one. The fish would lead us first in one direction, then another. Depending on the direction, I would alternately be drenched by waves as they struck the side of the chair and soaked with salt water from head to toe.

Another hour passed and I continued to inch in line against the fish. By now there was much speculation amongst Mark and Tim as to what sort of monster we were fighting. Meanwhile the *Cravings* crew munched away at cookies and

chips, enjoying the entertainment as I continued to fight for line.

Going into the third hour of the fight, I have gradually gained back almost 100 ft. of line against my nemesis. Much like Hemingway's protagonist Santiago (The Old Man), I cursed my hand for cramping up, yet continued to battle, no where near conceding defeat. There is too much "on the line" (pardon the pun) for me to give in. I have a strong need to show the crew of the *Striker 1* that I am not another soft, out-of-shape desk jockey. Maybe I lack Hemingway's precise writing skills, and maybe I don't have the intestinal fortitude to go into battle and report on foreign wars; but like Hemingway, I could still go out on the open sea and catch the big game fish.

Twenty more minutes pass and still nothing. I can't even reel an inch and I began to fear

that the fish is the better "man" in this battle of strength. What I was unaware of at the time was that the fish was also the winner over me in a battle of intelligence. Apparently the fish had doubled back on us and swam through a shipwreck, near where we had originally fought him and had gotten the line tangled in the wreckage. It was only a matter of seconds before "snap," the line had been cut and the fish had escaped.

There were many condolences. Tim told me there was nothing I had done wrong (I'm sure he told that to all the googans), that I fought the fish hard and that it was just bad luck that the line broke. Mark believed that we were fighting against a giant ray and that its wing span was probably wider than our boat, hence the difficulty in reeling him in.

It didn't matter what they said. I was positive that

I was still “cursed” and that it was my ineptitude that caused us to lose the monster fish or whatever it was. Ordinarily, this article would end as another “fish that got away” story. Mark the Shark, however, did not earn his reputation by telling fish stories of the one who got away.

The next morning we were right back at it. Beer, cookies, chips and sandwiches were packed and we were out to sea in search of big game again. We pulled in a number of fish to use as bait and we found the depth we were looking for and started to drift along the edge. Hours went by and we had no bites. I can’t believe that I am on the same boat with the greatest shark hunter who ever lived and that my “curse” has negated years and years of shark-tracking experience.

We were well into our second bag of Sausalito cookies when I heard Mark shout “Fish ...” Before he can finish his sentence, I was down the ladder from the bridge and into the fighting chair. This time I’m ready for action. Just like before, the fish takes more line from me than I am able to reel in against it.

But when I do get a chance to reel, I was able to get two or three turns in before the fish began to fight back. Before I knew it, I was rapidly gaining ground. I’m thinking that I was amazing, but it was really Mark’s handling of the boat that’s doing most of the work. I continued to reel and the fish soon became visible. It was a shark and a big one – at least seven or eight feet long. I have no idea what it weighs, but it doesn’t fight nearly as hard as the ray that outsmarted me the first time. Soon the shark was at the boat and my work was done. Mark jumped down from the bridge wielding a razor sharp harpoon and Tim used a gaff to bring the shark closer to the boat. As soon as the shark was within range, Mark stabbed it with the harpoon. The shark’s skin was too tough and the harpoon grazed harmlessly off to the side. Mark made another stab and then another, unable to pierce the armor-like skin of the shark. Mark stabbed once more and was finally able to spear the shark. That was the easy part. Now Tim and Mark maneuvered the thrashing shark up the back of the *Striker 1* and into the stern of the boat. The shark was still struggling and snapping as Mark and Tim expertly position the monster fish with its mouth against the side of the boat and away from any human limbs.

*Another shark bites the dust*



*Editor vs. Monster Fish in a battle of wits.  
(The Editor was sorely outmatched.)*



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I slipped down from the fighting chair back into the boat and gave the shark a wide berth as I headed back to the bridge. There was quite a bit of blood on the deck (thankfully, not ours) and it appeared the shark would be doing no more fighting that day. It turned out that he was a nurse shark (maybe not the most ferocious in the sea) measuring in at 93 inches; just short of eight feet.

Mark and Tim agreed that he was one of the largest of that particular species that they have ever seen. I was ecstatic. I have never caught anything worth mentioning in my life. Thanks to Mark and Tim, I was now a big game fisherman who has caught one of the hugest (in my mind) monsters of the sea. Hemingway had nothing over me.

Mark, however, has seen bigger and better (and

is almost embarrassed to call this fish a monster) and heads back to the bridge to search for bigger game. Tim puts out more bait and we continued to fish. I was happy with my day's work and sat back to catch some sun. One of the other guys can haul in the next one.

We didn't catch any more that day, but it didn't matter to me. I had my prize. Mark begged me to come out with him again and catch something really big, but even a lazy writer like myself had to go back to work sometime. Sure enough, that same week, Mark helped a tourist catch a huge 16-ft., 950-lb. hammerhead within a mile of where we caught our puny shark. Not just that, but in that same week, they hauled in a giant ray and a couple more hammerheads, to boot.

It was clear to me that when Mark had even a

moderately competent fisherman on board he could bring in all sorts of monster fish; but even "bad luck" cases like myself were able to bring in an impressive fish with the help of Mark the Shark – the greatest shark hunter who ever lived.

Just like some of the big game in Africa, Mark is an endangered species. There are no other shark hunters out there these days. Mark believes that when he retires, there will not be anyone left to take his place. This could very well be the last generation ever of shark hunting.

If you've resided in South Florida for any length of time or if you are just visiting, you haven't truly lived until you experience the thrill of catching a "monster" fish. It took me over 40 years to figure it out. If you want to catch the "big one," you need to call the expert.

**Mark the Shark goes out on monster fish catching charters every day of the week.  
Call (305) 759-JAWS (5297) to experience the adventure of a lifetime.**