



Billfish -- as in dollar bills

It isn't cheap to enter the White Marlin Open, but payoff can be big

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OCEAN CITY -- Madelyne Phillips says the White Marlin Open has taken on a life of its own in the 38 years since her father, Jim Motsko, came up with the idea to start a fishing tournament.

The idea came after he spent his college summers as a mate on fishing boats. It started small, but now it has blossomed into one of the most well-known tournaments around and is said to be the world's largest billfish tournament.

It isn't cheap to get into the tournament, which takes place today-Friday. There's a base entry fee of \$1,500 per boat that qualifies you for \$50,000 in the contest's guaranteed prize money pot. Some anglers, however, will spend up to \$15,950 to enter the 16 prize categories. About \$2.25 million in prize money is up for grabs altogether.

"That's where the big money is won," said Phillips, one of the tournament directors. "We call that 'going across the board.'"

Last year, about 30 percent of the boats entered went across the board, but Phillips said many will pick and choose the categories they want to pay into based on the species of fish they're targeting.

"Some of the boats know they're going to be going after tuna, so they'll enter the tuna categories," she said.

As of Aug. 1, 65 boats were registered to compete, but Phillips said the number isn't necessarily indicative of the amount of boats that will have registered by Sunday's cutoff date. One year, they ended up with 450 boats, and last year there were 255. The registered amounts at the beginning of August were about the same for both, she said.

This year, the tournament is expecting more than 300 boats that can leave from anywhere between Barnegat Inlet, N.J., and Rudee Inlet, Va., both about 100 nautical miles away from Ocean City. All of the fish, however, must be weighed at the Harbour Island Marina.

On Saturday, after all the fishing is done and before the tournament's award ceremony, some anglers will be subject to a professionally administered polygraph test to determine their honesty regarding their award-winning catches.

The tourney has become such a big deal that it halted, and then altered, the Indian River Bridge construction schedule so charter boats can pass through during the week of the tournament. A conflict with the construction schedule arose when boaters noticed the form travelers -- large pieces of construction equipment that hold up the incomplete bridge -- on the north and south sides of construction were getting too close together to allow safe passage. State officials hadn't taken into consideration the effect the project would have on the Indian River Marina when they formed a plan to accelerate the construction, and eventually halted work for a day to assess the next step. The halt cost the state about \$40,000. Officials then decided to make changes that will ensure a 65-foot width remains where the bridge sections approach each other.

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