Catching a 2,080 pound Great White Shark Off Cape Lookout in September of 1984

Editor's note: In honor of the 40th anniversary of the capture of what is still the most famous great white shark taken along the coast of North Carolina, we are reprinting an article written by one of the participants, Jon Dodrill. This story was penned in October of 1984, while the incident was still fresh in the participants' memory. In addition to the firsthand account of the capture of the great white shark, this article gives a good description of the short-lived commercial sharkfishing operations conducted by Lloyd Davidson and Travis Credle with their fishing vessel, the Alligator.

Catching the Great White Shark

The deck was awash with coagulated blood. Up forward Capt. Lloyd Davidson fired two shots in rapid succession signaling a renewed onslaught. Seven hours of continuous cutting and slashing of boated sharks had left my wrists stiff. Still, the sharks were hauled over the stern at regular intervals. I was now on my knees. The knife slipped from my cramped hand at the sound of the signal shots.

Details of this moment seem more descriptive of naval engagements among wooden ships and iron men. Instead, it was a good day in a pioneering commercial shark fishery with which I had become involved a couple of months before. Diesel power and fiberglass now replace the canvas and oak of bloody battles at sea, but the iron men and the same in this newest of North Carolina's offshore commercial fisheries. Shearwater Marine's year old shark fishing operation aboard the 41-foot vessel *Alligator* out of Beaufort, NC is conducted by Lloyd Davidson and Travis Credle. Fishing trips lasting from three to five days, twenty hours a day, are discomfited by unpredictable currents and quickly changing sea conditions at the continental shelf break on the edge of the Gulf Stream.

Like other area fishermen on September 25, we were fishing continuously, making up for the preceding twenty days of September fishing lost to Hurricane Diana. By day, we zigzagged over scores of ocean miles in search of deep water snowy grouper whose presence at ninety fathoms was no more apparent than a pencil mark on a fish finder. Toward sunset, we began to set mile-long, 120-hook cable shark longline. When darkness filled the boat's cabin Lloyd stared, bleary eyed, at the radar and loran screens, glowing compass, and the multi-colors on the fish finder screen. Crewmen Sylvester Karasinski washed down a greasy piece of cold chicken with a gulp of Gatorade. There had been no time for lunch, and a hot meal was four days away.

Into the night, we anchored and reanchored seeking to pinpoint concentrations of foot-long vermillion snappers. Beeliners they're called. These frustratingly finicky fish often refuse to bite until some late night hour when a fisherman is so exhausted he can hardly feel their bait-stealing nibbles stripping the hooks fifty fathoms below. When they decide to bite and are hooked, an amberjack, shark or barracuda will often insure that our hydraulic reels haul in a damaged, unmarketable product.

I thought of a remark made by my eight-year-old son, Jon, after a beeliner trip that barely

met expenses. "Dad," he said, "The reason you don't do well catching beeliners is that you just don't have the patience for little fish."

Patience. I had felt discouraged.

We shut down Alligator's engine at 2:00 a.m. The engine would not restart.

I awoke swiftly at 6:00 a.m. on September 26, our third day out. Sylvester seemed chipper, although the fish spine punctures and knicks in his hands appeared infected from constant immersion in sea water and bait squid. Flagging morale caused by the discovery of a water-soggy pecan cake we had saved for breakfast was lifted when the diesel finally cranked.

By 7:00 a.m. we began hauling the first of two one-mile shark bottom longlines set the night before. By mid-afternoon, we were half way through the second line. Sandbar and tiger sharks littered the deck, waiting for processing. Each shark had to be either manhandled or winched over a roller in the stern. The shark is bled, the fins are removed for shipment to the Orient, the head is removed, the fish is gutted and cut into pieces, then washed down and iced as quickly as possible. This mild, boneless meat is the fragile commodity of an underutilized fishery. Shark is valued in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, but the tasty white meat has not yet received a broad acceptance in the United States. Markets are so limited that, to date, the return on Shearwater Marine's investment in the shark fishery is small.

We hauled aboard several male tiger sharks over ten feet long, some of which had been caught by feeding on smaller sharks already hooked. With extreme difficulty we boated an 800-pound tiger, its gut packed with pieces of sandbar shark, bird feathers, a Ziploc bag, an amberjack head. Nearly a fourth of its impressive length still hung over the transom. Wearily, I sat down on the back of another tiger shark and began resharpening my knife.

In the resulting pause, Lloyd commented, "I think that tiger is about as big a shark as we'll see on this gear." His eyes examined the A-frame.

Lloyd continued to move the boat

Jon Dodrill, Jr., examines the great white shark captured by the crew of the 41' shark-fishing boat *Alligator*, which included his father, Jon Dodrill. Photo courtesy Jon Dodrill.

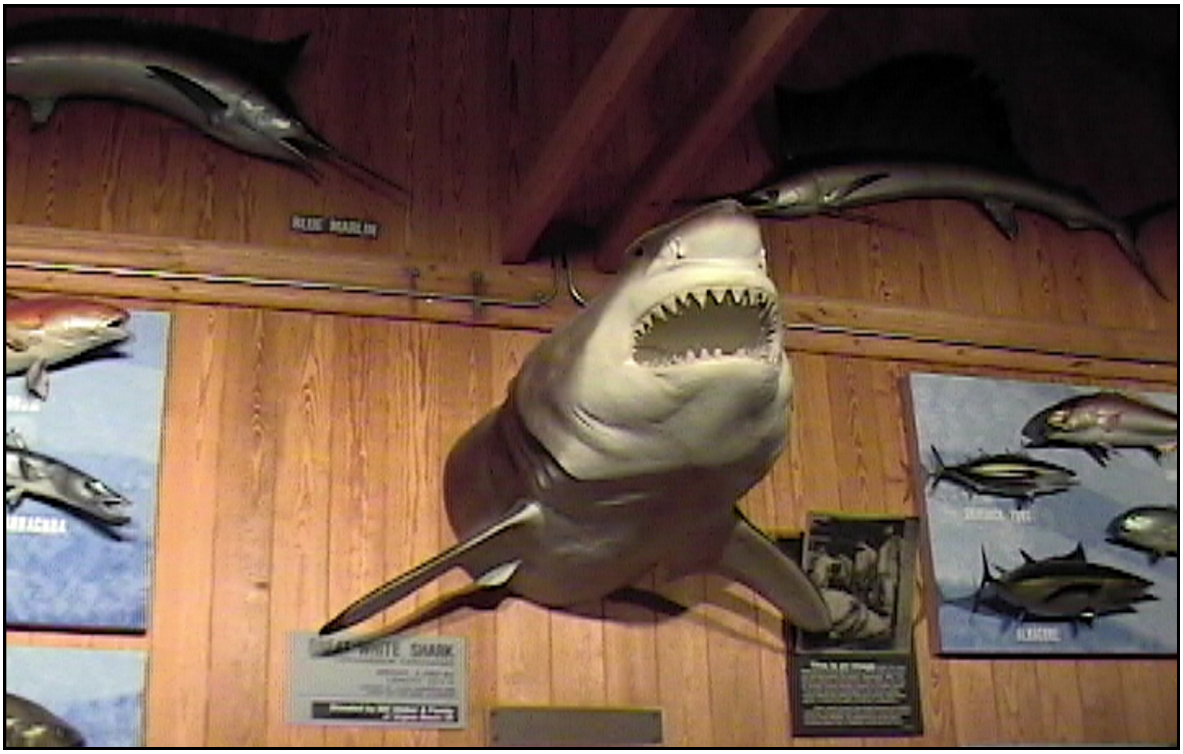
along the 3/16-inch galvanized cable. Every thirty feet, Sylvester unclipped a six-foot steel leader attached to a triple strength giant tuna hook. The head of an adult sandbar shark which, we estimated, would have measured seven feet came in on one of the hooks, the body missing at the pectorals. The single bite mark measured fifteen inches across.

Around 3:30 p.m., Lloyd called aft to me. His voice had an undertone of excited urgency.

"Jon, you better come take a look at this."

I started forward along Alligator's starboard side. Protruding from the water and wrapped in the cable mainline was a symmetrical caudal fin nearly four feet across. For a moment, I thought we had entangled a small whale. Then I looked further into the clear, azure water and saw a monstrous white belly and a gill-slit head. The angle and girth hid the snout from view. "My God," was all I could say. The crescent shaped tail and caudal keels, typical of mackerel sharks, clearly identified this as a great white shark.

It was weak, but still alive. I estimated the snout to be about fifteen feet below the surface of the water. The hydraulic rig was un-



The mount of the great white shark captured by the crew of the *Alligator* in September of 1984 continues to be a popular part of the NC Maritime Museum at Beaufort's collection. It is now the centerpiece of a recently opened recreational fishing exhibit. Photo by John Hairr.

able to raise it any farther. Sylvester sank a gaff into the shark and attempted to lift it. The huge fish moved slightly, scraping bottom paint from the hull of the boat. Another undulation and the gaff catapulted from Sylvester's hands and sank into the depths. Quickly, we put two half-inch lines around the base of the tail and cleated them off.

We tried to determine exactly how the white was secured to the shark line. It became apparent that it had tried to swallow a six-foot tiger shark already hooked and, in doing so, had become gut-hooked. The shark had dragged this leader down the cable and had bitten another hook. Before either leader could be bitten through or the hooks straightened, the sharks' struggles had created slack in the mainline cable. The base of its tail became wrapped in the mainline with the shark's twisting. Two or three wraps tightened in a kinked half-hitch, and the shark was pulling against a mile of cable, two anchors, and seventeen other sharks still struggling on the line. Trapped in this manner, the great white exhausted itself over a period of several hours and was suffocating due to its inability to move.

The shark's immense size made it nearly unmanageable. We had to decide immediately whether to cut it loose or try to bring it in at some considerable risk. The scientific value alone merited the risk and effort to get it to shore. The chance to examine a great white is presented to very few. We had to try it.

Still fifty miles south of Beaufort Inlet in 170 feet of water, we heard the weather service warning of an approaching frontal system. Lloyd worked at untangling the tail, but the cable tension was too great. The only solution was to cut away the cable, then resplice it. Cleat by cleat, alternating the lines, we transferred the great white to the stern of the boat, secured it by the tail, and continued pulling in the longline cable. Minutes later another twelve-foot tiger, also tailwrapped, surfaced. It was fresh and thrashed violently out of control. Lloyd fired three times with No. 8 twelve-

gauge dove shot. The shark ripped the hook out and escaped as the tail wrap loosened. A fresh great white could easily have done the same.

The remaining sharks were hauled aboard and processed. The angle of the late afternoon sun rays sliced the water without the resistance of a normally swift current. Before starting the engine, Lloyd said, "Wait just a minute. There's something I want to do first."

He went into the cabin for his facemask and fins. "I've got mine here, too," I said and scrambled for the face mask I had brought.

We stripped down, swished saliva from the face masks and went over the side. While Sylvester stood watch topside, Lloyd dove close to the contours of the massive body. I kicked hard in a vertical dive paralleling the shark about seven feet away. The visibility extended 150 feet. I kept a close watch on surrounding water while pushing my weightlessness toward the snout.

At the moment I saw the head profile, the lower jaw was agape and twitching. Unmoving black eyes were without expression and seemed to disregard Lloyd and me, eerily looking beyond us. Still quite alive, its strength was replaced with disinterest—a disinterest which emphasized the shark's formidability. The distorted enlargement of underwater vision heightened the effect and kept our attention drawn to the rows of serrated teeth, always exposed in great whites, and in motion as this one swayed in efforts to breathe.

We spent another hour unsuccessfully trying to get the shark aboard. The winch began slipping and the lines came under severe strain with only the back third of the body aboard. Towing became a necessity. We cut part of the anchor line, secured the tail with additional lines to the A-frame and began the slow, laborious six hour tow to Morehead City. In the final two hours, the storm front hit and seas mounted.

Periodically one of us would go tottering aft in the rain, spray and darkness to check on the great shark. We were especially apprehensive about losing it when the incision made at the base of the tail, an effort to bleed the shark, was widening and lightening as the huge body was buffeted in rough seas.

After relaying a radio message to Capt. Ottis' that we were bringing in a great white, we turned off the VHF. At 1:00 a.m., the lights of Atlantic Beach came into view. An hour and a half later, a small crowd of family and friends and inebriated passersby gathered to watch as Russ Russell hoisted the shark to the dock with a crane.

At the Morehead City Port Terminal the next morning, the largest shark ever landed off the Carolinas weighed in at 2,080 pounds. On the way back to Capt. Ottis' with the shark, we made a scheduled stop at the local elementary school. Five hundred excited children swarmed out to see the only great white most of them would ever see. My son, Jon, was one of those children. He was the one with the beaming smile.