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THE OTHER SIDE

# Smallest boat lands biggest shark in tournament

## Crew of 28-foot Mako lands 360-pound Mako in South Jersey Shark Tournament

By MARK ALLEN

The Other Side starts out with a very personal farewell note to Capt. Todd and Corry Prestidge as they head off to new duties and opportunities in Washington, D.C.

Gretchen Whitman and I were very fortunate to have been befriended by the Prestidges soon after their arrival here three years ago. We will miss them

greatly. The Prestidges' departure is tempered by the return of Kathy and Owen Gibbons; Capt. Gibbons assumed command of TRACEN at a Change of Command ceremony Friday, June 24. The Gibbonses are well acquainted with life here on the Other Side, having been previously assigned to TRACEN.

So I hope that the Cape May community will echo the traditional Coast Guard farewell of best wishes for "fair winds

and following seas" to the Prestidges and remind them that they will always have friends and a home in Cape May. And to Capt. and Mrs. Gibbons, welcome aboard.

Now, on to the results from the recent 2016 Shark tournament.

Smallest boat lands biggest fish. It often happens this way. Such was the case at this year's 36th annual South Jersey Shark Tournament when a 28-foot Mako called the El Cid III weighed the biggest

fish of the tournament, a 360-pound Mako shark. Intrigued, I tracked down Capt. Stephen Spagnuola and asked him to share the details of how they managed to pull off their winning feat.

Spagnuola explained how it was that he came to be fishing aboard Sam Dolente's El Cid III. Dolente had read an article Spagnuola had written about Mako fish-

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ing in Big Game Fishing Journal and had questions. Based on the discussion that followed, Spagnuola did a couple of instructional charters with Dolente and they soon became friends. Since then they have fished together regularly. After some moderate successes, they decided to "up the ante" and enter the region's premier shark fishing event, the South Jersey Shark Tournament, and invited three other anglers to round out their crew.

"Since this was our first shark tournament as a crew, we didn't have real high expectations," remarked Spagnuola. "I studied a Mitch Roffer temperature chart and detected a couple temperature breaks where I suspected sharks might be lurking. This was in an area about 55 miles south of Cape May in 160 feet of water, so that's where we headed. We put out about 13 buckets of chum: mackerel and false albacore mostly with some bluefish mixed in. For bait we were dragging sand eels, blue fish, Boston mackerel and false albacore."

"The first bite came on the #1 rod, but he backed off and I quickly hooked him on the #2 rod. Chris (Mace) grabbed the rod and fought the fish till completion. The fish really cooperated; he was alongside within 15 minutes, only jumping twice. Getting him into the boat was the hard part. As it turned out, we had the smallest boat in the tournament and what turned out to be the biggest fish; it was 101 inches long.



"The whole process was textbook. As individuals we didn't have that much experience with big sharks; this was our largest Mako to date, but our teamwork made up for the shortage of experience

and enabled us to boat the biggest fish of the tournament. ... teamwork, skill but most of all, luck. You know me, skill is great, but I'll take luck any day of the week."

When asked about their winnings, Spagnuola was succinct.

"Fishing for me has never been about the money; it's all about the experience," he said.

All told, payouts for this year's shark tournament were \$317,069.

There's no denying the fact that shark fishing is a controversial topic. Sharks caught as "bycatch" are often simply discarded. Even more poignantly, the popularity of shark fin soup as prepared in Asian kitchens has given rise to a barbaric practice known as "finning" whereby a shark's fins are sliced off and the living fish is then returned to the sea, where it dies an agonizing death. No one despises such wasteful practices more than do shark fishermen.

The South Jersey Shark Tournament

has a long-standing minimum weight of 200 pounds. When converted to pounds, this standard in practice far exceeds the weight of any shark that complies with the federal length limit of 54 inches. For example, the shark brought to the scales by the crew of the El Cid III measured 102 inches, which weighed out at 360 pounds. Just as significantly, the tournament encourages anglers to release nonqualifying fish by awarding valuable prizes based on number of releases.

Moving on from sharks to another aquatic creature: there's an octopus on the wall and octopus on the menu at South Jersey Marina. Next time you drive across Schellengers Landing, stop in at South Jersey Marina and admire the new and colorful painting of an octopus hanging in the stairwell. While at South Jersey, check out Salt Water Cafe's menu. Karin has recently added grilled octopus to that menu and it's already a hit. However, if you prefer your octopus alive, grab the kids and stop by New Jersey Audubon's Nature Center of Cape May situated on the north shore of the harbor near the Coast Guard base. The center has recently acquired an octopus (which has yet to be named) and it's alive and well in the touch tank. Standby for details on a naming contest.

Mark Allen promotes and markets fishing tournaments for South Jersey Marina, edits "On the Rips" magazine and is a retired lieutenant colonel with 27 years' flying experience with the U.S. Marines and Air Force National Guard.