

DIVING FOR A CAUSE

WORDS
Terry Maas

PANAMA





“Norte Americano, when you come back, we’re going to kick your ass!”

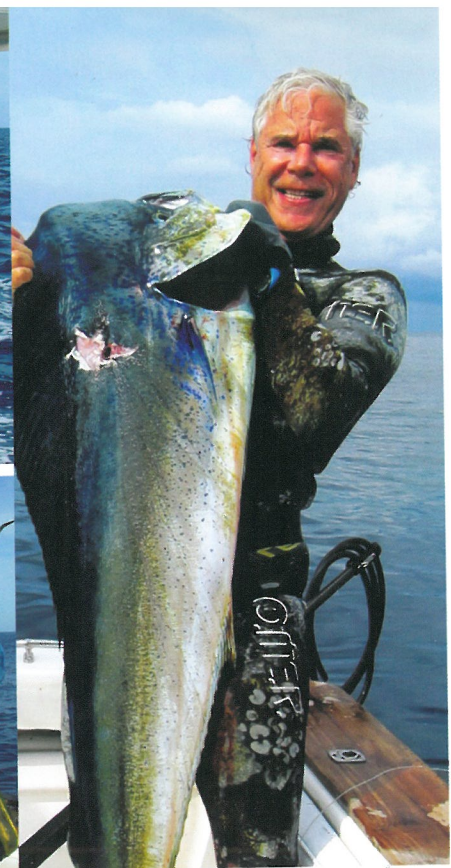
students taunted us at the Limoneres, Panama middle school. After a day of observing us painting, repairing computers, and rewiring, the students assured us that we would be trounced in a game of soccer scheduled in four days. During our first day of service, Diving for a Cause (DFAC) member and the “court jester” Juan Palma, had broken the ice by playfully bantering with the initially shy students. They were mystified by the appearance of five gringos and a gringa who climbed out of a battered pickup truck bristling with brushes, paint, and electrical supplies as they repaired the school with eager determination.

Like many DFAC trips, this Pacific Panama adventure began with a day of service followed by three days of diving and ending with an additional service day. Ian Elstrom and I scouted the area six weeks before and determined that the first rate accommodations offered by Hooked on Panama more than lived up to expectations. Our investigation proved that the resort’s resort rooms, food, boats and crew were all excellent. Aided by our hosts Mike and Gay Peavy, we evaluated the school’s needs and arranged for renovation supplies with DFAC founder and chief worker Colleen Gallagher.

Because the tuna were scarce on our scouting trip, Ian and fellow diver Brian Lee, the US nationals team captain, scouted reefs and pinnacles around La Drones Island for bottom fish and possible wahoo. We learned from our hosts that, with the recent significant influx of spearos drawn to the area including Montuosa Island and the famed Hannibal Bank, the local sports boat captains were becoming increasingly upset with divers taking their bottom fish. Mike explained these captains were becoming angry as they found the reefs crawling with divers and covered with float lines. “When divers occupy a pinnacle, they make it unsafe for trolling, and when they take a resident, such as an amberjack, it’s gone forever. On the other hand, fishing captains can take clients to these reefs and catch the same fish over and over. Please pass this message on to your friends so that we are not forced to restrict spearfishing,” Mike urged. He did allow for us to take a La Drones snapper for dinner and he had some good news for our DFAC trip: there was no conflict with blue water hunting for tuna, wahoo and dorado. Of course, we’d hoped for blue water species.

On the first day of the full DFAC trip, we divided into two boats with Colleen, FII instructor Bobby Kim and myself in one, Juan Palma, Ian Elstrom and the father-son team of Gary Guerrieri (father) and Adam on the other. Before the boats moved, we reviewed the DFAC boat and diving safety sheets with the crew, which included the boat’s safety equipment, safe boating practices around divers, and hand signals. This short briefing helped instill instant rapport with each crew whom we found to be extremely competent and attentive.

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We planned to hunt yellowfin tuna 40 miles away between La Drones Island and Montosa Island. By "running and gunning," divers with fully loaded guns waited for a signal from the skipper to jump into the water, hopefully just ahead of the hungry tuna chasing three-inch sardines. Twenty years earlier, I'd learned that the two dolphin species – spinners and spotted – followed marauding tuna attacking bait from below while birds struck from above. If we dropped off into dolphin in this fast moving parade, it was already too late because the tuna were long gone, leaving sardine scales in their wake. Sometimes we ran at 20 knots just to get ahead of the procession.

In my experience running and gunning follows the rule of threes. Only one in three boat runs ahead of the dolphin and swooping birds is in good position for a successful jump as the action is very unpredictable because fish abruptly change course. Only one-third of the jumps yield a fish sighting. Finally, you usually can only make three dives before the tuna depart and the dolphin start whistling and dancing past. Oliver and Carlito on our boat and Chaca and Carlos on the other soon learned the drill and we awaited their excited shouts, "Tuna, tuna! Buzzing all around the boat."

The first day we all made shots but were rusty, missing fish and only hitting the tail region when we connected. I luckily speared a 150-pound fish and landed it within minutes because the shot broke its spine. On another jump, Bobby nailed a schooly yellowfin, also in the tail. Colleen lent her gun allowing Bobby to make an excellent second shot so they could carefully bring the fish to the surface together.

As we closed out our first day, we disembarked at the lodge, greeted with tropical drinks. We shared stories with the other divers who had scored some very nice dorado. Gary shared some tricks he'd learned from a long-time dorado expert in the Gulf of Mexico. He brings dorados to the surface by gunning the boat engines or slapping the water with his hand. We all agreed that shooting the first fish and allowing it to remain on the line 20 feet below was a great way to hold the school.

As we retired to our rooms, we enjoyed the first rate comfort and the beach views. Our resort was so near the jungle that, at night, we shared the walkway with tropical land crabs and large toads. One night Ian was suspicious of how Juan was acting, not seeming to do much. Tired, he

went to bed only to be greeted by a large land crab sharing his sheets. Of course, Juan was there to record everything.

The next day, our boat team changed tactics knowing that tuna came up later in the day. On the way to the tuna grounds, instead of sleeping on the comfortable boat, we scanned the horizon for logs, buckets, trees and anything floating that might hold dorado. Birds sitting on debris often help spot these fish attractors. Our first jump was on a good-looking debris mat of twigs, branches, and trash. Our captain yelled, "Watch out for sea snakes!" While there were no game fish, there was a bright yellow sea snake guarding the middle of the mat. Despite being very poisonous, because of their small mouth, they rarely injure humans except when they bite the webbing between fingers. Sea snakes have a cool escape act. When threatened, they abruptly change direction; swimming backwards. With a tail that looks more like the head than the head, it can become visually confusing, especially when they quickly reverse direction again. Like other poisonous animals, their bright yellow color warns away potential predators.

Our second jump on a tree floating roots up was the ticket. Our captain was careful not to run straight up to the structure, staying a couple hundred feet away. However, even before we could jump in, a school of bright yellow and blue dorado breezed the back of the boat. GO TO P.93

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Instantly, Bobby shot a "rat" and allowed it to dangle in hopes of attracting others, but after several minutes, its buddies failed to show and Bobby boated his fish. A few minutes later, Colleen spotted a large hump-head male, which promptly swam within range. Lining up on the fish, she realized that its trajectory would take it too near Bobby. Not wanting to take Bobby home on a stringer, she lowered her gun and pointed to me just as I looked in their direction. The big guy made an "S" turn, and as it scooted by, I made a snap shot, hitting it just above the spine with my trusty Daryl Wong gun. Later, we learned from Gary that dorado are cannibals. We surmised that this dominant bull probably achieved its impressive 50 pounds by pruning its own family.

The last day was slow with tuna sporadically popping up to disappear within minutes only to reappear a quarter mile away. Ian took this opportunity to hunt a pinnacle off La Drones and took a quality snapper, which was cooked to perfection by the great chef at the lodge. We could not say enough about the boat crew and the staff at the resort. Rooms were comfortable and set in a beautiful tropical setting. Sitting on the veranda, sipping beer as the tropical sun set behind the coconut trees is my way of ending a perfect day!

Our last service day at the middle school was an unqualified success when the students realized that we were the "real deal" as Juan proudly presented his promised dorado to one student, Carolina. Colleen made our memories permanent, presenting each student with an instantly framed picture as a memento. Students each took a turn accepting the

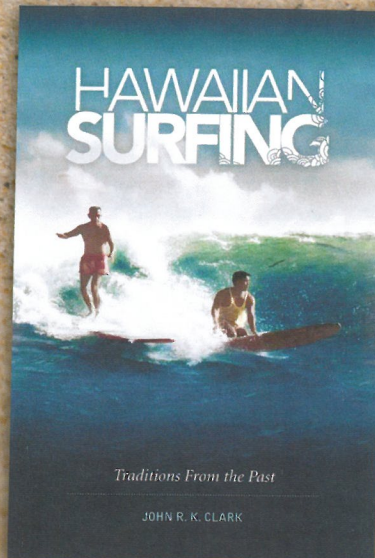
dorado and nearly 1,000 meals of fillets for the photo. Colleen's rapid-picture printer places them in the hands of students within a half hour. The program was so successful that a second group of originally shy students requested their own picture.

While I helped print the pictures, Gary, Ian and Juan captivated three classes by explaining blue water hunting. The school principal and teachers also asked them to express the value of remaining in school, as many of the young students

were prone to early drop out. We then presented the top 10 students in each class with DFAC backpacks containing assorted school supplies.

Despite all this, the highlight of the day was the soccer game, where the students demonstrated their skills. They were gracious enough to loan us some great players so our beating was not so severe. Still, we gave it our all, tweaking backs and busting knees trying to keep up with these excellent athletes that ran circles around us. The scene was surreal. I stood as goalie looking over the grass field literally cut out of the jungle with high trees and bushes serving as the field's boundary and where howler monkeys punctuated the air with their eerie calls. Gary earned a great laugh from the students when he chased an out-of-bounds ball into the bush. Disappearing deeper from view, he suddenly started shaking trees and screaming as if attacked by unseen horrors.

One of the things I appreciate most about DFAC excursions is the new friendships that we develop. Participating divers, with the combined interests of spearfishing and community service, share so much in common that a good group dynamic is assured. Additionally, the lack of competition helps to provide a collegial atmosphere, especially at dinner where we share a drink and stories of the day. Resort owners love us because they are able to leverage our combined service with their help to promote goodwill within the local community. **PAU**



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