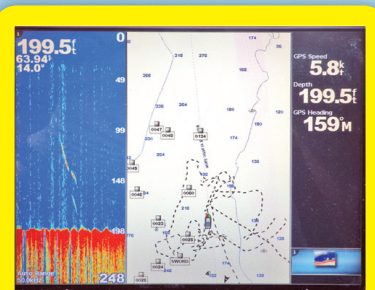


TUNA TIME OFF CHATHAM



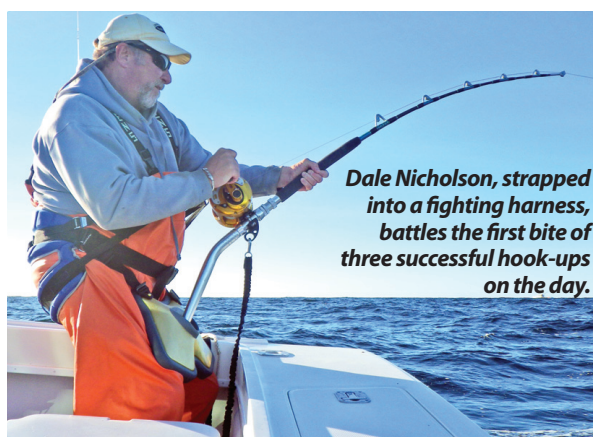
A tuna can be seen rising to the surface on the fishfinder.

The spread consisted of four rods set out at differing lengths from the boat attached to outriggers and one set short back in the wash directly from the rod.

When I was probably seven or eight years old, a string of cancelled tuna trips was set into gear as Mother Nature squashed my first-ever offshore trip due to a nasty storm. From there my opportunities were limited to get out until 2012 when two consecutive offshore trips were cancelled, again due to weather. So when *The Fisherman Magazine* advertising sales manager Dale Nicholson arranged a trip with *Fish Chatham Charters*, I kept my hopes within reason, knowing my track record wasn't great. The offshore forecast for the morning of Monday, September 9 was, of course, not looking good as the date grew ever closer, but we decided to at least give it a shot.

Captain John Clothier's 26-foot Steiger Craft eased away from the dock a few minutes before 4:00 a.m. We set a course from Stage Harbor in Chatham, out through the new cut in Monomoy Island and off to the area known as the Sword which is located some 26 nautical miles south east of Cape Cod. The *MV Regal Sword* was a 575-foot freighter which sunk on June 18, 1979 after a collision in a fog bank with the tanker, *Exxon Chester*.

With the first glimmer of sun to the east, signs of life in this otherwise barren stretch of ocean showed as humpback whales could be seen on the horizon. We were still a few miles



Dale Nicholson, strapped into a fighting harness, battles the first bite of three successful hook-ups on the day.

from the fishing grounds but it was obvious that something was going on already. In addition to the whale activity, sea birds of all different species could be seen flying about. I was getting excited and despite the steady four- to six-foot seas encountered on the ride out, I was in decent shape and showed no signs of turning green just yet (although this was to be short-lived.)

The plan was to set out five rods each rigged with custom splasher rigs produced by Captain Eric Stewart of The Hook-Up located in Orleans, MA. We set two rigs on each side of the boat as well as one short rig straight down the middle in the prop wash. The side rigs hung from outriggers with the outer-most baits set about 100-plus-yards back and the inside bars staggered to the short rig which ran directly from the rod in the stern rodholder. These massive squid rigs were composed of splasher "birds", spreader bars and rubber squid bodies with such names as the "Key West Special," Bacardi," Electric Green," "The Widow Maker" and more.

It didn't take too long after the spread was set out for the first signs of fish to pop up on the electronics as we could see large shapes moving up off the bottom to feed on the masses of sand eels around us. Despite the depth of the marked fish, somewhere between 75 and 150 down, Captain John assured us the



After a quick measurement, this 51-inch bluefin tuna was released to fight another day.

fish would be on top feeding in short order as we approached slack tide in the next hour.

We continued our heading with five spreads in tow for about 30 minutes, marking fish and sighting both minke and humpback whales as we went along. The first fish struck the short bait with green squids set back tight in the prop wash and looked more like someone had thrown a VW into the water than the take of a fish! The fish screamed off line as we rushed to clear the other four rods before I was directed to stay tight on the fish from the rodholder. Dale suited up with the stand-up harness and we passed the rod off to him for stage two of the battle.

After some solid back and forth with neither side showing signs of taking control, it was my turn in the belt. Just in case this was to be our only bite of the day, we both wanted to get a chance at fighting a fish. I harnessed up and quickly set about to the task of besting our as-yet-unseen foe. I was immediately impressed by the sheer strength and power of the fish as it peeled off line with relative ease despite the drag pressure exerted by the Okuma Makaira 80WII reel. Just as quickly as I cranked ten or 15 feet of line back onto the reel the fish would quickly peel off ten to 15 yards—I was making no ground!

The captain instructed me to put a hurting on the fish if we ever wanted to get some fresh lines back in the water, so I worked the stand-up gear like a champ (or so I thought anyway.) The process of fighting a fish from a fighting belt and harness was a totally new experience for me but with expert instruction from the captain I quickly got the hang of it. The fighting technique was very unnatural as I am far more accustomed to fighting a striped bass on a surf rod, but this was quite obviously no bass!

After what seemed like an eternity, but in reality was maybe 20 or so minutes, the splasher finally broke the surface of the water just off the starboard side of the boat. My achievement was to be short-lived as the tuna sounded and dumped another chunk of line from the spool. Back to the game of pumping and

cranking I went. The fish was losing ground much faster now as that last run took a lot out of her.

Several minutes later we had the massive fish alongside the boat and I let out a loud cheer. Dale was assigned the duty of harpooning the fish while Captain John followed with a gaff. The harpoon found its mark, as did the gaff hook, and I was finally able to relax as we set a tail wrap around the fish's tail. The fish was bled out and we were finally ready to bring her aboard.

After a few quick pictures of the 61-inch tuna, we set about the task of re-setting all five lines as the fishfinder was still blowing up with signs of life down below. Unfortunately I set to "chumming" no sooner than the final rod was set out as mal-demer got the better of me. About five minutes passed before that same short-set rod began peeling off line as another tuna was hooked up. We commenced with the fire drill of clearing lines again and Dale and I split duty fighting this fish directly from the gunwale. This second battle lasted noticeably shorter despite our fatigue from the first fish, so we knew she was much smaller. With the fish alongside the boat, we got a quick in-water measurement of 51 inches and set her free.

LOCAL LODGING

The Seashore Park Inn, located at 24 Canal Road in Orleans, is a short drive from the charter boats in Chatham, the beaches of the outer Cape and scenic Provincetown. Give them a call at 508-255-2500 the next time you plan to visit Cape Cod.

Again the spread was re-set and the first fish was finally iced and stowed in the fishbox while I returned to my job of chumming over the side of the boat. I was quickly interrupted once again as another reel screamed under the run of a fish. I began clearing rods and was joined by the rest of the crew a minute later after they finished tending to our first fish. This time one of the outer rods was tight to the fish, and somehow on the initial take, the fish severed the line of the outermost rod. We figured this was to be our sacrifice to the fish gods for such steady action so far.

I again battled the fish straight from the rodholder in the gunwale, but this time it felt like a much larger fish was on the end of the line. When she finally broke the surface alongside the boat, it became apparent that what was causing the extra weight was the severed spreader rig as well as about 75 feet of mono-filament line. We had not only hooked another 51-inch tuna, we successfully saved the rig which was thought to be lost!

This was to be our final fish of the day as only one more fish exploded on a spreader but the hook failed to find its mark. We continued to mark fish but they had moved down deep and our plan was to stick with the troll. While the captain assured us that we could have added a few more bites to the day if we dropped a jig down, there was no need to be greedy with a fish on ice and two successful releases under our belt. After another hour of trolling without any further action, we cleared the spreads and set a course for Chatham; our day was just about over.

Back at the dock Captain John made short order of cleaning the tuna and divvying up the steaks. We all went home with not only enough fresh bluefin tuna to feed a small army, but also an experience the likes of which we will not soon forget. 🐟