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Pacific Commercial Fishermen's Festival draws a huge crowd at its new location

By **DAVID PLECHL**
For The Daily Astorian

Shoot a raw oyster and stack some crab pots. Knot a perfect "eye splice," and mend a net. Chug a root beer. Kiss a barmaid, and be slapped in turn.

Just your average day as a fisherman in these parts.

The atmosphere at this weekend's Pacific Commercial Fishermen's Festival was that of a good day at sea. Warm September sunshine found its way around cottony clouds, as families, fishermen, and friends reveled in all the lore and lunacy of the fishing lifestyle.

The relocation from last year's downtown site to Port of Astoria's Pier One was a wise move.

It brought close the water and salty smell of it. And more importantly, it brought close all the ships, and the great people

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A crowd gathers to watch a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter rescue simulation during the Pacific Fishermen's Festival.



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It was fishermen vs. loggers in a tug-of-war. The fishermen, shown here, won after a lot of good-natured ribbing and some fierce, heel-dragging action.

Highliner competition results

Under-40

1. Michael Giles

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that drive and work these vessels at sea.

The event was produced by the same people that bring you the Astoria Sunday Market, and backed by the sponsorship and support of dozens of local businesses.

Organizers had promised a bigger and better event than last year's, and by all accounts they delivered.

The festivities spread out impressively like a maritime-themed midway. Craft vendors, live music, and historic commercial fishing gear all shared space in an off-beat but interesting collection of curiosities.

Big ships buffeted the perimeter, and crowds lined up for tours aboard the U.S. Coast Guard buoy tender, Fir.

The Maverick, which appeared in season two of the Discovery Channel's "Deadliest Catch," and the Pacific Future, skippered by Darren Reef, best all-around fisherman on the West Coast, were also present.

The delectable and unmistakable aroma of fried fish wafted alluringly in the air, and the impressive sweep of the Astoria Bridge made no mistake about which Northwest port you were calling home for the day.

On display was a whole slew of fish catching and processing equipment. Prawn traps, net reels, something called a crab dump box, and even a 1900-era Columbia river gillnetter, a graceful sail-bedecked beauty of superb craftsmanship.

You didn't have to be a fisherman to enjoy the weekend festival, but it sure helped if you knew one, loved one, or were a fan of one on TV.

Steve Edwards, of Astoria, was sporting a "Deadliest Catch" t-shirt and checking out some black cod pots with his wife Cyndee.

He has two brothers that are both crabbers in the Bering Sea.

"I'm the one that stayed on land," he said.

Which might be true, but he and Cyndee now watch the show "Deadliest Catch" religiously.

How did they like meeting and chatting with show members Monte Colburn and Lenny Lekanoff?

"It's like old friends," said Cyndee, "just talking about the crabbing."

2. Michael Retherford

3. Amos Johnson

40 and Over

1. Marty Kenneth McMaster

2. Ron Williams

3. Joe Abad

Best Overall Highliner (top times of combined groups)

1. Michael Giles - the "Highliner of the Year"

2. Michael Rutherford

3. Marty McMaster



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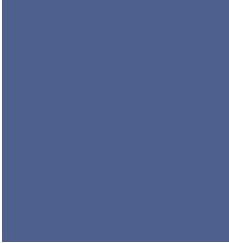
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Tug-of-Words, Tug-of-War



Sunday afternoon's much anticipated tug-of-war between the crew of the Wizard, of TV's "Deadliest Catch," and the "Ax Men," represented by the tough-as-nails loggers of J.M. Browning, drew a big crowd.

There was a lot of good-natured boasting and bickering. Plus some plain old trash-talking, about whose what would be handed to whom, and whether it would be on a platter.

The J.M. Browning crew showed up in intimidating fashion with a gang of about 20 logging men.

So when the seven salty fellows from the Wizard took the other end of the rope, things didn't look real good for them.

It was decided a team would consist of just 15 men, so the "Ax Men" would need to drop a few, and the fishermen would need to recruit some local talent.

Some tough Northwest fishermen and one self-described "fan of the show" stepped forward and grabbed the rope.

The horn blew. The crowd cheered. And the battle was underway.

For awhile it seemed the rope was moving neither this way nor that. Then it slowly but steadily nudged toward the fishermen.

The loggers held on mightily, but it was like a heavy crab pot rising from the sea, and all at once it was over. A winner was declared: The fishermen. And a good portion of the ecstatic crowd erupted in cheers and high-fives.

Travis Lofland, of the Wizard, is a big guy with biceps wrapped in tattoos.

"When they rolled up in that big red truck with all those big bad boys in there, I knew it was game on," he said.

He admits, that "fan of the show" was a giant rock of a man, and he was "a great anchor," but Lofland also said, "the rest of our recruits were local fishermen."

Nick Sinner, of Banks, was pulling with the rest of his J.M. Browning crew.

"We had them outmanned, but even with the even numbers, I thought we could take them," Sinner said after the defeat.

He was catching his breath, and catching a cold one in the beer garden after the match-up.

Sinner promised not to be deluded by overconfidence if the chance for a rematch ever presents itself.

"There is definitely respect for the fishermen," said Sinner. "They've got to work up some stamina to fish. They've got those rope pulling muscles."

Sturgell vs. Everyone Else

Infamous. Productive. Lucrative. Deadly. Life at sea is not for the faint of heart. It

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demands a sturdy hand. Strong guts. Big arms. And the willingness to never, ever quit when the going gets tough.

A "highliner" has all these qualities and more, and is considered an elite fisherman.

So when Dennis Sturgell challenged all comers to a highliner face-off with his son, and defending champ, Daniel, no lightweights showed up.

And with upwards of a thousand bucks on the line, there were plenty of vein-poppingly good photo ops, and bulging biceps to boot.

Sun-glassed crowds filled metal bleachers and cheered on their favorite competitors in a 12-man heat that pitted West Coast fishers against a buffed and sturdy looking Sturgell.

The competition is a test of toughness that starts with the slug of an oyster and ends with the slap of a barmaid.

Everything in between tests the skills of these real-life commercial fishermen. Stack seven, 70-pound crab pots. Pull in a crab line. Mend a net. Jump in a survival suit. Dive in a life raft, and pull in a hefty "dummy," a stand-in for your best friend or buddy lost at sea.

Jon Lawler of the "Deadliest Catch" bravely struggled through the course in flip-flops. His labored breathing didn't stop him from talking some smack.

He quipped that the 70-pound crab pots were lightweights when compared with the 800-pound behemoths he and his crew had to muscle around the Wizard.

"You've got cranes and a lot of steel swinging around up there," said Lawler. "This is Tinkertoys right here."

One highliner shot through the course with a decided air of graceful determination.

Mike Giles, of Warrenton, popped his oyster, stacked the crab pots in a flash, spliced, tied up a Carrick Bend, mended the torn net, jumped into the survival suit in a snap, and pulled in the dummy with concerted strength.

He chugged his root beer and was happily slapped. He clocked in at four minutes flat.

Not even defending champ Danny Sturgell would come close.

After being declared winner, Giles coolly slipped the five-hundred bucks in his pocket.

"It was definitely incentive to show up," said Giles of the cash. "I wasn't going for second."

Did he do anything special to prepare? Not really. But he did note that 10 years of tough fishing with the Sturgell clan might have helped.

How did the big dog himself feel about his crew member out-highlining his own son?

"If anyone was going to beat him, I'm glad it was MIKE," said Sturgell. Then he offered the explanation that, "Daniel never spliced."

The event certainly recreated some of the hard work and skills required at sea, but what if the locals were to challenge the crew of the Deadliest Catch in a real life fish-off?

Could the infamous Wizard be out-fished?

"That opens a whole big can of worms," said Giles, shaking his head. "I don't know if I really want to go there."

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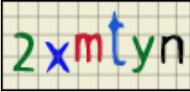


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