

Miracle at the Hurricane Hole

Sometimes what seems like disaster to a 9-year-old boy and his friends can simply be the setup for a truly remarkable event. So it was for Cameron Sanchez and his fishing buddies Kevin Ramos and brothers Dylan and Tyler Mironti during a recent trip to Key West. The boys were in the Keys with their families and 139 other anglers from Shell for the 2011 Key West Challenge, a charity event founded by Cameron's grandfather Hayden Blaylock. Since its inception in 1989, the fishing tournament, which is coordinated by Cameron's mother, Crystal Blaylock Sanchez, has become one of Key West's most successful events, donating more than \$2 million to charities.

Cameron and his 11-year-old brother Matthew have fished the tournament with their dad John for the past several years. When Matthew was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes six years ago the Shell Key West Challenge provided an opportunity for the Blaylock and Sanchez families to help raise funds for the Diabetes Research Institute (DRI) at the University of Miami. Since then Matthew has become somewhat of a spokesman for the DRI and a celebrity during the week of the tournament. This year John and Crystal thought it might be fun for Cameron to invite a few of his friends to field a team and compete on their own.

Things started out badly for Cameron's team when the veteran boat captain simply didn't show up for the first day of the tournament. Apparently, Capt. Jimmy was annoyed that he'd been asked to take a group of kids fishing. So, Cameron and his three friends sat on the dock dejected and nearly defeated. At the end of the day anglers from the other 29 teams shared great stories about their remarkable catches and eight of the teams had each scored more than 300 points during the first day of fishing.

Fortunately, fate would smile on Cameron's team the next morning, as tournament boat coordinator Findlay Sinclair was able to find a captain who was happy to fish with a bunch of kids. And even more fortunate was the fact that this wasn't just any captain, but the son of one of the world's premier light tackle guides. Chris Trosset grew up on the water, often fishing around Key West with his dad Robert, from whom he learned more than a few tricks. Capt. Chris has been guiding for several years but had never competed in the Shell Key West Challenge and was unfamiliar with the unique multi-species format which most closely resembles a scavenger hunt.

The team was joined by Cindy Mironti (Dylan and Tyler's mom) and Anthony Broad a talented South Florida-based marine artist/owner of FishSkinz. So the 29' SeaVee Reel Fly was sporting a full crew when it left the dock from the Hurricane Hole Marina that morning. Even though the boys were competing against 29 teams of adult anglers, had zero points, and were fishing with an untried captain, they had COMPLETE optimism that they could win the tournament.

Cindy Syracuse recalled, "The innocence and pure faith of those kids in their ability was really incredible to experience. Cameron declared in the cab ride to the marina that he was 'in it to win it'." Fortunately, Capt. Chris also believed in the

kids and he had studied the list of target species and worked out a plan deciding which fish to go after, and in what particular order.

Perhaps because Capt. Chris is only 22, he believed that a team of kids could actually catch the fish if he could find them. It was his leadership and knowledge, combined with the boys' youthful optimism that resulted in the final outcome of the remarkable day. Although it was broad daylight, the stars truly aligned that morning; the fish cooperated, and the kids worked together as a team to catch everything that Capt. Chris put them on. Cindy simply called it the Miracle at the Hurricane Hole.

Many anglers spend a lifetime trying to catch a permit and a tarpon in the same day. Cameron and his friends caught 12 permit and two tarpon, as well as nine amberjack, three yellowtail, 15 dolphin and one barracuda; plus a few other odds and ends that helped them score points. With a smile, Cindy recalled "At one point there were so many lines with dolphin on that the adults couldn't get the fish off the hooks fast enough for the kids; there were fish flipping all over the boat, kids yelling and Anthony and Capt. Chris working hard to keep things from getting too crazy - all while a hammerhead shark circled the boat."

Many elements combined to make this a special experience but what impressed Cindy the most was the Captain's demeanor throughout the day. "Capt. Chris always had a kind word for the kids, always making them feel like the best fishermen around," she said. "Every time they caught a fish Dylan and Cameron would ask how many points it was worth and they would calculate the totals. The kids were so proud of themselves as they flew their Shell flag on the boat, hauling in fish left and right, next to some of the big boats in the tournament who looked at us kind of funny."

Anthony Broad, who had designed the Shell Key West Challenge t-shirt and volunteered to help during the tournament, had no idea what was in store for him when he signed on to fish with four pre-teen boys. "This was most fun I've had fishing in years," he stated at the awards ceremony later that evening. In fact, Anthony spent most of the day baiting hooks and helping the boys keep lines untangled, but he did get to reel in the biggest fish, a 37-pound dolphin that he caught late in the afternoon.

Cindy mentioned in an email a week after the tournament, "Just as we believe we can find a cure for diabetes and work together toward that common goal, we will achieve it." She added, "Together they believed in themselves when no one - quite frankly not even myself - believed they would win anything."

*When Findlay Sinclair announced lines out of the water at 3:30 PM, Cameron's team, fishing with Capt. Chris Trosset on the *Reel Fly*, had scored a total of 740 points, the most for a single day of all 30 teams competing in the tournament. Their belief was enough to bring them victory. Although they were tired, hot, sunburned, thirsty and sore, Cameron, Dylan, Tyler, and Kevin beamed as the fish were weighed, photos were snapped and rods and reels were stowed at the end of the day.*

During the awards ceremony later that evening seven-year-old Tyler Mironti said, "It was my dream come true to be in Matthew's fishing tournament and to win."

For Captain Chris, Anthony Broad, and Cindy Syracuse, the day proved to be a magical one as well, for they were part of an experience that would provide lasting memories for four young men learning how teamwork, enthusiasm, and faith can transform an apparent disaster into a remarkable victory.