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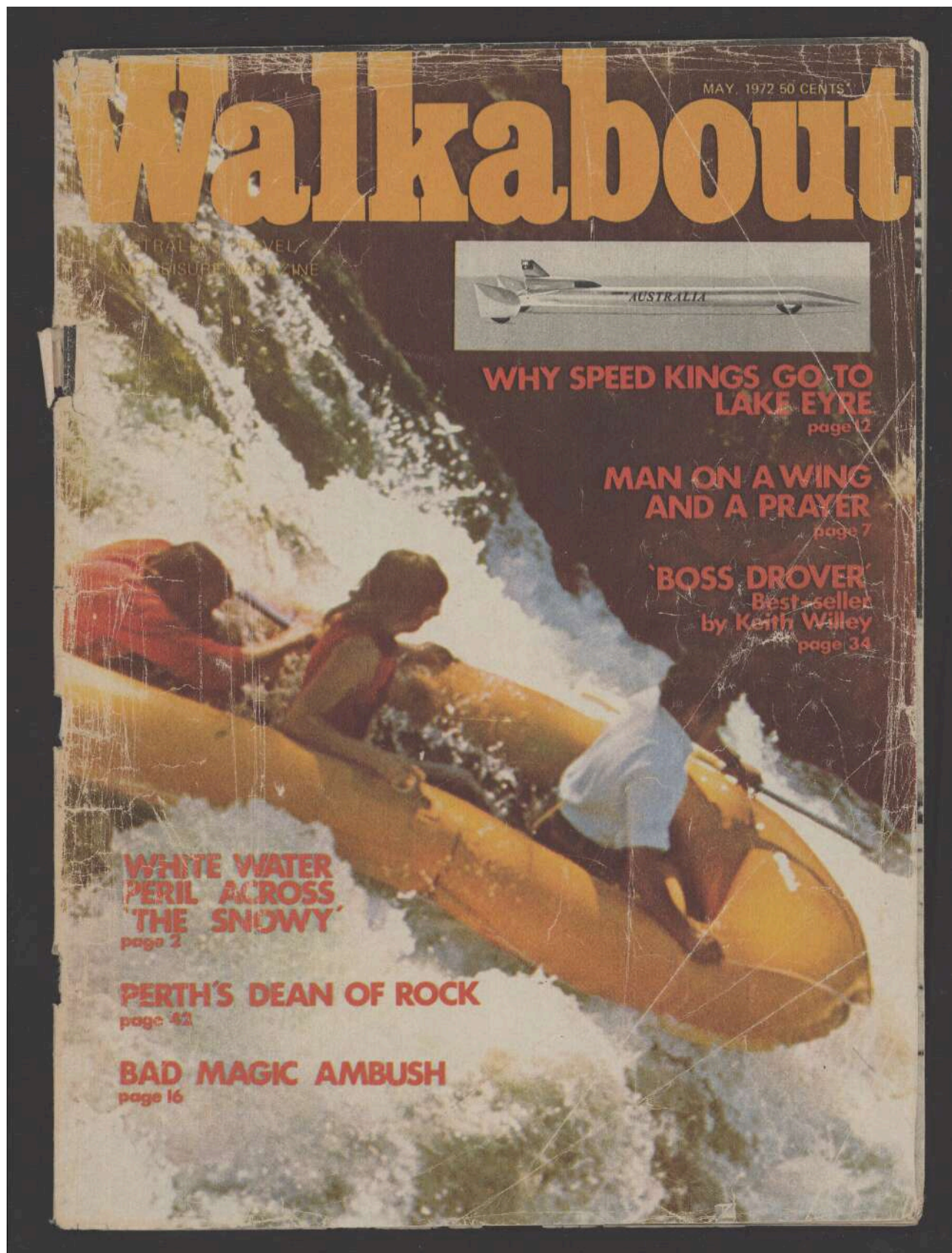
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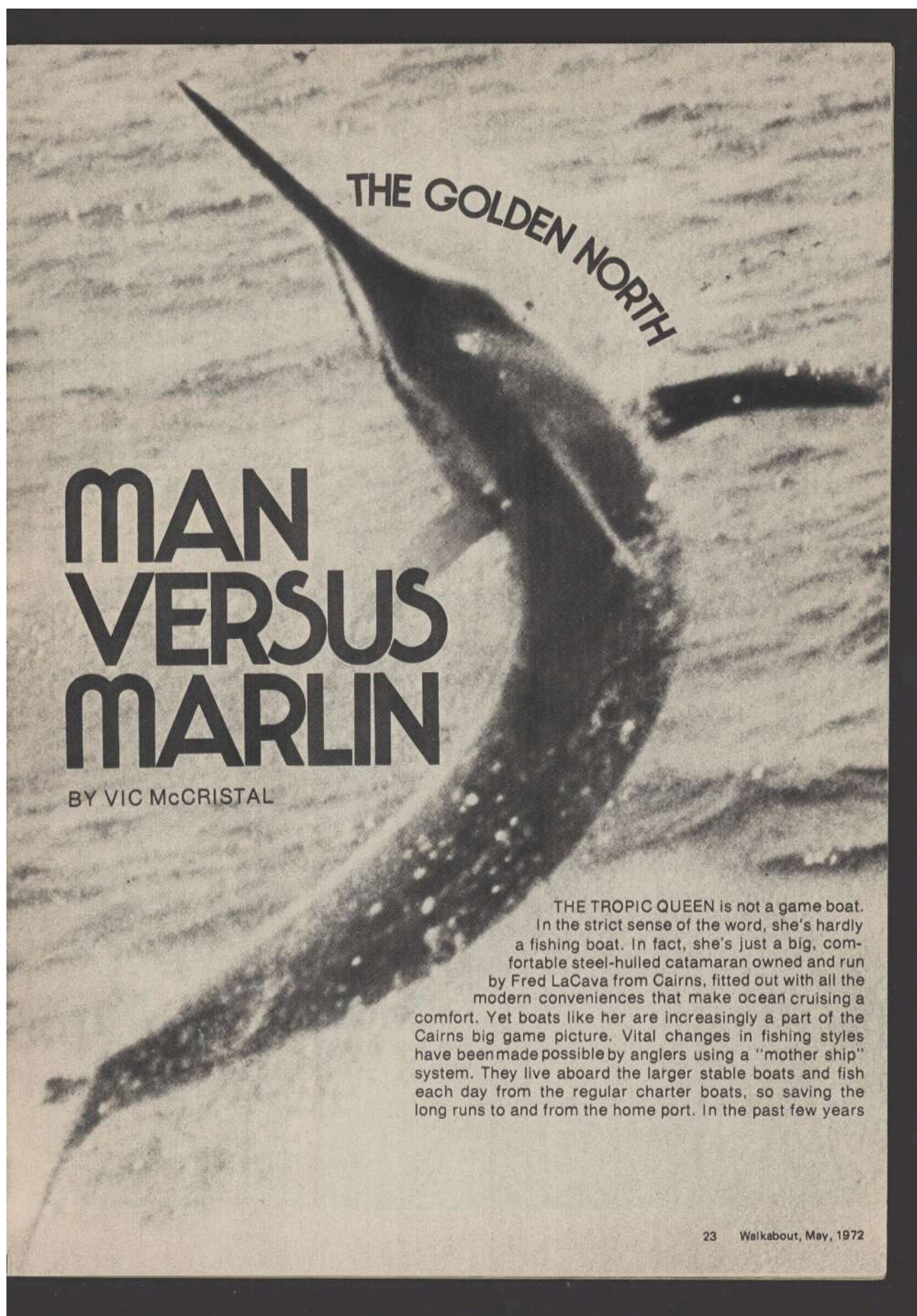
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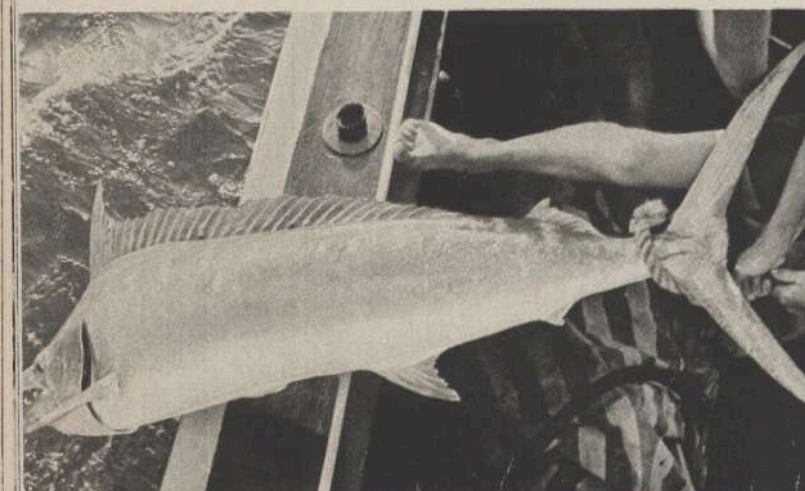
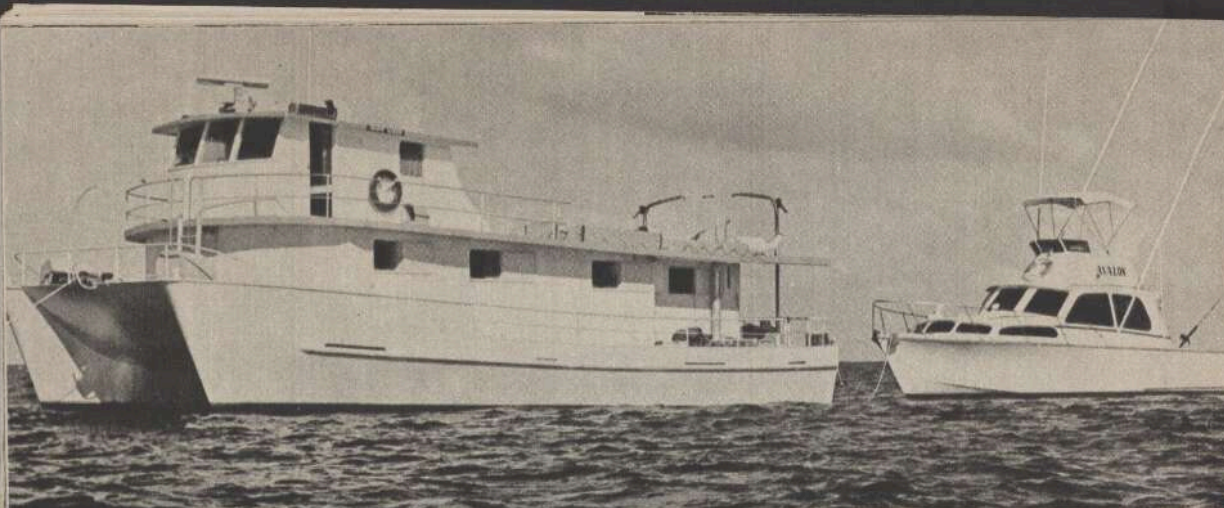


THE GOLDEN NORTH

MAN VERSUS MARLIN

BY VIC McCRISTAL

THE TROPIC QUEEN is not a game boat. In the strict sense of the word, she's hardly a fishing boat. In fact, she's just a big, comfortable steel-hulled catamaran owned and run by Fred LaCava from Cairns, fitted out with all the modern conveniences that make ocean cruising a comfort. Yet boats like her are increasingly a part of the Cairns big game picture. Vital changes in fishing styles have been made possible by anglers using a "mother ship" system. They live aboard the larger stable boats and fish each day from the regular charter boats, so saving the long runs to and from the home port. In the past few years



Above: Mother ship *Tropic Queen* leads a big game expedition from Cairns. Left: The fish giving battle here was returned to the deep (it was too small!), but the one below was not so lucky — it measured up to size.

the Cairns marlin men have located great fishing both north and south of Cairns.

The known grounds now cover a 250-mile strip of continental shelf from south of Dunk Isle to north of Cooktown. Cairns still remains the focal point of the steadily growing industry, and at least half the boats operate direct from port, commuting each day over distances from 35 to 40 miles. And the fish caught further afield, using the mother ship system, still are weighed in the northern sport-fishing capital.

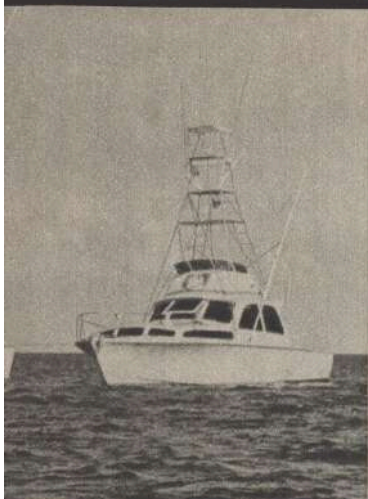
How big is the business? What's it worth to Cairns? Will it grow still further? What are the chances for newcomers seeking "in" on the bonanza?

In order, there are about a dozen families living directly off the marlin fishing business in Cairns. Indirectly, the motels, restaurants, airlines and hire car services also benefit. I've known most of the boat skippers and crewmen since the business started back in 1964, and they're all in the agreement on one point — nobody makes money out of game-fishing boat charters. To make regular wages is to do pretty well.

Instead, it's a way of life, a vocation if you like, taking men into confrontation with the greatest fish in the sea. But as a business proposition it should be forgotten.

Captain George Bransford, now retired from the field, once told me that he'd had a pretty good year. His accountant had just turned up figures showing a profit of \$3,000 — and which plumber in Sydney or Melbourne would work long hours for that?

The reasons are simple. Twin diesel game boats cost from \$25,000 up, and depreciation and running costs extra. Charters on the rest of the year, plus commercial fishing, can improve the annual take and balance running costs, but



Right: Another huge marlin is brought in from the deep. The streaky marks on the side of the fish were caused by the anglers' wire leader net. This marlin was held for some time next to the boat before being returned to the ocean.

not much more.

Yet the Cairns marlin scene is booming and growing at about 50 per cent a year. Each season sees more boats and more clients, for when big black marlin are caught with the regularity and expertise found at Cairns, fishermen the world over know it. The Great Barrier Reef has magnificent sport fishing ALL year, including sailfish and marlin as well as wahoo, dolphin fish, Spanish mackerel, barracuda, tuna, queenfish and an army of others. But it's from September through December that monstrous female marlin sweep by in a spawning run — the fish that bring big-league anglers from all over the world, prepared to pay upwards of \$30,000 dollars on a month or so's fishing from Cairns. They may bring their own skipper and crew, or even an almost feudal retinue of photographers, secretaries and organisers. To hire a mother boat and a game boat and crew will set them back from \$300 to \$400 per day.

Many are straight anglers with less resources. The sport tends to attract powerful personalities, people in executive positions or self-made businessmen who find in the raw power of black marlin an opponent who can sometimes be beaten, but which more often will win. Perhaps putting it too simply, it's the power of the opposition that attracts them.

To date the catch has increased steadily, reflecting two facts of fishing — growing expertise and knowledge in the charter crews and their angler clientele, and the steady increase in boat numbers each season.

Fishing has been so consistently great that the pressure for bookings has more than kept pace with development. Fishermen make a trial visit, and either see or catch the kind of fish which bring them



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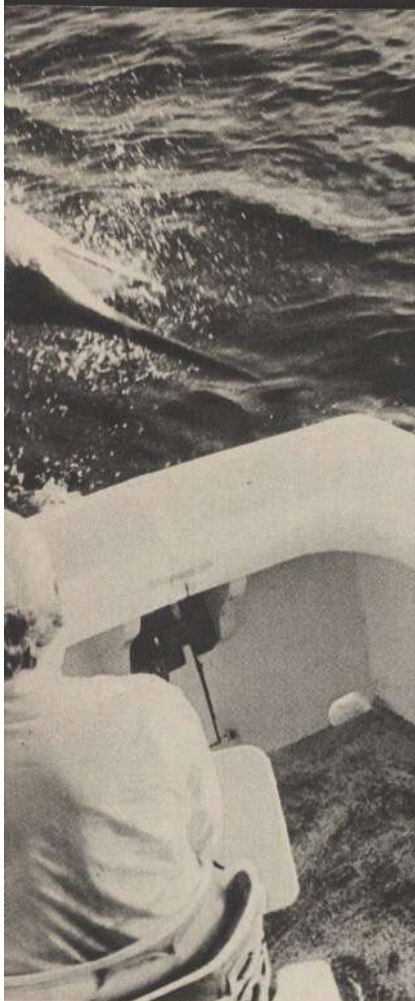
back next year — and the next. Many of those visiting Cairns are regulars, with permanent bookings. In theory, this should make it easy for new charter boats to set up in business, but marlin fishing is a specialised business.

I recall one comment from a Melbourne businessman some years ago. We were heading out to sea on Bransford's new Sea Baby II and I asked the angler what he thought of the boat.

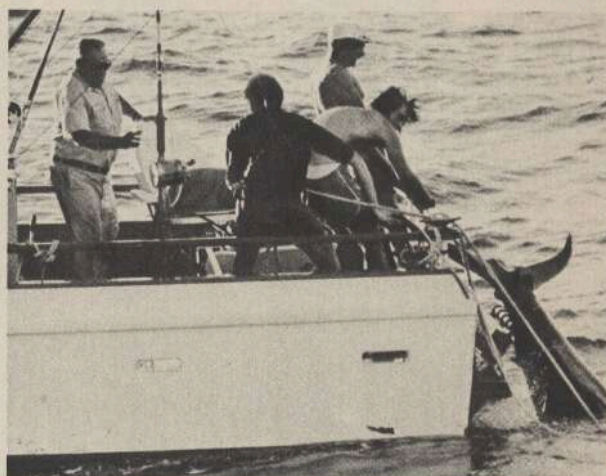
"I guess it's OK," he replied. "But it doesn't make much difference to me, really. You don't hire the boat as much as the man, and I'd go out with Bransford no matter if he only had a rowboat."

You don't become Wimbledon material just by buying an expensive tennis racket. The anglers know who the good fishermen are, and they're the ones they book, if they can. Marlin are a free-roving pelagic fish of the open ocean, and it takes years of training to zero in on the near-intangible indicators the boatmen use.

Most of the crews get to be skippers, and the best possible training for a skipper is a year or two in the cockpit as a crewman. Even the trying of the dozens of different forms of bait, the handling of



The captured marlins weigh anything from 1,000lb up — sometimes the crews are unable to lift the fish into the boat, (above and right), in which case the prey is towed to shore . . . and there are times (left) when the huge fish appear to jump aboard of their own accord!



leader wires, tackle and anglers has to be learnt over a period.

George Bransford has become kind of father-figure of fishing to the Cairns crews, who still go to him for advice. The founding father of the big-marlin businesses at Cairns is a unique character, so quiet and friendly that his considerable talents are sometimes overlooked by those not in on the whole picture.

Retirement took Bransford to a tackle store that already rates amongst the best in Australia, and it's as good a place as any to check for a booking. "George will know" has been the solution to many of the teething problems of the business at Cairns.

I discussed the situation one night on the Tropic Queen with two American sportsmen, Perry Van Vleck and Roger Derbyshire. They are keen repeat visitors.

I asked them what they'd like to see at Cairns, and ideas came pouring. A central booking agency, for a start, so visitors would know where they stood. Perhaps a club deal amongst groups of overseas anglers, buying a local boat and hiring a crew for the season. They pointed out that any decent New Zealand or US crew

would catch fish easily at Cairns. The mother-ship system fitted well, but it needed provision of accurate scales to reduce the need for long trips back to shore with the monstrous catch. A moored barge equipped with water-making machinery, ice machines, generators and workshop.

The mother-ship system suits some crews but not others. It can be much easier on boat and crew, cheaper on fuel and maintenance, to stay at sea. But it carries with it absence from wife and family, the inability to get out of contact with a relatively small group of people in cramped quarters.

The fresh developments in the past two seasons have included a discovery that marlin tend to feed in the afternoons rather than the mornings or at midday. My diary, kept over two-week periods on "mother-ship" explorations these past two seasons, shows a marked increase in strikes from 3 pm on.

I've gone out each year as a guest of New Jersey businessman Bill Chapman. Bill and his crew tended to take things easy through the mornings. We might fish a few hours, returning for lunch, but the serious

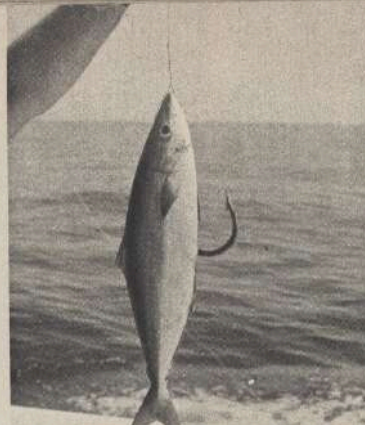
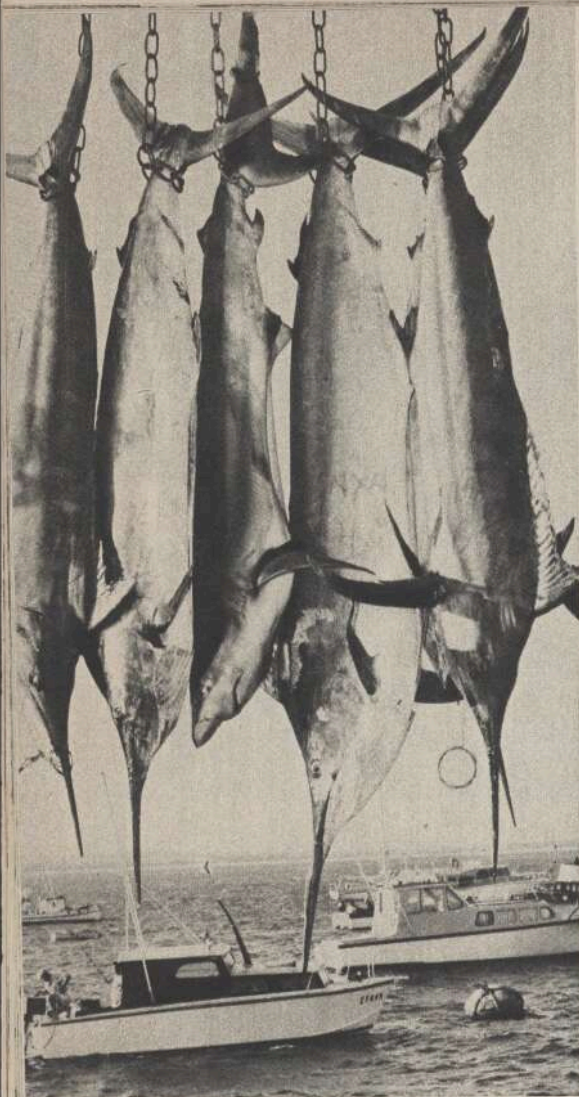
business always came later in the day.

The system gave us ample time for catching our baits, such as rainbow runners, mackerel, or small tuna. Or for idling behind Anderson or Escape Reefs, or up to the Ribbons, skin-diving in a virginal wonderland while the white surf boomed on the shelf a few hundred yards out.

I've seen my share of the Barrier, but I'm unlikely to forget some of those days. Perched high on the tuna tower of the Kingfish as we rode in through the bomboras towards the opal greens and changing blues of the coral, I could pick out monster coral trout and wrasse as they cruised in a couple of feet of water.

Most boats don't run to tuna towers, a stainless steel framework to a cage 20 feet up, but they aid in spotting fish. Many of our marlin were seen some distance off, and that tuna tower soon taught me to marvel at the astonishing distance at which the huge billfish can discern a bait.

Twice I saw the gliding brown forms "switch on" out to port or starboard at distances over 50 yards from the baits. An excited marlin turns on a glowing, iridescent purple, almost an electric blue at



Left: No, not a poor catch — this one is bait only! That's what a good day's fishing will produce — on the far left, 5 marlin and a shark. Below: A six footer is pulled up out of the deep.



the leading edges of the stiff pectoral fins.

These "hungry colours" are part of the spectacle, but the major thrills come during the fight — whether a few minutes, because some anglers and crews are fast and shrewd in taking an early "shot" at gaffing the fish, or whether the fight drags on for hours. Or longer. There have been battles which lasted all afternoon, all night and into the next day.

The problems are immense. One factor is fitness, for it takes a powerful man to last two hours of strenuous exertion on heavy tackle. Unless a big one is handled quickly, the struggle soon deteriorates to a point where the angler is unable to pull hard enough to affect the fish.

An angler's determination often exceeds his physical powers, so the skilled and intelligent conservation of strength — working on a fish without wasting your own power — is a large part of the angling skill required.

On the true giants, the best anyone can do has so far been inadequate. Fish over the thousand pounds mark are brought in regularly, but these are NOT the monsters. Marlin twice as large are seen and hooked every season. I've seen a couple of them, and the Cairns crewmen have seen considerably more. They're no fisherman's myth.

One that Bill Chapman hooked last season was plainly monstrous. The great fish was up by the stern of the boat within 10 minutes, still apparently unhurt and unworried, with the crew getting set to stick the gaff in the shoulder. The head came out of the water within feet of the flying gaff, and the tension almost cracked the air. We all had misgivings about what would break loose when the gaff bit in, for when the tip of the bill was at eye level the gill plates were still under water.

Right then the hook and bait pulled out. The crew were almost sick with reaction

to the loss.

"Big Bill" Chapman was the first to recover.

"C'm'on, fellers. Get another bait in the water. Let's go fishing."

Variants on the same story crop up on every boat in the business at Cairns. Most of them have lost at least one of the fish that would have been the largest marlin ever landed by rod and reel.

That's what gets them. Angler or crewman, they're all fishermen worshipping the raw power and beauty of one of the great fish of the sea. Connected by his line to the mystery and drama of a giant marlin, an angler may be aching with exhaustion and aware that he's losing.

Yet he'll be back next year, and there'll be more boats and new faces — not because of the economics of it, or the publicity, but because he is a fisherman and the fish he seeks is the giant black marlin.