

Hawaii Big Game Fishing Club: A Brief History
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Big game anglers visiting Hawaii were able to charter small launches to fish out of Honolulu Harbor by the early 1900's, but the first true sport fisherman known to have fished in the Hawaiian Islands was one W.C. Bradbury, a prominent member of The Tuna Club of Catalina Island, America's first big-game fishing club. Bradbury apparently traveled to Hawaii from California in 1914 to verify reports of plentiful schools of yellowfin tuna and monstrous "swordfish" (which is what California anglers called marlin).

Whether Bradbury fished off Oahu has not been confirmed, but it is known that he was advised that the "Big Island" was where Hawaii's largest fish were being caught, so he traveled by inter-island steamship to Hilo on Hawaii Island, and soon confirmed the fishing opportunities in Hilo and Kona were even greater than he had anticipated they might be. For that reason, he helped local anglers to found the Hawaii Tuna Club, which was later renamed the Hawaii Big Game Fishing Club. The Reverend W. H. Fenton-Smith and a Mr. H. Gooding Field, who assisted Bradbury during his visit to the Big Island, were named as the first officers of the new club.

Within two years of Bradbury's first visit, the Tuna Club of Catalina Island's archives note that a "proper game-fishing launch" was dispatched to Hawaii from California. The boat first went into service for visiting sportsmen at the new Haleiwa Hotel on the north shore of Oahu, at the end of the rail line from Honolulu.

A report published in 1916 notes that James W. Jump and Fred K. Burnham from California, fishing with Gerrit P. Wilder, the first President of the Hawaii Tuna Club and the organization's Secretary, H. Gooding Field, caught 2 yellowfin tuna, an albacore, 3 mahimahi, 7 ono, 7 ulua, a barracuda and several smaller tuna, off Kihei, Maui, where "a club house and hotel accommodation have been provided for anglers."

"Under the auspices of the Hawaii Tuna Club, fishing competitions are held throughout the year for which Club Buttons and prizes are awarded. Several prominent mainland anglers during the past year have won the coveted buttons," Field reported in the same publication.

Hawaii's stature as a sport-fishing destination grew steadily in the years before World War II. Fishing legends of the time like S. Kip Farrington stopped through the islands and fished with members of the Hawaii Tuna Club in the 1930s, off Oahu. Farrington later reported his positive impressions in his book titled "Pacific Game Fishing."

"More than 10 different varieties of major game fish are caught on the grounds off these islands and in the channels between them at various times of year," Farrington wrote. "The water is exceptionally deep, very beautiful in color and warm, and there are always plenty of birds to lead you to the fish. The two major areas, Waianae, which is about a 50-minute ride by motor from Honolulu, and the grounds off the Kona coast at Kailua on the island of Hawaii, usually have very calm water."

Reports from Hawaii like Farrington's, accelerated interest in fishing in Hawaii, and charter fishing vessels were now available on Oahu and in Kona, on the island of Hawaii. The oceanfront Kona Inn hotel was built in 1928, by the Inter-Island Steamship Navigation Company, in part to house the rising number of anglers traveling to Kona to pursue the great game fish being caught regularly there. Daily weigh-ins, photographed on the lawn fronting the hotel, with charter fishing boats bobbing on their moorings just offshore, brought increasing interest in the destination.

On July 24, 1934 President Franklin Roosevelt visited Hawaii on the naval vessel USS Houston and his presidential archives report that he spent his entire first day in Hawaii fishing off Napoopoo on the Big Island's Kona Coast. Whether the President caught his dinner seems to have been lost to history, but July is one of that coast's most productive months.

The approach of World War II limited ocean access for Hawaii's big game anglers, especially after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. These restrictions essentially put the Hawaii Big Game Fishing Club into mothballs for the duration, but after the war, sport fishermen found their home waters teeming with fish, rebounding after the strict limitations placed on commercial fishing in Hawaii, for the duration of the war.

In 1970 the State of Hawaii opened a new small boat harbor on the Kona Coast at Honokohau, to house the growing sport fishing fleet, long imperiled by the lack of safe refuge in the event of high winds and large surf impacting the open anchorage in Kailua Bay. The new harbor was surrounded by vacant land, which led longtime club members in Kona to think about the creation of a permanent home for the now six decade old fishing club.

The clubhouse, on a knoll overlooking Honokohau Harbor, was completed in the early 1980's and quickly became a social hub for fishermen, and many of the rest of the ocean-oriented members of the Kona community. Statewide membership flourished, fish caught across the archipelago were entered in the annual "Four Flags Tournament," and awards were distributed at an end-of-the-year Annual Banquet that was attended by members from across the state.

The Hawaii Big Game Fishing Club is in the process of yet another resurgence as old timers and younger members of the fishing community, step up to revive the second oldest big game fishing club in America.

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