

Montauk Charter Boat Legend

Captain Michael Potts

Story and Photos by Allan Weisbecker

The Blue Fin IV is just 41 feet overall but she looks gargantuan as she sits high and dry in her cradle at the Montauk Marine Basin. I find Captain Michael Potts by the port quarter, eyeing the seam he's just sealed with a long, thin mahogany wedge smeared with epoxy. He nods. The fit is tight and true. It's late spring and Captain Potts is looking forward to another 12-hour day of yard work, getting his boat ready for the summer charter season.

Captain Potts has run the Blue Fin IV since 1975, when his father

and uncle, who were partners in the Blue Fin I, bought her to accommodate their burgeoning charter business. (Curiously, there has never been a Blue Fin II or III). Over the ensuing 20 years, the Blue Fin IV has earned a reputation as one of the elite boats of the world-renowned Montauk charter fleet.

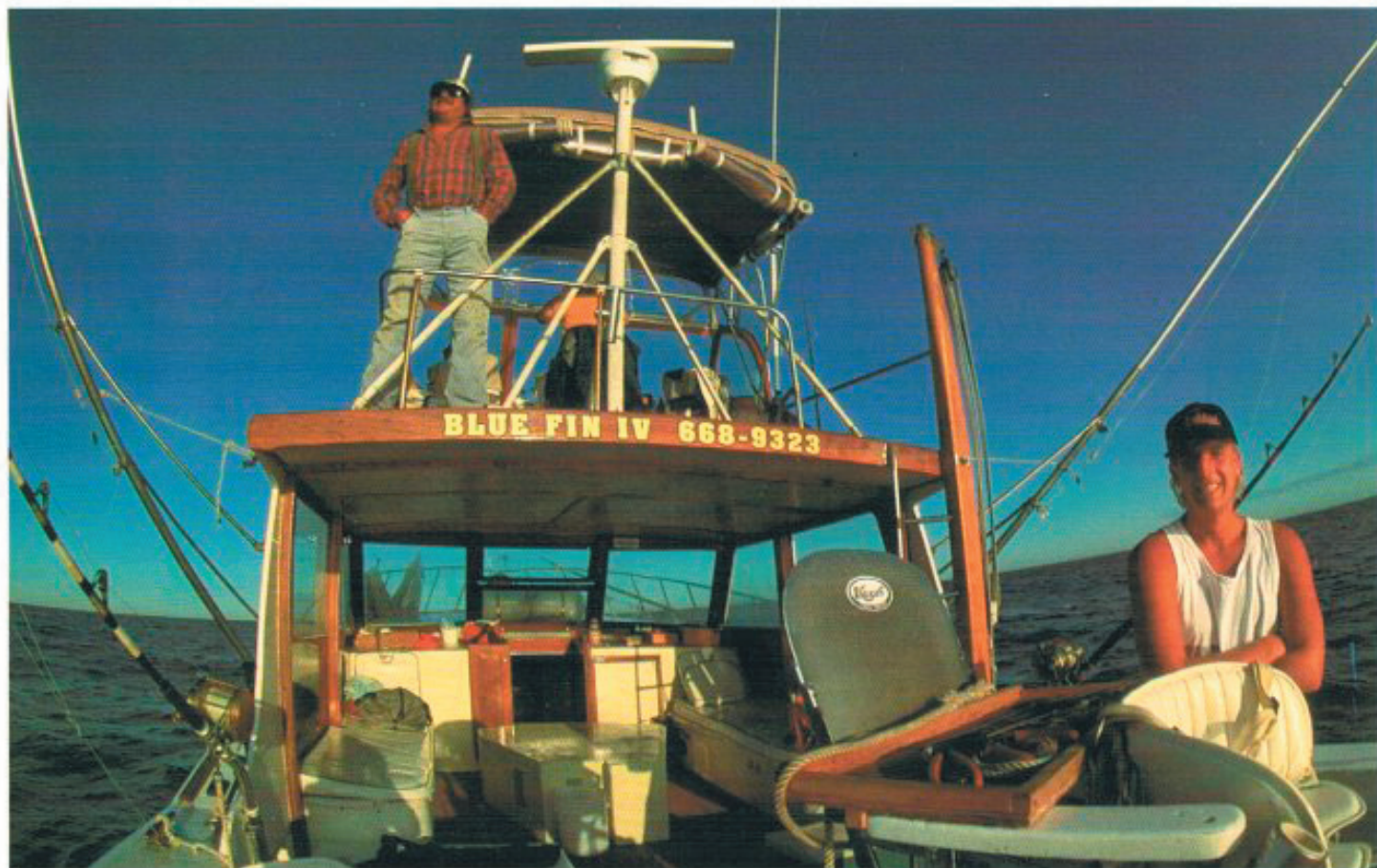
Indeed, I have first-hand knowledge of Captain Potts' expertise. In the fall of 1990, on my first offshore fishing trip, he put me onto a 551-pound bluefin tuna. (The fight and eventual landing of that fish was an experience I'll

never forget).

Of the dozens of Montauk boats hunting giant tuna (greater than 310 pounds) that day, the Blue Fin IV was the only successful one. Considering that a boat can go a decade or more without landing a giant, the fact that Captain Potts brought another home the day before made the feat even more remarkable.

When I ask him to elaborate on his family's history, Captain Potts steps back and contemplates his boat's rugged yet elegant lines.

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Captain Potts on the bridge of the Blue Fin IV, on the lookout for tuna.



Allan Weisbecker

The Blue Fin IV on an inshore bass charter.

“Mom’d fly out and spot the fish, then communicate their location to Dad in the boat.”

“My dad and his brother started coming to Montauk in the mid-’40s to fish tuna and swordfish in the summers,” he says.

“They eventually decided to settle here and were well established when the Montauk fishing scene boomed in the ’50s.

Captain Potts credits part of the family’s early success to his mother, Margaret, who ran her own seaplane charter business. “Mom’d fly out and spot the fish, then communicate their location to Dad in the boat,” he chuckles. “Usually, I’d be strapped in the back of the plane—Mom didn’t like leaving me with babysitters.”

Having experienced the wider perspective of the fishing business from aloft, the youngster began his hands-on, sea-level

“Dad’d take me along as crew,” Captain Potts says, “although I’m not sure how much use I was at first.”

By age 12, the future skipper was a regular fixture on the Montauk charter scene, selling fish from the Blue Fin I’s trips and picking up additional work as a crew member on other boats. And learning, always learning.

Young Mike continued to fish weekends and summers throughout his years in the East Hampton public school system. He first skippered the Blue Fin I in his senior year of high school. In spite of the time he spent at sea, his grades were excellent. Upon graduation he went off to college, earning a degree in environmental biology from the Florida Institute of Technology.

In 1978, Captain Potts attended graduate school at the

Ultimately, however, the pull of the sea won out over academics. In 1981, he was back aboard the Blue Fin IV fulltime. (He bought the boat from his family in 1984).

Over the years, the Blue Fin IV has cultivated a loyal year-round charter clientele that is about equally divided between offshore big game fishermen and inshore enthusiasts bent on the pursuit of stripers, bluefish, porgies, cod and groundfish.

“It was never a conscious decision,” Captain Potts replies when I ask him when he committed to fishing as his life’s work. “As a matter of fact, my parents were completely against it, especially Mom.”

Odd, considering that by the time Captain Potts took over the Blue Fin IV, fishing had been the Potts family’s living for nearly 40 years.

responds, meanwhile mixing up another batch of epoxy. "It's a tough, very competitive business. They of all people knew that."

When asked what makes for a successful charter boat, Captain Potts sighs, shaking his head. "There're a lot of factors, but in the end it's the skipper's ability to find the fish," he says. "You don't put your customers into fish, they'll go elsewhere."

Captain Potts figures that success in finding fish is based on experience, hard work, attention to detail and keeping up with technology. The latter includes space-age navigational equipment, new developments in sonar-based fish finders and satellite communications that produce real-time printouts of water temperature and salinity data. Improvements in fishing gear materials and design—everything from rod and reel to hook and monofilament—increase the odds that once hooked, the fish will be landed.

I ask if there's maybe another factor that has contributed to the Blue Fin IV's success. I'm fishing and Captain Potts grins, rising to the bait. "You're talking about your tuna, right?"

I nod, recalling how the morning I caught the fish Captain Potts had spent a good 45 minutes jockeying with the fleet, looking for a spot to anchor up that "felt right." Then, after an hour or so of chumming, he came down from the bridge, commenting that he "had an inkling" we'd soon see some action. A few minutes later I was in the chair, hooked up to what he and mate Dennis Gaviola referred to as "a dinosaur."

"There's also what I guess you'd call instinct," Captain Potts says. "All successful skippers have



Allan Weisbecker's 551-pound bluefin tuna, caught aboard the Blue Fin IV.

it, whether they know it or not."

I ask if there's anything about the fishing business he doesn't like. "Well," Captain Potts answers, "I'm not crazy about the alarm clock going off at four every morning." He pauses, glancing toward the harbor mouth. "On the other hand, most days I get to see the sunrise at sea. How many people have that as part of their job?" X