

SATURDAY, JULY 3, 2004 PAS

NATURE COAST

OUTDOORS / LEISURE

The rookie survives . . .

... doesn't throw up and actually manages to catch fish in the Gulf of Mexico.

CRYSTAL RIVER — Why don't you join me on a fishing trip?

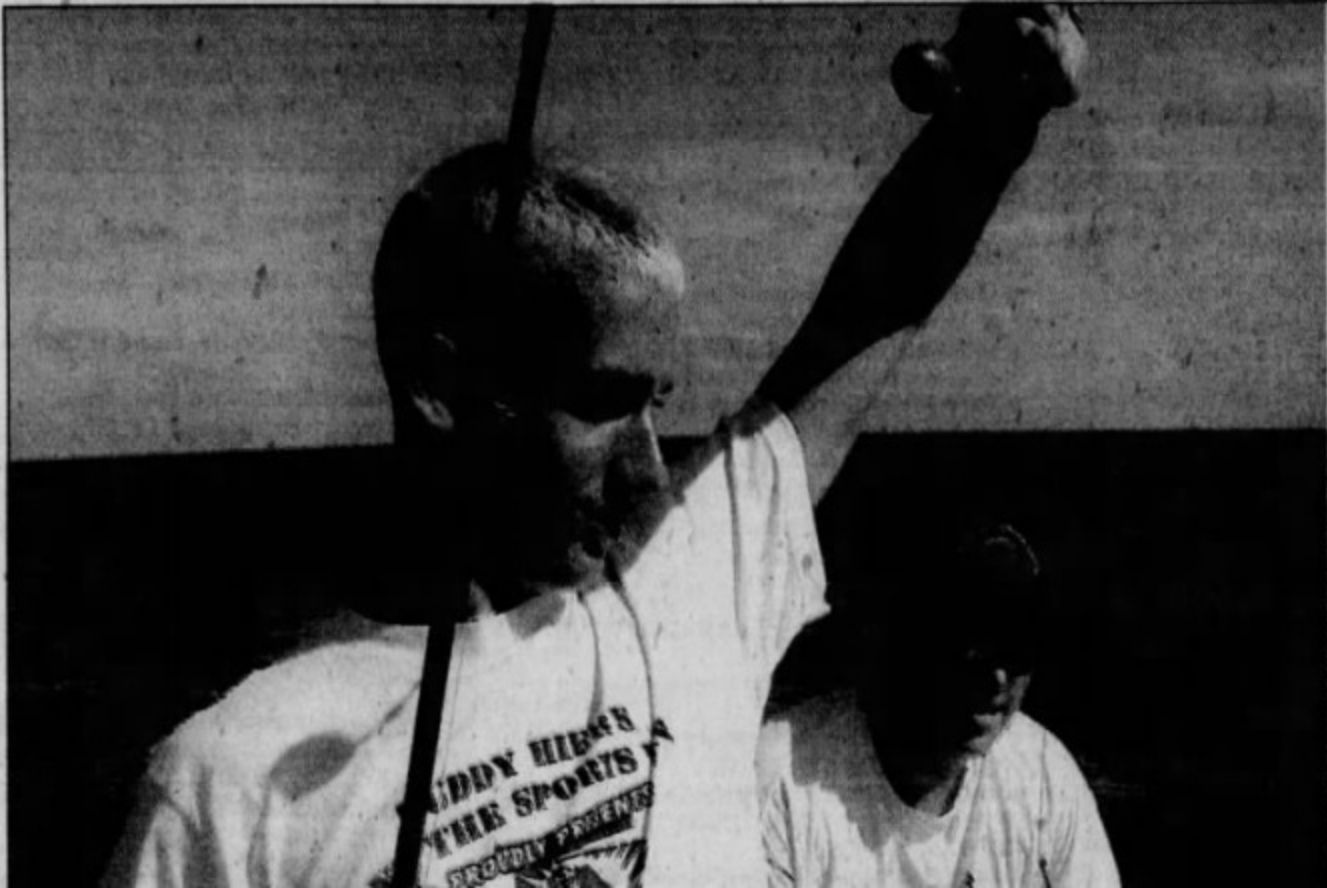
I strained my ear in the telephone receiver to listen for more. An outdoors enthusiast? Yes. Fisherman? No. At least not yet.

Growing up, I loved the outdoors, but no one in my family had ever fished. As a Girl Scout, I went backpacking in the Swiss Alps. I camped and pitched many a tent in the pouring rain and subfreezing ice and snow of the somewhat arctic-like Midwest.

With my parents and three siblings, we enjoyed boating, sailing and canoeing in Wisconsin, including white-water rafting at Shotgun Eddy's on the Wolf River. The latter culminates an all-day two-person raft trip with a slingshot over Smokey Falls for a 15-foot plummet. That sounds short but feels like you're riding a launched water balloon that eventually splats to the ground.

I rowed in college, breathing in frost and gliding across the water in the 4:30 a.m. slivers of moonlight.

But no, I had never fished before. Here I was listening to Crystal River High's Billy Bass ask me if I'd like to go on an offshore grouper fishing charter with a few high school boys.



Bass, the Crystal River junior varsity football coach until recently, created a fishing club with fellow history teacher Harold Wingate last fall to give students a chance to experience fishing firsthand.

And it worked. Thirty-eight students, including a varsity quarterback, showed up for the monthly meetings to talk about fishing and view photos.

A casting contest on the football field capped the school year. The top four earned a free trip with Crystal River's Rich Hinde, who owns Action Charters.

It was 6:45 a.m. when we met for the trip at Twin Rivers Marina. Bass, Hinde, former Crystal River assistant football coach Forest Stillwell, 16-year-olds Kyle Daquanna and Greg Bunts and I comprised the crew.

Thirty miles out of the Gulf of Mexico was our destination. On the 27-foot Baha Cruiser, we traveled the long channel, where the ocean floor was carved out like ice cream in the 1960s to make the passage deep enough to travel.

We passed through the slow no-wake zone for manatee crossing that is partitioned with posts lined up like birthday candles counting down to Post 1. Then we were free to go.

One look at the fish finder with coordinates provided by his GPS, Hinde had us on course for one of his 600 fishing holes. The



Crystal River High student Kyle Daquanna, 16, holds up a keeper grouper in front of Forest Stillwell. Daquanna is part of the school's fishing club, started by teachers Billy Bass and Harold Wingate, and went on the fishing trip with *Times* reporter Dawn Reiss. Previously, Reiss had plenty of outdoors experience but none with a fishing pole.

boys, subdued by the early-morning start, sat sleepily, trying to keep still as we bounced around the open water.

"If everyone knew how to anchor, they'd catch more fish," Hinde said as he started to drop 50 feet of chain and anchor. "It's all in knowing how to anchor, and the only way to know that is experience."

As I soon found out, the key to anchoring is knowing how winds, tides and moon phases change the currents. On this particular day, the tide wasn't running hard but laying with the wind, which meant anchoring to the northeast, between 45 and 60 degrees.

"Guys who go out once a week won't know that," Hinde said. "It's about fine-tuning and knowing the bottom to find where the fish are."

With that, Hinde handed me a pole as I looked blankly back, gently reminding him I had never fished before.

"So you really don't know how to use it?"

he said back in disbelief.

"Nope," I replied. "I have never used one in my life."

So he baited the hook and taught me how to guide the line down so I wouldn't tangle it. After the first half hour, I caught a few grunt fish and felt my stomach sway with each swell. I hadn't ever been out in open water this far. I tried to calm my churning stomach before finally asking if it would be all right to be sick over the side.

"There's a bucket if you need one," Hinde said, not too long after Stillwell succumbed.

The fresh air that accompanied moving to a new hole settled my stomach, saving me the embarrassment, just as Daquanna turned over the side of the boat for another look at his breakfast.

That's when Hinde chimed in, "Why

don't you do that in the bucket so I can get a good, hot meal."

Which only made Daquanna laugh and choke more.

"Yeah, then he wanted me to keep blowing chunks so I could turn up a meal by attracting the fish in the water," Daquanna said, who never did take a Dramamine. "I always throw up. I just do it and feel better."

His counterpart, Bunts, had prepared for the trip with ginger ale and seemed to be doing fine, except for an empty fishing line.

Sure enough, after his ceremonial regurgitation, Daquanna returned to his typical, animated self. He secured a few "big ones," including a 23-inch grouper, and threw back smaller ones before I could take his picture. Bass showed his marksmanship with several large catches.

I became nicknamed the "Grunt Queen"

with my ability to catch the blue- and yellow-striped fish that I thought were too pretty to use for bait. My big catch came when my second sand shark — a 2-foot silver and grey looking bullet — did not get away. I fought the line until I was able to bring up the worthy opponent and toss him back after ceremonial photos were taken.

We made many fine catches that day: remora, grouper, grunt and shark. Except for Bunts, who didn't catch a single keeper, a grouper 22 inches or longer, and was threatened that his lack of bounty would force him to swim in.

We moved along, traveling to many fishing spots, getting a chance to see sea turtles and crabs along the way. After catching 50 or so fish, many we threw back, we headed back in, content and tired to come fish another day.



Left, Greg Bunts, 16, leans on fellow Crystal River High student Kyle Daquanna after a long day of fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. Rich Hinde, right, led the outing, showing the group some of his 600 fishing holes.

