



VBAC HISTORY

By Greg Wehner

Fishermen tell the best tales about the ones that got away. I have mine. I hooked a king mackerel from the Virginia Beach oceanfront, but a cigarette boat named the Rudee Rocket, freaked the fish out, causing it to bite through the 50-pound monofilament leader, and it got away. Tales like this were told for years on the old Virginia Beach steel pier in the late 50s and early 60s. A group of men fishing at the pier in 1959 were sharing those tales when the idea of a new fishing club in Virginia Beach was spawned.

In 1985, Josh Vaughn, one of the founding members of the Virginia Beach Anglers Club, shared his memories of what it was like. While he could not recall who the first person to say, "Why can't we have a fishing club here instead of having to go all the way to Norfolk," he could spit off names like Sawyer, Dant, Crockett, Morse, Stevens, Davenport and Walker, as those who helped get it started. Mr. Vaughn said when the fishing was slow, they all shared stories. The camaraderie angered members of another local anglers club, he said, and it led to heated exchanges to the point that one of the members of that club taunted the men and called them the Steel Pier Angler's Club. Although that name did not stick, the club was formed under a new name—The Virginia Beach Anglers Club—with a few rules. Money interests would never influence the club, and the club would never be a sounding board for any group or person. Talk of politics was forbidden, and discrimination was frowned upon. So, it did not matter if a person fished from a pier, the beach or boat, nor did it matter if they were using eight-n-bait or a cork bobber with a bamboo pole. They were fishermen - all the same.

In the beginning, the meetings were held at the Virginia Beach Convention Center, the old Dome. During the first pre-organization meeting, Mr. Vaughn made a motion to call the club the Virginia Beach Anglers Club, and it stuck. At the club's next meeting, the charter officers were elected. Serving as the president was Charlie Dant, vice president was Jake Sawyer, and the secretary was Andy Holland. The club's emblem was approved two months later, in February 1960. On it were the old and new lighthouses which represent the City of Virginia Beach. Two boats are seen trolling in the background and a surf fisherman is in the foreground—both elements representing the diversity of the club.

For the first 15 years, men like Mr. Dant, Ellis Mills, Jay Smith and Fred Rushin served as presidents, but in 1974, Betty Smith became the first woman to serve in the spot. Diversity and equality rang true, even back then. In 1960, the club entered the Ocean City Cup in New Jersey. It was considered the “world series” of surf casting. The prize was a tall trophy with a silver Chalice that was valued at approximately \$150,000. When compared with the Stanley Cup back then, the trophy had a higher value. For years, the champions were able to take the trophy home. But that ended when the appraisal was done on the trophy, and it was since kept in Ocean City. That first year that the club entered the casting tournament, it finished in fifth—the worst it ever placed—but every years since, it finished either first or second. Along with participating in casting tournaments, the VBAC participated in fishing tournaments since day one.

In 1960, the club finished first in the Cape Hatteras Anglers Club Fishing Tournament. The club went on to win it again in 1967. VBAC teams continued to compete at tournaments in Ocracoke, Nags Head, Hatteras Village and Long Beach Island—which club members only began attending recently. The club hosted a few surf tournaments in Virginia Beach, but security at Dam Neck and restrictions along city beaches curtailed that. In the late 70s and into the 80s, the club ran a small boat marlin tournament that was very successful and allowed the club, to this day, to have a very comfortable treasury. As for freshwater fishing, the club hosted a bass tournament in the 60s, though details of the event are sparse. Even though political speak was frowned upon all of those years, club members became key figures in the fight against a saltwater fishing license and on fishing regulations. Today, members still speak up on major issues involving regulations and fishing quotas.

Members have been instrumental in educating the public about fishing, whether through hosted tournaments for children, or from a booth at the yearly boat show. While many events, such as the small boat marlin tournament, have been replaced with others or written out of the equation, the club is going strong, thanks to the help of generations of individuals who poured their heart and soul into it. When we all set aside our differences for the sake of the club, and focus on the things that matter—like catching fish and sharing stories about the ones that got away—our club can continue to thrive and will be around for generations to come.