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Stuart Sailfish Club

The Stuart Sailfish Club differs from sailfish societies created by sportsmen for recreational purposes. It was organized purposely by the Stuart Junior Chamber of Commerce as a civic agency to bring fishing tourists to Martin County during the depression years of the mid-1930's.

In 1934 at the suggestion of Bert Bittan, then owner of the El-Bit-Lor Apartments in Stuart, the Jaycees adopted the idea of giving to visiting sportsmen bronze, silver, gold, and diamond lapel buttons, according to the size of boated sailfish. Button competition had been originally initiated by the Tye Club of British Columbia, and had proved successful in bring anglers from all over the world to the salmon waters of the Campbell River on Vancouver Island.

One of the first activities of the newly-formed sailfish club was to begin a Winter Tournament and a Summer Tournament to provide competitive sport for anglers. In addition to lapel buttons and handsome scroll certificates attesting sailfish catches, the club began to award Bronze Sailfish Statuettes in both tournaments for (1) the longest sailfish caught by a man, (2) the longest sailfish caught by a woman, and (3) the heaviest sailfish caught.

In January, February, and March, 1941, the largest sailfish run in Florida's history occurred off the St. Lucie Inlet, at Stuart. In this unprecedented run that Lyons (1948) called the "great sailfish saturnalia", all sailfishing records were broken. Records of the Stuart Sailfish Club show an excess of 5,000 sailfish caught in the 90-day period. Many single boats made catches as high as 20 sails in one day. On the peak day, more than 200 sailfish were boated from 40 charter craft and private cruisers. Many real sportsmen let their sailfish go free, but thousands were slaughtered only to be dumped into the river, carted off by garbage collectors, or used for shark bait.

Captain Curt Whiticar, a sailfishing guide, supplied the answer of the Stuart Sailfish Club to this wanton killing. He suggested and later designed an expensive button to be given for letting sailfish live. Anglers soon began to compete for the prized Release Button in preference to all the rest.

Besides the Release Button, the Stuart Sailfish Club awards a Bronze Button to anglers who catch a sailfish under 7 feet 6 inches in length, a Silver Button for those that measure 7 feet 6 inches to less than 8 feet, and a Gold Button for sailfish measuring 8 feet and over. Most sportsmen naturally prefer the finest one of all, the Release Button. This puts them in a class by themselves. "In other words", says Ernie Lyons, editor of the *Stuart News*, "Release Buttons are worn by a League of Honor among sailfishermen, pledged to the sport—and not to the wasteful killing of the species."

The Stuart Sailfish Club started the Light Tackle Sailfish Tournament in 1955. This contest between individual anglers was designed to be an annual affair.