

SPORTS

Their prize catch was set to bring in \$3.5 million. Then the fish was disqualified

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By Bill Chappell



At first, the Sensation's large marlin looked to be the tournament's winning catch. But after the fish was held up on the scale, Big Rock announcer Tommy Bennett said, "It would appear that this fish has been bitten by a shark."

Screenshot by NPR/YouTube

Out of 271 boats in the Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament, the Sensation brought in the biggest blue marlin, and the only one weighing more than 500 pounds. But rather than collecting a \$3.5 million payout in the fishing tournament on the North Carolina coast, the boat's catch was disqualified because it was mutilated — bitten by a shark or another animal.

The initial appearance of the large marlin, later given an unofficial weight of 619.4 pounds, on late Saturday night set off loud cheers from spectators at the docks in

Morehead City. It looked to be the tournament's winning catch, coming from the last boat to return after an hours-long fight — a dramatic end to the popular contest in its 65th year.

Captain Greg McCoy and the Sensation team had been soaring as their boat backed into the dock, carried by the promise of a windfall and the story of the day they won it all. Instead, their apparent victory was put on hold, as officials examined a bite near the marlin's tail.

"I've never really been a money guy, but that paycheck would have been real nice. But you just, you know, we're not gonna get our plaque on the Big Rock fountain there," McCoy told local TV station WNCT. "It's a tough pill to swallow."

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"We didn't see a single thing" swim near the fish, Sensation owner Ashley Bleau said on Tuesday, speaking to Pirate Radio TV. He added that the damage to the marlin was "superficial."

Bleau has filed a protest over the disqualification.

Would that it were so simple

Those aboard Sensation knew the fish was big enough to win as soon as they saw it, McCoy told WNCT.

"Guys, it's really simple," Big Rock announcer Tommy Bennett had told thousands of people who waited with anticipation at Big Rock Landing, as McCoy's boat neared its slip. "If it's more than 500 pounds, Sensation is the winner."

Day 6 of the 65th Annual Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament 3



YouTube

But, Bennett said after the marlin was held up on the scale, "It would appear that this fish has been bitten by a shark."

As shouts erupted from the crowd, he added, "We'll get it sorted out here in just a second."

It wasn't until Sunday morning that Big Rock's organizers announced that Sensation's fish "is disqualified due to mutilation caused by a shark or other marine animal. It was deemed that the fish was mutilated before it was landed or boated and therefore it was disqualified."

With the large fish ruled out, first place went to Sushi, a boat that brought in a blue marlin weighing 484.5 pounds. It won more than \$2.7 million, falling short of the \$739,500 bonus for the first boat to catch a marlin over 500 pounds.

Discussing the protest he filed Sunday morning, Bleau says that he trusts organizers to undertake their due diligence.

"They've got five days to basically come to some kind of resolution," he said, adding that the next step in the process would call for an arbitrator.

Organizers cite rules, and precedent

The ruling to throw out Sensation's catch, organizers said, "is consistent with prior decisions made by the tournament in similar circumstances over the last 65 years."

"IGFA rules apply regarding mutilated fish," the tournament's rules state, referring to the International Game Fish Association.

That sentence appears in a section of the rules dealing with "weight alteration," regarding the potential use of weights, ice, and water. But the IGFA offers a different reasoning behind not allowing mutilated fish.

"If a fish has a chunk taken out of it, whether it be by a boat or another fish or shark or whatever, it's not going to be fighting to its full potential. So that's the rationale behind it," the IGFA's Jack Vitek said in 2019.

Critics say other mangled fish have won

"In a nutshell, I think the rule needs to be done away with," Bleau said. He notes that, while the Big Rock tournament follows the IGFA rules about fish mutilation, it doesn't adhere to others, such as limits on switching anglers who are fighting a fish.

"It's about as clear as mud," he said of the rule about mutilation.

Bleau and other critics of the tournament's decision to disqualify Sensation's catch cited the 2019 contest, when a boat called Top Dog brought in a 914-pound blue marlin that was both enormous and in bad shape. Unable to bring the fish fully aboard through the fish door in its stern, the crew brought the marlin to the weigh station with the fish's rear half dangling over the water, its tail lashed upward with ropes.

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Video and images from the scene show the 15-foot marlin had extensive damage from "exhaust rash" along one side, from the boat's engine running below it as its lower half hung out over the stern. One Top Dog team member said afterward that his biggest fear as the fish was lifted up on the scales was that the marlin might rip apart. Still, the fish was declared that year's winner, and remains the tournament record-holder.



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