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Local boy becomes a 'Marlin Man'

Smith column: 'Big Brother' takes J.J. Barajas fishing and he lands a big catch at a tournament in Mexico.



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Click on the photo to view a slideshow of the Stars and Stripes tournament.

TUSTIN -- J.J. Barajas had never been on an

airplane. He had never been on a deep-sea fishing boat. He had never spent a weekend away from his mother to stay nights in a resort hotel so luxurious that the clean towels were folded into cotton zoo animals.

J.J. is 10 years old. A "little brother" in Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County, J.J. got to take part in the 13th Stars and Stripes fishing and golf tournament, which raised more than \$1.5 million for five Southern California charities.

This past July 4 weekend the Lincoln Elementary fifth-grader realized all of his newfound independence that came from his recent fishing trip from Chileno Bay off Los Cabos, Mexico.

People call the kid "Marlin Man" now, not because of a fish tale but because of a charming story of this young man and the sea.

"If I told my friends why," he said, "they wouldn't believe me."

More than 500 locals and eventgoers on 45 boats competed in the two-day fishing tournament on Baja's renowned Sea of Cortez. J.J. and his "big brother" Sean Pritchett, a sales and marketing executive for Orange County-based Power Crunch-maker BioNutritional Research Group, were aboard Minerva IV, a 40-foot custom sportfisher.

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An hour from shore, the boat's engine failed. Windy conditions and an approaching storm made for rough seas. Everyone on board except the captain, a crewmember and J.J., became ill, and the boat turned back without even baiting a hook.

"The second day, everyone except J.J. was seasick and not wanting to go out," recalled Pritchett, 28. "So I took a lot of Dramamine and went with him. I wasn't going to disappoint him because I just didn't want to throw up."

So they cruised 27 miles out into the ocean and settled on a fishing spot between the Gorda Banks and Estiladera. The seas were calm after the storm. Within two minutes of casting their lines, J.J. got his first bite.

"I'd never caught a fish before even though I tried," J.J. said. "In April I went fishing for the first time in Reno (Nev.), stood in cold water and didn't even get a nibble."

J.J. climbed into the marine chair, his sneakers barely touching the footrest, the rod and reel secured between his legs and Pritchett shouting, "Reel! Reel!"

"The marlin was so strong and fighting that it could've pulled me in the water!" said J.J. "It was jumping out of the water, and when it got closer, all this water was coming in the boat."

Pritchett thought about helping the "little brother" he has known for almost two years. But Pritchett held off, letting J.J. work, pull, strain and keep cranking to land his first catch on his own.

J.J.'s eyes widened at the spectacular sight of the fish. It was as long as 4-foot, 10-inch J.J. is tall. It's silvery blue body was as wide as J.J.'s hips. The marlin, which was released, must've been nearly 50 pounds.

For the Pop Warner wide receiver, this fish became his most memorable catch. "I'll never forget it," J.J. said.

That day, J.J. caught seven more marlin and one tuna. "Oh, and Sean caught a tuna too — one tuna and no other fish," said J.J., his voice carrying the pride of an accomplished angler.

Between catches, J.J. reached into the boat's baitwell and handed a live fish to the captain who baited the hook. He wasn't squeamish. The thrill of his next catch excited him, despite his shoulders feeling sore and his hands chafed from tightly clutching his 30- and 50-pound Penn International rod and reel.

He was patient while awaiting the next tug on the 80-pound test line. He dreamed of the possibilities, the bigger and more stubborn fish out there who'd fight him.

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Each catch made J.J. proud. He leaned over the back of the boat to watch the captain unhook the fish, said a little goodbye and watched it dive back into the deep sea.

"People on the trip were calling me and telling me how well J.J. did, and I couldn't believe it," said his mother, Zulyana Covarrubias, 26, of La Habra. "I was so proud. He caught all those fish on his own."

A single mother who works at the Big Brothers Big Sisters office in Tustin knows she could have never afforded to give her son the experience he had on that June weekend.

She proudly showed off photos from the Stars and Stripes event: J.J. with his marlin trophy that he needed both hands to carry, J. J. at the harbor and J.J. smiling with Pritchett.

With nine fish to his credit, J.J. placed second – a local fisherman took first place – in the tournament. He also won a trophy for being the youngest angler to catch a fish.

"They gave me my own rod, too," he said, eager to go fishing again.

He used to have a fear of flying. He used to be afraid to be on the rough, open ocean. He used to be scared to be away from home.

But J.J. is braver now that the boy has

become a "Marlin Man."

Contact the writer: masmith@ocregister.com

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