



BY MICHAEL PETERS

# SIGHTLINES

## Sportfish Rules

THE DICEY DESIGN CANONS OF THE MODERN, TWO-FISTED AMERICAN BATTLEWAGON.

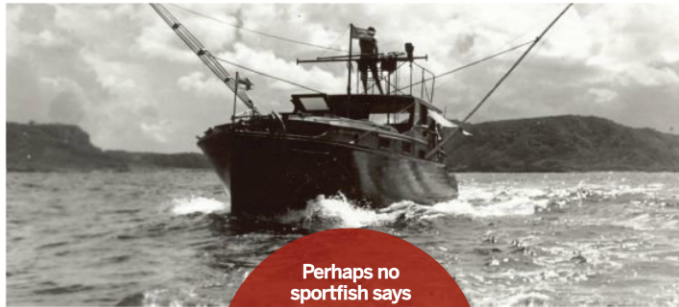
**I**tell Europeans that to understand Americans, you must realize that at heart we are all just a bunch of Texans. We are big, we are loud, and we don't like being told what to do. And we love our pickup trucks. Give a Texan a little bit of money and he'll get a truck. Give him some more money and he'll get a big-ass truck with oversized knobby tires, brush guards, and a dozen fog lamps mounted on a roll bar. Give him even more money and he will get a sportfish.

Without a doubt the most uniquely American boat ever invented is the sportfish. It is meant to take a beating and work hard, no matter what the weather throws at it. It represents man against the sea and all the freedom and machismo that that battle entails. Its very image has been honed over the years into its present form with a long foredeck, modified Carolina flair, pillbox cabin, and swept-back tower. Nothing fancy, no bullshit. A man's boat.

Have you ever noticed that every modern sportfish looks about the same? That's because the design credo is tight, very tight, and if you stray far from the formula, you will not make the club. There are rules to this game and you must abide: No nonskid, even on the foredeck: easier to clean the fish blood. No bowrail: spoils the lines and makes you look like a sissy. No anchor: you are fishing, not eating lunch. The tallest tower you can get: if you are prone to nose bleeds, your blood cleans up easily without all that nonskid. And a cockpit six inches off the water, with 27-inch coamings: don't worry about the cockpit swamping, gotta be able to reach the water you know.

The voodoo that surrounds these boats gets even spookier. A wooden boat attracts fish better. A flat stern attracts fish better. Nothing's better than an old Rybovich or Merritt. Try chroming one propeller tip to raise more fish. Heck, some guys have even painted a school of fish on their bottom paint. I don't know if any of this stuff works or if it is all superstition. I have my own theories.

Onboard a famous battlewagon equipped with all the requisite



Perhaps no sportfish says machismo as well as Hemingway's *Pilar*. What do you think of the modern American sportfish? Share your thoughts with Michael at [inbox@pmymag.com](mailto:inbox@pmymag.com)

gear, I was granted a learning experience a few years ago. The boat ran close to 40 knots and sparkled with her glossy decks. Offshore and at speed, I went up the ladder to the flying bridge. I stood at the top of the ladder and contemplated my life options. Behind me was a single rail, with three feet

of open, unprotected clearance beneath it. The nonskid-free deck ended below the rail in a waterfall shape, directly over the fighting chair. To port was another cavernous gap in the rail about four feet long. And going forward the only thing possible to grab if I faltered was the throttle!

I risked my life and lunged forward without killing myself. About then I realized why there was no nonskid anywhere on the boat. It was so *my* blood could be washed off easily! *This* was the boat we were supposed to use as a benchmark for designing a new line for the folks at Rybovich? So practical!

A surprising fact about sportfish is that a full 50 percent are bought by guys that never fish. They buy the boat for its image and manly looks, complete with tower and outriggers. It's the rich man's pickup truck and nothing looks badder at the dock. Who needs Viagra when you can boast that your tower won't even fit under the local bridge? It's the ultimate phallic symbol. It's no wonder the Italians can't get this sportfish thing right. They keep trying to overcivilize it. It's not supposed to make sense or be too cushy. It's about being American and making a statement. It is its own breed.

A couple of years ago I was introduced to a man that held the record for the most marlin ever caught. We were discussing the next boat he wanted built and I asked him all the regular questions about coaming height, helm position, backing speed, etc. You know, all the important sportfish stuff. His answer to everything was plain and simple, "I just want a pretty boat."

Nothing else much mattered to him, I guess. Indeed, I got the impression from talking to him that he could catch a marlin from a raft. Now *he* was the real deal. □