Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament in Kona

By Linda Jane Kelley

Note from Dr. Richard Kelley: For this week’s edition, I asked my daughter Linda Jane Kelley, a resident of Kailua-Kona, to comment on the Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament, which takes place there every summer – this year’s event comes to an end today.

Hawaii is well known as the host to many prestigious and widely viewed sporting events, but perhaps the first competition to put the Aloha State on the global sports map was the Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament (HIBT). For over 50 years Peter Fithian and his wife Roberta – better known as “Bobbi” – have dedicated themselves to the tournament and Hawaii’s tourism. Their vision, dedication and teamwork are some of the reasons for the tournament’s fame and longevity.

Peter Fithian, C.M. “Charlie” Cooke III, Porter Dickenson, Dudley Lewis, Desmond Stanley and Edward Sultan were the six visionary men who founded what is now viewed as the grandfather of most big game fishing tournaments. Their goal – to showcase to the world the Big Island’s then little-known, wonderful fishing grounds and surrounding beauty – was the force behind their creation of the HIBT in 1959.

While growing up in Honolulu during the 1960s, I fondly remember my father, Dr. Richard Kelley, and my brother, Dr. Charles “Chuck” Kelley, traveling to Kailua-Kona to fish in the tournament. They came back home loaded with pictures and stories about Pacific blue marlin caught, the ones that got away and encounters with some of the celebrities who also participated, including actors Lee Marvin, Richard Boone and Jonathan Winters. (Note the snapshots from the family archives below.)

Peter Fithian first came to Hawaii in 1948 as a midshipman on a U.S. Navy cruiser. After studying hotel management at Cornell University he returned to the Islands in 1955 and managed the Kona Inn. (Yes, the Kona Inn was actually a beautiful, idyllic hotel back then and not the shopping center it is today.)

It was in 1959 that Peter turned his love for sport fishing and Hawaii’s tourism into the Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament.

Every August I see Peter, now in his 80s and still tournament director, walking around the Kailua-Kona pier greeting anglers, supervising the logistics of the boats and teams and providing commentary as the afternoon weigh-ins are conducted. Bobbi, tournament co-director, graciously

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greets family members and guests, answers questions from the media, coordinates and escorts numerous activities and personally tends to visiting dignitaries and government officials. Alongside their outstanding crew of volunteers, Peter and Bobbi work endlessly to ensure that all the teams and crews have the best tournament experience possible.

This year 40 teams from 11 countries competed in the tournament. Of particular interest were the four teams from China along with a contingent of dignitaries and government officials. China is interested in sending more visitors to experience deep-sea fishing in Hawai‘i and is exploring developing the same industry in Asia. All week long Bobbi Fithian assisted the 30 Chinese visitors and even escorted them to Honolulu for a final shopping trip before they returned home.

Besides the great fishing, the HIBT is the occasion for a weeklong series of events, including a parade, silent auction, expo, opening ceremonies, a fashion show luncheon, daily weigh-ins at the Kailua-Kona pier, Science Night, a golf tournament and awards banquet. Guests and family members accompanying the teams have a range of activities and sightseeing opportunities to choose from while the boats are out fishing all day long.

Peter and Bobbi both own and operate successful visitor-related businesses, but for over half a century they have made the time to oversee the details of the HIBT. They not only are actively involved in the tournament as its directors but view it as a way to promote Hawai‘i and help bring more visitors to our beautiful state.

Peter and Bobbi are also mindful of showcasing not just the outstanding fishing in Hawaiian waters but everything the state has to offer. They encourage tournament participants and guests to visit historical sites on the island, patronize local eateries, purchase souvenirs and local treats to take home, and to visit other islands as well. Watching the care and Aloha they extend to every participant, guest and volunteer who crosses their paths is an amazing experience. They give everyone who approaches them their full attention.

The Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament is one of the many events that help drive Hawaii’s economy. Like other sporting and culturally oriented events, it provides national and international media exposure for Hawai‘i and helps the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority (HTA) showcase Hawaiian culture and promote each island’s distinctive characteristics.

According to HTA statistics, sporting events – including the HIBT, Sheraton Hawai‘i Bowl, Honolulu Marathon, Ironman World Championship, Pro Bowl, PGA and LPGA events, and the Queen Lili‘uokalani Canoe Race – generate spending of more than $200 million a year in Hawai‘i.

Competitors do not usually travel here alone. Coaches, family members, team support staff, members of the media, boosters and fans accompany them as well. In addition, viewers worldwide watch these events via television and streaming Internet, often seeing Hawai‘i’s beauty and warm climate during their own cold and wet seasons, which helps influence vacation plans.

The Outrigger ‘ohana recognizes the rich history of the Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament and extends a warm “Aloha and mahalo” to Peter and Bobbi Fithian for their decades of hard work to ensure the tournament’s continuing success and for their support of Hawai‘i tourism.