

Lucky Lonnie . . .

By: Captain Ted Wilson

The 17th Annual Swamp Guides Ball was held January 27th and once again was a huge success. "The Swamp" is a fishing tournament for guides put on by guides and fished by guides, along with some very talented angler friends. The Swamp Guides Ball is essentially the largest block party for backcountry anglers on earth, with over 500 people attending the kick-off festivities on the spectacular Lor-e-lei beach. All proceeds are donated to the Don Hawley Foundation which primarily exists to help Monroe County fishing guides during times of need.

This year, 73 teams consisting of two anglers each blasted from the Lor-e-lei docks in hopes of a victory . They were in pursuit of redfish, bonefish and snook, all being 20 inches or longer to count 100 points each. The team with the most species and most points wins. In 17 years, there have only been two years that at least one team did not catch all three species. This year, four of the teams achieved the critical objective of catching and releasing at least one redfish, snook and bonefish.

Grand Champion Team with one bonefish, four redfish and one snook were Bob Moller and Ron Williams. They were guided by the wily veteran Captain Lonnie Shaw. "Lucky" Lonnie possesses the uncanny knack of showing up to a tournament and quietly winning the whole thing. He has that intangible ability to be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. Nice job guys.

First Runner Up Team was taken by local and always perennial threats to win, Mark Cockerham and Captain Mark Hillman. These two have worn a path to countless winner circle's over the years. **Second Runner Up Team** went to Chris Gutierrez and Austin Accursio from Cooper City and Homestead respectively. These two have a pretty good story.

Fourteen year-old Austin was not planning on fishing the Swamp, but was spending the weekend in the Keys with his best two friends from Homestead. They were scheduled to fish but he was the odd man out in a two-angler team event. That was the case until lady luck came his way an hour before the 7:00 a.m. shotgun start. Gutierrez's partner fell ill, so he invited Austin to be his teammate. Austin Accursio not only finished as the 2nd runner up team champion, but he won the most bonefish award, and they were the first two bonefish he had ever caught.

Seven bonefish, 48 redfish and 85 snook, all being over 20 inches in length were caught by the participants. Hundreds of redfish were caught in the 14-19 inch range. Some teams reported catching over 75 redfish under the 20 inch minimum size. These "rat" reds are expected to be nice 20-25 inch redfish next year, so we may soon experience some of the best redfishing the Keys have seen in a long time.

On a final note, the bonefish won. Over 10 teams had caught their redfish and snook early and were bonefishing before noon. Any one of these teams could have won the Swamp Guides Ball by catching just one or two bonefish. Tough conditions lead to comments like Brenton Berry's from Homestead, FL.

"It was frustrating. We were bonefishing at 10:30 a.m. and had over four hours to catch a bone and we could not get it done," said Berry.

Many of the best bonefish anglers and guides in the world got humbled yet again by the gray ghosts.

It is estimated the Swamp Guides Ball will net over \$20,000 for the Don Hawley Foundation. Special thanks goes to SWAMP Co-directors Jim and Sherri Trice and Captain Rusty and Terry Albury.