

Lily Mercier, 10, and her friend Gracie Morehead, 12, show off their catch.



GULF FISHING **MADE FUN!**

Story and Photos By David Rainer, Staff Writer



Captain Troy Frady

There won't be any groans emanating from the wheelhouse of the *Distraction* when a big fish is lost at the boat. There won't be any sighs of disdain from the crew on the *Distraction* when a backlash snarls a fishing reel.

Fishing in the Gulf of Mexico is supposed to be fun, according to Capt. Troy Frady, and he intends to make it that way when he sends the 41-foot *Hatteras* through Perdido Pass. Frady, who became a charter captain nine years ago after careers in the banking and trucking industries, said his business experience made him realize he needed to specialize and cater to a certain clientele to be successful. He decided there were plenty of opportunities for the seasoned anglers to pursue their passion, which focused his attention on the people who might feel hesitant to book a charter because of a lack of angling expertise.



Twelve-year-old Jack Mercier with a red snapper he caught.



Linda Mercier and her daughter Lily, from Senatobia, Miss., use teamwork to land a red snapper.



Doug Mercier

FAMILIES AND FIRST-TIMERS

“My business model is focusing on families and first-time fishermen who enjoy the experience of being on the water more than they do harvesting the fish,” Frady said. “I reach out to the people who want an experience. I take the people who want an adventure more than killing fish. The focus of the trip is more than harvesting fish. It’s more educational and experiencing a light tackle fight without trying to injure or harvest the fish, but still having the experience and joy of fighting a fish and winning the battle. Thus, getting your picture taken with the fish and then letting it go.”

Frady said the customers choose the length of the trip, as well as the activities that will be included. The activities could range from just a boat ride in the Gulf to catching red snapper or other bottom fish or trolling for king and Spanish mackerel.

“Instead of telling people, ‘Hey, we’re going to catch fish.’ I tell them a story about what we’re going to do,” he said. “I created a niche market a few years ago for the people who want to go for the first time or people who wanted a G-rated experience for their kids. I use a Boga-Grip or a net to land the fish. The whole idea is to get away from the perception of killing. Not everybody wants to kill fish. Some people do want to keep some fish, and we encourage them to ‘keep the best and release the rest,’ or ‘why kill it if you’re not going to grill it.’ It’s about promoting sustainability of the fishery instead of killing the fish. So, why kill it just because you can is our business philosophy, and it really works.”

Linda Mercier of Senatobia, Miss., said she and her family are sold on Frady’s fishing philosophy.

“We use Capt. Troy all the time now, because we tried another captain before and he was not kid-friendly. The kids just got on his nerves,” said Mercier. “I know it’s hard to do this kind of trip with a bunch of kids, but Capt. Troy has always been really understanding. He makes sure the kids are having a good time and makes sure they are safe. We always book Capt. Troy now when we come to the beach.”

NO BOTTOM FISHING

When it comes to bottom fishing, Frady also uses a little different technique. He uses plenty of chum to get the fish to rise to near the top of the water column to reduce the chance of injury to the fish.

“We’ve been catching red snapper in shallow water, but we catch them high in the water so they don’t suffer from any barotrauma,” he said. “We catch triggerfish high in the water. We catch amberjack by jigging high in the water. We chum and get the fish to within 20 feet of the surface. We don’t allow our customers to fish on the bottom, period. If I thought I was harming a fish, I would change my practice and go even higher in the water column. I rarely fish deeper than 35-40 feet, and I try to not fish in water deeper than 80- to 90-feet of water, but we never fish on the bottom.”

CATERING TO CUSTOMERS

Frady said he was among the first, if not the first, charter boat on the Gulf of Mexico to publish his rates on the Internet, because he wanted to eliminate people who were calling simply to find the best price.

“Again, I’m selling a service,” he said. “The No. 1 page they

go to after your home page is rates. Most of the people, after they do that, they leave and never come back. When they read what I have on the front page, it sells them. It's a story. It tells them about the experience they're going to have, and then the rates become secondary to them. Then they read two or three more pages on my site. I have about 200 pages on my site. I've become the 'Wikipedia' of Alabama fishing. I sell the trip before the people ever arrive. I'm letting the people know what their experience will be before they get here instead of the unknown of arriving and just getting on the boat cold. If they just want to go out and look at dolphins all day, that's what we'll do.

"I give my customers options when they book the charter – how long of a trip do they want, do they want to keep any fish or release them all. I know what they want before they board the boat. The differentiators I have on my website make people choose me or avoid me. There's no in-between. I want the customer who wants what I'm selling.

"Remember, not everybody is my customer. Not everybody likes what I sell. I created the niche market with those families that want to go out and have fun, where dad can relax for a day outside the board room and bring his wife and kids, where kids can have an experience and hold their rod and reel upside down and reel backwards and we don't fuss at them. We allow them to learn at their own pace. We set people at ease. We let them relax, rejuvenate and unwind."

EFFECTS OF OIL SPILL

Frady expects there will be some pent-up demand for trips into the Gulf this year after last year's Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster that basically shut down all fishing in the




Gulf west of Pensacola. He had quite a few trips scheduled before the spill, but he basically shut down his charter business on June 2 when the waters off Alabama were closed.

He did have a request from a news network to make a trip to see the oil spill, but the trip didn't work out. "They wanted to go out and see the oil," Frady said. "This was the first part of June, and I told them it would be a minimum of 10 hours to go see the oil. They said, 'We want to see a lot of thick oil and birds covered in oil.' I told them it was just not out there, that we'd have to ride 60 miles to see any significant oil and then it would probably only be like a sheen on the water. They said the network might not want to pay to see that. That told me, they didn't want the truth, they wanted sensationalism to sell their story."

Frady then docked his boat for the rest of the summer and made use of training he had gained after Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina. Frady had worked with the Army Corps of Engineers, gone to classes and received certification from FEMA to work disasters. While many of the charter boats enrolled in the Vessels of Opportunity (VOO) program, Frady went to work at the Incident Command Center in Mobile and helped manage the VOO program. "I had experience in incident command, so I worked there all summer," he said. "I figured I could do more good because of my local knowledge of the area."

After NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) opened the waters back up off Alabama, recreational anglers were given a weekend-only red snapper season last fall. However, Frady said the red snapper wasn't really the reason he booked trips last fall. "It was because the people just wanted to get back on the water after not being able to all summer long," he said.

Frady said bookings for 2011 are up 55 percent over the 2009 season, and he doesn't think the stigma of the oil spill will be a deterrent to his customers.

"People don't even ask about the oil spill," he said. "Once they get on the boat, they might ask if we saw any oil, but they never ask how much oil. They just want to know if we saw any. People just want to go on a trip where they can bring their kids and not hear any cussing or fussing or any kind of abusive behavior toward the fish. I'm selling the experience and not filling the cooler." 

For more Information

Distraction Charters

www.distractioncharters.com
251-975-8111

Saltwater Fishing Regulations
www.outdooralabama.com/fishing/saltwater/