

Minorcan Catches Porpoise By The Tail

(Editor's note: A familiar figure around our coasts but one seldom seen in captivity is the porpoise, an intelligent creature fascinating to both scientist and schoolchild. The art of catching the wily dolphin alive for exhibition and study purposes is known to few—among them a Florida Minorcan with a unique method of fishing. In the following dispatch a UPI staffer describes the capture of a comparatively rare spotted porpoise... literally by the tail.)

By PATRICK HARDEN
United Press International
ST. AUGUSTINE (UPI) — Ronnie Capo hung perilously over the bows of the speeding boat, gripping a long, harpoon-like pole with iron pincers on one end poised for the strike. Four feet below him, just beneath the swirling waters of the Atlantic, skimmed the sleek, dark shadow of a spotted porpoise, one of six which had played tag with the boat for 30 minutes.

Lazily the dolphin broke the surface and rolled over the crest of a wave, its broad tail slapping the whitecaps cut by the vessel.

"C'mon, papa, c'mon," Capo breathed as the cigar-shaped mammal drifted closer and closer to the bow. "C'mon!"

Then he struck, a swift downward jerk of his right arm which clamped the pincers around the porpoise and fast-

ened a tape-bound rope about its thrashing tail.

The water boiled. The wooden pole spun in one direction and Capo grabbed the rigging and leaped clear as the 300-pound mammal coursed out to sea dragging hundreds of feet of heavy rope from the boat.

When the snorting dolphin returned to the surface to breathe some 250 feet from the boat, Capo grabbed the rope and began to slow it down. Then he and mate Joe LeBlanc began the 20-minute task of "landing" the porpoise, a job almost as difficult as snaring its tail.

Capo, a bronzed, bearded Minorcan with a rare knowledge of the sea, has been catching the black-and-white spotted dolphin by the tail for years.

His unique "tail snare" method is both humane and practical, but exacting. When stalking a porpoise at 10 knots with a 50-foot boat... "You only have one chance; miss your shot and the porpoise will scare away all the others in the school," Capo said.

"The spotted dolphin is hard to find and the chances are 25-1 against catching one... they've been clocked at better than 30 knots."

Capo is head of the collecting crew for Marineland of Florida, the oceanarium located on the coast about 18 miles south of St. Augustine. His boat, the Porpoise III is an unusual vessel—a sort of cross between a

shrimper and a freighter with a 11-by-14 foot steel tank in her belly and a 4-foot wide door to the outside sea cut in the hull.

The door, built with the base about one foot under water, allows larger catches such as shark, grouper and porpoise to be hauled from the sea directly into the "live tank" rather than over the side. This method prevents injury to the catch, Capo said.

It was through this door the thrashing, squeaking female porpoise came aboard.

Capo, a slight figure who looks more like a jazz musician than an expert fisherman, and LeBlanc, a burly Cajun and one-time shrimper, had sighted the small group of spotted dolphin playing about 10 miles off the coast.

Tolstoy Invention
LeBlanc took the wheel and steered for the school while Capo prepared his "tail snare"—an invention of Ilya Tolstoy, grandson of the famous Russian writer.

As improved by Capo, the tail snare is a 12-foot pole with

a pair of spring-loaded blunt pincers on the business end. The pincers hold a noose-rope which is snapped around the mammal's tail. The pole falls free after the strike, leaving the uninjured porpoise free to swim until hauled in.

For 30 minutes the boat, with Capo poised on the bow, had chased the six playful porpoises. "These fellas like to ride the waves cut by the bow," Capo explained. "You can often see them catching a free ride just ahead of ocean liners or shrimp boats."

Three times a calf swum within striking distance, but each time his mother chased him away and the small school moved further out to sea.

"They won't run today," groaned Capo disgustedly. "All except the little fella... and his momma won't let him. They just aren't in the mood."

But minutes later another large porpoise came to ride the waves, drifted into range... and Capo struck with perfect aim.

Haul To Boat
Working the rope hand-over-

hand, Capo and LeBlanc steadily hauled the porpoise to the boat. Then the Cajun dropped into the deep "live tank," opened the sea-door and dragged the porpoise in with his bare hands.

"It isn't so difficult as it looks," Capo said. "After all, we have control of the tail and the tail is the dolphin's source of power."

Gently, like a father handling a child, LeBlanc settled the seven-foot long dolphin comfortably in the tank, blocked in on either side by boards to keep her from twisting and

hitting her nose or dorsal fin on the steel sides.

"She's very nervous," said LeBlanc, his clothing dripping on the deck. "But she's in fine shape... not a mark on her. But we should get her home quickly anyway."

Porpoise Splashes
The porpoise splashed quietly in the tank as the Porpoise III sped into harbor where attendants waited to haul the catch on a special, stretcher-like apparatus from the "live tank" on to a mattress-covered truck for the trip to Marineland.

"Finding and catching the spotted dolphin is only half the battle," Capo said. "Keeping them alive and happy until they get in the exhibition tank is almost as difficult..."

At the oceanarium the porpoise was placed in a special tank until she had got over her nerves and adapted to captivity; given a careful inspection for injury; offered a fat meal of butterfish, then loosed into the massive exhibition tank to join her cousins.

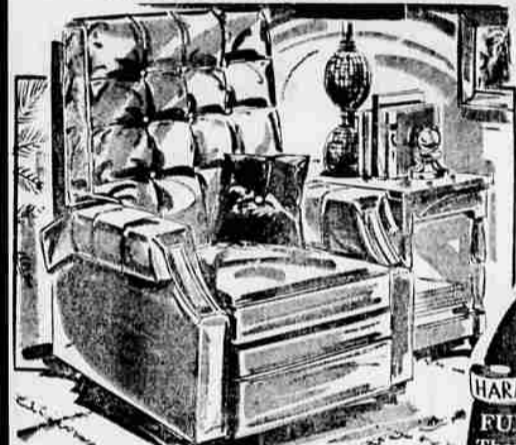
Capo, nursing a sore right arm, settled for a beer.

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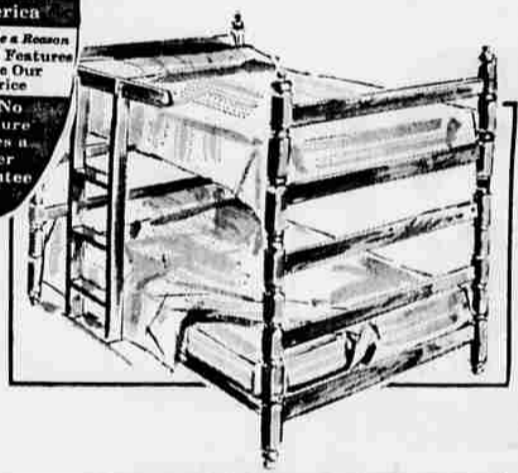
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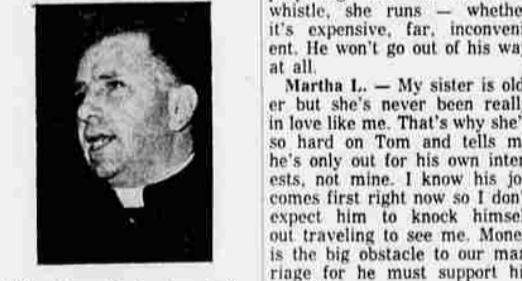
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The Family Council

(Editor's note: The Family Council consists of a judge, a physician, three clergymen, three editors and a women's editor. Each article is a summary of a family disagreement presented to the Council. The Council deals with problems, major and minor, encountered by guidance counselors and social workers. Edited by

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Martha L. — I understand Tom's problems. She doesn't.

THE NEW POPE'S AIDE—



Who Grew Up in America!

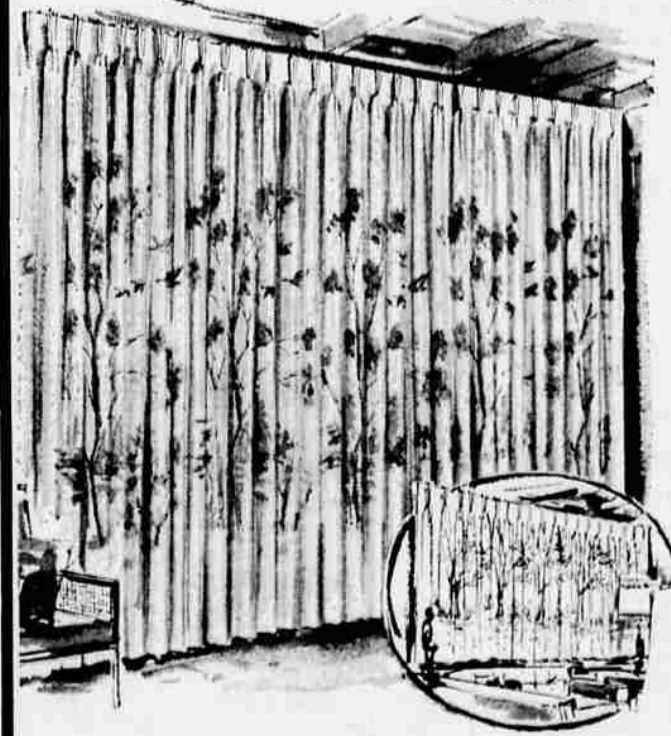
Here is the little-known story of the New York schoolboy, Msgr. Ignio Cardinale, who has reached the inner circle of the Vatican hierarchy.

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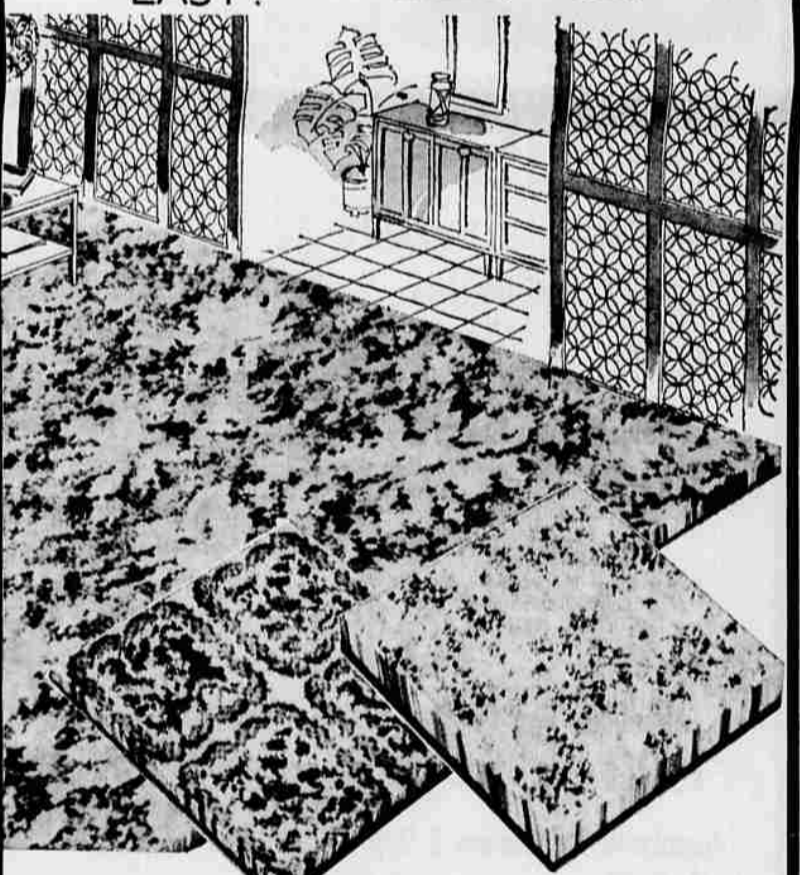
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