

ONE THING IS CERTAIN: IF Frank Johnson had never been born, or if any one of a diverse and complex series of events had not occurred, the sport of big-game fishing would look a lot different than it does today. Luck, both good and bad, played an enormous role in the development and acceptance of what is, by far, the most commonly used range of marlin lures in the world today: Mold Craft's Soft Head series.

While today's anglers don't think twice about tossing out a piece of plastic to catch a blue marlin, when Frank Johnson purchased Mold Craft in the '70s, most billfishermen had just two choices for bait — live or dead.

A Bright Boy

Johnson grew up in Middletown, New York, and became an avid outdoorsman under the tutelage of his uncle Gabe Card. Card was a noted trout fishing guide in the Catskill Mountains, who counted a number of major league baseball stars among his clientele. He specialized in catching giant trout.

Johnson caught his first fish with Card — a 5-pound catfish. Its open-mouthed wriggling chased Johnson off the dock. Card came to the boy's aid, and the two then released the fish because it was full of fry. "I remember crying because there were so many little catfish and I didn't want them to die," says Johnson. This hint of a soft heart proved to be the beginning of a fish conservation ethic that would

continue throughout his career.

Card eventually taught Johnson the secret to catching big trout by using live shiners. "Big baits kept the little trout off so you could get the big ones," says Johnson. "The limit was five or six back then, and we let an awful lot of trout go."

The consummate outdoorsman, Card also taught young Johnson gun safety and how to shoot with a single-shot Winchester Model 67 bolt-action .22. In high school, he bought his first shotgun: a 20-gauge Kessler with a bolt action and a three-shot clip.

"It was even cheaper than a JC Higgins from Sears Roebuck. I think it cost me 20 bucks," he remembers fondly. "We've come a long way since then."

A slightly older pal of Johnson's, Johnny Gambino, drove him to the coast for his first saltwater fishing trip when he was 10 years old. The pair boarded a head boat out of Sheepshead Bay, targeting codfish and pollock. Using rented tackle, Johnson, who had been entered in the pool by his friend, won his first calcutta — sort of.



The Soft Head Man

Frank Johnson's Innovations Revolutionized Big-Game Fishing

By Capt. Peter B. Wright



COURTESY FRANK JOHNSON

Gambino slipped a big sinker into the fish so it would make the weight, and Johnson, knowing the boy's personal history, was afraid to say anything about it. (When a bartender refused to serve the underage Johnson a beer after a fishing trip, "Johnny G." flipped his coat open and flashed a pair of chrome-plated .45 automatics in shoulder holsters. Johnson got his beer.)

During his sophomore year in high school, Johnson moved out of the house to avoid the escalating domestic bickering between his firefighter stepdad and beautician mom. He rented a room in town and worked his way through high school by holding down two jobs, one as a fledgling mechanic in a service station, and the other running a gun shop that also sold fishing tackle.

He tried twice to win a Naval ROTC scholarship, but wound up as first runner-up both times and had to give up on his dreams of a regular college education. "There was no way I

could get that much money together in those days," he says softly.

Instead, Johnson moved to Connecticut and took a job with Pratt & Whitney in 1959, a division of United Aircraft at the time. He got paid for a 40-hour week as an apprentice machinist, spending two days a week in school and three days working in the shop.

During the first two years of the three-year program, Johnson roomed in his Aunt Polly's house. Aunt Polly was presi-

dent of Hartford College for Women. "It was like living in a castle after where I had come from," says Johnson. "And there were 400 girls coming in and out of there all the time."

In 1962, at the end of the three-year course, he received a parchment certificate in a blue leather binder and spent another year learning tool and die making. After finishing that school, Pratt sent Johnson to learn production engineering.

"I never got a college degree, but I did get a great education," Johnson says. "If you got less than what was probably a B in a regular college, you were thrown out of school at Pratt and sent out onto the shop floor. There was a lot of pressure on you to both learn the course work and also be able to perform the job in the real world, making things in the shop."

In Connecticut, Johnson spent his weekends learning to catch shad in the rivers and striped bass in Cape Cod Bay. "It seems funny, or maybe politically incorrect, for where we are today, but in those days I also commercial fished a little for striped bass. If you knew where the mackerel were, you had the bass. They loved live mackerel. My best friend in those days was a lobster fisherman who was out every day, and he would tell me where to find the mackerel the next morning."

Johnson worked as a production engineer for several more years, traveling to many major cities, including Detroit and Chicago, and setting up specialized machinery designed and built by Pratt & Whitney teams. During these years, he got married and had a son, Frank Johnson Jr., who is better known to family friends as "Jocko."

When Johnson left Pratt & Whitney because of family medical problems, he had several job offers from which to choose. He took a job in Pompano, Florida, due in no small part to the fishing opportunities in the Sunshine State.

Johnson took an engineering job with ChemForm in 1969, once again making specialized machinery. He remarried, bought a 19-foot Aquasport and discovered the joys of fishing for sailfish. An old photo from 1969 shows a skinny young Johnson with his son Jocko and two neighborhood kids hoisting the team's very first sailfish.



COURTESY FRANK JOHNSON (2)

Johnson pioneered many of the sailfish techniques used by small center consoles. His first sail in 1969 (above) led to bigger quarry including broadbill and blue marlin.



COURTESY FRANK JOHNSON

Johnson's Mold Craft lures revolutionized the sport of big-game fishing by proving to anglers that soft-headed lures could be fished like dead baits. Plus, you could go fast and cover more ground.

A True Innovator

In 1971, Johnson got a chance to buy into a company called Mold Craft, and one day later, he acquired controlling interest in the company. At this time, Johnson began doing seminars for Phil Bart's Angler's Workshop. "I specialized in kite fishing for sails when you still used paper clips and wooden outrigger pegs to attach your baits to the kite line," says Johnson. The engineer inside Johnson knew that he could do better, so even before he got into making lures, Johnson combined his business with his passion and began inventing and building new items for anglers.

He originally invented and patented the world-famous Unibutt in 1974 — making it the first rod butt with all of the components machined from bar-stock aluminum. Up until then, the majority of reel seats were made from chrome-plated brass. When salt water interacted with the aluminum-alloy butts and brass reel seats, the result was a corrosion spewing battery. And although the corrosion was fierce, nobody wanted to go back to wooden butts!

By making all the pieces of the butt and reel seat from the same material and anodizing the whole assembly, Johnson's Unibutt kept corrosion to a minimum. Even scratches that pene-

trated the protective coating would "self-heal" and not threaten the structural integrity of the butt.

In addition, Johnson's butts were all interchangeable. Earlier versions had to be kept matched to the rod tip in order



COURTESY FRANK JOHNSON

Capt. Peter B. Wright helped Johnson design the most prolific marlin lure of all time — the Mold Craft Wide Range.

to ensure correct guide alignment. Johnson developed a locator system so any butt would align with any tip that had the same size ferule.

Johnson designed and built the Black's Clip outrigger pin to Capt. Al Black's specs, and also invented the Roller Troller, an outrigger clip that lets you move baits up and back in the spread over a roller bearing. Today, Bill Shedd's AFTCO empire produces both Roller Trollers and Unibutts, and they are standard equipment on most sport-fishing boats worldwide.

Johnson continued to fish and give seminars on fishing at various fishing clubs and tournament captains' meetings. He frequently gave talks at seminars for George Poveromo and Mark Sosin, passing on tips learned over the years and helping hundreds, if not thousands, of anglers catch their first sailfish. He was one of the first amateur center-console anglers I ever heard extolling the virtues of kite fishing for sailfish with live bait, and he taught the technique to hundreds of fishermen in south Florida. During this era, he caught 16 sails in one day, fishing all by himself in an outboard-powered center console.

The turning point for Mold Craft came in 1975 when Johnson made some molds for a company called PBI Inc. The job called for a new injection-molding machine capable of shooting more liquid PVC under higher pressures than existing technology had allowed. So Johnson built one. Soon after, the first Squirt Squid artificial squid hit the market. It proved popular with both recreational anglers and commercial swordfish longliners.

When PBI got into trouble, Johnson took back the injection-molding machine and made new molds for artificial squid. Soon he was making artificial Squirt Squids in sizes ranging from 6 to 16 inches, and the tuna fishermen up north loved to put them on spreader bars when trolling for tuna.

Soft Head Lures Are Born

I met Frank Johnson through an old friend, Scottie Boyd, in the spring of 1977. Boyd's Tackle was a most untidy and unlikely looking place in the early to mid-'70s. But no matter what you needed, Boyd would find it in the cluttered piles of fishing-tackle treasure stacked, seemingly at random, in mounds of new and old gear.

I knew I could depend on Boyd even



COURTESY FRANK JOHNSON

Johnson's 25-foot Grady White, *Soft Head*, made its mark in south Florida sailfish tournaments and doubles as a research vessel when the creative juices start to flow.

when fishing in far-flung places like Cozumel, Australia or Madeira, so his word meant a lot to me.

When Boyd told me I *needed* to meet someone in Cozumel, Mexico, in the spring of 1977, I did what he asked and took him and Johnson fishing.

I didn't know Johnson owned and operated a tool-making company and was also making the amazingly realistic squid I had seen earlier.

Sometime during the trip, I told Johnson that earlier that same week, eight blue marlin, two whites and 20 sails bit my handmade Ka Ka lures made from inner tube rubber.

I'd come to Cozumel to try and test soft lures on billfish, hoping to get enough bites to learn what did and did not work with respect to dropping back a soft lure like you would a natural bait.

By the end of the day, we came to an agreement and started to discuss what eventually would become the most

widely used marlin lure in the world — the Mold Craft Wide Range.

Johnson's talent for design enabled him to come up with a more graceful looking shape that worked just as well as the cylinders and truncated-cone heads I was using.

The Mold Craft Wide Range lure became, beyond argument, the most successful marlin lure ever made, mainly because it works well at speeds from 5 to 17 knots. In fact, the first big marlin ever caught on the 9-inch standard-size prototype was a 902-pound blue taken on the *Humdinger* in Kona, Hawaii, while trolling at 17 knots!

Johnson would go on to make or copy other great lures in injection-molded PVC — but the one I see the most all over the world is the original Soft Head Wide Range.

A few years later in 1981, Skip and Kent Smith, Jerry Dunaway, and I won the Poco Bueno tournament in Texas on a Mold Craft Wide Range. Capt.

Skip Smith started cutting the heads off a scoop-nosed Mold Craft and won so many tournaments with

it in Texas onboard Dunaway's boat, the *Hooker*, that Johnson changed the mold and added the Hooker lure to his product line. By this time, Johnson

made both Standard 9-inch lures and Senior-size 12-inch lures across a variety of lure-head shapes.

Years later when Capt. Bobby Brown moved from Hawaii to Florida, he gave Johnson the exact angle of the nose cut


on a Henry Chee straight runner, which was measured and copied and became the Bobby Brown Mold Craft lure.

Not long after, the public demanded even larger sizes, so Johnson obliged with his Magnum line, which gained popularity as both lures and teasers.

Another innovation Frank and Jocko Johnson came up with was a lure that looked like a sewing-thread spool. While the Spooler was not a good lure at the normal 7- to 9-knot trolling speeds because it was unstable and jumped out of the water, it became popular with knowledgeable skippers who used it at 4 to 5 knots in conjunction with a spread of dead natural bait. Even at live-bait speeds around 3 knots, the Spooler shimmied, shook and "smoked" a bubble trail. Incredulous anglers and crew were frequently heard remarking, "I can't believe he went right by a *bait* to eat that thing!"

A Mold Craft artificial ballyhoo called the Tuff Hoo proved so effective during a father/son tournament in Guatemala that a competitor protested after Frank and Jocko Johnson caught 14 sails out of 14 bites. The Johnsons used the same drop-back technique they used with natural ballyhoo, but never experienced the dreaded *san cocho*, where the body of the bait is pulled free from the head, leaving the angler with no catch and just the ballyhoo's head on the hook.

Today, Johnson proudly points to the number of world records caught on his lures as a sign of success — at one time, every line class world record for Atlantic blue marlin had been set with a Mold Craft, either used as a lure or as a teaser in the bait-and-switch.

Mold Craft lures have won more money in billfish tournaments than any other trolling lures, and no company in the world has sold as many. "We dominate a niche in a small market," Johnson says with obvious pride. "A lot of folks think we are getting rich and try to come in and compete with us. It hurts us for a little while, but after they lose enough money, they get smart and go away, and we can make a decent living again. We'll never be as rich as the big freshwater guys, but we have some toys and live a good life. Now if I could just come up with something that really takes off in the bass market ..." 

For more information on Mold Craft and their product line, visit www.moldcraftproducts.com.



The latest Mold Craft offering, the Reel Tight, came from a design favored by the crew from the famous 80-foot Merritt of the same name owned by Jim Lambert.