

“When the first wave hit, we knew we were in trouble.”

— Brian Schumaker



COURTESY PHOTOS

Rough start: Brian Schumaker left Comstock Park to pursue a dream that quickly turned into a nightmare when the fishing boat he was working on capsized. He sits atop the boat's holding tank for fish, which washed ashore.

Dream of sea career still afloat after night of peril

Comstock Park man swims mile to shore after waves sink fishing boat off Hawaii

The ordeal he had survived didn't fully engulf him until some five hours later. It was 2 a.m., and he had been munching on a ham sandwich.

Without any warning, 20-year-old Brian Schumaker suddenly stopped eating, balled up into a fetal position, and wept.

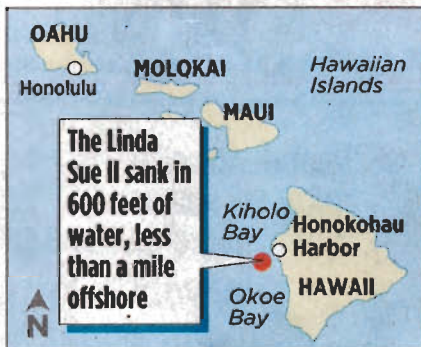
You or I might have, too, if earlier that evening we had helped save the lives of four passengers aboard a fishing charter that capsized off the main island of Hawaii, then swam nearly a mile in pitch blackness through shark-infested waters.

Schumaker, who left his hometown of Comstock Park just three weeks ago to pursue his dream of being a saltwater captain, got his feet wet in a



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PRESS GRAPHIC/NANCY JONESFRANCIS

big way when the boat he was working on was upended by a pair of rogue waves that developed in stormy seas. It sank in less than five minutes in 600 feet of water.

The ordeal unfolded a week ago



In better days: The Linda Sue II, captained by Jeff Heintz, now rests at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

today, on a morning that bore no hint of the calamity ahead. "We pulled out of dock at 7 a.m., Schumaker remembers. "It was gorgeous out — no wind and calm seas."

SEE CAPSIZE, A2

CONTINUED ON BACKSIDE

CONTINUED FROM A1

The 35-foot Hatteras, named Linda Sue II, was captained by Jeff Heintz, who has 30 years of seafaring under his belt. The passengers were a foursome from Iowa, looking to score fish.

They did — a blue marlin Heintz measured at 16 feet long and estimated to weigh “1,000 pounds plus.” It took five hours to haul in.

“Right after we landed that fish, the weather started picking up,” recalled Schumaker, a 2002 Comstock Park High School graduate and son of Bob and Deb Schumaker, both 50. “We were taking on a little water, but when the first wave hit, we knew we were in trouble.”

Following Heintz’s orders, Schumaker scrambled to get life jackets on the four Iowans — a middle-age couple and their daughter and son-in-law.

The second wave turned the big boat on its stern, sending the bow skyward. Schumaker was sucked underwater and became tangled in a line. He freed himself, then tried to settle the passengers, most of whom were hysterical.

As the boat began its quick descent, Schumaker instructed the foursome to follow him into the water. They became separated, though, and in the darkness he couldn’t make out their shapes — only their frantic cries.

Without a life jacket

“The boat’s pretty much gone,” Schumaker recalled. “I’d lost my glasses. We’re in 10-foot seas and it’s pitch black out. All I could hear were the worst screams I’ve ever heard in my life.”



Dangerous waters: Sharks like this one, caught on a previous fishing trip by the Linda Sue II, are common in the area where the boat went down.

With no life jacket himself and little more he could do to help the others, he decided to make for land. He’d checked the boat’s GPS system earlier and knew shore was just under a mile away.

Grabbing a bobbing 2½-gallon plastic gas can, Schumaker clutched it to his chest with his left hand, and began frog-kicking and paddling with his right arm toward the mainland.

He figures he was in the water an hour. He suffered his worst injuries closest to shore, where the raging surf “rocked me like I’ve never been rocked before.” Waves pummeled him into jagged lava, lacerating both his feet and legs.

He collapsed three times after reaching shore, eventually finding bystanders about 500 yards away.

They helped him hook up with a rescue effort now involving two helicopters and a boat. The watercraft plucked the other five from seas where Tiger sharks are common.

The reunion with his captain and the passengers was an emotional one. Schumaker had



COURTESY PHOTOS

Six with an uncommon fish story to share: Those who made the frightening fishing trip were, from left, Comstock Park native Brian Schumaker; Iowans Kim and Tony Schultz and her parents, Willis and Carol Wulf; and boat captain Jeff Heintz.

swum in, not knowing if the others would survive. And the five who climbed aboard the rescue skiff didn't immediately know Schumaker's fate.

"When we first saw each other," says Schumaker, there were hugs all around, and "everybody's crying." They celebrated the next night at an Outback restaurant, with the Iowans picking up the tab. Schumaker ordered a well-deserved prime rib. "Medium." Captain Heintz refunded the group's \$500 bill for a day of fishing.

Captain, passengers separated

Heintz credited Schumaker — who holds a captain's license to work the Great Lakes and is close to qualifying for a saltwater license — for helping save the passengers. "I gave him an order to put the life

jackets on them, and he did that before even worrying about himself," he said.

"If it hadn't been for him, there might not have been a rescue."

Heintz, who along with Schumaker didn't have time to don a life jacket, was separated from the four passengers, who were spotted from above because Schumaker had also made sure they were armed with glo-sticks.

The captain had a glo-stick as well, which helped a helicopter spot him some 250 yards from the other four, who had managed to hold hands.

The chopper got to Heintz, who was clutching a hunk of Fiberglas, just in time. "I'd gone under six times," he recalls, "and I was choking on water.

"I thought this was it," he

said. "When I finally saw the light of the helicopter above me, I hung on harder."

While the Iowans reportedly will never set foot in the ocean again, both Heintz and Schumaker have every intention of making their living from the deep blue.

Heintz is trying to secure another boat. His Hatteras, which would cost about \$200,000 to replace, was only insured for the hull, to the tune of \$30,000.

But whatever craft he acquires, he says he'd be proud to have the kid from Comstock Park aboard, and lauded him not only for his performance last week, but the sort of salt-water captain he'll be once he meets requirements in Hawaii.

"He's gonna be great," Heintz said.

Meanwhile, Schumaker's parents are just thankful their son and the others are OK. They were in Hawaii, helping settle Brian into a new apartment just 200 yards from the ocean, when last week's incident took place.

They know he might face less hazardous circumstances if he were to stick with his former job as an electrician. But they feel he has a right to follow his true passion. So does his older brother Joe, 25.

He'll be joining Brian in a couple of weeks, and together, they hope to some day operate a charter-fishing enterprise of their own.

Said the boys' mother, Deb, "You can't wish for more than that — for your sons to be happy."

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