

Ted Williams: The Splendid Splinter

BASEBALL'S LEADING MAN BECAME ONE OF AMERICA'S
GREAT ANGLING AUTHORITIES

Story by Ed Mitchell



Photos by Charlie Ebbets

CRACK! THE BALL STREAKED UPWARD under a sullen September sky. Flying high over Fenway Park's infield, it soared into deep right and then over the distant wall and into the Boston Red Sox bullpen. Gone. The year was 1960, and the home run was hit by Ted Williams, up for his final time at bat. It was an ending that no Hollywood scriptwriter could improve upon. It was the perfect career-capping moment, the perfect way for Williams to turn the final page.



A

AFTER ALL, WILLIAMS is believed by many baseball fanatics to be the greatest hitter to ever live, and when you look at his career achievements, it's hard to see it any other way.

In September 1941, with just two years in the majors, he finished the season with an astounding .406 batting average, a feat never since matched. His smiling face appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine as the country's number one batter. Despite giving up five years of his prime to the Marine Corps, Williams punched out 521 home runs in his career. And if he hadn't lost those seasons, the pundits figure he would have hit at least another 100.

During six seasons, his batting average topped the American League. He won two Triple Crowns and twice received the American League MVP award. Even at age 38, Ted still had his edge, slamming .388 in the 1957 season.

A Natural-Born Athlete

Williams was born an athlete. At maturity, he stood 6 feet 3 inches and weighed 200 pounds — his tall, lean physique earned

him the nickname the Splendid Splinter. That lanky frame gave him not only leverage on the ball but that special blend of speed and strength that only wiry men ever own. Coupled with that was Williams' extraordinary eyesight; he not only saw the world more sharply defined, he had incredibly fast visual reaction time.

Along with these gifts, Williams possessed another quality, one that often separates the greats from the also-rans. He had an iron will. From the first fastball forward, Williams focused on being the best batter ever to step up to the plate. It was a goal that burned in his heart with an unquenchable flame.

It was with this same mix of rare physical attributes and laser-like intensity that Williams pursued another sport, a sport that — like baseball — had been with him from childhood. But this sport provided Williams with a far more comfortable venue. Here, he could sidestep the sportswriters that he felt unjustly harangued him. Here, there were no surly fans. Instead, this sport offered Williams the challenge and adventure he craved inside the safe haven of the great outdoors. This sport was fishing.

Throughout his life, Williams fished with all kinds of gear for all kinds of fish, but he had a special love for fly-fishing. By



Fly-fishing legend Joe Brooks (right) helped lead Ted Williams to his first bonefish on the long rod.

his own account, he took up fly-casting around 1940 on Lake Cochituate, in Massachusetts. Teaching yourself how to fly-cast can be a rocky road, and Williams admits that his date had to lie low in the bottom of the boat!

Still, it's clear that Williams must have mastered the long rod with lightning speed. Within three short years, he would be walking Florida's Tamiami Trail, firing pinpoint casts under the mangroves for snook and baby tarpon. If fly-fishing had a rookie of the year award, Williams would have walked away with it.

To fully appreciate Williams' next fly-fishing conquest, we need a little historical perspective. While the origins of fly-fishing in salt water go back to the 19th century, it's fair to say that our sport's modern era got under way in the 1940s, and almost simultaneously on both the

southeastern and northeastern Atlantic coasts. If one man could be singled out as the most important catalyst into the modern age, it would have to be Joe Brooks. And if one of his angling adventures could be named a defining moment, it might well have occurred in June 1947, when Brooks took his first bonefish on a fly.

He did it with guide Jimmie Albright near Peterson Key, off Lower Matecumbe in the Florida

Keys. Using a 1/0 streamer with a white chenille body and grizzly hackle wing, Brooks caught what he believed at the time to be the very first bonefish ever purposely taken on a fly rod. (Brooks would learn years later that the honor actually belonged to Capt. Bill Smith.)

Word of Brooks' catch quickly spread, turning the angling world on its ear — and no one was more keenly tuned in than Ted Williams.


In the Mix of It All

At the end of the '47 baseball season, Williams high-tailed it to the Keys, determined to get in on this exciting new brand of fly-fishing. As best I can figure, he must have quickly tracked down Albright and Brooks, and they set him on the right path.

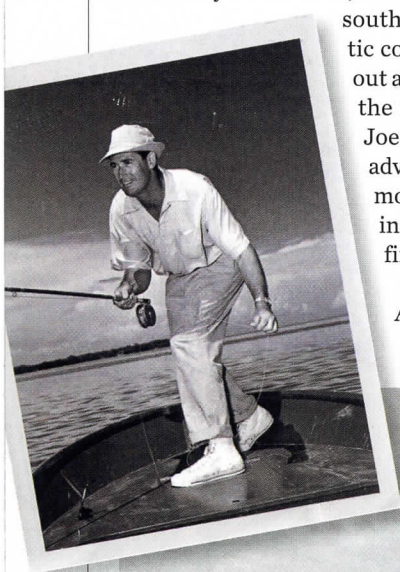
Bonefishing requires keen eyesight, fast reflexes and thread-the-needle fly-casting accuracy. Williams had all of that in spades, so in short order, he had his first fly-caught bonefish too. By the end of that winter, he had landed over 60 more, quite a feat even by today's standards, but in the age of cane fly rods, simple reels, silk lines and catgut leaders, it was an astonishing achievement.

In seven short years, Williams had gone from the ranks of rookie fly-rodgers to the rarefied upper echelons of the fly-fishing world. Yet he had only just begun. Ahead lay the 1950s, a pivotal time in the Florida Keys.

Like a hidden treasure slowly coming to light, the potential for fly-fishing in salt waters was being revealed day by day.

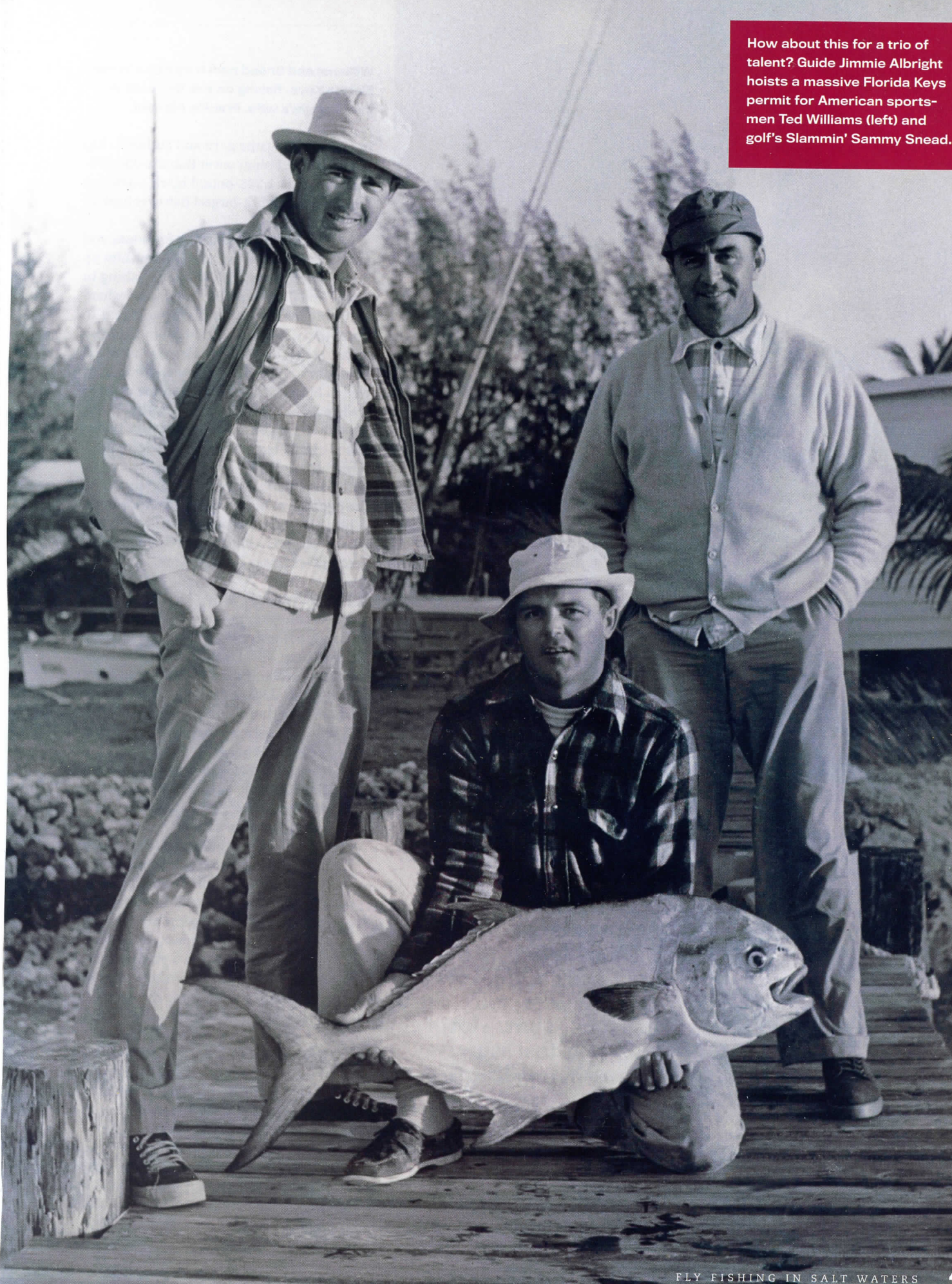

"A dynamic, eager, tackle-busting — well, just a sensational, spectacular fish. For excitement in angling there's nothing like a tarpon. For gameness it's better than any of them."

— TED WILLIAMS FISHING THE BIG THREE



The Splendid Splinter in action! Williams (left) closes the gap with assistance from famed Florida Keys guide Cecil Keith.

How about this for a trio of talent? Guide Jimmie Albright hoists a massive Florida Keys permit for American sportsmen Ted Williams (left) and golf's Slammin' Sammy Snead.





Williams and Snead ham it up again in the Florida Keys, fishing on this day with Jimmie Albright's wife, Frankie Albright.

in Peru by big-game guru and author S. Kip Farrington Jr. Using conventional tackle, Williams boated a 1,235-pound black marlin, at that time the eighth-largest fish ever beat on rod and reel.

Besides finding him fishing for bones and tarpon in the Keys, the '50s also saw him up north investigating the fabulous fishing in Maine and Canada's New Brunswick, where he would later become deeply addicted to the allure of Atlantic salmon fishing. He also wet a fly line on the New England coast. Al Brewster of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, now well in his 90s, remembers a spring night in the late 1950s when he saw two guys fly-fishing for striped bass on Tyler Point, where Rhode Island's Barrington and Palmer rivers join to form the Warren.

He immediately recognized the shorter of the two men as his friend the famous Harold Gibbs. The other angler was much taller and straighter. Later, Gibbs told Brewster that the second angler was Ted Williams.

A Hard Yet Soft Man

As the 1960s approached, Williams was arguably the most well-known angler in America, if not the world. Magazine and newspaper articles followed his every angling move. Shortly after Williams retired from baseball, Sears, Roebuck and Co. made him head of the Ted Williams Sears Sports Advisory Staff for

the then-princely sum of \$100,000 per year.

Williams field-tested gear, and his name appeared on hundreds of Sears' products, including rods and reels, baseball equipment, tents, camping gear and outboard motors. His 1954 marlin catch, which had been filmed, was played on television. And that same

catch had been immortalized with a Fleer baseball card entitled Fisherman Ted Hooks a Big One.

Around 1962, Williams bought an Atlantic salmon camp near Blackville, Canada, on the Miramichi River. Two years later, he, along with others, pushed the Islamorada Fishing Guides Association, now the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association, into creating the annual Gold Cup Tarpon Tournament. In 1965, the championship's first year, Williams landed the

largest tarpon, with Jimmie Albright as his guide.

Williams continued to fish far and wide throughout the 1970s. His book *Ted Williams Fishing the Big Three* was published by Simon & Schuster in 1982. Co-authored with John Underwood, it lays out what Williams felt was the triple crown of angling — tarpon, bonefish and Atlantic salmon.

New records for bonefish and tarpon were established, new flies developed, new gear tried out, new places fished and new tactics developed.

Williams was right in the middle of it. He bought a house nearby in Islamorada, tied his own fly patterns and studied knots, tides, fish migration patterns and more. Williams was hellbent for leather to learn it all and just as eager to exchange ideas with anyone else with the same affliction.

Joseph Bates Jr., in his respected work *Streamers and Bucktails*, describes this heady period in the evolution of southeastern saltwater fly-fishing this way: "Homer [Rhode Jr.], Joe [Brooks], Lee [Cuddy], baseball's Ted Williams and several others fished together and gave away developing fly patterns, and gossiped with all that wanted to listen — all this forming the bedrock of modern saltwater fly-fishing."

As the 1950s progressed, Williams' name was plastered all over the fishing world. In January 1954, he won Florida's Palm Beach Tournament. In December of that same year, he was invited to visit the famed Cabo Blanco Fishing Club, founded



"I'm convinced that the Atlantic salmon is the greatest of game fish. There is nothing that can touch it for all-around enjoyment. If that's a personal prejudice, I'm in good company. I know a lot of guys that feel that same way."

— TED WILLIAMS FISHING THE BIG THREE

[FFSW TIPPET]

Tying With Ted

TED WILLIAMS WAS AN AVID FLY TIER who spent many hours perfecting patterns for bonefish, tarpon and Atlantic salmon. No doubt Williams made some original flies, but the only one I have ever seen appeared in the revised edition of Lefty Kreh's *Fly Fishing in Salt Water*. It was Williams' Whore Fly, the pattern he used so successfully for bones on the Florida flats. He wanted a fly that landed softly and sank slowly, and because he often fished in turtle grass, he needed a weedless fly too. He wasn't a fan of monofilament weed guards, so he created one using deer hair. In fact, the entire fly was comprised of a single clump of it. The tips made a wing extending beyond the hook bend about a shank's length. The head was formed by bending the remaining hair back on itself and lashing it down. The butt ends were then flared upward like a brush in front of the hook point to form a weed guard. The example pictured in Kreh's book is yellow with a splash of red, but Williams also liked all orange. He tied it in sizes 1 and 1/0.

Williams remained a fly-fishing juggernaut right into the early 1990s, when a series of strokes and heart problems forced him to retire his rod and reel. No longer prowling the flats or wading his beloved Miramichi, he was nevertheless still able to witness his legacy grow. On Nov. 18, 1991, President George H.W. Bush, himself an angler, invited Williams to the White House to receive our nation's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of

Freedom. The follow-

ing year, his hometown of San Diego named the Ted Williams Parkway in his honor. The Ted Williams Museum opened its doors in Citrus Hills, Florida, on Feb. 9, 1994. Boston's Ted Williams Tunnel opened in 1995. Long since in the National Baseball Hall of Fame, Williams in 1999 was named to the Major League Baseball All-Century Team. And the All-Star Game that year was played in Williams' honor.


Ted Williams did have a reputation as an ornery man. He could be cocky, arrogant and critical; he absolutely hated anything that sounded like hogwash or seemed highfalutin. And if things didn't go his way, he could fire off a litany of foul language that would make a hardened longshoreman cringe.


Yet to fully understand the man, you need to look beyond the tough exterior to see where a heart of gold resided — especially when children were concerned. This special care for kids likely sprang from his own experiences. By all accounts, his father was far from an attentive dad, forcing Williams to depend on the kindness and generosity of neighbors as a young boy.

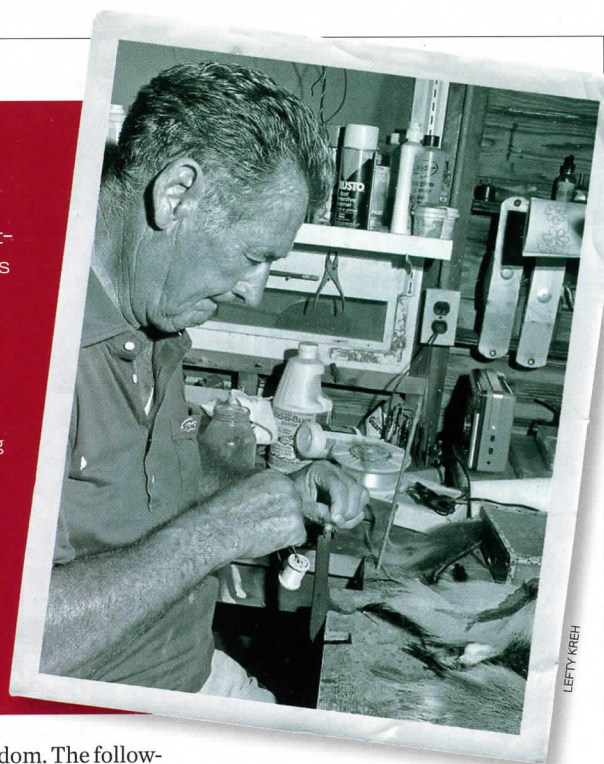
For years, Williams performed fly-casting demonstrations at Boston's Sportsman's Show, introducing many a youngster to the thrill of fly-fishing. In 1952 one of those wide-eyed lads was the late Jack Gartside, who asked Williams to show him how to tie a fly. Williams obliged, and Gartside went on to spend a lifetime deeply engaged in the sport.

In 1953 Williams got involved with the Jimmy Fund and remained an active supporter for over 40 years, raising considerable money through large events and personal appearances. For a few years he was chairman of the organization and personally endorsed every contribution check.

In 1958 Williams opened his Ted Williams Baseball Camp for boys in Lakeville, Massachusetts, and at the urging of Florida guide Gary Ellis, Williams in 1988 assisted in starting up the Redbone Tournament to help children with cystic fibrosis.

These things show the true measure of the man. 

 The author would like to thank Al Brewster of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, sporting-book dealer Dave Foley and Lefty Kreh for their help with this article. All images Copyright, 2010; Charles C. Ebbets/Ebbets Photo-Graphics, LLC.



Ted Williams could be harsh at times, but he was passionate about conservation and introducing children to sports.