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It was just after noon and we were alone on a jaunty blue sea when the line at the rear of the boat began to squeal. We were three. There was Nick Racanelli, a local construction magnate and owner of the Free Nicky, the 42ft powerboat on which we had set out. There was Joe Gaviola, the chairman of a local bank and a fisherman of local renown. And there was me. We had set out at dawn from Montauk, on the eastern tip of Long Island, like Ernest Hemingway's old man, or the grizzled crew of the Pequod in Moby Dick, determined to do battle with a beast from the deep. Like Quint the shark hunter and his two companions in Jaws, we were going to pick a fight with a shark.

Now the line was screeching out. Racanelli grabbed the rod while Gaviola engaged the fish in conversation. "Jump, come on jump!" he shouted. Suddenly a second line was whirring too. Gaviola scrambled to grab the rod and was pulled into Racanelli. "He may be on both lines," said Gaviola.

Pulled together by a single fish, the two men lurched around the boat that was itself pitching in the swell, their lines crossing, stepping sideways and backwards. "Reel in the third line so it doesn't get in the way," shouted Gaviola to me, as they were both dragged into the stern. The reel didn't seem to wind. "The lever!" he shouted. "To the right of the reel. The lever! On the side!" A few minutes, and a great deal of shouting later, I found it.

Montauk has been the jumping-off point for men on shark combat since the 1970s when a local resident named Frank Mundus pioneered "monster fishing". Mundus was the inspiration for Quint. The shark-killing tournaments grew, despite protests by environmentalists. This year, however, a local conservation group, the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, along with a local artist and the owner of a marina, have instituted a new contest in which sharks are caught and released. Besides a \$10,000 prize for the winning team, two chase boats carrying crews of scientists would be on hand to affix a GPS device to the rarest

catches. Fishermen would have the honour of naming the shark and be able to track their fish's progress on the website Osearch.

This was the prize that most attracted Gaviola. He wanted to name a shark after Racanelli's sister-in-law, April. They dated for a while. "She bit a hunk of my heart out and swam away," he said.

I was serving as a tournament observer on their boat. The shark that bit shortly after noon was a 250lb mako, the sleek and powerful species that can leap 20ft in the air. It passed behind the Free Nicky's motors, then Gaviola's line snapped. He called in the catch on the radio and a chase boat was dispatched.

"He could slip the line at any moment," said Gaviola, scanning the horizon for the chase boat. They came after 20 minutes. Racanelli passed the rod to a scientist, but the shark escaped as they were trying to put a rope around its tail. Gaviola was distraught. "Well April, so true!" he said. "Swam away again!"

But there were more fish in the sea. An hour later Gaviola hooked a smaller mako and the scientists returned. This time they roped the shark to their boat and fitted a blue GPS device, bolting it to the dorsal fin. "It's a male," one of the scientists shouted. "You wanna stick with April?" "Leave it," Gaviola shouted back. "It's a gay male. We are in the Hamptons."