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Record Turnout, Strong Fishing at Viking Key West Challenge

KEY WEST, Fla. (April 17, 2026) – The 12th annual Viking Key West Challenge drew a record 55 boats and more than 500 guests for four days of great fishing and family-focused fun.

“This is what it’s all about,” said Viking President and CEO Pat Healey. “You’ve got great boats, great people and time on the water doing what we all love. That’s what makes it so special.”

Presented by Christi Insurance Group and Travelers Insurance, the event featured a competitive field across multiple categories and a mix of Viking sportfishing yachts and Valhalla center consoles. Ideal weather and a picturesque Key West setting added to the vibe.

The fishing was exceptional, too, with 194 billfish releases over two days – the second-highest total in event history. The record remains 214 releases set in 2017. Anglers released 93 sailfish on the first day and followed with 101 on day two. A potential women’s world record blackfin tuna (pending certification) was weighed by Leonie Barry aboard *Salt Dawg*, a Viking 61, at 34.2 pounds.

For the third consecutive year, the Viking 61 *Right Choice* earned Overall Grand Champion and Top Sailfish Boat, releasing 16 sails and boating a tuna. The Valhalla 46 *Relentless* took second in the sailfish category with 13 releases, followed by the Viking 46 Billfish *Don Diego* with 10.

Top Angler and Top Female Angler honors went to *Don Diego*’s Jennifer Persinger with 10 sailfish releases and a tuna. Top Junior Angler honors went to Colin Dicembrino aboard the Viking 64 *Team HMY*, who released the tournament’s first blue marlin. He also released a sailfish and boated two dolphin.

Mark Busch of team *Headin South*, a Viking 66, took top honors in the wahoo category with a 60.2-pound fish. With her record tuna, Leonie Barry aboard *Salt Dawg* finished first in that division, while Jared Sporrer aboard the Viking 54 *TripleHeader* took heaviest dolphin with a 17.8-pound fish. On the Valhalla V-55 *Wingman*, Chris White won the kingfish category with a 27.6-pounder, while Cooper Crouch on # *Lucky Enough*, a Viking 58, came to the scales with a 39.6-pound cobia to capture that division. Collin Richardson on the 64 *El Jefe* took the bottomfish category.

Team awards reflected strong performance across the fleet. *Salt Dawg* took tuna. *Cubera Libre*, a Viking 52, won dolphin. # *Lucky Enough* led cobia. *Wingman* captured kingfish.

The results told one story. Owners and families shared the rest.

“This is our second year, and it was an easy decision to come back,” said Leslie Rickman, whose family – including her husband, Joby, and their sons Hayden and Kamden – returned aboard their Viking 64 *Dear Rodeo*. “It’s like a community – a family. We never even questioned it. The boys really love it.”

“I’ve made every Key West Challenge,” said Jacqueline Hinden, a longtime Viking owner whose team participated on the 1998 Viking 58 Enclosed Bridge *Bimini*. “It’s great to be part of something like this, where everyone feels so valued.”

Social media was filled with photos and videos, along with plenty of appreciation: “WE HAD THE BEST TIME OF OUR LIFE!” the team from *Game On*, a Viking 52, wrote on Instagram.

More than 80 partners helped shape the week, from dealers including Galati Yacht Sales, HMY Yacht Sales, Oyster Harbors Marine, South Jersey Yacht Sales and Valhalla Yacht Sales to sponsors such as Foley CAT, MAN Engines, Johnson & Towers/MTU and Papa’s Pilar.

In a drawing, *TripleHeader* won a GOST Apparition Security & Monitoring Package valued at \$7,500. First-place team *Right Choice* received a Spot Zero Mobile Pro Unit valued at \$7,000, while Top Angler Jennifer Persinger received a \$6,000 Switlik Coastal Passage Raft. Airmar, Atlantic Marine Electronics, ComMar, FLIR, Furuno, Garmin, KVH, Seatronx, Simrad and SiriusXM provided other prizes.

The weigh station at Conch Harbor Marina became the center of activity each afternoon on fish days as the fleet returned. It was a spectacle, with boats hovering in the harbor from 37-foot Valhallas to 90-foot Vikings. The mix included center consoles and convertibles – open, enclosed and sky bridge models, many outfitted with Palm Beach Towers gap towers. Crews handed in catch sheets and brought their fish to the scale one after another.

Friday's lay day kept the momentum going with a Pool Party Lunch at Dante's, a Kids Dock Tournament at the Galleon Fishing Pier and a Duval Street Bar Crawl Poker Run – proving the Key West Challenge is “More Than Just Fishing.”

The Kentucky Derby theme was well received and celebrated, with participants making their rounds in costume – from jockey silks and hobby horses to wide-brim hats and seersucker suits.

The Billfish Foundation sponsored the Kids Dock Tournament, and President Ellen Peel was right there on the dock taking it in. “It's exciting for all of us to watch,” Peel said. “You see that enthusiasm – that's the real magic. It gives you hope for the future of the sport.”

At the Awards Dinner at the Opal Key Sunset Pier, Pat Healey matched the energy in the room. Throughout the presentation, he was in the middle of it all, offering high fives, handshakes, and a steady stream of “well done,” “good job” and “thank you” as winners came forward for their awards and photos with him.

The Viking Key West Challenge continues to grow each year, built around the people who make the sport what it is. Next year's Challenge will be April 7-11.

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