

The Deadliest Catch Crew hits the high seas for another pulse-pounding season of real-life adventure



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By Joe Rhodes

Dave Farkas, 25 years old and about to embark on his first journey into the Bering Sea, as a camera operator for “The Deadliest Catch,” Discovery Channel’s high seas life-and-death docu-reality adventure series, thinks he knows what to expect.

He’s seen the heart-in-your-throat footage from the show’s first two seasons, the 40-foot waves and frozen sea spray that turned the undulating decks of the crab fishing boats, dangerous places in the best of circumstances into heaving ice rinks. He’s seen the shots of rogue waves crashing over the rails, the 800-pound crab pots, rusty steel cages dangling from giant cranes, banging into deck hands with bone-breaking force. He knows there will be exhaustion, sea sickness and mind-numbing cold, weeks at a time without meaningful sleep or seeing dry land, hundreds of miles from safety or shelter, his fate in the hands of a captain he hasn’t yet met, at the mercy of a cold, churning sea.

“It’s the craziest most insane thing in the universe, and I want to see what it’s like,” he is saying, standing dockside in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, shooting footage of crewmen loading gear and supplies onto the fishing vessel Cornelia Marie, getting ready for the first run of the 2007 Opilio crab season. He moves among the deckhands who are trading insults and smoking cigarettes as they vault over railings and bounce across the 30-foot high stacks of crab pots, nimble as mountain goats.

“I can’t wait to see how cold it’s gonna be, how dangerous it’s gonna be, slipping and sliding all over the deck, 50 pound blocks of ice falling from the mast, the constant motion and I’m gonna be right in the middle of it all, filming it,” Farkas, who grew up in Beverly Hills and competed as a world-class martial artist before taking up camera work, is saying, sounding like a football player the night before a big game. “I don’t ever want to look back on my life and regret the things I didn’t experience. I want to taste everything. I want to try it all.”

“Deadliest Catch” executive producer Jeff Conroy needs that kind of enthusiasm for his production crews, which is why most of them come from the high-stakes world of adventure filming and extreme sports, guys who have jumped out of planes and filmed in war zones, as drawn to a life of risk-taking as the fishermen themselves, But he warns them all, as he warned Farkas, to

think long and hard before signing on to “The Deadliest Catch” which, in upcoming episodes will feature underwater footage, shot from a miniature submarine and a haunting rescue operation in which one fisherman will survive, but at least two more will not.

“Every year I give this speech,” says Conroy, who started out as a camera operator on the show and has had his share of close calls, waves that nearly took him overboard, swinging pots that missed his head by inches. “I say, ‘You have to realize you are about to do something that you could die doing. You have chosen to be here.’ And if anyone gives me one hint that they’re not sure they want to go on board, then they’re out. And it has to be that way, for me. I can’t have that on my conscience. It has to be their choice.”

“Jeff explained to us that he always wears his life vest on deck,” Farkas says. “And I thought, yeah, that makes sense. I’ll probably do that, too. But then he says, “It’s not to save my life. It’s so my family can find my body in case I go over. You still want the job?”

The show, consistently one of Discovery Channel’s highest rated, has made Captains like Phil Harris of the Cornelia Marie and Sig Hansen, into sea-faring stars. Hansen, in particular, has parlayed the show into a series of endorsements and speaking engagements. He showed up at the Elbow Room, the notoriously-rowdy drinking hole in

Dutch Harbor, armed with ready-for-autographing 8 by 10 glossies of himself, and a space for designating lucky fans as “honorary greenhorns” on the Northwestern.

“A lot of my fellow fishermen didn’t want to do this (be part of the series) because they were afraid it would make us look silly or be something negative,” Hansen is saying, as his crew throws back drinks, their last break before the hard work begins. “But I thought it was important to show people what we do and how hard it is. And a lot of that has come through. But they still haven’t captured the worst of the worst.”

The Bering Sea in January is hell frozen over, but it’s also the most productive fishing grounds in the world, a treasure trove of cod, halibut and, particularly, crab. Although the fishing is more controlled and the catches more restricted than ever, the hunt for King crab in the fall and Opilio (or snow crab) in January still draws a special breed of rough-and-tumble fishermen willing to risk the brutal conditions for a chance at big money hauls. A full-share deckhand on a successful ship can pocket \$30,000 or more in an 8-day run. But the injury rate – cracked ribs, broken wrists, sprained ankles and gashed-open heads – is nearly 100 percent. At least four fishermen a year lose their lives.

It’s just as dangerous, for the two-man “Deadliest Catch” film crews who go out with them,

chronicling the exploits of 4 or 5 boats per season. The camera operators, who climb onto riggings and perch on rails where the fishermen won’t even go, are constantly fighting the elements just to keep their equipment functioning. Cameras, buffeted by salt-water spray and not built for sub-zero conditions, break down at rates approaching 80 percent. “We have a rule that you don’t take anything out of the box until you need it,” says Conroy. “These cameras just aren’t meant to go through this.”

Neither are the cameramen. After spending nearly 50 days at sea, Dave Farkas would have even more respect for the men he filmed. The work, he would say, was harder than he had imagined, harder than he – or anyone – could appreciate just from watching the show. The crews, he says, work at a blistering pace, with almost no sleep, for days at a time, fighting through sickness and injury and – for a few days, sub-freezing hurricane force winds.

“The cold was pretty mind-blowing,” he says, saying nothing could have prepared him for the physical fatigue of fighting to keep his balance every moment he was awake, of constantly banging into walls and rails, slipping and falling on deck. Just operating the cameras, his fingers numb from the cold, was a struggle.

“I was pretty miserable for the first few days. Physically and mentally, it broke me down,” he says.

He is, for the moment, glad to be back in California, safe and warm and able to stand upright. But, asked if he'd go back for another season, Farkas admits he'd probably do it again, that he agrees with Doug Stanley, the show's Director of Photography and most experienced camera operator, who'd been standing nearby on that dock in Dutch Harbor, watching the eagles fly overhead and the winds coming in from the north the day before the season began.

"It's a crazy world out here," so out of the ordinary," Stanley had said. "But this is the real drama of life out here and I love being part of that. This is real adventure."

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