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## Business

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### Cortez man's life is woven into nets

Oddjo x

By BRIAN NEILL  
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CORTEZ -- After fishing all his life, Cortez man makes cast nets - and time for reflection

Thomas "Blue" Fulford sits in his quiet, open-air workshop surrounded by mangroves and a canal that routinely plays host to manatees and snook.

A faint sound of a jackhammer and bulldozers can be heard in the distance, but Fulford's frozen-in-time domain is mostly impervious to the intrusion. He ignores the din and continues to push a shuttle through a series of knots in a length of monofilament line, intently focused on his craft.

The 76-year-old area native makes cast nets, and has been doing so since 1995, the year the inshore commercial netting ban was born.

Though environmentalists applauded the ban, it sounded the death knell for fishermen like Fulford who used commercial nets to harvest mullet and other fish.

"I couldn't fish, so I decided I needed a cash flow," he recalled. "So I figured there would be a demand for cast nets. Turned out there was."

The first year of the ban, Fulford sold 171 cast nets to area anglers.

He usually keeps 50 or 60 on hand in various sizes ranging from 6 to 14 feet. They sell from \$100 to \$250.

Despite the intricacy of the work, tying knot after knot, Fulford says he can complete a 6-footer in about a day if he really sets his mind to it.

Though various techniques exist for throwing a cast net, the angler typically bunches up the net in his or her hands and casts it in a sideways motion over the water.

A skilled cast-netter can form a perfect circle over the water. A ring of lead weights around the edge of the net quickly pulls it downward to entrap the fish.

Ironically, Fulford can't cast a perfect circle.

In fact, he can't cast one at all.

"I never could throw one of the dang things," Fulford said. "I knew a guy who could throw one-handed. He showed me how to do it and I threw it and it opened up beautifully. I tried it 100 times after that and never could do it. We can't ask him how he did it because he's dead."

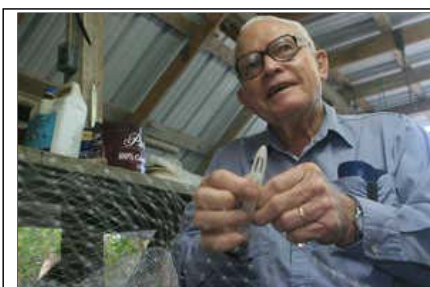
But Fulford does go to painstaking lengths to weave the perfect cast net.

"I really try to make the best and most durable cast net they can buy anywhere," Fulford said. "I sold one to a guy and he said, 'Man, that thing is lethal.' I've had some pretty good reports. Everybody likes them."

Fulford's life is woven into his nets. He's been around nets all of his life and has fond memories of past catches in local waters aboard his mullet boat.

Some memories, however, aren't so happy, like the time Fulford got his leg caught in the line of a purse seine net.

"Sawed it off," Fulford said.



PAUL VIDELA

Blue Fulford works on a 6-foot cast net at his home workshop in Cortez Village. Fulford was born and raised here, and has been a lifelong fisherman. PAUL VIDELA/pvidela@bradenton.com



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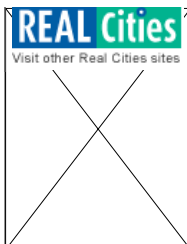


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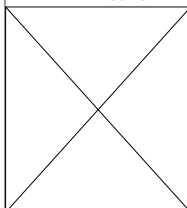
He used to cope fine with the injury and prosthetic leg, but age has begun to take its toll and has made it more difficult to get around.

"My world's gotten a lot smaller. It isn't much bigger than this," Fulford said, referring to his tranquil work space. "A lot of the time, I don't leave this area."

But he hasn't lost his sense of humor and still has memories of growing up a fisherman that keep a smile on his face.

"Last night I fished all night," Fulford said with a grin. "I caught two or three boatloads . . . in my dreams. But it sure was realistic."

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