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SPORTS - COLUMNISTS: SPORTS - NICK WALTER 

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Nick Walter column | Fishermen sympathetic to lost boaters

There's an unwritten code of ethics when it comes to mariners, and it's that when someone's lost at sea, you do anything to help.

On Saturday evening, the 21-foot boat belonging to Oakland Raiders linebacker Marquis Cooper flipped in rough seas. According to survivor Nick Schuyler, who was wearing a life vest and had been clinging to the boat since it overturned Saturday afternoon and was rescued, free-agent defensive lineman Corey Smith, former South Florida player William Bleakley and Cooper got separated from the boat.

Buzz up!

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At 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, the Coast Guard ended its search. Capt. Timothy M. Close, commander of the U.S. Coast Guard, told ESPN that the Coast Guard covered 24,000 square miles in the Gulf of Mexico.

But on Tuesday morning, Chris Galati of Galati Yacht Sales on Anna Maria Island and Dave Moore, who played tight end for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers for 13 years and was a Bucs teammate with Cooper and Smith, set out on a rescue attempt. They know all about the code.

And what else could they do? For three days when the seas were simply too rough to head into, Moore could only sort through frames of memories of seeing these men's families. He could even recall a conversation he had with Cooper in 2004 about fishing.

"He was just getting into fishing in the bays; he had just got a boat," Moore said. "He was definitely into it. He was definitely hooked."

So, Moore and Galati went in separate boats and worked an area in 6-foot seas. There were still white caps. The rough conditions made it tough to see. And after a half-hour, when Anthony Manali, George Reuss, and J.D. Jackson climbed down from Galati's tuna tower, clad in thick clothes — even ski masks — they were still shivering.

"It put a perspective on everything," Galati said.

The odds of finding the men alive after more than 72 hours of cold conditions were slim. But that wasn't the point.

"We couldn't just sit on our hands," Galati said.

Capt. Hank Williams of Wet Willy Charters knows about the code. In fact, the same day Cooper and company were offshore of Clearwater, Williams was guiding a charter boat 70 miles west of Anna Maria Island. Williams said the seas were 3 to 4 feet. Williams wished he would have heard a distress call on his radio.

It may have been a two-hour boat ride, but Williams said he would have been on a plane right away.

"Absolutely, I would have helped them," Williams said. "We're all good mariners out there. My heart, all us captains, our hearts go out to these people."

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According to the St. Petersburg Times, Schuyler later said the boat flipped because as they were pulling a stuck anchor, the boat took on a wave and capsized.

Williams said if an angler is in any type of rough seas, they must not short-anchor. In fact, if an angler is in 150 feet of water depth, they should let out four times the amount of rope.

"Take everything into consideration," Williams said. "... plan for all possibilities."

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