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Fishing guide gives the reel lake story

from PAGE C1

Still screaming, after all these years

And sometimes clients turn on you. A month or so after Bradshaw hired Frank, Bradshaw appeared on Jay Leno. "He badmouthed me," says Frank, who happened to be watching. "Said I didn't know anything. Called me 'Some pro guy.' Called Elephant Butte 'Lake TorC.'"

So what did Frank do? "I laughed. I took it in a kindly way. I really tried hard for him. As for him talking like that, well, you know, he's a celebrity."

Frank, on the other hand, lives to help clients catch stripers. What's a striper look like? Streamlined, pearly-white body. Dark stripes running from behind the gills to base of the tail. The largest one taken from the Butte, in 1992, weighed 54.8 pounds.

Says Frank: "Every day I'm going for that record."

Ninety-nine point nine percent of the people who



Looking for a fishing guide?

Here are some questions to ask an objective source

- Does the guide arrive on time, ready to go?
- Does the guide have a cheerful, positive attitude?
- Is the guide enthusiastic, but not full of wild promises?
- Does the guide know fishing and stay up to date with trends?
- Does the guide watch the Weather Channel?
- Does the guide know what spots are most productive?
- What time of day is best?
- Does the guide market his/her business, but not oversell it?

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Frank keeps a depth finder aboard his 24-foot center console fishing boat. The finder shows ridges

internship in El Paso, at R.E. Thomason General Hospital, but he had to start all over, says Frank. "He made it work. He practiced in El Paso for 35 years."

When Frank was a boy, his father took him to the Butte, where they fished for smallmouth bass from the shore. That was Frank's fish — until stripers came along. Like Santiago, Hemingway's Cuban angler in "The Old Man and the Sea," Frank knows that some of life's greatest things are worth waiting for.

After graduating from University of Texas-El Paso with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1984, Frank entered medical school at the Universidad Autonoma, in Juarez. That's what his father wanted. He practiced medicine for five years, then quit. "It wasn't in my heart," Frank says. "I wanted to be outside." It took time, but Francisco Sr. finally understood.

Putting away his stethoscope, Frank headed straight for the Butte, where at the time

Ron Campos, once a Frank client, now a good friend. "He breathes fishing and he's so generous."

Vacations for Frank, and his wife, Crystal, who lives in El Paso, often mean a fishing trip. Any type of fishing but ice. He's been to Alaska, Mexico, the Amazon.

More than anything, Frank loves to see kids fish. When Frank was a kid, he saw a boy in Fabens, Texas, take a carp out of a canal for his first fish. "When he pulled it up, the boy was shaking. That's what happens with kids. I love to see it."

Not long ago an orphanage asked Frank to take some kids out. He did it *gratis*. On his refrigerator is a drawing done by one of the young anglers. The boy caught a crappie, remembers Frank. The drawing says, "To Mr. Frank from Daniel." The handwriting is shaky.

**FRANK VILORIO'S
BREADED,
DEEP-FRIED**

the stripers biting
A good person
is Frank Vilorio

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Says Frank: "Every day I'm going for that record."

Ninety-nine point nine percent of the people who call Frank want him to take them striper fishing. No catfish, white bass, walleye, largemouth or crappie.

"I'm a striper guy," says Frank. "It's in my blood. I can't get rid of it. If some guy pulls in a striper, it's the biggest thrill for me. Now, that's hard for other fishermen to figure out. They wonder why I'm not fishing. People say I get more excited than they do. It's true. After all these years, I yell and scream."

When stripers aren't biting, they have "lockjaw," according to Frank. When they are hungry, they fight with a fury. Striped bass were introduced to the Butte in the mid to late 1970s, but nobody was really catching them until the



COURTESY FRANK VILORIO

Dylan Childress, a West Virginia youngster fighting leukemia, caught this 32-inch striped bass this summer, guided by Frank Vilorio.

mid-'80s. Now people want stripers because they don't give in easily. Stripers are smart, says Frank, and you sense what's coming next: "They go in schools." Ha-ha. Here's Frank describing that fight: "He'll come to the boat three or four times. He doesn't jump into the air when he's hooked. He dives down. You arm wrestle

him. You let him run till he tires, then he'll start rising. That fish, he's got some shoulders."

Shad is the best bait for stripers, says Frank. Where shad are, stripers are. And Frank catches his own shad. He uses a weighted net to pull them in. Live bait for this guide, always. "You can't call yourself a guide if

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you buy bait in stores."

Frank keeps a depth finder aboard his 24-foot center console fishing boat. The finder shows ridges and humps and dropoffs. "On those ledges is where the stripers like to hang," Frank says. "About 33 feet." When clients peer into Frank's depth finder, they often say, "I don't see any fish in there."

Oh, they're there, Frank will say. They're there.

Finding his place in the great outdoors

Francisco Vilorio was born in Santa Clara, Cuba, 51 years ago. He fled that country in 1961 with his mother and two sisters. His father, a physician, came along later. "We left everything," Frank remembers. "We didn't speak a word of English."

His father, Francisco Sr., managed to land an

internship in El Paso, at R.E. Thomason General Hospital, but he had to start all over, says Frank. "He made it work. He practiced in El Paso for 35 years."

When Frank was a boy, his father took him to the Butte, where they fished for smallmouth bass from the shore. That was Frank's fish — until stripers came along. Like Santiago, Hemingway's Cuban angler in "The Old Man and the Sea," Frank knows that some of life's greatest things are worth waiting for.

After graduating from University of Texas-El Paso with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1984, Frank entered medical school at the Universidad Autonoma, in Juarez. That's what his father wanted. He practiced medicine for five years, then quit. "It wasn't in my heart," Frank says. "I wanted to be outside." It took time, but Francisco Sr. finally understood.

Putting away his stethoscope, Frank headed straight for the Butte, where at the time 10 guides worked. Frank started at the bottom. He yearned to be an apprentice to the legendary Buddy Humphries, but wasn't chosen. That hurt. He had no mentors. "I had to learn on a trial and error basis. I had to learn on the back streets, all by myself."

Today, he is the best known guide on the lake. Other guides, even some from out of state, call him for advice. He freely gives it. No secrets. Not long ago, Steve Brewster, a guide from Oklahoma, drove 700 miles to sit at Frank's feet. "Works hard for you, excellent equipment, very professional," says Brewster.

"I've never met any one so dedicated," says Albuquerque businessman

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FRANK VILORIO'S BREADED, DEEP-FRIED STRIPED BASS

(One 20-pound striper feeds five people)

Fillet fish, removing red meat and cutting white meat into nugget-size chunks, each 2 to 2½ inches

Place chunks in buttermilk. Let soak in refrigerator 3 hours

Place chunks in a gallon-size baggie, with batter mix, or breading. Shake bag vigorously, then remove chunks from bag and place them on plate in refrigerator for 1 hour, so breading will stick.

(Uncle Buck's Breeding from Bass Pro Shops is recommended).

Deep-fry chunks in peanut oil for 5 to 7 minutes
Serve

stripers biting A good person s Frank Vilorio

photo, too, because Frank knows such a move is good marketing.

A barrel-keg of a man with a graying beard, Frank, despite an inclination to promote, does not live by the buck. Not greedy, not swell-headed, he says he only wants his clients to do well.

On the wall of his trailer here, about a mile or so from the lake, there's a photo of football great Terry Bradshaw. Frank is in the photo, too, of course, and both are smiling. Bradshaw is not holding up a fish because he did not catch one. Bradshaw came to the Butte with his father a little more than a year ago and hired Frank because, well, Bradshaw had asked around for the best guide.

"His daddy caught a striper," says Frank, adding that Terry had bad luck. "I don't think he'll come again."

That happens, says Frank. The Butte is not some go-fish pond at a grade school fair. This is the real world. "Some-

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Fishing guide Frank Vilorio steers a course across Elephant Butte Lake.

RICHARD PIPES/JOURNAL



Frank Vilorio does not mind telling people who he is.

THE REEL STORY



These little guys are shad, used as bait for striped bass.

Are the stripers biting today? A good person to ask is Frank Vilorio

By **TOBY SMITH**
Journal Staff Writer

ELEPHANT BUTTE LAKE

When Frank Vilorio watches someone catch a fish, he says he feels a lot like the guy who won the Powerball jackpot. Frank — no one calls him anything else — is a full-time fishing guide, one of only four working this man-made waterhole the size of approximately 35,000 football fields.

For 14 years Frank has been motoring people out on the Butte, showing them his spots, setting up their rods, telling them again and again to keep their lines taut and, when they're successful, taking their photograph. Frank does everything but cook their fish. But if asked, he has recipes.

Snapping a photo is important. If you catch a striped bass here, which is Frank's fish the way Jonah belonged to that whale, he'll show you how to hold a striper in front of the camera so that it looks even bigger than it is. And Frank will happily get in the

photo, too, because Frank knows such a move is good marketing.

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"His daddy caught a striper," says Frank, adding that Terry had had luck. "I don't think he'll come again."

That happens, says Frank. The Butte is not some go-fish pond at a grade school fair. This is the real world. "Sometimes you catch 'em," says Frank, "and sometimes you don't."