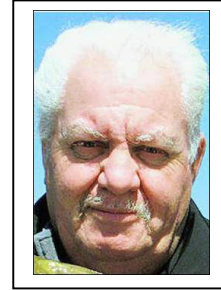


## OUTDOORS

# ERIC SHARP: Big Bert's death leaves a huge void

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Big Bert Cummings dies at 65.

If you're involved in the fishing business on the Great Lakes, you probably knew Big Bert Cummings. And the way Bert's Custom Tackle has been growing, it's probable he soon would have been well known to trolling anglers nationwide.

But the big-hearted, white-haired mountain of a man who created Bert's Custom Tackle was found dead Monday in his Monroe-area home, where he had been resting during treatment for blood clots in his legs. He was 65.

Bert had called Friday to confirm that I would stay with him next weekend during the Detroit Boat Show. He had been feeling lousy for a couple of weeks, but he felt a lot better and wanted to show off his latest idea that would be the best thing in fishing since worms.

Raised in Taylor, Bert owned a Downriver metal plating company for 30 years. About 20 years ago, he sold the place for a profit that gave him financial independence.

But Bert had always been an outdoorsman, especially a fisherman, and when you combined a keen intellect, an enormous amount of restless energy and lots of idle time, the result was a new company called Bert's Custom Tackle, producing the best rod holders and other trolling gear on the market.

Bert eventually sold that company to Tecla Corp. in Walled Lake, but he stayed on as the product developer and front man, wandering the outdoors shows like an amiable, white-haired Buddha in god-awful stretch pants and an old shirt that would have made a pretty decent tent for two standard-sized people.

"I ain't done losing weight yet," he protested when I once asked in exasperation why a guy who drove Cadillacs and Lincoln Navigators and owned \$300,000 worth of fishing boats dressed in what appeared to be pickings from a Dumpster.

"Why should I spend money on new clothes that won't fit me three months from now?"

Bert wasn't cheap. It was just that stuff like clothing didn't rank high in a brain that measured things, and people, by their quality and effectiveness rather than appearance.

While he took painstaking care in developing a new rod holder or planer board mast, he ignored his health. Bert was about 5-feet-9 and weighed more than 300 pounds, even after losing 80 pounds a couple of years ago. But he avoided any exercise that might have improved his overall fitness, saying, "Don't worry, I'll start in a month or so, after I lose another 20 pounds."

Bert was terribly sad after cancer claimed his wife, Sharon, three years ago. I drove to his house one afternoon the year after she died and saw a bunch of spring flowers sitting in flats on the front lawn.

Bert was inside on the couch, blowing his nose with a tissue and grinning sheepishly.

"Sharon always loved gardening, and I'd let the garden go to hell," he said. "So I figured I'd get some flowers and plant them. I was out there on my knees, my hands all covered with mud and surrounded by flowers, and I just started bawling like a baby. I couldn't stop. It was the first time that I had been able to cry for her."

It won't take that long for those who loved Bert to cry for him.

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