

ALL AT SEA

SOUTHEAST

Inside:
Fishing For
Miracles



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MEET THE SWAMP PEOPLE

ONE HAND. ONE GUN. ONE SHOT.

BY LISA OVERING



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MOLINERES

RJ (left) and Jay Paul on the hunt for 'gators.



PHOTO COURTESY, IBERIA PARISH CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

Two mammoth alligators lurk on the shoreline in the Atchafalaya Swamp.

“One wrong step in the swamp and you can scream for hours, but no one will come and find you,” says Jay Paul Molinere.

At 23, Jay Paul is the younger half of the father-son pop culture phenomenon on “Swamp People”, the eco-adventure based television reality show that’s taken America by storm on the History Channel. If you haven’t heard of the show, you must be living inside a very dark hole. Time to poke your head out enough to see the rays of crimson sunlight rising over the steaming swamp.

Jay Paul and his father, RJ, tribal members of the United Houma Nation, are depicted regularly on “Swamp People” in their daily life as alligator hunters in America’s last real frontier: The Atchafalaya Swamp and Basin. The show is filmed within an hour’s drive of New Orleans near Houma, Louisiana.

While they have 10 boats, including a 21-foot Triton bass boat, the Molineres are usually seen in an airboat with a bunch of dead alligators. During Louisiana’s 30-day alligator hunting season in September, they work 4 a.m.-11 p.m., stopping to nap instead of sleep, as they bait and check 100 lines to fight the next 1,000-pound alligator.

“It’s a bitch,” says Jay Paul. “Ever seen a pit bull come unglued or a great white shark lunge up through the water? That alligator is like a cross between a pit bull and a great white shark. If alligator fishing and hunting was easy, everyone would do it.”

Alligators are aggressive and shouldn’t be mistakenly kept as pets, as they know only two things: killing and eating.

“Alligators don’t get big by being stupid,” says RJ. “People don’t realize half the time that they have an alligator hanging out by their dock. But the alligator knows your land better than you do. The ones that you actually see aren’t the bad ones. It’s the one’s you don’t see that you need to worry about – those are the ones that get your chickens,

ducks, and dogs. You only see maybe a quarter of them.”

Alligator fishing and hunting, a sport passed down by generations of Houma Indians and shared with French Cajuns, is not something you can elect to learn. It is inherent, in your blood. RJ learned to fish gators from his mother, who learned from her parents.

Close calls

Unlike other cast members on “Swamp People”, the Molineres don’t go through the dramatics of yelling “Choot ‘em! Choot ‘em!” They don’t bumble with their firearms, dropping weapons into the murky water.

At the opportune moment during the fight with the gator, the Molineres simply use body language to signal the time for the kill. Jay Paul, who is a crack shot, knows exactly when to shoot and he only needs one shot. “The alligator will give you the opportunity to shoot – you just have to be ready,” he says.

They acknowledge that the swamp and marsh are two entirely different animals. The marsh is treacherous and you need to know how to get around.

“You can almost walk in the swamp, which is cypress stumps and fresh water,” says Jay Paul. “But the marsh is more brackish with layers of floating grass, like a prairie that sits over water, and the bottom is 10-feet underneath. You need to know what to be able to hold onto because everything you want to grab gives way. Your waders fill up with water. You can drown real quick.”

While they use their airboat in the swamp, the Molineres drive a mud boat in canals filled with lilies that can clog an airboat. In any case, they hold their collective breaths each morning when they turn the ignition key of their boat – and each and every time they skillfully stick their hands in the water to untangle a line.

“You just don’t know if you’ll be coming home again,” says RJ. “There is no guarantee. This is not a job that you want to have a mistake with.”

They race around all day, checking all 100 lines and quickly icing and covering the gators they catch before their hides literally fry in the scorching swamp heat.

The two men are as solid as the moss draped cypress trees that line Terrebone Parish, La., but not nearly as towering. RJ, age 50, is about 5’6”, 165 pounds and completely muscle-bound with a mere 29-inch waist and 17-inch biceps. His narrow, braided ponytail resembles a snake, and he trims it every full moon, which is about when it reaches his belt loop.

Don’t call us Hollywood

While accustomed to the limelight, the father-son duo always expected to be on television, just not for hunting gators. RJ is a four-time world champion arm wrestler, left and right handed, and Jay Paul, a self-confessed adrenaline junkie, holds several boxing titles.

“Jay Paul has never beaten me arm wrestling,” says RJ. “But I won’t get in the ring or a cage with him. Jay Paul could knock my block off.”

Their hands ache to the touch during the first two weeks of alligator season, gnarled with hook punctures and the punishment of bare flesh holding the line while wrestling and handling 20 live alligators every day during September. But then their paws callous up.


“We can’t feel hot coal on our hands the last couple of weeks (during season),” says Jay Paul. “Our hands are that hard.”

The Molineres haven’t changed who they are or how they live. “Swamp People” is just another level of fame. Their hobbies consist of work and, when Jay Paul wants to get away from it all, he enjoys using heavy equipment to dig holes and knock trees down on their 360 acres or hunting deer and duck in the swamp.

“Prior to the show, other cast members had never boarded a plane and didn’t know how to read signs on the interstate,” says RJ. “But we’d already been all over the world, wrestling and boxing. While the show does change the time you have, it hasn’t changed us. I don’t want to change at the age of 50. Some people say we’re just Hollywood, there for the picture. They don’t know RJ Molinere. I challenge anyone to keep up with us in the marsh.”

For celebrities, Jay Paul and RJ are approachable, humble and earthy. They don’t seem to care if the bubble of celebrity stardom and puffy paychecks suddenly bursts. They still sell the alligator they catch to local restaurants like Big Al’s in Houma, which boasts a drive-through window serving boiled crawfish instead of French fries to busy Cajuns on-the-go.

Jay Paul is a third year nursing student majoring in anesthesiology. His mother/RJ’s wife, Stacey, is a working nurse practitioner who handles their fan mail. RJ says all their jobs are equally important and that his family will always keep it real – with a culture that flows around water.

“With us, what you see is what you get,” says RJ. “Stacey’s been offered really good jobs elsewhere but turned them down because I can’t imagine my life without water, without swamp. I just don’t want to.” 

“When it comes time to die, be not like those whose hearts are filled with the fear of death, so when their time comes they weep and pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. Sing your death song and die like a hero going home.”

–Indian poem tattooed on Jay Paul Molinere’s torso