

# Beating an ALLIGATOR to the Punch

Hunter Succeeds in Capturing Saurian After It Has Him Pinned Down With One of His Arms in Its Mouth

By WILLIAM HORNE

WRESTLING with bears may have been considered a very thrilling and interesting sport half a century ago, but now a far more dangerous and unique game comes to us from the Florida Everglades, that tropical jungleland of wilderness and beauty.

This odd pastime is called "Wrestling With Alligators," and it is just what the name implies.

Mike son of Chief Osceola, of the Seminoles, is the originator, and out at the little Indian village on the outskirts of Miami in the edge of the 'Glades he gives daily exhibitions in this thrilling sport.

If left unmolested the alligator is a docile and harmless creature, and will hastily retreat at the first approach of man. But he can be a rather bad fellow when wounded, cornered or teased, and will fight like a demon with powerful tail and crushing jaws.

Florida's Everglades still abound with these saurians, and many lives and limbs have been lost by natives who make it a business of hunting them for a living.

"But don't you tame a 'gator before you wrestle with him?" a spectator recently asked Mike during an exhibition.

"Huh," Mike answered disdainfully. "You can't tame a 'gator. He's got sense, but it's sense like the 'possum. You think he's used to you and wouldn't bite you for the world, when suddenly—smack, he's snapped off your arm or your leg.

"Did you ever hear about the man who got hold of a rattlesnake's head and couldn't turn it loose? Well, I got hold of a big bull 'gator once, and I couldn't turn him loose."

## On Trail of 'Gator

IT happened during one night while Mike was on a gator hunt in the 'Glades. He was alone in his small, flat-bottomed bateau, and his sturdy paddle thrusts carried him steadily down the canal and deeper into the swamp.

"I knew right where I wanted to go," he relates, "to get a fair-sized 'gator for my collection, and I paddled on down the canal. It was quiet, and not a breeze stirred the moss that hung from the oak limbs nor rustled the palm fronds that lined the canal on either side.

"Now and then I would pass an open prairie. Thousands of frogs serenaded in a thousand different voices, but as the noise of my boat rubbing through the grass reached them, they shut up like clams.

"It was all like magic, and when I passed they would all begin their singing again.

"The moon was very bright and I could see well enough in the open, but suddenly the canal seemed to end up right into a thick, black wall of trees. But I knew it went on in, and as I approached the noise of the frogs was far behind, and in the shadows of the trees there was a dead silence ahead of me.

"I knew by this silence that 'gators prowled in the shallows at their nightly feeding."

It was eerie and ghostly beneath those trees. Trailing beards of Spanish moss hung in the silent gloom like lonely sentinels; deep shadows cast reflections where moonbeams broke through the thick foliage so close to the dark, saffron-hued water.

Mike's eyes slowly grew accustomed to



the thicker gloom beneath the trees as his bateau slid noiselessly along, and he was very careful not to scrape his paddle on the bateau side, for an alien sound carries far on the still air in the deep swamps.

Sometimes there came the hoarse squawking of a sandhill crane from a few yards off the canal, and Mike knew that some foraging saurian had managed to creep up on one of the giant birds as it slept on stilt-like legs, and dragged it down to its lair.

Twisting mangrove roots lined the canal on either side in grotesque shapes; thorn-spiked bamboo vines trailed like liana from the tangled roof overhead.

But Mike's had been a life in the wilderness of the Everglades; he knew every twist of the winding canals and 'gator runs that seemed to vanish so mysteriously in the jungle's depths, and certain towering cypress or gnarled mangroves conveyed a silent message to him as do our street signs on corner lamp posts.

He was completely at home, where an outsider would have been hopelessly lost.

Mike had already abandoned his paddle, for he didn't want any noise to reveal his stealthy approach. He propelled his small craft now by pulling along from root to jutting root, and suddenly fifty feet ahead in a patch of moonlight that broke through the foliage he saw a long, slowly moving form.

"It was one of the largest 'gators I had ever seen," he says, "and he was just crawling out of the water up onto a thick clump of grass. His tail was toward me, and as there was no breeze to take my scent to him, I knew I had a good chance to bag him, so I tied my boat to a root, picked up my rope and stepped easily into the water.

"As I left the boat I was very careful not to lift my feet clear of the knee-deep water, for the dripping would have warned him. Have you ever tried to stalk a 'gator? No? Then you do not know what a slow job that is. I al-

*Just as Mike pried the jaws of the giant open to place a stick therein, it flopped suddenly, pinning him underneath with one of his arms caught between the savage teeth.*

ways say that I am very lucky when I do it, and I did it this time.

"Pretty soon I was standing on a clump of roots ten feet from the canal out in the edge of the prairie. I had my rope, and I also had a short, green, tough stick about a foot long.

"Suddenly, while I was standing there ready to jump down on him, these roots under me broke with a loud cracking sound, and my 'gator made a quick, jerking move toward the canal.

"And then I jumped right quick, like that—" (Mike snapped his brown, muscular fingers) "right onto his back and locked my left arm tight around his neck.

"I squeezed with all my strength, and his mouth flew open, and I stuck the stick in endwise and propped it there. But just when I thought everything was going fine and I got a good half-hitch with my rope on both front feet the devil flopped over right on top of me and doubled up like a big jackknife.

## Trapped Under 'Gator

THERE I was under the bottom with my breath about mashed out, and swallowing a lot of mud and water, and couldn't turn him loose. If I had he'd have broken me half in two with his tail, and it seemed like if I hung on much longer I'd drown or be mashed flat on the roots.

"He shut his jaws down on my arm, and his teeth met almost against the arm bones. It made me sick, and I just lay there with my arm in his mouth, and him starting to crawl off and half dragging me.

"But pretty soon I realized what it would mean if I fainted. I yelled as

loud as I could and put my right arm around his neck and choked with every bit of the strength left in me.

"I tried to choke him to death, but I guess that would be a pretty hard job to do—choke a 'gator to death. Anyway, he opened his mouth and let go of my arm. I turned him a-loose right quick. He jackknifed again and his tail caught the side of my head and sent me fifteen feet into the canal.

"I scrambled up somehow, and stood looking at him as he lay there thrashing about in the shallow water. My arm was badly torn and blood was dripping into the water at my feet. It made me sick and dizzy, but I knew if I didn't do something right quick I'd lose my big 'gator sure enough, so I went back over to him, got hold of the end of the rope and looped it around a heavy mangrove root sticking out of the water.

"I went home, then. It took me nearly all night to get there. I went straight to a doctor and had my arm bandaged. During the day I took a friend with me and went after my 'gator. There he was, still tied to the root, and full of fight.

"But we tied him up good and towed him back home with us. That's him out there now I'm going to wrestle next."

## Still Vicious

HE waved a brown arm toward a shallow pool at the other end of the wire inclosure beneath some twisted palms, and a long, horny snout poked out over the edge.

"Has he tried to bite off your arm any more?" somebody in the crowd asked.

"Yeah," Mike answered with a wry grin, "and the bad part is, I can't even prop his mouth open any more. My customers like to get a thrill, and they claim there's no thrill if he doesn't have a chance to bite me. So I have to please my cash customers, don't I?"