



Be Prepared!

Knowing what to do before, during and after a hookup can help you put a tournament winning fish in the cockpit. - By Jeff Merrill

Sometimes it's better to be lucky than good and the best sportfishing crews take every effort to make their own luck whether they're competing in a big dollar billfish tournament or just a weekend outing with the boss and his family. Planning ahead can also mean the difference between success and failure, especially when big fish are involved. An organized plan of attack for boating any fish no matter how large or small can also reduce the risk of injury to all parties involved. If you're the "new guy" in the cockpit and you're the designated angler, don't be afraid to ask questions early to avoid embarrassment later.

Tournament winning teams treat every encounter with any fish as though it was a tournament winner. The old adage "you play like you practice" should be followed whether you're on a fun trip with the family or fishing in big buck billfish tournament. It's a good idea to know where all the necessary tools in the cockpit are before you need them. For instance, if stand-up tackle is being utilized, fit the first angler up with the gimbal belt and kidney

harness before the line comes out of the 'rigger clip and a sailfish is tail-walking towards the horizon, especially when novice anglers are involved. Likewise, if utilizing heavy trolling tackle use time running to the fishing grounds to adjust footrest and bucket harness for the first angler up that day. If the fighting chair is equipped with a flip-up gimbal, check that everyone in the crew is versed on how to use it correctly. Don't assume everyone knows and understands the proper use of all tackle being used, especially when lever drag reels are involved. When fishing in a billfish release tournament where digital date-stamped images are required, designate the photographer ahead of time and be sure he knows how to use the camera before the blue marlin is at the boat! Assign duties to other crewmembers including who will clear lines, ready flying gaffs, leader the fish and sink the gaff or plant the tag prior to release and be sure they're comfortable with the assignment.

A well prepared crew will also have all the end game gear ready as soon

as the first lure or bait hits the water. Assemble flying gaffs and store them in a safe place where they can be grabbed in a hurry. Tail ropes and large meat hooks for pulling large fish through the transom door should also be placed in an accessible location. Tail ropes with loops spliced both ends reduce time spent fiddling to find the loop to put the end through when a thrashing fish is boat side. Everyone involved in the leadering, gaffing and releasing process of fish of any size, must be wearing gloves. Cable, wire and monofilament leaders as well as swivels, crimps and chafe gear will slice through unprotected hands like a hot knife through butter. Have cable cutters for cutting wire and cable leaders and a Sportsman's Release Knife handy for cutting heavy monofilament. Keep in mind most fishing pliers don't have the cutting strength for cutting heavy monofilament, wire or cable. Besides end game gear, have a pitch bait handy on ice and ready to toss to a white marlin or sailfish when it shows on a dredge or other teaser though be sure the rules allow it if fishing in a tournament.



When fishing in tournaments, be sure all crewmembers are not only aware of tournament specific rules but also IGFA rules if the event requires following them. Some billfish tournaments allow any crewmember to hook the fish and handoff the rod to an angler while other events strictly prohibit that practice. Most tournaments also have specific rules regarding time of lines in, number of rods that can be fished and who the designated anglers are. It's important to explain these rules to everyone in the crew, especially when a certified tournament observer is on the boat. Don't take the chance on losing a tournament because of a technicality.

It's easy to become excited when a strike occurs but it's important to keep a cool head and clear other lines to prevent tangles. Keep in mind multiple hook-ups, especially with sailfish, white marlin and tuna often occur so leaving other lines in the pattern for an extra minute may yield an additional bite or two. Store rods in safe place, preferably in a rocket launcher or other rod holders and keep lures, baits and teasers off the deck to avoid injury and damage. Offer encouragement to the angler during extended battles and if

needed, instruction in technique should be relayed. Have a crewmember stationed behind the fighting chair whose job is to do nothing but keep the angler and rod tip facing the fish. Instruct the angler to pack the line on the reel while fighting the fish to prevent a build-up of line on one side of the spool. If a bucket harness is utilized with a fighting chair the angler should pump the fish with his/her feet on the footrest to lift the rod tip and retrieve line on the down stroke. Attempting to pump big fish with arms and shoulders will quickly tire even the strongest angler. Don't waste energy trying to retrieve line when a fish is taking drag because you can't turn a fish when line is exiting the spool and remember line capacity on the reel decreases, the tension on the line in the water increases and the lever drag should be backed off from the strike position until line is recovered by backing down or chasing your quarry to prevent a broken line.

As the "moment of truth" nears and the fish can be seen below the surface, often referred to as seeing color, the person at the helm and crew in the cockpit should agree on which side of the boat the fish will be taken on. Billfish, tuna and sharks

should be taken on the upwind side of the boat and away from the transom since a miss with the gaff or tag stick could send your quarry into the running gear of the boat. As the crewmember grabs the leader, have the angler back of slightly on the drag to prevent a broken line if the fish lunges away from the boat. Avoid taking wraps around the hands with the leader and grab and pull the leader hand over hand so the line can be released if the fish has other plans. White marlin and sailfish should be billed with thumbs together on the bill to prevent injury while a second crewmember removes the hook. Gaff food-fish such as tuna, dolphin, wahoo and kingfish in the head to minimize damage to the fish and modest sized fish should be swung aboard and directly into the fish box. If a fly gaff is used be sure the rope is attached securely before planting the hook!

It's impossible to cover every sequence of events that need to be prepared for when heading offshore in one article. Depending on the targeted species of the day different steps will obviously need to be followed. Hopefully some of the tips provided here will help you score on the next trip offshore. [m](#)