

A high-angle, close-up photograph of a fisherman on a boat. The fisherman is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, a dark green baseball cap, and red gloves. He is leaning over the side of the boat, pulling a large, dark-colored fish (likely a shark) into the vessel. The fish is partially out of the water, and its body is glistening. The water is a deep blue, and the boat's hull is visible on the right side of the frame. The overall scene is dynamic and captures a moment of intense action.

sportfish

Breaking Point

by Jeff Merrill

A properly set drag is an important part of tackle preparation and can often be the difference between a boated or released fish and a pulled hook or broken line.



A blast of whitewater was followed by the snap of the transom clip and in an instant line melted from the lever drag reel as the loud clicker pulsated and the barrel-sized tuna peeled yards of line on a drag searing run. As the crew hustled around the cockpit to clear remaining lines, Nick grabbed the rod from the corner rod holder and maneuvered to the fighting chair. Clipped to the bucket harness, he quickly realized he was in for a battle and relayed to the captain what was happening. “Jimmy, this fish is taking a lot of line. I’m already down about a third of the spool,” he noted. “I’ll try to slow him down a bit before we get spooled,” he added and before the words “Don’t touch the drag,” left Jimmy’s mouth, Nick had pushed the lever past the Strike setting and the fish was gone.

There’s a fine line between the proper resistance necessary to slow your quarry and too much drag which results in line failure, especially when utilizing light tackle for large gamefish. Several factors play a role in setting a drag on any reel including line type and breaking strength and the type of reel being used. Most spinning reels have a drag system that’s

adjusted by turning a knob on top of the spool though some models are produced where resistance is adjusted with a knob affixed to the rear of the reel. With either model, once the drag is initially set, it’s impossible to return to the exact same setting if the knob is tightened or loosened to increase or decrease resistance. Conventional reels are available in two styles and each has their pros and cons. Star drag reels are relatively inexpensive, durable and available in a wide range of sizes from small baitcasting models to large big game reels capable of holding well over 700 yards of 130-pound test line. However, for their favorable attributes, star drag reels also have two important drawbacks simply due to their design. First, the drag system utilizes a small drag washer system, roughly the size of a quarter, that’s susceptible to heat from long runs by large gamefish which can result in inconsistent resistance. Star drag reels also use a star-shaped dial on the reel which is turned clockwise to increase resistance and counter-clockwise to decrease drag. Though simple to set initially, resistance cannot be increased or decreased with any degree of accuracy since there is no measure of how much tension was added or re-

moved from the drag system without using a scale.

Though most models carry a significantly higher price tag than star drag reels of similar size, lever drag reels have several positive attributes which makes them a favorite of many anglers. Gold models such as the Penn International and Shimano Tiagra as well as lever drag reels by Avet and Accurate, have become the standard of tournament anglers worldwide. Graphite models by Penn and Shimano offer many of the features of their “gold” cousins and their light weight makes them an excellent choice for light-tackle applications.

Different angling applications often require the need to add or remove resistance even before a fish grabs the bait or lure and a lever drag reel provides that flexibility. Keep in mind as a fish takes line and line capacity on the reel decreases, resistance on the fishing line increases as the fish drags the line through the water. At this point it may be necessary to back off the drag and have the boat chase the fish. Shark fisherman often set their reels with light drag resistance just off free spool to prevent a backlash while drifting


and big game anglers also often prefer a setting just below strike position to prevent a broken line when the bite occurs while trolling billfish and tuna. Also, the drag washer on a lever drag reel is much larger than those utilized in star drag reels and this increase in drag surface area helps dissipate heat quickly while providing consistent resistance throughout the entire range from free spool to full settings. A lever drag reel also offers a variable drag setting thanks to a pre-set knob which sets the drag and the lever which applies resistance when moved forward and removes drag tension from the washer when pulled back.

Packing reels with Dacron, braid or monofilament line is a personal preference and each has its unique characteristics. When purchasing line it's important to note that any brand or type of line marked as "IGFA" or "Tournament" will not break above the stated breaking strength on the label. Lines not labeled as such will not break below the stated breaking strength on the label. While the stretch characteristics of monofilament make the line a lot more forgiving, especially if drag settings are off a bit, this same stretch makes it a lot harder to set the hook on large fish since the line can stretch

up to 15%. Conversely, braided line and Dacron each have minimal stretch which helps when setting the hook but require a precise drag setting to avoid a broken line. Today's super braids are very thin and offer a much higher breaking strength than monofilament lines of the same diameter and are preferred by anglers who want a line with a high breaking strength without sacrificing line capacity on a reel. Bottom fishing anglers particularly like the thin diameter of braid which allows the use of less weight to get their bait to the feeding zone of their quarry. Braided lines also offer superior abrasion resistance compared to monofilament. Regardless of which type of line you choose, always have fresh line on your reels and avoid leaving rods and reels direct sunlight when not being used for extended periods of time.

Setting a drag on any reel is most accurately accomplished with the use of a scale. Regardless of what type of line is used, any drag should be set between 25% - 33% of the breaking strength of the line. To set the drag on

a spinning reel or star drag reel simply attach a scale to the end of the line and lift the rod tip until line slips off the reel. Note the pound mark on the scale when the line slips and increase or decrease drag until the desired setting is achieved. With a lever drag reel, place the lever at the strike position and lift the rod tip until line slips off the reel and note the pounds on the scale. If an adjustment needs to be made, place the reel in free spool and loosen or tighten the pre-set knob as needed to increase or decrease drag. Repeat the procedure using the scale until the desired resistance is achieved. Many savvy tournament anglers will also add a piece of tape to the reel next to the lever to designate the resistance in pounds at given positions of the lever. Drags should be rechecked after extended battles with large fish.

Taking the time to properly set the drag on each reel is an important step on any fishing trip. The few moments of preparation at the dock will pay dividends on the water. 

Opposite: Fresh line and a properly set drag are two important parts of successful big game fishing.

Below Left: Add a strip of tape next to the lever to indicate the amount of drag in pounds at various positions.

Below Right: Use a scale to accurately measure the drag resistance in pounds on any reel.

