



The Rules of the Game

As with any sport, fishing has a set of guidelines designed for anglers all over the world. - By Jeff Merrill

The brisk chill in the air is only one of the indications the winter sailfish season is upon us and with comes a full slate of tournaments. Likewise, many Marinalife members will no doubt be on the water looking to score with spindlebeaks on fun trips with family and friends. With that in mind, we thought this might be a good time to review the importance of understanding IGFA rules since most tournaments follow that format. It's also a good idea to have background knowledge on these rules in the event someone aboard your boat catches a potential world record.

The International Game Fish Association's International Angling Rules were developed "to promote ethical and sporting angling practices, to establish uniform regulations for the compilation of world game fish records and to provide basic angling guidelines for use in fishing tournaments and any other group angling activities." For example, unlike basketball which has High School, College, International and NBA rules which players in each group compete under, the International Angling Rules insure all anglers the world follow the

same format when fishing for world records. Many tournaments also follow IGFA rules though most will modify those rules to suit their tournament species sought and fishing techniques required. For instance, several white marlin events along the mid-Atlantic coast allow any crewmember to hook a fish and handoff the rod to an angler, an act that would disqualify the catch in a strict IGFA rules tournament or for world record consideration.

Most events use the honor system for enforcement of IGFA and tournament-specific rules simply because many times the size of the field of boats makes it impractical to place an observer on each boat. Tournaments held at remote destinations also pose a problem with observer placement on every vessel since getting observers to the destination plus housing and feeding them could be a significant expense. While they can't be used to enforce IGFA or tournament rules, digital cameras with time and date-stamped images are gaining in popularity and have become a viable option for verifying the catch and species type in 100% release tournaments or modified

release events which have a high minimum weight to limit the number of fish brought to the scales.

Several tournaments including the Buccaneer Cup Sailfish Release Tournament, Florida Fish for Life and the Palm Beach Sailfish Classic use IGFA Certified Observers to document the release of the fish while also overseeing the rules of the tournament are followed by each team. Barbara Fox is a member of the IGFA Certified Observer Program and has observed in tournaments all over the world. Fox also serves as observer coordinator for the prestigious Palm Beach Sailfish Classic held out of Sailfish Marina every January. "We're (Certified Observers) there to help, not act as police," she says adding the biggest challenge is when a crew switches from charter fishing to occasional tournament fishing. "Sometimes mates are not familiar with IGFA rules and when tournament fishing they get anxious and grab the double line instead of the leader in an effort to assist the angler," Fox notes. Fox also notes though rare, she has had to disqualify a catch on a couple occasions because simple rules were broken by anglers who

didn't understand their purpose. IGFA also has documented instances where the handing off of the rod after the fish is hooked as well as fish being disqualified in events after an angler exceeded a time limit set by the tournament committee.

A frequent mistake made in tournaments involves leader length and crews should recognize that lines up to 20-pound test utilize a combined leader/double-line length that's different from lines testing heavier than 20-pound test. The length of the leader, regardless of the line class, is measured from the farthest end of the loop to the bend in the farthest attached hook, not to the end of the leader material. "I've checked some leaders when onboard a boat and relayed to the crew their leaders were too long before they put any lines in the water," says Fox. "If crews would spend a few minutes prior to each tournament and read the rules, both IGFA and tournament rules, they could prevent a problem before it occurred," she says. Some tournament savvy crews even go to extremes by showing an observer every piece of tackle, line, lure and hook they'll be using that day before they leave the dock. This may seem extreme but it could save an embarrassing situation later in a tournament should a rule be broken costing the team a potential win. For the most part, anglers in tournaments understand and follow IGFA rules but the biggest mistake they could make is not reading the tournament-specific rules.

Fox also believes a basic understanding of tournament and IGFA rules before the boat leaves the dock could prevent a problem down the road. "When I'm observing in a tournament the first question I ask of the crew is if they are ALL familiar with IGFA Angling Rules. If they have any questions, you need to ask me now, before the fish takes the bait," she adds. Often crews indicate they know IGFA rules though they may not interpret them the same observers do. Fishing waters off a foreign country also poses problems as well since a language barrier can lead to misunderstanding between crewmembers and anglers. An IGFA Certified Observer relayed an incident to me where only one member of the

crew spoke English. This crew member was not at the captain's meeting so none of the rule changes were relayed to the crew because the crew members at the meeting didn't speak English.

Though violation of a tournament rule could cause a disqualified fish in a tournament, it most definitely means the difference between awarding and rejecting an IGFA World Record application. Rebecca Reynolds, World Records Coordinator for IGFA, says anglers should be well versed in IGFA's International Angling Rules before they even leave the dock. "The most common rejection of a World Record application is line over-testing its stated breaking strength," she noted adding other rejections include a shock tippet that's too long or class tippet that's too short or a conventional leader that's too long. How and where a fish is weighed is also a critical part of the filing process. "We often reject record applications for anglers who failed to have their scales

certified in advance or didn't weigh the fish on land with a certified hand scale," notes Reynolds adding certified portable scales capable of weighing fish of several hundred pounds are now available. "A lot of people also don't realize they need to send a photo of the scale along with the record application and while it's preferred to have the photo with the fish on the scale it's not necessary." Reynolds also notes photos play an important part in the certification process and are often the difference between approval and rejection of an application. "When it comes to photos of the fish, tackle, lure, rigs, hooks, the more photos, the better," she adds.

Even though some anglers may question the reasoning for following IGFA rules when fun fishing with family and friends, it indeed is a good habit to get into. Failing to do so could mean having a tournament winning fish disqualified or a World Record application rejected. [m](#)



IGFA has a wide range of individual, family and group membership categories. Members receive a copy of the World Record Game Fishes Book, bi-monthly newsletter, membership decal and card, retractable fish measuring device, unlimited access to the IGFA Fishing Hall of Fame & Museum, unlimited access to the IGFA web site and special promotions and discounts from the IGFA store. For more information and to view a complete description of IGFA's International Angling Rules visit www.igfa.org.