



# THE RECIPE FOR TOURNAMENT SUCCESS

BY CAPT. RICKY WHEELER





There really is no feeling quite like fishing in a tournament where every fish could be a potential winner worth big money. Whether it's a smaller local tournament or a major tournament where a winning fish could be worth well in excess of a million dollars, the feeling of tournament fishing is always exhilarating! In the world of offshore fishing, fishing as part of a team is essential to success, and this is even more important to be successful in tournaments. It is one of the most exciting forms of fishing for me and just pure fun.

#### BUDGET WISELY

Before you even think about fishing a tournament, the first thing that must be done is figuring out the budget. You will need a very accurate layout of all of the tournament expenses, such as tournament fees, calcuttas (tournament side bets), crew expense, boat expense, tackle and bait expense, and miscellaneous expenses such as food and drink are not to be overlooked. Fishing tournaments can be an expensive proposition and knowing exactly what you are getting into ahead of time with no surprises makes it a lot easier to enjoy your time fishing the tournament.

Even more importantly is that everyone involved in fishing the tournament in your crew should all know what they are entitled to should any money be won. Discussing this ahead of time with everyone involved in the tournament and laying it all out on paper with everyone's signatures sets everyone's mind at ease. I have heard



Blue marlin length check.



## **THE HIERARCHY: EVERYONE HAS A JOB**

When it comes to offshore competitive team fishing, especially when the stakes are high, working together with your entire crew to the point where you work as one is crucial. Whether it is a release tournament, or a kill tournament where you are competing for the largest fish, everyone on the boat has to know the tasks they are expected to carry out.

A fishing team starts with the captain. The captain should be one of if not the most experienced person on the boat. They are the one who calls the shots as far as where to fish and how to react in situa-

tions on the water. To be capable of making the correct calls, they should be drawing their calls based on knowledge from experience. Many times these decisions need to be made in a split second and the only way to react quickly and correctly is through the muscle memory of experience. Another crucial role of the captain is to be sure the boat is well prepared and ready to run every day. Without a properly rigged and ready boat that can go hard every day of the tournament, you have zero chance at landing in the money or even catching fish for the matter.

Next are the mates. Typically in tournaments it is highly recom-

mended to have at least two mates as one ends up becoming a wire man and the other the gaff man, tag man, or videographer/photographer for releases depending on the tournament. The mates are typically responsible for running the show in the cockpit and having all tackle and bait prepared to perfection every day. Attention to the smallest details is so important to curb any chance of failure. The mates are the boss in the cockpit and are who the anglers refer to when it comes to translating what the captain sees and orders. In a lot of billfish tournaments now there are even tower mates who sit in the tower all day and help call out fish in the spread.

Then you have your angler(s). Release tournaments you typically have multiple anglers and in big fish kill tournaments you usually have the angler who is the go-to angler on the right fish. Everyone on the boat should be well aware who these people are and their responsibility.

## **PRE-FISHING**

It is crucial for each member of the team to know their job and to stick to it. Knowing what is expected out of each person allows them to mentally prepare and do their job well. Talking through scenarios together and even more importantly fishing before tournaments is important. This is especially important for crews who do not fish together all the time. Even a crew loaded with top professionals who have never fished together will have a few kinks to work out and this is what pre-fishing is for. You should always fish the way you plan to fish in the tournament during your pre-fishing days so everyone sees the scenarios and is ready to react more quickly during the tournament. Split seconds can cost you a fish, and not being able to react quickly and effectively won't win tournaments. When a team works together fluently, it makes it a lot easier to be successful and it's a lot more fun.

## **COCKPIT CONTROL**

As I said before, the captain is responsible for calling the shots, but the first mate is the one who runs the cockpit. The first mate is responsible for so much, but their most important task is quickly translating the captain's



**Prepping during the ride out.**



**Exile 65 hooked up for a tournament.**



far too many stories of crews being promised a certain percentage of any winnings and when that time came, the deal changed for the worse. As uncomfortable as this conversation may be, it is crucial that everyone is on the same page before committing to fishing the tournament together.

### **KNOW THE TOURNAMENT RULES**

Pay close attention to all of the tournament rules and make sure everyone on the boat is well aware of every single one. In the high stakes tournaments, polygraph tests may be administered to winning teams. Everyone should know what the rules are so no mistakes are made at any point of the tournament. This

makes it so easy to pass the polygraph test and collect your money. Not every tournament has the same rules, so be sure to attend the captains' meeting and don't be afraid to ask questions to make any uncertainty clear. Along with the tournament rules be sure to know the local laws as far as proper licensing and permits for everyone on board as well as the local and federal laws on fishing regulations.

It is also important to know the points system of the tournament. Some tournaments award more points for lighter line class, some award more points for certain species, and many have tournament minimums on each species. Sometimes you can use points systems to your advantage. For example,

years ago my crew and I were able to win a tuna tournament with a mako shark. We saw that makos were awarded the same amount of points as tunas, and at that time there were not many tunas around. We focused on searching for a nice mako, which we were confident we could find, and we did. Paying close attention to the way the points system worked and what was happening with the fishing is what won us the tournament. I have many other tournament situations similar to this one that helped us secure a win. Develop your game plan ahead of time for each day of fishing based on what the rules and the points allow you to do. Fish smart and fish hard!





Fish downsea party skirt baits rigged and ready.



First Place - Hang'em High Awards.





Double white  
jump caves.



Spice Island Tournament win.

orders and carrying them out as well as coaching everyone in the cockpit through the situation at hand.

The mate also is able to see what is going on with the angler when they are fighting a fish. Communicating to the captain how the angler is doing and also what the fish is doing is very important. This type of communication is crucial for the captain to know so they can react on the fish properly and many times react with the boat to where it helps the angler catch the fish.

In a perfect world you have a crew

that you fish with every time you go fishing. Everyone knows their jobs and does them on every trip so come tournament time, it's just another fun day on the water. In many tournaments, though, this is not the case for the majority of crews. Many times it is a charter boat with a crew of inexperienced anglers who want a piece of the big game action and the big money purse, and why not? It is an exhilarating feeling fishing in tournaments. In this situation, it is just as important for everyone to know what to expect in any given

situation. The crew of anglers needs to know who to listen to and to communicate directly with them. It is even more important for the mates and the captain to be ready for slower reaction times due to inexperience and to have the forethought to see and solve possible problems before they even happen.

### REMAIN CALM

For most, this is easier said than done. Offshore big game fishing is so exciting and it is hard to contain yourself when you hear the clicker



screaming or see that billfish crashing the teaser. It is in these moments where it is most important to remain calm and react. If everyone is shouting and getting overly excited, that is when mistakes are made. Everyone has to be able to communicate, especially those crews with less experience who need to hear what the captain and mate are saying in order to react properly.

Inevitably, mistakes do happen. Big fish place a true test on the anglers as well as the tackle. When the time comes that you are hooked up, everyone's skills on the boat are being tested, and unfortunately, sometimes the fish win. When this does happen the last thing anyone needs to do is play the blame game. True professionals certainly have no need to be scolded as they will beat themselves up badly enough as it is. The best time to address the issue is in a calm situation so the problem can be quickly identified and solved so it does not happen again. Chalk it up to a learning experience; learning from mistakes is all part of the process, but keeping a positive mindset on what is to come next always leads to positive results.

### USE YOUR LAY DAYS WISELY

Lay days are a great time to make any adjustments or tweaks to the boat, tackle, and crew. Work hard on your lay days to make sure everything is perfect and ready to go for your next fish day.

Fishing tournaments of any kind bring in a lot of top crews all in one location. Whether you are new to the tournament scene or if you have

been on it for a while, take the opportunity to get to know your opponents, dock neighbors, and peers. It is a great way to network and also to learn new techniques, tricks, and tactics from other fellow fishermen. I have found from my experience that you can always learn at least one positive thing that you can take away from everyone you meet. Even in a competitive atmosphere, you would be surprised how many crews are down to earth and don't mind sharing a few secrets.

### KEEP IT FUN

"Positive vibes lead to positive fishing." This is a quote that I live by, and it could not be more true. The mood among everyone on the boat needs to be positive and upbeat. It's amazing how one bad mood can poison the well, so to speak, and swing the moods of others to the negative. No matter what happens, keeping a positive attitude will lead to so many good times and fun fishing! Fish hard, work together, and hopefully the moon and stars align for you and your team to pull off a tournament win.

It is important to remember that even in all of this competition, no matter what the stakes are, you are still fishing. Hopefully you don't forget that it is still supposed to be fun. Of course during a tournament you may treat certain situations differently than normal, but it should always remain fun. One of the greatest feelings is the accomplishment of all of your hard work paying off and winning a tournament while having the time of your life. 🐟

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### CAPT. RICKY WHEELER

has been fishing since he was a little kid, with his dad, grandparents and his mom.

Growing up in Delaware he fished everywhere from the rivers and Delaware and Chesapeake Bay to the occasional offshore trip. It was during summers in Wildwood, New Jersey, that he really caught the offshore bug, and he especially loves billfishing, thanks to the thrill of landing his first white marlin several years ago. He now runs the charter operation on the Exile 65, a 65-foot custom Paul Mann Sportfishing Boat in various locations from New Jersey throughout the Caribbean. Check out his blog at [www.captainrickywheeler.com](http://www.captainrickywheeler.com)