

“Are You Fishy Enough?”

By John ‘Afishinado’ King

Have you ever wondered why some folks seem to catch more fish than others? Are there people that are just “more fishy” and therefore, better fishermen? What is it that separates average fisherman from the really good fisherman?

We start out learning the basics. We can tie at least three knots and we have a friend who knows how to tie an Albright, so we have our knots covered. Although we have long been confused by the difference between a hook that is size 1 and one that is 1/0, we do know that you have to use the right hook for the bait, the line test and the target species. We have learned to carefully choose our bait, nose or gill hook it so that it stays lively, and get it into the right depth with the proper amount of weight. That’s pretty easy, so why does Joe Fisherman still catch more fish than I do?



Although it may be true that the older guys have more experience and know a few more things about fishing, that is not what makes the difference between an average angler and a very good angler. There are many other variables that

can impact your fishing. The moon, the tide, the line test, line color, lure choice, boat handling, time of day, anchoring, casting, fish habits and habitats, etc. It is nearly impossible to know how all of these variables come together in the form of a trophy fish at the end of your line. No, the best anglers have a secret, and they are not telling. Besides, you would not believe them if they told you...would you?

OK, here it is, in black and white and for all the world to see...**top fisherman are really focused on eliminating errors** in their pursuit of fish. I told you that you would not believe their secret, but think about this for a moment.

We have all had the experience of getting THE hook-up, and sometimes we get the fish, and sometimes, we lose the fish. “That’s just fishing”, you say to yourself, but the really good guys ask about the hook, the line, the boat handling, the rod tip, the reel guides, the knot. They do not think that a fish should be lost once it is hooked. Sure, it happens to the best of them, but they do not let it happen twice. Here is a story to illustrate the point.

While fishing in Panama recently we found ourselves swinging and missing on big fish while slow trolling live skipjacks. After the first miss, we dismissed the problem as “just fishing”, on the second miss it was the fishes fault, “he dog-boned the bait”, after the



third miss we replaced the angler in the seat, which was me! After the fourth miss we were re-tying knots, sharpening hooks and generally kinda grouchy and the fifth miss was just about more than we could handle. Although we landed two blues and one black during the day, we missed at least 7 other bites. We went thru every scenario and we kept coming back to the hooks. In Panama you must use circle hooks, and it would have been easy to dismiss our misses on the hooks. At the end of the day we sat and reviewed the events and did a little forensic analysis (with some lime and tequila, of course).

For many fisherman and fishing teams, the forensic analysis phase takes a back seat to the “lime and tequila” or “cold beer” phase of a fishing trip. Once we leave the boat we are apt to forget about breaking down the day to identify mistakes that could be fixed thereby improving our catch ratio. That’s fine if you are happy with where you are as a fisherman. If, however, you are looking to get really good at catching, then you need to stay focused a bit longer and really break down the day and

the events. Here are some questions you might want to ask yourself and your team as you break down the day:

1. Were you positioned correctly or in the right place to maximize your chances?
2. Were you aware of the tides and solunar events that could impact your day?
3. Where you using the right bait or lure for the situation?
4. Where you aware what worked during the day and why?
5. Did you make note of the conditions, temps, current, wind, structure, etc.?
6. Did you check your catch for signs of what the fish were eating?
7. Did you control the easy variables; good line, sharp hooks, gaffs ready, etc.?

Many fisherman have a log that they use to record this kind of information. Any such information will always be insufficient in light of the number of variables and the tremendous mystery that is the sea. However, when faced with so much that is unknown, it is always good to start recording that which is known and use it to help identify patterns of success and avoid mistakes.

Our own forensic analysis included answering the above-listed questions and breaking down each failure to identify when in the process things went wrong. We

were getting the bite, so we knew we were doing a lot right, we just were not sticking the fish. It was conceivable that we had the wrong sized hooks, however, there was enough variability in the size of the baits to make this theory questionable. It seemed as though the problem was in fact with the circle hooks, they kept rolling back into the bait rather than catching the corner of the mouth. There are many reasons that this could happen, angler error (swinging on the hook set), captain error (too much pressure when speeding up the boat to set the hook), deckhand error (poor rigging) or equipment error (circle hooks simply miss more).

We needed to get some outside input. Frequently this is the case, unfortunately, there are more theories than there are fisherman, so you need to be very careful when you are going to ask questions about fishing. It is like getting help on your golf swing, there are too many part-time pros willing to help you fix that fade. As a result, we often ask more than one person and then we try to find the information that might help us to fix the problem. We did exactly this, and we found that many of the boats fishing out of the lodge had similar results. Lots of bites and a good number of mauled baits.

One of the boats had scored a slam that day and they seemed to be having a better hook-up ratio. We talked over dinner and yet we could not get to a source of the problem.

It was beginning to look as though the circle hooks were indeed the problem. We got lucky when one of the mates offered to show us his rig. We pulled the leader off of one of our rigs and met him on the boat after dinner. His rig was almost identical to ours...almost. The only difference that we could see, and it appeared to be a pretty significant difference, was that his circle hooks were snelled to the leader, not tied. We tested the movement of the two hooks as tried to simulate what might happen and it became very clear that the larger circle hooks were in a better position to stick the corner of the fish's mouth if they were snelled.



Of course there is a happy ending. Circle hooks do have their problems and they are probably slight less efficient on billfish since the action of the hook-set can be very erratic when compared to a tuna, for example. However, we improved our hook-up ratio dramatically by snelling the live bait. And so, another lesson was learned that will go into the books on our journey to improve our fishing skills.

Capt. John runs Afishinado Charters out of Avalon on Catalina Island. He can be reached through his web site www.afishinados.com