

## The Dorado Did It!



Story and photos by John 'Afishinado' King

We have all been involved in “competitive fishing” whether it is for the jackpot fish on a party boat or the side bets for first fish, biggest fish or most fish on a private boat. Competitive fishing is fun. It adds a new element to the process, much like betting on the underdog in a Super Bowl between two teams that you do not care much about. Money is magic, even as little as a buck can get you interested in the game. Tournament fishing takes this dynamic to a whole new level.

The Bisbee Black and Blue Marlin Tournament is a big money tournament. The base entry is about \$5,000 which is serious money. But entry to the side bets for biggest fish of the day run up to an additional \$20,000 per day! Why would anybody put up this kind of money to fish? Simple, the payouts are huge and the odds of winning are better than any game in Vegas. In 2005 the top team won about \$1.3 million and the second place team cleared just over a million bucks. Suffice it to say that is serious business, and the anglers in such tournaments really notch things up a level.

All the gear is checked and re-checked. The 130# class rods are checked for any problems, roller guides are tested for flaws and friction then oiled or replaced. Reels are disassembled, gears are checked, cleaned and oiled and then the reel gets about 700 to 1000 yards of new 130# line. All the gaffs are cleaned, sharpened and ready. Lures and hooks get the full treatment, 500# leaders are built, lines are doubled, tied and checked for length to insure compliance with IGFA rules. Even the fighting chair and the fish clubs are given a once over. If you are lucky enough to have a trophy fish bite during a tournament, you want to make sure to try to eliminate all the problems that can be solved ahead of time so you can focus on catching the fish, not fixing gear or readying gaffs.

Sure, there are parties, and the anglers get into the tournament spirit with a margarita or two, but not three. The Captain's meeting ends early and the local haunts seem empty the night before the opening day of the tournament. The prime spot for all the action is on the docks. I love to walk the docks the night before these big tournaments, particularly

those docks that are filled with the big battlewagons, backed into their slips with their outriggers reaching across and almost touching the outriggers of the boat on the other side of the gangway. As you look down this gleaming corridor of light and silver and bright white fiberglass, it takes on the look of a cathedral with the ministers of the sport scurrying around the open cockpits in preparation for the big day.

The morning of the tournament is beyond exciting, it is insane. Picture a scene where something near 200 boats are leaving the crowded slips at the same time, chasing down the pangas that are zipping around and delivering live bait to the boats that have the connections to arrange for the deliveries beforehand, while all the rest of the boats vie for the attention of the pangueros and beg to pay two dollars per bait or \$40.00 for a scoop of sardinias. All the while boats are zipping in and out in the near darkness, picking up anglers, buying sodas and ice or checking in with the lone Capitania at the harbor entrance to provide their paperwork and pay their fee.

Once outside the harbor you see at least two and sometimes three collections of boats on the near horizon. That is where the bait-sized 6 to 8 pound tuna are being pursued by the fleet. Tuna generally do not bite until first light and all the boats must try to make bait and get back behind the starting line before the 7:30 shot-gun start. This makes for a hectic time. If you have an experienced crew, they are standing ready with bait casters and light trolling sticks. As you move through an area you try to troll up the tuna while searching the sounder for structure or signs below. If you get bit or see something worth working, you chum the sardinias and quickly switch out to bait casters. Often, a tuna will boil on the chum and the game is on. When the tuna are finicky, which is most of the time, you have to get your bait out away from the boat with a flyfisherman's cast to get bit. As soon as you are bit, you will find a bunch of other boats crowding in to chum and try to start up a bite. As your small skipjack or yellowfin comes to boat you need a net to quickly get the fish into the boat and then into the already filled tuna tubes. The faster this happens, the better chance your bait has of surviving the run to the fishing grounds.

It is not uncommon to catch one bait and not another in this chaos, but if you get lucky and fill your tubes early, then you continue to fish and cull out the bleeders and the gut hooks with stronger baits until you hear the radio call for all boats to get back behind the line for the start. Everybody is watching the high-liners and the top local boats to try to assess where they might be heading. There is a lot of jockeying around for position and plenty of head fakes going on at this time. Some guys just set up near the arch and are heading for the Pacific, other guys stay back and watch the fleet while still others want to be the first to the bank.

I will never forget my first Bisbee start. That year there were 240 boats entered, and mine was among the smaller, faster boats; I thought. I took up a position near the front of the pack so that I could escape the incredible washing machine effect that is created by so many boat wakes. As I the flare went off I gunned to the front of the pack and was feeling pretty good until the bigger boats started to really spool up their power plants. I felt like I was standing still when the first Viking went roaring by at 40 knots giving me the "hammer down" sign as he passed. I found slight recourse later at the awards banquet

when this boater told me that he was burning about 300 gallons of fuel per hour when he passed me. He had to laugh when I told him that is how much fuel I burned for the full three-day tournament. Speed has its price!

This particular day was one of those beautiful, hot, flat-calm days that you get in Cabo. The sky felt like it was pressing down on the ocean and the usual wind on the Pacific was nowhere to be found. At nine-thirty in the morning it was already 86 degrees and the water was nearly the same temperature. Tournament control came on to provide a tournament update and reported that there had been a smattering of stripers caught, but that there were no hook-ups at the time and there were no boats coming to the scales; all in all a very quiet morning for 240 top boats with all the gear in the water. We decided to stick with our plan and continued to troll near the Golden Gate Bank.

About 10:15 in the morning we hear the first call in, "Tournament Control, tournament control, this is Chaser". There are boaters from all around the world in these tournaments so when you hear a call in you make a mental note of the guy's voice. If he has an accent, all the better. Not sure why, but it seems that there are some accents that are more 'fishy' than others. This caller sounded like a New Yorker, but without the cool. "Tournament Control, Tournament Control, this is Chaser come back!" Whenever a boat is calling tournament control, all ears tune in to hear whatever secret information can be gleaned from the caller. Most tournaments require the boats to report a grid, and I can tell you on my boat, when we hear two fish caught in the same grid within a short period of time, we pick up the jigs and haul to the grid location.

Surprisingly at this point in the tournament my chart had no markings of hook-ups. Chaser sounded like they were about to change that and so we listened intently as I imagined all the other boats were doing. Tournament control picked up the call, "Control back, Chaser". "Chaser here control, we are not sure what to do, but we have a dead body floating in the water out here", came the report. Control sounded flustered, "Can you repeat that Chaser". "Yeah", the called twanged back, "we need to report a dead body in the water". Control still could not believe what they were hearing so they checked back, "You mean that you are reporting a dead whale?", "No control, it is definitely not a whale. It's wearing blue jeans, although it is bloated up pretty good". Control was clearly confused and unsure about protocol at this point and came back with the request for Chaser to "stand by" while they contacted the authorities.

When a vessel is asked to "stand by" they literally must wait on-scene for further instructions. The silence that fell across the water was palpable. We were all on "stand by". You could feel all the other boats standing at attention, one ear cocked to the radio to hear what might come next. No one moved. The radio was silent. The seconds ticked by. With each moment came an increase in the sense of dread that was cast out over the water. Nobody wanted to hear about 'floaters' and yet we all had to listen to see what would happen. Would Control send out a boat, would the Chaser be required to assist or stand by during such a tournament? What would we have done? The silence continued to build. Nobody on board was speaking, we were all waiting. Out of this thick silence

broke a voice so dripping with a southern drawl that you could almost see the caller, “To the boat reporting the dead body, come back”.

Now it was getting interesting since this was clearly a new voice in the mix, and, he was breaking the radio rules. “Chaser back,” came the response. “Uh yeah, Chaser, you reported a dead body in the water, can you tell me your location?” the Southern caller asked. We held our collective breaths believing that ‘the floater’ must be a missing member of someone’s crew, we assumed that the Southern gentleman was tracking down that possibility. “We are on stand-by with tournament control here, what’s the nature of your call?” came Chaser’s reply.

We expected the Southerner to ask for a description or to identify the clothing of the floater so that they could confirm all of our worst suspicions, but that is not what happened as he came back on the radio, “Well, it’s been a pretty slow mornin, haven’t seen a fish yet. You sounded pretty close, and we were just curious if there were signs of any Dorado hanging about under that floater?”. His come back was like popping a blister. There was a collective, coughing laugh on board and we could hear the echo of a similar flash of nervous laughter across the water as the fleet of boats responded in unison to this fisherman’s quest to find fish.

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