

Tournament Control, We Are On!

By John 'Afishinado' King

Tournament fishing brings a new level of interest and focus to fishing. It provides the incentive to go through all of your gear, test drags, check the guides, change out the line, sharpen the hooks and measure the leaders. This is the time to put fresh batteries in the stabilized binoculars, change the filters and fluids in the boat and generally try to anticipate and remove any potential for problems. It is tournament time, and it is an exciting time to be fishing.



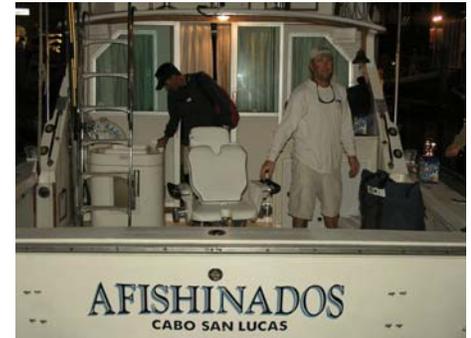
As you walk the docks and check out all the activity, you cannot help but be impressed at the various approaches fishermen take to their sport. The Hawaiian boys come in to town and set up their rigs "Kona style" which means tag lines and rubber bands for running the jigs and Kona clips for live bait fishing. The Mexican teams seem to prefer hand-lining the live baits, and the

Texas boys are going to sharpen those hooks and run the jigs. Some teams like to run a high and low with the downrigger and outrigger on live baits, others prefer to set up their baits short and long. Some pull baits till the baits die then pull them as skip baits, others switch over to jigs. Regardless, they are all busy throughout the day and often into the night readying their gear for their chosen strategy. With all the big battlewagons lined up back-to-back at the dock, lights on and outriggers almost touching, it looks like a cathedral filled with worshippers.

All tournaments start the proceedings with some kind of Captain's Meeting to make sure that everyone understands the rules. I have never seen one of these meetings pulled off without some kind of glitch. Something always happens. Only XXL shirts are available, the PA system does not work, "cash, no checks accepted", "sorry, we do not have your entry form", "do I really need to have all the team members sign this?" The march goes on. There is a lot of pressure at this meeting and it shows in the organizers who are anxious to pull it off and get the tournament started after months of planning. They show a lot of patience as some of the dumb questions get asked and they are amazed when a question pops up that they did not think of. It is all part of the process, and you

have to stay til the end to see if you won a door prize.

As you hit the bed the night before a tournament, you run through all the things that were on the checklist. Did we remember to get the larger crimps, do we have a measuring device on board, will we be able to make bait in the morning? Sooner or later you fall asleep, or maybe not, but ultimately, the alarm goes off and you do your thing to get ready and get to the boat. Everybody is there, the engines kick, the gear is ready, let's go fishing!



There is nothing that can prepare you for the scene as you pull out of the slip and ease into the flurry of boats maneuvering through pangas that are zipping around the harbor to get the baits to their customers. It is still dark and there seems barely enough room to squeeze through the fairway that is humming with activity. At this point you see all the guys and all the teams that have been here before. There is Steve Lassley on the Trauma, the After Midnight team is pushing their way through

the melee, already filled with baits from their own personal bait providers, Chupacabra, Senior Moment, Retriever, Reel and Deal and many others. Past winners mix in the fray with the hopefuls, all of them knowing that this year's winner could be any one of them.



As you look out from the harbor, the running lights of boats outside the harbor give a good sign as to where the bait might be. Making bait before a tournament is a fairly new concept in Mexico. For many years the tournament fishermen would pull jigs until they got bit. Then about nine years ago a couple of guys from Hawaii showed up with live bait gear. In Kona the grounds are very close, but in Mexico there was a good distance between where you might catch bait-sized tuna and where you wanted to fish. Eventually one of the boats showed up with these strange tubes on their transom that were designed to keep small tunas and skipjacks alive until they could get to the grounds. Not long after, Chipper caught a 715-pound Blue Marlin slow trolling yellowfin tuna as bait near Cristobal on the Pacific Side. Tournament fishing out of Cabo was forever changed.

Almost all of the boats now have tuna tubes and most were

diligently trying to jig up or bait small tunas with sardines. There are a number of places to catch 6 to 12 pound Yellowfin, but the timing is important. They never seem to bite very well before daylight, and you have to be back in and behind the imaginary starting line before the shot gun start or you are out for the day. Grey Rock, Roca Ballena, The Arch and The Lighthouse are all good holding grounds in some years. In other years, there is no bait to be found anywhere. We had been having good luck making bait at the drop off just past the starting line, but we had to wait until after the start to make this strategy work. The turbulence and commotion caused by all the boats roaring off the line, mixed in with all the chum that was thrown before the start seemed to bring up the perfect tunas.



My job on the bridge is to put my anglers in the best position possible to make bait. I watched for signs of breaking fish or birds as the diesel fumes from the shotgun start were settling. "There, boil!" We skip over a couple hundred yards and throw some fresh chum. Within moments the fish are on us and Todd is hooked up, then Paul. This is a wild time. We are catching some very powerful fish

on light gear. The Chinese fire-drill is on as the anglers weave back and forth trying to follow their fish. The net is out, but these fish seem to know that the net is the last place to be. A perfect Yellowfin leaps over the net at boat side, too fast for Javi to catch him airborne. The fish makes a couple more "death circles" before Javi can net him, quickly remove the hook or cut the line and get the fish into one of the tubes. It is a fun process, but somewhat tense at times when bait is hard to get.

We fill our six tubes in short order, but we are not done at this spot. Two frigate birds are picking about 100 yards in front of the boat and then I see a marlin working up the chumline. Todd sees him too, but not in time to pull his bait-making gear out of the water. The marlin moves up the chumline and inhales the small baits, including one with a hook on it. Todd is on a marlin with no leader on a 12 pound setup. "Tournament Control this is team 65, Afishinados, we are bit!" I say into the VHF mic. "This is Tournament Control, we got you. Give us the angler and the species when you have a moment. Your hook-up time is 7:35." I had to laugh as the fish made a leap behind the boat. I had always wanted to be the first to call in a hook-up, and I had always wondered how the other guys had done it. Now I knew. Always watch for marlin when making bait!

The marlin made a couple of jumps and then started on a bee-line for the Gambler who was making bait only yards away. The Gambler guys started scrambling

in anticipation of the fish jumping inot the cockpit. Todd tried to put some pressure on the fish, but his 12 pound, leaderless outfit was no match even for this small fish.



This would not be a money fish in any tournament, but it was good to get a release on the board this early. "Tournament Control, Team 65 Afishinados, our striper is off." We did not care; we were on the board within five minutes of start fishing. That was fun, now let's go look for those big blues and win some money!