

SKUD Fishing

By John 'Afishinado' King

We were all pretty excited; everyone took time off of work and made the flight to Baja to fish the Los Cabos Offshore Marlin Tournament. This is a great tournament. There are many ways to win money in the tournament, and each team makes their own choices as to how to fish their way into the money. Some teams focus on the release of Marlin, other teams are intent upon finding the one big fish that will take the top slot, while still others look to hedge their bets by running a smaller jig down the pattern to pick up a Dorado, Wahoo or Tuna that will pay off as the biggest fish of that species. No matter the strategy, everyone is serious about having a good time and catching the big one.



Our Cabo boat is a 35 Bertram which carries the name AfishinaDos. Although small in comparison to many of today's boats, AfishinaDos is well-rigged for tournament fishing and able to handle any kind of seas that we may find. It is precisely because of her sea-keeping ability that we frequently run for the Pacific side as we head out of Cabo. For those unfamiliar with Cabo's terrain, the famous Arch at land's end completes the Baja peninsula as it stretches out and separates the Pacific from the Sea of Cortez. Although it is possible to fish "both sides" in the same day, and we have picked up the jigs to make the run to the other side on occasion, it is not practical and therefore you usually find yourself choosing to run up the Pacific side, south to the 1000 fathom curve or east toward Gorda Banks or the East Cape waters up the Cortez. On this day we made the decision to run up the Pacific and fish in tight.



AfishinaDos is not a new boat. She was built in 1977 and has been re-powered with Cat 3116s that are rated at 300 hp. She can still run pretty well for her age with a 22 knot cruise, but sometimes the afflictions just seem to catch up with her particularly if she was to make a long hard run into rough seas. It was just such a day as we were chugging our way into four foot heads seas with a steep wind chop. It was not looking like a great day, however, we had made the decision to head up the Pacific side and once made such a decision is rarely aborted. We chugged on with our destination defined as the waters inside the Golden Gate Bank.

As we pushed into the seas I spotted a frigate bird working low on the horizon. I love those birds. They have put me on more fish than any set of binos could ever do. As the bird began dipping, a second frigate appeared. These birds are like ghosts. They just seem to appear out of nowhere, but when they do appear, they are usually on fish. I angled off-shore a bit trying to intersect the fish that I imagined would be swimming below the birds. I assumed it would be Dorado since frigates seem to follow them more than other fish. Javi had already spotted the birds and had put a couple of jigs into the water off flat lines. Sometimes you have to really zig and zag to get into position with these birds. They will dip and flutter, then gain altitude and move laterally without a flap of their wings before pulling up and hovering. My neck was craned as I tried to stay with the birds and fight the chop.

Suddenly one of the birds broke off and swooped downswell. I decided to follow it to give the jigs a better chance of working. As I caught up with the bird the fish caught sight of our jigs and we were immediately hooked up, although we were not sure on what. Dorado will frequently jump, Marlin too, and Wahoo sometimes but tuna, almost never. As Kevin worked the fish to the boat I could see the characteristic mackerel pattern of a very nice Wahoo struggling against the drag. Javi made a perfect stab with the gaff and the fish was on-board. A good start to the day, but our luck was about to turn.



As I headed back into the oncoming seas and pushed forward on the throttles, I got no response. My first thought was a broken cable, however, both cables would not have broken so I tested the theory on one engine then the other. Clearly, the port engine was lagging. We did a quick sea check and could not find an easy reason for the problem. The Golden Gate was still 9 miles ahead so I made the decision to push on for our destination and do a more thorough check once we had set up for a downswell troll. The idea would be that we would push as far north as we had planned to go and fish our way back regardless of the state of the engine.

We continued past a good number of boats that were already fishing their way back toward Cabo. We were looking for a temp break just at the northern tip of the Golden Gate so we pressed on. I like this area. I have caught a few nice Marlin and have seen a couple of tournaments won by boats fishing this zone. I remember my first Bisbee tournament when a boat named Chipper pulled a 714 pound blue from these waters. I have always felt good about this place, always felt like there was a chance that anything could happen. I spotted another frigate bird and worked toward him, scanning the waters for any sign of the fish that he was tracking. The surface broke with a small school of Dorado scattering across the surface. This little pod of fish looked frantic as a Wahoo about 30 or 40 pounds shot vertically out of the water and intersected the air born school of Dorado. The 'hoo did not appear to "catch" the Dorado, rather it appeared to shoot through the school with its mouth open and it's razor sharp teeth slicing

whatever was close. I could not tell if the 'hoo got one or three of the fish, but the frigate bird clearly got into the action.

We worked the area with the jigs, but to no avail. It may have been a good time to try soaking some bait, however, we had committed to running the jigs until we hit our destination, then slow trolling live bait. It was getting rougher and more dangerous as we continued north. We finally found the temp break and the purple water and decided to work it toward the west. The Golden Gate bank is really two banks and this temp break seemed to be heading off-shore in the direction of the southern bump. As we worked our way we came into scattered porpoise and generally good-looking water; but still we were not getting bit. We checked our baits, one small Yellowfin tuna and one large Skip Jack. The skippy was tiring, but both were still swimming. The temp break just petered out as we came upon the bank so I made the decision to stick with our plan and troll our live baits all the way back to Cabo if need be.

The seas continued to build to the point where we could easily see our baits swimming in the oncoming swells rising above our transom, then lifting the boat. It was kind of neat to fish this way, although it was also frustrating in that we could see how good the baits looked and could not understand why we were not getting bit in such fishy waters. It was not long before a sleek dark shape showed up behind the boat. It was a Marlin, and we could see him coming, however, he was not lit up at all. Many times a marlin that is in a feeding mood will literally light up. His stripes flare with color, his pectoral fins turn electric blue and if he is really on fire even the base of his bill will light up. This fish showed no such behavior and literally came in, took a look at what we were trolling and split. It was time to try something different.

I had heard of SKUD fishing from a friend and decided to give it a try. We had some smaller bullet tuna that had died in the tubes, but were still fresh. Javi broke the rigor mortis out of one of the dead baits by breaking the back bone and limbering up the fish, then bridling it. We ran a Kona clip a third of the way up the rigger and dangled the dead bait almost vertically so that it would be pulled out of the water each time that a swell passed beneath the boat. This technique creates a very life-like action as the dead bait literally speeds up, breaks the surface, jumps forward and splashes back into the water with each passing swell. I had never tried it before and was not sure if it would work, but it looked great in the water, much like a short kite bait thrashing about on the surface. At worst, it created something new to look at as we continued our long, slow troll.

As a swell heaved up behind the boat a trio of fish showed up in the pattern and I immediately recognized the shape and the color of the Dorado shadowing our baits. These fish were too small to take on our tuna baits, however, they seemed intent on chasing and banging them. We pitched some sardinias from the bait tank and the Dorado exploded on them. Within moments we had three anglers hooked up to three acrobatic Dorado. Things were getting a bit wild. The seas were still rolling pretty good, we still had two live baits and a SKUD hanging and all of my anglers were laughing as they did the dance to follow their lines. "Get 'em in boys, I can't do anything from up here to help," I yelled.

As the boys were fighting their fish I caught sight of a larger shape in the water. "Chum up some more of those sardinias Javi, there is a bigger fish in the mix." The sardinias hit the water and one of the already hooked dorado instinctively charged on the chum. "These fish are slow learners," I said to myself. I then saw the flash of the bigger fish. He was a nice bull and he was charging up the chum line amidst all the commotion. I could see him clearly, full tilt feeding and looking for more. Javi got his fish into the boat and into the fish box. Kevin popped his in just behind him. Shawn made the mistake of trying to bounce his fish in and broke it off; it did not matter, we had another target in mind now.



The SKUD jumped out of the water and splashed back down. The bull turned and charged in the direction of the SKUD. He hit the dead bait at full speed but missed the target as the bait lifted out of the swell and swung forward from the momentum. The bull dorado was clearly agitated and lit up. He spun and charged again, this time catching the SKUD bait and ripping it through the water. The rod bent hard and the big bull was bleeding from the penetration of the hook. All of this action took place right before our eyes as each swell would lift the fish into clear vision. On the heavy gear it did not take long to bring the fish to gaff and into the boat. It was not the biggest Dorado I have ever seen, but it was big enough to weigh in for the side bet money.

We could not charge in with our engine problem so we continued to troll and fish our way back. Our timing was important at this stage. Since we had no speed we needed to troll up to the weigh station before closing. We had plenty of time to consider the possibilities that this fish would be worth \$18,000 bucks. Of course, tournament control was having radio problems so they had no idea who might be coming in to weigh fish. We got our fish to the scales with 18 minutes left and the fish beat the previous high by three pounds. Unfortunately, our victory lasted only 15 minutes. We three minutes left another boat came into the scales and beat us by a pound. That is how it goes when tournament fishing. You cannot count your money until all boats have weighed in. But we had a great day in rough weather, brought in a contender and found a new fishing trick to add to the bag for future tournaments. Long live the SKUD!



Capt. John runs Afishinados Charters on Catalina Island. He can be reached through his website, www.afishinados.com