# That Golden Minute

In another life, I used to fly some pretty big jets, and trained pilots new to the business of long haul international aviation. While I could be accused of drawing a pretty long bow by comparing crew coordination on the flight deck of a Boeing 747 to crew coordination on the fighting deck of a big game boat off Coffs, readers might be surprised to know that there are some definite parallels. In both cases, everyone has to know exactly what to do when things get hectic, or it all can go pear-shaped remarkably quickly.

All game fishermen occasionally talk about the "hours of uneventful cruising around, punctuated by moments of mayhem and excitement" nature of game fishing. Having said that... sometimes just 60 seconds of hook-up mayhem followed by a couple of hours of angling excitement in one day is quite enough for many anglers. In fact, if you ever have one of those legendary days we all dream of where you're on a boat that hooks up a dozen big blue marlin in one day, you'd probably want oxygen and paramedics to meet you back at the marina.

Let's consider the average big game boat with a skipper on the flybridge and a complement of three or four on the fighting deck of the boat. After trolling skirted Kona style marlin lures or rigged baits around for anything from a minute to a few hours, the first marlin of the day can come charging into the pattern with barely a couple of seconds' notice, or, more likely than not if it's a blue marlin, it will simply materialise in the middle of the wake in a flash of blue neon and an explosion of white water.

This is when the serious coordination on the deck really begins, because if the fish attacks aggressively and hooks up, there are only seconds before the crew has to swing into action. Everything happens very fast at this stage, so there's no time for instructions, and everyone has a critical job to perform, without which, the chances of losing the fish everybody's worked hard to find increase exponentially.

As soon as the fish strikes, the deckies move smoothly around in a blurr of choreographed action against a background of a lot of noise - the boat is gunned forward to get clear of the marlin, and the crew leaps into action winding in the remaining rigs. Meanwhile, the reel with the marlin attached is screaming like a banshee as all hell is breaking loose with the fish stripping off line at up to thirty kilometers an hour as it runs away. One careless slipup or miscue between the people on the deck, the skipper, or the angler getting ready to start fighting the fish, and the only thing left is to watch the marlin heading for the horizon trailing your favourite hundred dollar lure.

However, on a perfect day, and without any talking or yelling, a good crew will all know where to go to get the most critical tasks done in the correct order.

*How it looks when it all goes smoothly – rods stowed away, angler working the marlin, and the deckies standing by ready to help. Photo – Glen Booth*

After they've been out a few times, everybody on deck knows what their job is, and everyone gets it done with a minimum of fuss so that in the "golden minute" following a marlin strike, the other rods are all stowed, and the crew are settled in their places and keeping an eye on the angler, who will be just starting what is often a lengthy battle.

One of the ironies is that during that first minute, the marlin has usually been putting on one of the greatest displays of breathtaking speed and aerobatics you'll ever see, but most of the crew will have been far too busy to be able to watch it. In fact, once everything settles down and the fish has dived, most of the crew will only then have the time to look up and ask the skipper what sort of marlin it was, and what he reckoned its size was. This is because they've had their heads down managing the vital task of clearing the rods and the deck since the fish struck, and it's only after that that there's time to talk about what really happened and what everyone saw.

One thing about this first minute is that as well as the potential for things to go wrong and a fish be lost, there are a few critical IGFA rules to observe in the middle of the pandemonium. While nobody wants any slipups that can result in a fish being lost, there are actions that can also cause a fish to be

disqualified and points lost in this golden minute if a couple of very important rules are overlooked.

Firstly, everyone on the deck should remember that if anyone except the intended angler accidentally touches the rod, reel or line to which the fish is attached before the designated angler picks it up, then that first person to touch any part of the gear now owns the fish, and had better be ready to pick up the rod and fight the fish.

Another less than black and white IGFA rule states that the angler must remove the rod with the fish on it from the rod holder “as quickly as possible”. Fortunately, that leaves everybody a bit of wiggle room, but the IGFA is quick to note that as quickly as possible means seconds, not minutes, and does not include time for the angler to don a standup rig, or wait until all the other rods are cleared. Make what you will of this, but it’s probably reasonable to assume that the rod has to be lifted out of the holder as soon as the angler can get over to it and safely lift the rod up, which on most boats is probably within 15-20 seconds. That amount of time will probably have the crewmembers busy getting the other rods cleared, the boat will be slowing from its initial burst of speed following the hookup, and the fish will have cleared the pattern. Once the danger of line crossovers or losing one’s footing on the deck passes, the intending angler will be able to move over to stand beside the rod, take the strain, and lift it out of the holder.

Of course, nobody gets thrown in at the deep end in big game fishing by being expected to handle the critical deckie tasks on their first go, so counter intuitively, many skippers start new game fishermen off by giving them the task of actually fighting the first fish. They will do this because while that may be the toughest task physically, and it may go on for an hour or two and really test your mettle, it’s often harder to make a mistake when you’ve got the rod with the marlin in your hands being coached by a lot of experienced crewmembers than it is doing the deck work in that first 60 seconds of madness after a fish hits.

*The end of a perfect day of good crew coordination – a blue marlin tag and release flag, and smiling anglers.*

There are plenty of videos out there on the internet showing experienced crews in action on game fishing boats, and the outcomes range from absolutely perfect when a fish is well-handled and released effortlessly, to total chaos when something unexpected happens, or someone forgets something and Murphy's Law takes over.