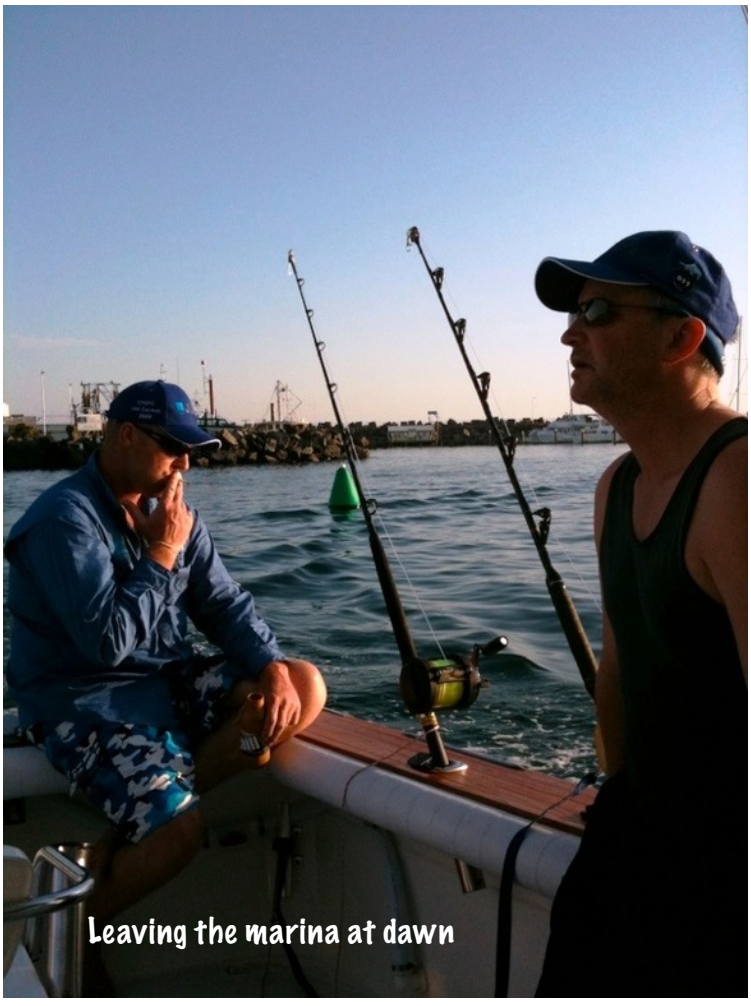
Big Game Fishing - Another day at the office

For those who have never experienced it, here's a brief outline of what to expect over the course of a day out with a game boat involving a marlin hookup, tag, and release while game fishing off the edge of the continental shelf.

This will all be yesterday's news to old hands, but if you've never been out there and done this, read on...

On a boat that has an experienced crew, a serious day of game fishing starts at about 0600 when the crew and skipper arrive at the boat. Someone's usually responsible for turning up with coffee, and anyone who can find 4 or 5 drinkable (which in general terms means not from Maca's…) flat whites at that time of day is to be considered an extremely valuable crew resource!

There's about 15 minutes of dockside preparation required on the boat, and one of the many important things that takes place during that quarter hour is a quick drag calibration while the engine warms up thoroughly. You live and die by the accuracy of your drag settings on the big game reels. A marlin can put some serious moves on your gear, and the drag system on your reel can be asked to absorb over 400kw of energy in one run from a big fish, so if it isn't set perfectly, there can be hell to pay.


Leaving the marina at dawn

While the engine warms up, the crew will also set the rods up (usually 5, but rarely less than 4) in the rod holders around the fighting deck, and attach safety straps to them. You may be forgiven for dropping one of these very expensive rigs over the side out at sea once in your life, but you'll never be forgiven for doing it when the rod doesn't have a safety lanyard attached. The rods will later be deployed with just one lure or maybe a skip bait attached, and when fishing with lures, you can never really have too many in the water when it comes to giving a marlin a choice of what to attack.

The crew will also dig out most of the peripheral gear such as live bait jigs, tag poles, gloves, fighting harnesses, and, usually in conjunction with the skipper, choose the first lures to be used that day.

While this is happening down below, the skipper is usually up on the Flybridge booting up and testing the electronic suite, which will typically include a couple of radios, a GPS system and a depth sounder/fish finder, as well as a radar and probably a forward-looking sonar system on bigger boats. As well, the skipper will often sign the boat on to the local Marine Rescue service as a safety measure, passing details of crew numbers and area of operations to the radio watch keeper.

As the boat leaves the marina, the last of the coffee is finished off (it can be rough out there, and coffee all over your warm dry shirt isn't a good way to start the day), and the crew will probably be working out how they're going to share the strike... Usually, only one angler is on strike at any time, and the crew rotates the strike based on a fixed time schedule of 30 minutes or an hour in the hot seat.

The next 40 minutes or so can either be a pleasant and very scenic high speed trip out to the edge of the shelf, or a rather bumpy endurance test, so activity on the boat usually ranges from enjoying the sunrise, snoozing (those 5:00am wake-ups can be pretty rugged), reading the paper, or talking game fishing. Someone is almost always out on the back deck enjoying the view and looking for whales, bird activity, surface bait aggregations and so forth, or if they’re up on the flybridge keeping the skipper company, fish trap buoys and other prop-fouling or boat-damaging flotsam as well as all the signs of fish.

Sometimes the primary transit activity can simply be hanging on if there's a decent swell and a bit too much wind, but whatever else is happening, there will generally always be one crew member sitting at the table downstairs checking the integrity of the rigs of each lure, and using a file and oilstone to put a razor sharp point on the hooksets.

As the skipper is steering out to the preplanned fishing start point, he's constantly on the lookout for hints of pelagic fish activity, often indicated by seabirds showing an unusual degree of interest in a specific patch of ocean. Other signs pointing to a good spot to start the day's fishing can be clear current lines, depth sounder indications of large bait schools at mid depth, and most importantly, sudden significant sea temperature and colour changes across a short distance. If you're really lucky, you'll come across all three of these in one location, and then it's a no-brainer. But even lacking any clear indications, the fact is that some patches of ocean just simply look "fishy", and then it's a matter of instinct more than any science that says - "fish here!".

So soon enough, the boat is slowed to trolling speed, the outriggers deployed, and everybody gets busy setting up the lures out on the rods in their usual trolling positions (check this website for other articles on lure trolling patterns, and some of the lures we use in specific positions).

Once the initial setup is complete, everyone settles down to watch and wait… which for most crew consists of monitoring that section of the wake where the lures are swimming and occasionally scanning the horizon.

Even a brief flash of colour, a possible shadow passing under a lure, or a sudden swirl of water behind a lure can give rise to a shout, which, even if it comes only a couple of seconds before a marlin strike, will still serve to get the attention level raised and all the crew on the same page as the fish hits.

What follows immediately after a fish strikes is best described as controlled pandemonium, and can be read about in The Golden Minute story elsewhere on this website.

Once the fish has hooked up, the rods have been cleared, the boat has stopped, and the designated angler has picked up the live rod and started to settle into the fight, things go pretty quiet. The most frequent noises are the constant ratcheting of the reel as the fish either takes more line out against the drag, or the angler slowly recovers line from the fish. The skipper will be coming in and out of gear to keep the fish directly behind the boat, going either forward to keep pressure on the fish, or at every opportunity, reversing back down on the fish to help the angler get line back.

The rest of the crew will usually be making the occasional comment about what they think the fish is doing (diving, coming up to jump, how far out it still is…), with plenty of speculative banter

about its size. At some point the designated trace man will be donning the gloves needed to protect his hands from the pressure a big fish can put on the trace in close, and the tag man will be making sure the tag pole is ready to go. Someone will also be steering the angling chair if one is being used, and hopefully, there's a spare crew member taking photos.

The pace is generally fairly leisurely during this part of the fight, and the only time the volume level cranks up noticeably is if the line starts to go slack, which often means that the fish has turned and may be charging towards the boat. This usually results in a burst of furious winding from the angler, lots of yelling, and a surge of power as the skipper guns the boat forward to get rid of any slack line and keep the fish under control.

The tension level will be rising imperceptibly throughout this period as the fish gets slowly closer to the boat, and it won't be long before things start to get busy as some critical activity starts.

The first indication that the fish is close will be the quantity of line on the reel, and once it gets over 90% full, then almost everyone is looking for a first glimpse of the fish. This may come the easy way, as the fish will frequently jump close to the boat once it senses the presence of the vessel. If the fish isn't inclined to jump in close, then it's often the skipper up on the elevated flybridge who catches the first flash of colour from the fish.

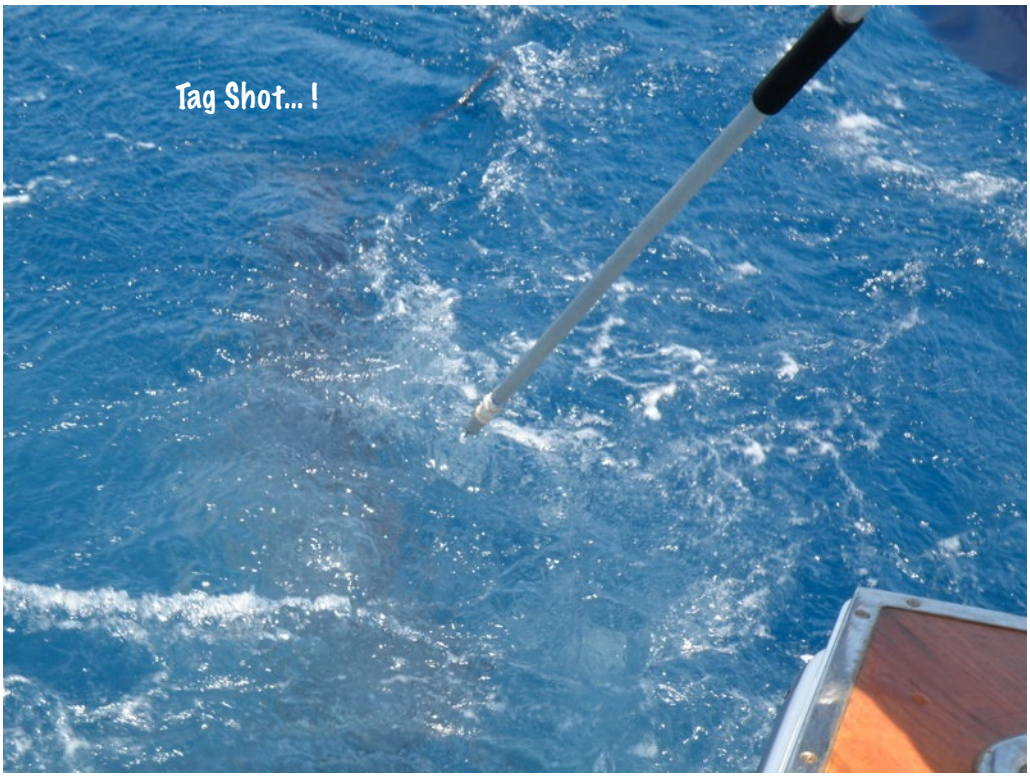
By now, the angler is working very hard to keep pressure on the fish, because the slightest moment of slack line gives the fish a big chance to throw the hook. The trace man is looking for the double knot to emerge from the water about 40ft ahead of the fish, because just behind it is the leader, which is the only portion of the gear he's allowed to touch, and which he's going to have to get a firm grip on if the fish is to be subdued and brought close to the boat. Also, the tag man will now be hovering in the background looking for a chance to get the fish tagged.

Once the leader is within range of the traceman's hands, he will take a firm two-handed grip on the heavy monofilament, and try to gently steer the (hopefully pretty tired by now) marlin in towards the boat and up to within a foot or so of the surface. At this stage, the angler is no longer controlling the fish so will back the reel drag off and step away from the fish, always being mindful of the fact that if the traceman has to suddenly drop the leader, the angler is going to own the fish again. If the fish gains a late surge of energy and decides that it's not in a very happy place, it can suddenly launch itself out of the water, run hard away from the boat (or worse still dive hard directly under the boat), and produce an extremely perilous situation where

it can very easily be lost, and/or the rules be broken unless everyone is right on the ball. It's not that unusual for a feisty fish to be brought to the boat several times before it finally submits, and at any of those times when it's up close to the boat and makes a sudden dash for freedom, the hard work of the last hour or two can be undone in a heartbeat and the fish lost if it isn't handled perfectly by both the trace man and the angler.

One of the not uncommon radio calls heard in game fishing is "…and then we lost it at the boat".

However, assuming this first element of the close-in drama passes without loss if the fish, the very second the traceman has it sufficiently under control and within a few feet of the boat, the tag man will try to step deftly in towards the fish, tag it, and retreat - all in the blink of an eye. This tagging work is highly skilled, needs to be completed in a couple of seconds, and is the culmination of all the effort to date, because the act of successfully tagging the fish qualifies the angler and the boat for the competition points, even if the fish falls off the hook a nanosecond later. Loss of the fish even one second before the tag goes in means no points.



Then comes another one of the many times for heightened caution as the tagged fish is brought to the side of the boat and the hook removed. There are any number of gruesome photos of game boat crew with large game hooks stuck in arms, legs, hands, even their heads, and while these sort of accidents are extremely rare, they can still wreck your whole day. However, by this time, most marlin are pretty tired and subdued, and with at least one crewman holding the fish securely by the bill, it will swim beside the boat while someone else quickly removes the hook. After a long fight, the hook has usually worn a sufficiently large hole in the jaw/bill/mouth of the marlin that the hook will often just fall out the second the pressure is off it.

Meanwhile, the boat is idling forward at a walking pace as the fish is pulled along with its mouth held below the surface and water flowing over its gills so that it can recover. A few brag photos are usually called for while the fish is recovering. Marlin are extremely photogenic, with a beautiful electric blue eye that looks unwaveringly at you, and it's only when the angler can get up close to the fish alongside the boat that it's possible to finally get a feel for how large these fabulous creatures are.

Sometimes it's only a matter of a couple of minutes before the fish starts to catch its breath and recover, the usual signs being colour returning to its fins, a regular tail beat, and increasing eye movement. Once released, the fish will usually glide off, diving below the boat and rapidly into

history, hopefully recovering perfectly, and wearing that new piece of marlin jewellery that tells the world it was your fish that day.

The usual high-fives, backslapping and congratulations process then gets under way as the lures are all reset into the pattern, and the boat sets off looking for the next fish, or if the day is at an end, the gear is stowed, tag flags are hoisted on the riggers, and the boat turns toward home.

Of course it wouldn't be totally accurate to not mention the fact that an entire day can often pass without ever seeing a single marlin, and therefore none of this action.

Instead, it could just be a quiet day out with the occasional visiting dolphin pod, maybe a passing albatross or two, and the sound of the boat motoring along for 10 hours… but that's game fishing too.