

## Striped Marlin Techniques

'Tis the season of the Stripes...



Assuming we're going to have a better striped marlin season during the cooler months than we've had in recent years (let's face it ... it couldn't be any worse than last year), it's time to start thinking about how to make the most of these great sport fish, and how to maximise your success with them.

Striped marlin are a different angling proposition after a season of blue marlin fishing, and you're going to need to rethink your gear, your tactics, and your crew work when you target these fish.

Firstly, while most of the old hands have all caught stripes on lures, lure trolling is probably the least productive way to catch these fish. If you can manage a hookup rate of even 30% trolling lures for stripes, you're probably doing better than average, and the only way to improve on that is to use switch/pitch-baiting tactics or live baiting.

Firstly though, you need to leave the heavy tackle hardware at home, and not waste time with anything bigger than 24kg gear. Many skippers go down to lighter line still, but in the rougher conditions on this coast, and given that the striped marlin here are usually a bit bigger on average than other places, 24kg is at least a good line class to start with until you and your crew have got it all worked out and/or you don't want to spend four hours on a fish.

If there's no bait to be had on the day, hopefully you've been out there on a special bait trip recently, and have an esky full of frozen slimys, small striped tuna or bonito that you have rigged up as skip and pitch baits so that you're ready for action but not totally dependent on finding live bait on the day.

If you're going to at least start out your day dragging lures while looking around for stripes, then you might also like to consider leaving the blue marlin stuff behind and limiting the lures to smaller setups no bigger than 9½ -inch skirted lures with smaller hooks – any hook larger than 8/0 is probably overkill, and they all need to be needle sharp.

Unlike their more aggressive blue cousins, the stripes will generally take a look at a lure that has caught their interest from all sides before they take a whack at it, and even then, any strike is likely to be tentative rather than a smash and grab raid. They tend to swipe at the lures with their bills, and will often end up just mouthing the lures and holding them briefly before letting go. You may not notice them come up and start looking at your lure, but if they get interested, it's hard to miss them as their pectorals light up like big neon purple wings, and they start flashing their huge dorsal.

Stripes have a frustrating habit of switching from one lure to another for a look, then reappearing beside another before either taking a swat at it, or maybe grabbing it in their mouth only to release it after a short tug. It seems that they're particularly sensitive to anything that "doesn't feel right" and will drop a lure like a hot potato if there's too much resistance. To help overcome this, you have to consider running lures with your drags backed way off, ideally to no more than half the usual strike setting, that is, just 15% or so of line breaking strain.

It's always a good idea to set and mark that 15% of breaking strain drag point on your reel with a bit of tape or a magic marker every time you check the normal strike drag setting. This way, crews will know exactly where to set the drag when they put a lure in the water, and there's none of the usual guesswork involved. The less resistance the striped marlin feels when he grabs that lure, it seems the more chance he might bite down hard and meet the hook, or at least run with it long enough to get the hook up to his jaw. But there's also a crossover point there – drag needs to be high enough to give the hook a chance to set, but not high enough to give the fish a reason to drop the lure.

Just remember that if the fish does hook up when you have the initial strike drag set low like this, he's going to take off like a rocket as soon as he feels the hook bite him, so he's probably going to take a little more line than he might otherwise pull off with a higher initial strike drag setting; so having a crew that can get rods cleared quickly, and an angler who can pick up the rod in a timely manner and push the drag to full strike to start putting good pressure on the fish will save you a hundred metres or more during that initial big run. However, losing a bit more line to start with after a successful strike is a small price to pay if the lower initial strike drag setting raises your hookup percentage.

If you're determined to fish for stripes only with trolled lures, then at least have your crew trained up and ready to drop the lures back at the marlin once they can be seen swatting it. Whereas blues will get really aggressive with a lure they've hit and which then refuses to play dead, the stripes will often get increasingly nervous about a skirted lure being trolled along that doesn't start to act dead or crippled after they've smacked it once or twice.

So if a stripe comes up for a pass on a lure in your pattern and takes a couple of hits without hooking up, your crew should be ready to go straight to the rig with the lure that has the fish's interest and drop it back as soon as the stripe makes an unsuccessful hit on it. This is no easy matter, and anyone dropping a trolled lure back briefly has to have a firm hand on the reel as they drop the lure back a few metres in case the fish bites while the drag is off. If they can drop the lure back and make it "play dead" for a few seconds, then that will often tempt the marlin to swing back in and attack more aggressively and hopefully hook up. If the momentary drop back doesn't work, the drag should be put back to the strike setting and the lure wound back up to its normal position in the pattern – all the while being ready for a strike. You can repeat this numerous times with a striped marlin that's dithering around in the pattern smacking various lures or just looking closely at one.

If you adopt the tactic of carrying rigged baits while using trolled lures until such time as you find a good bait area or until you start seeing a stripe or two in the wake, then you have to be ready to move instantly to switch/pitch baiting techniques. The only concession you may wish to make if planning to switch/pitch bait, would be to swap one of the normal lures running off a corner for a butterflyed striped tuna or something similar, flopping around in close to the boat without a hook and leaving a nice scent trail.

To switch or pitch bait successfully, you need to have a rig ready to go with a trace, a circle hook (and you can by all means use circles larger than the 8/0 limit I suggested earlier for skirted lure J hooks – usually 9/0 or 10/0 is good), and a bridled bait, live or dead. The baitfish doesn't necessarily need to be fully bridled as you would a skip bait, although it doesn't hurt. Live bait is of course best, but dead is still good.

But it should be rigged, attached to the circle hook, and positioned somewhere handy - bait in the transom tank, and rod in a chair rod holder if you have both. This allows a designated crewmember to grab it and flick the bait out into the wake behind the boat in just a few seconds. The drag lever should be set to free-spooling, but the reel controlled by a lightly-placed hand on the spool so that the bait flops back in the wake looking for all the world like a stunned fish dropping back out of the strike zone ready to be eaten. This is all designed to distract the fish away from the lures or teasers while it's in attack mode.

The only real difference here between switch baiting and pitch baiting as I use the two terms is that when switch-baiting, the teaser or lure that was being dragged along in the wake is flipped out of the water once it's raised the fish and got it excited, with the bait being tossed in to float past the fish and divert its attention as the teaser or hookless lure is flicked out. With pitch-baiting, the lures in the pattern can remain in the water while the pitch bait is tossed just in front of the marlin which in theory drops the idea of hitting the lure, and focuses instead on the new bait that just splashed in beside it looking more appealing as it goes past.

This is usually the time that having got the fish's attention with the bait that just went into the water, the skipper will back smoothly off the power and let the boat drift ahead as the bait falls behind.

If the pitch bait doesn't get a hit within a run back of 20-30 metres or so over the next few seconds, drag up, wind it back in, start the boat going forward again, and wait for the marlin to (hopefully) reappear. But always be ready for the unexpected hit – either from the fish you've seen, or its companion that you haven't – at any time during the pitch/retrieve/repeat process.

If you haven't found any fish out there when you're set up for a bit of trolling and pitch or switch baiting, then be on the lookout for one of the big bait aggregations usually marked by birds, or which looms up on your sounder in mid-water. This will be your chance to try some live baiting. Live baits (stand by for the pun...) are dead easy to rig in less than a minute, and there's no reason why you can't have a couple of livies swimming around in the tank with a nose bridle already rigged, just waiting for the circle hook to be twisted in before being dispatched over the side.

Having found a big patch of bait, it's usually not a good idea to put more than two rigs over the side with livies attached, because the potential for crossed or tangled lines increases exponentially once you go past two rigs.

So having found your bait school, get the lures out of the water and stowed, put nose-bridled livies on circle hooks onto two rods, and get them out there. It's usually best to have one swimming around the top water without any weights, and the second with a sinker set back up the leader that will get it down into mid-water. The boat should be either stationary, or just idling along very slowly if the school is moving and you need to stay on the periphery. Drags should be in free-spool with only the clicker on for resistance (or the lightest drag setting you can manage to stop an energetic livey pulling line off). The angler should always be nearby, and should always be ready to place a light hand on the spool to stop any overrun in the event a fish hits a bait.

Generally though, there's always a bit of belly in the line, and if the bait is taken by the fish, the angler should not dive on the rod, but just place a hand lightly on the spool to control any overrun, and then be very patient. Most marlin are lost when live-baiting either during the initial take-up of the bait when over-enthusiastic anglers forget themselves and try to strike at a fish (never do that), or when the angler simply starts to add drag too early.

Remember that the idea behind live-baiting (or for that matter, the switch/pitch baiting discussed above) with circle hooks is that the fish has to be allowed to swim off not knowing he's trailing line or just swallowed a bait with a hook in it. The bait has to be swallowed into the fish's stomach, and only then, the bait pulled smoothly back up from the throat or stomach into the fish's mouth where just as it's leaving the marlin's mouth, the unique design of the circle hook allows it to slip under the jaw of the fish and hook solid.

If you're the angler holding a rod that a fish is smoothly pulling line off as it swims away swallowing the bait, **DON'T HURRY...!** Let the fish swim off and take as much line as you like, but certainly not less than 25 metres or so before you start to smoothly push the drag up to strike and get ready for the hookup and subsequent explosion as the bait slides back up the fish's throat, grabs around the jaw, and the marlin realises that it's been had.

No matter what techniques you use to chase stripes, they're a very athletic fish pound-for-pound, and after hookup, the fight goes pretty much the same as it does for most marlin. The stripes are more inclined to try aerobatics at various times and not to dive as deep as blues after the initial run. They generally can't exert as much sheer power as the blues or large blacks, and when they finally come to the boat, they're a beautiful fish with distinctive stripes, a characteristic oversized dorsal fin that's generally as high as the fish is deep at the shoulders, and a slimmer bill and narrower mouth. They're also built like racing greyhounds, being a generally slimmer, lighter fish than blue or black marlin of a similar age.



Double hits are much more frequent with these fish, and the sight of more than one in the pattern or of a second following a lure being cleared in to the boat after its mate has just been hooked is not uncommon.

Regardless of how you decide to fish for these cool season marlin, crew training and preparation is essential, and everyone really needs to know their role down on the back deck when the stripes are around.

There are some wonderful descriptions of striped marlin techniques that are covered in excellent detail in several publications, but the one I'd recommend for further reading is the "Switch and Pitch" chapter of Glen Booth's excellent book, *The Complete Guide to Game Fishing*. And for more general striped marlin information, the article called *Striped Marlin* posted on the Western Angler website by Ian Stagles, is good reading, and can be found at <http://www.westernangler.com.au/fishing-info/fish-guide/184-striped-marlin>.

Go get 'em...!