



Saltwater Fish Fighting Techniques



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When a powerful saltwater fish strikes your fly, everything happens in a hurry and the excitement is electrifying. There is no guarantee how many jumps or runs a fish will make but the best way to experience the whole show until you land it, is to set your equipment properly and have a sound routine for beating your fish in a short amount of time. For the sake of the fish, good anglers prevent extreme exhaustion of their catch. This can include lactic acid shock when their muscles can fail and stop them from breathing permanently or being able to flea predators.

I'd like to start the discussion on how to fight saltwater fish by dropping the bombshell that the amount an angler allows the rod to bend during a fight does not increase the pressure it puts on the fish. It only increases the strain on the angler. Hook a spring scale to your leader with your rod-tip pointing at the scale. Set the drag to slip at say, 6 lbs. of straight pull. Now, let out a few feet of line and raise the rod-tip so the rod bends deeply until the drag slips. Set the drag at any point you like but once the drag is set, the resistance isn't increased by the rod bend. The rod bend, or flexibility of a rod only enables you to cast more effectively and to help protect the weakest part of your line or tippet, from breakage.

Let's start with reels and setting the drag. Some experts say using your dominant hand for retrieving line during a fight is the best choice. This would

mean having a reel set up for right-hand retrieve. I am right handed and I usually cast righty and reel with my line hand, without switching. I personally don't like changing hands to reel, regardless if it's playing a trout or a sailfish. I have never felt I couldn't keep up with a fish running toward the boat reeling with my non-dominant hand.

You have the choice between buying a direct drive or an anti-reverse reel. Since Tibor Reels discontinued manufacturing the Billy Pate Bluefin, there is no jumbo sized anti-reverse available. In the case of direct drive, the handle turns while the line got out and you can get your knuckles busted when a runs. This can even happen with a small fish if you set the drag too loose!

With an anti-reverse reel, the knob is not attached to the spool and it won't turn unless you turn the handle and it engages. One characteristic of this type of reel is the spool can turn and the fish can take line while you hold the handle. You can't override the drag setting with the handle, in other words.

There is also a "dual mode" anti-reverse reel, offered by two manufacturers. In the first mode, the handle doesn't turn when a fish is running and in the second mode, the reel goes into a direct drive whenever you turn the handle. So if you're holding the handle, a fish can't take line but you can retrieve line.

As a fish takes line, the effective diameter of the spool changes. This makes the amount of drag increase with the diminution of the spool diameter. Therefore, if you want to keep the drag tension the same, or decrease it when the fish has taken a lot of line, you'll have to make drag adjustments. The retrieve ratio also decreases when the spool gets smaller in diameter, so make sure you've selected a big enough reel for the job.

The more line a fish has taken into the water, the more water drag is exerted on the line and backing. This is especially true if a fish circles. This can theoretically decrease drag measured at the leader. To keep a circling fish attached, if fighting from a boat, I would chase it to shorten the distance and keep the connection between angler and fish straighter.

I like to use low-stretch, abrasion-resistant backing on big fish, such as PowerPro made of Spectra. If you're not using no-stretch backing, the longer the yardage between you and the fish, the more the line will stretch. If you're using a no-stretch backing or line core, this is minimized. For big fish, you want to have a fly line or mono shooting line that stretches to help cushion

jumps.

I like setting the drag to about 40% of the breaking strength of the weakest line in the system, which is usually the tippet. This gives a margin of error for knot strength and wear and tear. The amount of drag should be the least at the beginning of a fight because this is usually when there is the most impact from speed, jumps and rolls. It's time to set the hook.

Some types of fish have delicate fleshy mouths and others have mouths of mostly bone and cartilage. I've only had success with circle hooks with bonefish and they were hooked as soon as they ate and turned. I've tried circles on striped bass and only a small percentage hooked-up. When using J-hooks, the harder the mouth structure, the more aggressively you must set the hook for it to penetrate. Select hooks that are strong enough for the task so they don't open or break. Stainless hooks have a tendency to snap with repeated cycles of bending on multiple fish. I use tempered steel for my big-game needs. My favorites hook manufacturers are Tiemco, Owner and Gamakatsu. When I tie my flies or rig tube flies, I pick wire diameter, and hook-shape according to the fish I'm targeting and prey I'm imitating. I prefer short shank hooks and never use tandem rigging, except for billfish.

When hooking a fish, have the rod-tip at water level pointing at your fly, unless you're up high on a cliff or jetty. Keep it low to minimize slack. If you're retrieving with one hand, use your line hand to strip-set. If you're using a two-handed retrieve, where you pin the rod under your forearm and speed strip with alternating hands, set with both hands! Remember not to exceed your line strength and break the line. I did that several times on my first few bonefish until I learned.

After setting the hook, if there is loose line on the deck or elsewhere, use your line hand to pinch the line and create drag against the run of fish, so it doesn't all run out without tension. Hold onto the rod grip with your rod hand without touching the line or spinning handles(on a direct drive). Clear the line so it goes smoothly through the guides without catching anywhere or forming any knots. I once had a big loop hook on my casting elbow until the 20 lb. tippet popped. If the fish's run doesn't take all the extra line coiled for casting, you should reel until the line is direct from the reel to the stripper guide. You will then be playing the fish "on the reel." This includes all situations; fishing from land, boat or wading, when you might be using a stripping basket.

Knots do occur in fly lines but do not always end the fight. First, large stripper guides can sometimes minimize or free a knot as it passes through. Flexible guides like the Recoil, help prevent breakage. In the event a knot occurs, lessen the drag so it doesn't tighten the knot as much. Let the fish run and if you can get assistance, have someone hold the line beyond the knot to provide slack so you or another can unknot the line. Having a boat moving slowly in the direction of the fish can help decrease tension. Just don't run over the line with the propeller. Sometimes this works, sometimes it doesn't.

I like to let a fish run and jump as much as it wants unless there are obstacles it can reach. A fish will exhaust itself more by running and jumping than by holding and resisting sideways like a sea anchor. In the case of obstacles, I put as much pressure as I can to stop them from reaching trouble, such as mangroves, docks or markers.

When a fish jumps, lower your rod tip toward the fish to decrease tension because it can move its head faster in the air than underwater and break off. Also, if the line is under tension and the fish falls on it, it might not break as easily. This move is called "bowing to a fish."

The strangest jumps I've experienced are performed by the spinner shark I've fished for with Captain Scott Hamilton in the Florida surf. They jump completely out of the water and can complete several revolutions in the air before landing! This can tension the line, so I bow to them to reduce the tension.

The amount of rod angle during various parts of the battle varies the amount of protection the rod action gives to the line and hook. But a bent rod makes line connections bang through the guides the most. This can wear them prematurely. Pointing the rod at the fish when it's running the fastest lessens the impact of line-connections through the guides.

One tip I recommend is to hold the reel handle in the tips of the thumb, index and middle finger, to prevent it from busting your knuckles if it should slip free when a fish wants to run. The Tibor Reel Company also offers their oversized Gorilla Handle to give you more to hold to. I have them on some of my reels.

I like wearing fighting gloves so I can prevent minor injuries from palming a reel or line-leveling superbraid. Some people like to wear a fighting belt to

prevent bruising their lower abdomen. Others fish with the rod under their armpit and don't suffer that problem. That's the way Jake does it.

Captain Jake Jordan runs a billfish school and an invitational sailfish tournament in Guatemala. In his seventies, he has recently defeated several blue marlin over 500 lbs. with his technique and special tackle. The way he brings the fish in is by keeping the rod under his armpit and gaining line or pumping, by bending at the ankles and knees and rocking his body rearward and then bending forward while reeling, without moving the rod.

The Captain operating the boat also plays a big part by backing down, or paralleling a fish, to plane it to the surface. Jake starts with about 2 lbs. of drag on pacific sailfish and increases it to about 6 lbs. toward the end of the fight. Normally a fight should last about 20 minutes with a 14wt outfit. He uses the Mako Reel by Jack Charlton and remains their technical and fishing consultant. The carbon drag and large models make this a formidable big-game reel.

Other anglers hold the rod-butt under their armpit and pump up and down from that position like using a long-handled boat rod. Instead, I use a modification of short stroking, used by stand-up conventional anglers, to pump a running or diving fish toward me. The main difference is, conventional outfits are connected to a harness and anglers use their legs to squat to pump and straighten in order to make slack they can reel up.

To fight in this manner, I put the fly rod butt against my stomach and the rod-tip in the water. I use my core muscle to flex my body to lift the rod butt about a foot and I reel on the way down. Remember, the only time to reel with a powerful fish on, is when the tension is decreased, or when you provide slack by pumping or rocking. I'm only resisting with the reel drag or any judicious reel palming. If I'm in a hurry, or the fish is a long way out, I'll do this maneuver as fast as I can.

When I bring a fish in, it might be ready to handle, or it might run again and get close a few more times before surrendering. You can tell by touching the fish or the leader. Sometimes, when a big fish approaches the boat, it is just reading the name on the transom before leaving for good. I don't like to let fish stop and rest during a fight. They can quickly recuperate and add to the fight time. That's why I'll often try and lead them in, or disorient them by changing directions. This may make it harder for them to breathe but it

appears to be temporary, if you quickly release them upright.

This technique was named the “down and dirty” about forty years ago by one of my saltwater mentors, Captain Stu Apte. To perform it, lower the rod tip and pull in the opposite direction the fish is trying to go, then lead them toward you and if it turns, repeat until it’s spent. Sometimes I do the down and dirty one-handed to get more reach. Sometimes near the end of a fight, I’ll also palm the reel to override the drag setting and man-handle a fish near the line’s breaking point. It’s often best to step toward the bow if you’re in a boat, to bring the fish as close as possible, so someone assisting can grab the leader.

Since the invention of the Boga-Grip, I’ve been using one to grab the lip of small to medium sized toothy fish to safely unhook them. To unhook a fish, I use a Top-Shot Hook Out, or long nose pliers. As I mentioned in an early SL post titled, Monthly Dose of Tarpon, when you are night fishing with sharks lurking, it’s sometimes best not to handle fish in the water. A shark can take a tarpon out of your hands or make a grab for one of your body parts! In this case, it’s better to pop the leader and let a steel hook rust-out. In good conditions, using good techniques, you can quickly defeat and immobilize a spent fish. If you act quickly, you can leader it, unhook it and it will recover in a couple of seconds. Time for high-fives!