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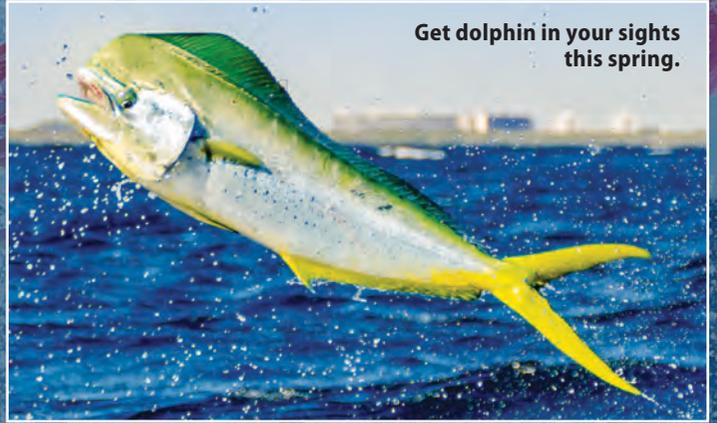
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# Offshore Special

YOUR  
GUIDE TO  
FLORIDA  
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ACTION

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# Fish-Finding Foundations

A three-tier approach to planning for bluewater success in Florida.

By Jeff Weakley, Editor

*Frigatebird is always a good sign. This large, pelagic bird follows open-water bait schools driven up by gamefish.*

**K**ee a hook in the water at all times” is the closest I’ve found to a magic formula for success on Florida’s blue water. The phrase, which I’ve heard from several captains over the years, suggests two things: One, we need to be ready for those unexpected encounters with big fish; and two, we’re often busy doing other things—re-rigging, chasing VHF reports, fixing things on the boat which we should’ve addressed last week.

There is more to it than that, of course. For anglers new to chasing the migratory ocean fish that roam the Florida coasts, I’ll offer a three-tier formula guaranteed to put meat on ice or release flags on your halyards. And by three-tier, I mean literally three tiers: three layers of physical observations that you should consider when assessing your game plan for the next day, or even the next hour. These layers are: subsurface, meaning both bottom features and midwater sonar returns; surface, comprising color changes, temperature breaks, structure and observed fish; and last but not least, sky, meaning our feathered fish-finders, the seabirds.

Taken together, these three tiers of observations can help take some of the mystery out of blue water fishing—but not all of it. In case you haven’t spent much time out there, here’s the thing about “blue” water: As marvelous and magical as it feels to be free of the tannic backwaters and the dusty green of the continental shelf, the open, warm-water sea is as biologically dense as a desert. Your

dreams of slaying tunas, dolphin, and wahoo, or releasing majestic marlin can seem like mirages.

Some days you will be blanked.

Some days you will be lucky.

Other days, you will be good.

## Subsurface: What’s on Bottom

This first tier is the one over which you can exert the most amount of control, because it’s the element that changes the least. Find a good patch of bottom, and you can return again and again. Small reefs are sometimes buried and uncovered by currents and storm-generated surges, but big natural ledges, sea mounts and large wrecks are permanent parts of the playing field.

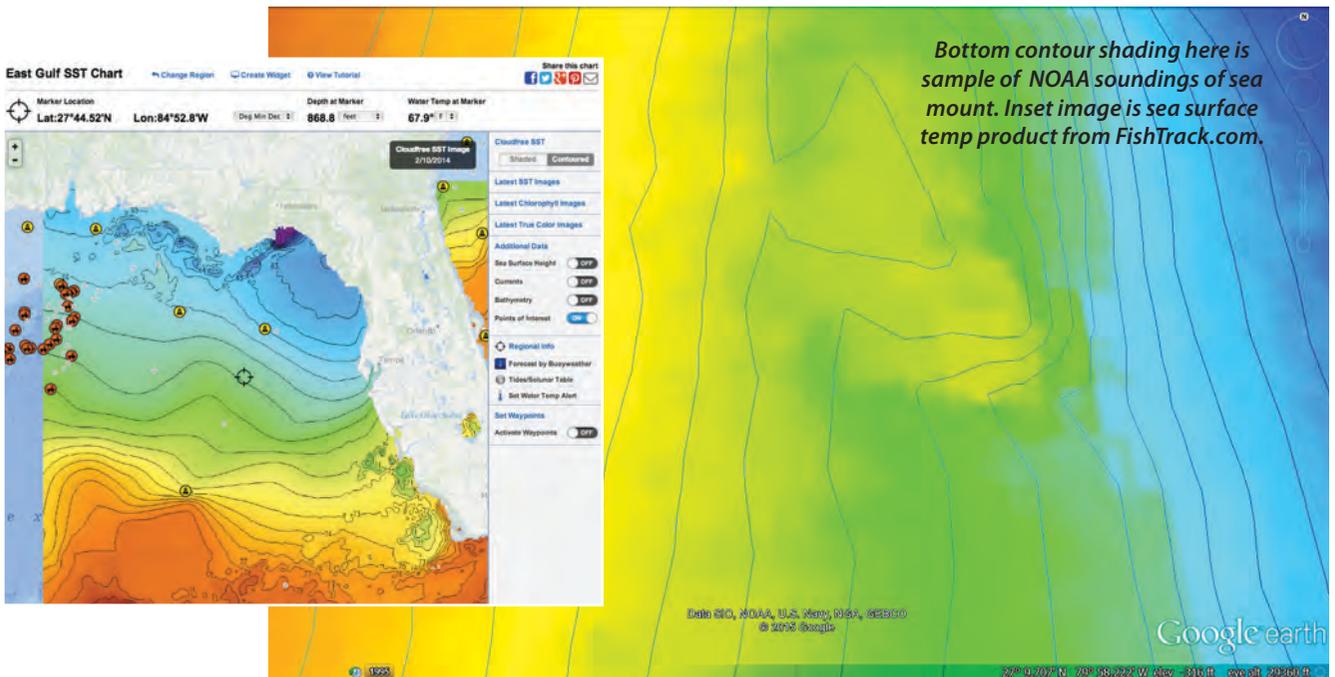
It’s very easy nowadays to identify, and locate, the kinds of sea bottom characteristics most likely to appeal to a particular class of fish. If you study up on wahoo, for example, you’ll note that many of the most productive areas around Florida are along dropoffs in the 150- to 280-foot range—not necessarily covering that entire range in one zone, but somewhere in that neighborhood. The Ledge off Jacksonville, the Steeples off Port Canaveral, and the rips off Jupiter are three examples. Other information which we’ll get to shortly will bear on the potential results, but in the absence of any other indicators, it would be a smart strategy to orchestrate your day such that you can “keep a hook in the water” in the likeliest zone for the longest possible

*Hooked sailfish bursts through a rough sea where wind is opposing the current.*

Photo Pat Ford



# Fish-Finding Foundations



time. Spend more time over the dropoff than in open water: perhaps that's your goal. Yes, that's oversimplification, but it's a starting point.

Now, sailfish and dolphin aren't ordinarily thought of as associating with bottom contours, but they very often do—and for the same reasons wahoo do. Significant interruptions in the seafloor contour may produce friction and constricting effects on sea currents, which in turn creates areas of upwelling that concentrate plankton and forage fish.

I'm reminded of a recent trip off Stuart, FL, where we flat-out pinpointed black-

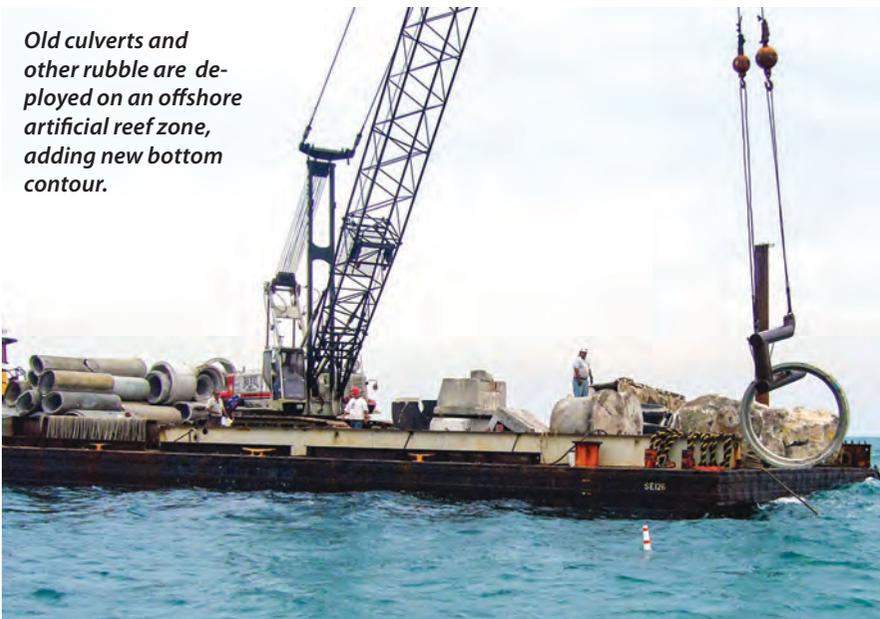
fin tuna, dolphin and sailfish bites on one particular formation where the bottom rises from 400 to 280 feet. There was lots of sargassum and otherwise attractive blue water in the area, but all our bites came in one distinct zone. The current was racing to the north at 4 or 5 knots—and we quickly determined that, rather than fight the current trolling back to the spot, the best use of our time (there's that "keeping a hook in the water" thing again) was retrieving lines, getting on plane, and simply re-setting our spread to parallel the dropoff. We went through a steady cycle: Send out lines, troll to the

spot we'd marked on the chartplotter, bend a rod, land a fish, reel up our gear, run upcurrent, and start over again.

Artificial reefs and wrecks can yield similar results. High-profile spots such as large shipwrecks commonly attract schools of sardines, runners, jacks and other potential forage sources for larger fish. These kinds of spots are excellent for slow-trolling live baits—in fact, you might use the current (assuming there is some present) to set up your bait spread so that it's very nearly stationary on one side of the feature or the other. But wrecks may also be productive when approached in a strategic fashion with rigged baits, plugs or skirted lures. Obviously, at 6 or 7 knots your hooks won't spend much time over a 200-foot-long shipwreck, but if you make a few cloverleaf passes across the feature, you can do a good job of covering the prospects. Another solution, if you aren't set up for live bait fishing, is to study your local chart and find networks of reefs that could present opportunities for trolling "lanes." (Be cautious and courteous toward other boats in the area—especially those flying dive flags: Many wrecks are popular dive spots, and blindly trolling across them will endanger human lives. Autopilot should NEVER be used in such areas.)

Now a word about oversimplification: The significance of what you've determined in terms of subsurface attraction, you should weigh in the face of what's evident at the surface, and possibly, in

*Old culverts and other rubble are deployed on an offshore artificial reef zone, adding new bottom contour.*



the sky. A deep wreck that's normally a good producer of wahoo and tuna might be a bust, if the kind of water these fish prefer happens to be absent. So, what might that water look like?

### **Surface: What's on Top**

For long-range fishing, where you're planning to travel beyond 30 miles, sea surface temperature services such as Roffers, Hilton's or FishTrack make very good sense. You can begin "reading" the surface before you leave port, identifying likely areas to begin fishing. Satellite imagery reveals the thermal profile of the sea surface, delineating helpful ranges. You can access the raw imagery online gratis through a variety of sources (including Rutgers University), but the three services mentioned offer some additional features, including annotation of latitude and longitude, interpretation of features, cross-referencing of chlorophyll and a variety of other complex indicators.

Certain fish have preferences: Dolphin (and by extension blue marlin, a chief predator thereof) seem to prefer water between 76 and about 82 degrees; sailfish are comfortable in slightly cooler water, starting about at 73 degrees and ranging into the low 80s. Yellowfin tuna prefer a lower range yet, from about 65 degrees to the upper 70s—and in fact some Florida anglers scouting for summertime yellowfins use the SST data to locate areas of water cooler than the surroundings. Besides preferred ranges for gamefish, what anglers are looking for on sea surface temp charts are positions of rapid change: Where an eddy off the Gulf Stream, for instance, brings 78-degree water in tight to cooler shelf water. These intersecting planes of water bodies not only tend to concentrate drifting sargassum, but also plankton, the foundation of the marine food web.

Regardless of your planned destination, while at sea you should pay attention to clues on the surface. Keep a careful eye on the temperature feature on your fishfinder—an abrupt change, or

even a minor one, could signal a transition zone worth fishing. Find such a zone over a relevant subsurface feature, and your confidence multiplies.

Over the years I've spent a lot of time targeting sailfish off Miami. Those trips—on my own boats, on charters, observing in tournaments—underscored this surface/sea bottom dynamic. Imagine choosing among three scenarios:

- 1) Favorable temperature and water color, unfavorable depth or contour.
- 2) Favorable depth/contour, unfavorable temp and color.
- 3) Favorable all-around: Right spot, right surface conditions.

With fuel to burn and some crowd-sourced intel to go on, obviously you'd go looking for No. 3, favorable all-around. In scenario 1, with the right surface conditions, you could expect a few bites during the day. It wasn't unusual to catch sailfish out on fairly uniform bottom in 600 or 700 feet, well beyond the steep dips of the outer reef line and the public artificial reefs. In scenario 2, with

the wrong conditions topside, you'd either go find better surface indicators, or you'd change plans—maybe go wreck fishing for amberjack or kingfish.

This kind of calculus can be applied to all pelagic fish: Tunas, dolphin, wahoo, billfish.

A long, broad line of sargassum weed with attendant baitfish is never to be ignored. Sargassum, which comprises a few different kinds of brown algae, is buoyed by gas-filled air bladders. It propagates vegetatively, and spends its entire life cycle adrift on the sea, transforming the energy of the sun, through photosynthesis, into rich, mobile islands of life. Dozens of fish species are known to hide and forage in the shade of sargassum. Many are there to graze on the shrimp, crabs and smaller fish yet which inhabit the weedlines.

From the standpoint of a fisherman hoping to tangle with migratory pelagic fish, the most productive sargassum is a golden honey to bronze color, contrasting vividly with dark, purplish-blue wa-

*Besides preferred gamefish ranges, what anglers are looking for on surface temp charts are positions of rapid change, intersecting planes of water bodies.*



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# Fish-Finding Foundations

ter. At times sargassum is pushed inshore by prevailing winds; disorderly clumps in opaque, greenish water may be less productive, but not always: Last summer I recall speeding past a sparse, scattered weedline in 60 feet of water on our way

mobile fish-aggregators. I'll never forget finding a leatherback sea turtle off Key West that was attended by a school of 20- to 30-pound dolphin. Turtles like this are apt to submerge, but this leatherback stayed topside just long enough for us

Frigatebirds are the biggest scavengers of them all. These pirates of the skies search not only for surface activity, but also other kinds of birds. At times a frigate will grab a morsel off the surface, perhaps even a live fish in flight. But quite often, the frigate waits for a tern or other bird to pick up some edible, then pursues that bird until it releases or disgorges its meal. A busy combination of frigatebirds and terns—especially the true wanderers of the sea, the sootys and bridled terns—is a sure sign that gamefish are close.

Much has been made in recent years about the bird-tracking capabilities of modern radar, and suitable outfits (4kW is a practical minimum for power output) within the price range of sportfishermen are now widely available from manufacturers. The trick is tuning the radar's sensitivity to pick up the birds. Many captains turn off clutter filters, dial up the gain until the screen becomes fuzzy with interference, and then back off the gain a tiny bit.

*Frigatebird seems to be sizing up the mackerel which has just skyrocketed through a school of ballyhoo.*



Jason Stemple

offshore. We located healthier-looking lines out 8 to 14 miles—but caught only a few schoolie dolphin. The next day, I found out through reports that someone took a 40- or 50-pound dolphin in the green water.

As productive as sargassum is, locating an isolated, large piece of debris such as a tree trunk is exponentially more exciting. There's something special about surface structure which extends below the surface. It offers, to some extent, the kind of shade and forage holdfasts associated with a weedline, but the subsurface structure clearly magnifies the appeal to roving gamefish. In recent years, the sharing of observations among Florida anglers and freedivers has cemented our confidence in the fish-attracting appeal of vertical structure. Some intrepid anglers even build their own temporary structures, in the form of vertical teaser arrays extending below the boat. Teasers might comprise reflective surfaces such as CDs or waterproof decals applied over thin plastic sheets.

Whole articles have been written about the fish-attracting properties of larger fish, rays and turtles, but it bears repeating here that any student of the deep sea should keep an eye out for these kinds of

to pinpoint his location and drop some lures in our wake. My friend David Carroll and I, with our wives, were on our way out to the famous Woods Wall on David's boat, but we quickly detoured to investigate the big turtle. Sure enough, we got tied up with big dolphin immediately, and while the gigantic turtle eventually left the scene, the dolphin stayed with us.

## Sky: What's on the Wing

Seabirds have always held a special fascination for anglers. In fact, certain types and behaviors can trump all other signs. As anglers, we have the technology to study bottom contours and sea surface temps, and we have the experience and creativity to interpret colors changes, weedlines and other surface characteristics. Birds—they are master fish finders.

Seagulls, distinguished from terns by a hooked bill (among other features), are a common sight near shore, and often range a few miles to sea, especially in areas where there is a lot of shipping and/or fishing traffic. Gulls are opportunistic scavengers, whereas terns are keen-eyed hunters. Terns circling or diving nearly always indicate active gamefish below, pushing up sardines, anchovies or other small forage fish.

A pair of waterproof, marine-grade binoculars is less expensive—and still recommended, even if hunting with the most advanced radar system. Don't go overboard on magnification: 8 power is about the maximum practical for boating, due to the detrimental effects of shaking on image quality at long ranges. The higher the objective lens diameter (the 50mm corresponding to 7X50 binocs, for instance), the better the performance in low light. A wide field of view is highly desirable, as is autofocus to infinity, allowing your eye to pick up birds along the horizon.

There are times when the birds will fool you: You might arrive late to the scene, when a school of tunas has sounded, or you might find the birds are gathered over bonito or peanut dolphin. In a situation like this, reflect on the other two tiers—subsurface and surface. Do the depths and bottom contours here align with what you'd expect for your target species? Is the water temperature and color appropriate?

Ultimately, what you should be driving at is a decision-making matrix that takes into account not just yesterday's Forum report, but what's under your boat, above your boat, and on the surface. **FS**

  
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Deep-trolling a lipped diver paid off with this wahoo. Dolphin, below, are commonly targeted using surface baits. Stinger-rigged goggle-eye, opposite, is ace-in-the-hole for large king mackerel.



# TDW



# Tricks of the **KDW** Trade

Tips for catching kingfish, dolphin and wahoo in tournaments from veteran South Florida anglers.

By Willie Howard



**W**hen the ocean water begins to warm in late April, kingfish, dolphin and wahoo command the attention of many South Florida anglers.

In the spring, fishing teams shift out of sailfish mode and begin preparing for the many KDW (kingfish, dolphin, wahoo) tournaments held from April through September.

In theory, even casual weekend anglers can catch any or all of the three popular ocean fish by simply drifting dead baits. But bringing a large kingfish, dolphin or wahoo to the scales during a KDW tournament typically requires days of planning, quality baits and a solid game plan.

So it's no surprise that well-prepared fishing teams, many of whom have been fishing together for years, place consistently high in KDW tournaments.

## **What Do They Do Better?**

To begin with, they make well-informed decisions about which of the three fish to target—and on where to spend their time when the tournament clock is ticking.

When dolphin are moving along the coast of South Florida in May, KDW fishing teams might be more likely to target them than kingfish or wahoo, assuming there's a favorable easterly wind.

A tournament held around the full moon in August or September is likely to

steer anglers toward wahoo.

Kingfish tend to be the most reliable catch of South Florida's KDW tournaments. But the competition is usually greater with kingfish, meaning it usually takes a hefty kingfish—often 40 pounds or more—to cash a tournament check.

Captain Bouncer Smith of *Bouncer's Dusky 33* in Miami believes catching a large dolphin during a tournament is essentially luck. Smith recommends targeting kingfish or wahoo in KDW tournaments, and he uses the tide to make his decision on which fish to pursue first.

If the tide is going out at the beginning of a tournament, Smith says, fish for wahoo. If it's a flood or incoming tide, begin the day fishing for kingfish.

These kingfish and dolphin headed for the weigh-in were taken on slow-trolled live baits.



"A lot of the time, you're going to win the tournament on a kingfish caught on a live Spanish mackerel," Smith said.

Smith rigs his live mackerel with a single J-hook inserted through the upper jaw followed by a pair of treble hooks—if treble hooks are allowed in the tournament. If not, he uses a J-hook stinger about three quarters of the way back toward the tail of the mackerel.

For leader on his live-bait rods, Smith likes 18 to 20 inches of 30-pound titanium wire. Above the titanium leader, he uses 10 feet of 50-pound fluorocarbon.

In tournaments, Smith recommends keeping livebait rigs ready in case small bonito suddenly become available. Because bonitos are hard to keep alive, they need to go back into the water as rigged baits soon after they're caught.

Smith says 1- to 2-pound bonitos are the ultimate baits for kingfish or wahoo. "If you've got those, you're so far ahead of the game it's not even funny," he said.

Palm Beach County tournament veteran Bill Wummer focuses on kingfish when fishing KDW tournaments on his 35-foot Contender, *Spiced Rum III*.

Wummer's regular teammates have fished competitively with him for years.

"It's kind of like a football team," Wummer said. "Everybody works together."

Wummer uses a variety of live baits for kingfish—goggle-eyes, speedos and blue runners—and will add a dead ribbonfish on a downrigger from time to time to round out the menu of offerings for scale-worthy kings, which often weigh over 40 pounds in South Florida tournaments.

For big baits such as large blue runners, Wummer inserts a 6/0 livebait hook through the nose and wires on a pair of trailing double-strength treble hooks. He uses about 3 feet of No. 6 wire leader and 50-pound shock leader above the wire.

The *Spiced Rum III*'s typical spread includes five rods: One large bait about 75 yards behind the boat as the center, or shotgun, line; two shorter flat lines; and two baits on downriggers—one 50 to 70 feet below the surface, the other 30 to 40 feet down.

Wummer says his team will dangle additional baits from a fishing kite near the bow when there's enough wind.

The *Spiced Rum III* team often fishes the waters between Juno Beach and Jupiter Inlet, typically in 70 to 120 feet. Wummer



William Simons (left) and his Absolut team nabbed this 42.6-pound wahoo off Boynton Inlet one hour before lines-out at the 2013 X-Generation KDW Challenge. A live goggle-eye did the trick.

For wahoo, Smith normally trolls, but not at high speed.

His four-line wahoo spread includes two flatlines and two planers. Typical baits include a blue-and-white Ilander lure paired with a horse ballyhoo and a blue Drone spoon (on the planers). On the surface, Smith said, he's likely to troll

a double-hooked, split-tail mullet and a rigged Spanish mackerel.

When targeting kingfish, Smith uses live bait and likes to start the day trolling the beach with spoons and small jigs in hopes of catching a special kingfish bait. Small Spanish mackerel and bonitos are among his favorites.

trolls slowly with the current to cover ground. If his spread gets hit, he usually doubles back to cover the strike-producing area again.

Big smoker kingfish often bite early. Wummer said he catches most of his big fish during the first hour of a tournament, but a few of his chubby kings have come aboard at midday.

In tournament fishing, there's no substitute for being on the water a few days before the event to find out where and when the fish are feeding.

Captain Ryan Carr used his familiarity with the water to lead the DV8 team to victory in the 2014 Lake Worth Fishing Tournament with a 51-pound kingfish.

Carr, who runs the *Sea Mist III* drift boat out of Boynton Inlet during the week, spotted jumping kingfish in 70 feet of water during the week of the Lake Worth tournament. He noticed the "skying" kings only in the mornings.

The DV8 team started the tournament by fishing the reefs off The Breakers hotel in Palm Beach, where they found small kingfish. Carr set a one-hour time limit for fishing The Breakers, and by 8 a.m. the DV8 crew had moved to the reef where Carr had seen kingfish going airborne.

"We put our spread out and started to bump (slow troll) them," Carr said. "As soon as I got to the outside edge of the reef, there she was."

Captain Nick Cardella of the *Pro Payroll* team said members of serious fishing teams often fish several days before a KDW event. They network with other anglers about the bite and have a full menu of live and trolling baits ready on tournament day.

"If you want to seriously compete nowadays, you've got to have everything," Cardella said.

When it comes to conditions, you have to also be prepared. When summer rains cause cloudy runoff water to spew out South Florida inlets, finding clean water can be the key to catching a quality tournament fish.

Joe Lucas and Tim Knapp, fishing with their sons, ran south from Boynton Inlet to the waters off Highland Beach to catch the 34.2-pound kingfish that won the 20th Annual Mark Gerretson Memorial Fishing Tournament, held in August, 2014.

Lucas said finding clean water was the key. They scaled down their hardware for clear-water conditions, rigging their goggle-eyes with 18 inches of 40-pound titanium wire leader, a 5/0 J-hook in the nose of the baits followed



Tyler Gilb, center, with his 42.9-pound dolphin, heaviest fish at the 2014 Palm Beach County KDW Classic. The crew was trolling ballyhoo 22 miles offshore.

by 6/0 J-hooks for stingers.

Spending time fishing the waters around Boynton Inlet helped, Lucas said. "My son and I fish probably 400 hours a year," Lucas said. "We're still learning."

Finding tournament-winning dolphin is usually a game of hunting around weed lines, current rips and floating debris. During summer tournaments, large dolphin are often found 20 miles or more

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44 TOURNAMENT WINS



Jay Pottlitzer struggles to hold the 70-pound dolphin he caught in May 2013 while fishing off Jupiter.

boat when Pottlitzer spotted another large dolphin in the water. She held onto her fish while Pottlitzer hooked a pair of fresh squid onto the 7/0 hook of a spinning rod and pitched it out.

After gaffing DiMarco's dolphin, Pottlitzer noticed the 50-pound braid disappearing from his Penn Torque reel.

He didn't realize how large the bull dolphin on the pitch rod was —70 pounds—until it broke the surface.

After a 45-minute fight, DiMarco hit the big bull with the gaff. The fish overpowered her and took the gaff from her hands. Another 45 minutes passed before Pottlitzer was able to bring the dolphin on board using a backup gaff.

Pottlitzer's dolphin measured 72 inches, a West Palm Beach Fishing Club all-time record.

Steve Sprague of Team Tuppen's fished with goggle-eyes, blue runners, live sardines and speedos during the 2014 Palm Beach County KDW Classic.

off South Florida.

Tyler Gilb and friends, fishing on *Teasers*, were trolling about 22 miles off Palm Beach when Gilb caught the 42.9-pound dolphin that was the heaviest fish weighed in the 2014 Palm Beach County KDW Classic, which attracted 226 boats.

The Teasers team was busy winding in baits when a line popped off the port-side outrigger.

"As soon as he came out of the water, we knew it was a good fish," Gilb said. "We got all the other rods in and chased him down. We weren't going to take any chances."

Gilb's friend John Andersen rigged the tournament-winning ballyhoo with double hooks and 80-pound mono leader. He used a green-and-yellow C&H Alien chugger in front of the ballyhoo to create a bubble trail.

Captain Jay Pottlitzer, sales manager for Tuppen's Marine in Lake Worth, knows the value of having a sturdy pitch rod ready when fishing for dolphin.

Pottlitzer was trolling about 25 miles off Jupiter with friend Diane DiMarco in May 2013 when they hooked several gaffer dolphin.

One of DiMarco's dolphin was near the

"We had a smorgasbord out there, and

it seemed we got one fish from each offering that ended in a great day," Sprague said.

The 40-pound kingfish caught on the Team Tuppen's boat by 11-year-old Billy Bachman won the KDW Classic's junior angler award.

William Simons and his crew on Team Absolut had a slow fishing day during the 2013 X-Generation KDW Challenge, held on a hot, mid-September day.

The Absolut team ran 22 miles offshore in search of dolphin, but found none. Instead of heading home in defeat, they stopped to soak live goggle-eyes in 180 feet off the Eu Palm Beach Resort & Spa, north of Boynton Inlet.

With less than an hour left before the

3:30 p.m. lines-out deadline, they noticed a wahoo following angler Frank Croft's bait to the boat. They pitched out several baits and watched the wahoo eat Croft's goggle-eye about 8 feet from the boat.

On the scales at Boynton Harbor Marina, Team Absolut's wahoo weighed 42.6 pounds and won \$2,000 as the heaviest fish of the 48-boat tournament.

When fishing tournaments, if Plan A doesn't work, move on to plans B, C and D. Anglers who quit trying before lines out might miss the opportunity to catch a fish that is worth both money and months worth of bragging rights. **FS**

## TIPPETS from the Tournament Pros

- *If the tide is going out at the beginning of a KDW tournament, target wahoo first. On an incoming tide, target kingfish first.* — **Bouncer Smith**, Bouncer's Dusky 33, Miami

- *When choosing places to fish, target areas the size of a basketball court, not areas the size of a football field.* — **Mike Theis**, Custom Rod & Reel, Light-house Point

- *Networking and pre-fishing are important if you're serious about winning a tournament. There's so much water out there, and the fish are always on the move.* — **Capt. Nick Cardella**, freelance captain and member of the Pro Payroll fishing team, Del-

ray Beach

- *Use planers to troll below the surface with bonito belly strips rigged on double hooks with a Sea Witch to catch kingfish and wahoo.* — **Capt. Paul Fasolo**, Ham 'R Time Charters, Boynton Beach

- *Rig small live baits such as sardines and pilchards with triple hooks tied to 50-pound fluorocarbon leader. Insert the end hook through the throat of the bait to make the bait swim down.* — **Mark Lamb**, veteran tournament angler, Hard Way fishing team, West Palm Beach

- *When drifting with live sardines, use rattling floats over the baits. Lively sardines will make the floats sound off. Sometimes, kingfish will attack the floats.* — **Capt. Jay Pottlitzer**,

Tuppen's Marine, Lake Worth

- *Set drags light for kingfish, but tighten them when sharks are around. The risk of pulling the hook beats winding in half a kingfish.* — **Bill Wummer**, veteran tournament angler, Spiced Rum III fishing team, Palm Beach Gardens

- *Look for current when trolling for wahoo. If you don't find current, troll elsewhere.* — **Pete Schulz**, co-owner, Fishing Headquarters, Jupiter



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How to rig your outriggers  
for maximal returns on  
Florida waters.

By Seth Funt

# Ins and Outs of Outriggers



*Typical center console setup: T-top mount 15- to 18-foot aluminum (shown) or carbon poles. Above: Sport-fisher accommodates longer poles (man on bow hopes for bonus hookup as boat backs for billfish release).*



*“They increase the number of lines fished at any given time and improve the presentation of baits and lures.”*

**T**he origins of outriggers on fishing boats date back hundreds of years, but Rybovich is credited by many to be the innovator of today’s retractable versions. Outriggers vary in length, material and cost as much as the boats they are attached to. From single poles to retractable, 50-foot sections of highly polished alu-

minum pipe balanced by a delicate system of spars and aircraft cables, all outriggers play a crucial role in improving your trolling success on the water. By design they are intended to increase the number of fishing lines fished at any given time and improve the presentation of baits or lures to targeted game fish of all sizes and species.

Not all outriggers are creat-

ed equal, with a high variation of materials used that start with simple bamboo poles and graduate to high impact, lightweight carbon fiber or highly corrosive resistant metals. It is crucial to choose a set of outriggers that not only matches the size of the vessel but also the crew’s intended purpose.

Outriggers marry to a vessel through either a pivot-

ing point at the base arm, found on many larger sport-fishing boats, or a swiveling arm found on many of the smaller center console and walkaround boats. To maximize the efficiency and operation of outriggers, the key is in the rigging. No other area of the marine industry has had a greater influence on modern outrigger rigging as the sailing industry. Sailboat rigging

# Outriggers

techniques, tools and equipment are now applied to achieve the perfect outrigger rigging scheme.

At its core, an outrigger is designed to take the main line of a fishing rod from the cockpit and suspend it out away from the boat's hull and out of the prop wash to give the bait or lure a more visible presentation. There are three basic components in an outrigger rigging: the release clips, the halyard mainline, and the mechanism for how the halyard mainline or mainlines are accessed and manipulated from the boat's cockpit.

Let us begin at the bottom of the system. If we dissect a few versions of outrigger rigging, all share a basic halyard cord rope with roller at the bottom of the system closest to the boat. I prefer New England Ropes, Stat-Set Polyester Braid or Double Braid for my basic halyard cord rope. They provide a variety of color options to suit your preference, and I like to match all colors of the rigging to the boat's overall color scheme, for instance blue hull, blue halyard cord rope.

Next, I use a stainless steel metal thimble. I match the halyard cord rope diameter to the thimble size. I prefer a 1-inch



*Basic twin-halyard rig with pin-release clips, roller and cord, common on center console vessels.*

***“Three mainlines on larger sportfishing boats accommodate two release clips and a teaser ring.”***

thimble. The thimble is attached to the halyard cord rope using a method called grafting. Because the thread count of many of the newer nylon and polyester braid ropes that I suggest in this article are so high, I have found that using a closed eye needle and a 5-foot section of 60-pound wax floss is most ideal to achieve the grafting concept. The rope is doubled up to form an eye around the thimble and the needle and floss is passed back and forth through the two sections of halyard cord rope at the base of the thimble to create an extremely tight connection between the two pieces of rope. This is then finished off by several surgeons' knots in the floss and finally all covered with a cut to fit section of heat shrink tubing to achieve a smooth, hang-free and attractive transition from the rope to the thimble.

Next, I select the base roller to attach to the halyard cord rope eye and thimble. This is where I start to see some variations in outrigger rigging. To be clear, there are many products on the market but I prefer to use either a Harken or Ronstan double or triple (block) roller attached to the rope eye and thimble. The roller should have a pitched base and a pre-mounted swiveling shackle in order to marry the roller to the eye of the thimble. There are many variations but I suggest keeping things simple and clean. The halyard cord base roller will determine how many individual halyard mainlines run through your outriggers. Typically, I use two mainlines on smaller boats to accommodate at least two release clips per mainline and three mainlines on larger sportfishing boats to accommodate at least two release clips and a teaser ring. The main purpose here is to dedicate each cord its own roller on the halyard rope. This will allow you to



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access and position your halyard mainlines and release pins independently.

Moving on to the actual outriggers, the first roller on the outrigger closest to the boat should match the base roller on the halyard cord rope (double or triple rollers). This first roller on the outrigger should also have a shackle but not have the ability to swivel to avoid twisting. There will be eyes on the outriggers themselves where the non-swiveling shackles will be attached. Make sure to tighten each shackle by hand and then with a pair of pliers. The connection should be semi-permanent as you do not want the shackle pin to rattle loose in high seas or as a result of extended vibrations. I recommend using a Q-Tip and a very small amount of 3M 4200 in the threads of the shackle and pin.

Each of your outrigger mainlines should have its own single roller shackled to the eye of the outrigger before returning to the main multi-roller at the base of the system on the halyard cord rope. The overall purpose is to have all the halyard mainlines flowing through a series of three rollers at all the pressure points on the outriggers for ease of operation and

extended life of the halyard mainlines.

The halyard cord rope at the bottom of the system should have the ability to be loosened or tightened as needed when the outriggers are transitioned between their traveling and fishing positions. I like to use a sailing product made by Harken called a Standard Cam-Matic Cleat or a jam cleat to secure the halyard cord rope to the boat in two places, one for traveling and one for fishing. These Standard

Cam-Matic Cleats or jam cleats are available in a variety of different sizes and colors and should be matched precisely to the base halyard cord rope you choose. I also recommend adding a Harken Composite Eyestraps to the Standard Cam-Matic Cleats or jam cleat to prevent the cord from jumping out of the Standard Cam-Matic Cleats or jam cleat in rough seas. You can also tie a simple over hand knot in the end of the halyard cord rope as a



*Jam cleat secures halyard cord rope topside in traveling position; a second set of cleats is installed below the T-top or on the gunnel, for fishing.*

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## Outriggers

back-up to ensure that it does not come free from the Standard Cam-Matic Cleats or jam cleat. The halyard cord rope is also finished at the bottom end with a section of heat shrink tube to prevent the rope from fraying or unwinding over time. This also allows the rope to pass smoothly

through the Standard Cam-Matic Cleat or jam cleat.

### Getting Everything Tuned Up

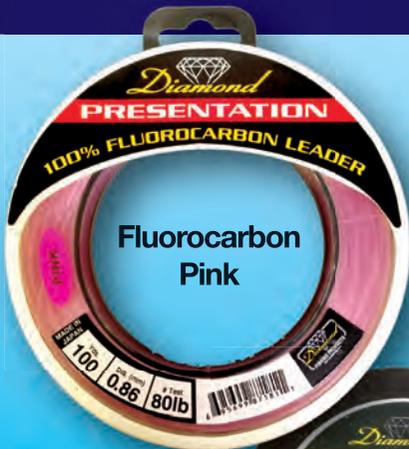
This next section deals with what I like to call running the outrigger halyard mainlines. I prefer to use 400-pound-

test (2.0 mm) monofilament for my outrigger mainline. It has a strong, durable finish. It is thick enough to grab when moving the outrigger release clips in and out; is relatively inexpensive, and comes in a variety of colors to help customize our rigging projects.

Once all of the mainlines have been run through the outriggers and rollers it's time to make a permanent connection on the boat. Always tune and tighten your outriggers in the traveling and non-fishing position. The most amount of slack will be on the halyard cords in this traveling and non-fishing position. That is why it is essential to tune the outriggers in this position. Always start with the

farthest outrigger release pins and work your way back to the boat. I like to pull the halyard cord into place with the rope tight in the Standard Cam-Matic Cleat to get a measurement, but once I have everything in place I release the rope and slack the line before compressing the

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# Outriggers

crimps to marry the two measured ends of the mainline to size. This allows the person doing the crimping to focus on making a uniform crimp compression and not have to battle the tension of the cord during this crucial moment of locking the mainline into its useable length.

There are many options and varieties of outrigger release clips on the market today and you will need to determine what outrigger release clips are best suited for your specific fishing style and application. In most of my fishing adventures I use live bait or troll ballyhoo. For those applications I prefer Blacks or Rupp Release Clips without rollers. I also prefer to crimp the release clip in the center of the clip to lock it into its position on the outrigger mainline. This is the cleanest tangle-free method to position and lock your release clips on your outrigger lines. Also, in the event the main outrigger line needs to twist as it is moved, the crimp in the center of the release clip will allow the main outrigger line to twist while not twisting or tangling up your fishing



*Roller release clip, left, for trolling large lures. Pin-style clips, middle and right, are good for small rigged baits or live baits. Some anglers install more than one type on a halyard.*

line. I exclusively use copper double barrel crimps to lock the release clips into position, because they do not pit as their aluminum crimp counterparts do. Also, black permanent marker can be used over time to bring back a black finish to

the copper crimps. You must use a quality crimping tool to make a flawless crimp in the center of your release clip. This is a crucial step to create a tangle-free clip and will also give a professional finish to your rigging project.

Finally, make sure that the clips are not positioned upside down: They should lock at the top of the clip away from the boat and open up towards the boat when released.

In another application such as trolling heavy marlin lures or wahoo baits at high speed, I prefer to use the Rupp roller release clips. These by design will accommodate a heavy load on the roller and allow for us to maneuver the line through the roller without chafing the fishing line.

Choose your release clips to match the style of fishing that you do because each release clip has a specific application and if used incorrectly they can do damage to your fishing line. Roller release clips will not function ideally with light drag settings or smaller baits and lures. On the other hand, non-roller release clips will not tighten down enough to pull heavy lures and can damage fishing line on a strike. To be as versatile as possible in your rigging, you may want to rig a set of roller and non-roller release clips about a foot or two apart on each outrigger mainline to cover all of your bases and fishing scenarios.

Finally, to lock your outrigger mainlines in a fishing position and to avoid slippage, clip a long line clip or tie a No. 64 rubber band around the base of all of your outrigger mainlines just above your halyard cord base roller. **FS**

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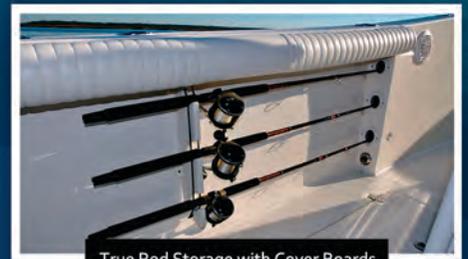


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# EAST SIDE STORY

Running to the far edge of the Gulf Stream.

By Eric Vaughn

**T**he Gulf Stream, as it flows north along the Florida Atlantic coast, is a massive river of warm, oceanic current that has a markedly different thermodynamic profile than the surrounding seawater. It's warmer, it's moving faster, and it even looks different. It's a deep, almost fluorescent blue, and its northern flow sometimes forms an oceanic tidal rip.

For anglers in southern Florida, reaching the Stream is easy. But up in places like Jacksonville and St. Augustine, things are a little different.

Ponte Vedra Beach angler Curt Englert and his sons Hayden, Harrison, and Hansen love the Northeast Florida bluewater fishery, the seasonal runs of mahi-mahi, tuna and billfish. Fishing out of a 36-foot center console, they recently geared up to do something a little different. They wanted to fish the east side of the Gulf Stream. An "East Side Trip" or "the other side" as it is referred to in sportfishing parlance—is an exceptional undertaking in an open boat. Fishermen like Englert and his sons will attempt to run over a hundred miles to fish the far boundary of the Gulf Stream during the spring and early summer. Luckily, the far east side of the Gulf Stream had meandered close to Northeast Florida—relatively—at just

over a hundred miles, and a window of mild wind and weather was developing.

"Oh, hell yes!" I blurted when I received their invite.

I knew I'd be pushing farther offshore with Englert than I had ever gone. As a point of reference, "orbital" space—the minimum altitude required to reasonably achieve an orbit around our earth—can be maintained at an altitude of about 522,000 feet, or about 99 miles up. For this particular east side trip, we'd be traveling farther than that: 130 miles offshore. The sheer scale of the undertaking is intimidating, but exciting. It's not your ordinary bluewater trip, and it requires some special planning.

Englert's attitude on a trip like this is to

*Chunky cow dolphin brings smiles from the young crew, who ventured far from port to see what the far side of the Gulf Stream offered on a mild day. Opposite: Hooked up and buckled up for another ride.*



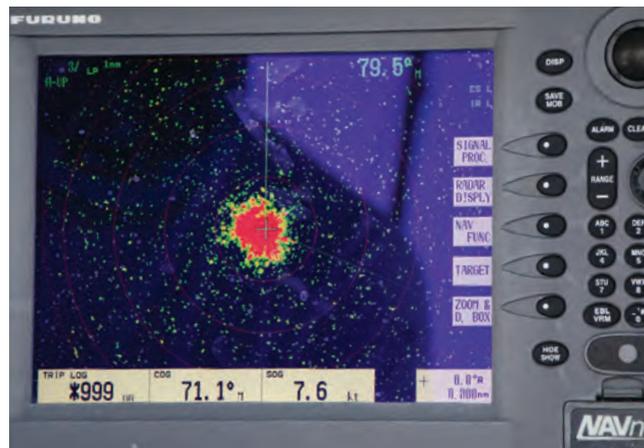
place safety first.

"The very first thing we look at is weather—it cannot be stressed enough that an accurate and reliable weather window must be obtained," said Englert. "I won't even consider a trip of this extreme nature unless the conditions are extremely mild." He had ordered satellite imagery, chlorophyll analysis, and obsessively dissected the weather from a half dozen sources, and recent, real, first-hand reports. The NOAA forecast was showing 2- to 3-foot seas, which was very reasonable for the time of year.

I told my wife I thought we would be safe and that we were doing everything correctly. I was a little nervous that NOAA had recently defunded the weather buoy located approximately 40 miles east of St. Augustine. That meant a blackout zone for realtime wave and wind data we had relied on for years. The closest off-

shore buoy is 125 miles away, off Cape Canaveral.

The loss of the St. Augustine buoy, which helped many fishermen verify conditions before leaving land, was upsetting to local anglers. But this begs the question: Why head to the "other side" if all you are seeking is a temperature



*Radar is extremely valuable when you're 100 miles out and looking for scattered seabirds.*

break? Can't you find that on the western edge and cut your transit roughly in half? The answer is simple: Everything is a little bigger on the other side: The depth, the fish, and often times, the seas. The only exception: fishing pressure. There is hardly any at all.

Many Northeast Florida blue-water fanatics will make an east side trip into an overnighter. An overnight trip will typically take the first day to run out about 50 miles to the continental shelf, and either anchor or perform a controlled drift, then wake early the next morning to run the additional 60 to 70 miles it might take to locate the temperature break formed by the east side of the Gulf Stream. The "ledge," as most fisherman call it, is where the slope of the continental shelf tapers off, starting at about 50 miles east of St. Augustine, and then drops off sharply the farther out you go. On any overnight trip, there has to be

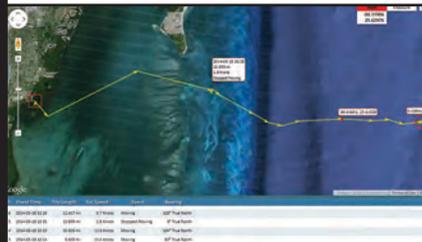
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## EAST SIDE STORY

a lookout crewman if others are sleeping, since there are increased hazards involved with navigating at night.

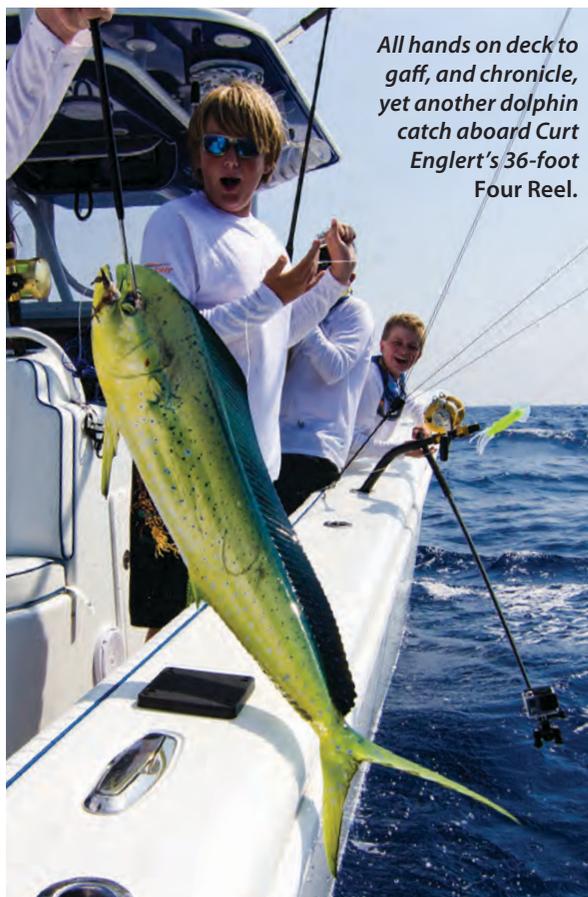
"In a center console, we have the benefit of speed," Englert explained. "We are going to run out, fish, and run back—all in the same day." The plan was formed to leave the inlet at 3 a.m. and make a 115-mile run out to the east side so that we could theoretically be fishing by 7:30 or 8:00 a.m..

Surveying Englert's vessel, *Four Reel*, I was put at ease. It is a very seaworthy boat.

float plan, federal fisheries permit? Check, check, and check.

Pulling up at the agreed upon time of 3 a.m., the bed of my F150 loaded down with 600 pounds of ice, I was excited. Having loaded almost everything on the boat the evening before, the only order of business was to get the ice and my camera gear transferred to the battlewagon.

Watching the port, then center, then starboard motors fire up, I knew that if all went well, those motors wouldn't shut



*All hands on deck to gaff, and chronicle, yet another dolphin catch aboard Curt Englert's 36-foot Four Reel.*

off for the next 18 to 20 hours, which is a tall order for three outboards propelling a fully fueled and completely loaded center console with 8 people aboard into potentially snotty seas. "These motors are freshly back from a full service," Englert relayed to Mike Richardson and his son Jack, seated closest to the engines.

Part of what makes *Four Reel* such a pleasure to fish with is the thoroughness that comes with experience. The Englerts and Richardsons routinely fish together. Everyone on the boat knows what everything does and where everything is located. What's more, Brian Sasaki-Scanlon, also aboard, only adds to the experience. Sasaki-Scanlon, former captain of the sought-after St. Augustine charterboat *Jodi Lynn II*, spent most of his time at the helm of Englert's boat so that Englert could focus better on helping his sons

catch fish and run the spread. Mounted on the hard top of the center console were the GPS and VHF antennae, an EPIRB, navigation lights, and a closed array radar dome, and there were redundant backups for each system (except for the radar). *Four Reel* has three motors and three fuel tanks, which were filled with over 525 gallons of fuel. The boat's freshwater tanks were chock-full, there was duly inspected lifeboat aboard, and a satellite phone sat encased in a waterproof box next to a box of spare pumps. More redundancy. We had more food and drink aboard than we reasonably needed in case something were to go wrong, and everyone was experienced in general bluewater techniques and had fished together on this particular boat in tournaments in the past. Fishing licenses,

catch fish and run the spread.

"Brian is a captain, but he is coming with us as a friend that has made the trip before," Englert had explained to me days earlier.

Sasaki-Scanlon eased the throttles up to about 40 knots, adjusted the gain on the radar, and dialed a heading into the Simrad Autopilot. Leaving shore at 3:30 in the morning was an experience I won't soon forget. Without the coastal light pollution or the pre-dawn sun to dull the sky, every celestial orb was visible in the sky. Lying on bean bags in the stern of the boat, the crew had the type of brilliant views that most Floridians rarely get to see.

Heading farther out, a 12- to 15-knot wind materialized and made the morning a

little bit uncomfortable, but as the sun rose I noted that we were 125 miles offshore. The NOAA forecast of 2 to 3 wasn't going to hold. Pounding into the 3- to 5-foot confused chop, Sasaki-Scanlon, still at the helm, focused on the radar. He wasn't worried about other boats, he was looking for birds—and still heading east.

Birds, or more accurately, diving birds, will show up as small objects on the radar. After you get some experience watching your particular radar unit, you will notice that there are spots of interference that center on the screen. There is no shortcut to developing this spotting technique. You simply need to get a ton of reps under your belt. Every now and then, some of that radar "interference" will reveal itself as a legitimate hard target. At depths of more than 3,500 feet, the pelagic fish we sought weren't necessarily centered on top of structure like they might be closer in. They were following bait, high in the water column. Once we located the temperature break, we knew we really didn't want to start fishing until we found schooling bait, birds, or both. As I walked to the front of the boat to prepare some camera equipment, I felt the boat surge hard to port. I cemented my fist to a stainless rail and stopped what I was doing to look back at the helm. I noticed everyone facing port. They had identified a hard target on the radar and were all trying to spot the pack of birds that would identify the first fishing spot.

Once the birds were located, we could see the pandemonium developing beneath them. Hayden Englert, 17, start-



**Reminder: East of midpoint between Florida and Bahamas requires a Bahamas permit. See [www.bahamas.com](http://www.bahamas.com).**



*Yellowfin tuna are often encountered April through July along the eastern edge of the Gulf Stream current. Catch them by trolling feathers or naked ballyhoo, or by chunking.*

ed deploying the spread. I watched as he prepared the 50-wide gear with standard skirted, brined ballyhoo. A full spread was efficiently deployed, the crew had teasers in the water alongside them before I could blink. Before we knew it, we were hooked into a blackfin tuna, which we boated and bled before icing down. After pulling a sizable mahi off the same set of birds, the action stopped as soon as it started. Before long, however, another pack of birds was picked up on radar. "Pull 'em in!" demanded Sasaki-Scanlon. "We've got another group of birds on radar!"

The second stop was about 1.5 miles from the first. This time, the birds were higher, and making more dramatic dives. "This is what we are looking for!" Sasaki-Scanlon said to Hayden. "Get 'em in the water."

We couldn't get the spread halfway deployed before big mahi were outright inhaling our ballyhoo. Mahi after mahi was heaved over the gunnel. These weren't schoolies, either. The fish out here were consistently larger than what I was used to seeing on the ledge. Blackfin tuna were bled and iced and a few under-sized yellowfin (smaller than the 27-inch curved fork length) were hooked and released. We did this at the third, and

fourth, and fifth and six stops and had a thoroughly enjoyable day on the water.

We trolled our way west closer to shore almost all day. Each time we spotted birds, we'd deploy a trolling spread and were rewarded by healthy strikes. At about 2:30, we decided to pick up and run farther west. Finding a weedline, we decided to redeploy. After having consistently trolled west and having just made another hour and a half running in at speed, I glanced down at the GPS, and noticed that we were still 100 miles offshore! At this time, Englert used his satellite phone to call and update his float plan contact, advised of the sea and wind conditions, our location, then hung up and turned his eye back towards the trolling spread. The crew was battling more mahi and blackfin tuna and painting the decks red. I reveled in the elegant violence that is offshore trolling.

Heading back in, the seas gradually became more and more calm, and finally, inside of 40 miles, the seas laid down and were a pleasure. With smooth conditions and a heck of a lot less fuel on board, the Englert's 36-footer made 45 knots and sounded like an F1 car screaming back to land.

The only thing missing was sleep. **FS**

# TRENDING NOW

## Offshore Boats

Many boat manufacturers have designed steps into their hulls to increase the efficiency of large center consoles.



One of the perks of being the boating editor of *Florida Sportsman Magazine* and hosting “Florida Sportsman Best Boat” is that I get the opportunity to run a lot of boats throughout the year. From technical poling skiffs all the way up to the big offshore center consoles, boat manufacturers are constantly tweaking the design of their craft to capture more market share. Some of these refinements come from years of experience while others are a result of customer demand.

### Bigger is better

One trend that is sweeping the offshore market is super-sized center consoles. It used to be that a hull length of 35 feet was considered huge. Not anymore. Common now are center consoles over 40 feet, with a new entry into the offshore arena that tops the fleet at 53 feet. One dynamic that seems to be fueling this growth is that of owners who have had the big flybridge sportfish and are tired of the maintenance and full time captains. They want to be able to run to the islands fast and in comfort, with a big advantage of being able to operate the boat themselves. Driving a boat from a flybridge does give you a better view over the horizon, but perched atop your tower you are very much out of touch with the cockpit. In a large center console you can run the boat in conditions that keep most of the fleet in the marina, use your electronics to see past the horizon and you're able to hold a conversation with your fishing buddies. Maybe even reel in a fish or two yourself.

### Step it up

Many new offshore center console hull designs now include a single or double step in the running surface. Not necessarily new to the boating industry, stepped hulls have been around for over a century. What a step in the hull does is lessen the wetted surface of the boat at higher speeds by airing out the hull immediately aft of the step. This decreases the friction of the water interacting with the hull and allows you to run faster with less horsepower. As a stepped hull planes off, the forward step tends to stay in contact with the water. This allows the attitude of the boat to run a little flatter with a bow-down trim. Typically, a step in the hull allows a boat to go faster when compared to a deep V in the same size range or run the same speed with less horsepower and fuel consumption. As with many things in boat design, there's usually a tradeoff. Stepped hulls can be a bit of a challenge to get used to handling at high speeds. They may not have as predictable of a ride, especially in a hard turn, as a conventional deep V enjoys.

### A family affair

The center console design gained popularity as a hard core fishing machine. The no frills, tournament-winning, interior layouts included baitwells, fish boxes, rigging stations, a leaning post and not much more. These boats were easy to maintain and perfect for a group of fishermen to head out to blue water. Lately a change that has occurred industry wide is the addition of family-friendly features to these otherwise hard core platforms. Plush bow and stern cushions, marine heads in the console and cup holders now vie for space once reserved for rod holders and cutting boards. The result is a center console boat that can fish a dolphin tournament one weekend and take the family to the islands the following weekend. In speaking with several boat manufacturers, they feel that this hybrid interior layout targets a boating population that is more family-value oriented. Plus as new boat prices have crept up, spouses are less tolerant of a single-purpose boat that allowed dad to leave the family ashore.



Multi-engine center consoles can get you offshore fast.



Fishing boats that include family features are popular.



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# A Surprise Guest

*Night operations save a friendly and get her home.*

I am a United States Marine Corps infantry captain and recently transferred from active duty to the reserves. Upon doing so, I moved back to my home of Southwest Florida and began guiding again, as I did before I joined the Marines. One day last winter, I had a charter for a night shark trip that turned into a rewarding rescue adventure.

By Billy Norris

On that trip, we set out around sunset and began fishing the local near-shore waters. After catching a few sharks, we decided to move into a little bit shallower waters and target some big snook. After fishing for an hour or so, we began to hear a loud breathing noise coming from just behind the stern of my boat. The customer asked me what the sound was, and I said that it was probably a manatee. As it was pitch black, we couldn't see, so we shined a light and to our surprise it was a yellow Labrador retriever swimming as hard as she could for the boat! We grabbed the soaking wet dog and brought her on board. Unsure of where she had come from, we let her finish the fishing trip with us. I took her back to my house at the end of the trip.

She stayed at the house for several days and spent her time lounging around in the evenings, and going fishing with me on charters during the day. After a lot of research and posting on the internet, we were able to find her owners and return her to them! Daisy Mae, as her name turned out to be, is now back with her family and doing well. **FS**



*Captain Billy Norris of Pale Horse Charters, right, stands with the yellow Lab Daisy Mae as he reunites her with her owner, left. Days before, Norris found and rescued Daisy Mae on the waters of Estero Bay during a charter fishing trip.*

If you have had an interesting, exciting or funny experience in the outdoors, tell us about it and send us a picture: It might qualify as "An Outdoor Happening." If your story is chosen, you'll receive a Florida Sportsman book set, including a chart for your area, worth over \$100. Send your story and one or more photos to Outdoor Happening, Florida Sportsman, 2700 S. Kanner Hwy., Stuart, FL 34994. By e-mail: davidc@floridasportsman.com

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