

Lessons on Losing a Great Fish

By: Capt. David Bacon

How to lose a trophy fish...

There are Plenty of ways to lose a great at fish all throughout the fight, but why wait? Some anglers lose trophy fish before the fight begins. I watch them. I coach them. They do it wrong anyway. I groan silently but commiserate with the perplexed angler, keep coaching pleasantly and accept full responsibility for the fish count because that is the life of a charter captain. Every charter captain across the land who reads this will nod his or her head in mystified agreement. Every angler across the land who reads this will assume I'm referring to other anglers. Some skippers scream at the passengers. Some passengers scream at the crew. Awe what the heck... let's blame it on the fish... the wily varmints. Nobody screams at fish. Howl maybe, but never scream.

Okay, okay.. here are lessons on how to lose great fish:

Hookset timing: This is when the greatest number of fish are lost. One of the most common questions I answer is, "When do I set the hook?" The real answer is, "When the hook is in the fish's mouth." Many anglers don't wait for it and swing too soon. Fly fisherfolk are the worse. They swing wildly at the first hint of a pickup. That's fine when they are flyfishing on a trout stream, but when they are using an 8-inch nose-hooked mackerel for bait they must exercise enough patience to wait for the predator fish to take the big bait ALL the way in its mouth. I tell folks to wait through the tap-tap-tap, until a steady weight is felt. Then set the hook and be fast about it. Sometimes it doesn't matter, such as when a yellowtail inhales a bait or lure at thirty knots and the deed is done before an angler can react. Most of the time however, hookset is a matter of strategic timing.

Maniacal hooksets: This is classic and often stems from lazy fishing habits by people with too little focus on fishing. First, the rod is held too high while waiting for a bite. Once a bite is detected, the angler swings wildly from about a ten o'clock angle to up past noon (which is often downright dangerous to friends or crew members standing nearby), then quickly lowers the rod creating slack line and repeats the entire incorrect process at least three times. As near as I can tell, this is to absolutely insure the absence of a fish on the line. At no time was sufficient force delivered to sink the hook deeply and subsequent slack line allows the hook to pop right out. Then the angler's reaction is always the same... blame all the gods of fishing for allowing that fish to get away. The problem here is that a hookset move loses power above ten o'clock. The rod has no more load-up power because all the bend is too near the rod tip. If an angler will fish with a rod tip low there will be plenty of room to swing, utilizing the power in the lower half of the rod to drive the hook home past the barb. Keep your hooksets low and powerful!

Pumping wildly: When fishing for large tuna, it is sometimes helpful to horse the short strokes. But even that is more a matter of lifting than pumping. For most other fish, it is counter productive to savagely pump the fish while bringing it up. Certain fish, such as flatfish (halibut, flounder, etc.) and huge lingcod are best brought up gently so that they remain docile as long as possible. Pumping the rod wildly aggravates fish and causes it to go ballistic, thereby creating more opportunities for the fish to bust a line, rip out a hook, or otherwise mess up an angler's day. Strive to keep a fish as calm as possible during the fight to prevent creating opportunities to lose it. Most fish will give you as good a fight as possible anyway.

Lifting a big fish out of the water with the rod: When a fish comes to the surface before a crew member is ready with a gaff or net, it is important to keep the fish's head in the water. Many anglers instinctively want to lift the fish's head out of the water. Fish do not appreciate air and they tend to go hog wild when the last short length of shock-absorbing leader is at risk. Broken lines and ripped out hooks are common results. Similarly, avoid allowing the fish to float on the surface while your line is slack. This is a common reason rockfish are lost. Keep your line taught, but do not lift the fish's head out of the water until the gaff or net is in position. The exception is with smaller fish, when the proper process is to grab your line by hand and lift the fish quickly over the rail. Please, do not bounce fish aboard by loading up the rod and swinging the fish over the rail. People get hurt that way.

Do you find any of your own bad habits listed here? I recommend printing out this article and putting it in your tackle box to read and reread on your way out to the fishing grounds. If you do, you'll hook and land more fish.