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WINNING STRATEGIES FOR BLUE GRANDERS

PART 1: PREPARING FOR BATTLE

Catching a blue marlin of over 1000lb is easier when you have a master coach like Capt Peter Bristow. He's helped his anglers catch more grander blue and black marlin than perhaps any other skipper in history. In this first instalment of his detailed guide to catching a grander blue, Captain Bristow outlines his invaluable step-by-step procedure to prepare anglers for the battle of their lives. You'll discover the correct way to adjust and set-up a fighting chair and harness – essential skills whenever you're using heavy-tackle.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: **PAUL WATSON; BRYAN TONEY; CAPT PETER BRISTOW; JOHN ASHLEY**

This is a guide to prepare you for tackling a blue marlin of over 1000lb. In Madeira, where I run the charterboat *Katherine B*, a fish like that is not uncommon. In fact, some years we catch lots of huge blue marlin, with our average fish something like 800lb.

Before moving to Madeira to chase big blues, I spent decades catching grander black marlin off Cairns. These are quite different animals and the fighting techniques that I'll outline here are not the same procedures that I would suggest for giant blacks.

In a playground like Madeira, we get to see many anglers hooked-up to their first truly enormous marlin. It's not an easy situation for most

first-timers. There is a lot going on and it all happens very fast.

Most anglers get flustered and confused, and fumble the initial stages, when they should be enjoying one of the most exciting spectacles on earth. This purpose of this article is to prepare you, so that when your opportunity comes, you'll be confident, relaxed – and successful.

Imagine yourself facing a big fish on heavy-tackle for the first time. It's all very well that you've been on a boat before. Perhaps you've even done some serious gamefishing for smaller game. Even so, the feeling of being up against a 1000lb fish is rather daunting – terrifying would be closer to the truth.

You'll probably feel that everyone is watching you and you might think that you're expected to know everything. The reality is that what you experience in the heavy-tackle chair, especially when connected to a huge blue marlin, will be quite different to anything you've experienced before. Because of this, I'm going to run you through the procedure as though this is all new to you.

Approach this information with an open mind and absorb what you can. When the moment arrives and you're in the spotlight, you will most likely forget everything I have said – it is a phenomenon I like to call an 'adrenaline blackout'.



Above: The first adjustment to the chair is getting the length of the footrest matched to the angler's legs. The reel must be positioned within easy reach.

Right: For as long as you have a fish on the line, your left hand must be braced on the top of the reel. Your left hand plays no role in lifting the rod, but if the hook pulls, or the line breaks while you've got a heavy-tackle outfit loaded under strain, the rod will rocket back and could strike you in the face. Keeping your left hand in place will save you every time.

THE DAILY ROUTINE

The routine of introducing new anglers to the heavy-tackle cockpit is generally an enjoyable experience. People go marlin fishing because they want to see a big fish – they want to encounter the 'king of the ocean'. New anglers are usually receptive to what is happening and they are eager to learn. If they have never used heavy-tackle before, it is relatively easy to get them into the mind-set for taking on the biggest fish they have ever seen in their lives. However, if the right approach is not taken from the outset, the anticipation can build into fear.

I enjoy the challenge of coaching newcomers as much as catching the fish itself – and even more so with kids. Kids are so much fun because it is all so new and impressive to young eyes. I've found they enjoy the whole experience more than adults because they are more responsive and generally more appreciative of the outcome.

It is much easier to teach someone who has never done it before than an experienced angler who has got it all wrong. Bad habits and

blinkered vision are hard to erase. Surprisingly, I have seen some of the biggest names in big-game fishing with the most appalling technique and lack of co-ordination. My feeling is that they learnt it wrong right from the start.

START AT THE CHAIR

Beginning at the start of a typical fishing day, I would like to guide you through my step-by-step approach to preparing an angler for a big blue marlin. The first thing I'd do is establish the extent of your experience. Most of my UK and European anglers have never seen a marlin, let alone caught one.

Before the lines touch the water, there are several procedures that must be attended to. The first of these is fitting you to the fighting chair and seat harness. In these waters, a blue can strike at any time, even minutes after leaving the dock. Island fisheries are often surrounded by plunging coastlines, which means deep water and big fish can be found right at the harbour entrance.

The basic principle of the chair is to fight the fish with the weight of your body. Big guys have a distinct advantage, but technique and co-ordination can overcome any lack of weight or size. Your legs and feet must take all the pressure. If you weigh 150lb, then correctly balanced and fitted to the chair and harness, you can fight the fish with 150lb, free of charge. It's as simple as that!



Most, if not all of the adjustments will be made to the chair settings. The footrest is the determining factor for any angler. The footrest must be extended for long legs, so your knees will not be up around your ears. You must be comfortable

at all times with the reel positioned within easy reach. It should not be too far or too close. If it is too close for the big guys (beer belly) then extend the harness straps slightly.

The rod is in a fixed position because the butt is located in the

“It is technique and co-ordination, rather than strength and size, that makes a good angler.”



gimbal and cannot be moved fore and aft. If the harness rides up your back during the fight, then shorten the footrest to move your bum back into the harness. Do not shorten the harness straps or it will all go pear-shaped.

First-timers have a strong tendency to try to lift the rod too high when retrieving line and to rise up on their toes. This is wrong! You must take your weight on flat feet. Do not try to lift the rod any higher than you can manage with your feet still flat on the footrest – and don't strain yourself backwards. You are only going to hurt yourself to no advantage.

THE HARNESS

When the fish is out on the surface, there is nothing you can do but get line when you can – achieved either by the boat backing up or the fish swimming towards you. Don't for one moment think you can wind in a 1000lb fish with your own strength in this situation. Just get line when you can and don't force it. Your turn to pull will come when the fish is down there at a good angle, allowing you to apply technique and skill.

There are seat harnesses available that are designed to slide up the back, so the angler can pull on a fish while it is out on the surface. However, keep in mind that your

back muscles are weak and if you want to hurt yourself seriously, then start pulling with your back. I can tell you for certain that you won't be able to do this for long.

So far, we've addressed the length of the chair's footrest. Next, we look at the height. The correct setting depends entirely on the body weight of the angler. As I've said, it is technique and coordination, rather than strength and size, that makes a good angler – I cannot emphasise this point strongly enough!

For smaller or lighter anglers, we raise the footrest until you are pushing right against it. When the pressure is on, the fish now has to lift you straight up. Now you can use

Above: Capt Peter Bristow takes his angler through a training session. Before the lures are put in the water, the angler should be fitted to the chair and harness, and be comfortable with the procedure. The chair's footrest should be set so that the angler's knees are over the edge of the seat. The feet are spaced wide and kept flat to distribute the load. The lower the footrest, the easier the tackle can lift an angler.

“The sizzling run of a big blue marlin will shock most anglers into disbelief.”

your weight to its full advantage. For bigger anglers we lower the footrest. The rod under pressure can now lift you up out of the chair because of mechanical advantage.

Setting the balance – between your weight and the fish’s ability to lift you up off the chair – is adjusted by raising or lowering the footrest, and is set according to the pressure of the drag on the reel. Whatever pressure you have on the line will determine that balance.

The ‘feel’ of this balance point is largely up to the individual. If you’re fishing with experienced crew then listen to them, but use your discretion. If you’re fighting a fish and it feels wrong or that the fish will pull you out of the chair, just back off the drag.

Mistakes with the footrest setting are easy to make. I see a lot of young skippers set the footrest far too low for novice anglers. They may set the rod low thinking that it gives the angler more chance of lifting the fish, but this is wrong. With the footrest too low, your body weight cannot be used efficiently and the fish will be able to lift you out of the chair with little effort at all.

When we’ve finished adjusting the chair around you, I’ll want to see you sitting in the seat harness with your rod tip resting at a 45-degree angle to the horizon. If that is not so, then something is wrong.

As soon as we hook-up, I will be driving the boat so that the angle of the line from the rod-tip is kept at 90 degrees, angling the line at 45 degrees to the water. There are two reasons for this: first is to keep the

fish swimming and the second is to give you maximum lifting power. Throughout this initial period, I want to see you *relaxed* at all times. There is no need to ever strain yourself. Relax and let the fish do the work. Use your weight – it comes at no price to you.

THE REEL

Have you ever used a reel the size of this thing? Most likely not if it’s your first time on heavy-tackle. They are big and cumbersome. They are that size because we need a lot of line to deal with that first run. Even with its substantial size, it is difficult to get more than 850m of 60kg line on the spool. Nevertheless, that should be plenty, as in 50 years of giant marlin fishing I’ve only run out of line twice – and we still managed to catch both fish!

Get some practice changing gears. Each brand of reel is different. Modern designs have a press-button shift, which is absolutely idiot-proof. If the reel you’re using doesn’t have this luxury, make sure you know how to change gears – then practise until you can do it without thinking.

Now I want you to place your left hand on top of the reel – and it is important that it stays there! Your right hand goes on to the reel’s handle. Next, I’m going to put my two hands on the rod and pull down with all my might. This will have the effect of lifting you up from the chair. With a correctly set-up rod, chair and harness combination, you actually have the power to lift me right off the deck, using your body as a counterweight. That’s

how much power you have without even trying to pull.

If I loaded your rod with my weight then suddenly let go, you might fear that the reel would fly back and hit you in the face. This is not so – although the situation simulates what happens if the hook pulls out or the line breaks under extreme pressure. With your left hand still sitting relaxed on top of the reel, the backwards motion of the rod is completely neutralised. Your reaction to stop the reel from flying back into your face is automatic – you don’t have to think about it. Had your left hand not been there you would have suffered serious damage to both your face and demeanour. There have been some horrible accidents resulting from ignoring this principle – but not on my boat! The other reason for your hand to be on top of the reel is for guiding the line. When retrieving, I want to see that line going back on like a cotton reel; each revolution should lay side-by-side with the one before it.

I can demonstrate the necessity of this by winding on some line in an erratic criss-cross manner. Apply a little drag and pull the line off fast under some pressure. Hear that ripping noise? That is the sound of friction and the line destroying itself by rubbing over the adjoining strands – and we don’t want that! So carefully guide the line all the way to the edges of the spool, each strand lying neatly next to the strand before it, so that when it comes off under pressure, it is going to come off like silk. You would be surprised how many new chums get this wrong without a bit of practice on the real thing.

THE STRIKE

Now, imagine a marlin has just appeared back there in the lure spread, or has actually taken one. There will suddenly be a lot of screaming and yelling from the crew (I love it). Stay calm! Whatever you do, *stay calm!*

If a reel is screaming, coolly and carefully determine which rod is going off. If the fish is simply stalking one of the lures, determine where it is. If you don’t have polarised sunglasses on – then get some! They will enable you to have a chance of seeing what the crew is watching.

When the fish strikes and the line comes down from the ‘rigger and the reel starts screaming, go to it – but don’t do anything until I tell you to. Until you know the fish is hooked beyond any doubt, you should not

Once you’re hooked-up, you’ll find it difficult to remove a loaded heavy-tackle outfit from the rodholder unless you pull the tip up to disengage the pressure holding the butt against the front wall of the rodholder. Make sure you grasp the rod as shown, so that your hands are positioned correctly to carry the outfit and to place the butt into the gimbal-fitting on the game-chair.





take the rod to the chair. If the fish drops the lure – and they quite often do – and then climbs on to a different one, you will be in the chair with the wrong outfit. That's a big mistake and you would look stupid!

Something to bear in mind at this point: a blue marlin usually jumps and runs in circles, whereas black marlin generally jump and run in straight lines. Only on the rarest of occasions will a black marlin run back on you – it's not in their character. Once we're hooked-up, I have some fast decision-making to do. I want to get the boat away from that fish as quickly as possible – to avoid it jumping across the other lines. Even worse is if the fish runs ahead of us then cuts across in front of the boat. In that scenario, we would be trapped in a circle of line laid down by the runaway fish. I have been there before and it was not good! Another bad outcome is if a fish takes a second lure. It does happen!

Therefore, once I have cleared the fish from the pattern of other lures, I will stop the boat and you can transfer the rod to the chair

in comfort and safety. When you hear my confirmation to make the transfer, consider carefully where you are going to place your hands on the rod. You do not want to end up with your arms crossed over as you step into the chair and try to guide the rodbutt into the chair's gimbal socket.

As the rod will have load on it, you should pull the rod back slightly while it is still in the rodholder. This will relieve the pressure between the butt and the rodholder tube so you can more easily extract it.

You'll find the transfer manoeuvre much easier if a 'Hayes Handle' is fitted to the rod's bent butt. These clamp-on grips make it ever so easy to control the bulk and weight of this top-heavy equipment during this critical time. They are highly recommended and are available direct from Capt Roddy Hayes (visit: www.legendlures.com).

So that this is all familiar to you when the pressure is on, before we even start fishing we'll do a couple of dummy runs and you'll practice getting the rod from the covering board to the chair. Get used to the feel and the weight of the outfits, it

Blue marlin have a tendency to run and jump in circles. There's a danger that it will turn back and run towards you.



helps – and practice changing gear repeatedly, until you have it right. Big 80 and 130 reels have two-speed gears with ratios of 1:1 and 2:1 as standard. The low gear is 1:1 and this is very useful when the fish goes deep and there is a lot of pressure to crank against. You will find it very difficult to retrieve line under heavy pressure unless you go down to low

When transferring to the chair, place the butt into the chair's gimbal cup before climbing over it to get seated. Once in, clip your harness to the reel – always towards the outside from between the reel's harness lugs.





When your big blue finally piles on, the action is going to unfold very quickly.

You need to be comfortable with the drill beforehand because your chances of success will be much better if you can react automatically.

gear. The faster 2:1 gear is used on the strike and at all times when the fish is near the surface. You simply can't wind fast enough in low gear to pick up line when the fish is coming easily.

NOW YOU'RE HOOKED-UP

We all have our own way of doing things. For the beginner I will set the strike drag for 60kg tackle at around 4kg (8-10lb). There are a number of reasons for this. If the hook is sharp and the fish hammers it on the strike, then it will get hooked. Once the fish starts running, the lure will slide up and crash into the end of the leader, acting as a slide hammer to help set the hook. If the hook is only on the bill, then the light drag will not dislodge it.

The sizzling run of a big blue marlin right out of the gate will shock most anglers into disbelief. If there is any excessive drag and it is not backed off immediately, the additional pressure from inertia and water friction will pop 60kg line in an instant. The drag of the line being pulled through the water at this speed is sufficient alone to hold the hook in place.

Do not put the drag up until the fish stops running. If you are getting short of line, I will turn the boat and chase the fish to keep you connected. Once the fish slows and the pressure relaxes, you will have to put the drag up in order to retrieve. Until you've got a lot of experience and are familiar with this reel, take the drag up in small stages. This way you can become accustomed to the pressure – and how to handle it.

Keep in mind the adrenalin problem and keep your wits about

you. Try to imagine what the fish is doing. Adrenalin overload is a common problem with first-timers. The result is that they fight the reel and not the fish. For example, when the line is running out, there is no point in winding. Likewise, if you are cranking the handle but nothing is coming on to the reel, you are only burning your own

energy against the drag. I see it all the time. So once again, concentrate and fight the fish, not the reel. If the drag setting is not sufficient to crank the line up out of the water, do not turn the handle. Make sure that only the fish is straining against the reel's drag.

Whenever your right hand is moving near the drag lever, be very careful not to accidentally bump it back into the free-spool position. This catastrophic event could also happen during your transfer to the chair.

Experienced anglers, who are accustomed to catching giant blacks off Cairns, might think they know it all – but they are in for a shock when they hook their first big blue. When you're hooked to a huge blue, you'd better back the drag off in a hurry or it will all be over very quickly! Giant blacks are very different.

We now have a fish on and all is going well, but I do not want to get too close to the fish in the early stages of the fight. Blues are very unpredictable and extremely dangerous when they're green. So, what happens from here? All will be explained in our next instalment – 'The First Five Minutes'. 🐟

“The heavy-tackle chair will be quite different to anything you've experienced before.”



Capt Bristow's Katherine B.

Capt Peter Bristow has over 45 years experience in commercial and sport fishing. In 1968 he moved to Cairns, Australia, to work on gamefishing vessels. The following year he built the 38ft gameboat *Avalon*, then ran her out of Cairns for the next 23 years. By 1976 his boat had caught 1000 giant black marlin. By 1991, Capt Bristow had caught nearly 2000 giant blacks, 51 of which weighed over 1000lb, and the largest of which weighed 1323lb. Along the way, he accrued numerous world and Australian records for his clients. In 1992, Capt Bristow took *Avalon* 2000 miles to Pohnpei in the central west Pacific. Together with the founder of the Cairns fishery, Capt George Bransford, they ran *Avalon* for four years under the Australian flag. Since this stint in Micronesia, Peter has operated in Madeira, where he runs his 40ft *Katherine B*, chasing the world's largest blue marlin. For more on this fascinating captain, visit: www.fishmadeira.com

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