

WINNING STRATEGIES FOR BLUE GRANDERS

Part 2

Capt Peter Bristow has a long history of catching marlin over 1000lb. In this second instalment of his series relating specifically to grander blue marlin (blacks are quite different), Peter describes the procedures during the crucial first five minutes of your battle. You'll discover what should happen – and what can happen. He'll also relay some very sobering advice about what he describes as 'the most dangerous fish in the ocean'.

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The first five minutes

"If you mess with those things while they are still 'green', then make sure you carry some body bags on board."

Whether you're a charter captain or a private angler, most of us have our own opinions on how procedures should be conducted on board our own boat. This article outlines an accumulation of observations that I have made over many years, while chasing some of the biggest blue marlin on the planet. They highlight the common traps that have cost many beginners the fish of their dreams. These traps catch plenty of seasoned crews too, particularly when they are not ready and focused on the danger signs. The result of my observations is a series of strategies that have allowed my anglers consistent success while chasing huge blue marlin, many of which have weighed over 1000 pounds.

My daily workplace is the Atlantic Ocean surrounding the Portuguese island of Madeira. It's a destination renowned for producing an

accumulation of enormous blue marlin. In this fishery, the size of the fish and disposition of the charter anglers narrows the options down to heavy tackle and lure fishing. I work to the angling rules laid down by the IGFA, as they are the essential regulating element that is so fundamental to this sport. What a shame it is that more anglers and charter operators don't respect them.

In Madeira's waters, a good-sized blue marlin weighs over 1000lb. Even the average blue weighs more than 750lb, year in, year out. My goal is the IGFA all-tackle world record, which, for an Atlantic blue, is currently 1402lb 2oz (636kg). Few of the new anglers think about that aspect when they step aboard my boat, but this goal is my top priority and always on my mind. On one occasion, I've had the right fish on. Other captains in Madeira have seen her as well. It is a moment that brings extreme anxiety.

Through working with grander marlin over a 43-year career, I have been able to refine my methods and techniques to the point where it has all become second nature. Even so, no matter how good we all think we are, there is always something new to learn.

Last issue, in Part 1, we went through a beginner's guide to equipment set-up, and an outline of what to expect when a big blue strikes. I would now like to take you a step further and go live on a fish that we are about to hook. You will be the angler, assisted by the crew and me. You will be one-on-one with the fish, but we will be there to make sure it all goes well for you – or to pick up the pieces afterwards. I want you to get a feel for the typical scenario. Later, I also want to recount some incidents that went very wrong. These will illustrate how quickly a situation can change, and how even a well-planned expedition does not always go according to plan.



EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

There is no certainty as to the outcome in any encounter with a big fish. There is no 'always' and no 'never' in fishing. It is up to a good captain and crew to make sure that everything is in the right place, and that you are well briefed for what you are about to see and are expected to do.

Picture yourself out on the deep blue. The water looks perfect. The baitfish are up and when I swing in tight on the edge I can see them on the sounder's screen, packed into tight red balls. I know there is something watching them. They are intimidated; all of them trying to hide behind each other. You know in your gut it will happen. Confidence wells up inside you.

Then a call comes from the bridge – sounding more like a maniac in distress. The crew have also seen the fish and are going crazy with

excitement. You can tell by their fever pitch that this is a big one. "Long left" is the call – but there is no reel going off. Get yourself out there in the cockpit! You are best to stand in the centre, behind the chair, as at this point we have no strike so we don't know which rod you'll need to go to. The fish is stalking the lure, getting ready to pounce.

For this phase, you really need to see the fish for yourself. Make sure you are wearing quality polarised sunglasses and a hat, or you will see very little except the blazing glare of the sun reflecting off the water. Now the fish moves up into the centre and approaches the 'right short' lure; this is a big chugger that is making a lot of fuss and 'smoke'.

... Still no strike.

You are in the right place, centre stage. In a flash, you can move to whichever rod goes off. Tension is mounting and the crew are screaming – but don't get sucked into panic. Just focus on the fish and desperately try to remain calm.

Suddenly, the fish sees the 'left short' lure – a huge lure pushing volumes of water. The marlin lunges for it with enough force to pierce a ship. Both short lures are on tag lines, secured by rubber bands. The left tag line snatches down and the band snaps off with a bang ... and the reel starts screaming!

HOOKED-UP!

Even though you're fishing with 60kg tackle, the reel's drag has been set for the initial phase of the battle at only 4-5kg (8-10lb). This is sufficient to lodge the hook, and will prevent the line from snapping due to inertia, and the considerable additional drag that is added by water friction at the phenomenal speeds that these things swim. At the rate that line is melting off your spool, there is now no doubt in anyone's mind that we have 'got him on'! Now I must act quickly and make some important decisions.

By this time, you have gone to the rod and are standing by, waiting for the nod to take it to the chair. At this instant, I have gunned the boat full ahead. Line is pouring off the reel and the fish is going ballistic off to the right. The reel's ratchet is wailing – but leave it on as I want to hear it telling me that we are still connected. Then, when I think I am at a safe distance from the fish, I will stop the boat. This is your cue. Pick up the rod and take it to the chair.

Remember how I told you to pick up the rod (in Part 1). Look at

the chair first before you make your move, then look at me for reassurance. We are a team now. We must rely on each other for guidance.

The crew is frantically clearing the lures on the right-hand side because the fish has taken your line over both of them. Don't worry about that; just let the fish go. For heaven's sake, *do not* try to stop the fish by pushing up the drag. That would be instant disaster. At the speed this thing is doing, the drag of the line through the water alone is enough to hold the hook in place.

All the rods have been cleared from the covering board and the cockpit is clear of any clutter. You are connected to a huge marlin that might weigh up to 1000lb or more. From my vantage point above you on the bridge, I can see your reel clearly and notice that you are now running low on line. So I turn the boat and run after the fish – heading forwards at an acute angle towards it. I've lifted up the outrigger on that side to clear the path for your line that is stretched taut, out to the horizon.

At this stage, I'll tell you to push the drag lever up about half an inch. Charter anglers won't need to know details about drag settings – and it's better that they don't as this will create information overload and confuse them. But if you're fishing on a private boat, this move will increase the drag from the initial pressure of around 4-5kg (8-10lb) up to a pressure of about 8kg (20lb). This will give you the power to lift line out of the water and get it back on to the reel.

By the way, the pressure at the reel's 'Strike' button is set at 20kg (45lb) – but we won't use that pressure until things have settled down, a little later in the fight. Please keep in mind that these settings relate to 60kg (130lb) tackle – and the 'Strike' button position on the reel is always set at one-third of the line's breaking strain.

GET RID OF THE BELLY

The fish has jumped in a great circle and without some pressure on the line I'm unable to tell exactly where the fish is. But the line is all close to the surface so, with care, I can follow it so you can get loads of line back quickly – the easy way. Always take advantage of every opportunity to gather line back on to the reel when it comes easily.

If there is a great belly in the line, then pump it out. While standing

If the marlin circles back towards the boat – and blues often do – you will need to pump the belly out of the line. To do this you may have to slightly increase the drag pressure from the initial low setting. As always when using heavy-tackle, your left hand must rest on top of the reel to protect you in case the line parts – as shown here by IGFA President Rob Kramer.



“These are the most treacherous fish in the ocean. Do not *ever* underestimate what they are capable of.”



“Blue marlin are dangerous due to their lightning-fast acceleration, and because their choice of direction is completely random.”

on the gamechair's footrest with straight legs, rock back and forth to pump the belly out of the water. Once again, it's difficult at this stage for me to know exactly where the fish is.

On a charter boat we'll be watching and advising you constantly. However, if you are on a private boat, and during this phase you find yourself pumping the line, but the handle and spool are just spinning with no line coming back on to the reel, then increase the drag slightly – by 5kg (10lb) at a time – until you are able to gain traction. Be careful to only increase your drag enough to gain line while backing-up after the

spoke of in Part 1. Soon you will be involved in a high-pressure slugging match, and during that stage, the line needs to peel off your spool like silk, rather than being damaged while crackling across the erratic wraps of a criss-cross retrieve.

In the early stages of the battle I will not get too close to the fish, as I have learnt from my experience and from the horror stories of others, that these are the most treacherous fish in the ocean. Do not ever underestimate what they are capable of.

We are coming to the end of the first five minutes. So far, it's all gone according to plan – but anything

your left hand between the reel and your face. When the pressure is on, you will be standing up on the footrest of the chair. If you find you need force to pull back, then hold on to the chair's armrest with your right hand. For safety, you must still – *always* – keep your left hand on top of the reel. And your feet flat on the footrest. Safety first! If anything, use your left hand to lightly push the reel away from you. This will help to keep the harness snug around your backside. At no stage should you pull on the reel, or the rod's foregrip, because if you do, the harness will slide under you. All pumping and lifting of the rod must be done by



belly. If you're still having difficulty, tell the captain.

Soon, the line has some angle and is no longer on the surface. I can only run forwards so far before I must spin the boat around and back-up towards it. At all times, I want to keep as much line on the reel as I can. Blue marlin run and jump in circles. Not ring-a-rosy circles, but circles of a few hundred yards across, or more.

Your part in this battle is to retrieve the line from the water and carefully guide it back on to the reel in neat, even, parallel wraps around the spool, like the cotton-reel effect we

can happen now. The fish will most likely take another run and do some spectacular jumping. You must be ready for that, and when it happens, back the drag off to around 5kg (10lb). In other words, back to the drag position you started with when we first hooked-up.

When the fish is deep and slugging against you, click down into the reel's low gear. That will allow you to still crank line on to the reel in small grabs. Take whatever you can get. When necessary, adjust the drag with your left hand. As detailed in Part 1, when fishing heavy-tackle, you must always keep

pivoting your body on the chair's footrest, the rod being pulled up by the straps on your seat harness. Your hands are *only* for cranking the reel's handle, and to protect your face in case the line breaks.

LESSONS FROM HORROR STORIES

Alan Merritt once said to me, “Never let the truth stand in the way of a good fishing story”. I don't think I'd ever laughed so much in my life. But some stories are graphic enough without elaboration. When you mix with giant blue marlin, you'll discover real events with real people that have



suffered horrible outcomes. Hopefully, by learning what can happen, you'll prevent these situations from happening to you.

Before I begin, let me tell you something that will put your first five minutes on one of these blues into perspective. Blue marlin are volatile and dangerous due to their lightning-fast acceleration, and because their choice of direction is completely random. They can bolt in any direction, with no predictability. Then throw in the wild card of their horrible habit of doubling back – reversing direction without warning. They can be peeling line off at a phenomenal rate one minute, then double back and be travelling just as fast straight towards you. When you consider the speed and bulk of these creatures, plus the fact that they are armed with a spear on the front end, no other fish in the ocean compares to them. Blue marlin are very dangerous animals and should be treated with great respect and care.

After more than two decades spent chasing giant black marlin off Cairns, my first encounter with a blue marlin was off Fremantle, Western Australia, on the north side of 'The Trench'. This fish taught me a lesson that I will never forget. It was slick calm and I was on my way home late one afternoon. This thing knocked down the two swimming mullet we were towing. Both baits got munched, but failed to hook-up.

I had a jellybean bluefin tuna on ice, caught earlier on the bait rod. I fired it out, rigged with a 16/0 hook through its lips. The fish took the

leader out of my hands, right at the back of the boat, then bolted. Screaming off against 20kg (45lb) of drag, it was definitely hooked. Line smoked off the reel at an alarming rate. I called to the angler to back off the drag, which he did very well. We were losing a lot of line very quickly so my reaction was to do what I would normally do with any black marlin hooked off Cairns: I started backing down in a hurry. The line had some angle into the water.

The next thing I can recall is the fish coming out of the water, aimed towards us and directly abeam of me, only 50 metres away. Bloody hell! It was going to nail me right amidships. Thankfully, the boat I was driving had a pair of very powerful engines and a gearbox with no delay. I slammed it full ahead – just in time to see the fish clear the transom by a whisker. The fish weighed 600lb. That night, I wrote an entry in my log: "These blues are totally unpredictable!" That incident could easily have ended in disaster had my reflexes not been sharp.

NO FISH IS WORTH YOUR LIFE

These crazy blues are dangerous to say the least. I've watched some of the American boats doing what I call 'cowboy fishing' and my blood runs cold. If you want to mess with those things while they are still 'green', then make sure you carry some body bags on board, because sooner or later you will need one.

Not so long ago, in Bermuda, Alan Card found that out the hard way. He was fishing a tournament and

had an 850lb blue hooked-up. He wanted the fish and was trying to gaff it – but he got too close, too soon. The fish doubled back at close range and came out of the water at the corner of his transom. "Watch out!" he yelled, but his son, who was in the forward corner of the cockpit getting gaffs ready, stood up to see what was happening. The fish came out of the water, flew across the lap of the angler in the chair, and nailed his son in the shoulder on its way through. With the big blue's momentum, it kept travelling and plucked the poor chap right out of the 'pit and over the side. It took him down 50 feet before it stopped, and he was able to push himself off its bill. He made it to the surface, in a pool of blood, but he had a hole through his shoulder that you could put your fist through. By the grace of God, nobody died – but that was as close as you'd want to get. I read this in the *Washington Post* and soon after, someone verified the story.

Only one week later, in Madeira, I had Neil Patrick, from the Australian lure manufacturer Halco, on board. His colleague, Tim Carter, had brought one of his favourite lures so we put it out. Suddenly, a gigantic blue came at it from behind, pushing a great mound of water over its enormous body. The 'rigger bent over and the line clipped loose, but there was no hook-up.

Neil is a very experienced angler so he instinctively cranked on the reel and wound the lure away from the fish to make it more aggressive. In it came and pounced on the lure – but again with no result. Then, with its enormous mouth open, it

"He made it to the surface, in a pool of blood, but he had a hole through his shoulder that you could put your fist through."



Above: Blue marlin are extremely dangerous creatures. Their speed and erratic direction changes, particularly their propensity to jump back towards the boat, requires all aboard, especially the skipper, to remain poised for evasive manoeuvres.

“Blue marlin are very dangerous animals and should be treated with great respect and care.”

Right: Neil Patrick battles a blue marlin off Madeira that was estimated at more than 1400lb. Only metres from the transom, the marlin's unpredictable moves caught everyone by surprise.

lunged at the lure again – and nothing. Something very strange was going on. Neil kept cranking the lure to entice the fish up again. The fish was hot and really wanted that lure! On its fourth or fifth attempt to eat it, I got a good look at what was happening. What I saw amazed me...

By this time, the fish had followed the lure almost to the back of the boat. I could clearly see that as it struck the fish's enormous bulk was pushing so much water that the lure was washing out of its mouth! Finally, it tried a different strategy; veering off to the side, then turning back and engulfing the lure like there was no tomorrow. We hooked-up and it exploded with four magnificent jumps across our wake. We all got a good look at what we had on. Capt Bark Garnsey, the respected skipper for Stewart Campbell's boat *Chunda*, was close by and came on the radio. “That's a nice one, Peter! You want to hang on to him.”

I can still visualise Neil turning around in the chair and looking at me with very large eyes saying, “What do you reckon, Peter?” My response was, “1400lb, minimum!”, followed by, “Okay, put the gaffs down, boys”. The feeling was unanimous.

Neil lost almost a full spool of line in seconds, but I drove the boat very hard and he got it all back. Eventually, we had this beast right there behind the boat. I could see the splice of the wind-on. We were almost there, but it stubbornly refused to be dragged the last few metres. Neil pushed the lever to

maximum drag in an effort to make it jump or do something. I was keen to see it come out behind us so I could get a good look at its back – to see how wide it was and if it carried the weight all the way back. The fish didn't react for what seemed like ages (but what was probably only seconds). When it did, it caught us by surprise. I was certainly not ready for the fish's next move.

In an instant, the marlin spun 180-degrees and dashed under the boat's transom, severing the line on a zinc anode. I was sick. Capt Bark called me on radio and asked what happened. I was so distressed that I couldn't speak.

Later, we held a post-mortem on the stuff-up. I admitted that I should have gunned the boat ahead if I'd had any idea what was going to happen – but I didn't; it had all happened in a split second. I'd tried

to drive the boat out of the circle, but it was all over too quickly. Neil said that he could have pulled the reel into free-spool – to which I added, I could then have reversed out of it.

Well, it was over and another lesson had been learnt. I called Bark on the phone and admitted my cock-up. He said, “Peter, if it makes you feel any better, I have lost count of the number of times that has happened to me. Not only that, but I have had two of them land in the cockpit with me!” What a piece of Hell that would be to have a fresh 1400-pounder in the 'pit beside you!

Neil Patrick's fish was not the biggest blue I have seen out there. There are even bigger fish – and I'm still perfecting my game for our next encounter...

When that happens, the first five minutes will be critical. 🐟



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