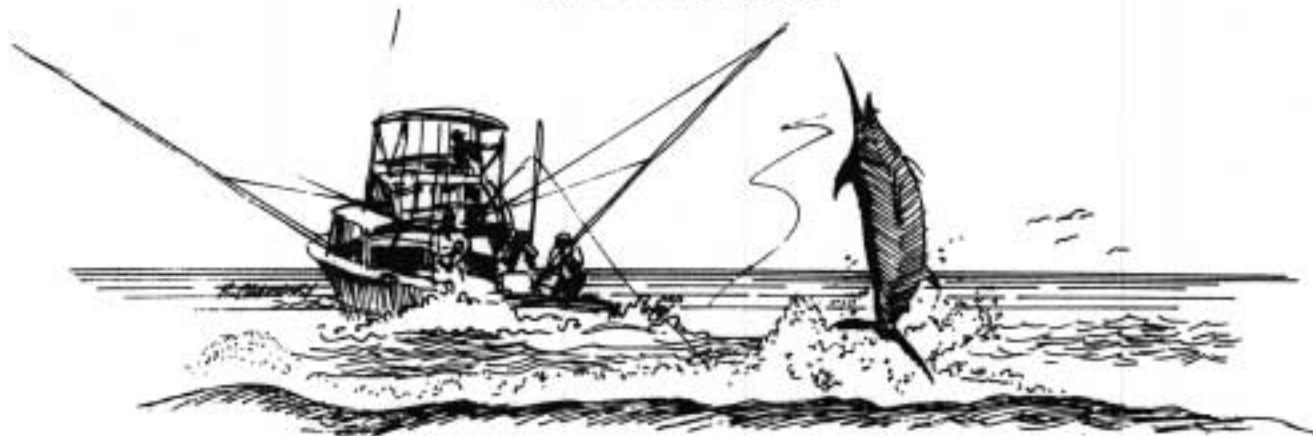


PLANNING AND HOLDING SPORTFISHING TOURNAMENTS

by

Donald L. Hammond



Educational Report No. 16

March 17, 1992

Finfish Management Program - Office of Fisheries Management
Marine Resources Department



South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department
Post Office Box 12559
Charleston, South Carolina 29422

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Foreword

by

C. M. "Rip" Cunningham
Editor-in-Chief,
Salt Water Sportsman Magazine

In the not too distant past, I have to admit that I was a confirmed opponent of competitive fishing events. Okay, I may have said that a local club affair that did not load up the docks with dead fish was acceptable or at least not objectionable. In fact, the policy of SALT WATER SPORTSMAN was to ignore fishing tournaments in hope that they would go away. Fishing was meant to be more contemplative and a means for escape.

Well, what do you know. Tournaments did not go away. To the contrary, they have flourished and have had a positive effect on the sport of fishing. In the process, I woke up to smell the coffee and have changed my opinion about 180 degrees. Salt water fishing tournaments are here to stay. If organized correctly, they can be beneficial to the local economy, the fishery and research and management. My investigation of competitive events has lead me to believe that they are truly an untapped resource for fisheries managers and that participants want to be part of the process to enhance their avocation. They want to be part of the system.

My hat's off to Don Hammond for his compilation of this information to help tournaments get organized and become a productive part of the system. This publication should be required reading for anyone starting up a new tournament and for that matter, for those who want to fine tune existing events. It is all here and is another example of the excellent work being done by the South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A special thanks is extended to Mr. C. M. "Rip" Cunningham, Editor-in-Chief of SaltWater Sportsman magazine for taking timeout from his busy schedule to review the manuscript and prepare the foreword.

In acknowledgment to the numerous tournament directors and committees with which I have had the pleasure and honor of working, this guide is dedicated.

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PLANNING AND HOLDING SPORTFISHING TOURNAMENTS

Introduction

Sportfishing tournaments are rapidly increasing in popularity throughout the country. No longer are these competitions held only by local fishing clubs. Today's tournaments are held by businesses, civic clubs, groups of individuals and even church groups. Many events are held simply for fun and camaraderie; others are used as promotional tools or as fund raisers.

In 1988, over ninety saltwater sportfishing competitions were held along the South Carolina coast. These tournaments focused on virtually every major gamefish from spotted seatrout to blue marlin. While these events were very diverse in nature and appealed to different groups of fishermen, the competition for participants was very keen among similar events. This competition for anglers has required that each event be well-organized and operate as smoothly as possible to project the most positive image while minimizing conflicts.

The goal of this guide is to assist organizers of sportfishing tournaments in developing professional competitions. Well-developed events project a positive image for tournaments and for sportfishing in general. It is vital that sportfishing tournaments project a healthy, positive image as the news media portray these as primary examples of South Carolina's marine recreational fisheries.

This basic guide to planning a sportfishing competition is based on twenty years of experience the author has in dealing with competitive events. It is designed to cover the full spectrum of frequently asked questions. Not all points discussed will apply to any one tournament, and organizers will invariably encounter issues important to their particular event that have not been addressed herein or have only been mentioned briefly.

For the tournament director wishing to read further, additional sources of information on planning and holding tournaments are available (see reference section). The Sea Grant Programs at both Texas A & M University (Snider et al, 1987) and the University of Florida (Otwell et al, 1982a, 1982b) have published materials beneficial to developers of competitions. Peter Goadby, in his latest book on sportfishing published in Australia (1991), dedicates a chapter to operating sportfishing competitions. A national magazine, Sport Fishing (Dugger, 1990), has published an instructional article on planning fishing tournaments.

Tournament Goals

The first step towards a successful sportfishing tournament is to establish its purpose. Sportfishing tournaments are held for a variety of reasons but virtually all can be classified into one of three basic goal types or a combination thereof. The most frequent goal of saltwater competitions is simply for fun and camaraderie. The second most common objective is to promote a product, business, etc. The third major goal is that of a fund raiser for a club or charity.

A tournament whose primary goal is fun and camaraderie normally targets a club membership or local anglers, and are relaxed, low-key events. Such tournaments feature low entry fees with awards presentations emphasizing the social aspect. Winners generally receive trophies and plaques along with some merchandise. These competitions require a minimum of manpower, time and money to properly develop. However, even low key events can go awry

if attention is not paid to the details.

Most high stakes/cash prize competitions fall into the promotional category. Large cash or merchandise awards along with a substantial entry fee are hallmarks of these tournaments designed to attract large numbers of fishermen into the area. By combining high numbers of sportfishermen with attention-getting prizes, media coverage can be readily attracted.

Well-organized promotional competitions are effective tools to advertise fishing clubs, businesses such as marinas or tackle shops, products or events, or a resort's sportfishing or recreational opportunities. These tournaments require the most time, money and manpower to produce. Because of the high value of prizes being offered and the intense competition that pervades these events, it is essential that rules are strictly adhered to and attention paid to every detail.

A modified form of the promotional tournament is used by municipal, county, and state-wide organizations to advertise area sportfishing opportunities and develop their local sportfishing industry. Such programs are designed to provide recognition for quality catches made during normal fishing, rather than encourage fishermen to kill additional fish. The cornerstones of such programs are no entry fee, long terms of operation, high levels of publicity, and broad-based, low key awards. An underlying purpose is to show both visitors and residents the quality and diversity of fishing opportunities available, thereby stimulating participation.

Sportfishing tournaments are also frequently used as fund raisers for clubs and charities. Properly run, these events can be good money making projects but require very careful planning and strong fundraising campaigns. To maximize monies realized for the club or charity, it is necessary to raise capital for operating expenses and also prizes whenever possible. In circumstances where entry fees alone are relied upon to cover expenses and prizes, the result is a profit level much lower than anticipated. However, this method is used frequently where fund raising is a secondary objective for the tournament.

A few organizers have looked at competitions for profit just from the entry fee alone. The mistake is usually made only once. Profits realized from a tournament come from purchases made by participants such as fuel, bait, tackle and food. Unless production expenses are paid for through donations, a tournament's final budget statement will seldom be in the black.

Tailoring Your Event to the Consumer

The best intentions of any tournament sponsor can be washed to sea in a flood of mis-marketing and improper design. It is imperative that tournaments be carefully tailored to suit the tastes and life styles of the sportfishermen targeted. To meet these goals, every facet of the tournament must be balanced against the social and economic level of sportfishermen being targeted. To seek a \$500 entry fee on any inshore tournament would price it out of the market and few fishermen would be interested. Likewise, to serve beer and pretzels as hors d'oeuvres for a billfish tournament social requiring a \$1,000 entry fee would encourage few repeat anglers. Affluent anglers don't mind spending money for a first class event, while other economic segments are more cost conscious.

Species Selection

Selection of eligible species of fish for the tournament is the first step in targeting a consumer group. If you are interested in affluent sportsmen, billfish are the fish of choice.

Billfishing requires expensive equipment and boats and the aficionados of this sport usually reside in the upper level of society. This is not to say that billfish are the only fish sought by affluent sportfishermen; just that upper echelon sportfishermen comprise the largest proportion of this recreational fishery. When targeting this economic group, organizers should remember that it is the smallest market to draw upon. These fishermen schedule their activities well in advance and organizers should plan accordingly.

The largest segment of active tournament sportfishermen belong to the middle income level and consist largely of professionals and small business owners. These anglers commonly fish from trailerable boats in the 18 to 27 foot range. Fuel capacities of these vessels generally restrict fishing to within 40 miles of shore. Subsequently, king mackerel, dolphin, wahoo, tuna, cobia, amberjack and barracuda rank high on their list of gamefish. These anglers will also participate in both billfish and inshore tournaments.

The vast majority of saltwater tournament fishermen fall into the third category, that of inshore anglers. These fishermen, as a whole, are upper level blue collar workers who have been fishing inshore saltwater for many years. They principally own boats in the 14 to 18 foot range and restrict their fishing to creek and bays, only occasionally straying beyond sheltered water. Fishing for red drum (channel bass), spotted seatrout, flounder, sheepshead, black drum, bluefish and crevalle jacks are these angler's forte.

Highly competitive tournaments offering big prizes normally recognize only a single eligible species. This eliminates subjective quality ranking of recognized fish necessary in determining an overall winner. On the other hand, organizers of events intended for fun and camaraderie want to provide as many opportunities to win as possible for their participants. One of the best ways to achieve this is by recognizing many different species. Normally, general species events target fish that occur in the same general area, i.e., inshore or offshore. (See Appendix 1). However, by featuring fish that occur in distinctly different areas such as seatrout and amberjack, events target a broader spectrum of fishermen. This also serves to distribute awards among more boats.

There are but a few species of gamefish that transcend all social and economic levels of sportsmen. In our waters, it is the magnificent tarpon that crosses these barriers. Anglers from all walks of life have become addicted to the pursuit of this great gamefish. These anglers often become fanatics in pursuit of the silver king, but tournament organizers should be aware that tarpon enthusiasts in the Palmetto state represent one of the smallest markets.

Entry Fees

The price of entry into any tournament is extremely important. It largely determines the segment of sportfishermen that will be attracted to the event.

Tournament organizers must first establish the objectives of the entry fee. The most important consideration is to what degree these monies will be relied upon to finance the tournament. From this point the fee can be utilized to control participation by adjusting its level. It can even be used to market to a particular segment of fishermen.

It should be realized that there are limits as to how much each economic level of sportfishermen will pay to participate in a tournament. These limits however, are tempered by what the tournament is offering in the way of socials and prizes. In general, marlin fishermen place a greater importance on the elegance of socials than do seatrout and red drum anglers.

Generally speaking, the higher the ratio of entry fee to prize payback, the greater the appeal is to the fisherman. Example: an event with a \$10 entry for \$1,000 payback would be far more appealing than a \$100 entry for \$1,000 payback. However, marlin fishermen, due to their small numbers, routinely accept a lower ratio of payback than most other fishermen. Ideally, fishermen like to see 100 percent payback of entry fees.

Unlike most inshore fishing where the angler succeeds in catching a fish unassisted, offshore big game fishing is a team effort. A basic team in big game fishing consists of four people; one to run the boat, one to wire the fish, one to gaff the fish, and the angler. For this reason, entry fees for offshore and other big fish tournaments are based on boat entry and not on individual anglers. The rationale is that registering by boat rather than angler encourages teamwork, not individual competition. Additionally, individual registration may encourage unscrupulous anglers to register one person and credit them with all fish caught, resulting in a substantial savings on the entry fee. To control the number of people participating in the competition, organizers may restrict the number of anglers aboard each vessel (restricted limit should be no lower than four for offshore events and two for inshore). Attendance at socials may be controlled by issuing a fixed number of passes per boat. Angler participation should not be unduly restricted only because of costly socials. Additional angler registration and party passes may be made available for purchase to offset expenses.

Balancing Awards to Objectives

Improperly gauging the awards in a tournament can be embarrassing for an organizer. For example, a tournament that was held as a fund raiser for a conservation cause offered prizes only for dead fish. The event suffered extensive embarrassment at the hands of the media. Another organizer put forth a competition that had a \$200 entry fee with the top prize being a \$250 rod and reel. This event never received a single entry. Another competition attempted to present the winning angler of the wahoo division, who caught a 97-pounder, an ultra light spinning outfit designed for 4 to 6 pound test line. The angler refused to accept it in front of the entire crowd.

These examples demonstrate a few of the problems encountered with improper awards planning. Not only do such incidents generate a poor public image, they also serve to alienate current and prospective fishing clients.

Large cash or merchandise awards are not conducive to a low-key, fun, camaraderie tournament. Such awards inspire anglers to keen and often cut-throat competition. Awards of high value belong in promotional or fund raising competitions because of their effect on the attitudes of the participants. Fun tournaments should feature plaques or trophies possibly coupled with inexpensive merchandise.

Events promoting sportfishing for a particular area by recognizing fish caught in the course of everyday fishing normally feature certificates, trophies, and nominal merchandise. A primary purpose is to provide low cost recognition to as many people as possible. These seasonal or year-long programs normally award certificates, shoulder patches, and hats to all anglers entering a qualifying fish. Trophies and occasionally merchandise are presented to the overall winners.

Marine art has gained respect in recent years among tournament anglers. Hand carvings, sculptures, prints and paintings by internationally renowned artists are popular competition

awards. Tournaments also find that top quality equipment associated with the type of fishing featured in the competition is eagerly accepted. Inferior merchandise, however, will be instantly recognized by fishermen. Likewise, trophies or plaques should reflect the quality of the event. As a general rule, the more affluent sportfishermen have a deep appreciation for works of art while other segments prefer functional merchandise.

In highly competitive sportfishing tournaments, a large purse captures the attention of fishermen. There is no question that competitions featuring cash prizes are preferred by anglers who fish high stake events. However, there are many drawbacks for the tournament organizer who utilizes cash. The primary drawback is that a 1099 miscellaneous I.R.S. form must be filed with the Internal Revenue Service on each winner.

Cash for awards is the hardest item to obtain. Organizers have found that businesses will far more readily part with merchandise costing \$200 to manufacture than \$200 in cash. The merchandise promotes their product or service, whereas little promotional value is received from cash donations.

Organizers often rely on the entry fee to provide award money but this is a gamble at best. If the participation is below par, the organizer is placed in an awkward situation. One method used to avoid this is to have sponsors escrow the full prize amount in case of a short fall. Another option is to base the prizes on a specific level of participation. This should be clearly stated in all advertisements. However, fishermen have become somewhat wary of tournaments with conditional prizes.

Most of the effective fund raising tournaments rely on numerous sponsors to provide good quality merchandise useful to fishermen. The cumulative value of such donations can be a very attractive enticement for participants. These tournaments can be further enhanced by a low entry fee.

Special awards for setting a new state or world record in a tournament have become very popular. These awards are established for a specific species and usually represent a large cash sum arranged through an insurance company by purchasing a policy to cover such an occurrence. This is a good way to boost total purse offerings for advertising purposes at low cost.

Tournaments should be aware that the International Game Fish Association will not recognize any fish for a line class world record except in the all tackle category when a substantial cash prize is offered for its establishment. Additionally, insurance companies may refuse to write a policy for state records in states where there is no solid documentation required in the setting of state record fish. This is not a problem in South Carolina as all potential applications are thoroughly documented (See Appendix 2).

Concern for the health of popular marine gamefish stocks no longer allow tournaments to ignore conservation of these resources, and require steps be taken to reduce kill. Many fishermen, clubs and organizations fight to protect the resources on which sportfishing depends. It would be both foolish and a publicity concern to hold a large kill competition appearing to waste these resources with blatant disregard for conservation. With the current public concern about conservation ethics, it is not enough for tournaments to simply take steps to reduce the kill. They should also provide recognition to anglers who practice conservation through live release or tag and release of gamefish. Such awards don't have to be expensive to demonstrate

that competitions can also promote a conservation ethic.

The South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department encourages every tournament to provide awards or recognition for anglers tagging and releasing gamefish. Placement of scientific research tags into game fish is a primary tool used in life history studies of marine game fish. By incorporating tag and release of gamefish into main awards or providing recognition, a tournament encourages anglers to practice conservation while aiding fisheries managers to achieve a better understanding of our fisheries resources. Free fish tags are available to individual anglers through the Marine Game Fish Tagging Program sponsored by the Marine Resources Division of the Wildlife Department. Fishermen may receive a tagging kit by writing: Marine Game Fish Tagging Program, P.O. Box 12559, Charleston, SC 29422. Anglers should specify what types and sizes of saltwater fish they are interested in tagging.

Because of misconceptions by many anglers, tournaments may wish to define what actually constitutes a released fish. It is a common misconception that I.G.F.A. states that a legal release occurs regardless of events after the swivel has been brought up to touch the rod; no matter whether the leader was cut or broke on its own; whether the hook was physically removed or was thrown by the fish. The fact is, I.G.F.A. does not define what constitutes a release.

The following constitute a legal release:

1. When the fish has been hooked, fought to the boat, the hook has been physically removed or the leader cut by an assistant and the fish returned to the water or released without any intentional injury or damage being inflicted on the fish.
2. When the angler has verbally declared his intent to release the fish, which has been successfully fought to the boat, and an assistant has the leader in hand or the fish has been placed in a landing net and an attempt is being made to implant a scientific identification tag in the fish; from this point on it does not matter whether the fish gains its freedom from the action of a member of the crew or not.

Designing Socials

Socials are an important feature of virtually all tournaments. These functions can be looked upon as a consolation prize for unsuccessful participants. Tournament socials are the only time when all people involved in the event are brought together for friendly interaction and camaraderie. They provide the opportunity to meet new friends and re-establish old friendships. These functions are not without drawbacks beyond basic expenses. Tournament organizers may consider legal counsel regarding their liability when serving alcoholic beverages at these functions.

Balancing the socials to the expectations and refinement of the fisherman is extremely important. An event that is below what the fisherman is accustomed to will be looked upon as

an insult. On the other hand, an elegant affair for inshore fishermen would be considered pompous and an unappreciated expense. Socials should start when the majority of fishermen have returned and have had time to clean up. The gregarious nature of sportfishermen virtually guarantees that a well planned social will be enjoyed by the participants.

Funding

No matter what the reason behind the tournament, the last thing an organizer wants is to wind up in the red financially at the end of the tournament. This is why funding usually dictates a tournament's organization. Most tournaments operate on funding received from a combination of sources such as donations, sale of advertisements and entry fees. Donations come in every conceivable form from cash to physical labor and all are valuable. Free labor should be welcomed as there is a prodigious amount of behind the scenes work involved in a successful tournament. The sale of advertisements in brochures distributed to all participants or in promotional brochures has become a popular funding technique. It is one, however, that creates additional expense, more work and requires advance planning.

Frequently, organizations or groups interested in holding a tournament can join with a business such as a marina or resort development. Such joint efforts can be mutually beneficial as tournaments offer one of the best forms of advertising and promotion for sportfishing-related businesses. Additionally, a marina stands to make money from additional sales created by the tournament. Because such businesses would benefit from the event, organizers can negotiate the level of financial responsibility the business will assume.

One very important point often overlooked by tournament organizers is following through on promoting the merchants and companies that supported their event. It is imperative that donor names are put before the public at every opportunity as their sole reward. If they feel ignored, it will be much harder to enlist their support in the future.

Public Relations

Getting the message to the public about your tournament is important to its success. This is true for every competition, whether for fun or a \$100,000 purse. Sole reliance on word of mouth among fishermen to bring in participants is simply not enough. The public must be constantly reminded that your event exists. (See Appendix 3).

Promotion of the tournament should begin three to ten months ahead depending on the size of the event planned. Many tools can be used. Promotional flyers and brochures are very effective when distributed to every place a fisherman might visit. Advertisements in sportfishing publications are also effective and adds credibility. However, the most effective method to reach anglers likely to participate in your event is a direct mail promotion to fishermen who have participated in similar tournaments in the past. Also, local radio and television stations will frequently provide free advertising to philanthropic tournaments held in the community.

Tournaments often fail to follow through in their promotional efforts. Large promotional or fund raising events can often get the local news media (radio, television and newspaper) to run daily progress reports as part of their community news and activities. But to receive this coverage, organizers must provide the media with a detailed daily report or a specific person, telephone number, and time that they can call to get information. Television is especially interested in being alerted to newsworthy catches, especially state records, but they must be

given a specific time for filming. A news release covering any special happenings along with results of the tournament should be sent out to all local news media immediately.

Scheduling

An important point to be considered in planning an event is selecting a date. A host of factors influence this simple step. Weather patterns, seasonal fluctuations in the fishing, even daily tidal fluctuations, are common points for considerations when picking a date. Other local fishing tournaments, festivals or major national events can adversely affect a tournament's participation level and therefore must be taken into account. These considerations will help to ensure the best participation and improve the odds for good quality fishing.

In an effort to minimize conflicts between tournaments, the Marine Resources Division through the Finfish Management Program (F.M.P.) offers a scheduling advisory service. Under this program, tournament directors can check to see what tournaments are already scheduled for a given weekend in order to avert competition for participants. Likewise, other similar tournaments can be alerted to your schedule to prevent or minimize conflicts. Also, F.M.P. personnel can advise about general trends and seasons for various gamefish. An annual brochure is published each spring listing the saltwater sportfishing tournaments that have been scheduled for that year. Each year, copies are distributed throughout South Carolina and into Georgia and North Carolina. To be listed in the brochure, tournaments must mail in information on tournament name, dates, sponsor, contact person, address and telephone number by February 28 of each year to the Finfish Management Program, P.O. Box 12559, Charleston, SC 29422. Inclusion is based on space and first received.

In choosing the actual days of the week for the tournament, some thought must be given to the participant's flexibility in taking time away from work and family. Upper level executives and business owners are more flexible in taking time off during the week than are blue collar workers. Subsequently, organizers of billfish tournaments can schedule their event to include week days with little effect on participation. However, scheduling an inshore tournament during the week may prove disastrous, as most inshore anglers prefer to fish weekends and holidays. Only occasionally, and if the tournament is large enough, will inshore anglers fish during the week. Another point for consideration is that fishermen coming from out of town like to have Sunday to return home before starting back to work Monday.

The number of days a tournament should encompass has much to do with the objectives of the event. Most events consist of one or two days of fishing, although some span up to five days. One of the basic reasons for multiple fishing days is to help ensure that enough fish will be caught to claim all prizes. Most serious charity tournaments are one day events in order to cut production costs. However, promotional events usually extend over several days to ensure having enough fish caught for a good media showing. A longer period also allows more time for advertising the promotional subject of the competition.

Abundance of the specie(s) of fish sought must be taken into account. Ideally, the tournament should be held during peak fishing periods, such as a blue marlin event in May or June. An abundance of fish is desirable for angler satisfaction. Sponsors should check on seasonal as well as monthly fluctuations in abundance for targeted species.

State and federal restrictions on harvest of species should be checked. It would be embarrassing to knowingly schedule a tournament for a species when it is illegal to have the fish

in possession, i.e., closed season. Additionally, it is risky to schedule an event for heavily exploited species such as king or Spanish mackerel at the end of their management year. The possibility of a closure looms greatest at this period if the Total Allowable Catch is reached.

Another consideration in scheduling a competitive event involving boats is registering with the proper law enforcement authority. Because of problems associated with boating activity, state and federal law requires the organizers of boating events to register their plans at least 30 days prior to operation. This is intended to alert enforcement authorities to increased boating activity and allow them to schedule necessary patrols.

Tournaments in South Carolina should secure a Marine Event form from the Boating Office at the South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department in Charleston. If the competition involves boating activity in the open ocean, the application is turned over to the Marine Safety Office at the U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters in Charleston. Events whose primary boating activity occurs in inland waters come under the jurisdiction of the State Boating Office.

For applications or further information, tournament organizers should write: Boating Office, South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department, P.O. Box 12559, Charleston, SC 29422, or telephone (803) 762-5041.

Awards Criteria

The rewards of winning or placing in a tournament and the criteria used for assessing the winner must be clearly presented to participants so there is no room for misunderstandings. All prizes and awards should be clearly and specifically detailed for each category or place. If the prizes are conditional such as based on a certain level of participation or for establishing a new state or world record, this must be perfectly clear. When the prizes are ambiguous, the results are often discontented anglers and an occasional law suit.

Eligible categories of fish must be clearly stated. A problem frequently arises in determining what species are eligible when collective or colloquial names for fish are used. This is frequently the case when terms such as snapper, trout, kingfish, or tuna are listed as a category. Fishermen chronically lump distinctly different fish belonging to different families under common terms. Red porgy, cousin to the sheepshead, is called pink snapper. Hogfish, a wrasse family member, is called hog snapper. Weakfish in South Carolina are referred to as summer trout. Little tunny, locally called bonita, is a member of the tuna family, so it could qualify as a tuna. There is nothing wrong with using a collective term, but if used, the particular species of fish to be included should be properly defined.

It is just as important to provide information on how winners will be determined. Identify specific criteria used to select the winner of each award. This is especially important in events recognizing several species, and also for overall awards, such as outstanding female angler. A potential problem frequently overlooked is the handling of ties. While length of the fish may be used to break ties (longest fish wins), it requires measuring each fish before a tie occurs and leads to extensive record keeping. A simple alternative is to use earliest entry (time fish was weighed in) as the tie breaker. This can be achieved by logging the weigh in time on each entry or by keeping a consecutive list of entries as they are weighed in each day. This also encourages fishermen to weigh in their fish as early as possible. All methods used should be clearly stated in the rules.

Another point often omitted is handling a situation where not enough fish are caught to fill each prize category. In cases where only trophies are offered, they can simply be retained. However, in situations where merchandise or money is being given for each category, a decision has to be made whether to divide awards from unfilled slots among the categories filled or retain the prizes. Information detailing divisions of unclaimed awards or the disposition of unclaimed prizes should be presented clearly to the anglers preferably in writing. These points should also be clearly covered at the captain's meeting prior to fishing.

Such plans should also cover the "worst-case" scenario of no fish being caught. In cash prize tournaments the options would be to:

- 1) escrow the money adding it to next year's prize
(entry fee doubled for boats not having fish this year;)
- 2) hold a fish bowl drawing among all participants;
- 3) refund entry fee less specific amount to cover socials or other costs;
- 4) divide prize money evenly among registered participants; or
- 5) donate the prize money to a worthy cause.

Anglers usually prefer a fish bowl drawing or the escrow of prize money.

Judging Awards

There are two primary ways to judge winners: the objective method, i.e., largest fish and the subjective method, such as most outstanding catch. In the former, the deciding factor such as weight can be physically measured, while the latter is a judgement decision by a group of individuals. Fewer problems are encountered using objective judging, since individual prejudice is removed. This prevents disgruntled fishermen and negative rumors.

Criteria for awards may be as simple or bizarre as the tournament sets. Most common are: single heaviest fish of a species; heaviest total weight for a species; and best quality catch (usually subjective). These basic categories may be expanded by breaking awards down into categories for men, women and children or any other qualifier the tournament wishes.

Basing awards on the weight of only one fish has advantages over other options. It reduces record keeping, number of fish being weighed, and can even help reduce the number of fish killed. Aggregate weight categories are good if the fish are to become the property of the event for use in a fish fry, or if they are to be sold to raise funds. However, this entails handling more fish and increased paperwork, especially when multiple days of fishing are involved. Additionally, there are both state and federal laws regulating the sale of fish and the possession of certain fish in quantities above the daily individual creel limit. Also, the public is becoming very conscious of the decline of many gamefish, therefore a tournament encouraging a large kill could draw negative media attention.

The South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department recognizes the value of basing awards on the weight of single fish in reducing the number of fish killed within a competition. By imposing a reasonable minimum size requirement for a fish to qualify, a tournament can further reduce the kill associated with its event. The Department recognizes the value to science and fisheries management that these criteria offer when combined with a program that recognizes or rewards the tag and release of gamefish. All sportfishing tournaments are encouraged to adopt concepts that aid in conserving our valuable marine fisheries resources.

Rules and Regulations

Successful tournaments have been held that were based on minimal rules, and with rules that cover every aspect of the event. Generally, a low key competition requires simple rules. Unfortunately, in today's world of tournament fishing, high value prizes mandate drafting precise rules to keep the other fishermen straight (See Table 1).

A rules committee should be formed, composed of people knowledgeable in both general sportfishing and tournament fishing. This committee should be responsible for drafting rules for the event as well as handling any protests that may arise during the competition. Rules must be tailored to fit the species of fish sought as well as the objectives of the event.

Tournament rules are intended to create an environment for equitable sporting competition among participants. While rules may make it more difficult for unscrupulous fishermen (these are not sportfishermen) to cheat, they can not absolutely prevent it. If fishermen intend to cheat, they will. Even the use or threat of a Torrymeter test or lie detector examination is not 100 percent effective in deterring or revealing fraud.

Ascertaining the freshness in fish entered in a competition has been an area of concern among tournament officials. Ostensibly, the reason is to ensure that the fish entered were caught that day by the angler. Unfortunately, there is no absolute 100 percent positive test that can show the exact time and date that a fish died or who actually caught it.

Contrary to public belief, a Torrymeter, an electronic device that measures the dielectric property of fish flesh, cannot pinpoint the time a fish died. It does, however, provide an accurate guide to the relative quality of the fish's flesh, i.e. freshness. Fish flesh is highly perishable and prone to progressive spoilage. Subsequently, the Torrymeter can indirectly indicate the older (dead longer) fish within a group of fish that have been held under the same conditions. Fish that have been previously frozen can easily be detected. Unfortunately, no two fishermen maintain their fish under the same conditions. The result is that frequently a fish could be held more than one day under ideal conditions and produce a higher quality reading than a fish held only six hours but was neglected. This compounds the problem of detecting fish caught prior to the legal fishing period.

Ideally, two control fish of the same species and same approximate size expected to be entered should be available during the weighin period. Both fish should be caught early that morning, with one fish being properly stored in crushed ice. The second fish should be maintained at ambient temperature and exposed to the air. Then, by taking a reading on each fish you are provided a direct reference to what fish caught that day should register when properly maintained and when improperly maintained.

Visual inspection of the fish should also be used in assessing freshness. A fresh fish should exhibit red or pink gills (not gray, brown or white), having no strong rotten or sour (fishy) odor, and should have an eye lens that is clear, not milky or cloudy. Other fresh fish characteristics to look for are some stiffness in their body, a thin layer of slime (mucous) over the skin, clear, crisp eyes, no heavy layer of slime on the gills, firm flesh that springs back, not mushy, and shiny skin that doesn't wrinkle excessively when the body is bent.

While visual inspections coupled with the use of a Torrymeter test will probably detect any attempt at presenting a fraudulent fish caught prior to the tournament, it could also toss out a fish caught legally within the competition. Subsequently, many tournaments are now putting the burden on the fisherman by requiring that the fish meet certain freshness requirements such

as a Torrymeter reading of X to Y to qualify for entry. No matter what the reason, if these conditions are not met the fish cannot be entered. This is simply another step to qualifying in the tournament. More detailed information on assessing freshness of fish is available in "Judging Tournament Fish" (Otwell et al, 1982a) and "Verifying Freshness of Tournament Fish" (Otwell et al, 1982b) published by the University of Florida Sea Grant Program (see reference section).

Another alternative for tournaments in dealing with fraud is the polygraph. Polygraph examinations are the best device currently available for deterring and revealing fraud. Their use has become common within big money tournament circles. However, they have their drawbacks beyond a relatively high cost. First, the results of an exam are usually not admissible in a court of law. Secondly, devious anglers know that readings cannot be made on all people and that drugs, both depressants as well as stimulants, and alcohol consumed before the examination can render the test inconclusive. However, an experienced, qualified examiner can eliminate these counter-measures. Thirdly, most experienced examiners work within a 95 to 98 percent confidence level which means there is still room for human error.

The use of the polygraph exam in a tournament should be all or nothing. That is, each winner in the tournament must voluntarily submit to and pass an exam to qualify or no one is tested. To say that a polygraph test "may" be required and then single out one or more people to be tested is to imply that they are suspected of cheating. Such implications could land the tournament committee in court on a defamation of character lawsuit. However, when the printed rules state that "to qualify as a winner, a participant must voluntarily submit to and successfully pass a polygraph test" then it becomes nothing more than a qualifying step to win just like meeting a certain minimum weight for a fish.

Today's fishing competitions should be based on the "sport of fishing" and not just the kill of fish. What exactly constitutes "sport fishing" has probably been best defined by the International Game Fish Association (See Appendix 4). This august institution of sportfishing is recognized as the world authority on the ethics of the sport. For over fifty years they have provided the last word in defining the proper techniques and tackle for sportfishing world wide. These rules were originally drafted to establish an equitable basis for judging world record fish. Tournaments all over the world have fished for decades by these rules.

While the use of I.G.F.A. rules does provide an impartial code of ethics for the catching of fish, they are very detailed and highly restrictive. Strict adherence to these rules can lead to protests especially where fishermen compete in close enough proximity to observe each other during fishing. A mate has only to touch the line during the fight for a fish to be disqualified. Before any competition adopts I.G.F.A. rules in their entirety, they should be reviewed thoroughly. Many competitions find one or more rules too restrictive or not applicable to their event. They wind up selectively deleting I.G.F.A. regulations that do not lend themselves to achieving objectives of the tournament.

Tournament rules commonly go beyond the catching of fish to regulate virtually every facet of competition, hours that can be fished, departure times, minimum size of fish, number of fish weighed in, delivery of fish to the weigh station, number of lines fished, line test used and even the kinds of bait used are commonly covered. Each rules committee will have to determine points of concern and draft rules to address these (See Appendix 5).

The most controversial rule in any tournament is often the one dealing with bad weather

and when to cancel a day of fishing. It is a case of never being able to please everyone. Bad weather is usually handled in one of three ways. The oldest method is to select a weather committee that will go out each morning to make the decision of whether or not to fish. The second option is to utilize the National Weather Services' marine forecast of small craft warnings posted at a predetermined time to cancel the day's fishing. The third option is to make the fishing days "Captain's Discretion", whereby each boat captain decides whether he fishes but the tournament does not cancel.

There are advantages to each. Utilizing a weather committee provides your best chance of accurately determining local weather conditions. However, because tournament representatives make the decision, should bad weather lead to a damaged boat there is an increased potential for the tournament to be held liable. Using the weather service places the decision in the hands of an impartial body of experts, removing potential liability. The Captain's Choice scenario virtually guarantees that the tournament will be fished and will not have to be rescheduled. This is especially useful when large scale promotions and out-of-state participants are involved. However, in times of bad weather larger boats have a distinct advantage often leading small boats to venture out when they should not. No matter which method is chosen, each participating boat should be accounted for at the end of each fishing day.

The process and guidelines whereby a fish, fisherman or fishing team is disqualified must be clearly and precisely decided well before a confrontation. There is no room for any misunderstandings among the tournament workers as to the procedures and as to who has the authority to make a disqualification decision when a question of rules violation surfaces.

The tournament director or members of the rules committee should always be available during weighin periods to investigate and rule on a questionable fish or rules violation. The judges should act quickly and responsibly to secure all the facts surrounding the reputed violation so that a speedy, prudent decision can be rendered.

Immediately following the discovery of a potential rules violation, tournament persons should collect evidence to document its occurrence. In the case of mutilated fish, photos of the injuries should be taken. If it is a poor quality fish, it should be retained by the committee for further testing and to verify the stated conditions. Otherwise photographs, written and signed statements by witnesses and any physical evidence should be collected.

When the facts indicate that a rules violation has occurred, the judges may invite the contestant to meet with them. This should take place in a quiet room without spectators. The judges should present their facts to the entrant and invite the angler to respond.

If there is strong evidence of a deliberate attempt at fraud, such as an angler presenting a previously frozen fish to be weighed and entered in the tournament, then tournament officials may consider talking to the proper authorities to see if a criminal act was committed.

A point frequently overlooked that should always be addressed is a protest procedure. This establishes a formal process by which participants can make known possible violations of tournament rules. It should not, however, encourage or make it easy for disgruntled fishermen to make unfounded accusations against successful competitors.

The rules committee is logically the body to settle such disputes since they compiled the rules. A member of the committee should be physically present at the weigh station during the entire weighin period to receive any protest. A protest by a participant that is required to be presented in writing, dated and signed by all parties lodging the complaint. A filing fee should

be required that is high enough to discourage petty accusations. The filing fee should only be refunded if the protest is sustained. There should be a prescribed period each day of fishing when these protests may be filed. This period should allow at least a 30 minute period following close of the weighing scales on the last day of fishing to allow any possible protests of fish weighed at the close of weigh in.

When a protest is received, the committee should act immediately. A meeting of the rules committee should be held as soon as possible that day. A spokesman for the anglers filing the protest should be allowed to present their case followed with an explanation by a spokesman representing the boat or angler in question. Both presentations should take place without the other party or spectators in the room. This will avoid a direct confrontation between the parties that could later be an embarrassment to all.

All matters involved with a protest should be handled as discreetly as possible. Public attention should not be called to any conflict. Any resulting changes in winners should be announced matter-of-factly without explanation or apologies. Controversies, no matter how small, hurt the image of a tournament.

Table 1. Rules Commonly Addressed in Tournaments:

1. Define fishing hours and any exceptions to be allowed.
2. Define departure port or marina.
3. Define departure time.
4. Required return to port each day for boats offshore.
5. Define any restrictions on fishing area.
6. Define how or if fishing days will be canceled due to weather.
7. Define what will constitute a fishing day under "Captains Choice".
8. Specify how fish may be transported to the weigh station and if any exceptions will be allowed.
9. Specify hours for fish to be weighed and what exceptions will be allowed.
10. State whether fish can be entered on days other than day caught.
11. Specify any fishing line restrictions.
12. Specify any bait or angling method restrictions.
13. Specify whether boats can come in contact with other boats during fishing hours.
14. Specify how protests will be handled.
15. Spell out what consideration will be given disabled vessels.
16. Require all entries to meet all state and federal laws.
17. Specify what freshness standards will be required for fishes entered.
18. Specify if a polygraph exam will be required.
19. Statement declaring that the decision of the judges is final and by registering all participants agree to abide by their decisions.

Released Fish Competitions

The concept of holding a saltwater tournament where no fish are killed is not new. It has been practiced for a long time in the winter sailfish fishery in Florida. A decade ago, few fishermen would have even considered participating in such an event in our waters, citing that

the only fish released were those lost at the boat. Today's anglers not only recognize the need for catch and release, but are extremely proud of practicing non-consumptive sportfishing. Other fishermen on the dock now applaud these releases with the same enthusiasm as accorded fish brought to the dock. Releasing or tagging and releasing has become a recognized part of sportfishing in South Carolina.

Holding such a competition is not easy. There are many problems unique to holding a saltwater tournament where no fish are killed. Unlike freshwater bass tournaments whose target species conveniently fit into a small live well to bring in for live weighing, most saltwater gamefish are either too large, dangerous or fragile to handle in such a manner. This leaves tournament organizers in a quandary as to how to document and score fish caught, but released.

Fortunately, there are several options available. All have been proven effective for achieving specific goals. Awards in release events are usually based on either the number of fish released, points accumulated, or size of fish released. Methods for documenting releases are: 1) accept word of the angler; 2) require a legal affidavit be filled out; 3) require a photograph of each fish released; 4) have an observer on the boat to document releases; and 5) require winners to pass a polygraph examination. The choice of documentation will depend largely on the basis of judging and the value of awards offered.

Judging based simply on the highest number of fish released is the most common foundation for awards. It is the simplest to tally, and reduces the opportunity for angler error in identification or size measurement, intentional or not. This method of judging is particularly effective for single species events when difficulty or quality of catch is not a consideration. Many fishermen feel that the better angler will catch more fish, but luck plays a bigger role in the size of the fish. This form of scoring, however, can lead to frequent ties when fishing is slow.

A point system is commonly applied to a competition featuring multiple species. Anglers frequently like to rate the quality or difficulty of catch for different species. A variable point schedule applied to the eligible species allows anglers to take calculated gambles on what species to seek. Additional variation in point earnings can be based on length of fish, i.e. a fish over a set size would earn more points than smaller specimens of the same species which are considered easier to catch. Such a system would reward the angler targeting the more difficult fish. Most competitions either make it mandatory or offer extra points for the implantation of a scientific research tag. Fishermen recognize that it takes as much or more skill to tag a fish as to boat it. Unfortunately, fish size is the hardest to document, normally requiring the use of photographs or a legal affidavit. Lengths on fish under 36 inches can be documented via photographs by having the fish laying flat on a measuring board when the photo is taken. Larger fish such as billfish or sharks especially those too large to boat, are hard and even dangerous to measure, especially when taking a photo showing the length. It is prudent to use length only for species small and safe enough to handle. One problem associated with photographing a fish for measurement is the increased length of time the fish is kept out of the water for the picture to be taken. This may lead to less healthy fish being released.

A tournament offering only trophies has no real need for an elaborate or costly documentation system. A competition offering several thousand dollars in awards however, cannot afford to be lax on documentation. Expense and additional work are the primary drawbacks to increased levels of documentation, as you move from simple angler reporting to

observers and polygraph testing.

Accepting the word of the angler works well among small friendly events. When bragging rights are the only prize, there is little cause for indiscretions to occur, even among strangers. Small, close-knit clubs may even offer cash prizes without problems arising when only their members are involved. However, release competitions open to the public featuring high value merchandise or cash prizes require good documentation.

The simplest method for verifying the identity and date of release for a fish is the use of photography. A good quality photograph can provide for species identification, verification of size, as well as documentation of catch. A number of suitable low cost cameras are available today. Many cameras are sealed units intended for one use only. These are even available in waterproof models. Requiring a uniquely numbered card issued to each angler or boat be placed in the photograph with the fish is one way to guarantee that the fish in the photo was caught during the tournament. However, if the tournament itself is issuing sealed, one use cameras the evening before fishing, collection of the cameras at the end of the fishing will automatically guarantee when the photos were taken. If there is concern that cameras will be switched, then a unique number engraved on the camera housing will allow monitoring.

There are several problems inherent to the use of cameras. The most common is poor quality pictures resulting either from weather conditions (such as a rain storm) or an inexperienced cameraman. Secondly, photographs capture only an instant in time and most fish of a species, except for size, look identical. These facts could allow the unscrupulous angler to take ten pictures of the same fish, submitting them as different individuals.

Another widely used form of documentation is the legal affidavit. This is probably the simplest and lowest cost method to document released catches. The South Carolina Governor's Cup Billfishing Series is one program utilizing this method to validate all billfish tag and releases in each competition (See Appendix 6). The affidavit, when properly worded, signed, and notarized will hold up in court as a legal document. To knowingly sign this affidavit under false pretenses is an act of fraud, punishable under state law. By requiring every individual on the boat to swear to the validity of each release makes everyone an accomplice to any fraudulent act. The failure of any crew member to sign should disqualify the entry. This method, counts on at least one member of the crew having a conscience or being fearful of later exposure and prosecution. This type documentation is most effective in competitions where two or more individuals would be fishing together.

Observers placed aboard each fishing vessel can be the most effective method to document released fish when properly handled. The observer's role is that of a referee, to closely watch all fishing activities aboard their vessel to insure compliance with all rules, and to verify identity and proper release of all fish. The exact role observers play during the fishing day should be made perfectly clear to everyone. The best policy is for observers to take no part in the boat operation or fishing. They should also maintain visual contact with fishing activity at all times during the actual competition period. A quick nap or several mixed drinks are absolutely taboo. Observers should never be put on the same boat twice. There should always be a different observer each day. Additionally, observers must be thoroughly versed in the tournament rules and experienced in the identification of the target species. These individuals should not be prone to motion sickness.

There are three sources for observers. 1) each boat provides a person specifically for this purpose; 2) arrange volunteers from the community; or 3) hire experienced people to work. Utilizing the first source puts the burden of finding competent people on the fishermen saving time and money for the tournament. Unfortunately, these individuals may not possess the desired knowledge, dedication or personality for the job. Volunteer observers can provide the opportunity for the tournament to screen potential observers and ensure quality personnel, but this works only when sufficient qualified volunteers are available. When volunteers are used, the tournament should provide recognition and appreciation, such as providing free food and a tournament shirt. The primary draw back to their use is that the tournament has little control over volunteers. Morning “no-shows” are common, especially during periods of bad weather. A simple way to counter act this is to maintain a surplus of observers. Paid observers are the logical choice when they can be afforded. It allows the tournament not only to screen applicants but also to set strict guidelines for their behavior and duties. The major problems are cost and the effort required to interview and hire the individuals.

A final method to authenticate the release of fish is through the use of the polygraph. Competitions regularly require all potential winners of large prizes to take and pass a polygraph examination. Such testing would be just as effective for verifying released fish. Arranging for the test and its associated costs are the primary deterrent to this method of verification.

The South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department recognizes the valuable assistance provide science through tag and release of gamefish. Scientific tags generate needed life history information vital to proper management of our fishery resources. Tournaments, by adopting minimum size limits, limiting daily entry of fish, and featuring awards for tagged and released fish, serve to stimulate anglers into practicing conservation while helping fishery managers. A gamefish returned to the water with a tag implanted represents a potential scientific gold mine of information upon recapture. A competition featuring tag and release is an appealing product readily marketed to both print and electronic media,

Because of the ever increasing demand on gamefish stocks, and the concern to conserve these stocks, release tournaments will play an increasing role in the future of competitive saltwater sportfishing.

Weigh Station

Weigh stations ‘are one of the most critical points of a tournament. An efficient, professional weigh station takes careful planning and preparation. It is here that the outcome is decided. No other phase of a competition comes under such close scrutiny from both the fishermen and the public as does the weigh station.

Location of the weigh station is the first consideration. In choosing a site, accessibility to the fish to be weighed must be considered first. If sharks or marlin weighing hundreds of pounds are targeted, then the site must be close to where the fish will be off loaded. Using a fork lift or boom truck to lift fish allows more flexibility. With fish such as spotted seatrout, red drum, or flounder, all easily transported by the fishermen, there is more latitude for location of the scales. Working areas should be roped off to keep spectators at a safe distance, while allowing room for the fishermen. When large numbers of and fishermen are expected, it may be necessary to delineate entry and exit to the scales to allow a smooth flow of traffic to and from the site.