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TOURNAMENTS RIDE TIDES OF CHANGE

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PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF RIVIERA PORT LINCOLN TUNA CLASSIC

The Tuna Champions project is working with tournaments to help guide anglers to better respect the fish and make the most of their catch. Dr Sean Tracey looks at what's changing on the tournament circuit and why it's a win for southern bluefin tuna as well as for anglers.

If you've been on the game fishing tournament circuit lately, you may have noticed a shift in the way some competitions are run. That's because tournament organisers are now changing the competition rules to encourage respect for the fish and good handling practices. It's something that's starting to catch on.

In *BlueWater* issue 137 I mentioned the Coast 2 Coast Tuna Tournament in South Australia's Victor Harbor, where the focus was on responsible handling of tuna and promoting zero-waste from the fish. All fish weighed-in were bled, gilled and held on ice. A cleaning station was provided for anglers to process their own fish or a professional fish filleter to do the job for them, with the fish frames then given to local commercial crab fishers as bait.

Meanwhile, at the Riviera Port Lincoln Tuna Classic, event managers Russell and Gabriella Bianco encourage all competitors to rig their hard-body lures with inline single hooks instead of treble hooks, since

trebles are far more likely to cause damage to the fish and lower its chance of survival if released.

"This is predominantly a catch-and-release tournament targeting southern bluefin tuna, and we're playing our part in the Tuna Champion movement by making sure the released fish have the best chance of survival," Gabriella said.

Russell said they'll be taking efforts a step further next year by introducing this as a tournament rule, effectively banning competitors from running hard-body lures with treble hooks.

SINGLE HOOKS BETTER THAN TREBLES

This simple change can make a big difference for a fish's post-release survival. For example, research shows that fish caught on lures configured with single J-hooks had more than an 83% chance of surviving after release if handled well, while post-release survival for those caught on lures with treble hooks dropped to around 60%.



Left: The BKK 'Diablo' single inline hook for use on hard-body lures like diving minnows. Their small barb enables easy removal to minimise damage to tuna destined for release.



Above: Rigging your hard-body diving/swimming lures with inline single hooks – as on this Halco 'Max 220' – provides a more secure hook-up and is much less damaging to the fish than lures rigged with treble hooks.

Fishing gear outlets like Tackle World Port Lincoln, a major sponsor of the 2020 Riviera Classic, are also leading the way. Owners Alicia Bolitho and Shane Hodgens will be promoting the sale of hard-body lures configured with single hooks for the competition. In support of this, Wilson Fishing is manufacturing some of their tuna lures with inline single hooks for use during the competition.

Tackle World Port Lincoln will also be placing Tuna Champions stickers on hard-body lures rigged with inline single hook throughout the store to encourage those entering the competition to use them. And for anyone purchasing single hooks and hard-body lures with trebles already on them, a free change-over service will be provided in-store. They recommend inline hooks like the BKK 'Diablo', which has a small barb with a sharp point. This ensures the hook comes out with ease and the tuna is released with as little harm as possible.

TAG – OR KEEP WITH QUALITY

The momentum continued this year with a Tag & Release category introduced to the month-long Hooked on Tuna competition in Portland in support of the Tuna Champion program.

As Tourism and Events Manager for Victoria's Glenelg Shire Council, Michael Cottee explained, the program encourages recreational anglers to respect southern bluefin and adopt ways to fish better with minimum waste. Hooked on Tuna competition rules are now aligned with best practice fishing of southern bluefin, with all fish presented at weigh-in mandated to be brain spiked, gutted, gilled and bled to avoid wastage, therefore resulting in less spoilage and better-quality meat for anglers to take home.

Brain spiking, gill-gutting and bleeding the fish before weighing is important as essentially it is the most humane way to handle the fish and maximise meat quality by stopping muscle activity and removing the innards which hold a lot of heat. This optimises the chilling process when the whole fish is put directly into an ice slurry, reducing meat spoilage.

WHY YOU NEED TO CHILL

Southern bluefin and other tuna have the unique ability to elevate and maintain their body temperature well above the temperature of the water. This endothermic reaction is why processing and chilling tuna as quickly as possible after catching and dispatching is so important.

Research has found that quickly cooling your tuna greatly improves its eating qualities. Chilling in an ice and seawater slurry:

- Reduces 'burning' of the meat which occurs when pH levels decrease due to lactic acid build-up, and the temperature of the muscle increases from exercise.
- Slows the bacterial growth that causes spoilage.
- Slows the degradation of muscle proteins, keeping the meat in its best condition possible.



Winner of the 2019 Hooked on Tuna competition, Mark Rombolas, with his southern bluefin tuna weighing 104kg after being gutted, gilled and bled at time of capture to preserve its outstanding eating qualities.

LITTLE CHANGES / BIG RESULTS

At Tuna Champions, we have the fact-based information on the simple changes you can make when you're out fishing for bluefin. With the recreational fishing community now getting behind the Tuna Champions, those small moves will compound over time and result in a big improvement in the tuna stock – and that's a win-win for both southern bluefin and anglers. Discover more information at www.tunachampions.com.au

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TUNA CHAMPIONS

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