

# Blue Battling Granders

Continuing Capt Bristow's series on how to catch enormous blue marlin, this instalment deals with the battle after you've hooked the big one. As a recognised expert with half a century of giant marlin experience, this detailed guide is worth its weight in gold if you're serious about tackling a blue marlin weighing more than 1000 pounds.

AUTHOR: CAPT PETER BRISTOW  
PHOTOGRAPHY: TRACY EPSTEIN; BILL BOYCE; JOHN ASHLEY; BRYAN TONEY; K.J. ROBINSON



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I've lost count of how many times I have been asked, "What makes you keep going all these years?" To be honest, I don't know the answer. I never thought of it as a job, so why should I want to quit?

The only thing I can say that drives me to get up each morning and look forward to another day on the ocean is just finding one of those huge fish again.

The anticipation of seeing one of those huge marlin never ceases to inspire me with their frightening attack on the lures. Giant blue marlin are like prehistoric monsters. In fact, we have a spot on the south coast of Madeira that we call 'Jurassic Park' – where the monsters live. The danger of encountering them is tantalising in the extreme.

No-one is going to be able to tell you effectively how to deal with massive blue marlin. Driving the boat and having it in the right place at the right time will come from instinct gained from a world of experience. However, one way or another, you must get it right. After the excitement of finding one comes the thrill of the chase. This is where teamwork comes in, and extreme pressure on the captain to co-ordinate a fantastic gig. That's what it is – a gig – entertainment at its best.

You can't really learn this stuff from a book. You must do it for yourself and learn from experience before much of this will make sense to you. But read on; most of this is how I learnt to do things myself.

## GETTING ORGANISED

Let me make this absolutely clear – the advice that follows applies to blue marlin only (although it should make interesting reading for black marlin skippers as well).

In my previous two features I covered the preparation and first five minutes after hook-up from the angler's perspective. This time I would like to describe the scene once you're hooked up and battling your blue grander. Your first big blue will be nothing but excitement, confusion and the thrill of battle. Nothing you read in a book can fully prepare you, or be a substitute for the experience gained from years of seeing these magnificent fish behind the boat, trying to eat the paint off the transom.

To relate the actions and reactions of an experienced captain and crew in the first few minutes will only make sense to a very few, but take note – there may be some wisdom for you to hang on to. When getting started in my career chasing marlin I recall vividly the comments from the best captains of the time and trying to remember every word of advice; although I made some terrible mistakes by listening to some bad advice. All I can say is you will learn a lot more from your own mistakes than from bad advice.

After the crucial first five minutes of battle there is something going on up there on the bridge that most novice anglers are not aware of. Decisions are being made and relayed to the deck. The captain is really



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the only person who can see clearly what is happening as they try to anticipate the fish's every move. With competent crew on the deck, the captain's decisions and manoeuvres can be co-ordinated with everyone, most importantly the angler. Once you get the hang of it, this will come easy, and then you have a team. Well-conducted big-game fishing is teamwork.

### DRAG PRESSURE

If you like heavy drag for the hook-up then make sure it is backed off the instant the fish is hooked and takes off on its first blazing run. This is a critical point for first-timers, so to make life easy on my charter boat I set the drag light to begin with. It is amazing how many big marlin you can successfully hook on 8lb of drag. In fact, the first year I tried it I was looking at 100 per cent success, although I think it was the way they were biting that year. The law of averages pulled me back to reality the following year, but levels have remained very high – always better than 70 per cent – even when the marlin are just picking at our lures.

From here on, the drag is not increased until the fish stops its first run. Then and only then is the drag increased in stages. At this point in the battle I need a tight line to know where the fish is, but not so tight that it will break should the fish bolt again. However, I have not seen a second run that is equal to that initial burst of lightning speed.

In the final stages of the fight – once we are settled down – the drag can be increased to as much as the angler and the gear can handle.

### BATTLE TACTICS

Once hooked-up, the skipper has a number of options for how to begin the battle. You can start backing down right away or just gun the boat forward to make sure that the fish is hooked tight, although, it really doesn't matter, because the fish is going to be hooked on the strike anyway. When using light tackle (anything from 24kg down), no amount of gunning the boat is going to hook the fish – she's already on or she's not.

The advantage of getting away from the fish in the first few seconds is to minimise the chance of it coming flying back through the lure spread, or worse, coming flying into the cockpit – it does happen! If you are going to stay close to the fish then your manoeuvring will have to be world-class, because these things move around extremely quickly.

When the fish takes off in a jumping run you can do one of two things – start backing down or turn the boat and run the fish. Blues are particularly hard to keep up with by running them, because they always run and jump in circles.

Unless you know exactly where the fish is and where the line is laying on the surface, you need to be very careful not to run over it. If you run the fish then stay on the outside of the circle. When the line takes a dip and is showing angle, spin the boat round and have the line square off the transom. This moment can be full of surprises.

### RUNNING THE FISH

Here is a secret about running the fish. When line gets low on the reel, the quickest way to get it back is to spin the boat and run it forwards in pursuit of your fish. This applies whatever species you're chasing.

Raise the outrigger on the side of the boat you intend to take the fish. Now turn the boat and warn the angler they're about to lose line because of your manoeuvre. Go after the fish at whatever pace it takes to maintain or gain line. Watch the line exactly where it enters the water and look for the finger of line just below the surface. This will tell you where the line is laying, and if the angler is tight it will point right to the fish.

While that finger of line points away from the boat or straight ahead, you can stay on course or even come closer. On the quarter is comfortable. However, if the finger closes in towards your bow then turn away immediately or you will run over the line. Should the line close in I think it is better to turn hard around and then back in to square off with the fish until you know exactly where it is. This is all very exciting stuff. If the angler in the chair keeps the line tight, the point of entry will rip a great 'rooster tail' of spray from the surface. If the pressure is on, you can hear it from the bridge.

Dacron is the line that I have always used, and 130lb stands out in the water like rope. The new green colours are all very well, but totally unnecessary. Hi-vis mono is good for this (at night-time it's fantastic) and you can get by with clear so long as you pay attention. But don't ever try this with blue mono – it disappears – and black is even worse.

### UNLIKE BLACK MARLIN

At this point some heavy pressure can be applied, but watch where the line is pointing. My best advice is to look where the line enters the surface, and just below it will point to where the line is laying or where the fish is. If the angle suddenly increases and line starts pouring off the reel – watch out, she is coming up to jump, and that might be right under your bow.

Add to that advice the following scenario. You are hot on the fish and are close. You have good angle on the line, say 45 degrees. To entice the fish to jump a good angler will, at this point, put on maximum pressure –

even 'sunset' drag if the fish is not going anywhere. This is a critical moment with a blue. If the line should start quickly going off to one side or the other, the skipper needs to get out of there by going forward in a hurry, and I mean *right now!*

These blues are treacherous, and unlike a black in every way. They will double back on you, and if you're unlucky, will jump right into the boat with you. I got caught once with an unhappy ending (see *Winning Strategies for Blue Granders* in *BlueWater* Issue 86). Since that time, this has happened more than once, and I was able to recognise the move and anticipate the outcome. It's the lightning speed of the blue that will catch you off guard, so do not be complacent.

The situation just described can be quite a trap for those captains not used to blue marlin. After a lifetime of giant blacks off Cairns, I must say I was not ready for it the first time around. Those big blacks are so predictable. Get up close and hammer the drag on a black marlin and 9 times out of 10 it will be one of the best, and safest, photographic experiences you've ever had.

### IN THE LOOP

As I've indicated, from the outset blues are full of surprises. They have this habit of going right around the boat, and before you know it, they are jumping right in front of you. If you are not careful you will be trapped in the circle of line. About all you can do is spin

the boat and drive around the outside of the circle; or you can back down and follow the line. Of course, success with all this depends on the angler's ability to handle the situation. You will have to judge this one on its merits.

If you're running the boat around the outside of that circle of line, the new-chum angler cannot be expected to know how to retrieve rapidly in such an extreme situation. However, if the angler was to drop their right foot to the floor and lower the rod tip to horizontal – with the right elbow raised level to the reel – the line can be retrieved at high speed if the angler can wind like a runaway machine.

Always take the advantage of getting line back the easy way. When chasing an active blue there are times when bails of line will suddenly come easily, giving the impression that the hook has pulled out. Don't worry; all will be okay with a bit of luck. Remember that while the fish continues to swim ahead, the drag provided by just the lure being pulled through the water is enough to keep everything in place.

I watched this happen to a boat right by me one day with the crew on board totally oblivious to what was going on. They did not see the fish jump right across in front of them and then ran right over the line. By some miracle they did not cut the line, but after realising they were hooked-up, they stopped the boat – period. Hours later they hand-lined up 400kg of dead marlin

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Blue marlin are fast and unpredictable, so should always be handled with great caution at the boat.





**“If the angle suddenly increases and line starts pouring off the reel – watch out!”**

– a prime example of what not to do, on every count. It is a shame the fish was not cut off when they ran over the line. It is vitally important to keep the boat moving forward and maintain an angle of around 45 degrees on the line. This should keep the fish alive by allowing it to swim right up to the boat, still in good shape and ready for release. You can do exactly the same thing with a tuna. The easy way is to head down-sea, and no matter what the fish does, do not change direction.

Tail-wrapping a fish usually occurs right at the outset after hook-up, on its first jumping run. While the fish is going nuts it gets wrapped up in the leader and throws a hitch around the butt of its tail, which will not come off.

**TRICKY SITUATIONS**

There is so much to say about the tail-wrap situation, although there is not a lot you can do. However, like everyone else, I have had my share of it over the years. In comparison to the number caught, I am pleased to say this is minimal. So let’s be realistic about what you can and must do with the boat to relieve this predicament.

On 60kg (130lb) tackle it is possible to steamroll fish of 600 to 700lb and bring them to the boat before they die. Upwards of that you are in real trouble when they take a death dive. There are two trains of thought on how to react in that situation. Should you reduce to light drag and allow the fish to voluntarily come to the surface, or should you stay on heavy drag and try to muscle the fish up before its curtain falls?

The answer comes from knowing what the problem is before the rot sets in. When battling a huge tail-wrapped fish, the more you pull the worse the situation becomes, because you are lifting the tail in such a way that the fish will drive itself into the depths.

With almost a full spool of line out, there is nothing you can do but wait with heavy drag and keep a good angle on the line – ideally at 45 degrees to the horizontal. When all has stopped and come to a stalemate, then the fish must be planed up using the boat.

**RAISING DEEP FISH**

With one engine, nudge the boat ahead slowly without losing line until the angle is well up – then reverse quickly to pick up a few turns. This laborious practice can go on for hours until the fish pops to the surface as dead as a door nail. There’s nothing anyone can do about this, and sorry, but the fish will not be able to recover from such an encounter.

The other method is very effective and I have used it on light tackle with good results. One occasion was off Tangalooma in southern Queensland when I battled a sailfish estimated at 250lb for nine-and-a-half hours. I figured that to stop the boat and drift would put so much angle on the line that this enormous sail would voluntarily come to the surface.

It was a long wait between chances to run back down the line, and I hoped the fish would stay on the surface and jump. During the drift away from the fish, a full spool of 6kg line was let out. Six hours later, in the dark and after I don’t know how many attempts – the fish finally jumped within gaffing distance and could have been ours ... but what did the anglers do? They put a tag in this thing – much to my regret – because they were in a tournament! Of course, it took off and we never saw the fish again. After nearly another four hours of battle the line broke – and I said goodbye to a world record!

The lesson learnt on that occasion was that a fish will come to the surface if you stay far enough away on light drag. Then, once it’s up on the surface, you can



run back hard and pounce on it. It is a technique worth thinking about, but a hard one to call.

**EARLY SHOTS**

Getting a shot early in the fight calls for superior boatmanship and a very experienced crew. This is dangerous work and I would advise anyone without great confidence in all the team on board to wait patiently for a good and more docile chance at a capture or release.

After the first blazing run of a blue, the fish can be approached with some degree of safety. Keep a good angle on the line and when necessary keep the boat going forward so as to keep the fish swimming. With good pressure on the line they will come up relatively easily.

This is the time when a blue will show its real colours. When you are about to bring the fish alongside and think you have it made – watch out! They have a horrible habit of tacking suddenly to the opposite side they are laying on. Squirting the boat fast ahead is the best way to keep out of trouble. This manoeuvre by the fish quite often results in a small circle. Just let her go and don't back up. She is going to return to the same position or just go down a bit. Don't worry – she's coming back. Maintain your direction and don't take your eyes off the fish for a second.

At this point, I have watched so many boats run over the fish. I cannot impress on you enough how unpredictable these blues can be. Make absolutely sure the entire crew understands they should let the fish go if this should happen. There is no way you can stop 1000 pounds of blue marlin going the other way! Something is going to break – or the crew-member will get ripped into the water with the fish.

Over the past two decades several crew have been pulled overboard and drowned. I suspect the situation just described had caught them unawares. Remember: this is a dangerous business when you are not tuned-in to what is going on – or is likely to happen.

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By the time blue marlin are able to be brought alongside for release they are often bronze in colour and exhausted. To ensure they have an excellent chance for survival, they must be given the time and care necessary to revive them back to swimming strength before they are set free.



When they do this side-to-side bit just hold them there behind the boat and hang on waiting for the chance to bring them alongside. Once secure, they seem to settle down quite well and a snooter can be slipped over their bill. Keep the boat slow ahead at all times until you are secure – perhaps out of gear for a brief moment to let the fish swim alongside. You will know when the time is right, but don't take any chances and don't be in a rush.

I think the most important message is not to change direction – remain in control and do not allow the fish to take any advantage of any move that you might make in error.

**HEALTHY REVIVAL**

This is now the time to take stock of the fish's condition. Should it need reviving, are you ready? Have a good piece of half-inch poly floating rope ready with a spliced eye in one end. Throw a snooter over the bill by passing the end of the rope through the spliced eye. Come tight on the bill and maybe take a hitch. The skipper should move the boat slow ahead with one engine while the crew let the fish back 10 metres or so and hold the line taut after a turn around the cleat.

After a while the fish will revive, but may take up to 20 minutes or more. It is a wonderful feeling to see one of these puffed-out fish swim up to the boat with all of their colour back and then swim off to feed and fight another day. I always say, “See you next year, fish”.

In this late stage of the proceedings it is highly unlikely that the fish is going to jump. In fact, I think you can be sure it is not going to jump – unlike its black

counterpart again. My opinion is that blues fight more like a tuna after the antics are over, in so much as they want to dig and stay down, and then lead like a tuna. Foul-hooked fish are another story and can only be dealt with on a case-by-case assessment.

**THE WIND-ON SYSTEM**

The leader I like using is the standard wind-on set-up with 650lb mono – attached via a loop-to-loop connection to a one-metre-long double. The leader tip with the lure is three metres long and connects to the swivel at the end of the wind-on with a shackle. This set-up has a lot to recommend it. The other outfits can be wound up with the swivel at the rod tip, and the lure left in the water while the rest are dealt with.

The lures should be in the water where they cannot hurt anyone, but short enough not to get in the wheels. Then, in orderly fashion, the outfits can be cleared while the captain and angler are getting on with the hooked-up fish.

The other big advantage of fighting a fish on this set-up is that when the angler's swivel eventually comes to the rod tip, the fish will be right there within reach of the tag pole, snooter, dehooker or gaff. In a lot of ways this eliminates the need for a second crewman who would otherwise have to wrestle with a 30-foot leader and carry on with all the cowboy antics and heroics. With the wind-on system, the angler is able to wind the fish right to the side of the boat, but can also be aided with open-hand assistance on the leader, without the need for the crew to take wraps until right at the end. 🐟

An effective and safe way to revive a marlin is by using a snooter or a bill rope to slowly tow it while it regains its strength.

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