

The IGFTO Observer  
- Newsletter

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*Observing Today...Conserving for Tomorrow*

# The IGFTO Observer

*A newsletter for International Game Fish Tournament Observers*

*Volume 10 Edition 1*

## Los Sueños 2021 Ladies Only and Triple Crown Tournaments

By Steve Hargett

Los Sueños billfish tournaments are known for beautiful vessels, the best fishing teams, gorgeous amenities and, of course, a bite that is off the charts. They also offer a lifestyle that makes this destination one of the premier venues for IGFTO members.

Sure, we were all hoping that by saying goodbye to 2020, the New Year of 2021 would usher in renewed optimism, vaccines for all, a lifting of travel

## You Make The Call *Reel Blows Up*

By Art McDonald

You are observing a billfish tournament in Central America. IGFA rules are in force with a maximum line strength of 50 lbs. The sailfish bite has been off the charts with some boats releasing over 40 fish per day. The boat you have drawn the third day of the Tournament is within striking distance of the lead and has an excellent combination of crew and anglers. It is mid-afternoon when a large Black Marlin (elephants eat peanuts) engulfs one of the rigged ballyhoo and takes off for the sunset – nearly stripping the reel in the process. With the aid of the crew, the angler is harnessed to the reel lugs and settles in for, what appears to be, an epic battle.

restrictions, and a resurgence of social gatherings. Well, it did not happen. It's not all roses. BUT...

### **The Lifestyle is Alive and Well**

The 2021 Los Sueños Ladies Only and Signature Triple Crown Series were held in spite of the pandemic. Granted, they may have seemed subdued due to social distancing and the absence of social functions. Nevertheless, the currents of excitement generated throughout the marina by the fishing teams and observers were the same as in the past. The lifestyle is alive and well!

Tuesday, January 19, kicked off the 2021 season with the Ladies Only Tournament. Twelve teams of women competed and released 159 sailfish and 1 marlin for the day. Fish Tank released 20 sails and took home the Ladies Only Championship.

### **An Exciting Triple Crown**

Midway through the 2<sup>nd</sup> hour disaster struck when the reel, basically, fell apart while the angler was adjusting the drag. The drag adjustment knob popped off and the working parts fell onto the cockpit floor. The crew quickly retrieved the pieces and handed them back to the angler who re-assembled the reel while still harnessed to the lugs. Since non-one ever touched the rod and reel except the angler, would this constitute an infraction of IGFA rules?

### **Answer:**

The situation described would be completely legal, even though multiple people touched the internal components of the reel. The intent of the IGFA rule stating that "no-one other than the angler can touch the rod and reel" is that the angler is physically unassisted in fighting the fish throughout the entirety of the fight. In this case, the angler fought the fish completely on his own and the assistance provided did not remove any of the physical strain of the fight from the angler. In essence, this is no different than the crew assisting the angler into a harness or fighting belt, which are both legal when done properly.

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### **Featured Member:**

Wednesday, January 20, marked the start of the Los Sueños Triple Crown, beginning with the meeting of captains and observers.

Traditionally a social event, this year's virtual Zoom call created some challenges, but the exceptional team of Tournament Director Ashley Bretecher pulled it off without a glitch.

Thursday, January 21, thirty-eight vessels and teams headed offshore on the first of the 3 days of catch and release fishing. The bite was on and at the end of the day, the vessel Grand Slam, a 60-foot Paul Mann, held a commanding lead releasing 23 sailfish and 1 marlin.

On Friday, the second day, Goose, a beautiful, new 72-foot Viking flexed its muscles winning the daily and taking 3rd place by releasing 23 sailfish. Saturday, day three, proved just as exciting with a down-to-the-wire late surge by Fish Tank (the Ladies Only Champion). At the end of the day, Grand Slam held on for a

## Rick Alvarez - Tournament Operator Extraordinaire



*Rick takes a moment to relax from the action at his Cap Cana International Billfish Tournament*

Story by Art McDonald

The heading above was stolen from an *On The Edge* magazine story from a few years ago – profiling Rick Alvarez. There are few IGFTO members, and, perhaps, fewer big game tournament anglers who do not know Rick Alvarez – a true legend in game fishing, tournament organization, and an outspoken advocate of the Observer Program.

Rick is of proud Cuban heritage. He and scores of others left Cuba as a child in August, 1960, during the early days of the Castro inspired exodus. His father was a high-ranking executive in Cubana Airlines,

wire-to-wire win of the Los Sueños Triple Crown Series Leg 1. A total of 953 sailfish and 48 marlin were released over the 3 days.

### **Plan On It**

The Los Sueños Ladies Only and Triple Crown Series continue to provide a great tournament experience for IGFTO members. I encourage all members to put these tournaments on your list of destinations. Even in the midst of a pandemic, the life style is special and lives on.

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## **38 Sails in 1 Hour 45 minutes**



*Los Sueños 2017 Sailfish  
A huge school of sailfish were feeding on  
the surface.  
Photo by Pepper Ailor*

in addition to owning several small businesses. He stayed behind for a few months to take care of their house in Havana and the summer home in Tarara Beach before fleeing the country.

Before the exodus, Rick started fishing with his dad and his friends at the age of 5, although he was not allowed to touch a rod when there was a billfish among the baits. He was only allowed to reel in Mahi and Barracuda. He did get to tag along during some of the local tournaments, including the prestigious Hemmingway International that continues to this day. Their boat docked at Tarara Marina, a few slips away from Hemmingway's *Pilar*. He would see Hemmingway frequently at the Marina – and even got to exchange fishing stories with him on occasion.



*A young Rick poses with his dad and his dad's Blue Marlin*

## **A Wild Day in Los Sueños**

By Bob Stimolo

Saturday, March 25, 2017, Los Sueños, Costa Rica, 5:15 a.m. I climbed the steps to the Hook Up restaurant to report in and receive my instructions for day 3 of Leg 3 of the Signature Triple Crown. I had observed in all three legs of the tournament that year and this was the last of 9 days of observing. I was tired, but still looking forward to the day of fishing. The fishing had been hot. Anglers had caught and released over two thousand billfish during the course of the tournament.

At 5:15 a.m. it was still dark. The air was perfectly still and it was hot and humid. The boats in the marina were lit up but there was very little activity on the docks. Mostly mates prepping the rods and tackle, rigging ballyhoo, stocking food and drinks for the day.

My turn in the line of

## **His First Billfish Tournament**

When Rick's dad finally left Cuba, he took a job with the newly founded (and now defunct) VIASA Airways of Venezuela, and the family moved to New York. Rick traveled with his Dad to Venezuela and together they participated in a billfish tournament along with the late IGFA Board member, Dr. Ruben Jaen. That was the beginning of Rick's long association with fishing in Venezuela. On one of those trips, he caught his first billfish – a white marlin.



*Rick, hooked up to a billfish*

He later graduated from Holy Cross High School in Flushing, NY, and after that, received a degree in Business Administration at St. John's University in Jamaica, NY. After graduating, Rick accepted a job as Director of North

observers came up and I was handed my information packet. I received several documents telling me the name, make, and length of the boat, the names of the captain, the names of the anglers, and the standings for the first two days of fishing. My boat was named *Pelese*. It is a Spanish word that doesn't have an exact translation into English. Later in the day, the owner, Marc Stanley, told me it meant something like "wise guy" but worse in Spanish.

I grabbed some OJ and a bit of fruit. I was careful about how much I ate or drank. It was too early to eat much; and I didn't want to drink too many liquids in order to minimize the number of visits I might have to make to the head during the day. I sat down among the blue shirted observers and started filling out my log. I entered the names of the boat, the captain, and each of the anglers.

### **Report to Your Boat**

At 5:35 a.m., the

American Marketing and Sales, working for AeroPeru in Miami. In that position, he had the opportunity to travel to a number of foreign countries, including Venezuela. Rick's dad also accepted a position as a consultant to AeroPeru.

It was not long before Rick and his dad hooked up with Dr. Jaen to fish extensively in the waters on the famed La Guairá Bank, a short distance from Caracas. La Guairá, in its heyday, became the most prolific bill fishing mecca worldwide, offering anglers an abundance of sailfish, white and blue marlin, and swordfish. It was not uncommon to experience triple and quadruple grand slams in a single day!

### **A Tournament Record 256 Blue Marlin**

Years later, after Rick began sponsoring his famous "Shootout" tournaments in Venezuela, one of Rick's tournaments in 1999 produced a record of 39 boats releasing 256 blue marlin in just 3 days – the highest CPUE (catch per unit effort) in history! Rick also played a role in the promotion of game fishing in Panama, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, and the Galapagos Islands. Since 2010, he has conducted his Cap Cana Shootouts and Casa de Campo Blue Marlin Tournaments in the Dominican Republic as well.

announcement came over the loud speaker “All observers have reported in. All boats may leave as soon as your observer reports for duty.” That was our cue to head for our boat. I followed the map I was provided. Down the stairs of the Hook Up, under the restaurant to the entrance to the docks, past the official cameraman filming everyone moving toward the boats, looking for something memorable that he would include in the film shown at the awards dinner.

When I got to the boat, there were just two mates there rigging gear and checking supplies. I stood on the dock next to the boat until one of them turned to look at me. I said, “Good morning gentlemen, I am your observer for today. Permission to come aboard.” They helped me aboard and after asking permission again, I entered the cabin and put my knapsack down. There was no one in the cabin and no one down below. It was just the three of us. I took advantage of the

Rick’s no slouch as an angler either – having released close to a thousand billfish (he’s never kept an exact count) in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, and has caught all species of billfish (Royal Slam Club). Most of his releases were in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Costa Rica.

### **An Outspoken Supporter of Observers**

Along the way, Rick has been a vocal supporter of Observers. He, along with St Thomas’ Jimmy Loveland, convinced the IGFA to foster the Observer Program focusing on conservation issues regarding billfish. All of his tournaments require the successful release of all billfish species. When IGFTO first formed, Rick was supportive and provided input. He is an honorary lifetime member.

Rick’s career spans more years than he is willing to admit. The “*On The Edge*” article included this quote from Rick: “I sometimes marvel at the experiences and places my job has taken me, the people I have been fortunate to have met and become friends with. I never found the pot of gold I was looking for when I left the airlines to start my own business, but I found much more in the friendships and fishing experiences I’ve made. I’ve enjoyed a life well lived. Were my father still alive, he’d probably say something like, that’s

quiet and went back out to the cockpit.

Many boats I have been on will tell me there is no first mate. However, I find there is always a first mate. He is the one giving orders. On *Pelese*, the first mate's name was Apollo; and I asked him to show me the release point on one of the rods. He peeled the leader off until the point where the leader connected to the double line. I made a mental note of what I would see during a catch – green to white. The green double line would come up through the rod tip and the moment I saw the white leader hit the rod tip my job was to scream “RELEASE” as loud as I could so that everyone on the boat would know the fish was officially caught.

### **All Aboard!**

Around 6:30 a.m. Captain John Lagrone came aboard. I had never fished with him before. I found an article in Marlin magazine by Sam White in which Captain John

more than a good man deserves.” Well said, Rick!

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## **Industry News**

### **Vessel *Agitator* wins the 2021 Pescadora Billfish Championship**

February 18, 2021, Marina Pez Vela, Quepos, Costa Rica: The Pescadora Billfish Championship kicked off with a meeting of captains and observers, followed by a welcoming party. The ladies only tournament donated a portion of the proceeds to a local orphanage.

Some of the best woman anglers in the world competed in this two-day, all-release tournament. Twenty-six teams comprised of 104 anglers released 471 billfish, including 457 sailfish and 14 marlin. That is an amazing average of more than 18 billfish per team over the two days.

On day one, the vessel *Agitator* and its team, the *Agitator Babes*, took a commanding lead by releasing 16 sailfish and one marlin. On day two, the vessel *Outage* gave them a run for their money, but *Agitator* was able to hold on and win the tournament. The *Outage* team, *Billfish B\*tches*, finished in second place.

was interviewed about how to get a billfish to make a second bite after having missed the first. Here's what it said by way of introducing Captain John: "Capt. John LaGrone has fished extensively throughout Central America for nearly three decades and was a standout skipper for many years in Guatemala before relocating to Costa Rica's fish-rich Pacific coast. He's currently at the helm of Marc Stanley's 60-foot Spencer, *Pelese*, in Los Suenos. The article was dated "February, 10, 2017.

Captain John introduced himself, asked me if there was anything he could get me, and invited me to help myself to the cockpit cooler. He went into the engine room for a few minutes, came back up and disappeared up the ladder to the bridge.

About 15 minutes later, Marc, the owner, and 4 anglers arrived. There was a flurry of activity. The overhead lights came on, gear and food was passed on board, the engines

The top female anglers and teams were recognized at the awards dinner and ceremony. All the participants were encouraged to continue to pursue all-release bill fishing and to have fun while doing so.

All IGFTO members should put this tournament on their schedules. The 2022 tournament is tentatively scheduled for February 17th and 18th.

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### **Observer Training Moves to Fort Lauderdale Airport**

The Observer Training Course that was normally conducted in Delray Beach moved to the Fort Lauderdale Airport on February 27. The course was taught by IGFTO directors Terry O'Neill and Art McDonald at the Holiday Inn Express. The change in venue came about because COVID-19 closed the facility in Delray Beach and the IGFTO board of directors thought having the course near the airport would be convenient for those traveling from out of state.

The Holiday Inn is located near shops and restaurants, offers free shuttle service to and from the airport, and gives attendees group discount rates for rooms. The next program scheduled there is on Saturday

started up, and within a few moments we were moving out of the slip.

### **Shove Off!**

Now there were boats everywhere, waiting their turn to exit the marina. One by one they drove through the no wake zone, finally throttling up to running speed. I settled into one corner of the couch and tried to nap. I knew it would be at least an hour until we found the fishing grounds.

Even with the engines running and the satellite TV on, you can't help but hear the conversation in the cabin. Marc and his fishing team were anxious. The fishing had been slow the day before and they had fallen from 2<sup>nd</sup> place to 5<sup>th</sup>. The prior year, in 2016, they won 2<sup>nd</sup> place in Leg 2 and again in Leg 3 for total prize money of \$85,500. Captain John had led them to release a total of 165 sailfish over the course of the two legs.

I sat and tried to appear that I

April 24, and an additional offering on Saturday November 13th. To view our training schedule, click [HERE](#).

Please welcome these new members:

Brian Ashby, Germantown, TN  
Josh Blakely, Calistoga, CA  
Pete Blocker, Big Rock, IL  
Roger Dart, Panama City Beach, FL  
Steve Foulk, Dundee, IL  
Paul Harrell, Calistoga, CA  
Philip Kile, Hendersonville, TN  
Thomas Matlock, Boca Raton, FL  
James Morrison, Boca Raton, FL  
Dave Roof, Delray Beach, FL  
Frank Schmidt, Lighthouse Point, FL  
Steve Shuff, Tiffin, OH

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### **Quepos Observer Training Course February 17, 2021**

On February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021 an IGFTO Observer Training Course was held at Marina Pez Vela in beautiful Quepos, Costa Rica. IGFTO President Steve Hargett taught the course. This was the second year an observer training course was conducted prior to the Pescadora Billfish Championship. Scheduling these two events together enabled new members to put their training into practice by observing in the tournament the day after the course.

wasn't listening to their conversation. I had my logbook out and I was making notes so that I could identify each angler from the bridge. I would only be able to see their backs, so I made notes about the color of their shirts. Hat or no hat, and what kind of hat, and any other identifying feature.

### **Hunting for Fish**

We stopped about 50 miles out. The captain began looking for where he would start fishing. This is the time when everyone on board is the most optimistic and, at the same time, the most superstitious. This is the time when prayers are offered up, chanting begins, and appeals are made to the fishing gods.

At about 10 minutes before 8 a.m., I grabbed my bag, stood up and in a voice that everyone in the cabin could hear I said "Good luck today gentlemen!" and I went up the ladder to the bridge. At the top of the ladder, I said to the captain "Cap, I will observe from

Several of the new members also went on to Los Sueños to observe in Leg II of the Triple Crown, which was held the following week.

Please welcome these new members:

Maikel Aguero, Jaco, CR  
Vitaly Balasanov, Heredia, CR  
Doug Johnson, Pt. Pleasant Beach, NJ  
Rudi Kerkhof, Quepos, CR  
Francisco Monge, Alajuela, CR  
Ramiro Ortiz, Managua, NI  
Carter Takas, Quepos, CR  
Josh Weber, Fremont, CA

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### **The Billfish Foundation Needs Our Help!**

Waters in the Gulf of Mexico and off Florida's east coast and Charleston were closed 20 years ago to protect a number of important species deemed overfished. Included were marlin, sailfish, juvenile swordfish, marine mammals, some sharks and tunas and sea turtles. These populations continue to be overfished because they are caught as bycatch in pelagic longline fishing. Only swordfish have recovered. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proposes to open the Closed Zones to pelagic longline gear to fish for swordfish.

where ever you want me. But I think I can do a better job from up on the bridge.” He said “Come on up and make yourself at home.” I entered the bridge and found a place out of the way to store my bag. I pulled out my logbook and stuffed it between the cushions. I put sunscreen on and went to the shady side of the bridge being careful not to distract or in any way interfere with the captain.

I took out my iPhone and stared at the time. As the time approached 8 a.m. I propped myself up against the railing in one corner of the railing at the stern of the bridge. At exactly 8 a.m. I leaned over the railing and yelled down into the cockpit “Lines In!” and we were off.

### **Lines In!**

The captain reached over his head and flipped the switches to release the dredges. On one side of the boat, the dredge consisted of dozens of dead mullet, rigged to look like a school that was following the

### **The Billfish Foundation has established the following goals:**

- (1) Protect overfished marlin, sailfish, tunas, sharks, sea turtles, marine mammals from pelagic longline fishing.
- (2) Improve species abundance by retaining the Closed Zones and, thus, recreational fishing.
- (3) Support thousands of jobs in the recreational fishing, boating, and marine industries, which generate huge economic returns to coastal communities.

The IGFTO is asking you to help by going to The Billfish Foundation page here:

<https://billfish.org/take-action-to-your-representatives/>

Follow the instructions on that site. The site is designed so that you may easily send a copy of a letter prepared by the Billfish Foundation to your congressional representative asking them to retain the Closed Zones.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

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### **Help Us Tell NOAA Not All Fishing Gears are the Same!**

A recent Executive Order (EO) treats

boat. On the other side, the dredge consisted of artificial baits. Both dredges were weighted so that they would travel behind the boat and under the water.

Down below, the mates released the teasers, one on each side of the boat. These artificial lures looked like a school of squid. They would travel behind the dredges but on the surface of the water, splashing along and creating a commotion designed to attract billfish.

The rules of the tournament allowed only six lines in the water at any time. If the mates wanted to replace a line, they had to pull one out of the water first before they could put another one in. Each of the five anglers took up a position on one of the rods. They were all baited with ballyhoo, rigged to look like they were swimming behind the boat.

### **First Fish of the Day**

The bridge radio was tuned to

recreational fishing gear like bottom trawls and pelagic longlines in a proposal to designate new Marine Protected Areas (MPA), despite major differences in the impact of fish and habitat. The EO calls for closing 30% of U.S. ocean waters to fishing, including recreational fishing, by 2030. The potential closing of these areas will negatively impact the entire recreational fishing community and supporting businesses, as well as diminish the ability to continue our Tag and Release data collection/research. NOAA is looking for input from our community before this is implemented. Now is the time to make sure the recreational community's voice is heard.

Read our article on the subject and our submitted comments [here](#).

[Click on the link below and follow the instructions on how to submit comments to NOAA by the end of March.](#)

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the tournament channel and, after just a few minutes, a voice came on the radio: “Control, control, one number for Tranquilo”. Tournament control would respond “one sail for Tranquilo, your number is 748”. This would be followed by calls from other boats reporting their billfish releases to tournament control.

Everyone on board the *Pelese* stared at the baits dragging through the water. An hour went by. There was quiet, everyone feeling tension. Then, at 9:00 a.m., one sail, no wait, two sails, whoa, three sails hooked up. I watched as the white leader came to the rod tip three times and screamed “RELEASE!” each time. In the cockpit, there were smiles and high fives all around. An hour later, a single sail was hooked up, brought quickly to the boat and released.

Then, nothing. The mates kept refreshing the baits. The captain was on his cell phone, talking to other captains that

**We're here for you.  
Director contacts:**

**Steve Hargett**  
President & Director  
[steve.hargett@igfto.org](mailto:steve.hargett@igfto.org)

**Evan Hipsley**  
Director & Webmaster  
[evan.hipsley@igfto.org](mailto:evan.hipsley@igfto.org)

**Art McDonald**  
VP and Director  
[art.mcdonald@igfto.org](mailto:art.mcdonald@igfto.org)

**Terry O'Neill**  
Director & Treasurer  
[terry.oneill@igfto.org](mailto:terry.oneill@igfto.org)

**Bob Stimolo**  
Director & Marketing  
[bob.stimolo@igfto.org](mailto:bob.stimolo@igfto.org)

**John Treat**  
Director Emeritus  
[john.treat@igfto.org](mailto:john.treat@igfto.org)

IGFTO  
P.O. Box 7333  
Gainesville, GA 30504-0017

+1 (404) 386-3388

were friends of his, hoping to get a lead on where the fish were. At noon, one of the mates served lunch to all on board, but still, no fish.

### **The Race Was On**

One o'clock came and went, then, at 1:30 p.m., I overheard the captain talking excitedly on his cell phone. He threw the phone down among the instruments. He turned and leaned over the rail and yelled "we're moving, bring the lines in, leave the riggers out!" The cockpit was awhirl with action. Anglers cranking reels, mates pulling in the teasers, the sound of the dredges being brought up and into the cockpit.

I grabbed my bag and my log and high tailed it down the ladder and into the salon. I knew what was about to happen. The moment the last of the gear was in the cockpit, the captain pushed the throttles forward and the 60-foot Spencer climbed out of the water and took off. In no time, she was flying along, the

outriggers bouncing in sync  
with the waves.

We ran for a good twenty  
minutes or so and then the  
boat started to slow down. I  
looked out the cabin window  
and I could see three or four  
boats trolling relatively close  
to each other. As we  
approached them, the captain  
called for the dredges and  
teasers to be put in the water,  
the anglers all took up their  
positions on the rods, and I  
climbed back up on the bridge  
and sat on a side cushion so  
that I could see everyone in the  
cockpit.

### **Sailfish Pandemonium**

As we got closer to the other  
boats, I could see the water  
was roiling. We were  
approaching a huge school of  
sailfish that were feeding on  
the surface. There were birds  
screeching and diving into the  
water. I could see sailfish  
leaping and breaching the  
surface of the water. All of the  
other boats were hooked up,  
fighting fish.

We trolled into the

school. One fish on, released. Then, 5 minutes later, 4 fish on, released. Four minutes later, 3 fish on, released. The cockpit was a frenzy; the captain was leaning over the rail shouting instructions to the mates and the anglers. He was trying to judge which fish to take in which order so that we could maximize the number of fish released. The mates were racing to the “man up”, the angler who was next, grabbing the leader, cutting it loose or pulling the hook and then re-rigging the line with bait and moving on to the next angler.

Everyone was yelling and screaming including me. “RELEASE!” I screamed and then turned to my log book. Then I thought “Who the hell was that?” I looked at my list of anglers and the shirts and hats they were wearing, and immediately knew which angler should get credit for the fish. Six minutes passed, 2 fish released, 10 minutes and another 2 released. Five more minutes and 5 fish released, 10 more

minutes and another triple released.

We stayed there catching sailfish after sailfish until lines out at 4 p.m. We released quintuplets, 5 fish on at once, at least 3 times. By the time the fishing was over, we had released 38 sailfish in 1 hour and 45 minutes. We averaged one fish every 2  $\frac{3}{4}$  minutes.

### **Winning and Losing**

I sat in the cabin with the Marc and the anglers on the way back to the marina. The conversation now focused on standings. Where would *Pelese* place in the standings for the day, for the leg, for the entire 3 legs of the tournament?

I found out that evening at the awards dinner. *Pelese* won second place for the day. Marc went to the podium to receive the prize winnings and made a short speech. He talked of the pandemonium that had taken place that afternoon, and then he said "I don't know how the observer kept up". That made

my day.

*Pelese* missed winning second place for the tournament by one fish. She missed first place for the tournament by two fish.



*Pelese, Los Sueños 2017 Leg III:  
The crew of the Pelese. Owner Marc Stanley is front row center. Behind him, over his right shoulder, is Captain John Lagone. First mate Apollo is to Marc's his left.*

*Photo by Pepper Ailor*



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*International Game Fish Tournament Observers Inc. is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt charitable organization dedicated to the preservation and conservation of game fish worldwide. We provide trained and insured servers to authenticate the "catch and release" of billfish and game fish during international big game fish tournaments.*

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International Game Fish Tournament Observers, Inc. · P.O. Box 7333 · Gainesville, GA 30504-0017 · USA