

From: IGFTO President and Board of Directors <member.services@igfto.org>

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The IGFTO Observer Newsletter



Observing Today...Conserving for Tomorrow

The IGFTO Observer

A Newsletter for International Game Fish Tournament Observers

Volume 12

Edition 1

A Letter from the President - Counting on You to Help Us Grow

It was a proud moment when we delivered 48 trained observers to the Pescadora Billfish Championship in Quepos, Costa Rica. That was a record for us! As tournaments are returning and expanding, the demand for qualified observers continues to grow.

We need your help. Growing the membership is a challenge. We have to replace observers who retire each year. We need additional observers to meet the growing demand. Our research indicates that most people who sign up for the Observer Training Course were referred by an IGFTO member. That's why I am asking for your help. You know who among your acquaintances will make a good observer. I am asking you to encourage those you think are qualified to go to our website and register for a course. There are four courses scheduled and here is the information you need to share:

April 29, Hampton Inn Las Olas | Fort Lauderdale, FL
July 29, The Shack, Virginia Beach, VA
Sept 7, Safe Harbor Ferry Pt Marina, Old Saybrook, CT
Nov 11, Hampton Inn Fort Las Olas | Fort Lauderdale, FL

How long is the course? Each course runs from 9 am to 1:30 pm
What do you receive upon completion of the course? Membership through the end of 2024, IGFTO Work Shirt, IGFTO Dress Shirt, Observer Log Book, Buff, and Lapel Pin, a course notebook, and web access to Billfish Identification and IGFA Rules downloads.
Total value of up to \$273. Your cost to attend the program? Just \$295 (plus convenience fee if paying online.)

Register here: [REGISTER](#)

I know I can count on you.

Steve Hargett
IGFTO President | Director

PS: Please don't delay. Our first Observer Training Course this year was sold out! *I will personally guarantee a spot for anyone you refer.*

YOU MAKE THE CALL Can a Fish Hook Itself?

Story by Art McDonald

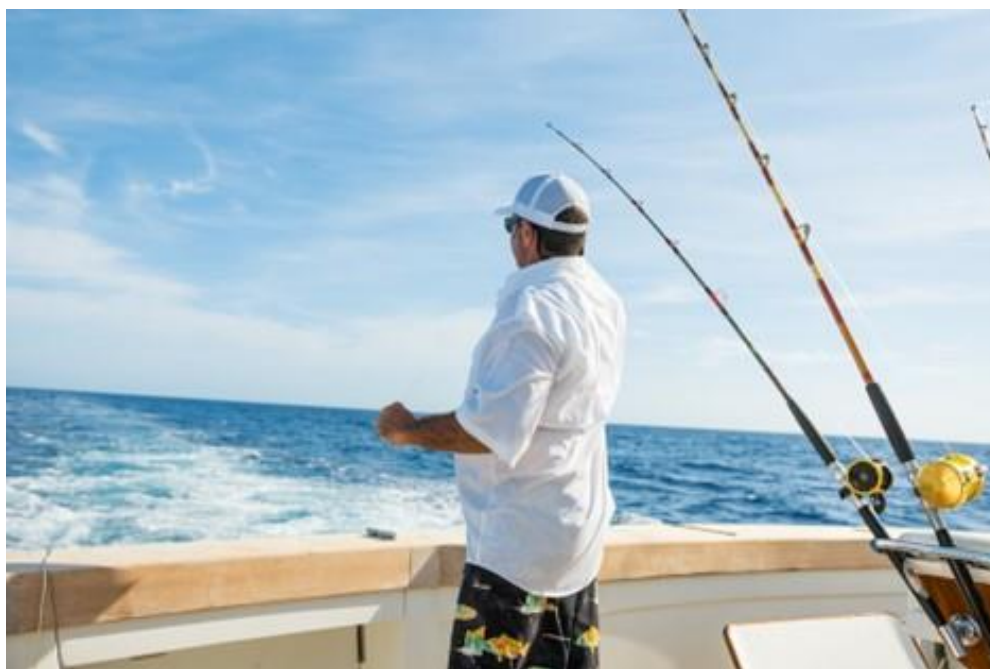
Ahh, sunny Costa Rica where the sailfish are snapping, palm trees are swaying – a true Pura Vida experience! You're attending a billfish release tournament – seas are perfect – almost flat calm. You notice that some of the anglers are holding their rods, while some are not, allowing the rod to sit in either a rod holder or in the rocket launcher. You also notice that the reels in the rod holders are almost in free spool – with the clickers on.

“Sailfish Left Long!”

Suddenly, the Captain yells out “Sailfish, left long!” and the angler on the left outrigger bait does not pick up the rod, and when the line comes out of the clip on the strike, he does not remove the rod from the rod holder. Instead, he disengages the clicker on the reel and tightens the drag until the fish is hooked. Only then does he lift the rod out of the rod holder and begins to fight the fish.

Is this legal?

The answer is **“NO!”** IGFA rules state: “If a rod holder is used and a fish strikes or takes the bait or lure, the angler must remove the rod from the holder as quickly as possible. The intent of this rule is that the angler shall strike and hook the fish with the rod in hand.” There can be a “grey area” such as when a fish “commits suicide” by hooking itself on the strike. But this is more likely to occur when the drag has been set in the strike position. Still, IGFA rules require a “reasonable” time to pick up the rod from the rod holder. In the case above, the angler could have picked up the rod, fed the fish line, and tightened the drag. Clearly, the angler did not “strike and hook the fish with rod in hand.”



Angler Waiting on the Strike.

2023 Pescadora Billfish Championship and Quepos Observer Training Course

On Tuesday, February 14th, 2023 IGFTO President Steve Hargett, IGFTO Treasurer, Reese Bowles and IGFTO member Maria Jimenez conducted an Observer Training Course at Marina Pez Vela, Quepos Costa Rica.

13 new IGFTO members participated and eventually worked their first tournament during the 2023 Pescadora Billfish Championship.

Please welcome the following new members: Karen Behnke, Max Bocanegra, Larry Brownyard, Ed Castella, Chelsea Hagan, Ashely Irwin, Jorge Jimenez, Thomas LaMoreaux, Shane Ransom, Danial Rodriguez, Frank Shade, Matt Tyner, and Byran Willman.

On Thursday, February 16th, 2023 the registration and kickoff party began for the 5th annual Pescadora Billfish Championship. Competition began the next day and concluded on Saturday with the crowning of the 2023 champion. A gala awards ceremony and dinner was enjoyed by all owners, anglers, mates, and IGFTO observers and guests.

For more information, videos and pictures, visit: [PESCADORA](#)

IGFTO is looking forward to returning in 2024. All members should mark your calendar for next year. The tournament dates will be February 15–17, 2024.

Less Sailfish, More Tuna? An Update on Costa Rican Fisheries Management

Story by Art McDonald

With 10 IGFTO Tournaments, Costa Rica is the epicenter of our activities on an annual basis. Primary to our participation are the number of hook-ups per day, compared to many of the other areas we observe. What makes Costa Rica so intriguing are the number of sailfish that populate the Pacific Coast in the early months of the year.

One sail every 32 seconds

Was it really seven years ago, during the second leg of the Los Sueños Signature Series that 43 boats, fishing three eight-hour days released 2,753 sailfish – an average of one fish released every 32 seconds? It does not seem possible, does it? Sadly, those numbers were the extreme. In recent years, we have seen declining numbers of sailfish. Do not get me wrong – today, raising 15–20 fish a day isn't bad, but whatever happened to the “really great old days when we used to see 60?”

In the last five or six years, the number of sailfish teased up by sport fishing boats has declined between 60 and 70 percent. At the same time, the commercial harvest of dead sailfish has risen by 126%. How can the numbers be down for one sector and up so much for another? The difference is how they fish. Sport fishermen are trolling, attracting the fish to chase teasers and baits – fishing six to eight hour days, while the commercial fleet soaks baits for hours or even days on lines with hundreds of hooks (classic “long-lining”) with no discrimination as to species.

Costa Rican Sailfish Conservation

Sailfish are highly migratory, and any management plan should consider a regional approach. Costa Rica lags behind other neighboring countries when it comes to sailfish conservation. In Panama, the commercialization of all billfish is prohibited. Nicaragua prohibits the harvest of any sailfish or blue marlin. Honduras, Belize, Mexico, and the United States all have billfish conservation measures in place. In Guatemala, it is unlawful for the commercial fleet to possess any sailfish—a position taken

by the minister of tourism in recognition of the value seen in sailfish to the tourism industry.

All countries of the Central Americas have some degree of protection against the commercial use of sailfish. Costa Rica's regulations are relatively lax, realizing the value of sailfish as a catch and release species for the tourist sector. A study conducted in 2018 estimated the value of sport fishing to the Costa Rican economy at over \$500 million, employing over 18,000 citizens in the industry. Unfortunately, Costa Rica continues to allow commercial harvesting and sale in the national market.

Hopeful Developments for Sport Fishing

A campaign has started to prohibit the commercialization of sailfish in Costa Rica. It is illegal for recreational anglers to possess a harvested sailfish. It is also illegal to remove them from the water for a photo. Previously, sailfish were included as part of the Canasta Basica (Basic Basket) which is a list of the most popular food products that are included in the Costa Ricans diet and are taxed at a low rate. These are the bi-products of domestic commercial fishermen who employ the non-discriminatory long-lines that we often see offshore. As a step in the right direction, the Costa Rican Fishing Federation (FECOP), the National Chamber of Tourism (Canatur), and the Costa Rica Tourist Marina Concessionaires Association (CRMAR) have excluded sailfish from the "Basket."

Since 2009, exporting sailfish has been prohibited; however, it can be sold for consumption in Costa Rica's Central Market allowing commercialization of the resource. This is not to say that domestic commercial fishing (long-lines) have been prohibited, but the new laws recognize the economic importance of the sport fishing industry. This represents a step in the right direction! The next step is to ban the long-line commercials entirely.

Recent Tuna Reform Law

Secondly, the government recently passed legislation called the "Tuna Reform Law." Previously, tuna seiners were permitted to work just 12 miles from the coast. A Presidential Decree in 2014 moved them 45 miles offshore. Unfortunately, a Presidential Decree could be changed at any time. If it were a law, it would be much more difficult to change. The new Tuna Reform Law (not a decree) requires the tuna seiners to be at least 80 miles offshore. This is great news for recreational fishermen! The incidental by-catch of tuna nets includes many species including marlin, sailfish, dorado, and wahoo. Now we have 80 miles of ocean from the coast to fish unmolested by the tuna fleet.



The time has come for Costa Rica to fall in line with the other Central American countries and give up sailfish as a commercial species once and for all. We could easily return to those incredible days when we experienced 40-60 hook-ups and Costa Rica could recapture the title of sailfish "Capital of the World!"

A Costa Rican sailfish leaps for life during Leg 2 of the 2023 Los Sueños Triple Crown. Photo courtesy of Pepper Ailor.

IGFTO observes in the Guatemala Billfish Invitational for the First Time

Story By Terry O'Neill

It was Saturday, December 10, 2022. It was the second day of the 7th annual Guatemala Billfish Invitational Tournament held at Pacific Fins, formally known as Fins and Feathers, in the town of Iztapa. We were heading due South on the *Gypsy* from Puerto Quetzal about 35 miles offshore when the captain yelled, "right long," and one of the anglers picked up the rod and put it in free spool. He waited a few seconds and slowly pushed the drag up. As the line became taught, I could see a trench being made in the water perpendicular to our course and plenty of splashing.

The dorsal fin was hidden

At this point, I could not identify the fish; it might as well have been a dorado or some other species. The fish continued to take line and then suddenly leaped out of the water. It was so far away, if I wanted to communicate with it I would have had to send a telegram. The fish had its back towards me, and the dorsal fin was hidden by its body, but I at least could spot a bill.

Was it a marlin?

The captain yelled "marlin!", and with that, I started replaying in my mind what I had seen. Was it a marlin? The captain did not appear to be the kind of guy that sees a marlin at the end of every line, but I had no indication to convince me it was a marlin, only a billfish. Perhaps on the next jump, I could positively I.D. the quarry.

The entire crew was thinking it was a marlin, and for a good reason, a marlin was worth 300 points and a sailfish only 100; therefore, if this were a marlin, it would give them a significant advantage.

The fish went deep

The fish went down deep, and Nick, the angler, had never caught a billfish. As the minutes ticked away, Nick was making slow progress retrieving the line. Apparently, the fish was tail-wrapped, and Nick was wearing out.

Finally, the bright orange monofilament yielded the double line and, eventually, the clear monofilament leader. At that point, I had to announce that I had not identified the fish and needed to do so before it was released. When the leader passed through the rod tip, I called "release!" but reminded all that I still needed to see the fish.

The fish was about 30 feet down, and Nick no longer had the strength to continue to reel. Another angler, Matt, asked if he could take the rod and bring the fish to the surface. What would you have done in this situation?

The pressure was on me

The pressure was on me. I had not identified the species, and this was the first time IGFTO observers were invited to participate in this tournament. An incorrect call might cause the tournament to never invite us back. The rules also required video of all marlin releases, and the boat had a GoPro camera in the water. Apparently, the tournament officials were not convinced of our skills. The tournament theme was billfish conversation, and I was the one who would be responsible for the death of this billfish if we were unable to release it soon.

Technically it was a caught fish since the leader had passed through the eye of the rod tip. According to IGFA rules, anyone could touch the leader. By extension of this rule, the rod and reel should also be included. I agreed that Matt could bring the fish to the surface.

It was still a chore to bring the fish to the surface. Fearing the fish was about to drown, I suggested the reel be put in full drag, and if it broke off, I would identify it by what could be seen on the video. In the worst case, it was a billfish, so 100 points.

Finally, the fish came to the surface

Finally, the fish came to the surface, and the dorsal fin unfolded to reveal a huge sailfish. I have seen my share of Pacific sailfish, and in general, they are huge compared to the Atlantic species, but this one was a granddaddy or, most likely, a great-grandmother. It is little wonder the captain thought it was a marlin due to its size. It had been tail hooked, and the crew removed the hook. I asked if she could be revived, and Matt took her by the bill, and with the boat in gear after a few minutes, she was revived and swam away.

At the end of the tournament, a total of 1,078 sailfish and 5 marlin were released. The tournament director has invited us back next year. I am looking forward to it.



IGFTO President Steve Hargett presents Niels Erichsen, Managing Partner of Pacific Fins Resort and Marina, with a \$2,500.00 donation. This was the first time that the IGFTO participated in this event. Steve commented "we look forward to making the Guatemala Billfish Invitational an annual event for the IGFTO."

An Interview with Art McDonald

By Bob Stimolo

Art McDonald has served on the IGFTO Board of Directors as Vice President since joining the organization in 2009. At the annual meeting in Los Sueños this past January, Art announced that he will retire from the Board at the end of 2023. Fortunately, for us, Art will continue as an IGFTO member.

We asked Art how he became involved in Bill fishing, and an IGFTO member. His response:

“I was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, with very limited fishing in my upbringing. My Mom and Dad would take off for six weeks during the winter, and vacation in Miami, Florida. I would stay with my aunt and uncle in Cincy. During their travels, they ran into a gentleman by the name of George Hamway, who was a Fishing captain and owned a head boat and two charter boats at the Bakers Haulover Inlet in North Miami. George would invite my parents to go fishing a few times during their visit and they ended up becoming very good friends. Each year when Mom and Dad would go to Florida, they would visit George. They would go to the racetrack and even took trips together to Cuba. I met George when he and his girlfriend came to Cincinnati on a few occasions.

In high school, I had a good athletic career, which resulted in my being awarded a basketball scholarship to the University of Miami (The U!). On the first Sunday of my first week at UM, George telephoned me, insisting that I meet him that afternoon in time to go fishing on the party boat *Popeye*. He insisted, so I made the 45 minute drive up to Bakers Haulover.

Billy Hamway and fishing on the *Popeye*

He introduced me to his nephew, Billy Hamway, who was running the *Popeye* and, occasionally, one of the charter boats. The whole Hamway family were fishermen – first running charters out of New Jersey before moving their operation to Miami. Billy had gotten his 100-ton Captain’s License at 18 and was just out of the Army – he was only five years older than I was. I did not catch a fish that first day, but really enjoyed the whole experience. At the end of the day, Billy invited me to come anytime I wanted to and bring friends, including teammates, or a girlfriend.

I had only been on campus for less than a week. Between the rigors of class and traveling with the basketball team (sometimes for as long as two weeks at a time), my free time was stretched thin. During the first semester, I managed to go a few times, and even caught my first kingfish.

It became evident to me that I was not bound for the NBA! Our season ended in February and I found myself fishing at least one day a weekend for the rest of the second semester. College basketball takes its toll with travel and practices, so I decided to stay in Florida over the summer to take some night classes. When George Hamway learned this, he said, “good then you’ll come up here and work for me, and I’ll teach you to be a fisherman!” I decided “what the heck” – so I did! I learned to tie various knots, wrap wire, how to fillet fish, gaffing techniques, dealing with massive tangles (“spaghetti”) etc. – I ate it up!

I was hooked for life!

I also learned how to interact with people! The second summer I also worked the *Popeye* and made my first trip to the Bahamas for some incredible bottom fishing. During the summer of my junior year, I was offered a job on one of George’s charter boats, the *Fascinating Lady* with Billy Hamway as captain. This was a totally new experience including trolling baits, kite fishing, and fishing with wire line. We caught Wahoo, lots of Sailfish, and an occasional White Marlin. I also had my first encounter

with a Bimini Blue Marlin (approximately 350 lbs.), and learned not to wire a fish with my arms extended! Later, we fished the annual Tuna run in Cat Cay and I had my first chance to wire a 600 lb. Bluefin Tuna. To put it bluntly – I was hooked for life! Billy Hamway instilled in me the passion for big game fishing that I have to this day!

After graduation, I went into the real estate commercial mortgage business – first, as a lender and subsequently as an independent broker. Times were good and I did well enough to buy my first boat, a 31' Bertram Moppie. Over time, this was followed by a 35' Bertram, 42' Bertram, and 46' Hatteras. I liked being the Captain, and with my experience as a mate, I found great pleasure in helping my guests catch fish. That was more important than me catching anything.

Chasing world records with Captain Skip Smith

Along the way, I met a number of great fishermen who opened a lot of doors during my travels. One that stood out was a fellow by the name of Dick Love. Dick and I fished Panama, the Bahamas, St. Thomas, and Turks & Caicos Islands. We fished a ton of tournaments, mostly in the Bahamas and St. Thomas, then the Blue Marlin capital of the world. Dick eventually hired Skip Smith off the famous *Hooker* and built him a new 48' G&S named *The Sound Machine*. We chased after world records and I watched a master captain in Skip (who has 60 some billfish world records under his belt). His instincts and boat handling were impeccable. I swear he could talk to the fish! I learned a great deal from Skip!

A beautiful blond from Nashville

In 2002, I made a life decision to leave Miami after almost 40 years. I sold my company in 1998 and was thinking of moving north along the eastern Florida coastline (Fort Lauderdale, Delray Beach, Jupiter, and so forth) when fate intervened. At the home opener of the Miami Dolphins in September of 1999, I met a beautiful blond from Nashville, TN. She was a season ticket holder for the Dolphins and was madly in love with Dan Marino. We became acquainted at the game and, since she had four seats, she invited me to the next game vs the Buffalo Bills on Monday Night Football. I accepted with the proviso that she would accompany me to dinner the night before; and that is how I met Roxanne! We dated long distance for two years when I moved to Nashville in 2002. It was 400 miles away from salt water. No one in my circle of fishing friends could believe it. Roxanne and I were engaged later that year and married in 2003. I ended up joining her family business that owned a Ford auto dealership. We had that until it was sold in 2017.

Becoming an Observer

What does a person with salt water running through his veins do when he is far off the water? I had thoughts of getting back on the water, seeing old friends, and getting back into the fishing. My friend, and fellow IGFTO member, Captain Charlie Kluck and I took the IGFA Observer class. I attended several tournaments and was taken back by the lack of experience on the part of most of the “observers.” It was in Venezuela, in 2008 while observing in Rick Alvarez’s La Guaira Shootout that I met Bob Malerba and John Treat who were among the founding fathers of the IGFTO. We chatted about forming a new group of qualified observers with emphasis on experience – especially billfish experience! The rest is history – from a fledging beginning with 16 initial members, IGFTO has grown to over 250 qualified observers – the largest organization of its kind in the world!

I was honored to be asked to join the Board of Directors in 2019, as Vice President, where I am responsible for membership and the Atlantic & Caribbean Tournaments. I have gotten back on the water, seen some old friends, and made many more new ones. I have celebrated numerous on-board

experiences, and great fishing. I am also honored to include my son, Art Jr., grandson, Hayden Mulder, and Son-In-law, Vaughn Mulder as fellow IGFTO members. Is there anything better than watching a teased blue marlin engulf a pitched bait 30 feet from the transom? Nope!

In 2021, I experienced a life-threatening infection that almost cost me my life. It was time to reflect on life's challenges and maybe take a step sideways. I made a decision to make my current term as an IGFTO director my last. My term will expire in January 2024. We plan on traveling and spending more time in our Cape Coral, FL, vacation home. I am learning a completely new type of shallow water fishing for Tarpon, Snook, Redfish, and Seatrout. Rest assured, I will continue my involvement with IGFTO – a wonderful organization. Can't get rid of me that easy!"



*Art and Wife Roxanne on the **Huntress** in Kona, Hawaii.*



Art hooked up to a Blue Marlin in Costa Rica.

Tournament Number 3 in Los Sueños Proves to be a Charm Story by Bob Smith

Los Sueños Marina and Resort is a premier fishing and lifestyle destination tucked between two mountain ridges that meet an ocean cove. This body of water naturally resembles the shape of a crescent moon. The resort's home is Costa Rica, a country blessed with natural beauty and ecological diversity. In many parts of this small Central American country, green mountains drop to white and grey sand beaches, then to turquoise waters.

For big game anglers, some of the biodiversity includes jumbo Yellowfin Tuna, Pacific Sailfish and Black, Blue, and Striped Marlin. Sometimes the abundance of Dorado is a curse and other times this athletic creature is a blast – giving the hardest of hard-core fishermen an adrenaline bang. Near shore, just beyond the breakers, Roosterfish and Cubera Snapper forage.

Los Sueños translates as “Dreams”

The English translation of Los Sueños is “dreams” – suggesting, it seems, that the resort and marina is a place of highest attainment, maybe, even heavenly. The marketing folks of Los Sueños use two words to describe the destination. “Beyond Compare” is the tagline. The name and accompanying slogan sound a bit boastful because they are.

Yet, Los Sueños' proclamation matches what one finds. The masterfully designed resort is par excellence. It combines the best of pelagic fishing, golf, water activities, and luxury lifestyle. Even though marketing promises often fall short, Los Sueños may well be "beyond compare".

The artists who designed Los Sueños chose the perfect canvas: Costa Rica, with its raw, unadulterated beauty. Los Sueños would not be Los Sueños without Costa Rica. If the resort were located in Boca Raton, it would be just another gorgeous, five-star joint. The juxtaposition of Costa Rican (also known as "Tico") culture with a first-class, North American lifestyle makes Los Sueños all the more majestic.

I first visited and fished out of Los Sueños in November, 2005, a few years after its opening. My work and passion for offshore fishing led to a strong relationship with the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA), which was financially backed by Viking Yachts and the Healey Family, as well as Johnson and Towers and the Johnson Family. I served in the New Jersey General Assembly as Chairman of the Natural Resources Committee -- the legislative committee charged with fisheries management.

Los Sueños was "the place to be"

The talk among sport fishing elites, at the time, was that Los Sueños was "The Place" to be. It was the Billfish Capital of the World. Yes, of course, it hosted a golf course, elegant housing and fabulous dining experiences, but it was really meant to be a billfishing club. It was a pelagic paradise frequented and inhabited by the captains of industry, real estate developers, investment bankers and other entrepreneurial types.

Seventeen years after my first visit to Los Sueños, the presenting sponsor of the Signature Triple Crown, I arrived back as an International Gamefish Tournament Observer (IGFTO). This would be tournament number three for me, having had the 69th San Juan International Billfishing Tournament and the 28th El Salvador International Billfish Tournament as observer experience. Even though I had hooked and landed a fair share of White Marlin in the Atlantic and Sailfish in the Pacific, most would consider my observing and billfish experience limited. Certainly, this was true by Triple Crown standards.

Signature Triple Crown is the Major League of Sportfishing

This was the Major League of sportfishing bar none. Accordingly, my excitement was only exceeded by my trepidation. It can be intimidating. It was intimidating. The enchantments and abundance of cheer in the air belie the seriousness of the contest. This was a winner-takes-all contest -- that is, all of the bragging rights and accompanying status of top billfisher. I do not believe that the Owners give too much thought to the prize money. The thrill of victory, itself, is the incalculable motivating factor.

I succeeded and tapped down the jitters in two ways. I drew upon my experience as a lawyer and the training I received from IGFTO. Practicing law taught me composure -- how to keep cool when the thermostat rises. The IGFTO taught me the nuts and bolts and technical aspects of being a qualified observer. I remembered to be a good guest on the boat, to be invisible and to be a credible witness. Importantly, I memorized key IGFA rules and made it my business to understand the tournament rules. The tournament directors requested that the captains rate the observers after each day.

The Mission of IGFTO

I joined IGFTO because I believe in its mission. The organization's purpose is to conserve and protect gamefish around the globe. In just one week, IGFTO observers witnessed 1,123 billfish releases between the Ladies Only Tournament and Leg 1 of the Signature Triple Crown. With skilled anglers, captain and crew, along with an observer on many boats, most of the sailfish and marlin were released rapidly. Almost without exception, I was able to identify the fish species after the line came tight. The bite of the circle hook often sends these pelagics into an angry aeronautical display. Early ID helps with quicker releases and less stressed fish.

To say that I did *not* join IGFTO to travel, enjoy the fellowship of sportsmen and to learn from the best would be a plain lie. The beauty is that the goals of IGFTO and personal fulfilment intersect naturally. It is a symbiosis of sorts. For others interested in the conservation of game species, hanging out with fascinating people and having a front-row seat to the top billfishing in the world, joining IGFTO and becoming a certified observer is something to fully consider.



IGFTO observers attend the Captain's Meeting for the Los Sueños Signature Triple Crown Tournament, Leg 1. Tournament Director Ashley Bretecher is centered, row two, fifth from the left. IGFTO President Steve Hargett is kneeling in the first row, second from the right. Photo courtesy of Pepper Ailor.

Need to contact one of the IGFTO Directors, navigate here: [DIRECTORS](#)

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