

The IGFTO Observer ~ January 1, 2025 - to - March 31, 2025



Observing Today...Conserving for Tomorrow

The IGFTO Observer

A Newsletter for International Game Fish
Tournament Observers



~Volume 14

Edition 1~



Los Sueños Sunrise. Photo Credit: Evan.

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2025 Pescadora Billfish Tournament

Story by: Art McDonald

Forty-nine IGFTO members attended the 2025 Pescadora Billfish Championship. The event was held from February 20-22 at Marina Pez Vela, Quepos, Costa Rica. The two-day tournament is the brainchild of Samantha

Mumford, who recognized that the number of female anglers worldwide was increasing each year. At the same time, the available women-only billfish tournaments were scarce. To encourage women who were hesitant to compete against the "pros," Samantha made the tournament a two-tiered event. Women could choose to hook their billfish (IGFA rules), or they could allow someone else to hook them (labeled a "hook and hand" category).

The first event in 2020 drew 34 boats and saw the release of 339 billfish. This was followed in 2021 with 26 boats, releasing 421 billfish, and 2022 with 40 boats, releasing 323 billfish. In 2023, 52 boats released 355 billfish, and in 2024, 61 boats released 717 billfish. Over those 5 years, more than 10 billfish per boat were hooked and released. The totals this year were even more impressive.

The tournament kicked off Thursday night with the observers, anglers, & crew reviewing the rules in detail. This was followed by a fun meet and greet of all participants. Lines went in Friday at 8:00 AM, and then it started - hookups galore! Fish were released almost constantly - doubles and triples. The women "lit up the joint" - and it continued all day until the call for lines out at 3:30 PM. This was just the beginning.

Day 2 followed in a similar style - there were so many releases that the captains had trouble calling them in - the radio was jammed with calls. When the smoke cleared, *Pura Vida* claimed first place with 6,450 points, followed by *Kelly Dawn* with 6,300 points. *Sea Duction* took third place with 6,220 points. A tournament record 1,741 billfish were released, an average of more than 32 billfish per boat. For those of you who are mathematicians, this works out to 116 releases per hour, just shy of two releases each minute or one release every 30 seconds - wow! Lots of champagne corks popped at the lavish awards banquet on Saturday night..

Mark your calendars for the 2026 event - it will be held February 19-21, 2026 - you will not want to miss this one!



Welcome to Quepos. Photo Credit: Evan.

IGFTO Observer First Experience

Story by: Mark Janocha

It is 4 am on January 23, and my alarm is ringing, but I wasn't sleeping anyway. It's the first day of Leg 1 of the Signature Triple Crown at the Los Sueños Marina in Costa Rica. It's also my first experience as an observer for IGFTO. Along with a contingent of friends and fellow observers from Ocean City, MD, I arrived earlier in the week. We had time to experience the food, the culture, and the amazing sights this beautiful country has to offer. The observer training course and testing I experienced last summer gave me the tools and confidence I needed to do my job. Yet I still felt some apprehension about what lay ahead. Now it's time to get to work.

Arriving at the marina, each observer is given our boat assignment for the day, along with the names of the captain and anglers. I am assigned to a local team in the tournament. I make my way down to the boat, and there is already a buzz of activity on the dock. I find my boat, introduce myself, and request permission to board. The captain welcomed me aboard and showed me around the boat. He introduced me to the rest of the crew and anglers. I found myself repeating their names over and over in my head so I could readily remember them when I make an entry in my logbook. Soon enough, the diesel motors are fired up, and we cast off dock lines and make our way out of the marina. The captain and team have already identified an area within the tournament-specified 50-nautical mile radius where they will begin their quest.

Lines In - Hooked Up!

It is 8 am, and "Lines In" and the efficiency of the crew is apparent as the baits, teasers, and dredges are quickly deployed. This is what we

came here for. Now we are fishing! It is now about 30 minutes in, and we have our first hook-up. With pen in hand, I quickly note it in my logbook. Hook-up time....Check! Angler...Check! Species...I don't know??? I just see a bent rod and a lot of line peeling off the reel. Finally, the fish breaks the surface almost a football field away, but it's quite apparent by its waving dorsal fin and dancing acrobatics that we have our first sailfish. Species ID...Check! The angler regains the line quickly as we back down on the fish. I am watching the line from the rod tip down into the water. Soon enough, the double line and leader are in view. Just a few more turns of the reel and I am screaming "Release". The captain radios the release, and I note the confirmation number in my logbook. My first fish as an IGFTO observer!

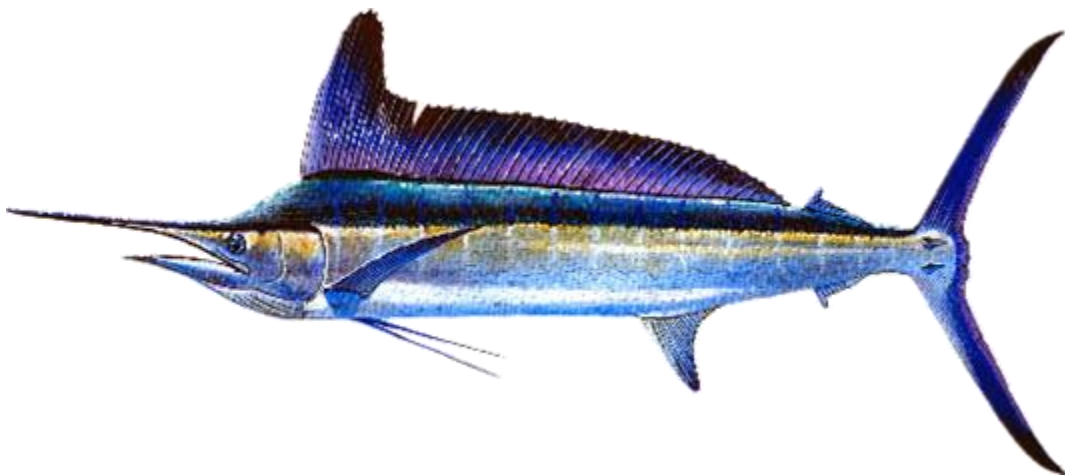
Blue Marlin Freight Train

Another twenty minutes pass, and we are hooked up again, but this is different. The fish breaks the surface and runs like a freight train. Blue Marlin! For the team, the drill is mostly the same. Hook-up; re-gain line, back down, release. Finally, it is approaching 4 pm, and we hear the countdown on the VHF radio. It is "Lines Out". We end the day with 11 sailfish and 1 blue marlin.

As we head back, I transcribe the day's activity onto the official scorecard. Once back at the dock, the captain reviews the scorecard, signs off and completes the observer evaluation with some very positive comments. The following days of the tournament are much the same- amazing world-class boats, awesome captains and crews, and new friends from around the world. My level of confidence as an observer rises quickly. I think I can get used to this!

Bet You Didn't Know - Spearfish

Story by: Art McDonald



Longbill Spearfish - Credit: Carey Chen

Certainly, in the lives of fishermen, the most elusive of all billfish species is the spearfish. Spearfish consist four visually and genetically distinct subspecies: the Atlantic Longbill spearfish (*Tetrapturus pfluegeri*), the Roundscale spearfish (*Tetrapturus georgi*), the Shortbill spearfish (*Tetrapturus angustirostris*), and the Mediterranean spearfish (*Tetrapturus belone*). All are considered deep-water, open-ocean fish found in most temperate and tropical climes, along the continental shelf and current lines. Spearfish can be distinguished from most other billfish species by its lean, lightweight body (rarely exceeding 80 lbs.). Equipped with the shortest bill of all the billfish, they have a dorsal fin that is less than 50 percent of its body height, higher than that of a marlin and lower than that of a sailfish. Common for all variations is that the dorsal fin is bright blue with no spots.

While spearfish exist in many oceans, they are not abundant. They are rarely caught except near Hawaii, the Canary Islands, and in the Mediterranean Sea. Shortbill spearfish live in the Pacific and Indian oceans, while the Mediterranean spearfish live in the Mediterranean Sea. Roundscale spearfish live in the Atlantic and the western Mediterranean, near Portugal and Spain, and closely resemble white marlin.

All spearfish are surface feeders, eating small or medium fish and squid. They are thought to mature at two years old and rarely live past three years old. The maximum age may be up to five years, but it is not very common. Little is known about spearfish due to low catch rates. Spawning activity, migrations, and adaptability factors are virtually unknown. Here is what is known of the characteristics of each of the four types of spearfish:

Roundscale Spearfish:

- Once identified as a "Hatchet Marlin" and thought to be a mutation of a white marlin and blue marlin, it was not until 2006 that the scientific community confirmed that a Roundscale spearfish is a different species from White Marlin. Recent samples taken at the White Marlin Open Tournament found that 31% of identified White marlin were Roundscale spearfish. They inhabit the Atlantic Ocean from Europe to the Gulf of America and Caribbean Sea to Venezuela.
- Roundscale spearfish has an abbreviated dorsal fin that is not tapered at the end like a blue marlin. The pectoral fins are sharp (not rounded like a White marlin) and resemble the pectoral fins of a Blue marlin. The anal fin is rounded, much like a White marlin.
- Roundscale spearfish do not have "spots" on their dorsal fins like a white marlin.
- As their name suggests, the Roundscale spearfish has rounded scales (not easily seen).

- The operative "acid test" is the fact that the anal vent is approximately 5" forward of the anal fin, while the anal fin on a white marlin is 1" above the anal vent.
- The "All Tackle" record stands at 70 lbs. 0 oz.

Shortbill Spearfish:

- Shortbill spearfish are a species native to the Indian and Pacific oceans, with occasional reports of them from the Atlantic Ocean (South Africa).
- They are the easiest of all the spearfish to identify as their bill is short, almost non-existent - barely longer than its lower jaw, and the dorsal fin is shorter than that of any of the billfishes.
- They are called "Chuckers" or Hebi in Hawaii.
- Hawaii is one of the only areas in the world where a spearfish can be caught predictably - usually in the early spring. Of the 20 reported IGFA world records, 11 Shortbill spearfish weight classifications were caught in Kona, Hawaii, while 9 were caught in either Australia or New Zealand.
- There are 3 World Record vacancies for Shortbill spearfish: men's 130 lb, and women's 2 lb. and 130 lb.
- The "All Tackle" record stands at 97 lbs. 7 oz caught in Barrier Bank, New Zealand.

Longbill Spearfish:

- The scientific name of Longbill spearfish is *Tetrapturus Pfluegeri*, which honors famed taxidermist Albert Pflueger, Sr, who identified the species in 1957. It is sometimes called the Atlantic spearfish.
- Longbill spearfish inhabit the eastern and western Atlantic oceans between 40 degrees N (Massachusetts/Spain) and 35 degrees S (Brazil/S Africa).
- It is characterized by a long, slender body with a bill a tad shorter than a sailfish and a prominent dorsal fin that is spiked like a Blue Marlin but tapers down the length of its body to above the second dorsal fin, closer to the tail. It's anal and pectoral fins are pointed like a blue marlin
- Of the 15 IGFA classes, 11 World Records come from the Canary Islands, with the remaining 4 from Madeira, Portugal (3) & Olhao, Portugal (1).

- The IGFA "ALL Tackle" records stand at 100 lbs.4 oz caught on the Isle of Lanzarote (Canary Islands). The current Men's 2, 4, 130 lb. and Women's 2,4,6, and 130 class lines are vacant.

Mediterranean Spearfish:

- As the name suggests, generally found in the Mediterranean Sea, and particularly common around Italy, these fish often travel in pairs (unknown as to male/female like dolphins (Mahi)).
- Commercial catches have been reported in the Atlantic Ocean near Madeira (Portugal) and in other areas of the Atlantic Ocean (unconfirmed). Also reported is a commercial fishery in the Mediterranean using harpoon methods.
- Mediterranean spearfish have an elongated and much compressed body with the shortest bill of all spearfish except the Pacific Shortbill. The tips to the dorsal fin and anal fins are rounded but not as distinct as a white marlin. As in all spearfishes the anal fin is considerably forward of the anal vent - as much as 6".
- The IGFA "All Tackle" record is 90 lb. 13 Oz.

Summary:

- Spearfish are a rare billfish and little is known about their basic biology, ecology, and migratory behavior. Catch rates are very low and only a few locations are known, within certain times of the year, to exist as a "fishery." One prominent individual, Dr. Martini Arostegui, an old friend from years past, is an accomplished fisherman (has held over 100 IGFA World Records) who lives in Coral Gables, Florida. He has worked with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution over the years, studying various marine species. He recognized the lack of biological information on the spearfish family and began his research a number of years ago. To date, there have only been three published studies on Spearfish, with Dr. Arostegui publishing two of the three on Mediterranean spearfish and Shortbill spearfish using satellite tag data. In conjunction with the IGFA (and their IGFA Great Marlin Race (IGMR), in collaboration with Stanford University, they have deployed six additional PSAT (pop-up Satellite Archival Tags) tags on Mediterranean spearfish and hope to deploy more on Shortbill spearfish in the future. There is a lot to learn about these "Mystery Marlins!"
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Member Profile - The Howell Family
Story by: Art McDonald

We're always eager to meet new IGFTO members and hear their history, adventures, and why they decided to join IGFTO. Meet the Howell family of new members: Tabitha & Kurt (mom & dad), Morgan, and Mason. Some history:

Kurt and Tabitha met in Ocean City, Maryland in 1998. Kurt, from Baltimore, MD, was working as a mate on a private offshore fishing boat. Tabitha, born in Central Pennsylvania, decided to spend a summer at the beach and was working at the same marina. One day Kurt invited her to join them on an offshore fishing trip and she agreed - has been addicted to offshore fishing ever since. Kurt and Tabitha got married in 2000 and shortly thereafter had two children, Morgan (now 25) and Mason (21).

Tabitha was forced to take a little break from fishing while raising their two children but as soon as they were able to stand, the kids started fishing as well. As a family, they fished for many years on a 25' center console. Kurt came to love shark fishing, and the Ocean City Shark Tournament quickly became his favorite - even fortunate to win it a few times. We know how those middle east coast seas can be and, after a particularly rough day on the water in their 25-footer, Tabitha started doing some research on a bigger boat and, as luck would have it, they were able to purchase a 36' sportfisher. A bigger boat meant they could now participate in many more of the tournaments in Ocean City, including the Ocean City Tuna Tournament, White Marlin Open, Huk Big Fish Classic, and the Mid Atlantic 500. Sometimes, they were even fortunate enough to place in several of the tournaments.

They made their first trip to Costa Rica in 2021 and the family absolutely fell in love with the place - what's not to like? They go back several times a year. Daughter Morgan spends winters in Costa Rica now working on various sport fishing boats. Through a group of friends in Ocean City, they were introduced to IGFTO Member (and Treasurer) Lynette Catha. Lynette shared her experiences as an IGFTO Observer, and it sounded like something they could really get into - so they took the OTC in Ocean City, Maryland in August of 2024. Their first observer trip was to Guatemala in December of 2024, and it was an experience they will never forget. Having never been to Guatemala they were able to see a new country and witness the tremendous fishing they have there.

After returning home to Ocean City, they shared their experiences in Guatemala and both children decided they wanted to be observers as well. Morgan completed the OTC in Quepos in February, 2025, and Mason is set to take the course in August, 2025 - and then there will be 4 Howells! It's truly a family affair, and they are proud to be a part of IGFTO.



L to R: Tabitha, Morgan, Mason, and Kurt. Photo Credit: Crew.

Want More Information? Navigate to: [IGFTO](#), upcoming [OTCs](#), and [FAQs](#).

Welcome Aboard!

Congratulations and Welcome Aboard to our 17 newest observers from Quepos and two classes in Los Sueños, C.R. As a reminder, Observers are always welcome and encouraged to attend one of our courses as a refresher at no charge. Our next OTC is in Fort Lauderdale, FL on May 3, 2025. Direct registration is available here: [OTC](#).

Rich	Basile	Fort Lauderdale	FL
Vincent	Beatty	Mercer Island	WA
Rick	Brennan	Grand Barachois	Canada
Karen	Comstock	Fort Lauderdale	FL
Rodger	Comstock	Fort Lauderdale	FL
Scott	Ferguson	Quepos	Costa Rica
Dean	Handy	Hamilton City	CA
Morgan	Howell	Berlin	MD
Sophia	Kopecky	Ocean City	MD
Henry	Marin	San Jose	Costa Rica
Chuck	McLaughlin	Corolla	NC
David	Perfetti	Los Sueños	Costa Rica
Mike	Phelan	Fort Lauderdale	FL
Sergio	Santorum	Satellite Beach	FL
William	Scheid	Bradenton	FL
Christina	Truitt	Bel Air	MD
Anthony	Uliana	Garribito	Costa Rica
Willy	Vega	Tamarindo	Costa Rica



IGFTO Observer Course #1 at Los Sueños. Photo Credit: Evan.



IGFTO Observer Course #2 at Los Sueños. Photo Credit: Evan.



IGFTO Observer Course at Marina Pez Vela, Quepos. Photo Credit: MPV Staff.

Have feedback or want to submit an article? Get in touch with our [webmaster](#).

Around the circuit.

Narrative and statistics by: Evan.

Since our inception 16 years ago, the IGFTO has witnessed the release of 76,460+ billfish and has incurred millions of dollars in personal expense in order to observe and conserve the species for future generations.

As of March 30, 2025, 174 observers attended seven separate tournaments in Costa Rica including the Los Sueños Ladies one-day tournaments, the Signature Triple Crown Legs 1, 2, & 3, and the Pescadora witnessing the release of 7,651 Billfish (7,476 Sailfish and 174 Marlins (all species)) in the Pacific.



IGFTO Observers at Leg 1. Photo Credit: Pepper Ailor.



IGFTO Observers at Leg 2. Photo Credit: Pepper Ailor.



IGFTO Observers at Leg 3. Photo Credit: Pepper Ailor



The 2025 Signature Triple Crown Champion Grand Prize. Photo Credit: Pepper Ailor.

Thanks for taking the time to catch up as we return following a very busy first quarter of the calendar year from Costa Rica. As always, Tight lines and all the Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Evan".

Evan A. Hipsley, Jr.
IGFTO President | Director | Webmaster
