



Observing Today...Conserving for Tomorrow

The IGFTO Observer

A Newsletter for International Game Fish Tournament Observers

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In this edition:

Ashley Bretecher - Tournament Director Extraordinaire
Central America Sportfishing Association Report
You Make the Call
El Salvador and Guatemala Observer Reports
IGFTO Observer Training and Refresher Course Updates
Around the Circuit, Annual Statistics

Get to know Tournament Director Extraordinaire Ashley Bretecher

Story by: Art McDonald

For us IGFTO observers the new year begins with our sights set on the first leg of the Los Sueños Triple Crown tournaments – a 3-leg series that begins in January and concludes in late March. It's the epicenter of the sport fishing world pitting some of the best anglers, captains, and crews on earth in pursuit of championship status. Besides the incredible fishing, there is also one constant – the smiling face of incomparable Tournament Director, Ashley Bretecher. The Triple Crown is her baby, and she runs it like a well-oiled machine.

Originally from Canada, Ashley grew up between Manitoba and Alberta before moving to Costa Rica with her family in 1996. Prior to beginning her college studies, she, briefly, worked for the Los Sueños Resort and Marina in 2001. Intending to move back to Canada, she began studying international relations and languages, but fate would play its hand, as while saving for the move, she returned to Los Sueños as an assistant to the receptionist in the marina office. It wasn't long before management recognized there was something special with this lady, and she went through a series of promotions, including handling the scoring and assisting in the original Billfish Series.

She took over in mid-2005 with the Signature Billfish Series and then had a second tournament, The Marlin Invitational Tournament established in 2008. Both tournaments were incorporated to create the current Triple Crown in 2014. The Ladies Only portion of the series (a one-day event prior to each leg of the Triple Crown) began in 2019. Throughout it all, Ashley became the face of

all Los Sueños tournaments. We look in wonderment at how she handles the radio, observer assignments, rules explanation & interpretation, and all the nuts & bolts that go into putting on such an event. To outside eyes, we marvel at how flawless all these things happen in such a complex environment. On top of all that, she oversees the entire marina operation, including office staff, maintenance crews, fuel dock, slip assignments, etc. If that's not enough on her plate, she is also on the board of Costa Rica's Marina Association and is a representative of the National Sport Fishing Commission, which advises the Costa Rican Fisheries Department (Incopesa)...whew!

In July 2025, the marina operation at Los Sueños was purchased by Safe Harbor Marinas – which owns and operates over 150 marinas and shipyards in the world's greatest waterfront destinations. The GREAT news is Ashley remains at the helm as the general manager – she's the "Gold Standard" of the operation. Our good friend, Eduardo Lizano has stepped into the role of marina manager.

As an IGFTO Honorary Member, she is also an advocate of the conservation aspects of the IGFTO's mission statement to preserve the billfish species for future generations. She recognizes the importance of live, qualified, observers for possible rules violations and species identification, to ensure the integrity of the competition. She is also the founder of the LSCOP (Los Sueños Certified Observer Program) where Costa Ricans and other locals who enjoy the sport, or mates and captains who work in the industry are qualified via a stringent written exam covering observer rules and protocols, as well as the Triple Crown and IGFA bill fishing rules.

Ashley marvels at the beauty of Costa Rica and has visited, virtually, every corner of the country with daughter, Kayla. She loves the landscapes, mountains, rivers, valleys, and, of course, the incredible animals – especially the numerous species of birds – in particular the Scarlet Macaws. Just this past summer, Ashley and Kayla visited Europe – landing initially in London before cruising through Brussels (for a K-pop concert), Geneva, Zermatt (to see the incredible Matterhorn), Verona, Venice, Prague, and Karlovy Vary. A whirlwind adventure packed into a short two and a half weeks.

Despite all these years in the industry, Ashley has limited time on the water. For so long she suffered from seasickness but is thrilled that she has now found her magic pill which allows her to get out there and enjoy the sport she is so close to. A couple years ago Ashley and Kayla had an unforgettable experience with friends aboard Bob and Bea Osborn's Sonny Boy. Capt. Christian and mate Sergio hooked a double header soon after the lines went in, and the girls were able to release their first sails together. If the memory wasn't enough, she was graced with a video of the day, filmed and produced by Rich Christensen of RK Creative. Her most recent fishing experience was on the Duffie's Billfisher; their incredible Capt. Noah and mates Seabass and Noah put her and Kayla on the fish and helped them release over twenty sailfish! There's no better way to learn than fishing with the best.

As for now, Ashley is leaning into her new role with Safe Harbor Los Sueños and looking forward to navigating the marina towards further success. Personally, she is focused on supporting Kayla as she finishes high school and explores all the beautiful opportunities in her path – not the least of which is a visit to Korea for more than just a K-pop concert.



Left and Right insets: The recognized and respected voice of tournament season, Ashley. Picture Credit: Pepper Ailor. Center inset: Ashley and Kayla on vacay.

IGFTO Participates in Regional Sport Fishing Alliance (CASA) Strategic Planning Meeting

Story by: Bob Smith

On December 12, 2025, IGFTO director Lynette Catha and I had the opportunity to participate in a strategic planning meeting of the Central American Sport Fishing Alliance (CASA). The meeting was held at the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) headquarters in Dania Beach, Florida. Participants included representatives from conservation, science, and sport fishing organizations. Their objective was to align priorities and advance a coordinated regional approach to sustainable sport fishing in Central America.

Agreement in Three Priority Areas

Key takeaways from the meeting included agreement to advance three priority areas: development of coordinated billfish stock assessments among member countries; creation of regional best-practice guidelines for sport fishermen focused on responsible catch and healthy release of billfish; and increased transnational lobbying and policy engagement to support sustainable sport fishing and conservation at the regional level.

IGFTO's involvement in this planning effort reflects its ongoing commitment to responsible sport fishing, credible data collection, and collaboration with regional and international partners. As CASA advances its 2026 initiatives, IGFTO will continue to engage where its expertise and observer-driven perspective can add value to conservation, fisheries management, and the broader sport fishing community.

CASA is a regional alliance formed to strengthen cooperation among sport fishing stakeholders, governments, and conservation organizations, with a focus on science-based management, policy coordination, and economic development in coastal communities. The December meeting centered on developing consensus around CASA's 2026 Work Plan and defining concrete actions to improve governance, conservation outcomes, and long-term sustainability for species of interest, particularly billfish.

IGFTO's Growing Role in Regional Conservation

IGFTO participation underscored its growing role in a regional conservation dialogue as well as a commitment to supporting initiatives that align observer programs, data integrity, and best practices across international boundaries. During the meeting, IGFTO director Catha was also identified as a future participant on CASA's Artificial Reef Committee.

Other organizations represented at the meeting included FECOP (the voice of sport fishing in Costa Rica), the Guy Harvey Foundation, IGFA, Pacific Fins Resort, Billfish Conservation Project–Guatemala, Club de Pesca del Caribe (Honduras), Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, Smith Optics, and the Sportfishing Championship (SFC). Collectively, participants emphasized the need for collaboration across sectors and countries, recognizing that migratory species and fishing-dependent economies do not adhere to national borders.

Editor's Note: IGFTO joined CASA in October 2025. For additional information, you're invited to visit: casa-alliance.org



CASA Strategic Planning Session Attendees. Picture Credit: Staff.



My First of Many Firsts (Hopefully) - El Salvador

Story by Carolyn Stash

When I joined the IGFTO, I did not think that four years would pass before I would observe in my first tournament. Captain Barbara Evans, a longtime observer and team member of the *Pink Ladies Breast Cancer Fishing Team* provided me with the courage to overcome my nervousness about observing. She encouraged me to go on an adventure with people who would become lifelong friends and “partners in crime” as observers.

When you form an immediate bond with people the first time you meet, you know you will be developing life-long friendships. Sharing a love of fishing and a belief in the conservation of this incredible resource makes the experience special.

An Early Day of Fun Fishing

Four of us decided to attend the tournament early to get in a day of fun fishing and a little training on my part. Fellow observers Tony and Tim picked me up, and the three of us headed to Miami, where we met Barbara. Then the four of us were off to observe in the *31st El Salvador International Billfish Tournament*.

Joan Vernon and her team - from transportation and accommodations to food and beverages- planned for every travel consideration. I never once worried that they might overlook any planning detail for this large-scale tournament in another country.

The Costa de Sol Hotel and Marina was the perfect venue for this event. Barbara, Tim, Tony and I fun-fished on day one, and each of us released at least four sailfish. With the help of these three, my confidence about being an observer grew over the entire day. “I can do this!”

Because of the relationships that Barbara built after attending over fifty tournaments, we were invited to pre-fish with the Brazilian team, *Los Hermanos*. Barbara and I released nineteen sailfish and a nice dorado by 2:30 in the afternoon.

The rest of the amazing group of twelve total observers started filtering in over the next days. We ate together, raised a few glasses, and truly enjoyed being around each other.

Tournament days

My first day was cut short by engine issues. I felt so bad that the family was not going to be able to fish this three-day tournament.

Day 2: My assignment was on *The King II* with Paco Saco, who started this tournament thirty-one years ago. It was a family affair with Paco, his sons, and his grandchildren on board. What an amazing day to hear stories about the *thirty-first El Salvador Billfish Tournament* and share the day with the family.

Day 3: The *Don Juan* was another family affair. So nice to see the El Salvadorian families work and play together through the generations. We were only able to get one blue marlin to the boat, but it was exciting as they always are.

After three days of intense competition, the winners were announced at one of the most lavish awards dinners that I have ever been to, complete with live music and fireworks. Team *Los Hermanos* was the winner of the sailfish division. Barbara and I were thrilled when we were invited on stage to celebrate with the team.

This was my first time as an observer, my first time to El Salvador, and my first time pre-fishing with a winning tournament team. However, it will not be my last time as an observer. It was a truly remarkable experience.



Left inset: Team Los Hermanos Captain and Crew along with Barbara Evans and Caryloyn Stash (center front) in their Pink Ladies Breast Cancer attire. Right inset: IGFTO Observers Barbara Evans, Karen LeCompte, Carolyn Stash, and Los Hermanos Captain Franklin Arrieta Jimenez. Picture Credits: Crew.



Guatemala Observer Report I

Article by: Morgan Howell

My first trip to Guatemala as an observer for the *10th annual Guatemala Billfish Invitational* was truly an experience I will never forget from start to finish, I made memories and friends I will forever cherish.

Starting Day 1, I was assigned to the boat *Uno Más* where I got to experience fishing with some southern gentleman who have experienced fishing and hunting all over the WORLD - finished out day one with some pretty slow fishing, but five new friends and some excellent stories to share on.

Day 2, I observed on the boat *Knot Work* with Captain Jimmy from Guatemala who shared a lot with me about his country. It was either our first or second fish of the day we lost an engine, that didn't slow them down though - it made for EPIC fishing, they still managed to finish the day with almost 20 sail fish fighting everyone of them in forward.

Day 3, THE *INTENSITY* - probably one of the coolest observing experiences I have had in my entire life and I was just watching! Captain Mike is one of the coolest people I have ever met and extremely knowledgeable in this industry as he goes all over the world. I could not say enough good things about this day, saw my first three blue marlins in Guatemala, they managed to release two - finishing the day with 27 sail fish and two blue marlins, winning 1st Place overall in the tournament!

Meeting and being able to celebrate these guys all in one was the cherry on top!

Day 4, *OUR FIRST ANNUAL OBSERVER SHOOTOUT* - I had the luxury of being placed with our very own Peter Van Dingstee as my team captain, and the best teammates Barbie Fischer and Jen Hybki. After watching everybody fish over the duration of the tournament it was our turn, and we came to PLAY!

The four of us fished our own rod throughout the duration of the entire day and our hard work prevailed as we made it to back to the dock to find out our "*Team Pete's Hen House*" were the 1st ever champions of an Observer Shootout... we had the best crew ever guiding us and teaching us - cannot thank them enough for all their hard work and competitiveness!

Our host, *Pacific Fins*, and our accommodations at the *Aero Club* were as a whole, the most accommodating places I have ever stayed, the staff could not have been any kinder to us, I had the luxury of spending my birthday in Guatemala during this experience and they made me feel absolutely special! I can't fully put into words how grateful I am for this opportunity and experience and I'm so stoked to get back down there!

Guatemala Observer Report II

Article by: Jenn Hybki

The 10th Annual Guatemala Billfish Invitational was my first time in Guatemala and my first chance to observe a tournament. I really had no idea what to expect. From the pick up at the airport to the drop off, this was a trip for the books.

On our ride to the resort, we rode with some of the returning tournament anglers and some seasoned observers. We had a little time to pick their brains. We arrived at *Pacific Fins Resort* and were ushered to a panga headed to the *Aero Club* with a solo rider, Mr. Guy Harvey. I have followed his work for over 30 years, so this trip was definitely off to a good start.

Upon arriving at the *Aero Club*, there was such a high-energy vibe. I love the energy that a tournament brings; fellow observer Lynette made sure to walk us around and introduce us to everyone. I ended up sitting at a table with the gentleman on my day one boat.

The three boats I was assigned to were the *Gringo*, *Gypsy*, and *Prime Hook*.

I could not have chosen three better boats to start observing on. Each boat had a different level of experience. My first crew were experienced anglers, a few lived in Guatemala. My second crew was interesting because you had a father and son, both Captains from North Carolina. They were instructing the other two anglers who had just started their fishing journey. The third and final day of the tournament was a learning experience. I had professional anglers. I watched them move around the cockpit like a well-oiled machine. All three crews were very welcoming. I enjoyed getting to *Pacific Fins* every night, seeing the crews you spent your days with, and going over your day.

The last day was our turn; the first observers' tournament, called *The Annual Observers Shootout*. We selected numbers at breakfast to see who our team captain would be. I was fortunate to draw the number that put me in *Pete's Hen House* (Elected Team name) with Peter Van Digstee, Barbie Fischer, and Morgan Howell on the *Legacy*. We had a great crew that kept the rods in our hands from lines in to lines out. Getting back to the dock, we learned we had won the tournament with sixteen sailfish and two very nice-sized mahis. A win is always a great way to end your day.

To say this trip did not disappoint is an understatement. I will always cherish the friends and memories made. Guatemala, I hope to see you again, and I look forward to wearing the blue shirt again.



Observer Shootout Team Pete's Hen House. Pictured L to R: Legacy Mate Ashley Teilborg, IGFTO Observers Morgan Howell, Barbie Fischer, Jen Hybki, and Peter Van Digstee. Many thanks to Pure Lure for their swag donations. Photo Credit: Crew.

You Make the Call

Article by: Art McDonald

So there you are, seated on the bridge of a large sportfish, observing a billfish tournament in Guatemala. This is an “all billfish release” tournament – meaning ANY billfish qualifies for points on a successful release. The anglers are seasoned, and you’ve been on this boat before – great experienced crew. It’s around 1:00 PM and you’ve had a pretty good day so far – 8 sailfish and 2 striped marlin – all released in good shape.

Suddenly, another sailfish appears in the spread attacking the daisy chain teaser on the right side. The captain hits the electric reel and the teaser quickly comes toward the boat – the sailfish is all over it. The angler on the right flat quickly positions his ballyhoo and presents it to the sailfish and WHAM, a solid hookup. The sailfish jumps but you notice something odd in the jumps before the fish sounds. As is common, the boat remains in gear as the crew is looking for multiple

hookups... meanwhile line is peeling off the hooked anglers reel.

There didn't appear to be any other fish in the spread, and the captain turns his attention to the hookup. This fish was stubborn and stayed down in the water column – the angler was unable to gain any line. 20 minutes went by with a stalemate and the crew wondered if the fish might be foul hooked or tail wrapped. The angler increased the drag tension and, slowly, began to gain line.

At about the 30-minute mark, the fish appeared and was, indeed, foul hooked in the mid tail region – it came up backward and appeared lifeless. The crew quickly unhooked the fish and attempted to “swim” it alongside the boat. There wasn't much hope that the fish would survive, but they “released it” and it, slowly, sank out of sight.

Did this fish count – or was there an IGFA violation?

Answer: The IGFA was consulted on this issue as to the question of whether or not a foul-hooked fish would qualify for a record. The answer was: Yes, a foul-hooked fish would qualify as long as the fish was not, **intentionally**, foul hooked or snagged. An example was given that, in high-speed trolling with artificial baits, many billfish (and some tunas) are unintentionally hooked outside the mouth which is not a violation.

This same scenario would come to play when a billfish becomes tail-wrapped, fights to exhaustion, and comes up unresponsive – it would still qualify. Remember, you are an observer, not a judge, and some tournaments have a release statement that the fish is to be able to swim away. Knowing it is not an IGFA violation to foul hook, or even have a fish tail wrapped, it would serve the purpose of bringing it to the attention of the Tournament Director for a final decision.

However, there is a crucial stipulation that might affect tournament results: *the fish must be able to swim away to count as a legitimate release*. Since the fish appeared lifeless and sank slowly out of sight, it seems there was some doubt about its ability to survive. If the tournament's release criteria state that the fish must be able to swim away (a common rule in many conservation-minded events), this could be a gray area.

Given the scenario:

- The fish was accidentally foul-hooked, so it doesn't break any IGFA rules about foul-hooking.
- The fish was released, but its condition was questionable.
- The final decision on whether the fish counts should be made by the Tournament Director, as they are the final authority in applying specific tournament rules (such as survival criteria after release).

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

Welcome Aboard!

Congratulations and Welcome Aboard to our seven newest observers who completed our Observer Training Class (OTC) in Fort Lauderdale, FL during November.

As a reminder, Observers are always welcome and encouraged to attend one of our courses as a refresher at ***no charge***. Our next scheduled OTC is in Quepos, Costa Rica, Tuesday February 17, 2026 just a few days before kickoff of the *Pescadora*. New Observer direct registration is available here: [OTC](#). Current observers should log in to [igfto.org](#) and select REFRESHER. ***Qualified*** applicants are welcomed to join IGFTO.

Anna	Bush	Bradenton	FL
Ben	Lazar	Woodstock	GA
Francis	Hamilton	Williamstown	NJ
Ansley	Bates	Saint Augustine	FL
Mike	McCarthy	Boca Raton	FL
Janice	Drimer	Cary	NC
Jeff	Watson	Vero Beach	FL

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

Around the circuit and yearly statistics - IGFTO achieved another new benchmark closing out calendar year 2025!

Statistics by: Evan A. Hipsley, Jr.

International Game Fish Tournament Observers, Inc. are both professional and amateur sport fishermen originally trained by the International Game Fish Association, now taught by IGFTO, in both species identification and tournament rules. In IGFTO's fifteen-year history, Observers have witnessed releases of 77,834 billfish [as of December 2025] (all species), and have incurred millions of dollars in personal expenses in order to observe and conserve the species for future generations.

C O N G R A T U L A T I O N S !!

2025 dispatched 240 Observers to 10 tournaments including: Costa Rica for six instances including three *Los Sueños Ladies Tournaments* and Legs One, Two, and Three of the *Signature Triple Crown*, Quepos for the *Pescadora*, Charleston South Carolina for the *HUK Billfish Cup*, El Salvador for the *31st International Billfish Tournament*, and Guatemala for the *10th Annual Guatemala Billfish Invitational*.

On the water, in real-time, IGFTO Observers witnessed the release of 9,274 billfish. Among these were 8,949 sailfish and 325 marlins (blue, black, and striped). Releases were observed in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. 2026 is shaping up in similar fashion with the tournament circuit kickoff in Los Sueños, Costa Rica January 19, 2026.

Thanks for taking a few minutes to catch up. As always, Tight lines, and all the Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Evan". The signature is stylized with a large, looped 'E' and a cursive 'van'.

Evan A. Hipsley, Jr.

Member Since 2014

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