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Observing Today...Conserving for Tomorrow

The IGFTO Observer

A Newsletter for International Game Fish Tournament Observers

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Los Sueños: The Crown Jewel of Big Game Tournaments

Story by: Art McDonald

Records Are Meant to Be Broken

If you were lucky enough to witness the February leg of the 2016 Los Sueños Signature Series, you would remember the madness: 43 boats, three 8-hour fishing days, and 2,752 releases. That worked out to virtually one release every 30 seconds — a record and living proof that this is the best tournament on the planet. The Los Sueños

Signature Series is the crown jewel of saltwater big game fishing. How much do you know about the history of Los Suenos? Please read on!

How It All Began

The story of Los Sueños starts in 1991, when real estate developer Bill Royster stumbled upon a 1,100-acre cattle ranch in Herradura Bay in the course of cruising the Pacific coast. At the time, Costa Rica's west coast had no major marinas — charter boats moored offshore and were boarded via panga. Bill recognized the diversity of the fishing and, with tremendous foresight, envisioned a major marina and real estate development.

Royster recognized the potential in both the excellent fishing and the real estate opportunity, and named the project Los Sueños ("The Dreams"). Of course, like anywhere in Latin America, things take time, and it took nearly a decade to turn that dream into reality. However, in 2000, the first government-approved marina in Costa Rica opened with 50 slips. Today, it has evolved into a world-class facility with 200 wet slips, 166 dry slips, and space for yachts up to 180 feet.



An aerial view of the marina at Los Sueños. Photo credit: Los Sueños.

Tournament Tradition

By 2004, the marina was bustling — 100 boats booked almost every day, with anglers reporting multiple hookups and many releases. A bill fishing tournament was the natural next step to showcase both the fishery and the community. Word quickly spread not only about the excellent fishing but also about the charm and beauty of the

development. An 18-hole golf course along with a first-class Marriott Hotel added credibility to the community.

From the start, Los Sueños led with innovation: adopting circle hooks to preserve billfish survival and later launching the three-leg Signature Billfish Series in 2014. With an average of 44 boats per series, it quickly became a *who's who* of the sportfishing world.



The IGFTO team of observers at the 2025 Triple Crown in Los Sueños. Photo credit: Pepper Ailor.

Raising the Standard: Observers & Fair Play

With so many fish released, photographs and videos weren't practical for validation. Tournament Director Ashley Bretecher and Royster pioneered the idea of on-board observers. Partnering with the IGFTO, Los Sueños brought in an average of 35 certified observers per leg to ensure all participants had a fair competition with regard to

certified releases, strict adherence to IGFA Rules and Regulations, and proper species identification.

Ashley, who joined the marina staff in 2002 and became Tournament Director in 2006, also founded the Los Sueños Observer Certification Program (LSOCP) to train Costa Rican fishermen in tournament rules. Many LSOCP graduates have joined IGFTO and have gone on to observe at release tournaments in Central America and around the world.

Welcoming the Ladies

Recognizing the growing number of female anglers, the Signature Series added a one-day Ladies Billfish Tournament in 2018, held the day before each leg. Since then, both participation and release numbers have climbed steadily, showcasing the skill and passion of women in the sport.



Ashley Bretecher, second from left, and associates ready to welcome observers to the 2025 Triple Crown. Photo credit: Pepper Ailor.

A New Chapter: Safe Harbor Acquisition

In July 2025, Los Sueños Marina was acquired by Safe Harbor Marinas, the world's largest owner and operator of marinas, with over 140 premier properties worldwide. The good news! Ashley Bretecher remains in charge — now as General Manager of the marina, still overseeing the tournaments. Her longtime aide, Eduardo Lizano, steps in as Marina Manager.

The Dream Lives On

From a cattle ranch in 1991 to a record-breaking tournament hub today, Los Sueños has truly earned its reputation as the flagship of big-game tournaments. With Safe Harbor's support and Ashley's steady leadership, the vision continues — bigger and better than ever.

You Make the Call

Article by: Art McDonald

You are an observer at a billfish tournament in beautiful Costa Rica. You are assigned to a well-known boat, although you have never been on it before. You arrive early in the morning and see the mates rigging baits in the cockpit. You ask for permission to board, and they both nod. You notice that they are Hispanic and make a mental note that communication might be a challenge. You also observe that both mates have slight builds.

You take off your shoes and step into the cabin where the anglers and the captain are enjoying coffee and doughnuts. Each greets you warmly and offers you a cup of coffee — you accept. You swap information about where you're from, the boat you drew yesterday, how many fish they caught, and so on. Before long, the lines are cast off, and you're heading out.

Lines are in at 8:00 a.m., and you take your position on the bridge. Within the first 15 minutes, you hear the shout — “Blue Marlin, left teaser” and there she is - all 350 lbs. of hungry, pissed-off blue marlin. The captain hits the electric reel, bringing in the teaser as the blue attacks it. The angler in the left corner gets ready to pitch a small bonito, just waiting for the teaser to reach the transom. The blue attacks the pitched bonito, immediately feeling the sting of the hook, and leaps out of the water.

The fight begins with a magnificent aerial display before she dives back to the depths. The next half hour is a tense back-and-forth battle with the fish down 200 feet, but suddenly the line starts to come toward the surface as the captain backs down the boat. Things happen quickly, with white water pouring over the transom. One of the mates moves to the transom, preparing to grab the leader. The angler is well over 6' 2",

but the mate standing next to him is no more than 5' 7".

As the leader approaches the rod tip, the mate tries to grab it, but he's too short. He quickly stretches to reach it but loses his balance. Instinctively, he grabs the rod tip with his left hand to prevent falling and makes contact with the leader with his right hand. He hangs on as the fish leaps out of the water, but, true to the nature of wiremen, doesn't let go. Two, then three, then three more wraps, and the fish is subdued. The second mate cuts the line near the base of the leader to free the Blue, and she swims off – a little sore in the mouth, but moving pretty well. You look at the captain and say... "Did you see that?"

What's your call? Key Points to Consider:

1. *IGFA rules:* According to the International Game Fish Association (IGFA), the mate must not touch the rod except to ensure the angler's stability during the fight. The moment the mate grabbed the rod tip, it was a violation of this rule.
2. *Consequence of actions:* According to IGFA rules, the fact that the mate touched the rod tip before securing the leader means that the fish was not yet officially caught. Although the fish was successfully released, the sequence of events invalidates the catch.
3. *Short versus tall anglers:* The height difference between the angler and the mate is notable. This scenario is common and highlights the importance of communication and teamwork. Ideally, the angler should have adjusted his stance or made more effort to help the mate reach the leader.

Final Call:

Considering these points, and the disqualifying act, it would be annotated in my log book, discussed with the Captain, and brought back to the tournament director / committee for ruling / decision if not in agreement. The mate touching the rod tip was a clear violation of IGFA rules, and preserving the integrity of the tournament is essential.

Additional Note: In competitive environments, it's essential to have protocols ready for situations like this. To prevent similar issues later, teams should practice techniques that account for differences in height among participants, improving safety and adherence to tournament rules. While I have never experienced this firsthand, I am aware of several disqualifications caused by this exact scenario. Specifically, this has

occurred multiple times in Central America.



Mate wires a wild marlin boatside.

In Memoriam

IGFTO was saddened to learn of the passing of Harry Sargeant Jr., one of the most accomplished anglers on the tournament circuit. Harry was the owner of *Black Gold*, a 65' custom American sportfish, famous in the Caribbean. Over the years, she won just about every major billfish tournament including the Cap Cana Shootout, Casa de Campo, the Boy Scout Tournament, and the St. Thomas July Open.

Those of us who had the honor of observing with “Sarge” on *Black Gold* will always remember him as a gentleman and excellent fisherman. It was an honor to spend time on the water with him. Sarge was 90 when he passed. Condolences to his family.

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

Welcome Aboard!

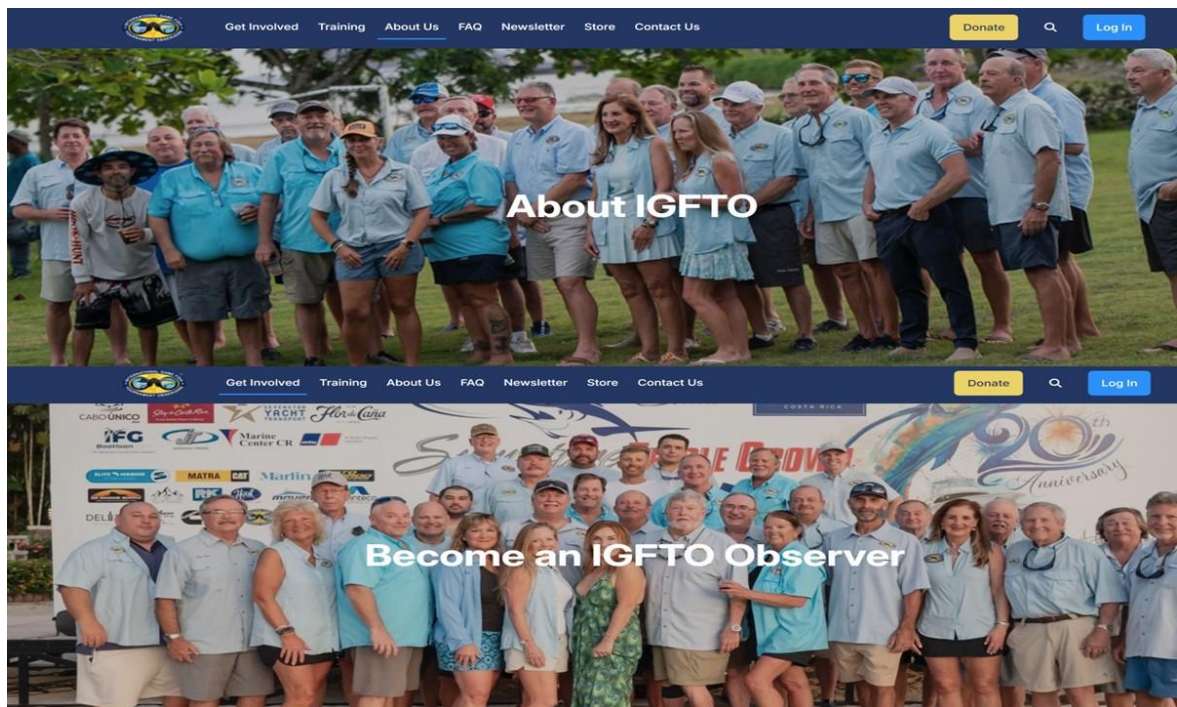
Congratulations and Welcome Aboard to our 15 newest observers who completed our second-annual Ocean City, MD observer training course following The Mid Atlantic. As a reminder, Observers are always welcome and encouraged to attend one of our courses as a refresher at *no charge*. Our next scheduled OTC is in Fort Lauderdale, FL on November 1, 2025. New Observer direct registration is available here: [OTC](#). Current observers should log in to [igfto.org](#) and select REFRESHER.

Geoffery	Barlow	Willow Grove, PA
Ansley	Bates	Saint Augustine, FL
Jeremy	Blunt	Ocean City, MD
Scott	Donnelly	Salisbury, MD
Taylor	Gorman	Berlin, MD
Mason	Howell	Berlin, MD
Barbara	Miller	Mountain Top, PA
Dean	Miller	Douglassville, PA
Jodi	Pilkerton	Berlin, MD
Sydney	Pilkerton	Berlin, MD
Zack	Rishkofski	Ocean City, MD
Bo	Rites	Baltimore, MD
Kara	Rites	Baltimore, MD
Jessica	Shue	Ocean City, MD
Ken	Torrance	The Woodlands, TX



Ocean City, MD Observer Training Course attendees and IGFTO Staff. Photo Credit: OC Marlin Club Staff.

Our new website is online and incorporates new user experience (UX) incorporation. All observers are encouraged to peruse the upgrades, as well as log-on to verify your credentials.



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

Around the circuit.

IGFTO Observers will travel to EL Salvador in November and Guatemala in December 2025 to observe in their Billfish Tournaments. Members in good standing receive an eBlast approximately three months prior to tournament kickoffs.



Industry news from The Billfish Foundation. Read one of their recent articles recognizing IGFTO [here](#):

Did you know?

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.

Since IGFTO's inception and founding, observers have witnessed releases of 76,471+ billfish [as of 30 June 2025] (all species) and have incurred millions of dollars in personal expenses in order to observe and conserve the species for future generations.

Qualified applicants are welcomed to Join IGFTO.

Dues Renewal Season.

Each year on October 1st, the IGFTO dues renewal campaign commences and runs through December 31st. Members in good standing should be on the lookout for renewal notices by email. If your contact information has changed, please [notify us](#).

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



Evan A. Hipsley, Jr.

Member Since 2014

IGFTO President | Director | Webmaster



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 observers to authenticate the "catch and release" of billfish and game fish during international big game fish tournaments.



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