

TALES OF GAME FISHING THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

By Ken Morris
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PROLOGUE

On September 25, 1966, Captain George Bransford and his fishing mate Richard Obach landed a 1064 lb grander black marlin putting a fishing bulls eye right on the city of Cairns (pronounced Caans), Australia. The fish was caught on a 10/0 Penn Senator with 80 lb line and piano wire for a leader. Tackle has changed just a bit since that time!

In 1972, my father Marty and his friend Dr. Sanbo Sakaguchi were swayed by the glowing reports of the fantastic black marlin fishing out of Cairns. After writing to the proper contacts (there was no such thing as email or the internet), they embarked on a 10-day fishing trip, exactly 45 years ago. Boats were "kind of expensive" as my father wrote and it cost \$250 per day for fishing and another \$250 per day if a mother ship was utilized. He wrote about the experience at least 10 years ago and wrote that he understood that it was "at least double that now if not more." If he only knew what it really costs now!

In any event, they arrived only to find out that the captain of the boat that they had reserved had been stabbed in the chest by a marlin bill while trying to leader the fish. This is not pansy fishing! Not to fear, another boat had been arranged for them. The boat was the "*Kamilah*" and was a wood boat built by a family (father and two sons).

In 10 days of fishing, Sanbo caught an 850 pounder and my dad had a 650 pounder along with a number of "rats." All of the large black marlin that come to the great barrier reef (GBR) are females that spawn during the Spring and Early Summer (Australia calendar). The "rats" are mostly males and there are often 1-2 male rats following the big girls around. In general, the crew on the GBR consider anything less than 400-500 lbs to be a rat! I know a lot of people, especially those fishing the Bisbee's that would take one of those rats in a country second. In the old days, many of the fish were kept, weighed and then discarded to the sharks (Sanbo weighed his 850). Nowadays due to the foresight of some conservationists (similar to my father's own advocacy), it is common practice to release most fish with only the biggest marlin over 1,000 pounds (granders) kept occasionally. This has greatly allowed the fishery to keep going strong year after year. For more information on my father's trip, go to www.ken-dan.com/1972/1972-Cairns.htm



My father and Sanbo spent 3 nights on the reef overnight, but most of the time, they did the run to and from Cairns on a daily basis. The fishing then and now is usually best late morning until darkness, but as it was then (and now), it is critical to get through the opening in the outer reef while it is still light. You hope not to hook a big one right before dark! Nowadays, they still offer day trips from Cairns, but the majority of the action is done from 3-6 day trips on "live aboards" or via a Mother ship. Live aboard larger vessels anchor up inside the outer

barrier reef (a low tide offers more protection) or at Lizard Island for the night. The mother ship option affords another level of luxury and comfort, but at a more unaffordable price except for the truly financially blessed.

Well, 50 years to the month that Captain Bransford caught that first grander, I began working on putting together a 7 week family vacation for my wife, Meredith and daughter, Amelia in celebration of my 50th year of life. I have been dreaming of visiting the GBR since I was 7 years old and given my father's footsteps before me, I also had grand images of fishing the GBR for the gigantic black marlin. Armed with the gift of an 8-week work sabbatical from my boss, I put the plan into action.

ARRANGING THE CHARTER & PREPARATION

When it comes to fishing marlin in San Diego or Cabo San Lucas, I know exactly where to go. Australia was not exactly in my line of expertise. I reached out to *Bad Company*, Anthony Hsieh who I have known since being a teenager and he connected me with Tracy Melton from Melton International Tackle. Ideally, I was looking for 3 days (or 5 days with a partner) in mid-late October so that I could send the family home first and then return after the fishing was over. Tracy sent introductory emails to 3 charter boats that he knew and respected and that he thought would meet my needs. I heard first from Captain Tim Richardson from *Tradition* Charters and I learned that contacting charter boats in December was very late in the game for the next season's worth of charters. Tim offered me a 5-day trip around September 20th, which is the beginning of the season, but this didn't work with the family projected schedule. I then heard from Captain Brett Goetze on the *Amokura* (Reel Chase Charters) who offered a 5-6 day live aboard trip October 2-7th, because they had a cancellation. The cost of the charter was \$3,300 (Australian Dollars) per day. For reference, at the time of the trip, the US Dollar was about 80% of the Australian Dollar. Come se dice "sticker shock" in Espanol? Translation: How do you say sticker shock in Spanish? Aye Currumbas! The trip was all-inclusive except for alcohol. Well, I was hell bent on going, but decided at that price, I was going to need to find a fishing partner or my wife was going to end up looking for another husband. After thinking about the dates and projecting a driving trip from Sydney to Port Douglas (an hour North of Cairns), I thought that I could make a 5-day trip work. It would involve putting Meredith and Amelia in a nice resort for a week in the middle of our vacation while I was "slumming it" on the boat. I reached back to Brett and booked the trip with a 25% deposit.

If I would have had a fishing partner worked out in advance, I would have probably booked the 6 days although in retrospect, the 5 days was quite enough for the experience. Note: I never did get a response back from Captain Luke Fallon of the *Kekoa* (the 3rd boat that Tracy reached out to on my behalf with a follow up email from me).

After booking the fishing trip, the first thing I did was to look for a nice resort for the girls. I settled on the Peppers Resort & Spa in Palm Cove (about ½ hour North of Cairns). It turned out to be a blessing on a number of fronts. After 1 month of vacationing together in Australia (3 weeks of it driving), I was about ready to strangle my daughter and perhaps both of the girls were ready to strangle me. It gave all of us a much needed break without moving the suitcases in and out of the car on a 1-3 day basis. The Peppers resort had a Spa with a nice

spacious room and beautiful pool. It was also "Holiday" (Spring Break) for the Australian school kids and Amelia made a ton of friends at the pool. Meredith made friends with the moms as the token Americana at the pool.

My next step was to find a fishing partner to share cranking responsibilities, filming and to share costs. I initially reached out to one of the kings of the Go Pro, Mr. Rodney Williams, but he couldn't make it work. He gave me the sage good news that I had 7 months left to work out! I reached out to a couple of other prospects with no takers and then decided to put out an all points bulletin through the San Diego Marlin Club of which I belong. I got a couple of interested bites from members and then I heard from my fishing partner Dennis Albert. Dennis and I go together on the 116' long range "*FV Intrepid*" each summer and he fished quite a bit with my father on his previous "*Ken-Dan*" boats. I hadn't contacted Dennis initially, because I knew that he was retired and watching his finances. He indicated though that he was in the process of selling his house AND that he only needed a black marlin to complete his super billfish grand slam and that this trip was on his bucket list! In addition, Dennis is a total video and camera junkie-SCORE! After giving it about an hour's thought, Dennis was committed and I had a partner to share the experience.

I helped work out the time and travel commitments for the family and Dennis after reviewing a kazillion options. The fishing charter was to take place out of Cooktown, Australia, which is like the end of the world. It is the furthest North that you can drive on the East Coast of Australia on a paved road. There were 3 options for getting there: short commuter flight, shuttle or car rental. The problem with the flight was that on our return from fishing on a late Saturday PM, the next flight was not until late Sunday PM, which would mean sitting around not so glamorous Cooktown for an entire day. The shuttle was a 4-hour ride, but would not get into Cairns until 5:00 PM (about the same time as the plane). The car rental issue was that there was no rental agency in Cooktown so that if I rented a car and drove it there, it would sit for 5 days at the hotel while we fished. We ended up choosing the car rental option. We didn't have to deal with baggage limitation issues and it would allow us an early ride out of Cooktown on the Sunday morning after fishing. From a cost standpoint, it was actually cheaper than the plane option even though I didn't use the car for 5 days.

As August came and went, I made arrangements for my practice to be covered at work and even got in a root canal 2 weeks before the trip due to a cracked tooth that was really beginning to throb constantly. Fortunately, all went well despite Rodney telling me about his recent root canal complications that caused an abscess and the loss of two teeth. Yikes!

The family was fortunate enough to have scored business class seats on American Airlines departing on Sunday, September 3rd and arriving into Sydney on September 5th and the seats were very much appreciated. While in the business lounge at LAX waiting for our flight, I happened to look up and note that the gentleman sitting next to me was none other than Dave Wannstedt, the former coach of the Chicago Bears and Miami Dolphins of the NFL. Meredith noted that he didn't look too happy being recognized by me. After getting into Sydney, it took me about 4-5 days to get acclimated to the time changes due to all the driving that I was doing. After winding our way up the coast in a rented mini van and partaking in a countless number of adventures and activities along the way, we arrived in Port Douglas on Monday, September 25th for a 1-week stay. The plan was for me to drive back to Cairns in

the morning while the girls slept and return the mini van and exchange it for a smaller SUV for the next 2 weeks.

All went to plan and while I was on the way back to Port Douglas with the new car, I noticed a sign on the side of the road pointing to a fishing museum in Clifton Beach, which was right before Palm Cove. Well seeing that is like taking a kid to a candy store and asking them if they want some. As I turned right, I noticed a marlin sticking through the roof of the gas station store and I knew that I had arrived. Bransfords Mobile Gas Station and Tackle Shop! The tackle shop is of course named after Captain Bransford who got the first grander black marlin out of Cairns. I went in and immediately began looking at memorabilia, trophies, artwork and pictures. After several minutes, the owner by the name of Keith Graham came and chatted with me. I told him where I was from, what I was going to be doing and about my father's trip 45 years prior.



He asked me the name of the boat that my dad fished on and Keith actually knew the boat, which was quite impressive. Keith was a wealth of information and he showed me around the shop and was quite hospitable. He pointed out the blogs where the black marlin adventures are written about on a regular basis. He also mentioned that he rigged the fishing gear for the *Amokura* on their brand new Penn 130 VIS International reels. On query, he told me that the Cairns Big Game Fishing Club's physical premises are no longer around.

They were the victim of Cairns esplanade upgrades over the years. The majority of the memorabilia is now in Bransfords Tackle Shop or the Cock n Bull bar in Cairns (which I visited). The black marlin stuck through the roof on the outside and then sticking into the actual tackle shop was 1220 lb specimen and quite the interesting mount. Go to www.bransfords.com.au to see a picture. On the way back after our fishing adventure was over, Dennis and I stopped back in the store to detail our adventures and Dennis bought some fishing artwork detailing the GBR and its fishing locations.

On Sunday, October 1, Dennis arrived safely into Port Douglas after a small plane delay into Cairns due to 50 missing rolls of toilet paper and we all had dinner together at a nice Italian restaurant in town. That morning, Captain Brett had called me with final plans and as it turns out, a change in plans. Like my father before me, I was serendipitously informed of a change in captain plans. It turns out that Captain Brett was expecting his first child and was already 1 week overdue (he had expected that the baby would have arrived already before our trip). He had made arrangements for his fill in captain, Damon Gruzdev to take over along with Brett's regular crew. Brett explained that Damon was the captain for the King of Malaysia on a 76' Viking with 10 years of experience fishing the reef for marlin. I could sense that Brett really wanted to run the trip, but I told him that I was a Pediatrician (and father) and that I thought he was making the right decision and that he needed to be present for the birth of his first child. I came to learn later that Brett is totally addicted to marlin fishing and missing any marlin time during the short 3-4 month season was a tough decision. It sounds like I met my match for someone more addicted than me!

The following day, I checked out the family from our Port Douglas apartment and stuffed the SUV to the gills with our luggage and drove Meredith and Amelia to the Peppers resort in Palm Cove. We were fortunate that the room was ready early and we got the girls settled into their room. After saying our goodbyes and leaving the girls with excess luggage, I drove back up to Port Douglas to pick up Dennis and we then drove 3 ½ hours North to Cooktown arriving by 4:30 PM. After checking into the hotel, we drove up to the Cooktown grassy hill lookout. There were 360 degree views of the town, river and ocean and we saw one of the sport fishers coming in from a day of fishing. Cooktown was named after Captain James Cook who transiently settled there in 1770 to repair damage to his vessel incurred on the GBR. This was the first non-indigenous settlement of Australia. Captain Cook himself had actually climbed this very hill to search for a passage out through the reefs!



THE BOAT, TACKLE & CREW

Shortly after visiting the hill and returning to the hotel (for a quick Dennis snooze), one of the mates (Jake) called me and asked us to come down to the boat to meet everyone and check out the vessel. We arrived down at the "wharf" which was comprised of a few moorings in the river and a couple of docks. The *Amokura* was tied up at the fuel dock for the evening, which is apparently where all of the sport fishers and mother ships tie up while in port to the tune of around \$100 AUD per night.



The *Amokura* (which is the name of a seagoing bird) is a 57-foot Assegai sport fisher powered by twin C-18 Cat engines and was a beautiful sight to behold particularly with the blue water lights illuminating the water below. In the cockpit sat a

varnished wood fighting chair along with 4 matching Penn Rod & Penn International 130 VIS's fully rigged and ready to go. The boat is sponsored by Penn and the reels barely had 2 weeks of use on them. In fact, the previous trip was the first trip of the season with the Sandy family (the owners of the boat). The older son who is 13 y/o, got in the chair for the first time and got a 800 as well as a 200 and a 400 on the same day. A couple of days later, the 11 y/o younger son got



in the chair and got his own rat. The reels were loaded with high visibility yellow Stren who also sponsors the boat. Owner hooks used to also sponsor, but the boat currently uses 20/0 Eagle Claw circle hooks for the baits. The boat only had 3 other rod and reel combos on the boat, a far cry from the porcupine days on my Grady White and the tackle warehouse that my father used to carry on the *Ken-Dan*. Two of the combos were light tackle Penn fathoms for catching bait with the last combo being a spinning rod also used for catching bait. Translation: no tourists squawking, *what do you need all these rods for?* When the boat is not being used by the owners, it is available for charter. Go to www.reelchasecharters.com for pictures of the boat and information on charters.

During the non heavy-tackle season, the boat will fish the reef for bottom fish, light tackle juvenile black marlin, giant trevally and barra (barramundi) fishing. For this adventure, the trip was a live aboard, with 3 crew as you sleep on the boat overnight. During the night, they run the AC off the generator, which is a welcome luxury. There was one nice suite with a queen bed and its own bathroom/shower that Dennis let me sprawl my big body out in. A 2nd stateroom and bathroom on the Starboard had two bunks where the mates slept and the forward stateroom had 3 bunks where Dennis and his camera gear slept. The captain sprawled out on the outside at night with a blanket. During the day, they did not run the generator nor the AC. Frankly, I would have hidden inside the cabin during the day if they would have run the AC as I am a total heat wimp and the sun was quite hot. Perhaps a Dynamote would have been great to run the AC like we used to have on the old *Ken-Dan*?

Both engines are under large hatches in the cockpit, but under the bridge. The hatches had nice cushioned mats for watching the lures or resting and being under the bridge, they provided shade most of the time. The cockpit is all teak, which looks beautiful, but gives me a near migraine just thinking about the maintenance of it. At least they don't have 50 albacore flopping around on the deck like we used to have.

The bridge had two nice chairs for watching the lures 100% of the time. Everyone drives looking backward for fear of missing a bite. This is quite the contrary to Southern CA marlin fishing where one set of eyes follows the lures for the occasional bite and the rest of us are "glassing" looking for sleepers, tailers, feeders, jumpers and the occasional broadbill if we are lucky. It also had a very nice tuna tower, where I usually plant myself to look for fish. In this case, it made for some very nice height for me to climb into in order to get just enough cell signal (1 bar) to transmit reports each night or early morning. Some of the captains use the towers to run the boat while fighting a fish, but it was quite bouncy on the water and I'm not sure how pleasant it would have been riding up there.

In addition to Captain Damon for the trip, we had two mates. The first mate was Jake Wyatt who had been on the boat for 6 years and also served as the executive chef. Jake is from Lord Howe Island, which is about 600 km off the coast of Australia. There are only about 400 permanent residents and it is fringed by the southern most coral reef in the world. I mention the island after having read about it in one of my disaster at sea novels where the marooned sailors from a wreck floated ashore there and survived. The 2nd mate was Mitch Shiels, his first year with the boat, but clearly a veteran of many fishing campaigns.

For those of you that know me best, I am great for giving everyone nicknames and changing people's names for the occasion. In Australia, they make a habit of shortening names or adding an ee to everything, so I fit right in. So, Jake was Jakee, Mitch was Mitchee, I was Kenney, Dennis could have been Denny and Damon was out of luck with his name. Cooktown was also called Cookie in case you were wondering.

Chef Jake made breakfast in the morning usually comprising of cereal followed by a breakfast sandwich. Lunch was usually a wrap, which I usually just made a salad out of. Dinner varied from steak to pasta or fish soup, but it was always quite delicious. One night we had peel prawns for our appetizers and two nights by popular demand, we had Panko fried, Spanish (King) Mackerel poppers. They were really good and I am going to have to try that with my wahoo after I abscond the recipe from Jake.

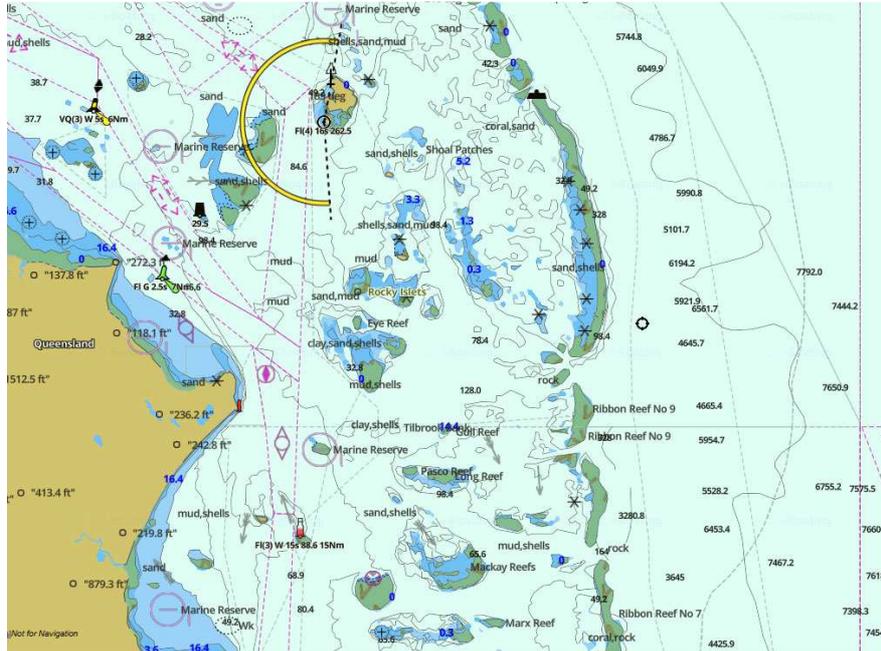
FISHING LOCATION

As you have noted, we had arranged to depart Cooktown for our fishing. The boat is based out of Port Douglas, but earlier in the season, the fish are more North and it is a shorter run. As the season goes on, the fish start migrating South and I believe that the boat will then start migrating South to follow the fish. Port Douglas and Cairns are nice marinas depending on where the fish are. No swimming though in any of the locales. The saltwater crocs can be infested and they are apparently quite wily. Not sure what they do about with regards to bottom divers for the hull.

The GBR has a number of different reefs for both the inner and outer reefs. Bait fishing is usually done near the inner reefs, but the big game fishing is done in the deep water just outside the outer reefs (with the best snorkeling being done just inside of the outer reefs). When we went snorkeling out of Port Douglas, we went to the Opal reef further to the South. Outside of the outer GBR, the depth falls off several thousand feet quite rapidly and this provides a natural congregating spot for baitfish as well as predatory fish and sharks. During the early part of the big marlin season, the most consistent fishing is done outside of the ribbon reefs, with ribbon 10 being the big producer from year to year. Ribbon reef 10 is fairly close to Lizard Island, which hosts one of the most prestigious marlin tournaments in the world, the Lizard Island Black Marlin Classic in late October. Lizard Island is also home to one of the most swankiest resorts in the world to the tune of \$1900-\$2400 AUD per night. www.lizardisland.com.au



Many of the live aboard boats and mother ships anchor in the Lizard Island bay at nighttime. The wind comes ripping down the middle of the island into the bay and it must have been blowing 25 knots when I was up in the tower. On other nights, the boats will anchor on the inside of one of the ribbon reefs. There are openings between the reefs, but these must be navigated in the daylight and must be done carefully. Even in the openings, you will find a random small coral tower formation coming off the bottom that can do some serious damage to the hull of a boat. Having a good set of sharp eyes is the most important defense.



GIANT BLACK MARLIN FISHING

After dinner and drinks with the crew the night prior while Dennis slept, we set out on Tuesday morning the 3rd of October arriving at the boat at 7:00 ish and taking off around 7:30 in the morning after parking the rental car at the hotel.

Bait Fishing & Rigging

The first order of business was to go and catch some fresh baits. Jake and Mitch unfroze several already rigged and unrigged baits that had been frozen for future use. After traveling for a couple of hours at 20 knots, we stopped and put out two CD-18 Yozuri like Rapalas on the light tackle gear and trolled around until we got a bite. Bites came early and often and Dennis and I took turns cranking in a myriad of bait fish and some non-bait fish. We caught Spanish (King) mackerel. I got a small one for bait and Dennis got a



big one (about 25 lbs) for eating. Under about 30 lbs or so are good, because the bigger ones often have ciguatera (reef poisoning). Google it for more information, trust me, you don't want it. We also caught Scaly Mackerel up to 10-15 lbs, Giant Trevally (released), Barracuda (released), Green Job Fish (blow's cousin and apparently quite tasty to eat), Mac Tuna (Kawakawa), Queenfish (Queenie), Long Tail Bluefin Tuna and a Dog Tooth Tuna. Normally, the dog tooth are much bigger and are caught in deeper water with lures (Damon mentioned that it was the first one he had caught while fishing for bait).

In addition to fishing with Rapalas, we fished with a daisy chain of hoochies off a deep running planer fished using the 130's (those planers pull serious drag). The targets were smaller Scad Mackerel that we sometimes caught 4-6 at a time along with an occasional scaley. We also fished the spinning rod with a small hoochie lure long down the back targeting queenies or an occasional small tuna.

Each morning, we fished for bait to polish off our supplies with some days being easier than others. I can remember one morning off Lizard Island, I was hot and tired of waiting for a bite and managed to stimulate a bite 3 times in a row just the same way that my father used to by going to the water closet.

As soon as the baits hit the deck and we had the Rapalas in the water and the boys were fast at work rigging the baits. The tunas, Spanish and scaley mackerels were rigged as big baits and the queenies and scad were rigged as swim baits. Both mates were master bait riggers, but Jake was quick and stealthy like a surgeon.



With the big baits, a slit was placed in the belly and all of the guts and gills were removed. A bait with trailing entrails does not look too appetizing. The belly was sewn back up with an alternating mattress like suture of wax line rigging floss. The leaders and 20/0 circle hooks were pre-prepared. A 30 yard roll of 650 lb mono leader was used and was attached to the hook via a snell and then piece of protective poly tubing from the knot to just past the eye of



the hook (the main line was passed through the hook from back to front). On the bend of the hook, two long pieces of Dacron were tied with a small oval glow bead on the two pieces of Dacron just distal to the hook. Using a bridal needle, the bend of the hook was attached to the bait with the dacron with only the bead between the hook and the bait. The gill plates were also wired shut with the same Dacron giving the hook a firm attachment to the bait. The big baits were skipped on top of the water while being trolled.

With the swim baits, they popped the eye balls out of the scad and the queenies. They inserted a double longitudinal lead weight (pre-tied together with a Dacron loop) into the vacant gill plate area. The weight served to keep the bait under the water a bit. The loop was worked out the top of the nose with a needle and the same hook and leader combo was attached. The same stomach sewing procedure was employed as well as the gill plate sewing. Once complete, the swim baits swam just under the surface a bit with the queenie being the prime swim bait.

All of the bait fishing was with dead bait. Apparently, some different boats had tried live bait from time to time with mild success. The real problem on the reef is not the marlin, but the critters and the sharks. The live baits if fished like they are in Kona would dive down a bit and they would more likely than not become shark food.

Trolling

The boat trolled three rods. The starboard outrigger was trolled the closest with a medium to large swim bait. The port outrigger was trolled with a swim bait (which is the smallest bait of 2-3 pounds) as the middle bait. The center outrigger attached to the tower trolled the biggest bait (up to 10-15 pounds) the furthest back down the middle of the pattern. With all three trolling lines, a small loop of Dacron colored line is attached to the main line so that when the line pops out of the outrigger clip (due to fish strike or just wind resistance on the bait), the bait is put back in exactly the same spot (no need to guess where the bait is skipping). Interestingly, they used the old school Aftco outrigger release clips instead of the newer Aftco roller release clips, which is in part due to the loop method used.

Damon would drive the boat looking back at the baits the entire time and even had one of those hospital urinal collection containers in order to not miss any of the action. Every time the line popped out of the outrigger, he would yell “yup” and the mates would jump into action to see (and feel) if there was anything big on the bite. The reels were fished in free spool giving an attacking marlin the opportunity to swallow the bait sufficiently before engaging the drag. The outrigger clips would pop loose all of the time, sometimes due to drag of the bait, sometimes due to toothy critters and sometimes due to a marlin bite. Translation, you always had to be ready to jump into action.

Setting the Chair

Given the tackle being used, a big game fighting chair was employed. For those not familiar with the chair, there are two types of techniques in the chairs that I have seen used. Both use a bucket harness. The bucket harness fits around your rump and is basically a reinforced cushioned seat similar to one of those bleacher pop up seats for a game except that there are sides and a chain on each side that attaches to the reel lugs (hooks). In one case, the bucket harness slides forwards and backwards on the chair as you pull up or crank down. On the *Amokura*, they use stand up technique utilizing the foot rest, which is at an angle. The force



of lifting the rod up is done using your rump and using your legs to push against the foot rest, while cranking is done while standing up on the chair. Before going into action, the foot rest height, chain length of the harness and the gimbal position measurements were taken for both Dennis and myself. I have long Marfan man like arms so I needed a longer chain length and a lower foot rest. The gimbal is where the butt of the rod is placed and it pivots back and forth with ease as you pull up and down on the rod.

I have to tell you that when you are in the chair the first time and that big marlin is pulling line and you go forward on the foot rest, there is the sensation that you are going to lose your balance and go flying overboard attached to the reel. One should note that all rod & reels setups have a safety tether attached to the chair so that if a rod is dropped or if an angler should go flying, there is only so far that they can go. In addition, the mates are usually holding the back of the bucket harness, because they really want you out of the chair in order to pull back on that rod.

Snorkeling

One of things that had me really excited was the opportunity to snorkel the GBR each morning and spearfish for coral trout. I didn't get to do the latter, but got to jump in twice. I mention this here, because once I get to the actual fishing part, you all will just ignore this section. After waking on the 4th morning, Damon drove the boat to the mooring for the famous cod hole, home of the giant potato cod. No dive boats were there, so I donned my snorkel gear and jumped in. No lava core wet suit top needed as the water was quite warm. Immediately after I jumped in, a big bunch of 100-200 lb potato cod and black tipped reef sharks made their way up towards me. It turns out that the dive boats feed the fish for the divers and the fish thought I was the food! Eventually, they realized that I was not edible and they went back towards the bottom. I got some nice photos of the cod and the sharks.

On the last morning, Damon tied us up to another spot on a different part of the reef. The coral and fish life was incredible and I saw another big grouper hiding from me. The highlight



of my diving career was when I looked out and saw a remora swimming towards me. I have only seen them attached to marlin and sharks, but this sucker, pardon the pun, made a beeline for me and then attached itself to my stomach for like 5 minutes. Apparently, dressed in black, it thought I was a predatory fish and was waiting for a free meal. Prior to finding me, it decided to try and swim up Captain Damon's shorts thinking that he was a fish and those were his gills. Too funny!

Tuesday, October 3rd

After making bait on the way out, Dennis and I decided to take turns catching marlin and we flipped a coin to see who would go first in the chair and I lost the coin flip. Such is life. I wanted Dennis to get his grand slam so he gave me a crash course of video camera filming. We immediately had several outrigger knock downs or mostly what were determined to be loose clips or a wind wave knocking the back down. We occasionally had a bite off by the trifecta of toothy critters (wahoo, spanish mackerel and barracuda). In some cases, half the bait was missing and in other cases, just a bite. Sometimes, we just see the bait flopping funny and in other cases we would see the bite. I think that if we would have trolled a large wahoo plug, we would have caught a lot of Spanish Mackerel and Wahoo. Fortunately for them, we were not targeting toothy critters



Mid afternoon, we had a decent sized marlin come up on the swim bait and follow the bait for a while like a striped marlin, but the big black was not interested in eating. 1-0-0 for the day and we pulled the lines around 5:45 PM. While fishing with my dad in the Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament (HIBT) as a kid, I learned that the nomenclature stood for: Number of Marlin Encounters-Number of Marlin Hooked-Number of Marlin Caught. That evening, we anchored between Ribbon 8 and 9 inside the reef. We were visited by a giant

barracuda in the lights, which I named Bob. It hung around all night waiting for a tasty morsel to appear in the lights.

Wednesday, October 4th

After making bait on the inner part of the outer reef, we made our way to the outside and basically just dropped in the baits next to the reef. From anchor to fishing is no more than a mile due to the sheer drop off right next to the reef breakers. We used a mixture of frozen baits and freshly rigged ones depending upon what we caught. It was a very cloudy day, which meant little sun and less searing heat. I remember one of the mates saying that it was cold, not for me! We also had several small rain squalls. As it was, I lathered up with sun screen at least 3 times daily, including the top of my feet. Apparently, when my father and Sanbo came to Cairns, he burned the top of his feet so bad, he had to walk barefoot through the Cairns airport due to the discomfort. I managed not to replicate that feat.

As the hours dragged on, we had absolutely no action other than a couple of obligatory bites offs from the critters and it was getting very late in the day. I began to wonder if I should have booked 6 days of fishing and how in Cairns of all places we only could manage 1 bite in 2 days. Another boat had tied into a grander black and had been wired for 4 hours and lost it after an accompanying male marlin cut it off. Ouch! I saw a couple of other boats wired during the day, but no bonanza. Ouch! I was having a nice chat with the mates about the girls getting some good time off from me and me from the girls when there was an absolute crater of water behind the center rigger. At 5:25, A very large marlin attacked the bait and we were finally hooked up. I didn't see the fish, but Damon did and said it was a big fish. Dennis was first up and climbed into the chair and I took command of the video camera (this time actually turning it on) and began my silly Ken Morris commentary. Dennis was getting used to the chair, but the back of his knees kept hitting the front edge of his chair causing his popliteal reflex to fire making it difficult to keep his legs straight. Mitchee was holding the back of Dennis' bucket harness, but Dennis didn't know it and every time the marlin went for a run, Dennis grabbed at the chair for stability. Spray went flying over the transom as we backed down and the camera got wet a couple of times so I had to turn it off to wipe down the lens. As the minutes went by, it was clear to me, that this was a big fish. Eventually, Dennis had the reel drag setting up to about 48 pounds, which is some serious drag. The fish took enough line to get to the backing, but never took any gigantic runs and was clearly dogging it. After about 45 minutes, we finally got close enough to grab the leader and the fish made one good jump showing us how big she was. The crew estimated her at 800 lbs and then he wound in as much leader as possible before cutting her loose. After two days of virtually jack, Dennis was very excited as were crew and myself. Talking about pulling a fish out of the hat at the last half hour! The fish completed Dennis' super marlin slam (sailfish, swordfish, blue marlin, striped marlin and now black marlin). Dennis remarked to me that he got his butt kicked pretty good, but it is always good coming back to anchor as a conquering hero. Final tally of 1-1-1 for the day. Because it had gotten dark, it was too late to enter the reefs and we made the hour run to the Lizard Island anchorage for the night.



After anchoring, there were a ton of giant trevally attracted to our underwater blue lights in addition to several whaler sharks that were quite aggressive. These are the sharks that will often attack a black marlin under duress. No snorkeling there for me!

Thursday, October 5th

Dennis and I woke up early as usual and there were a couple of large mother ships tied up in the bay along with some sport fishers tied up to them as well as several others anchored up. After a leisurely breakfast, we pulled the anchor and trolled outside of the island for baits. We caught several mack tuna, longtail bluefin tuna and some more scaley's although the bait catching was not fast and furious.

After making the run out to Ribbon 10, we put the baits out at 11:00 in the morning and it was a different day. The weather was up a bit (it definitely was not Bob weather) with a little



more wind and a little more swell. On the plus side, so were the fish. After missing an early bite, at 1:17, the Port swim bait got knocked down and we were on. It wasn't a massive bite and I didn't even realize we were bit with all of the intermittent knock downs from critters, weather and the occasional marlin. Nonetheless, it was my turn to climb into the chair and I did so swiftly. The fish took quite a bit of line

out on the surface and jumped a bit revealing that it was a "rat." Dennis kept telling me to crank, which I did, but it is only so fast that you can crank with those big 130's. After about 5 minutes, I had the 200lb fish subdued near the boat. I actually had time to climb out of the chair, grab my camera and take a few shots before we clipped the leader. Rat or no rat, I was on the board with my first black marlin ever.



In between reading of the book "*Madame and the Hooker*" on my Kindle, we had a couple of other bites and misses by marlin and so we ended up the day 4-1-1. Because of the high tide on the reef, we made the run back to Lizard Island for the evening. The giant trevally's were back and all lit up under the boat attacking the tiny mackerel worms attracted to the blue



lights. In between munching on prawn cocktails and discarding the prawn heads, larger trevally would come in and suck down the offerings. We also had another visitor that evening in the form of a very large grouper or potato cod that might have been 200-300 pounds. He/she would swim in and out of the lights and it was quite the sight to see. Later that evening, I climbed into the tower to send out a quick

post regarding the action and to tell my brother "got another one," which was a tribute to the

late Homer Johnson who spent an entire fishing season torturing my father with that phrase. I got the following text from my loving wife, Meredith, "Are you bummed with your wimpy catch?" This was in deference to the size of my fish compared to Dennis'.

Friday, October 6th

After a morning of bait catching and my snorkel at the Cod Hole, we were out on the reef trolling the baits by 10:00 in the morning. It didn't take long before we wired at 11:00 AM with Dennis taking the chair. His black was quite acrobatic jumping around quite a bit and making a beeline for the reef. It was actually quite nervy as we got close enough to pick up the bottom on the sounder at less than 100 feet before Damon was able to steer the boat and the fish away from the reef. After 15 minutes, Dennis was able to subdue an approximately 250 lb black marlin putting us on the board quite early in the day. Next up in the chair: Dr. Ken.

After missing a bite, we continued to troll along with several other boats having some excellent action. A couple of boats caught big fish with one of the fish being attacked by sharks. At about 3:30 PM, I was looking back at the baits and I saw what looked like a big splash behind the Starboard bait. Damon was in the middle of a good piss and missed the splash I believe. The next image was one that I will never forget. This very large black marlin races forward and makes a turn parallel to the boat transom and inhales the bait. I got a full visual of practically the entire fish out of the water. I am a veteran of 40+ years of striped marlin fishing and have seen a ton of bites on jigs and live bait, but I have never seen a marlin take a trolled bait or lure like that. It was truly an awesome sight. I climbed into the chair and started cranking. It was a completely different experience than the rat I got the day prior. I used the chair to the best of my ability considering that I am not a veteran of the chair. The fish jumped a couple of times as we backed down and we took a lot of water over the transom.



Fortuitously, I had changed back into my snorkel shirt so the water didn't really bother me. Pulling and cranking was a whole new experience. You basically put your left hand on the front of the reel (for defense) in case the line breaks so that the recoil of the rod does not clock you in the head. You use your rump and your legs to do all of the pulling. As you stand up out of the chair, you crank (or at least attempt to crank) while leaning forward. I had done a lot of rowing for my work-outs in preparation, but this did not really help with the torque required for turning the handle. Unlike our fishing in Southern California, you don't really use the 2-speed gear, because when you need to really turn the handle, you have to be ready. When the fish was under full

drag pressure, it was really hard to turn that ratchet. A couple of times, I reached over with my left hand to do a chick maneuver (as I once coined it myself) in using both hands to turn the handle and I was scolded for it. After about 25 minutes, we got the double line and then the leader out of the water and Jake was able to get a few wraps on the leader which prompted the fish to make an awesome leap out of the water right behind the boat (they feel the added pressure). Damon yelled out that the fish was bigger than the one that Dennis got. Wowsah! After another minute, Jake was able to wrap the leader again, but the fish was still

hot and we didn't want to cut the leader with too much remaining leader so we let it go off again. We did some fist bumps in congratulations for the catch while I worked at getting the fish back for another leader job. The fish of course then decided to dive a bit and while working it back up, I managed to break off the leader. This was a far better alternative in that there was no trailing leader after the release. The crew got together and estimated the marlin at 900 lbs!!! I have to tell you that I was pretty amped up by the catch. I had really been hoping to get a "good one," but had no delusions that I needed to catch a grander. With that single fish, I quadrupled my previous personal best fish, which had been a 214 lb swordfish and bested the family record of my father's 650 lb black marlin caught 45 years prior. I was quite happy that it was Dennis' turn to go into the chair next as my shoulder and arm were a bit sore.

A little later in the afternoon, we had another bite and Dennis was on again with a decent rat. The fish jumped a few times before throwing the bait and hook after a minute or two. After reeling in the line, the leader was chafed pretty far up from the hook indicating that the fish was bill wrapped and was likely never hooked properly. With that, we finished the day at 4-3-2.

Given that the following day would be our last day, we went back to our first anchorage on night #1 as this would be closer to Cooktown. After anchoring up, guess who was there to greet us? Bob the barracuda was back! Soon after anchoring, a garfish (ballyhoo) wandered into the lights and Bob make quick work of its mistake. I climbed into the tower to broadcast the day's excitement on a Facebook and email blast. After texting Meredith "wimpy yesterday, goliath today" even she seemed to be impressed with the catch.



Saturday, October 7th

After waking up early for our last morning on the GBR, the giant trevally were out in full force until Bob returned from wherever he had wandered off to. I got a nice photo of the sunrise while checking email on our last morning. After breakfast and bait catching, Damon took us to a nice dive spot where I had my remora encounter. Shortly thereafter, I was having some urinary discomfort and I ended up passing a small kidney stone after an hour or two. I didn't want to worry the crew so I kept that one quiet. Frankly, it was the easiest stone that I had ever passed so I count my blessings.



By 10:00, we had our lines in the water as we worked down on a southerly course off Ribbon reef 8. At about 2:30, we had a very lit up female black marlin take a smack at the Port rigger swim bait while an accompanying male smacked at the Starboard rigger. This went on for a bit with no hook up. Apparently, when the black marlin are lit up like this, they are ready to spawn and rarely take a bait. In any event, it was good to know that there were some marlin in the area. We continued to troll and I figured that they would be pulling the lines at 3:00

or 3:30 and Damon was literally in his final turn when we got bit at 3:50 PM. Dennis got back into the chair for a final time with a very feisty rat that acted bigger initially than it actually was. After about 10 minutes, Dennis released the fish putting the capper on a 2-1-1 day and the capper on the trip. We got back around 6:00 PM and then met Damon, Jake and Mitch for dinner and drinks at the Sovereign Inn putting an end to our GBR game fishing adventure.

REFLECTIONS

I had a few reflections after the trip.

During the season, a blog on the black marlin fishing is kept where you can see what is happening from day to day. Go to www.blackmarlinblog.com

Unlike their blue marlin cousins, the black marlin do not rip out tons of line. They run out some line and stay away from the boat, but you never feel like there is a risk of getting spooled. As Damon says, if you have more than 300 meters of line out, you have a problem. In California and Mexico, we use smaller reels with braid and top shots. I really think that they can use Penn 80's with braided line and a top shot and still have tons of line capacity and drag pulling power. It would make the cranking experience in the chair a bit easier in my opinion as that Penn 130 is a monster!

The crew of Damon, Jake and Mitch worked together like a fine-tuned Swiss watch. They never yelled, never got on each others nerves and always knew what to do and when to do it. We have nothing but the finest compliments for the Amokura and its captain and crew.

It was great to share the experience, the filming and the cranking with Dennis. I could have probably survived doing all the cranking myself, but when the fishing gets really good, sometimes they are catching 3-5 fish per day and that would have been a total wipe out. Dennis was already to go again although I think that I had my great experience and my fill. I think that I would rather go fish the juvenile blacks on light gear or go fish the huge stripers at the Three Kings Islands off the tip of New Zealand. Of course, my true passion is to fish for the gladiators of the sea, the broadbill swordfish. I learned that just very recently in the past 2 years off Victoria to the South, they have developed a deep drop swordfish fishery and some truly massive swords have been caught. A commercial boat caught one that would have eclipsed Lou Marron's 1180 lb all tackle record taken in Iquique, Chile in the 1950's

If I had my choice of times to fish the GBR again, I think that mid to late October is best if you can get a charter. The trade winds are strong, which helps tame the heat. The bite starts heating up with multiple strikes per day and the deadly stinger jellyfish don't invade the coastal waters until November or so in the event that you are combining your trip with a family vacation.

Until the next time, the bites goes on...