

Really rough days offshore just seem to stand out among fishing's strongest memories. "One day off Cabo San Lucas, it was blowing probably 30 knots, but we'd been catching 50 to 100 fish a day," says George Sawley, captain of *Stalker*, a 57-foot Spencer. The boat had racked up nearly 1,000 striped marlin releases after just a month of fishing.

"The seas were a solid 10 or 12 feet and really steep, but the chance to catch that thousandth fish was all we needed to go out," Sawley says.

Any doubt about that decision was quickly forgotten as soon as the boat had drawn alongside a flock of birds over feeding marlin. *Stalker* released "only" 45 striped marlin that day, not quite reaching the four-figure mark, but close enough to nearly guarantee the goal next trip out.

Sawley's take on the outing makes the big seas a memorable part of the day when he describes "seeing those vibrantly colored stripes sliding down the faces of large waves."

Whether competing against a tournament fleet or out to reach some personal milestone, top crews produce fish in all conditions, including big seas. But any fishing in rough water is a lot more fun when skippers and anglers use the waves to beat the fish, rather than to beat up the boat and crew.

To understand just how some top experts do this, I persuaded four veteran skippers to share their tactics, from bait rigs and lure choices to trolling schemes and fighting methods.



When the **WIND BLOWS**

*Rough Water Demands Special Tactics and
Teamwork — 15 Tips from the Pros' Playbooks*

Text and Photos by Vincent Daniello



Tip: Rough-water seamanship starts at the dock.

Responsible captains don't just charge out into big waves. Sawley starts a rough day offshore in the harbor, checking door and cabinet latches, stowing clutter and looking for loose gear in the engine room. Also, "If I know I have 100 hours on the Racors, I'll [change] them at the dock," Sawley says, recognizing that rough seas stir particulates off tank bottoms. "The last thing you want is to have to shut down an engine [offshore] to change the filters." Prep continues in the cockpit, securing buckets and coolers.

Once offshore, *Stalker's* crew also watches for clutter while fishing. "Some mates like to throw the sancochos [half-eaten baits] in the corner," he says. "One good wave and they're floating around in the cockpit." That practice changed permanently on the boat after one angler had to fight a 250-pound blue marlin with two hooks in his foot.

Tip: Use temp as a guide to stay on the edge in rough water.
Tip: Troll rough-water weed lines with lures with single hooks.

Scott McCune, a charter-boat and tournament skipper in Port Aransas, Texas (www.fishtexas.com), also plans for rough days long before heading offshore. Boat prep is important, but so is knowing where to fish, especially within a range like that which McCune fishes, spanning up to 200 miles off the coast from Louisiana nearly to Mexico. Roffer's Ocean Fishing Forecasting Service (www.roffs.com) helps him choose a stable temperature change or current edge and troll with the waves. "But when it's rough, you're not going to be able to see that edge," McCune says, so he relies on seawater-temperature instruments. To troll weed lines when the sargassum is scattered by breaking waves, McCune rigs Mold Craft Wide Range lures with single hooks. "I'll occasionally have to shake the weed off, but not even reel it in."

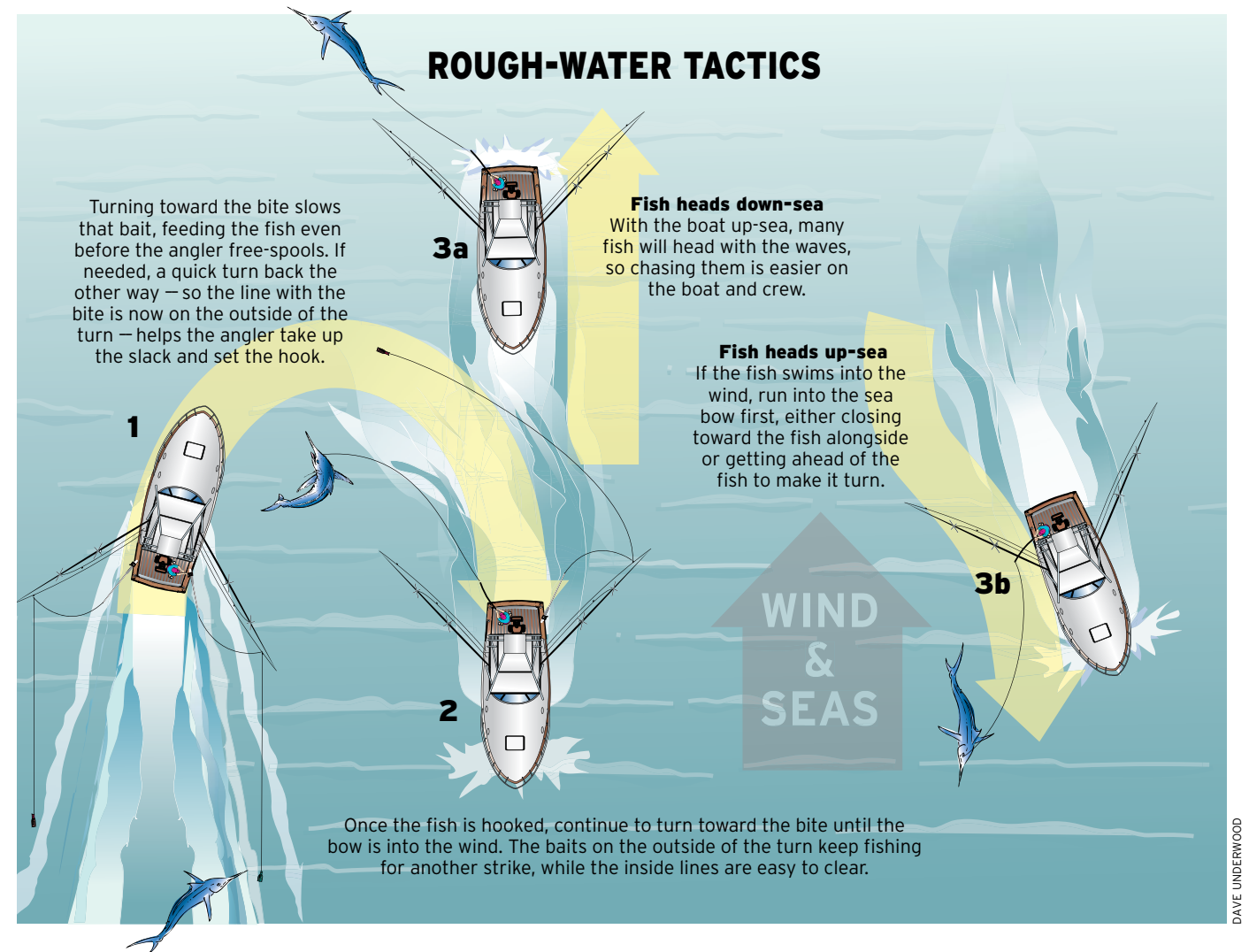
Tip: Troll flat heads.
Tip: Add chin weight to ballyhoo.
Tip: Go to a Wide Range.

Sawley's trolling presentation changes in rough water as well. "When it's [only] choppy, we'll use a little chugger head on the ballyhoo, but its concave head pops and snatches out of the water when it gets rough," Sawley says. He prevents this by switching to a flat head in heavy seas. "If that doesn't keep it in the water, we'll add a half-ounce [of lead] or so under the chin." He tows heavier versions of his favorite Gary Bost teasers, made with an extra ounce or two of lead, and has a selection of lures that don't fly out of the water when it's rough (www.bostcustomlures.com). "Longer, flat-headed lures are very good in rough water," Sawley says. "If all else fails and you can't keep your lures in the water, go to a [Mold Craft] Wide Range."

Rough conditions make staying aware of what's around the boat a challenge, but doing so can offer bonus dividends, as this crew is about to prove by sticking a big cobia.

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Tip: Try moving trolled baits/lures closer or farther.

Trolling spreads differ when rough and depend on a pro's experience; see what works best for you. Freelance skipper Mike Merritt (merritt2230@aol.com), for example, moves his baits closer to the boat in big seas. He says they don't blow as far out of lanes, and bites are easier to identify. Sawley, on the other hand, sets spreads farther back where, in his opinion, baits or lures troll better in rough water, relying on his crew's skill. Both captains throw teasers and pitch baits close to the stern where trolled baits won't effectively stay in the water. And both skippers, as well as McCune, adjust course and speed and lower outrigger halyards until baits troll well over the seas.

Tip: Increase hook and leader sizes.
Tip: Advantage angler with slightly heavier tackle.

While George McElveen grew up fishing in Maryland and Delaware, he chose the Florida Keys for his charter business (www.the.reelmccoycharters.com). Strong springtime easterlies pushing against the Gulf Stream are particularly productive for kite fishing. Such conditions also pile up the seas, and that's just the way McElveen likes it. "Instead of digging against the current, [sailfish] get up on

top. It's like they're surfing with their tail on the surface," McElveen says. He also sees lots of big dolphin and cobia, and an occasional white or blue marlin, using the sea the same way. "The rougher, the better," McElveen says. "Sometimes we see 50 or 60 sails in a day."

McElveen steps up leader and hook sizes since fish have a harder time seeing them in rough water, and he prefers slightly heavier tackle. The latter makes it easier to nail dolphin in rough Keys seas when anglers often pluck them from debris or weed patches by sight-casting. "When it's calm, we have to use really light rods, mainly so we can cast farther," McElveen says. "On rougher days, they're not as spooky, so I can get closer [with the boat]."

Tip: Track the waves like a fish. "Billfish use rough weather to travel, tailing down the seas," says Merritt of his home waters off North Carolina and fishing grounds throughout the Caribbean to Venezuela, noting the phenomenon McElveen cites above. "Tuna too. Any pelagic surface feeders will use the waves to cover as much ground as they can while expending less energy. School [dolphin] are looking for something to get on — grass, a board or whatever — but the bigger dolphin are just tooling along with the waves," Merritt says. "They're

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As conditions roughen, the ability of the angler, wireman and tagger to work together and in harmony with the skipper makes the difference for a successful outcome.

tracking all over, looking for that squid or fish to eat.” Merritt, McCune and Sawley capitalize on this behavior, trolling with waves broad on the bow or quartering astern, working across them as much as comfort and safety allow, to cover wide areas. If not tight to a particular color line or the like, they’ll start “up-sea” of a broad area then work through it by quartering down the waves.

Tip: Turn hard toward biting fish.

Anglers must be alert too. Strong wind that carries line off reels and away from rods can tangle outriggers. Crews need to pay attention to baits since captains are busy dealing with waves. Reels should be free-spooled while still in rod holders to avoid the risk that fumbled rods will be felt by the fish. Sawley helps his anglers by turning sharply toward biting fish. “That hard turn drops the bait back to the fish and gives the angler more time to get to the rod.” Once a fish is hooked, his crew clears lines on the inside of the turn,

A Different View

Most of Rob Ruwitch’s time offshore has been behind the rod. As an angler, he’s caught every kind of billfish on the planet — even releasing all five Atlantic species in one day off Venezuela.

“The captain has to see the macro picture” when it’s rough, Ruwitch says. “How to get around the fish, warning the angler of a big wave. The angler sees the micro picture, just what the fish is doing. It’s imperative that you let the captain know when the fish is coming up.”

Ruwitch fishes his own 46-foot Kincheloe-Nickerson throughout the Caribbean but also fished on the Contender factory team for seven years. “You can run up to that fish a whole lot faster on a center-console,” Ruwitch says. “But the captain can’t see through you to know where the line is. You have to direct him.” Whether in the pitching bow of a center-console or the stern of a 60-footer, the angler has to absorb sudden boat movements and know when to take line. “In heavy weather it’s imperative to be able to use hand pressure, or you’re going to wind those same two feet of line on and off the reel,” Ruwitch says. “You can practice that when it’s calm.”

hoping for another bite on the other side, and Sawley continues his turn until the bow is pointing into the waves, prepared to chase hooked fish whichever way they go. “We get as close as we can [to the fish] with the bow into the sea. Sometimes you get lucky and can pull right up to it,” Sawley says, admitting this is easier on center-consoles where anglers can fish farther forward.

Tip: Stern into the sea demands extra caution.

At some point the boat may have to turn stern to the sea, but rough days demand more caution. “During some of our [light-tackle] world-record stuff, I had so much water in the stern that it felt like I’d lost an engine,” Sawley says. “I wasn’t getting any response out of it.” That water not only settles the stern, but may slosh to one side, pushing one corner of the cockpit below the waves, potentially sinking the boat. “[If it should] get that close, throttle up and pull away,” Sawley warns. With enough horsepower and the transom door open, a full cockpit usually clears in about 30 seconds, and the fight resumes safely. “Make sure everybody knows

how to work that handle,” Sawley adds, since the weight of the water against the door may require two people.

Tip: Avoid the head-sea roller coaster.

The first time I was aboard a sport-fisher with Merritt at the helm, it was a particularly rough day, even by Venezuela standards. Yet his crew on *Sniper*, a 56-foot Paul Mann, snatched a tournament win with a double grand slam, plus a third blue marlin on the last day. I noted that, like Sawley, Merritt swings his bow into the wind on the bite. Both captains strive to get upwind/up-sea of the fish as quickly as possible. “Once it feels that strain coming from the direction it’s headed,” Merritt says, “the fish is going to turn [away]”; if the skipper has moved into the wind quickly enough, that should have the fish heading down-sea, and the boat can follow during the fight. Whether the angler is fighting from the bow of a center-console or the stern of a sport-fisher, fighting the fish down-sea, with the waves, gives the boat the advantage as opposed to the thudding rise and fall of the boat if working into big swells.

Tip: At the endgame monitor everything and fine-tune boat position.

The final few feet of any fight are critical but particularly so in big seas. “The boat is rolling, falling, jumping, snatching. You can go from a tight line to slack in a moment,” Merritt says. “I watch the pole, the angle of the line and the angler all at once,” he says, adjusting the boat to keep the line taut. The sea can help close that gap: “You can get that last little surge, but if it’s too much, you end up on top of the fish.” This is made harder when the captain can’t see over the bow of an open fisherman or through the white water thrown astern of a big boat backing down. “Next thing you know the rod is bouncing because the line is in the wheel,” Sawley says, unfortunately from experience.

Tip: Let practice trump comfort.

Most professional captains quickly acknowledge discretion as the better part of valor — that there are days fishing boats simply don’t belong offshore. But spectacular memories often come when Mother Nature flexes her muscles. Don’t rush out into a gale, but try fishing on days your crew may consider marginal — as long as mere comfort, and not safety, may be in question — to build skills and confidence over time.

Teamwork, practice and planning may turn uneventful days into memorable ones. Sawley’s crew will attest to that: They ended up not simply releasing 1,000 marlin during the season described at the beginning of this feature, but went on to release 1,736 marlin in 27 (often rough) fishing days.

About the Author: Vincent Daniello, who grew up fishing and diving in south Florida and the Bahamas, has run boats professionally for 20 years. Daniello currently works as a freelance writer based in New Hampshire.



Teamwork is key: Success and safety in big seas warrant experienced crew who maintain constant communication with the helm.