

DOWNRIGGERS FOR BIG TUNA AND BILLFISH
SMALL-CRAFT ADVISORY — FISH OFFSHORE SAFELY

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DOUG OLANDER

This massive yellowfin met its demise for angler Ray More of Tulsa, Oklahoma (left), thanks to the downrigger shown that ensured a live skipjack bait swam in "the zone" (see image, page 66).

A dead goggle-eye skips along tantalizingly below a kite while my boat trolls along at 8 knots. Yellowfin tuna savagely bust bait everywhere — voracious 200-pounders and larger tearing up the surface.

Everyone on the boat waits with anticipation as I aim for the closest group and line up the crosshairs for a precise attack. It's what we like to call a proper start to the morning, Riviera Nayarit style.

We finish our first pass without a strike and make the second, followed by a third, fourth, fifth and sixth. Hundreds of boiling fish surround the boat yet remain oblivious to our most cherished method for slaying giants.

After an hour of this torture, I've finally had enough. I clamber down the tower and start rummaging through tackle drawers. One by one, all the tricks come out.

Finally, I remember the smuggler's compartment below my berth, finding there the battle-scarred Scotty electric downrigger I had lugged south all the way from my native salmon and halibut grounds in British Columbia.

I race back out of the cabin, wild-eyed, waving wire cutters and duct tape. Right then and there, in true Mexican MacGyver style, we fashion a makeshift blue-water downrigger system.

Despite our best surface-trolling efforts, it turns out these fat boys want nothing but a nice, juicy livey slow-trolled at 69 feet. My magic number, as though it was meant to be.

The very first pass through the tuna carnage elicits a savage strike on a live skipjack trolled from the downrigger. The ensuing battle later yields a 285-pound monster yellowfin for the first of many lucky anglers aboard the boat that day. Thanks to my trusty downrigger, so falls another Rosetta Stone of offshore fishing.

Lots of practice with downriggers since that has yielded some phenomenal results. Now, when I live-bait for marlin and tuna, few days go by when at least one bait doesn't make the descent toward Davy Jones' locker for a little look around.

Learn the basics of fishing live baits on downriggers to increase your blue-water repertoire. You can add some

technical tricks and flash later. These tricks can save your arse on days when nothing else works, when anglers start staring far into the distance and nodding off.

Newcomers to downriggers can avoid many headaches by learning basic principles.

Practice the Basics

First, make sure you have the rigger — whether electric or manual — mastered at the dock before you take off. This sounds simple, but believe me: Trying to figure out things like brake control and tension adjustment with fish going off around you in 8-foot seas can result in wire in the props, lost downrigger balls/planers, or nasty cuts from braided lines or cable.

A few days before your first downrigger excursion, take time while tied up to the dock to practice operating the machine. Raise and lower the ball or planer; secure lines with release clips or rubber bands; and for goodness sake, if you have an electric model, check and recheck the wiring before you head out. Practice makes

perfect, so a few humbling hours of training at the dock may pay off in a big way later when the heat is on.

Practice Bait Deployment

Second, become proficient in lowering a bait without tangling the fishing line in the downrigger cable; that seemingly simple act can be more complicated than you might imagine. Dealing with a livey on as much as 50 feet of line trailing the release clip takes a few dress rehearsals to achieve a flawless performance come showtime.

All too often I've seen crews deploy a fresh candy bait on the downrigger, and moments later, *smash-woosh!* — a big cow Hoovers the bait. But as deckhands scramble for the downrigger, they see that the fishing line has tangled in the cable, and the agitated behemoth threatens to rip the entire works right off the covering board.

Avoid this costly mistake by tossing bridled live baits astern while the boat moves ahead at your regular live-bait trolling speed. Carefully pay out 50 feet and secure the main line to the downrigger release clip or swivel.

Use Different Strategies for Different Baits

Then closely monitor the rod tip while lowering the downrigger ball and bait to the desired depth. The rod tip serves as a superb indicator of the bait's condition. You should see a steady pulsing of the rod tip, indicating a healthy, albeit sometimes frantic, critter swimming below. If the bait dies or the line tangles in the downrigger cable, the rod tip stops pulsing. A static rod tip means it's time to haul the works to the surface and have a look at things, just to be sure.

Practice diligently, pay attention and learn the special adjustments or little details required to cleanly deploy different types of baitfish. You'll find, as I have, that certain baits require a fast drop and others a much more cautious approach to keep them from swimming hard into the downrigger gear.

Small baits like goggle-eyes tend to rush the boat if not lowered quickly once they're tossed astern. To avoid problems with small baitfish, our crew attaches the main line to the release clip before bridling a bait. Once the

bait hits the water, we immediately start lowering the downrigger so there's no chance to foul in the cable.

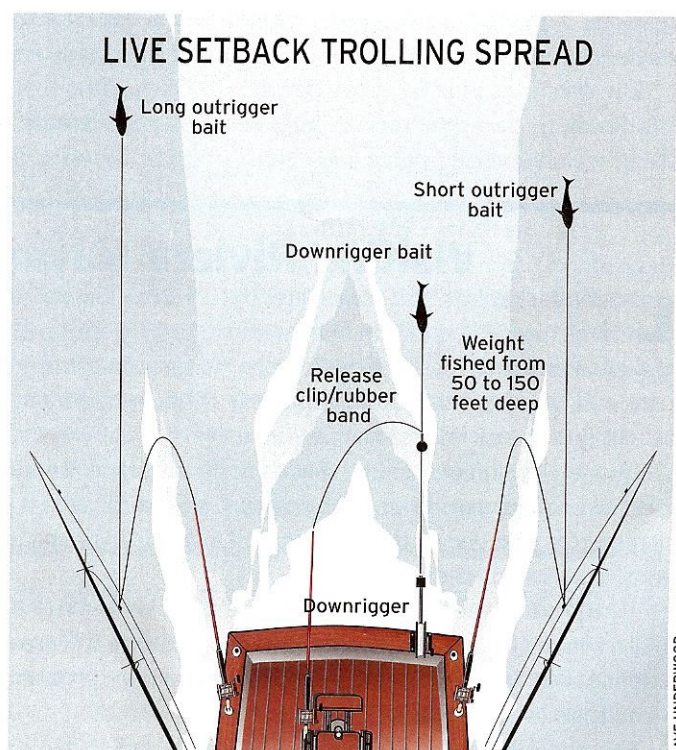
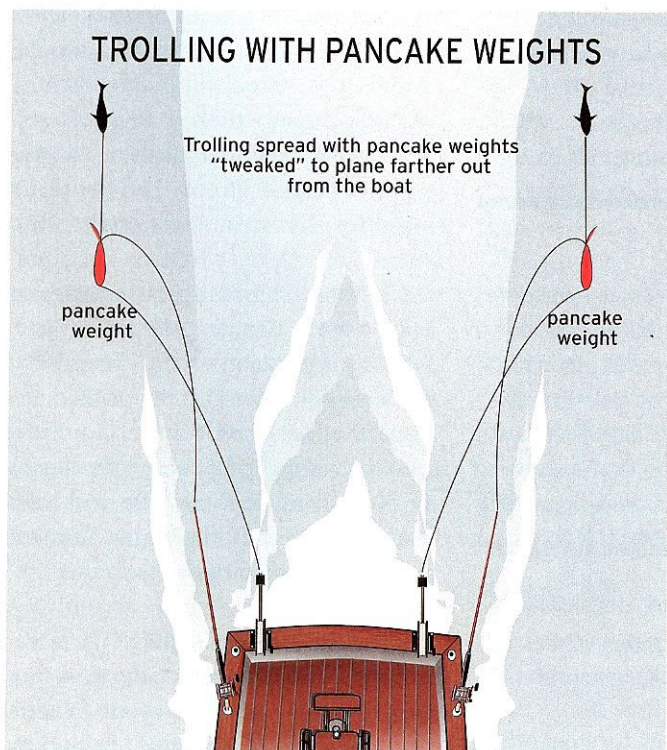
Larger baits like skipjack or peanut yellowfin call for a different approach. Use a slower, more controlled descent for football tuna because they exert more pressure on the line. Rocketing such larger baits down to the depths often results in premature popping of release clips and tangled lines.

Cables and Weights

The decision to work with manual versus electric downriggers depends on your budget and fishing style. I lean toward electric models to avoid tying up a pair of crew hands when they can go to good use clearing other lines.

Opinions abound about the positives and negatives in regard to the electrical field an automatic downrigger could conceivably put out, but I don't buy into that.

Speaking of cable, don't take the term too literally: We recently switched to 220-pound braided line instead of steel downrigger cable and have enjoyed great success with the





DOUG OLANDER

On calm, sunny days, tuna and marlin may be prowling too deep to see surface-trolled baits like this skipjack, but a downrigger increases the odds of putting dinner down where it needs to be.

setup. The braided line doesn't hum like metal cable, and its thin diameter reduces "blowback" so the weight stays deeper.

Now we come to the great debate surrounding the pros and cons of using weights versus planers on your

downrigger for taking baits down. For offshore action, I like weights. Once again, the choice boils down to individual preference and particular situations.

For slow-trolling live baits at extreme depths, I always go with a solid, round lead cannonball weight

with a fin of some sort because it drops quickly and tracks true. Z-Wing planers and the like certainly work well for faster trolling at shallower depths. (We're lucky to have this kind of equipment these days; I still remember having to fashion downrigger weights from heavy chain shackles because we could find nothing else.)

When running multiple downriggers off the stern, use pancake downrigger weights with stainless-steel fins. Bend each weight's fins in opposite directions; they act as rudders and force the two downrigger baits to "fly" away from each other. This little trick also makes it nearly impossible for the weights to tangle on turns.

Visiting Riviera Nayarit

Labeled as "Mexico's Next Great Place" by *USA Today*, Riviera Nayarit has in a short span of time made the transition from a secluded spot known mostly to avid surfers to one of Central America's must-see destinations. It's also one of the hottest spots in the world right now for record-class marlin and tuna. Offshore banks and islands thrust up from incredibly deep, rich waters to create a veritable holy grail for offshore-fishing enthusiasts.

Riviera Nayarit lies just 30 minutes north of Puerto Vallarta. Besides its stunning beaches and remnants of an older, unspoiled Mexico, the area is capitalizing on a wealth of resources and funding from government interests to promote its natural potential as a hot new vacation destination.

Infrastructure such as the new world-class Marina Riviera Nayarit at La Cruz, beautiful modern hotels, exquisite restaurants and ample nightlife complete the picture, offering an invigorating opportunity to couple a serious big-game fishing trip with a remarkable family vacation.

For more information, visit www.rivieranayarit.com.

Snubbers and Clips

Always — and I mean *always* — use a 1- or 2-foot section of elastic material (like a Rubber Snubber or heavy-duty,

industrial-strength bungee cord) between the downrigger weight and cable. Whether on manual or electric downriggers, deployment and retrieval generate some start-and-stop, jerky motion. When a heavy ball on no-stretch cable or superbraid line suddenly stops a *loooooong* way down, problems may occur — namely lost downrigger balls, and no skipper can afford to lose his balls.

The choice of release clips becomes a matter of personal preference as well, and a little research turns up plenty of options. Instead of spending a fortune on clips, we make our own releases that work just fine. We crimp a heavy-duty snap swivel to each end of a 4-foot length of 300-pound monofilament. One snap swivel attaches to the downrigger weight, and the other opens to receive the loops of a #64 rubber band, wrapped figure-eight-style around the main line. It's a highly effective, ridiculously cheap way of doing things and a bit old-school, but that's exactly why we like it.

Downrigger Dos and Don'ts

Certainly, downriggers are not tools most blue-water anglers would want to use all the time.

For starters, I've found that it never pays to fish a downrigger first thing in the morning for marlin and tuna because we simply have too many other things going on. Our priorities include catching fresh bait, then switching out tackle to fish the live bait we've just caught. More importantly, we often capitalize on flurries of action that come immediately after gray light. Sometimes nothing beats that morning surface bite! I prefer to wait until the initial sunrise blitz has tapered off before breaking out the downrigger.

Common sense dictates that if the most straightforward, basic methods produce hookups, you have no reason to complicate that simple approach. Don't pile on unnecessary

Downrigger Options

You'll find plenty of good downriggers on the market that will do a yeoman's service for serious blue-water big-game enthusiasts. Here are three on my list:

- **Cannon Mag 10 TS** — electric, \$699.99; www.cannondownriggers.com
- **Penn 600 NW Fathom-Master** — manual, \$249.95; www.pennfishingstore.com
- **Scotty 1101 Depthpower** — electric, \$459.99; www.scottymarine.com

chores by using gear that requires special attention. Setting up the downrigger and deploying baits take extra time; downrigger cables represent a potential hazard that captain and crew must deal with.

Once the morning's surface activity settles down, I start checking the sonar. Where are the meter marks? Where's the bait? Are predators and prey hanging out together, or are the baitfish holding at one level and the marlin and tuna slightly deeper?


Let the answers to these important questions help define your strategy. For example, if you pull a livey through the middle of suspended baitballs all day while the big boys stay below that level to pick off stragglers, you've successfully hidden your bait within the schools, giving your little buddy down there plenty of time to make friends.

To get bites, you have to put the bait in front of your quarry, and at times marlin and tuna feed surprisingly deep. We've caught plenty of marlin and tuna by running live skipjacks at depths of 300 feet or greater.

Not gathering enough info from the electronics to make a call? Then pay

close attention to the weather and natural signs. Do you like staring up at the midday sun with no sunglasses? Bright, clear conditions tell me to send a live bait into the depths — for marlin and tuna, that often means 150 feet or more. Conversely, I've noted that fish tend to stay higher in the water column on overcast days. Even after devising and implementing a strategy, consult your electronics constantly throughout the day and cross-reference the information with your observations of weather and water conditions.

When you finally hook that first fish on a deep bait, don't let the excitement, whooping and hollering cloud your thinking. Remember to pull the downrigger up and out of the water! We generally start pulling up the rigger even as we're feeding the bait at the strike. Once we've given the game fish sufficient time to engulf the bait, we lock up the drag and I hammer the throttles to ensure the hook proper purchase.

Over the years, we've caught countless giant tuna and big marlin and won several tournaments thanks solely to the fact that we took the time and effort to deploy a downrigger bait. Welcoming the downrigger into your offshore fishing repertoire means you'll have another viable option to utilize in your pursuit of our world's great game fish. 

About the author: Capt. Josh Temple (www.primetimeadv.com) skippers the 57-foot Maximo (a brand-new custom Dean Johnson), chartering out of Riviera Nayarit, Mexico, consistently catching big fish and winning tournaments. Be sure to check out Temple's entertaining forum at www.sportfishermen.com/board/f276.

See More at www.sportfishingmag.com!

At www.sportfishingmag.com/downriggers you'll find still more information!

- Learn why making your downrigger work as a teaser can be risky business.
- Check out Josh Temple's "pop-and-drop" trick.
- Get more specifics and specs on downrigger models to help you choose.