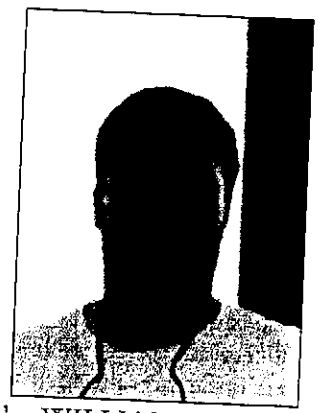


by WILLIAM POPE II
with Neal Dunn and the members of
the Cape Fear Blue Water Fishing Club

William Pope II has lived in Wilmington, North Carolina for 20 years. He has fished the offshore waters for the past 18. He first targeted king mackerel, a relative of his favorite quarry the wahoo, using trolling lures and later, live bait techniques. "Many of the current methods I use for wahoo came from my experience with kingfish," Pope revealed. He also credits alot of what he learned to his years fishing out of Pirates Cove Marina, in Manteo.

Over the past 10 years, fishing blue water has become his passion. "Some people live to work," says Pope, "I work to fish." He is the current president of the Cape Fear Blue Water Fishing Club, membership about 100 similarly afflicted individuals. He runs a Yanmar diesel powered Pursuit 2600 center console, the REEL STRESS, a boat that he and other club members have found to be ideal for their fishing needs.

Neal Dunn is a native of Wilmington, NC and owner of Hanover Electric Motor Service. He has fished the area for nearly 30 years, only venturing into blue water for the past six. Neal also credits his experiences with kingfish as the basis for his success with wahoo. Another Pursuit 2600 afficionado, his is powered with a single gas inboard. Neal says his only hobby is fishing and when he is not working, he is on the water. He is one of the founders of the Cape Fear Blue Water Fishing club.

Way back in the early 1700s, the Carolina coast was terrorized by the famous pirate, Edward Teach, better known by his criminal alias, Black Beard. Teach was notorious for preying on merchant ships as they navigated the treacherous waters off Cape Fear, seizing their cargo and slaying or setting adrift their crews and passengers. Today Cape Fear, named by early sailors who experienced the area's dangerous currents and the fury of its unpredictable weather, is better known for its fishing than its legendary scourge. It is here the Gulf Stream approaches near shore carrying warm water that originates in the Gulf of Mexico. With it comes a wide variety of pelagic game fish to the delight of area fishermen. Here I cut my saltwater fishing teeth and here I still spend most of my fishing time. It is also the home to the Cape Fear Blue Water Fishing Club, a group of saltwater fishermen who pursue game fish.

While we don't have to worry about Black Beard anymore, we do have to contend with a different type of modern day pirate. This one preys on unsuspecting sportfishing boats, using speed and stealth to slip through carefully prepared trolling patterns, cutting each rigged bait off just behind the hook, or even worse, cutting adrift your treasured lures. This pirate is fast beyond the speed of almost any other saltwater predator. It is armed with a mouthful of razor-like teeth that would make Teach's sharpest saber appear dull by comparison. Even old Black Beard would have found these dentures formidable.

When battled on well-matched tackle, this pirate is nothing short of gallant in its fight for freedom. The pirate with which we have to contend is the wahoo, the fastest member of the mackerel family. It has glowing horizontal stripes on silvery blue sides and the uncanny ability to surprise and confound anglers that challenge it.

If you have ever had a wahoo explode on your bait, then watched as line screamed off your reel from a spectacular first run, you already understand the sheer power and amazing speed of this great game

fish. The wahoo is recognized as one of the fastest fish in the ocean, reaching speeds well over 50 miles per hour on a flat out run away from your boat, while pulling strike drag off a 50-pound class outfit. I have often wondered who named this blue water speedster and am willing to bet that person was standing in the cockpit of a sportfishing boat watching one flash through the pattern before launching itself into an aerial attack on one of the baits. When all was said and done, the poor sole was probably left with nothing more than the leaders to crank back to the boat. Or maybe he was hooked up when he inadvertently named the fish, yelling WAHOO! as it smoked the drag. However this fish got its name, it certainly seems apropos.

Living In Wahoo Territory

The area we fish is perfectly situated for catching wahoo on a year-round basis. The only thing that keeps us from them is the weather, which can create some nasty sea conditions, especially during the winter months. Whenever we can venture offshore—even in November, December and January—we can catch wahoo. The close proximity of the Gulf Stream maintains a constant supply of warm water within reach of our boats. Whether we're fishing out of Carolina Beach or Wrightsville Beach, it's only 55 miles to some of the best year-round wahoo fishing found anywhere in the world. When you have access to a great game fish with such regularity, you have the opportunity to hone your techniques.

Wahoo are common to all the warm and temperate ocean waters of the world. They are caught further north than Cape Fear, although the further north you go, the more seasonal their presence. They are plentiful further south, in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico, and can be found thick as fleas in certain areas of the eastern Pacific, especially off the coast of the Baja. If you currently, or plan to, fish out of North Carolina, here are some areas we find most productive.

The Cape Fear Terrace area, and a spot locally known as "The Steeples" (27120/39068), regularly produces monster wahoo, as well as yellowfin tuna and billfish throughout the year. This area is appropriately named for its dramatic bottom structure: peaks which look like church steeples when you pass over them with the depth finder. The Steeples provide excellent bait-holding structure and if the current or tide is moving, there is usually a significant rip making them very easy to find and fish. Wahoo love hunting around rips, weed lines and other types of structure.

Just inshore of the Steeples, there are some good areas of what we call live bottom, structure comprised of coral reefs, the northernmost true coral reefs found on the East Coast. These areas of live bottom are a haven for all types of fish, like the vermilion snapper—locally called a B-Liner—which wahoo love to eat. When you find what wahoo eat, you usually find wahoo. Also inshore of the Steeples, you can find several good ledges that offer rapid bottom depth changes that attract and hold bait, providing good wahoo habitat.

Further south, Black Jack Hole is another area of live coral bottom. Located just inshore of the 50-fathom curve in 180 feet to 220 feet of water, this area has paid me big dividends in past tournaments, producing some of our largest wahoo. During the 1996 Bald Head Island Fishing Rodeo, most of the winning fish came from Black Jack Hole, including the top fish. This area can also produce yellowfin and billfish at different times of the year.

In the late fall and winter months, the "Same Ole" (27100/39125) can be a very productive location for big wahoo. Good bottom structure along a 10-mile stretch, as well as structure inshore in shallow water nearby, attracts and holds bait. The water temperature stays in the mid-70s to the low 80-degree range along the entire area, even through the winter. Work this area from 30 fathoms out to 50 and back again to up your chances of seeing an aerial assault by marauding wahoo.

Another great wahoo area is the 260 (27060/39260). Working in 180 to 240 feet of water, this area can be very productive. You can troll five miles on either side of this spot and find good fish holding structure. The Wahoo Hole is just inshore and a little south of the 260 and is aptly named.

All these areas have excellent bottom structure and its usually no problem to find large pods of bait congregated on the shallow side of these drop-offs. When I fish these areas, I prefer working the shallow side of the structure first, with most fish coming out of 180 to 230 feet of water. I've caught wahoo in water as shallow as 80 feet and as deep as 950, but 180 to 230 feet is the most productive, depending on time of year.

Wahoo can be caught year-round, but the best months are late March, April, May and again in October, November and early December. As I looked back over my log, November seems to be the best for both the largest specimens and the greatest number of wahoo. The only problem with November is that the number of days you can get offshore is usually limited by the weather patterns.

The Club With The Scary Name

My love of blue water fishing landed me as president of the Cape Fear Blue Water Fishing Club, based out of Carolina Inlet Marina. It is made up of blue water enthusiasts that all share a passion for catching wahoo. Member's boats range from 23 to 34 feet, with most in the 26- to 30-foot range. The club is recognized by many of the charter boats out of Carolina Beach and a number of the skippers are actually members. When fishing 55-plus miles offshore, it is comforting to know that our members look out for one another and can depend on professionals in the area for safety and for sharing fishing information. This is especially comforting for members like myself, who frequently fish alone.

The Cape Fear Blue Water Fishing Club sponsors several events throughout the year, the largest is usually held the last weekend in June and is a two out of three day shootout. The club's focus is on promoting the sport and the conservation of our marine resources. We hold an annual tournament for the largest wahoo, tuna and dolphin caught during the calendar year, with a category for billfish, all release and based on points.

We recently created a home page on the Internet, which led to my contact with the folks at THE JOURNAL. Our page links you to current weather and sea conditions along the southeast coast, as well as information on fishing. There is a place to brag about catches and leave messages. The address is http://localsonly.wilmington.net/~wahoo. My E-mail address is: wahoo@wilmington.net.

Fish Shallow or Fish Deep?

As you might expect, there are a lot of methods that consistently catch wahoo, so there is always debate on the effectiveness of one over another. The information we provide here was developed from two different points of view within the club, as expressed by Neal and myself. A lot of the techniques we use in the Gulf Stream have been off-shoots of common background, but from that point on, they differ based on what we enjoy most about catching this specific game fish.

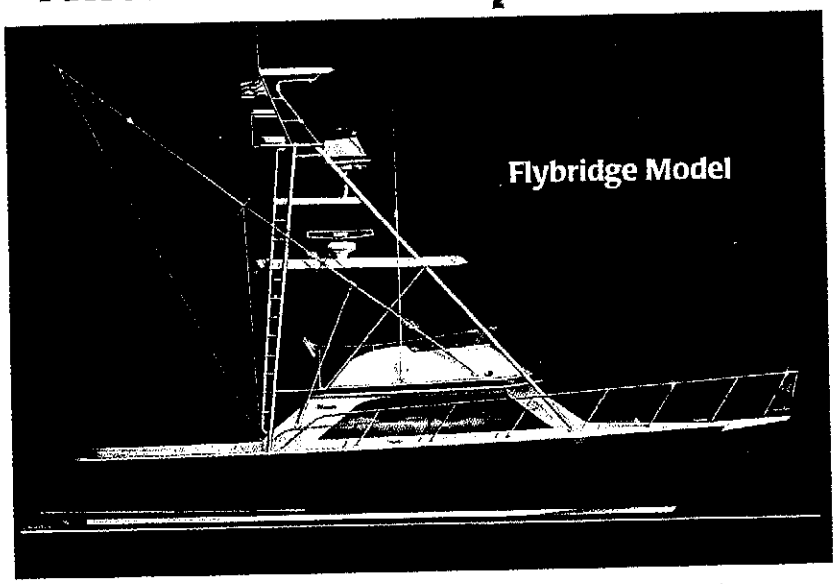
I prefer to fish baits and lures near the surface because I feel the most exciting part of fishing for wahoo is being able to watch the way they take a surface trolled bait. The strike is an awesome visual spectacle. Neal, on the other hand, fishes most of his baits deep, the place where wahoo spend most of their time. He has been very successful using such techniques and it's hard to argue with success. Neither method is wrong or right, they both catch wahoo. It becomes a matter of what you want from the experience that flavors the way you go.

Wahoo REEL STRESS Style

Style is defined in Funk and Wagnall's as "The manner in which some action or work is done." My style might be a bit unorthodox to some, but it consisently works for me. Even on slow days, I never lose confidence in my trolling pattern's ability to produce.

Here are some of the basics, including the how and why of wire leaders, rigging baits, rods and reels and the like. These are

Radovcich 35 Sportfisher



Features:

- Express & Flybridge models
- 34' 8" length; 13' beam
- Superior fishability
- Over 130 sq. foot cockpit
- 550 gallons of fuel
- 35 knot speeds
- Twin & single diesel options
- Sleeping for 6 persons
- Designer interior w/full galley
- Electric head & stand-up shower
- Fresh & salt water washdowns
- Non-skid decks and S.S. handrails

Options include tuna tower, 8-scoop bait tank, tackle station and more.

Custom-Built and Factory-Direct Pricing
Call for detailed Specifications and a free Brochure

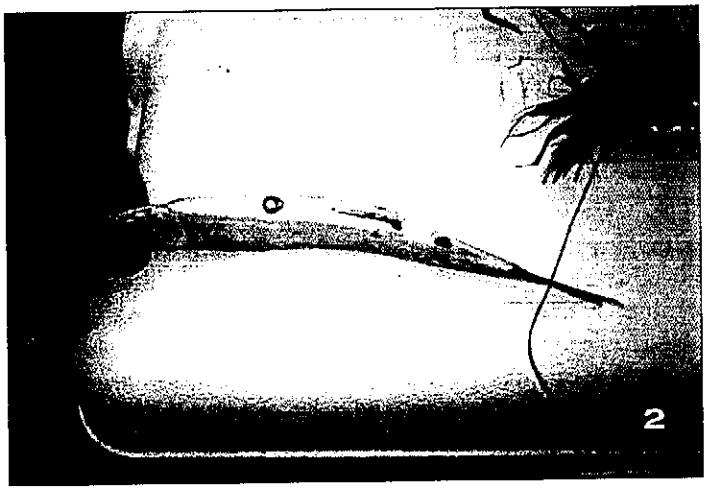
Designed For the Uncompromising Sportsman

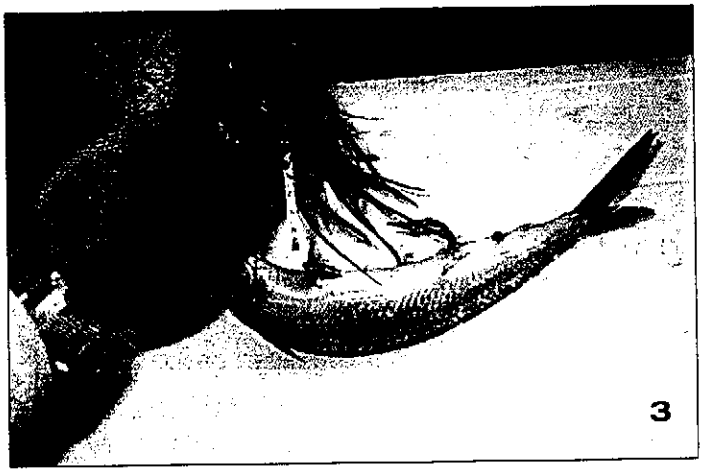
Radovcich

When Integrity, Quality and Performance Count, Count on Radovcich.

Radovcich Boats Unlimited, Inc.
823 Watson Avenue, Wilmington, CA 90744 • Tel (310) 830-2180 Fax (310) 830-2880







common to most wahoo fishermen here, and apply to both my fishing style and to those of deep trollers like Neal.

I use a basic spread or trolling pattern for wahoo, however; I like to experiment with new ideas, combining them with the standards. New stuff is pulled close to the boat as wash baits on flat lines. By trying new stuff in tight, I can watch and see how well it works and tweak as needed. A lot of new ideas end up in the trash, but once in a while, something new pays off and becomes part of my overall bag of tricks.

Rods and Reels

My spread consists of two 30TWs and four 50TWs. I use 50-pound test on the 30s, and 80-pound test on the 50s. I prefer Berkeley Trilene Tournament Gold monofilament for a couple of reasons. First, it's relatively small diameter lets me pack over 500 yards on the 30s and over 700 yards on the 50s. Fishing alone like I do, I sometimes need the extra line capacity that will allow a big wahoo a longer first run. It gives me the time to clear the other lines before getting down to business. The work load gets extra busy when I get a multiple hook-up.

Fishing by myself has given me the opportunity to fine tune my skills, while providing a better understanding of the importance of team work when fishing with other people aboard. When you are the captain, mate, and angler all rolled into one, you gain an appreciation for each person's role while fishing as part of a team. From hook-up through the fight and finally to the gaff, I had to learn to control the fish, the boat and the gear.

I'm often asked, "How do you drive, fight, wire and gaff by yourself? Driving is the easy part, accomplished with a Robertson AP3000 auto pilot interfaced with a Northstar 941xD. I have a remote control located at the transom of the boat. Fighting the fish isn't too bad either. But, the wiring and gaffing is a science. An uncluttered cockpit is a must, as well as plenty of rod holders to clear outfits to when it's time to gaff a fish.

Wire or Not

I fish a lot of ballyhoo, a common practice in Carolina waters. When asked about leader systems, I usually respond with a question, Spring or Fall? In the Spring I use #9 or #10 brown wire on my shotgun and short rigger lines, while I use 100- to 130-pound monofilament with no wire on the long rigger lines. The reason is yellowfin tuna. Tuna bites usually come on the long rigger lines and in Spring and Summer tuna are usually leader shy. Wahoo mostly bite the lines closest to the boat or the shotgun, which carry wire leaders. In the Fall, all my lines are fitted with #10 wire leaders. They average six to seven feet in length behind monofilament leaders averaging 12 to 15 feet.

When trying to accommodate the tuna with monofilament leaders, you always run the chance of having a wahoo cut you off. To try and guard against this, I make the nose wire long enough to go through the hook and back up the line several inches. I use a single crimp to secure the rigging wire to the monofilament. Even doing this, some days the wahoo will bite right through the monofilament, wire and all.

The Hook That Gets The Job Done

I prefer Mustad 7694 hooks, a tuna-bend, needle-eye, plated model. I use either 7/0 or 8/0 sizes inside the ballyhoo. For those who are not familiar with this particular hook, it is more beefy in the throat and body than the more popular 7731A. Since switching, I have increased my hook-up ratio tremendously and found it holds the fish better once hooked. I need a hook that stays in the fish, even if it gets a little slack. When I get a double or triple

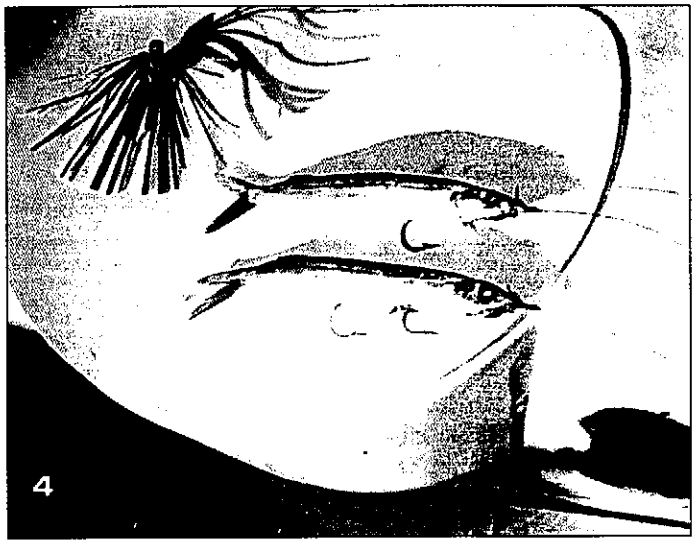
header, it might take 30 minutes to an hour to land all the fish by myself. I like needle-eye hooks because they hide inside the gill plate of the ballyhoo better, especially when using a chin weighted bait. When using this hook with monofilament, I de-bur the eye with a Dremel tool so it won't cut or chaff the leader.

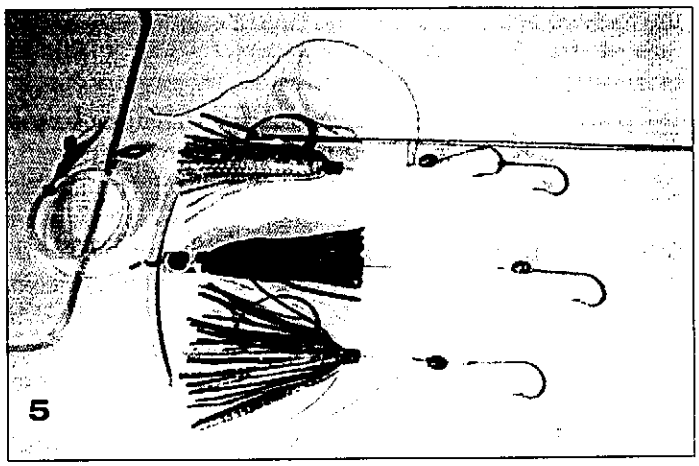
Ballyhoo Baits & Rigs

I prefer to use five- or six-pack size ballyhoo (large or horse), and find the larger baits hold up longer. Also, they allow me to hide the hook and weight, making a cleaner presentation. I prepare at least 20 baits, rigged naked or with my favorite lures, for a days fishing. Preparation and presentation is a priority. I spend several hours the day before my fishing trip rigging baits. I use a medium mullet de-boner to remove the bally's eyes, then pinch down above and below the spine to separate the meat from the bones. This makes the bait more supple and swim better. I also squeeze the bellys, bleeding the bladder out through the anal port. This procedure makes very life-like baits. The shape of the ballyhoo's head, flat or sharp, determines where I place the bait in my spread. I believe rigging natural baits is an art form and a science, one I practice and learn from each and every trip.

I use several different rigs depending on the time of year. The basic ballyhoo, stiff-pin rig I use is always weighted (reference photo 1). The stiff rig keeps the hook in line with the nose wire, which assures the bait will swim upright. In the Fall, I use a double-hook rig on my long lines. It's simple to make, especially if you have the Dremel tool. I use the tool to edge out the top of the ring on the second hook so the front hook point will slide through it where it passes out of the body. Wahoo are known for their ability to cut off your baits and this rig gives you a fighting chance when they are striking short (reference photos 2, 3, 4).

Another rig I have taken a real shine to is a short wire version. Instead of a five- to seven-foot-long wire leader, it consists of a 12-inch piece of #10 wire with the hook haywire twisted in place and a small 100-pound test ball bearing swivel haywired to the other end. It is attached at the swivel to a 15-foot leader of 130-pound test mono. It works well and has been replacing the long wire leaders more and more each season. It is the least amount of wire you can get by with for wahoo (reference photo 5). It is a great rig for people who are timid about using wire and with it, you never have to handle the wire when leading a fish to the gaff.







Above: The final result — rigged and ready for action.

Lures

Whenever the subject of favorite lures comes up, it is like asking which basketball team you root for. Everyone has their own favorites that are often a closely guarded secret. You know, the ones that only you and a couple thousand other people know about. I believe the productivity of any lure depends on speed, boat wake and the fishermen's confidence in its ability to produce.

Over the past six years I have spent a lot of money and energy on skirts, lures, and gadgets to run over rigged ballyhoo. Blue/white and black/red are the only two colors I use anymore when running skirted ballyhoo, with the exception of black/ purple or a navy/chartreuse /green, which are used in hopes of attracting a white marlin. Most of the lures I use are made by Dave Reed at Hatteras Lures. Dave is a Hatteras native who fishes the area regularly. He and I have swapped a lot of ideas back and forth over the past years and I have found his creations to be extremely productive.

I believe the current Georgia state record wahoo, a 108-pound monster caught aboard Capt. George Patterson's ESCAPADE out of Savannah, bit a Hatteras Outlaw model. This lure has consistently paid off for me, too. I have won back to back annual tournaments in the tuna category, and first place in the club invitational for the past two years, using it. It also landed me first place for 1995, and second place in 1996 in the billfish release category. I've gained a lot of confidence in it's ability to catch most pelagic game fish.

Over the last two years, I have found that you can't count out a "Plain Jane" ballyhoo. You may rig it straight or split-bill depending on the action you want, but a naked bally catches real well at times. I run one up close behind one of Dave's Hatteras teasers with deadly results.

During the fall of the year, I occasionally place plugs in the wash specifically for the 'hoos. The CD18 Magnum Rapala in green/gold is my favorite. It trolls about six to 12 inches under the surface and is run behind a short wire leader. I will caution that this lure can be frustrating at times. I had many strikes that did not result in a hook-up on these plugs at first, but when I replaced the treble hooks with singles and used a small rubber band to hold the front hook against the lure body, my hook-up ratio improved. If you troll these plugs, dump the trebles immediately.

Speed And Good Vibrations

Trolling speed is one factor which is relative. Relative, that is, to boat wake, area being fished, type of baits, sea conditions and so on. I normally troll at 5.9 knots, but increase to as fast as seven knots during calm summer days. But, I noticed that a lot of wahoo strike a bait while the boat is at idle fighting another fish. This prompted me to slow down more when fishing for them. I know a lot of people fish wahoo at speeds of 10 knots or higher and I often fish right beside these guys, but slowing down can produce when fast trolling isn't working.

Since I began trolling more slowly, I've had quite a few days when I caught four to six wahoos and a few tuna and was on my way home by one o'clock. That might not sound like a big day to some, but brother let me tell you, it's plenty when you're by yourself. Also, there are normally another two to six wahoo I don't land due to cut offs, bite offs and just plain missing the hook. One thing you should remember, keep an open mind! You never know when something new will pay off.

Most people believe the sound of the boat has a lot to do with raising fish. I believe they are 100-percent correct. My prop is balanced and the cup is checked at least four times a year. Martin Davis at Coastal Propeller has blue printed the prop for pitch and cup so we can keep it consistent. I fish a single Yanmar diesel, so I don't have to worry about synchronizing twin engines, but the proper hum of the engine and prop makes a difference. The extra attention keeps my rig raising fish consistently.

Wahoo MISS SHERRI II Style

Another deadly method for bagging wahoo is trolling deep, using downriggers. Fellow club member and good friend Neal Dunn has become something of an expert on the technique, using downriggers aboard his MISS SHERRI II on a consistent basis. He feels wahoo spend most of their time deeper in the water column and therefore, he has the most chance of catching them when presenting his baits there. He has taken some incredible wahoo using this technique, consistently placing him in the money in most of the tournaments he fishes.

Neal does not like the noise often created by the cable and weights that come standard with most downriggers. At trolling speeds, the cable can create a harmonic humming noise that he feels can turn off the fish or at least announce the presence of something unnatural in the water. So he removes the cable and replaces it with 200 or 250 pound monofilament. He makes it a point to use the smallest diameter monofilament available in that pound class for the least resistance in the water. This helps reduce blow-back.

He then replaces the downrigger weight with a Nekton Z-Wing, which is a large, plastic and metal planer designed specifically for downriggers to carry the release clip and line deep not by weight, but by water pressure on the Wing. It actually flies the bait down instead of sinking it. He uses the #500 model, which is perfect for blue water fishing. He prefers the Z-Wing over a regular planer because he says it gets down deeper with less line and has less blow-back at his trolling speeds.

The release clip is placed on the line a foot or so above the snap swivel that attaches the Z-Wing to the downrigger line. The release clip is set for a relatively tight trip pressure, but he is careful not to set it too tight. What Neal is trying to accomplish with release settings is to get a preliminary hook set from the release clip when a 'hoo strikes, but he doesn't want it so tight that the line can snap from the impact of the strike. You have to find the right balance of tight, but not too tight.

An excessively long drop-back from the release clip to his baits or lures is avoided. He lets the lures back 30 to 40 feet, puts a twist in the line to keep it from sliding any further back through the release clip, and attaches the loop to the clip. As he lowers the Z-Wing, he loosens the drag on the downrigger spool and the reel so the line will go down with it smoothly. When he reaches the desired depth, he resets the drag on the downrigger and the drag on the reel. He then cranks any bow out of the line between the rod tip and the release clip and gets ready for action.

Smaller, 12-pack size (medium) ballyhoo are used to eliminate short strikes as much as possible. Neal rigs them using several of the methods explained earlier, depending on time of year and conditions.

He recommends that baits be checked frequently because short strikes from a wahoo on deep downrigger lines frequently don't trip the release clip. That means you can be trolling a mangled bait, chopped in half by a marauding wahoo, and not know it.

Checking baits can be a hassle using this set up because you have to crank up the Z-Wing. This requires backing the boat down to dead idle because the Z-Wing puts so much pressure on the downrigger at trolling speeds that you could kill yourself trying to crank it up on a manual downrigger. When you get a strike, you will need to raise the riggers up quickly, even if the fish is on another rod, to prevent it from tangling with the downrigger line and Z-Wing.

Neal's best luck has come on ballyhoo combined with lures with dark colored skirts. A red/black Hawaiian eye is his favorite lure for pulling down deep. He likes to trim the hair back so it just covers the front of the ballyhoo back to just over the hook. A yellow/green Zucker over a ballyhoo, which has produced several tournament winners, is also a favorite. He breaks the ballyhoo's backbone and always makes sure it is being pulled by the chin. A #10 wire ballyhoo pin-rig down deep, is a must. These toothy critters can slice through monofilament and, on a downrigger, you'd never know they were hit.

Trolling speeds with downriggers are often considerably slower than most people troll for wahoo. While five knots may seem slow, if you have ever pulled a Z-Wing, you will understand why that is pretty much the maximum trolling speed with this equipment. The downward force of a Z-Wing is much greater than that of a normal planer and generates far more pressure on the downrigger than any weight. Before you go trolling with Z-Wings, be sure your downrigger is bolted to the boat using a backing plate, or you could damage the the gunnel.

Mid-April through September is the best time of the year to pull baits deep for wahoo in this area. Neal's preferred depth is 130 feet on the downrigger scale, especially in the heat of the summer. It's where the wahoo hang out and putting the bait in front of their face is sure to produce a reaction. As the water starts cooling down again in the Fall, it becomes less important to get that deep, making this system less desirable compared with surface trolling.

Putting Them Together

Now, not everyone fishes either topside or down deep. One of the interesting things about our different approaches to catching wahoo is if you pull dead baits on the surface at moderate speeds, five knots or so, you can add one or two deep baits on downriggers into the pattern. The two methods can be blended into a harmony of baits or bait and lure combinations, that will produce for you whether the fish are holding deep or easily coaxed to the surface to strike baits there.

Regardless of your trolling preferences, one thing remains constant. Wahoo are an incredible game fish that will amaze you each time you hook up. They are also fine eating when brought to the table fresh from a day's fishing. We hope you found our diatribe on wahoo helpful to your fishing and if you want to communicate on a two-way basis, hook up with us on the Internet. Good fishing from Neal, myself and the entire Cape Fear Blue Water Fishing Club, where wahoo fishing is an affliction that is understood and appreciated.

