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BY THE WAY

GUEST EDITORIAL
BY CAPT. SKIP SMITH

Tournaments Should Be Fun

Once you decide to start fishing competitively in tournaments, there are a wide variety of options to choose from that fit your skill level and areas of expertise. Most tournaments have many different categories and levels to enter.

To be competitive in most tournaments, a lot of private crews train in places like Cancun, the Dominican Republic, St. Thomas and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the Atlantic, and Hawaii, Cabo San Lucas, Panama and Costa Rica in the Pacific. Anglers practice hooking a great number of fish on circle hooks, while the captains and crews try out new ideas and refine their techniques.

One thing I always tell people is that once the tournament starts, pretend that you purchased a lottery ticket and put it up on the top shelf of the bookcase. Now go fishing, have fun and see where your numbers come in at the end of the tournament. There's no sense in having a missed bite turn into a the-world's-coming-to-an-end drama scene.

One of the hardest parts of being a traveling fisherman is finding charter boats that can compete with the private boats that fish as a team year-round.

Hawaii is probably the best place to find a world-class tournament fleet, since they've proved that they can field a fleet of experts every year in the world-renowned Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament (HIBT). Most of the boats that are "hired" by the tournament have won a few tournaments and boast world-class crews.

Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, also boasts a proven track record, having hosted the IGFA World Championship for quite a few years, and Los Sueños, Costa Rica, is another place that you can find a fleet of excellent charter boats that can compete with any crew in the world.

Out of all the places mentioned, Los Sueños is probably the easiest place to complete a dream trip. The fellow in Chicago or Buffalo who is sitting at home watching his favorite fishing show, dreaming about getting out of the cold weather and onto some calm water filled with lots of jumping billfish would be hard-pressed to find a better spot to try and get tournament-ready.

This exact scenario played out this year in the 2013 Los Sueños Signature Series, Leg One. Five years ago, two friends, Tim DonLevy and Mike Rankey, decided to charter a boat in Costa Rica. They caught a few sails and thought they would come back and try their luck during a tournament. They chartered one of the top local boats and caught a few fish, learning along the way that they needed more practice if they wanted to be competitive among the field of experts that they faced in Costa Rica. They fished on a few different boats over the next few years, learning from different pros, and continued to fish the series. They scored a couple of top-10 finishes, and Rankey even won top angler one year, catching four marlin and a few sails. But that wasn't enough for them.

They wanted to win, and they made a commitment to find a captain and a crew that would give them the chance to do so. DonLevy met George Beckwith, owner of *Dragin Fly*, a 40-foot Maverick sport-fishing charter boat, and they soon forged a friendship with the desire to fish, and win, these tournaments together. With the well-respected Capt. Tucker "James" Smith at the helm, the odds were tilting in their favor.

With rumors of plenty of sailfish showing up in early January, just in time for the 2013 Leg One tournament, they got there early and practiced fishing for a few days. When the tournament started, the radio crackled from start to finish: 415 fish the first day, 525 fish the second day and 472 fish the third day. The fleet scored a record 1,412 billfish releases with only 38 boats fishing.

Dragin Fly came out on top, catching 62 sails and one marlin, to give another set of anglers a couple of check marks on their bucket list.

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