

BILLFISH TECHNIQUES

By Tony Orton



Above: A squid chain and teaser lures, including a centre lure with J hook and small sailfish pitch bait. Baits and belly flaps can be added in the lures for added tease.

The big tease

You fish lures for marlin and some days get bites, but just do not get the hook up.

Perhaps a small amount of line peels off the reel and that's it; you watch the lure slip back up to the surface with no fish anywhere to be seen. You may think you're having a bad day or that you're just plain unlucky. You might feel you have no control over the situation and that the fish are teasing you.

Over the last few years I have been fortunate to fish locations where we can get 10-50 billfish bites in a day. In calm waters and sitting up in a very high tower, I have seen lots of very common and reoccurring situations unfold when billfish strike. Based on these observations, I have

elected to continue running lures, but have taken the hooks out. Guess what? My catch rate has increased!

Lures are great for raising fish, no doubt about that, but what happens afterwards can sometimes be out of your control. The fish may strike at a lure and then fade off; it may have hit the metal hook and become spooked; or sometimes it will just sit under the lure for a while, follow it, then swim off.

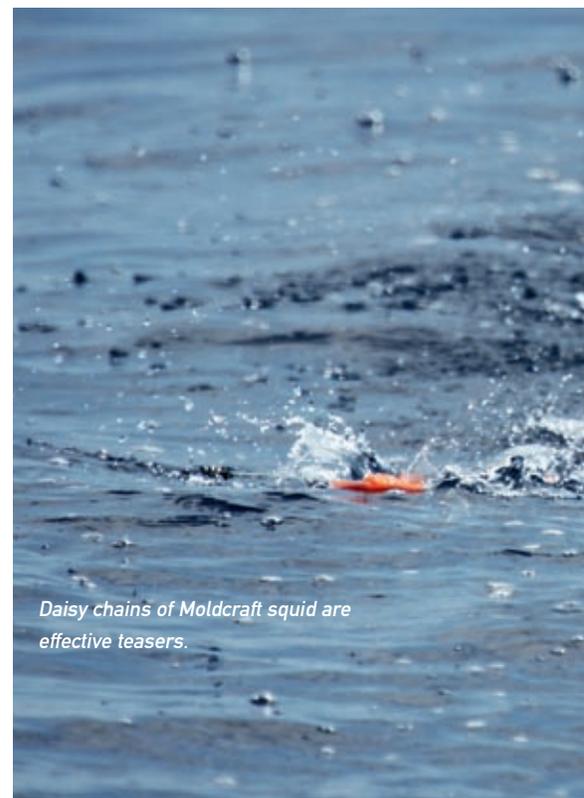
When a billfish hunts in open water, it uses its bill to stun its prey. It comes up from behind, its head slashing back and forth, its eyes constantly looking from side to side in the turbulence to see if it has stunned or disabled its dinner. By this time it is so worked up, all it

wants is food. Quick as a flash, it turns its body or head and swallows its struggling prey.

This simple scenario is why I use lures to attract the fish, but then drop live or dead baits back to hook them. We use circle hooks for the wellbeing of the fish, as well as for another important reason that I will cover later.

'Tease and switch', 'pitch baiting' – whatever you want to call it – will increase your hook-up rate when correctly done, entertain your guests, and over time you'll learn more about how a billfish strikes. It also creates a great team environment for your crew, and their skills will increase tenfold.

A lot of overseas crews run four teasers, all on the 'riggers. That keeps



Daisy chains of Moldcraft squid are effective teasers.

them out of the prop wash and in clean water, where it's easier for the crew and the fish to see them. Teaser reels with 250lb lines and very quick retrieves are used to get the lure/teaser away from the fish and out the water quickly; I use two teaser reels I operate myself in the tower and two in the cockpit operated by the crew. One crewman's job is to tease the fish and the other's is to pitch the bait back to it. Constant communication between the bridge and the crew is vital to explain where the fish is and what it's doing.

Once you see a fish, timing is important. Everyone needs to be alert 100% of the time. One of the mates starts bringing the teaser in, just quickly enough to stay out of reach of the fish. While this is happening the other crewman is dropping the bait back. Then, when the bait is close to the teaser, the teaser is removed from the water and the bait presented to the fish.

This is when things either go well or badly. I encourage my crew to hold the rod tip as high as possible with a finger on the spool and the reel in free-spool (no ratchet on). This lets us see the bait on the surface and then, when the fish strikes, the rod is dropped quickly down, giving a moment of very slack line and a more natural presentation (similar to stray-lining to wary snapper). Free-spooling with the rod tip as low as possible stops the bait being pulled out of the fish's mouth, and when it has turned, it's time to quietly engage the drag lever. BINGO! You're hooked up.

After watching so many strikes I

have also noted that most fish turn away from the prop wash. With this in mind we always have our circle-hook points facing towards the prop wash for a better hook up when the fish turns away. We use circle hooks for two reasons: one, it reduces the incidence of deep-hooked fish, which usually results in damage to their internal organs and ultimately death; and two, once hooked, it is hard for a circle hook to pull out.

The latter reason is crucial for the way we fish. When we hook a medium-sized fish, say 80-150kg, we do not clear our gear and back up – we keep fishing. We drive around the fish in a large circle (normally the side we hooked it from), gradually getting closer and closer to it. We clear the gear on the side of the boat where it was hooked, but leave the gear on the opposite side out with one crewmember on standby. Meanwhile, the other crewmember assists the angler and tidies the cockpit to ensure it's safe.

Once close (we have marks on our lines at 50 metres) and within striking distance, we quickly clear the rest of the gear, pop the engines into reverse and release the fish.

You only need medium pressure to keep a circle hook in, so while we're driving around the fish, the circle hook works well for us. (This technique would also be great on a smaller trailer boat with a single engine, as it is easier to drive to the fish than back up).

On days when the bite is hot, we can be hooking fish such as mahimahi and small tuna while fighting marlin, then tease and catch another marlin



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A marlin teased up, angry and hungry.



Electronic teaser reels with remotes.

(marlin eat mahimahi and tuna) on the opposite side. Normally fighting the non-targeted species is considered a waste of valuable time.

The gear used is varied and costs as much as you want to spend, but if on a tight budget, setting up for tease and switch is far cheaper than conventional lure fishing. Squid chains are cheap, and rubber (Moldcraft) lures are cheaper than the fancy resin-head lures. If you wanted, you could use just one rod and reel, and

rig up some cheap way of getting the teasers in quickly. I have seen some small boats just tie their teaser lines onto their hard-top frame and pull them in by hand.

Short teaser rods are great; they can also be used as a downrigger, deep-drop rod and reel, or to troll for skippies and other live baits, as they are so compact and easy to wind in.

Pitch baits include small tuna, mackerel and piper, pitched live or dead. On the big boat I also run one

skipping bait off each long 'rigger, as well as a long centre bait with a small lure over its nose to give it some action and armed with a J hook. This rig has caught a lot of stray tuna and marlin that faded off early out of the spread, as well as the odd fish that we never saw.

If into time and control management, then this style of fishing may be for you, as more time is spent with baits in the water and there's certainly better control when

it comes to hooking the fish. Maybe you just want to see angry, lit-up marlin chasing your teaser, your crew struggling to get the teaser away from the increasingly frustrated fish's mouth, and then watch it as it swallows your bait right at the boat's transom. See it turn its head; feel the strike and power of a large and angry fish peeling the line in your hands. If this sounds attractive, then maybe with a little practice and teamwork, this strategy is for you. 

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