

Rare Encounter



Capt. Mike Rowell had only seen it twice before in his lifetime on the water. Vernon Minton, Director of the Marine Resources Division said he could probably count the times he's seen it on one hand.

It's such a rare event in the Gulf of Mexico that fishermen in the entire region spread the word like wildfire when it happens.

Such was the case last year when Orange Beach boat *Annie Girl*, with Capt. Rowell at the helm, weighed in a 700-pound bluefin tuna at the Mobile Big Game Fishing Club's Memorial Day Tournament.

A 700-pound fish of any kind is reason for celebration, but giant bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*), the largest of all tuna, are rarely encountered in the Gulf of Mexico and almost never landed. Bluefins are warm-blooded and tend to prefer cooler waters, although their range is extremely wide — the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Mexico.

Just another Tournament

Because encounters with bluefin in the Gulf are so rare, anglers are seldom prepared to catch one of the behemoths. It takes giant tackle to handle a giant bluefin.

Annie Girl was fishing the Memorial Day tournament with a crew of 12 regular customers of Capt. Rowell, who happened to be prepared for just about anything on this trip.

"Truitte Jackson, my stepson, had been going to the University of Alabama," Rowell said. "He had worked for us during the summer while he was in school. He had just graduated and actually went to work for the people who had chartered the boat. This was his first time as a registered angler."

Conditions were not good for big game fishing. Capt. Rowell had to run 140 miles into the Gulf to find blue water.

"We started fishing a rig, I think it's called the International Hub," Rowell said. "As we were approaching the rig, we had some ballyhoo out trying to catch a yellowfin or a marlin. As we were getting close, I noticed something a couple of hundred yards away. I ran up into the tower, thinking it might be tuna. I told my deck hand that it was tuna, to get ready. As we got closer I said, 'Nah, it's porpoises.' I could see big black backs just rolling. I thought for a second it might be bluefin, but bluefin are so rare in the Gulf. I've only seen bluefin two other times in my life. I said, 'Nah, it's pilot whales.'"

Then one of the tunas went airborne.

"It was huge," Rowell said. "I screamed, 'It's bluefin, it's bluefin, put the big stuff out.' We had bigger leader rigged up. Well, it was too late. We use smaller leaders when we're trying to catch tuna. So the fish hits before we can get the big stuff out."

"Everybody said, 'Truitte, you get in the chair.' He's 23 years old and in great shape. He gets in the chair but the fish breaks off. We had 200-pound test first and then we put out 400. I started heading back to the rig and they popped up again. It was just perfect, right off the bow. I swung around and pulled in beside them. The right rigger — it looked like a Volkswagen fell in the water, a huge explosion. Line starts peeling off the reel. The fish goes away from the rig, thank goodness. He makes runs in spurts. He'll go like the devil for a while and then he'll slow down and we'll catch up to him."

Then the big fish does an about-face and heads straight back toward the rig and all the sharp-shelled mollusks that can slice through a line in a flash.

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Fighting Fish

"At one time, we're within 50 feet of the rig and he's straight down," Rowell said. "How we kept from getting cut off, I don't know. Then he comes up and takes off again. I'm backing down as hard as I can. Then, after about an hour and a half, he starts sounding on us. He dies with about 100 yards of line left on the reel. We knew it had died because it was going at such a steady pace straight down.

"We kept pushing the drag up trying to stop it. We could have snapped on another rod, but if we do, we will disqualify ourselves from the tournament. I told Truitte it was up to him because he was the angler. I told him if it was up to me, I'd try to stop him. He put the reel on full drag and put his thumbs on the spool with less than 100 yards of line left on the spool. Then the fish just hung there for 30 minutes. If he took his thumbs off the spool, the fish would slowly go down. I tried to maneuver the boat around. Some guys use a circle or figure eight, but that didn't work. So we just started letting the wind drift us away from the fish. Then we'd back up to try to get some line back. The first 20 times we did that, we probably gained a foot of line.

"I'm an optimist when I go fishing. I take the tartar sauce with me. I think we're going to win every tournament we're in. But I had serious doubts about getting this fish in. There was nothing we could do. I kept letting the boat drift away and backing up and that started working. We started getting a little bit of line. But it was all Truitte."

Fortunately for the anglers on the Annie Girl, Jackson was a seasoned deck hand from working on the boat during the summer breaks and knew all about fighting big fish. Of course, he'd never been hooked to a 700-pound tuna, but he'd been involved in boating large billfish.

However, when the tuna hit, Jackson reverted to his deck hand days.

"I turned around looking for an angler because I thought I was going as a deck hand," he said. "I had just graduated and was going to work for the people who had the boat chartered. I was hired but wasn't on the payroll. But they had signed me up as an angler and it was my time up. I got on the rod and got in the chair as they cleared the other lines. I set the drag up as far as I possibly could without losing him. Then Mike started backing down as fast as he

could so we could get as much line back while he was near the surface.

"Then he just started going down, down, down. Somewhere about an hour-and-a-half in, he died. With all that stretch in the line, we couldn't tell for sure if he was dead or not. It was slowing, but with all that weight it took a long time for the momentum to change."

With the drag full on and his thumbs on the spool of the Penn International 80W, Jackson bided his time as best he could. With Rowell continuing to drift off and back down, a new problem emerged.

"About two hours into it, the fish had smoked the drag so bad that it wouldn't grab at all," Jackson said. "I had to reach up to the first eye (on the rod) and pull the line so the reel would take it up. That's how bad the drag was. Then about three hours into it, the screws started backing out of the reel. You can't touch the angler, so they had to hand me the screwdriver. We probably had to do that 10 times.

"We lost low gear, but it didn't really matter because the drag was gone. Right around three hours, I realized how tired I was. We were gaining a little line, but you still knew there were two-thirds of the spool out, about 500 yards. And it was coming super, super, super slow. We did that pretty much for four hours. They could hand me water and Gatorade, but they couldn't touch me or the reel. I was hurting all over. The only thing that kept me going was that we were gaining a little bit of line every time. I couldn't figure out how long it was going to take but we weren't losing line."

Reeling in the Tuna

All of a sudden, the battle changed again. The anglers were able to gain enough line to get the big tuna closer to surface. The pressure change caused air to enter the fish's body cavity and the fish started rapidly coming to the surface. Then visions of Hemingway's "The Old Man and Sea" started dancing in Jackson's head.

"I was reeling as hard as I could, but the reel was so completely shot I couldn't keep up," Jackson said. "And then we began to worry about sharks. It would have really been a shame if we'd lost that fish to sharks.

"When they got the gaff in him, it was a huge relief because I knew my job was done. I knew we were going to get him in

the boat. I didn't know how we were going to do it, but I had confidence we would find a way."

When Jackson tried to lend a hand with preparations to haul the monster fish aboard, he ran into another dilemma.

"When I tried to get up out of the chair, I just fell down," he said. "I had been sitting so long, my legs weren't working."

The fight lasted a grueling seven-and-a-half hours and the work wasn't finished. Annie Girl doesn't have a transom door, so a block and tackle had to be rigged to the tower.

"We have a plan to get big marlin – 500, 600, 700 pounds – in, but the tuna was such a chunk," Rowell said. "It's just huge. I thought if we put a hook in him, we'd probably pull the hook. So we put the rope around his tail. We broke the rope once, but when we got the rigging right it came right in.

A Day to Remember

"It's times like that you never forget. When that big fish hit the deck, the whole boat shook."

Jackson remembers that huge thud vividly.

"When the tuna finally came over the transom, everybody started screaming," Jackson said. "That's when I just laid down on the deck and laid there for a while. There's a video on YouTube (Annie Girl Bluefin Tuna) of when we finally got the fish in the boat. If you look toward the edge of the screen you'll see my legs where I'm lying on the deck. I felt physically ill for 24 hours. I didn't want to do anything."

Jackson did muster enough strength to help fillet the behemoth and, according to all who partook, it was every bit as good as they'd heard.

"It was incredible," Rowell said. "I think why our fish was so good, when he died he was probably 2,000 feet down and the water is cold. He was there so long that he was cold to the backbone. You hear all these wild numbers that people pay for these fish. This would have been a premium fish. But we eat sushi like crazy. We just about killed ourselves eating that thing. But it was so good."

Jackson added: "The toro (belly meat) was awesome. It would just melt in your mouth." ☐