

The tuna being  
dragged backwards



# Tuna Delight

Story and Photos by David and Mary Gayle Sartwell

Capt. Mike Parisi spotted it first. The orange balloon floating on the water 50 feet behind the boat started to move slowly to the left, sideways to the wind and against the current, crossing behind the other two rigs. “Something’s on,” he said in a calm but firm voice. I hastily cranked up the Sabiki rig I had been using to jig the bottom for bait fish. Mike moved quickly forward, started the motor and then reached over and dropped our anchor ball to free us without having to pull the anchor.

I hurried to put the bait rod in the companionway and return to the stern. I cranked the reel on one of the two remaining rods, hauling in the balloon and the bait that had been suspended about 15 fathoms below. We cleared the deck for the fight to come.

The line continued to peel off the big Penn reel on the remaining rod in a slow but steady rate. There was no big screaming run typical of a striking tuna, just a steady but powerful pull away from the boat. About a hundred yards out, the fish realized that it was hooked and turned back toward us as if to try to figure out where this pull was coming from. I reeled in the line as fast as I could, attempting to keep the 250-pound test Jinkai line tight. About 30 yards out we saw a boil deep beneath the surface but couldn’t tell what was on the line.

“Must be a bluedog,” Mike ventured. There are a lot of blue sharks in the Ipswich Bay off Gloucester, Mass., and this fish was behaving like one. No sudden movement, no running line, just a steady pull.

And then it sounded. Down it went, line stripping off the reel, taking us



The author has the tuna on the rod.

Hoisting the tuna from the boat to the processing room



deep. Mike backed the *Amanda Marie* toward the fish, keeping the stern square to the action. I could do little but watch as this powerful fish simply made the reel holler and the short telephone pole of a rod bend deep to the task.

As suddenly as it dove, it stopped, like it was sulking on the bottom. The rod was still bent in a full arc as it swam against the current, but it neither gave or took, simply kept pace, the weight of the boat on the incoming tide providing the resistance.

“Must be a thresher,” Mike ventured. “Whatever it is, it is huge.”

I slipped the reel into low gear, cranked the drag up a bit and pulled a glove onto my left hand. The line was tight and the rod was bent. Reaching forward just below the bottom eye, I grasped the line and pulled it back much as you would do on a bow and arrow. Gaining a little, I reeled a turn. I did this several times, not sure

whether I was pulling the boat forward or the fish back, but I was making a little progress.

“I’ve only got 130-pound test Seaguar fluorocarbon for a leader,” Mike

said. “I’m not sure it will stand up long against sharp shark teeth. Crank on it hard and let’s either get it up or break it off so we can get back on station. I’d like to catch a tuna today.”



Reading the scale

This eight-foot-plus tuna weighed 387.8 pounds after cleaning. It was sent to Japan for sale.

With that I pulled hard on the line again. I could feel its huge head shaking back and forth deep below us. I was sure I had never had a fish this big on my line before. Shark or not, I wanted to see this one up close.

After 40 minutes into the give-and-take, the fish decided to come up from

the depths to the surface as if to check us out. It cruised by *Amanda Marie's* stern 20 feet out and 10 feet deep. As it rolled by it turned sideways. It was then that we saw the eye. And it saw us.

"Holy crap, Mike! It's a huge tuna!" I shouted.

The tenor of the boat conversation

totally changed. From a casual "well, if it breaks off, who cares" to a brand-new level of concern and attention. There was a lot of money on the end of the line. For whatever reason, the fish looked to us like a "her."

"Back off the brake on the reel," Mike hollered. "Watch the line so she doesn't scrape the corner of the boat." Just as he said that, the fish took off on her first really serious tuna run. It was a deep slashing charge that had line screaming off the reel like never before. She had seen us and the boat and wanted no part of either.

The rod bent and quivered like a tuning fork. The tension on the line made it sing. We could do nothing but hang on and hope she would run out of energy before we ran out of line. As quickly as she ran, she stopped. Mike backed the boat and I reeled in the line. Soon we were over her. Mike pulled forward a bit so we had a bit of an angle and I went back to the bow-and-arrow technique, slowly grinding her up off the bottom. I am still a strong boy but this fish was an incredible athlete.

She didn't want to come up. She was a huge fish with power to burn. She rested a bit and then spun off once more with me watching helplessly as the line peeled off the reel. As before, she stopped and we started to make back some line. We were now an hour and 20 minutes into the fight. She slowly came to us, but she was far from done.

Mike got the harpoon ready, making sure the line box was free and clear. Sweat poured down my face and my muscles strained as I applied all the pressure I could muster. I wheeled the big fish across the stern and up the starboard side of the boat as Mike made ready. When she got parallel to us I strained my back and brought her up to 10 feet below the waterline. Mike reared back and drove the harpoon straight down into the blue water, striking deep into the darker blue fish below.

The tuna took off in a blinding rush, the lines stripping from the reel and

the harpoon basket. Mike had struck straight and deep. We now had two hooks in this mighty fish. If we thought she was done we were sadly mistaken.

Down she went as if on fire. We both applied all the pressure we could, but she wasn't to be turned. Fighting with incredible determination, she went deep. But we just had too much mechanical advantage for this magnificent fish. We kept the pressure on, slowly bringing her to the boat. She tired and came to the stern. Mike gaffed her and I got a loop of rope around her tail and then slipped on another just to be sure.

It wasn't until then that we allowed ourselves to think it was over. The giant tuna was now attached to the boat but was still alive. We towed her backward to put her down for the count before we tried to bring her on board.

I went forward and got the tuna blanket down from the roof of the cabin. We spread the insulated bag on the deck.

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