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## FISHING OFF THE BACK OF THE BOAT...

### *The Art of being a Great Co-Angler*



on the fish during the tournament and manage proper boat control. The boater also gets to make all the major decisions during the day.

In South Africa it is a little different since we do not have a professional circuit up and running yet and most cash-4-cash tournaments are fished as a team event. The Federation tournaments are individual qualifying events and the boater can choose to fish alone or share his/her boat during the event. Fishing off the front or the back of the boat is a personal decision and dependant on the boater's preference. More often than not you would find two fishermen fishing shoulder to shoulder on the front deck and turns would be taken on the trolling motor, usually whilst one angler re-ties or is busy with something else on the boat. Fishing like this is a partnership in the true sense of the word and each angler usually has an equal share in the decision making on the boat.

One fact remains consistent though; one angler would be the owner of the boat and the other not. One person still has to pack up and get on someone else's boat, be able to catch fish behind the other angler and know how to behave and fish courteously and ethically off someone else's boat. The information and tips I am going to share with you in this article are applicable both in South Africa and in America and will go a long way in helping you, the non-boater, become a better angler.

#### WHY CHOOSE TO FISH AS A CO-ANGLER?

There are many different reasons anglers choose to fish as a non-boater but the three main reasons are finances, confidence and not owning a boat. It is extremely expensive to operate as a boater; firstly you would need quite a chunk of money to purchase a boat and then you have to add on the expense of travel to pre-fish and fish the tournament and fuel, oil and mechanical service to run the boat.

The next most mentioned reason an angler chooses to fish as a

When fishing a team tournament the two anglers on the boat should complement each other in their fishing; a partnership in the true sense of the word. Photo: BETT

In the United States many tournaments, including the Women's Bassmaster Tour, are fished in the Pro-Am format (Professional/Amateur) and, not being accustomed to this format, it has taken me a while to get accustomed to fishing this way. There are several different terms used to describe this format, depending on the type of tournament – Professional/Amateur, Boater/Non-boater, Pro/Co-angler - but essentially the format stays the same. One person; the pro/boater, is in total charge of the boat regarding navigation and it is their responsibility to find the fish, put the non-boater



non-boater is because they are looking for an entry level niche to start fishing serious tournaments. Many anglers are not quite confident enough to run a boat on their own or do not want the extreme pressure of having to find fish for themselves and having a partner rely on them to do this. By fishing the amateur side for a while you can get a better understanding of how the professionals handle the pressure and work conditions, instead of letting conditions work against them. Fishing as a co-angler is a great place to gain knowledge, polish up your basic skills and gather experience whilst fishing tournaments. I consider it a bass fishing school where you have experienced, knowledgeable anglers who act as teachers and can show you the ropes and guide you until you are ready to take on the tournament scene single-handed.

When fishing a tournament of this format non-boaters only compete against other non-boaters and not against the more experienced boaters or pros. This levels the playing field by creating fishing scenarios of equal opportunity. Realistically someone on the back of the boat is at a disadvantage against the person fishing off the front because the boater will normally get the first and best opportunities at most targets but when you are competing against other people in exactly the same position as you this does not matter any more.

## BACK-OF-THE-BOAT BASICS

I interviewed quite a few co-anglers and asked them all the same questions. One of the questions I asked was to name the things that they felt could help the non-boater fish more productively off the back of the boat and in my mind this was one of the most important questions. The No. 1 subject that came up repeatedly was **observation**.

## OBSERVATION

Almost every person I talked to told me that it is extremely important to pay attention to every single detail whilst on the back of the boat. Pay attention to the kind of bait your partner is throwing, the type of cover or structure that is being targeted, the retrieval speed and method i.e. dragging, hopping, sweeping, etc. You will not get the first cast at all the good looking spots but by careful observation you can cast into all those spots the boater missed in front of you. It is impossible for the boater to cover every inch of the bank or cover whilst fishing so there will always be a place for you to come in from behind. If your partner is loading the boat in front of you and the lure you are fishing with does not work do not be afraid to change up your bait; this is not the time to be proud. Take careful note of the lure your partner is fishing with and try to match it as closely as possible. Do not be afraid to ask specifics about the bait such as weight, colour and line diameter; small details could make a huge difference.

When you are fishing as a non-boater, take full advantage of the school you are attending. You are in position to learn more about fishing here than anywhere else, and at a much faster

pace. Pay close attention to what the various anglers you fish with are doing. More importantly, learn "why" they do it. Being successful in tournaments is based more on "why," rather than "what." Why a lure change was made, why a colour was changed, why depth has changed? "Why" is much more vital. Set aside the "what" and "where" and continually focus on the "why."

## COMMUNICATION

Communication is extremely important on the boat and can mean the difference between a good and a terrible day on the water. Start communicating with your boater as soon as you have been paired together; by asking what kind of water you will be fishing the next day (deep, shallow, off-shore, heavy cover, etc.) you will ensure that you are better prepared in your tackle selection. Ask about the size of the boat, how many rods are allowed and size of bag so that you know how to organise your tackle.

Once you are on the boat try to keep idle chit-chat to a minimum. You do not want to talk the ears off your boater whilst they are trying to concentrate on fishing as this could be a distraction. Talk about netting procedures before take-off; you do not need a netting issue to sour your day on the boat. Ask about the how's, where's and why's on the boat so that there will be no future misunderstanding. Take the time to ask your boater basic operating procedures on the boat if you are not an experienced boater; how the kill-switch works, how to start the main motor and put it into gear, trolling motor operation, etc. You never know when you might need to operate the boat in an emergency situation.

## FISHING

The most important issue here is that you need to **match your style and speed** of fishing to that of your partner. You are fighting a losing battle if you are trying to fish an 1/8-ounce finesse bait in strong wind while your partner is burning a spinnerbait down the bank. Do not try to copy-cat your partner; by doing this you are only showing the same bait to an uncooperative fish instead of giving it a different option to choose from. Unless your partner has a proven pattern that is consistently working, try to do things a little bit different from your pro. You can pick up fish behind anyone and many times you could be the one to discover the winning pattern. If the boater is burning a spinnerbait try throwing a shallow-running crankbait, if they are pitching a jig use a heavier Texas-rigged bait or if they are Carolina-rigging you could drag a football-head jig in the same area.

**Fish slower** than your partner; this may be difficult if you are fishing with a power fisherman but the secret is to use a heavier bait that will get into the strike-zone quicker. A really heavy spinnerbait, Carolina rig, or a heavier jig should work to get your lure down to the bottom before your partner has passed the area. Angle your cast toward the front of the boat but do not cross your partner's line or cast past the ethically accepted dis-





During tournaments in South Africa you would most likely find two fishermen fishing shoulder to shoulder on the front deck sharing the trolling motor, usually whilst one angler re-ties or is busy with something else on the boat.



Fishing as a co-angler is a great place to gain knowledge, polish up your basic skills and gather experience whilst fishing tournaments.  
Photo: C Thomas



Communication between the boater and non-boater is essential at all times. By asking about netting do's and don'ts before take-off you will be able to avoid any disastrous misunderstandings later whilst helping your partner put fish in the boat. Photo: Karen Elkins Roberts

tance (see ethics). Once your bait has reached the bottom try to keep the bait in the strike-zone as long as possible by slowing down your retrieve drastically.

Take time at home and during social fishing outings to learn more about and practice different fishing techniques. The **versatile** angler is a successful angler; the more skilled you are in different presentations, recognising patterns and identifying different baits and lures the better chance you have at adapting to different fishing situations. The boater has had time to practice and determine the pattern beforehand during practice, is already comfortable in catching fish that way and will most likely be fishing to his/her strength. You, on the other hand, come in blind and will most likely find yourself having to adjust to the situation that presents itself. You could find it extremely difficult and frustrating trying to present a lure in an area that is covered in overhanging branches and barely wide enough to turn the boat around in if you do not know how to pitch or flip. Imagine trying to fish for bass suspended in 80-foot of water if you do not know how to drop-shot or fish with a spoon.

Don't let the **pressure** get to you; develop a game plan and stick to it throughout the day. If you feel you need to change your strategy work on it that evening after weigh-in. If you try to change your strategy during the middle of the day you will stumble, lose concentration and lose all the good ground you have made up thus far. Do not fall into the trap of listening to **dock talk** and decide you need to change your plan at the last moment. **Stay focussed** and stick to your guns. Always remind yourself why you initially started fishing; it is supposed to be fun. Keep it simple, **enjoy yourself**, ignore the pressure and you will find yourself celebrating success more often.

## MENTAL ATTITUDE

You have chosen to fish as a non-boater and your day on the water will be determined by the decisions your boater has made. Many co-anglers talk about the 'luck-of-the-draw' but it is important to approach your tournament with the right mental attitude. Your attitude will affect the way you fish, the way you feel, the way you present your lure and the way your day will turn out. Teach yourself to be positive at all times even when things on the boat are not going as planned and you feel increasingly frustrated because your boater is not fishing the way you would have preferred. Rest assured in the fact that your boater has spent time pre-fishing and is confident in the fact that the area they have chosen holds fish. Confidence is a great lure to pack into your tackle box. Fish do not know the difference between a boater or a non-boater and the two of you are only about 20-foot apart so, if the fish are there and willing to bite, you stand just as good a chance in catching those fish as your partner does.



## TEAM TOURNAMENTS

When fishing a team tournament the two anglers on the boat should complement each other in their fishing. Obviously the first objective is to get five fish on the boat as soon as possible so that you have time to go fishing for those bigger bass. Being at the back of the boat you know you will not get first cast and you will have no control over boat positioning or fishing speed but you do have the advantage of being able to concentrate solely on fishing. One of the best strategies to use is to target bigger fish whilst your partner targets the numbers; there is nothing better than a couple of kickers to plump up a winning tournament bag.

## PAY ATTENTION!!

A winning team pays attention to each other at all times. It is no use casting a similar lure into the same spot your boater has just cast into. If you are fishing for bigger fish then use a slightly bigger lure/bait than your partner. For example; if he/she's using a baby brushhog you could use a regular brushhog or a creature bait or upgrade their 6-inch worm and use a 10-inch worm. It does not matter if the fish-catching ratio is 5-to-1; your partner is catching the keepers but you should be catching the hawks. You do need to note where they're presenting the lure though; if he/she continuously brings in fish by casting toward the deeper side of the boat and you've not even had a bite yet whilst casting toward the bank you should assume that the fish are on the other side of the boat and get your bait in there.

## RULES

There are certain rules, written and unwritten, that have to be observed whilst fishing the pro/am or boater/non-boater format and some of these include the non-boater not being allowed to handle the boat via main motor or trolling motor at all except during emergency situations and the non-boater not being allowed to fish off the front deck of the boat. Make sure you have studied the tournament rules thoroughly before the start of the tournament so that you know what is allowed and what is not. Some of the unwritten rules state that the non-boater not be allowed to cast past the boater and actually should not even cast past the centre console or nose of the boat. Many of the unwritten rules are actually a basic code of ethical conduct on the boat and there are certain ethical rules that the boater and non-boater should keep to in order to keep everybody happy on the boat. By simply exercising common courtesy, you will gain the boaters' respect, which in many cases may earn you a few extra favours and perhaps a few extra fish.

## ETHICS & ETIQUETTE

### The boat

Always keep in mind that you are fishing out of somebody else's boat and that it is important to have respect and take care of their property. Consider yourself a guest on the boat; all the regular guest courtesies apply. Do not leave all your discarded plastics and trash lying in the boat, eat and drink with care in order to avoid messes and spills. If you happen to have an accident make sure you clean it up immediately and thoroughly.

Offer to help at all times. Launch the boat but if you cannot launch, hold the boat at the dock or on the side or offer to pull out the tow vehicle and park it. After the day's fishing don't just pack up your stuff and head off into the blue yonder; help to get the boat cleaned up and wiped down. Just as word travels around about good and bad boaters so it travels around for non-boaters too. Your goal should be to build up a reputation as a great co-angler who is a pleasure to take along on the boat. The other factor to remember is that 90 percent of all non-boaters eventually become boaters and that the way you would want your equipment and yourself to be treated is the way you should treat others.

## Tackle

Boaters are very fortunate to have a whole boat to pack all their tackle in but unfortunately co-anglers cannot expect to enjoy this privilege. Most of the modern bass boats are extremely well designed and built to be more passenger friendly but space for passenger tackle still remains limited. Speak to your boater and find out how many rods and bags you could comfortably bring along. Do not arrive at the boat ramp overloaded on rods and tackle bags and expect the boater to accommodate all of it. Most co-anglers have found that no matter how big the boat the most rods you can carry comfortably are five and that you should limit yourself to one medium-sized tackle bag. The secret here is to minimise; neither you nor your boater want to be tripping over rods, boxes and lures while trying to land that keeper or navigate around the boat.

If you are not sure how your boater will be fishing pack a selection of rods that can be used for a variety of different applications. Instead of packing three cranking rods only pack in one and re-tie when you think it necessary to change baits. I have a cranking rod which I also use for my topwater plugs and stick-baits because medium action rods work well for all treble-hooked baits. A medium heavy rod can be used to fish worms, weightless flukes or senkos and jigs and a spinning rod can be used to fish anything from a small crankbait, weightless worm, shaky jighead, drop-shot and a finesse jig. Unfortunately you have to resolve yourself to the fact that you will be re-tying a lot as you change your various baits.

First of all, pack the baits you have the most confidence in as these will be the baits you end up fishing the most anyway. Do your lake research, speak to the local fishermen and visit the various tackle stores in the area to determine whether you would need any baits specifically productive for the area and pack a small selection of these in. Do not overload on them unless you are confident fishing these specific baits. Most anglers will only use a new bait for a short time if they're not catching fish on it, eventually putting it down to pick up their confidence baits. Pack a decent assortment of crankbaits, spinnerbaits, topwater plugs and plastics. Your tackle bag needs to consist of a small but diverse collection of lures with enough terminal tackle to get you through one day.

## Casting

Casting etiquette is one of the most important issues to be dis-

cussed as this could make or break a perfect fishing day. Normally boat position will determine the angle you can cast and a considerate boater should always pay attention to this detail. The most productive angle for both boater and non-boater to cast would be 45-degrees forward. However there are times when this could change and that is when good communication comes in handy. You could be fishing a steep drop where parallel casting is essential or come across a laydown that is angled so that the boater would need to cast backward to get the most favourable presentation. In all of these situations talk to each other so that everybody stays informed at all times.

The boater will normally get the first and the best opportunity to cast to the various targets and this could be frustrating to a competitive co-angler but resist the temptation to quickly sneak a cast to that hot-looking spot up ahead before your boater gets a chance at it. Never fish in front of your partner unless they have explicitly given you permission to do so. Boaters spend a lot of time, money and effort pre-fishing areas before the tournament and they deserve the opportunity to work their game plan. It is also good to remember that the boater is in control; if you frustrate or irritate your partner it is very easy for them to allow you fewer back-seat opportunities.

If your partner is fishing and has a fish swirl but not take the bait or has a bump but is not able to set the hook do not cast there until you have permission to do so. It is a general rule of thumb that the angler (both boater and non-boater) have at least three attempts at the fish but the boater has the prerogative to fish for that bass as long as they choose to. Once the boater has decided to pass up on that fish, only then, are you allowed to make an attempt to try to catch it.

## Payment

Fishing is expensive, especially when you are a boater. The cost of running a boat, pre-fishing, fuel/oil, boat, motor and trailer maintenance is astronomical and yes, that is part of the reason you choose to fish as a non-boater but it is always good to offer to pay half of that day's fuel and oil expense. Many boaters may not expect you to do so or may not even take the money when you offer it but at least you offered.

## Information sharing

Most boaters will be happy to share fishing information with you and may even give away a couple of their cherished secrets to help you catch more fish. They understand how it felt when they first started fishing and will happily answer your questions. However, it is important that you respect the value of this information, the spots you fish and the lures you fish with. They belong to the boater who takes you there; this information should not be shared with anybody else; not your room mate, your practice partner nor your next day fishing partner. A reputation as a trustworthy, respectful co-angler is an asset worth cherishing and protecting.

## WHAT NOT TO FORGET

**Culling system** – can be a helpful tool. Use the simple rope systems that have floats attached.

**Lure covers** – will save you worlds of time from having to unhook all your rods after a long run. The boater will have a measuring bar, and a culling balance so there's no need to tote those along.

**Rain Gear** – will keep you warm during the run if it is cold and dry the whole day if it rains.

**Skiing Goggles** – will protect your eyes from bugs during a long run and keep the rain out of your face at 65mph.

**Polarised Sunglasses** – are essential in spotting underwater cover/structure/fish and protect your eyes from harmful UV rays.

**Lifejacket** – Most boaters may have two sets of PFD's (Personal Flotation Device) on their boat but do not expect it. Always come with your own.

**Drinks & Lunch** – should be your own responsibility. Some boaters may pack additional drinks and boat food but it is your duty to keep yourself hydrated throughout the day. Heat-related injuries may be deadly.

## Anglers Interviewed

*Robertina Filburn – WBT, Co-angler winner, Lake Dardanelle, Arkansas, 2006*

*Angie Everitt – Qualifier, WBT Co-Angler Championships, Lake Mitchell, Alabama, 2007*

*Linda Berry – WBT co-angler and journalist, Co-angler veteran (17 years)*

*BJ Carson – WBT co-angler*

*Susan Dameron – WBT, Co-angler winner, Kentucky Lake, Kentucky, 2007*

*Kala Wright – WBT co-angler*

*Denese Freeman – WBT co-angler and journalist* 🐟

