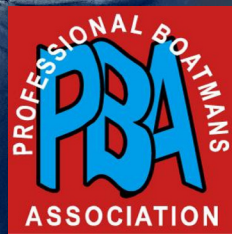


BLUEFIN TUNA TRAINING MODULE

TACKLE: RODS

PRODUCED BY THE UKBFTA
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
THE ANGLING TRUST AND THE PBA



RODS

Introduction

Using the correct rod for any kind of fishing is important, but when it comes to large powerful fish such as Atlantic bluefin tuna, that choice can be the difference between a healthy, releasable fish boatside in reasonable time, or a lost or dead fish.

There is no 'magic' about 'the right' fishing rods, it all comes down to the science behind a particular design. In this article we will try to explain the various factors that should influence your choice of rod, hopefully this will help you make the 'right' choice



CHOOSING THE RIGHT ROD

The first question to address is what size of bluefin are we actually likely to catch?

The average size of bluefin caught over three years of English CHART was as follows, (NB: Cefas used 'Straight Fork length' and a length/weight table of their choice for their reporting in CHART 2021-2023)

The average size fell in 2023 largely due to an influx of smaller fish during the middle third of the season. Over that period the average for the five weeks was 165lbs .

Average bluefin size in UK Waters

2021 71", c255lb

2022 74" c290lb

2023 65" c200lbs

Either side of that 'small fish' spell, the average weekly size was around 250lbs.

Only 2.5% of the total caught/measured in 2023, were at or below c100lbs.

Our UK bluefin are BIG, POWERFUL fish.

'Go lighter' for 'sport' from those smaller fish and you will compromise the welfare outcomes for the vast majority of fish you will catch over the entire season.

If your budget limits you to equipping yourself with just a few sets of 'conventional' rods/reels it should be geared towards being able to comfortably subdue 250-300lb fish with the power to be able to manage fish exceeding 400lbs, bearing in mind 500-600lb fish are not 'unicorns'.

If your budget runs to it, having a set of lighter 'conventional' or 'popping' and/or 'jigging' set ups for days or even weeks when you encounter boils of smaller (sub 150lb) fish would give you a chance at some great sport should that opportunity present itself.

In this document we are going to focus upon 'conventional' rods used for trolling, fishing baits at drift. Popping and jigging rods are a different beast, with specific characteristics and requirements of their own, and we aim to produce something on that topic soon.



THE “RIGHT” RODS

The ‘right rods’ for bluefin tuna?

Not only do we have bluefin from 100lb to 750lb+, the English CRRF allows you to:

Fish at drift or anchor with live or dead baits.

Troll single lures, daisy chains, skirted deadbaits, big spreader bars.

Fight fish ‘stand-up’, from a chair or a rodholder in the gunwhale.

Each of these fishing and fighting techniques may require slightly different things of the ‘optimal’ fishing rod. You will have to answer questions re the characteristics of that rod.

- What length of rod do you choose?
- What ‘action’ of rod is ‘the best’?
- What ‘line class’ rod is right?
- Do I need rollers throughout?
- What material should I choose in my rod construction?
- Should I choose a ‘straight’ or ‘bent butt’, ‘long’ or ‘short’.

Some of these characteristics are really important to match to a particular technique. For example, choose a ‘short’ (c5’ 6”-6’ 6”) rod to fight from a chair positioned in the cockpit and you will likely cut off your fish as the line rubs against the gunwhale or transom. Choose a ‘130lb class’ rod and reel combination to fish ‘stand-up’ and

- You will likely exhaust yourself in short order.
- You will not be able to apply enough pressure to the gear to ‘make it work’ and fight the fish effectively.

Some rods, when set up ‘properly’ in a stand-up harness or properly adjusted fighting chair are just SO much more efficient at fighting fish than others.

Let’s look at those characteristics.

ROD LENGTH

A fishing rod is a lever with a negative mechanical advantage. Every inch of length you add to the rod increases the inefficiency of that rod i.e how much effort the angler must apply to generate ‘x’ amount of force upon the fish. To fight fish efficiently you want ‘the shortest rod that is practicable for the chosen fishing and/or fighting technique....’

‘Stand-up’. Most ‘stand-up’ rods are between 5’6” and 6’6” long. This allows the best balance of efficiency plus allowing the angler (with the helmsman’s help) to keep the fish/line clear of the hull.

‘Chair rods’. Here you need the rod to be long enough to ensure the line clears the transom and gunwhales. ‘Chair rods’ are therefore by necessity longer than ‘stand-up’ rods. Most dedicated factory ‘chair rods’ are at least 7’ and often nearer to 8’ long.



‘Gunwhale’ rods. A la ‘wicked tuna’, rods best suited to fish from a rod holder are again usually ‘long’. Dedicated US ‘gunnel’ rods are often well over 8’ long.

The extra length provides an additional ‘cushion’ that helps to reduce pulled hooks and snapped lines.



So, if you want the option to fight from a chair or standup, (or transition between them), you need to go with that longer rod and just accept that it will be a less efficient fish fighting tool in a stand-up harness, and set up your chair to use a short butt rather than a long one, (see below re ‘Butts’).

ROD ACTION

The rods we are using come in (broadly), 'slow', 'medium' and 'fast' actions. There is no international recognised or quantified 'standard' as to what each means. But, generally speaking.

'Slow'. 'Loaded' these rods will bend in a fairly even pattern across the length from the reel seat to the tip. Frequently observers will state 'what a lovely action' when loaded, but without understanding that may NOT be what you want or need at all.



'Medium'. Under load these rods will exhibit a curve that progressively 'increases', with the majority of the 'bend' occurring in say the top 2/3 of the rod.

'Fast'. Under load the curve in these rods is predominantly exhibited in the top 1/3 of its length. The image below illustrates this and you can compare it to a 'medium' action



So what 'action' do we want?

In terms of applying efficient, effective pressure to large bluefin, a fast action rod is the best 'fighting tool'. It is short, fast pumps in a short arc that 'break' a bluefin, not great dramatic 'sweeps' of the rod across 50-60 degrees or more.

However, that faster action is less forgiving in response to a thrashing/headshaking fish, or a boat rising and

falling sharply in big seas. In a stand-up harness, (and chair depending upon set-up) the angler may provide some cushion to avoid pulled hooks and broken lines, but in a rod holder that is not the case. Here a slower action rod, like a longer rod, will provide some additional cushion.

So, a rod for exclusively fighting fish stand-up should err towards a 'fast' action. Most quality factory 'stand-up rods are 'fast' or 'medium-fast'.

A 'chair' or rodholder rod ('gunnel' rod as our US friends call them), may err towards a 'medium' or 'slow-medium' action to help provide additional cushion, however, US 'IGFA trolling rods' are often a faster action to aid in hook setting (billfish especially present a challenge)...

LINE CLASS

The 'line class' or if you like 'power' of a rod determines how much pressure you can apply to a fish before the drag gives or the rod starts to risk a failure.

There is not one international standardised benchmark, and for example an 'IGFA 80lb class trolling rod' is in effect nearly twice as powerful as a 'UK 80lb class rod'. The 'IGFA' label is also often abused by some manufacturers of lower quality rods which are often way 'over class'.

Two rods from different manufacturers marked '50-80' may have very different characteristics as to what force it takes to 'load' them, and their 'action'.

When selecting the 'right rod' for the fishing/fighting technique you will predominantly use, bear in mind the following general principles.



LINE CLASS AND GUIDES

- A typical 'big game' rod is applying OPTIMAL pressure when an imaginary line drawn through the tip is at 90 degrees to a line drawn through the butt/reel seat.
- Often, but not always, the load on a rod to bring it to 90 degrees will be around 50% of the stated line class. However some 'IGFA 80lb class trolling rods' need well over 40lbs and would be impossible to load or at least unsafe for the average angler fishing stand-up.
- The effort from the angler to 'fully load' the rod is significantly more than the force you are exerting on the fish. Remember, a rod is a lever with a negative 'mechanical advantage'. How negative depends upon a bunch of factors re rod and harness/chair set up but can be up to twice the force applied to the fish.
- There is a maximum effective amount of pressure an angler can apply 'stand-up' before he becomes unstable or muscles/joints start to seriously complain.
- You have to match the rod 'class' to reflect the strength of the rest of your gear, (line b/s, strength of connections, hook strength etc).
- If you fish a heavy duty rod in a way that does not allow you to 'load' it, you will be seriously handicapping your ability to 'read' and 'manage' that fish, and in extremes increase risk of pulled hooks etc...
- If you 'overload' a rod beyond what it is designed to take, it will fail. If at a high angle it will break in the top ¼, at a lower angle it may fail elsewhere, for e.g. at the joint between 'blade' and reel seat.

What 'line class' should you use?

After up to seven years of experience with UK bluefin, the consensus amongst a group of experienced skippers/anglers is that in correctly chosen and fitted stand-up gear, a 'true 50-80' or 'true 80lb' class rod is optimal. Also, note that it is near impossible to fully load a 'true' '80/130', '130' or 'unlimited' class rod stand-up without something breaking, often the angler.

From a Chair? Seated, rather than standing, and with other aspects of the chair/rod position, anglers can apply more pressure effectively, and can 'load' heavier duty rods more easily and safely.

From the gunwhale rod-holder this is also the case, greater pressure can be applied to the fish. In both the latter cases, those longer '80-130', '130's' etc can become effective tools.

However, bear in mind that there will come a stage where too much pressure will sharply increase the risk of pulled hooks. Although large bluefin have solid jaws, they are not the same as the bill of a marlin.

You will lose and kill more bluefin if you consistently target the typical sized bluefin in UK waters with inadequate tackle.

The gear recommended with the right set up and technique can provide great sport, AND tame big fish in 'sensible' timeframes, aiding their survival prospects, which is an essential consideration in our catch and release fishery.

GUIDES AND ROLLERS

Good rollers throughout do add to the cost of a rod. They also require more maintenance than guides. Breaking a big bluefin out of a pinwheel can create huge pressure and friction upon the guide and line. A fish running at 30mph under some drag will do the same. If your budget runs to full rollers, they are a good choice.



Rods with a tip (and maybe bottom) roller and rings in between are acceptable on a quality rod, IF your line connections are slick (served mono/hollow-core, 'cats-paw' loop to loop, or a well executed specialist knot).

Some of the Penn rods used successfully season after season in CHART have tip and base rollers only.

Consider your connections used, and your budget and decide accordingly.

MATERIALS AND BUTTS

MATERIALS

Broadly speaking, the 'big game' rods you can buy are 'carbon/graphite', (carbon scrim mixed with resin), or 'glass', ('S' or 'E' fibreglass), or a composite of carbon and 'glass'.

Carbon dominated rods became popular for the weight and bulk savings they provided versus 'glass'. With the advent of newer, lightweight resins, quality 'glass' blanks (not the 'online marketplace specials') are now lighter and compete with 'carbon' rods as they didn't 10-15 years ago.

Carbon rods still have a strong following and image as 'higher quality', but they do come with their drawbacks. A bang on a high carbon content wand, easily done on a busy charter deck in the midst of hooking and fighting bluefin, slight as it may be, may show up spectacularly with the rod 'exploding' at that point when next loaded.

It is a personal choice, and you generally get what you pay for. Do your research and if you are looking for genuine high quality gear you should either buy from a specialist big game tackle dealer, or a custom rod builder who really understands what a good 'bluefin rod' is, like Dean Farley at Legacy Custom Rods.

BUTTS

Most of the quality 'big game' rods suitable for our bluefin are two-part, with a standardised range of butt sizes, (diameter of the opening to fit the male ferrule of the 'blade' (tip section)).

Additionally, they come in 'curved' and 'straight' versions, and in two lengths, 'short' and 'long'.



Manufacturers such as AFTCO, Stuart, PacBay also sell butts separately for custom builds or aftermarket options. Size?

No2 butts are designed to fit the standard male ferrule size on 30, 30-50, 50, and 50-80 'blades', with corresponding size reel seat 'hoods' (that go over the feet of the reel). No4 butts are designed to fit 80 class rods and 80W reel feet.

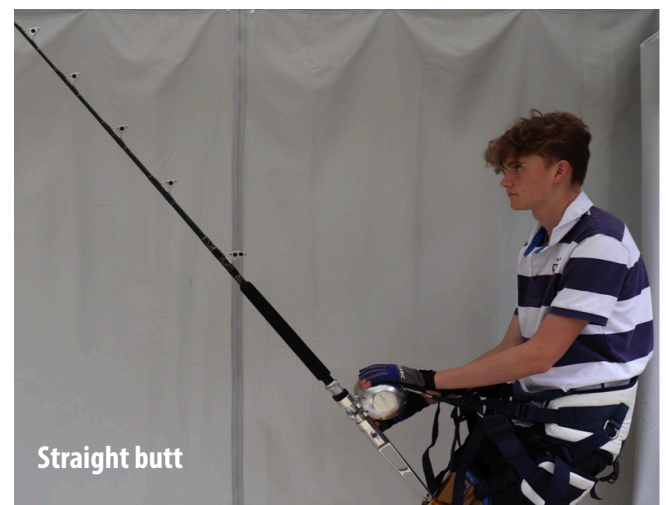
No 6 butts are designed for 130 and 'unlimited' rods. 'Short' butts are primarily designed for stand-up use in fighting pads and harnesses. Some 'short' swivel gunwhale rod holders allow short butts to fit and still allow the handle to turn.

Some fighting chairs have adjustable gimbals to allow short butts to be used.

'Long' butts are designed to be used from fighting chairs, and 'long' gunwhale mounted rod holders. They are NOT designed to be used in even low fitting pads with harnesses, as they present the reel at a dangerous and unstable height in front of the angler.

'Straight' or 'curved'?

There are reasons why rod butts for seriously large fish are invariably curved. They present the rod at an acceptable range of angles to the quarry (horizontal to say 60 degrees) whilst keeping the reel at a workable range of distance from the angler's abdomen. See images below,



A straight butt rod like this will, with a fish under the boat either 'high stick' (and break), or require the reel straps to be lengthened, moving the reel away from an optimal distance to the angler and force the pad back upwards into the anglers stomach.

CONCLUSION

(illustrated with a Winthrop adjusta-butt). In addition to the angles, curved butts improve the leverage you can obtain, improving the efficiency of the anglers set up.

Winthrop offer the 'Terminator Adjusta-Butt' which via a locking pin can switch from a straight butt to a 'curved' butt. (See images above) They come in No2 and No4 sizes, long and short and in different finishes. The downside? The price, at between \$360 and \$390 each, (plus shipping and tax).



A bent butt rod like this presents the rod at an angle that can easily be adjusted to fight between the optimal horizontal and say 60 degrees. It provides better leverage, and presents the reel at the optimal height and distance from the angler.

If buying aftermarket butts or 'mixing and matching', note that you may not be able to slot just any No2 or No4 blade male ferrule into all No2 or No4 butts with a perfect fit.

There can be minor differences in the ferrule length, and/or location or shape of the cross butt pin that stops the blade rotating. You can tighten down the locking nut fully and still have a wobble in the tip. In the worst case this can form a weak point which will fail under stress.

So, for stand-up, a SHORT CURVED butt. For fighting chairs typically a LONG CURVED butt.

CONCLUSION

No one rod is perfect for the range of fishing and fighting techniques we might use on bluefin tuna in UK waters.

Think about how you will predominantly fish for and fight your bluefin. All designs will force you to compromise.

We have an amazing fishery, with what appears to be an increasing range of year class/size of fish. They are unlike anything most anglers will have encountered in the UK previously, (with the exception of similar sized Porbeagle sharks).

If, in the interests of 'setting a challenge', you fish lighter gear than these fish warrant, you will almost certainly be guaranteeing fight times that may run into hours, exhausted or injured anglers, and bluefin that will suffer more break-offs with gear attached, higher incidental and post release mortality rates than is justified.

Please, please treat them with respect. A 90 minute plus fight is not a badge of honour, it means either something out of the ordinary has happened, (a monster fish for e.g.), OR that you really don't know what you are doing regarding gear, set-up and technique, and should probably take up golf instead.

We would like to thank the experienced charter skippers who helped with this article and a special mention to Dean Farley of Legacy Custom Rods not only for sharing his amazing wealth of knowledge with us but also for the best bluefin fishing rods many of us own!

Produced by the UK Bluefin Tuna Association
in partnership with The Angling Trust and the Professional Boatman's Association



www.ukbfta.co.uk
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