



GEORGE POVEROMO

Rock 'Em, Sock 'Em

Three proven tricks to reclaim rocked-up bottomfish

BY GEORGE POVEROMO

We had just lost a brute of a fish over a reef some 130 feet deep off the Abaco Beach Resort & Boat Harbour, in the Bahamas, because of a miscue (which is a story for another day). The kick in the pants is that though it tried to hole up twice, I succeeded in finessing it out of its lair and yet we didn't even get a look at it. We did a lot of rationalizing on the way back: It could have been a huge amberjack, black grouper or cubera snapper. Then friend Carl Grassi said, "It could be anything you want it to be. We didn't catch it." That cut as deep as a well-honed knife.

When you're gunning for big bottomfish, you'll often find yourself in the rocks — otherwise you're not fishing in the right places. To have a shot at hooking quality fish, you have to bait them over or very close to their sanctuaries, which are often

PATIENCE PAYS: Simple methods can seem futile; however, in many cases patience will be rewarded with sizeable rewards like this yellowfin grouper.

rugged networks of coral, rock piles, wrecks, ledges and artificial reefs. The denser and higher the profile of the structure, the better the odds it will produce trophy bottomfish.

I enjoy fishing for big grouper and snapper and assign a variety of fishing outfits to the task, based on the threat level of the structure. For instance, when fishing around scattered rocks and sea fans, bottom which is less likely to fray line, for mutton snapper and small- to medium-size grouper, I'll fish a 20-pound-class outfit and enjoy the fight. When anchored over a high-profile reef or wreck and seeking black grouper or cubera snapper,

a Tuna Stick rod rated for 80- to 100-pound-test and a reel spooled with 80- or 100-pound-test braided line get the nod. The goal is to strike fast and keep that fish off balance and heading away from the danger zone, but sometimes the fish still gets the best of us and holes up under a ledge or in the reef or wreck.

Braided lines have proven a boon to bottom anglers for two reasons.

First, they don't stretch. This provides sensitivity to feel the bait and the subtlest of bites and allows for successful hook-sets, even in deep water. Second, they offer superior abrasion resistance, perhaps the best feature when going for big fish. Braided lines are just darn tough and hold up much better than monofilament when contact is made with structure. Over the long haul, you'll catch more

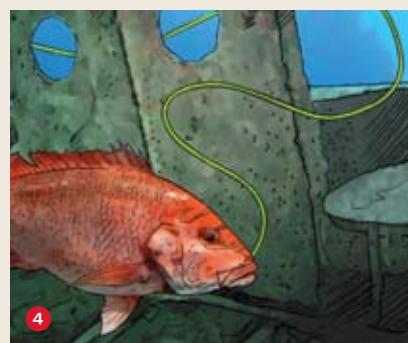
bottomfish with braided line.

Despite stout tackle and braided line, a big bottomfish could rock you up. Whether the fish wins at this point comes down to experience and your knowledge of a few key tricks. The following tactics have worked wonders for me over the years, just as they have for those who taught them to me when I first began seeking big bottomfish. ~

PLAY THE STRING

The first trick I use after a bottomfish lodges itself in structure is to apply a lot of pressure, forcing a respectable bend in the rod. I'll then pluck the fishing line **1** much like one would a banjo or guitar string. As it was explained to me over three decades ago by Bob Colvin, a friend of my father and a hard-core fishing fanatic who taught me a ton about bottomfishing and offshore fishing and boat handling, the sharp vibrations emitted by the fishing line telegraph through the fish's lateral lines and irritate it. The harder and more frequent the picking, the more it seems to bother the fish. In many cases, the fish backs out of its hole **2** in an attempt to flee the irritation and confusion. And if you're ready to counter by pumping and winding once you sense the fish making a move, you've a great shot at beating it.

On the Boat Harbour, Bahamas, trip mentioned above, we used the plucking tactic on two separate occasions and unrocked two beautiful grouper. Braided lines transfer sounds and vibrations much better than monofilament lines, so they'll have much more impact with this tactic. When strumming to free up one of those Boat Harbour grouper, I



knew it must have been bothering the fish some kind of bad; I could hardly stand to listen to how out of rhythm I was. You can take it to the bank that I will not be the next Jimi Hendrix.

GO SLACK

When playing the long version of "Stairway to Heaven" or "Free Bird" fails to chase a fish out of its sanctuary, the next option is to go slack. That is, put the reel in free-spool and set the rod in

the holder for a while, usually 15 minutes or so. Pull enough slack line off the reel **3** so the fish can't sense even the slightest pressure **4**, such as when the boat rocks. The trick is to fool the fish into thinking it has gotten away.

Sometimes when a fish is hooked and fought off the bottom then races back down into a hole, it might not be in its primary structure. This is especially common when chumming, which pulls a fish into the slick and away from →

JOE MAHLER (4)/MARKERJOCKEY.COM

its lair. The piece of structure it's in might not be large enough to contain the entire fish. What's more, given that predators such as sharks, large barracuda or goliath grouper are likely nearby and sensing the distress vibrations emitting from the hooked fish, that fish doesn't want to be in a small hole with most of its body exposed. It is also possible that the fish's breathing might be hindered if water flow is restricted in that hole. For a variety of reasons, when the hooked fish senses freedom, it just might back out and scam back to its main lair sooner rather than later.

When waiting for a fish to swim out of the structure, keep an eye on the slack line. Should it appear to be straightening out, grab the rod, engage the drag, come tight to the fish, and pump and wind like there's no tomorrow. Ditto at the end of the wait period if the fish does not move off prior to that. And if unsuccessful, go into free-spool again, strip off a lot of slack and set the rod in the holder for another 15 to 30 minutes. Sometimes we wait out a fish for more than an hour. Be patient, not frustrated.

GEOMETRY TIME

When tactics one and two have failed to force a hooked fish from its lair, it's time to decide how bad you want this fish. If you believe it's an average-size fish and you're not terribly concerned about losing it, just cut the line. If you're convinced it's a true monster grouper or snapper — the trophy you've been searching for — it's time to school the fish in some geometry.



JOE MAHLER (2)/MARKERJOCKEY.COM

From an anchored boat, let out enough scope **5** to slide well beyond the structure the fish is locked into. When you believe there's enough real estate between it and you to provide a straight pull on the fish from the opposite direction, wind tight and go for it. Sometimes a hooked fish can run

up and over a piece of reef or wreck and into a hole on the backside of that structure **6**, making it impossible to pull the fish out from where the boat is positioned. In this case, if the boat is repositioned beyond that structure, you'll stand a fair chance at pulling the fish out. Use the same concept when drifting or jigging: Put the reel in free-spool, and then drive the boat up to and beyond the structure where the fish has holed up. Then engage the drag, wind tight and try fighting the fish out from the opposite direction.

And in a worst-case scenario, try muscling the fish out while slowly circling the boat around the structure the fish is wedged into.

If you keep these tricks in mind the next time a big fish rocks up, the odds favor your not only finding out what you've hooked but also ultimately determining whether to put that baby on ice or set it free to provide excitement and, perhaps, grief to some other angler! The words you don't want to hear after the fight are: "It could be anything you want it to be. We didn't catch it."

| DON'T LEAVE IT HANGIN' |

If all else fails and you have to break your line, try and break it near the terminal gear so you don't leave a bunch of line dangling from a fish or structure. With monofilament, this task is as simple as wrapping the line around a gloved hand and pulling until something gives. Do so with braid, and it could easily slice through the glove or — even worse — your hand. A T-shaped piece of StarBoard makes an ideal tool for safely breaking braid. Simply wrap the braid several times around the tool in a figure eight, grip the T and pull until the braid parts at or near the terminal gear.