

BY JOHN BROWNLEE

A DIFFERENT KIND OF TOURNAMENT

**Casa Vieja Lodge Finds an
Innovative Way to Help
a Local School**

RICHARD GIBSON



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Anyone who has fished for billfish in Central America or Mexico knows the term *sancocho*. Mates, captains and other anglers gleefully shout this good-natured term of derision at you when you drop back a rigged ballyhoo to a sailfish or marlin, but miss the fish and reel in only the head of the bait on the hook. That's a sancocho.

We've all suffered through our share of these events, as a billfish escapes with a free meal at our expense. It usually happens when you hold on to the spool too long; knowing just when to drop the bait back makes all the difference, but if you let the fish grab the tail of the bait and then hesitate, you're on a one-way trip to sancocho city.

I've asked lots of captains and mates where the term came from, and I've never gotten a definitive answer. The etymology of the word remains unclear, but various Spanish dictionaries tell me that it means "stew" in English. Your guess is as good as mine as to why someone decided to call a ballyhoo head the word for stew, but someone did somewhere along the line. So be it. Suffice it to say that sancochos are to billfishing what strikeouts are to baseball.

A NEW APPROACH

Given this reality, the folks at Casa Vieja Lodge in Guatemala devised an exceedingly clever way to turn the dreaded sancocho into a positive thing. They put on the No Sancocho Sailfish Shootout tournament each spring, in which the boat captains tally up the sancochos for every angler aboard; at the end of the event, the anglers must pay the tournament \$20 for each sancocho. They even offer an "award" for the angler committing the most sancochos.

This event turns angler failure into a positive thing by taking the money raised from the

sancochos and donating it to the local primary school, Santa Cecilia, where many of the Casa Vieja staff send their children. The money raised by the tournament helps the school's staff afford critical improvements, such as running water and new classroom desks, an enormous boon to a school in need.

Casa Vieja Lodge owners David and Kristen Salazar understand the special nature of what they've created. "I've fished many tournaments around the world, but I've always had a love for the No Sancocho Sailfish Shootout," says David. "There's a pure, simple feeling to it, and that's why we brought it back for all to enjoy. It's a downright good time, and everyone relaxes and gets back down to the basics, how tournaments used to be."

"Sometimes there's more to fishing tournaments than the money, and that's why we love this tournament," adds Kristen. "It emphasizes fun, camaraderie and truly raising money, not winning money. The money raised from sancochos went to an elementary school with 200 children, including those of our mates and staff, where they don't even have running water. So while anglers have a blast, we are also able to provide a basic necessity to our local community, and, at the end of the day, that's what really makes a difference."

AVOIDING THE SANCOCHO

I attended the 2015 event with my wife, Poppy, and Yellowfin Yachts president Wylie Nagler. We added Casa Vieja's Herb Rosell to our team and fished the three-day event with Capt. Jason Brice aboard the classic Rybovich *Makaira*. Anticipation ran high on day one as we raised a sailfish right off the bat; Nagler successfully hooked it, fought it to boat-side and released it. Score: Team *Makaira* 1, fish zero, and no school money raised yet.

Rosell and Poppy each caught and released a fish in the next hour to keep our streak going, and then I got my shot. A sailfish popped up on the right long teaser, and as I dropped back, all I can remember thinking is: "Don't get the first

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The word *sancocho* could be a derivative of *salcocho*, a Spanish fish-head soup. In fishing, it means you got back only a head.



one, Brownlee.” Fortune smiled on me, and I successfully hooked the fish.

In most tournaments, radio chatter focuses primarily on the number of releases, and it did in this event as well. But, in addition to the talk of release numbers, reports on the building sancocho count filtered through. A couple of boats were having a hard time securing solid hookups, it seemed, and the count began to climb.

The crew aboard *Makaira* felt pretty cocky at the midmorning point because we had released five fish without a single sancocho, but then our luck seemed to turn. Rosell had the first one, executing a seemingly flawless drop-back and coming up empty-handed. As he reeled in his line, we saw that only a tiny bit of the ballyhoo remained on the hook, which led us into a spirited debate about what, exactly, defined a true sancocho. Did the entire head need to remain to qualify? If you got back a bare hook, did that trigger the forfeiture of a double sawbuck?

TOUGH SCORING

It was essentially a moot point because Brice marked down every missed fish with a wide grin, head or no head, and our sancocho count began. We proceeded to miss about five fish in a row after that; Poppy missed three straight, and whatever cockiness previously existed had

vanished. Other boats suffered the same fate, although a few were on a hot bite and enjoyed more success hooking fish.

The fish seemed to have lapsed into a state of malaise, rising to the baits or teasers in a half-hearted fashion and either fading away without biting at all, or mouthing the baits nonchalantly. For whatever reason, we settled into a bad streak. The middle of the day brought slow fishing, as is often the case, and our frustration grew as the fish that did rise behind our baits or teasers were not eager eaters. At the end of day one, we had baited 25 fish and caught only 10, although not all of the misses were sancochos. Humility had returned to the crew, and we vowed to produce a better effort

Pacific sailfish (above) are experts at removing a ballyhoo from a hook, and every angler eventually commits a sancocho. That’s why it’s a good idea to bring along plenty of rigged baits every time you go offshore (below).





The sailfish to the left did not cost the team \$20; it failed to deliver a sancoco. Team *A-Fin-ity* attacks during an intense water-balloon battle (above), a daily ritual when entering and leaving the marina.

in the subsequent days.

One of the most interesting facets of the No Sancoco Sailfish Shootout involves the tournament rules. In addition to the usual boilerplate tournament rhetoric and the \$20-per-sancoco rule, this tournament had a few unique entries in its rules document. One concerned water-balloon fights, which are sanctioned and encouraged between boats. This made for some interesting encounters on the way in and out of the marina (and occasionally offshore when two boats passed each other) as groups of middle-age men gleefully regressed into packs of junior high-school students away at summer camp.

In the interest of full disclosure, I'll admit that I was right there in the middle of it and it was a hell of a lot of fun. The one rule concerning the water-balloon bombardments stated that no such fights could occur at the dock. That rule was widely ignored after the first day. Engagements were close quarters and, at times, hand to hand. It really got interesting when a few of the crews began filling the balloons with mayonnaise instead of water. If you've never seen a balloon filled with mayo explode upon contact with a tower leg, you should. It's a sight to behold.

NO GOATS

The other fascinating rule stated that placing live animals aboard another boat was strictly prohibited. As it had never occurred to me to do so, I had to find out where this particular rule came from. Rosell informed us that in a previous tournament, an unnamed crew had locked a live goat in the head of a competing boat one night. An unsuspecting angler had a rude awakening the next morning when he went to use the facilities and encountered one extremely irritated and unhappy goat. Time for a new rule.

Over the course of the next two days, our hookup ratio improved aboard *Makaira*, though our sancoco count did rise steadily. At one point, we began discussing the possibility of the school

naming an entire new wing after us since we were going to end up donating so much to the cause. Each evening, the staff of Casa Vieja threw elaborate parties with awesome food. At these gatherings, the conversation was as much about each crew's sancocho tally as it was about the great fishing we were all experiencing.

On the final day, we had the best conversion rate from bites to hookups, but we still tallied a few sancochos. There was a lot of talk about the lack of commitment on the part of the fish, given the lackadaisical bites going on at times, but in reality, we raised a lot of fish and simply failed to catch as many as we probably should have. And after all, we knew it was for a good cause; perhaps, in this isolated case, failure had an upside. I can tell you unequivocally that there was actually a fair amount of competition to see who might actually end up with the most sancochos.

GOOD RESULTS

In the three days of the tournament, seven boats released 217 sailfish and one striped marlin, and the anglers racked up a whopping 222 sancochos for a total of \$4,440 raised for the Santa Cecilia school. But the raising of funds didn't stop there. A team from Cummins fished the tournament, and prior to the tournament kickoff, Dave Crompton, president of Cummins Engines Business Unit, announced that the company would match the dollar amount of total sancochos. "One of Cummins' main priorities is to invest in the communities in which we live and work," Crompton said. "It's a big part of who we are and what we do."

So Cummins threw in an additional \$4,440, and then Club Nautico de Guatemala matched its own personal sancochos, raising the total donation for the school to an even \$10,000. That's a pretty amazing display of generosity — and a huge boost for the school.

Capt. Brad Phillips won the tournament aboard *Decisive*, his 40-foot Gamefisherman, with 45 sailfish releases and 21 sancochos. In second place, the team from *A-Fin-Ity*, led by Capt. Chico Alvarenga, released 43 sails with 28 sancochos, and Capt. Chris Sheeder placed third aboard *Rum Line*, with 28 sailfish releases plus one striped marlin and 41 sancochos.

Angler David Coto, fishing aboard *Rum Line*, achieved the dubious distinction of having the most sancochos overall, with 16, but he took it all



in stride and cheerfully pitched in his \$320 to the kitty just like everyone else. Poppy ended up taking home the Top Lady Angler prize for releasing 10 sails.

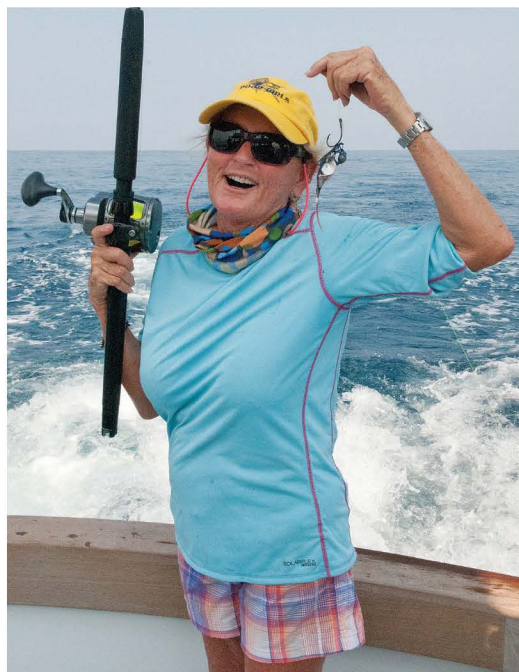
HAPPY ENDING

I'm happy to report that no one found any goats or other critters aboard any of the boats this year, and no permanent injuries arose from the water-balloon fights, although a few minor mishaps did occur. On the third and final day, I refrained from partici-

pating in the melee with the intent of photographing the battle, and if you thought having about \$7,000 worth of Nikon equipment in my hands might have spared me from the barrage, you'd be dead wrong. It made me a high-value target, if anything, but both my body and my camera emerged from the war intact.

The No Sancocho Sailfish Shootout has brought a fresh and exciting new wrinkle to the myriad of tournaments that go on around the world each and every weekend. The Casa Vieja staff should be congratulated for creating an event that combines a tremendous amount of fun, a high level of competition and a fundraising effort for a worthy cause. Throw in great people, parties and food, and you've got a top-shelf event that is unique in the sport-fishing world.

As for me, I'm already working on my drop-back in anticipation of next year's event. If I don't get better at it, they might break ground for the new Brownlee wing of the Santa Cecilia school next summer, but in reality, I can't think of a better way to spend my money. 🐟



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Poppy Brownlee with one of her sancochos. Each missed fish raised badly needed funds for the local school, so no one complained much about them when they occurred.

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