



BY JOHN BROWNLEE

SPORTFISHING

Fishing for Kids

IN A UNIQUE TOURNAMENT IN GUATEMALA, FAILURE IS ITS OWN REWARD.

Billfish tournaments around the world vary greatly due to a variety of factors ranging from targeted species to focus on release or kill, money prizes or trophies. But it would be fair to say that almost all of them place a high value on efficiency and successfully hooking as many fish as possible.

Except that's not entirely true of the No Sancocho Sailfish Shoot-out tournament, run by the folks at Casa Vieja Lodge on the Pacific coast of Guatemala (casaviejalodge.com). This lighthearted (and very fun) event takes a somewhat different approach to fishing for sailfish and marlin, which abound in the waters off this country.

Sancocho Etymology

First, a little background: The term *sancocho* comes from a common soup popular in Latin America, which is made from fish heads. Fishing teams adopted the term to describe the moment an angler drops back a rigged ballyhoo to an approaching sailfish or marlin, only to miss the bite entirely, leaving the hapless angler with a considerable chunk missing from his bait—i.e. just the head remains.

All of a sudden, a missed fish soon became known ubiquitously as a *sancocho*, a good-natured term used to rib fellow anglers when they'd screw up.

Casa Vieja owners David and Kristen Salazar came up with the innovative idea of turning the failure of the *sancocho* into an opportunity to do some good for a local school. Many of the local employees of the lodge have children who attend the Santa Cecilia Primary School in the nearby town of Puerto San Jose.

The Salazars' concept transforms the *sancocho* into a revenue source, because each time an angler enters into the tournament and misses



a fish, he or she must put \$20 into a kitty to benefit the school. And like many Latin American schools, Santa Cecilia desperately needs all the funds it can get.



When it comes to catching giants, it's all about the bait prep.

Team A-Fin-Ity

My wife Poppy and I fished aboard the 37-foot Knowles *A-Fin-Ity*, skippered by Capt. Chico Alvarenga, with fellow anglers Wylie Nagler, president of Yellowfin Yachts, noted marine artist Carey Chen, angler Sara Brooker, and our son, Capt. Ben Brownlee.

Casa Vieja is unique among fishing lodges in that it operates a diverse fleet of older custom boats. In fact, the only production boats they run are two Contender center consoles. The rest of the fleet comes from prestigious custom builders including Bill Knowles, Merritt Rybovich, Whiticar, and Gamefisherman.

Team *A-Fin-Ity* started off strong, with a solid sailfish bite and a firm hand among the anglers as we released five fish without a single *sancocho*. But as often happens, the

bite slowed somewhat in the afternoon, as fish would rise but halfheartedly swipe at a bait before sinking out of the wake. These lazy fish began to run up our *sancocho* count. On day one we tallied 15 releases, not red hot by Guatemalan standards, but a great day in anyone's book nonetheless.

This Means War

On the way in, the mates produced an odd-looking bucket filled with colorful round objects, and it took me a minute to remember what those were. Water balloons, of course! One hallmark of the No *Sancocho* event involves the customary afternoon (and sometimes morning) water-balloon battles between rival crews.



Capt. Ben Brownlee hoists a yellowfin. He's also handy with a water balloon.

As the boats file back to the Puerto Quetzal marina late in the day, captains jockey for position, maneuvering the boats close together to gain advantageous position over competitors and get close enough to attack with the short-range weaponry in the bucket.

It's quite a sight to see grown men and women hurling water balloons at one another as they devolve into junior high school kids again. You quickly learn that if you use too much force when throwing your balloon, it bursts in your hand, soaking you instead of your intended target and thereby defeating the whole purpose.

Solid Results

Over the course of three days, the 10-boat fleet caught and released 378 Pacific sailfish and 6 blue marlin. We also committed 224 sailfish *sancochos* and six on the marlin, for a total of 230, which generated \$4,600

for the Santa Cecilia school.

But then the team from Cummins Marine, including Marketing Director Andy Kelly, and Cummins' director of engineering Scott Malindzak, matched the \$4,600 on top of their own *sancocho* tally, for a total donation of \$4,980.

In addition, angler Bob Smith, fishing on Team *Intensity* with Capt. Mike Sheeder, matched the donations for the 78 *sancochos* aboard *Intensity*, *Makaira* (Capt. Jason Bryce), and *Rum Line* (Capt. Chris Sheeder), donating an additional \$1,580. Jorge Sinibaldi, fishing aboard *Tranquility*, donated another \$2,000, and Carey Chen from our team painted a beautiful original marlin painting on-site and we auctioned it off.

At the end, the Santa Cecilia school got quite a generous infusion of needed capital, and we all had a wonderful time. The team aboard *Intensity* won the tournament, releasing a total of 63 sailfish and two blue marlin. Angler Tracey Kealy of Miami committed the most *sancochos* with 17, and accepted her prize as "Sancocho Queen" with grace and humor. Poppy won the top lady angler award for the second year in a row with 15 releases.

No other event combines billfish action with top-shelf service and wraps it together with a meaningful, altruistic goal. We're looking forward to attending this one-of-a-kind tournament next year—after we bone up a little on our water-balloon warfare, of course. □

John Brownlee is the executive producer of our sister production, *Anglers Journal TV*. Catch JB and this interpid new show at waypointtv.com