

Tournament Rules: Make Them and Use Them

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of tournament rules is to avoid misunderstandings, disputes and arguments and to see that all anglers are competing on an even footing. You, as a tournament director, want your tournament to be enjoyable, so you should keep the rules as easy to understand as possible and as simple as circumstances permit. If you are having a small, friendly competition with a few plaques as prizes, the rules can be extremely loose and simple; but if you are running a large, high stakes tournament, the rules must necessarily be more stringent and precise. An example of a very casual tournament is the Mako owners series of tournaments held around the U.S., Bahamas and Cayman Islands. There are no cash prizes, only plaques, and the only strict rule is to be sure to be back from fishing in time for the cookout. You can start fishing whenever you want, and catch whatever takes your bait. The other extreme would be a high stakes billfish tournament where observers are placed on each boat to make sure all IGFA and tournament rules are strictly observed. A growing number of tournaments are also routinely giving lie detector tests to all big money winners. Last May, a big money tournament in south Florida had to disqualify the first place winner when all three people on board flunked the polygraph exam. However, whether simple or complex, tournament rules should be made and observed by all parties involved.

THE RULES COMMITTEE

The first thing your tournament committee should do is set up a rules committee. This committee will decide what rules are necessary, and should also officiate over any dispute. In some cases, the entire Board of Directors may become involved in setting up the rules. Make sure everyone connected with the tournament is familiar with the rules. It is especially important for the radio communicator (if you use one) and the weighmaster to know the rules. The reason it is important to have a formal "rules committee" is in case of a dispute — the committee is the group who has proper authority to make a final decision. A judge in a law suite will frown on an ad hoc committee making a decision on rules.

SETTING UP AND WRITING THE RULES

OK, you are starting a new tournament and you need to set up the rules — how do you go about it? Fortunately, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. The

International Game Fish Association (IGFA) has, over the past 49 years, refined a pretty good set of rules that are recognized and accepted all over the world. These rules are contained in a booklet cleverly named "The IGFA Rule Book." This book is available to members of IGFA at their cost of 20 cents each, so they can be given to each registered angler in a tournament. The booklet is 16 pages, but don't worry, we really don't have that many rules, most of the pages tell how to apply for a world record, enter the IGFA Annual Fishing Contest, or describe the 5, 10, 15 and 20 to 1 Clubs. The actual rules are on pages 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Most serious tournaments use IGFA Rules, but you can't just say "IGFA Rules prevail" and let it go at that! You must lay out additional guidelines that fit your tournament and you may want to modify the IGFA Rules to suit your particular situation. Some examples of possible exceptions to IGFA Rules are:

1. Allow use of wire line — for kingfish tournament.
2. Allow more than one person to handle rod - Wahini Tournament His & Her Tourney.
3. Allow one angler to land double header.
4. Allow up to 130 lb. test line. Allow a lighter maximum line test--IGFA maximum is 130 lb. test.
5. Allow shooting of fish for safety reasons--shark tournaments.
6. Limit bait to dead bait or artificial lures.

In addition to possible modification of IGFA Rules, you will also need rules pertaining to the logistics of your tournament. You need rules to tell the anglers:

1. What time to start and stop fishing.
2. What is deadline for weighing-in fish.
3. Where do they check out prior to start fishing.
4. Do anglers radio-in hookups or boated fish.
5. If observers are used, what are requirements.
6. Do the fish need to be tagged with angler names before weigh-in.
7. Who owns the fish.
8. What happens if fighting a fish at lines-out time.
9. What fish are eligible for prizes.
10. If there is a minimum weight required.
11. How many points for each fish caught.
12. What is procedure for making a protest.

The rules should be written out clearly and concisely, and all participants should get copies. The rules should be available as far in advance of the tournament as possible, so interested registrants can study them. Another important factor in the rules is to spell-out the predetermined consequences of willfully or even unknowingly breaking the rules. The severity of the consequences should be determined by the seriousness of the infraction. Here are some examples:

1. Missing captains meeting- one hour delay in starting to fish.
2. Late weigh-in - disqualify that fish.
3. Fail to check out with stake boat - disqualified for the day.
4. Lead weights in stomach - out of tournament and future tournaments.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Conservation Rules

And you thought putting on a tournament was going to be easy! You will also want to consider tournament rules pertaining to conservation and possibly antipollution rules. It would be a good idea to include a rule prohibiting the disposal at sea of any non-biodegradable material; such as, plastic or styrofoam. These can kill sea birds, fish, turtles and engines.

Conservation-oriented rules are becoming more common. For instance, a large billfish release tournament series requires that leaders be cut as close to the fish as possible. If an attempt is made to release the fish by breaking the leader or ripping the hook loose, that fish will be disqualified.

To get information on what rules other tournaments are using, write and ask them for a copy of their rules. IGFA publishes an International Tournament Calendar updated six times a year, listing who to contact to get information. Many other fishing publications have tournament calendars as well.

State And Federal Rules

Make sure you comply with state and federal fisheries rules. In Florida, if you're having a kingfish tournament or sailfish tournament, there is a limit on the number of fish each angler can take per day. If you're having a redfish tournament in Florida, make sure the rules comply with the state's minimum size limit and bag limit. Don't schedule a snook tournament in Florida in January, February, July, August or September - it's closed season. Learn the local rules that could affect your tournament and make them part of your tournament rules.

Unnecessary Rules

As I mentioned earlier, keep the rules as simple as possible. Don't fall into the trap of including unnecessary rules. These can lead to controversy that can reduce enjoyment of the tournament, cause hard feelings, and even lead to lawsuits. A tournament on the east coast of Florida had a rule that prohibited professional captains or mates from being registered anglers. This, to me, is an example of an unnecessary rule that can cause problems. In this case, the rule led to a protest by a second place winner that the first place winner was a professional mate. There were several thousand dollars at stake. An ad hoc committee of tournament directors disallowed the protest saying the winner was not currently employed as a mate, and was, therefore, eligible. The second place

winner sued and two years later, after a long court battle, a judge declared him the official winner. It's not a pleasant situation - so avoid unnecessary rules.

Some other examples of unnecessary rules are: (In some cases these rules may be necessary)

1. Making deadline for weigh-in too early.
2. Restrictions on fishing area.
3. Must check back in at end of day.
4. Limit number of rods that can be used at one time.

Whatever your rules, set up a time (usually at the captains meeting or kick-off party) when someone on the rules committee goes over the rules carefully to make sure everyone understands them. Allow time for questions and answers.

RULES INTERPRETATION

Every day at IGFA headquarters we get phone calls asking for clarification of our rules, and as familiar as we are with the rule book, we still refer to it often when answering these questions. So don't expect that just because you have a neatly spelled-out set of rules that you have nothing to worry about. The rules committee should be readily available throughout the tournament to help decide any questions. There will be times when the rules committee will have to interpret IGFA Rules, for example:

Mutilated Fish

A tournament in Jacksonville, Florida, had a situation where an angler brought in the largest marlin of the tournament, but after it had been weighed and was lying on the dock, another angler noted considerable damage to the fish and filed a protest saying the fish was mutilated and should be disqualified. The rules committee had to make a decision and ruled the fish was indeed mutilated, much to the chagrin of the angler who claimed the damage was done legitimately with flying gaffs during the landing of the marlin. The case may still be in court.

Broken Rod

In a Bimini tournament, they had a situation where an angler's rod broke during the battle but he was still able to reel in the fish. Should the fish be disqualified? When a rod breaks (while the fish is being played) in a manner that reduces its length below minimum dimensions or severely impairs its angling characteristics, the fish should be disqualified.

When Is A Fish Officially Boated ?

A shark tournament at Montauk, New York, had a situation where a 600 pound mako was gaffed and tailroped and then shot. Is that in compliance with IGFA Rules? A tournament committee may be called on to decide.

One Final Example

Even if time allows you to call IGFA headquarters, there are going to be situations when the rules committee will have to make their own interpretation. We did have one situation where we were called by a tournament official while a fish was actually being fought. In the Cayman Islands each June, they have what they call Million Dollar Month. If an angler catches a marlin bigger than the all-tackle record (1,282 lbs), he wins a yacht, a condominium, a lifetime pass on Cayman Airlines, and \$1 million cash. One rough June day, an angler was fishing by himself in a small boat and hooked what was reported to be a huge marlin — almost as big as his boat. After fighting the fish for several hours, he faced the dilemma of how to land the fish single-handed. A larger boat standing by the action radioed to the weight station to ask if, when the angler fighting the fish brought the swivel to the rod tip, could the larger boat back in close and gaff the marlin and bring it into the larger boat. It was reportedly too rough to transfer a mate to the smaller boat. Since the marlin was close to the boat, they needed an answer right away, and there was possibly over a million dollars at stake. As a tournament director, what would you have done? Think about it.