

What to Look for in a Tournament Weighmaster, Where to Find One, and How to Use One to a Tournament's Best Advantage

DEWITT O. MYATT & EVELYN N. MYATT

International Weighmaster, Inc.

Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33309

Fishing tournaments have long passed the point of being the friendly competitions they once were. They have become serious business for tournament committees, sponsors, and participants alike who invest unprecedented amounts of time and money in the events. Now that fishing tournaments have come of age as major competitive events, there is a pressing need for the same quality officiating as is afforded other major sports.

Quality officiating is needed, because the high stakes and sidebetting that provide more incentive for anglers to enter tournaments also provide more incentive for cheating. Publicized cases of tournament cheating have hurt the credibility of tournaments and tarnished the image of sportfishing.

Tournament committees can help promote a wholesome image of tournament fishing by instituting an effective judging program that will discourage cheating and bring greater credibility to the tournament. They need to establish enforceable rules; retain qualified weighmasters; and provide the state-of-the-art equipment now available for weighstations. With these measures, tournaments can be better assured of continued growth and popularity.

Sportfishing presents an enjoyable challenge that allows man to pit his wits and skills against species superbly adapted to their environment. Many fishermen find ample reward in simply catching fish, but others also enjoy matching skills with fellow anglers. Because of this competitive spirit, fishing tournaments have become increasingly popular. Their rising popularity has in turn created a greater demand for qualified weighmasters.

Fishing tournaments need qualified weighmasters for the same reason other serious sports need referees or judges: to make sure players go by the rules. This is particularly true when tournaments offer such high stakes that anglers may be tempted to win by cheating.

The publicity surrounding cases of tournament cheating have reflected badly, not only on the person caught at it, but also on honest anglers, tournament reputations, and sponsors associated with the event. Cheating can be inhibited by enforceable rules; a well organized weighstation; and a weighmaster who can detect questionable fish.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A WEIGHMASTER

A weighmaster needs to have a good knowledge of the target species, its life history and distinct characteristics. Knowing the life history would enable him to spot anomalies that could indicate a suspicious entry. Familiarity with characteristics would better enable him to make positive identifications. For instance, an untrained eye could easily mistake a spanish, or cero, makerel for a young king mackerel because of similar size and markings. Some species of sharks, tunas, and catfish must be dissected for positive identification.

Being unfamiliar with the species could result in an ineligible fish being wrongly accepted into competition or an eligible fish being wrongly disqualified. It might also mean overlooking a state or world record catch. A weighmaster should be aware of these "booby trap" species and not attempt to identify them without references or other means of verification.

Technical experience should also be high on the list of weighmaster qualifications. Weighstation equipment and technology have advanced along with fishing equipment and methodology in recent years. For example, electronic digital scales may be on hand at the weighstation. They can save time, increase accuracy, and eliminate guesswork during weigh-ins. However, it takes technical know-how to set them up properly and to understand their limitations. Freshness testing devices are another recent innovation at tournaments. They reduce guesswork, but accurate readings depend on consistent, systematic procedures. The user then needs to know acceptable values for a particular species before making a final judgment.

Sportfishing experience is another attribute to look for in a weighmaster. A person surely need not be a fisherman to weigh fish, but being one makes him better qualified for collateral tasks. He might, for example, need to check leaders, rigging techniques, and hook arrangements for conformance with tournament rules. Being familiar with competitive fishing and past tournament rules would enable him to review proposed rules to check adequateness and enforceability. He might, for example, spot loopholes that could be used to unfair advantage.

If one word were needed to sum up the qualifications needed in a weighmaster, it would be professionalism. Whether paid or not, he will be a highly visible part of the tournament. He therefore needs to display professional expertise and convey a professional attitude and demeanor.

SOURCES OF WEIGHMASTERS

Tournaments can recruit weighmasters from the general public, government agencies, academic institutions, or from tournament officiating businesses. Each source has advantages and disadvantages to consider.

General Public

Volunteer weighmasters from the general public are usually easy to get on a one-time basis. The biggest advantage is that volunteers are free. The biggest disadvantage in getting a weighmaster from this source would be the difficulty finding a qualified person. Also, a volunteer cannot usually provide services for every tournament and sometimes not for even one full event. Changing weighmasters midway through a tournament could become a critical issue, especially if weigh-in procedures changed with each new weighmaster. Competitors might also question the impartiality of a local volunteer weighmaster if he had a friend or relative in the tournament. Suspected bias could discourage angler participation and confidence in the event.

Government Agencies and Academic Institutions

Government agencies and academic institutions can often provide inexpensive and well qualified weighmasters. This is particularly true if the organization has fishery biologists on its staff. Fishery research facilities have traditionally provided weighmasters for tournaments in order to collect fishery data. However, some agencies might find this practice infeasible, because frequent weekend work and the risks of tournament officiating can put an overload on personnel. Tax-supported agencies might consider it inappropriate to provide weighmasters if the tournament is a private profit-making enterprise.

Tournament Officiating Businesses

Independent tournament officiating businesses are another source of good weighmasters. Professional weighmasters come fully qualified and can provide credible, impartial judging. Their services might also include equipment use and weighstation planning. A professional weighmaster would benefit the tournament through improved credibility, better participation and reduced risks. The only disadvantage is the cost, but the benefits would justify the additional overhead.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF WEIGHMASTERS

After finding a weighmaster, the tournament committee needs to clarify the weighmaster's responsibilities. His primary responsibility is to provide unbiased, accurate data so that the tournament committee can decide on the eligibility of entries and disposition of prizes. The weighmaster, whether voluntary or paid, should provide the following services:

1. Make sure scales are calibrated, certified, and working properly;
2. Take systematic and accurate weights and measurements during weigh-ins;
3. Make sure data are completely and accurately recorded;
4. Report suspected discrepancies to the head of the tournament committee;

5. Maintain good lines of communication with the tournament committee throughout the event; and

6. By all means, stay sober!

The weighmaster might also agree to explain the weigh-in procedures at the captain's meeting, manage the toteboard, furnish weighstation equipment, or provide other needed services.

DEVELOPING WEIGHSTATION PROCEDURES

After clarifying the weighmaster's responsibilities, the tournament committee should establish procedures for weighing, measuring, and screening fish for eligibility. These procedures need to be consistent, accurate, and efficient. They must also suit the tournament's format and target species. For example, slow methodical procedures might suit tournaments with ten daily catches but not for tournaments with hundreds of daily entries. With that in mind, the committee needs to consider the options and decide which ones best suit their tournament format.

Weights

Weighing fish is the most critical part of a weighmaster's job. The committee should first decide on the type of scales needed. Then it should choose the most consistent, methodical procedure for using them. The necessary scale capacity will depend upon the number of fish to be weighed and their anticipated weight ranges. If multiple weighstations are absolutely necessary, the scales should have the same capacity and accuracy. Each scale should be carefully calibrated with standard weights matching the weight range of the target species. Each weighmaster should use an identical weigh-in procedure throughout the event. Speedy, but accurate, weigh-in procedures will reduce the possibility of weight loss in fish from dehydration and drainage.

The tournament should state clearly in its rules that no entries will be reweighed after the weighmaster initially calls the weight. In extreme cases where a reweighing is unavoidable, the second weight should override the first. Reweighing fish should never be used to resolve ties.

Measurements

Fish lengths and girths are commonly measured at tournaments, with some using length measurements as tie-breakers. Fish lengths and girths can be measured in several ways. The committee should decide the most appropriate method for the target species and whether all, or only contending fish, will undergo measurements. The weighmaster should use the same consistent, methodical approach to measuring lengths that he uses for weighing fish.

Internal Examinations

Internal examinations detect foreign objects inserted into the body cavity to add weight. The tournament should decide if these examinations will be needed. If so, will the weighmaster examine all fish or contenders only, and if examinations will take place publicly or privately. Fish to be checked away from the weighstation need to be labeled or otherwise marked with the angler's name or team number. Labels would also be needed if an angler wants his fish mounted.

Freshness Testing

Freshness testing can be done visually, histologically, by internal thermometer, by electronic device, or by all four methods. The committee needs determine which tests they want performed and whether the procedures will be done on all fish, on random selections, or on contenders only.

Disqualification Procedure

The committee needs to decide in advance (and perhaps seek legal counsel) on a discreet procedure to follow if a suspicious entry is discovered during weigh-ins. Disqualification requires a committee decision, rather than one made solely by the weighmaster. The committee chairman, at least, should be on standby during weigh-ins.

Tournament cheating, if proven, constitutes fraud, a punishable criminal offense. The seriousness of such an offense, or even the accusation, implied or otherwise, should not be underestimated. The committee should document everything that transpires during a disqualification and preserve physical evidence for possible court use.

PLANNING AND EQUIPPING THE WEIGHSTATION

After developing weigh-in procedures, the committee should plan the weighstation. A preliminary assessment of the host marina will determine equipment needs and special planning. Many marinas offer less-than-ideal tournament accommodations. Some might have scales in awkward places, and others might have inadequate scales for the target species. Others might lack such essentials as hoists for hanging fish or facilities for handling large crowds. Preliminary planning can help correct, or at least offset, such limitations.

The following is a starter list of items that will probably be needed to equip the weighstation:

1. Adequate scales
2. Freshness testing equipment and supplies
3. Hoists and tailropes
4. Communications equipment
5. Thermometers for taking internal temperatures of fish

6. Dissecting instruments for internal examinations
7. Preservatives and specimen containers
8. Measuring devices for lengths and girths or leaders
9. Record forms
10. Pens with waterproof ink
11. Toteboard and grease pencils
12. Electrical extension cords
13. Adequate light sources for after-dark weigh-ins and photos
14. Rain protection for electronic instruments
15. Weighstation tables and chairs
16. Ropes for crowd control
17. Labels and markers for fish

If the committee plans ahead and covers all the contingencies of the weighstation, it will set the stage for an effective judging system that will favorably impress anglers. Promotion and publicity may attract first-time tournament participants, but an effective judging system will bring anglers back for the next event. When it comes to future participation in a tournament, the angler is the judge.