



This feature is provided courtesy of
BlueWater Boats & Sportsfishing magazine.
It originally appeared in issue 64, 2007

BlueWater
BOATS & SPORTSFISHING

www.bluewatermag.com.au



for the RECORD

Like a challenge? Try landing a 3m sailfish – or a world record wahoo – on 4kg. Tim Simpson heads to Fiji on a quest to attempt just that – and offers here some technical insights for your own light-tackle escapade.



It's not often you encounter anglers using ultralight-tackle for gamefish. Many seem to have started gamefishing with medium to heavy tackle and have never felt comfortable fishing for sizable and powerful fish with spiderweb. Perhaps they also live in areas where catching just a couple of fish is a big day out and, therefore, the threat of losing a fish on ultralight is not a risk they are willing to entertain.

It's a shame that more anglers don't try to push their skill boundaries. One of the great attractions of gamefishing is the challenge of trying to catch a powerful fish with a comparatively light line – using your skill as an angler, together with your team, to achieve extraordinary captures.

The game becomes relative. If the quarry is huge then, perhaps, 60kg tackle is proportionally light. On the other hand, if the quarry is typically small to medium sized, then light- or ultralight-tackle can provide a terrifically satisfying challenge. And if you lose a couple, so what? True gamefishing is like that!

In the end, it's not whether you win or lose that matters, it's how you play the game. Have fun! Fishing on edge is much more exciting than fishing 'safe'. The founding premise of gamefishing is that fish should be entitled to an even chance to escape. You are probably going to tag and release them anyway. And as you soon learn, once tension is removed from the line, fish have a remarkable ability to shake free of the hooks.

Having graduated from childhood in a 12ft tinnie chasing tuna and kingfish on 3kg, 2kg and even 1kg line off tiny baitcasters, I still find it extremely exciting to exercise my skills with high-ratio captures whenever I get the opportunity.

SOUTH PACIFIC ADVENTURE

It's a wonderful thing to have the adventure of a major fishing trip to look forward to. It's even better when it incorporates a personal quest.

This year I set out to fish the outer coral reefs of Fiji using only 4kg tackle. It was a trip that I feverishly looked forward to for 12 months.

It had started the year before, during a heavy-tackle blue marlin trip to fish with Adrian Watt, one of the owners of Matava Eco Resort on Kadavu Island in Fiji. Kadavu is the large, slim island sitting to the south of Fiji's main island. Blessed with some of the best fishing grounds in Fiji, it has the distinct advantage of having a seamount nearby to the south and a fringing coral lagoon that extends to the north around a turquoise lagoon studded with small tropical islands. Sitting detached just a few kilometres beyond the deep-water channel at its northern tip is North Astrolabe Reef and Solo Lighthouse. This is yet another local reef of world repute as a



Above: Tim with a 14.6kg yellowfin on 4kg.

Top: Skirted lures, typically 20cm, were rigged with a 1m 400lb cable tip (for flexibility) to wahoo-proof them, then on to 250lb mono leader. Diving lures were rigged with .022-inch single-strand wire on to 150lb mono leader.

Right: Carrying minnows with hooks removed made selection and storage much easier.

“Fish have a remarkable ability to shake free of the hooks.”

diving destination, due to its stunning coral and crystal visibility.

Matava's location towards the northern end of this slim island gives it a distinct advantage over many other fishing destinations. This is because, regardless of wind direction or strength, it's simply a matter of driving across the lagoon to the lee shore to get comfortable deep-water gamefishing in calm water beside a pristine South Pacific coral reef.

KINDRED SPIRIT

Towards the end of my initial Fijian marlin trip, the wind kicked up and made the seamount – and the blue marlin – a difficult proposition. It was then that I found Adrian was a fellow light-tackle aficionado. We broke out the 4kg outfits and set about trolling the lee shore of the outer reef that, in season, is usually crawling with huge wahoo. With the supposedly abundant supply of suitable fish, our sights were soon set on breaking the world record.

During those few days the wahoo made a conspicuous detour around Kadavu, but schools of sailfish, also approaching a 4kg world-record size of 60kg, made an extremely welcome stand-in. We came very close that year and, after losing a couple of huge sails at boatside, we did manage to set a bunch of Fiji national 4kg records. The plan was hatched to



return this year for a dedicated week of world-record attempts.

Late June, July and August are prime wahoo time in Fiji. And prime fishing for a generally wahoo-prolific area like Kadavu means they are swarming in packs, skyrocketing through the lures or baits at the back of the boat. The size is typically 20kg to 30kg, and fish up to at least 40kg are not uncommon.

To set a new world record we would need a wahoo of at least 26kg. Finding it should not pose a problem, but hooking it, ensuring it survived its first run and then landing it would certainly be a challenge.

Magazine schedules left me a window of opportunity during the last few days of June and the first week of July. Adrian booked me in and the plans were cast.

TACKLE CONSIDERATIONS

The next few months of eager anticipation were studied with trips to tackle outfitters, as well as deep thoughts about strategies that may

deliver the goods. I already had a 20-50lb Daiwa graphite jigrod that I liked as a gutsy 4kg game rod, and another similar rod in glass. Adrian had two new custom outfits of his own. I commissioned another new custom 4kg rod and scoured the web for the latest and greatest 4kg lever drag game reel to match.

Steve Morris, designer for Top Shot, also runs a custom rod business called The Reel Rod Factory. I knew Steve had spent years chasing 4kg records in South Australia, so it was him I turned to for the new stick. For reels I had two old Shimano TLD 5s that, although now discontinued, have proved to have an excellent drag and an appropriately sized lightweight aluminium spool that packs on over 1000m of 4kg line.

Adrian had recently bought two tiny Avet game reels for his outfits. Although they looked and performed beautifully, I settled on the Duel Speedie for my new outfit. This alloy lever drag reel sports a higher retrieve, which, on light-tackle, where the winding strain is minimal, makes it

great to gain line fast when a fast-moving fish like a wahoo or sailfish is streaking about the surface. The only thing I didn't like is the preset, which takes up most of the left-hand side plate. With the light drags fished on 4kg, there is not much tension on the preset knob, so it is in great danger of being bumped and adjusted against your wishes while fighting a fish. I checked and adjusted the preset each morning with a set of precision Bouz drag-checking tension scales, and then stuck a patch of masking tape over the preset dial to immobilise it. Ugly, but necessary.

For line, I took over a quantity of the new Platypus Lo-Stretch, fluorescent, pre-tested game line. Using light-tackle, and having lots of it in the water at one time, meant that the low-stretch properties of this line would help to keep us in direct contact with the fish, and not simply pulling on the end of a gigantic elastic band – as with many other brands of line. This line is also thicker than some of the new breeds that seem to trade fine diameter for shock and abrasion resistance. We needed a line that would withstand some abuse and a hard workout in the hot, tropical sun.

LURE SELECTION

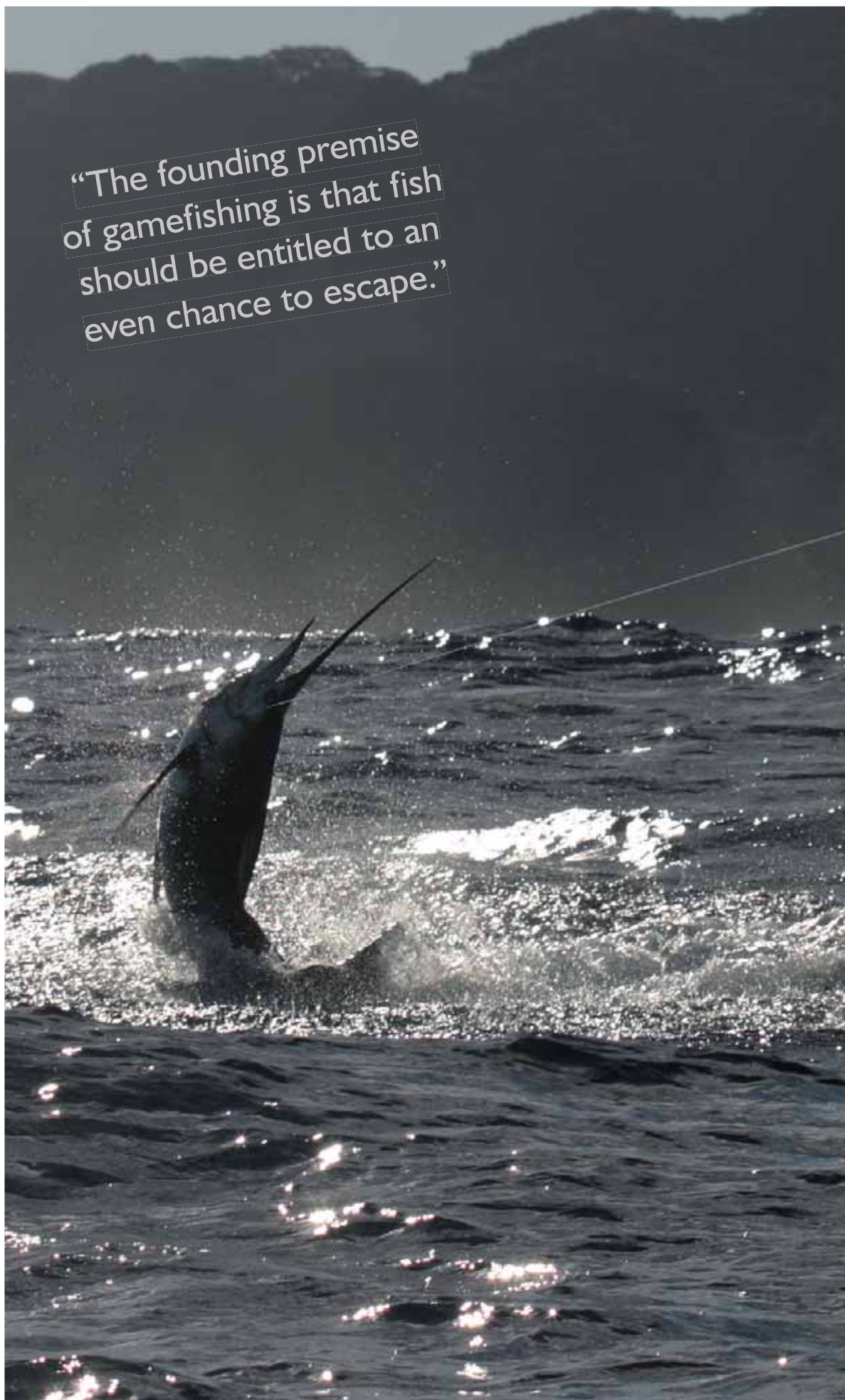
Next obstacle was the hook-up. Using skipping garfish (ballyhoo) would seem to offer the best chance of achieving a hook-up through allowing a fish to swallow the bait. However, last year, and on previous wahoo sessions, I'd found that often a premium brand of diving, swimming minnow lure proved the most attractive.

I'd trolled medium-sized minnows on ultralight before, but this time we wanted the biggest possible lure we could troll on 4kg. After all, we were hoping to tempt wahoo up to 30kg, and a small titbit was less likely to stand out and interest the fish that we had intentions for.

We found that you can successfully troll a Halco shallow-running Laser Pro in the biggest size (190) on 4kg at over 6kt. The medium-deep diver can also be trolled – just – but at 6kt it creeps line off the reel against a one-third strike drag. Since, for the wahoo and sails, we found that it was best to set the reel at slightly less than one-third until after hook-up, this lure was of limited use. The other lures we had great success with were the fabulous new Classic Bluewater F-18 (styled after the brilliant Peter Newell Scorpion) and the Rapala floating Magnum 18.

The Rapala floating Magnum is frustratingly difficult to obtain

“The founding premise of gamefishing is that fish should be entitled to an even chance to escape.”



“I cranked like a thrashing machine in a desperate bid to gain line back on to the reel while I could.”

in Australia as its deeper-diving CD18 brother has, for some reason, dominated Rapala's Australian sales. Over many years I've found the floating Magnum series to be a much more reliable lure, and far easier to tune as the tow-point is set on the nose of the lure, rather than in the bib as with the CD Magnum series. The CD 18 pulls too hard to use on 4kg, but the floating Magnum 18 – which is quite a sizable lure – was terrific on the light-tackle at 6kt or more.

RIGGING AND HOOK REQUIREMENTS

The thick, blunt-ish hooks these lures are delivered with would certainly hamper an easy hook-set on 4kg, so the next job was to replace all of the hooks with forged, medium-gauge, razor-sharp, so-called 'chemically sharpened' trebles (which are not really sharpened with chemicals!). I chose the Owner ST-41BC Stingers (in size 2/0) for their strength, reinforced cutting-edge points and sharpness.

On the tail of each minnow I used a treble on a heavy-duty split ring. When the lure's action would take it, the trebles were a size larger than standard to give us additional holding power on the leader. In the belly position, I

replaced the treble with a single hook as its larger gape provided even better holding power. These were thin-gauge, 'chemically sharpened', saltwater fly hooks in size 4/0 – such as the Owner Aki, Tiemco TMC 600SP or Gamakatsu SL12 models. To get them to sit with the point riding down, a second split ring was added, in tandem, between the lure and the hook. This also provided a knuckle joint to prevent the hook from becoming twisted out of the fish.

For sailfish, we planned to use garfish as a switchbait after teasing them up with small- to medium-sized skirted lures. We also had a selection of Williamson jet-heads, Pakulas and Mold Craft Wide Range lures in the medium size. These were all rigged with light-gauge, razor-sharp Pakula Katana 7/0 or 8/0 hooks with the eye set in the very tail of the lure. They proved extremely successful and gave consistently solid hook-ups, despite the large size of the hook.

We would need to be able to hang on, to some degree, with reasonably large fish on the leader, so any split rings or other hardware had to be strong enough to withstand the strain.

Before heading for Fiji I took all of the hooks and split rings off the minnows and then carried the bodies in a lure

wallet, along with a pair of Berkely split-ring pliers and a large quantity of trebles and rings. We re-rigged them at the lodge, using a 600mm tip of 0.022 camouflaged brown, stainless steel, single-strand piano wire. The lure was haywire-twisted on to one end, while on the other was a blackened 5/16-inch solid brass ring. To this was tied a leader of 100lb hard nylon mono. The overall length of each pre-stretched leader – each one measured from the rear treble to the far end of the mono – was 14ft 9in. This gave us a small buffer for possible additional stretch, but, otherwise, a leader as long as was allowed under the IGFA rules. A maximum length leader is often crucial when trying to coax large fish the last few metres to the boat.

READY FOR THE FISHING

I arrived in late June to a windy, overcast Fiji, which had intermittent rain and a sizable swell breaking along the outer barrier of the lagoon. It was just as well we had a lee shore to hide behind.

On the first morning we headed around the top of the island to North Astrolabe Reef. We were fishing alone. Adrian skippered his twin-screw, 31ft flybridge Deep Vee, *Bite Me*, from the

Capt Adrian Watt is relieved and thrilled when his spectacular 10.2kg GT on 4kg finally hits the deck.



bridge, while I ran the cockpit and tended the lines. We had four lines with minnows astern when we first encountered the swarms of 8-15kg yellowfin that had recently established themselves in the area. We soon found that four lines are way too many when you're fishing in an area like this with only one and a half people to tend them! All four lines went off together, and I was kept on my toes trying, in vain, to prevent crossed lines and cut-offs.

Each of these yellowfin took between 10 minutes and almost an hour to land, so it wasn't long before we decided to veer away from the churning schools of tuna and continue up the reef in search of wahoo or sails. We ended the day a few lures lighter and with six yellowfin and a Fijian record kawakawa (mackerel tuna) in the boat to feed the lodge with fresh sashimi.

On the second day we again fished by ourselves and caught another four yellowfin, plus a Fijian record 7.2kg dolphinfish, as well as barracuda, longtom and loads of scad. Each time multiple lines went off Adrian and I would find ourselves together, fighting fish in the cockpit, while the boat drifted at the mercy of the wind. We had a ball!

RICHARD'S BATTLE

On the third day, Adrian's partner, Richard, took a day off and joined us. The wind had eased, so we headed out to fish the front reefs where the coral points often held the wahoo we were seeking. On our first pass Richard saw a large wahoo slash at one of the lures – but it missed and didn't return. Second pass resulted in a double strike. My line ran under Richard's and burnt through, while his continued down into the depths and steadily moved offshore. Adrian gave chase and we soon found ourselves out in the slop, beyond the protection of the point, where the current upwellings tossed the boat around like a cork.

Richard found himself locked in a very serious battle. It was a big fish and didn't respond to any of the tactics or strategic manoeuvring that we tried in order to break its pattern. For most of the fight the line was vertical. At one stage Richard had almost 600m of 4kg line off the reel, pointing straight down beneath the boat. He fought it like a champion, gauging the strain on each pump with a careful finger-lock on the line between his left index finger and thumb. He gently lifted the fish, guiding it with as much strain as the line could possibly withstand, cranking every centimetre that was available on to the spool.

After three hours of constant manoeuvring we found an angle that worked. Richard was able to pump it most of the way to the surface. But then it rebelled and, again, screamed a blistering run 400m straight down into the depths.

Then, eventually, a new angle seemed to pay steady dividends in line. It was awkward to achieve. I was at the helm and had one engine in reverse and one idling forward. This screwed the boat sideways into the sea and kept us slightly up-current and upwind of the fish. It was very difficult to maintain position and presented a dangerous situation to the line if the fish reacted quickly – but it was the only angle that lifted the fish.

After four hours the fish seemed to have given in. Richard pumped line constantly for over 20 minutes and the angle lifted dramatically. The fish was steadily led to the surface; the end was near. We peered into the ruffled, purple water, straining for a glimpse of colour to betray the identity of the unseen opponent.

We all thought it must be a yellowfin – probably approaching 30kg by the way it was fighting – but we had not seen it on the strike.

Then a loud and sharp CRACK rang out like a rifle shot from the reel. A puff of salt and water burst off the reel in a momentary cloud as the spool of the TLD 5 shattered and imploded in on itself. The ratchet button, on the left side plate, shot out like a bullet and was never seen again.

The stretched line, packed down during the gruelling centimetre-by-centimetre battle, had compacted the line so much that the spool had crushed and spread. It's a symptom of fishing light line on a reel not specifically crafted for the task. It was also a devastating blow to Richard, who was gutted and disbelieving as he stood with a completely locked-up reel – and nowhere to go. The fish was beaten and almost within sight, but it only had to drift a few metres away for the line to grow impossibly stretched – and snap. It was over.

SLEEPING WHALE?

The next day Adrian's deckie, Joe, joined us as we headed north to Solo Lighthouse once again. The water was still 26.6°C – two or more degrees



warmer than ideal for the wahoo. Adrian thought this was why we hadn't seen one. By late June the water has usually cooled, which brings the wahoo flooding in.

As we trolled up the outside edge of the reef, Adrian spotted a large humpback whale, seemingly dead and stranded among the gentle surf in the shallows of the reef. We drove closer and were almost upon it when it came to life, exhaled, turned for the drop-off and gently dove beneath our spread of lures. It was amazing and something none of us had even heard of before. Was it asleep on the reef, propping itself upon the coral?

Over the next couple of days we continued to catch a steady stream of yellowfin and assorted reef pelagics. Adrian caught a beautiful 10.2kg GT on a skipbait – for yet another Fijian record. All posed an exciting challenge on 4kg but, although some took 90 minutes or more to land, none demolished us without a chance.

On the last day the water cooled to 26.2°C – nearly half a degree cooler. Straight away we noticed a change in the activity. The yellowfin school in the channel had been replaced by a new rippling mass of skipjack.

Top: Passing storm fronts just added to the excitement of fishing 4kg along a deep-water coral edge.

Above: Even large longtom, like this one caught on a medium-sized Halco deep-diving 160 Laser Pro, become fun when using 4kg.



With a setting sun and fading light, Tim's five-hour fight with a large sailfish on 4kg enters an even more testing phase.

A triple strike along the reef edge resulted in a longtom cartwheeling across the surface, while the other two lures were slashed by what seemed to be wahoo. The hook pulled out of one and the other was soon bitten-off at the swivel by another fish from the pack. At last! Wahoo!

We combed the area, but couldn't find them again. Reluctantly, we continued searching down the reef.

THE CHALLENGE IS ON!

It was my last day. In the afternoon, with only a few hours left, we found a section of reef to the south of North Astrolabe that seemed alive. Longtom skipped about the shallows, an endless procession of scad nipped at the swivels (we regularly checked the line for damage) and, finally, our first sailfish of the trip made an appearance. It was a big fish and launched itself from out of sight, pouncing on a luminescent Mold Craft Wide Range bubbling at the end of the long, flat line. As I picked up the rod, the hook bit and the fish screamed off in a blistering run towards the reef. Its first jump was over 200m from us. By the time its thrashing acrobatics had tired it, it was over 400m from the boat. Adrian hit the throttles and powered *Bite Me* backwards, while I cranked like a threshing machine in a desperate bid to gain line back on to the reel while I could.

Sure enough, within a few minutes the fish had regained its composure and headed deep for the first slug-fest. Still, by that time we had regained a lot of lost ground and now, having survived the initial burst of power, we felt we were in with a chance.

The chance came after 40 minutes. The sail rose to the surface, shaking its head. Adrian slammed *Bite Me* backwards, leaving a frothing trail of white water from our bow and drenching me with shattered wind chop. Joe stretched for the leader. It was literally 200mm from his straining fingertips when the fish slowly dove to 10m – and beyond our reach. For the next 10 minutes we could see it beneath us as we backed after it. Then it sounded.

An hour later the fish again rose to the surface for a tired, half-hearted jump. Again we came within centimetres of getting the leader. Again it sounded.

Another hour ticked by.

In the fading light of dusk, as the sun set behind the mountains of Kadavu, we had another reasonable chance. The fish was not jumping any more, and this greatly reduced the opportunity to pounce while it sat, temporarily exhausted, on the surface. It was now an all-out battle of strength and determination. With only 1.5 to 2kg of drag to offer, I certainly had a challenge.

The only option was to strategically position ourselves and apply relentless pressure at the extremities of the line's capacity. We constantly evaluated the effect of different angles and positioned accordingly. The fish was tired and often within visibility but, stubbornly, it refused to be coaxed the few remaining metres to the surface – where the 15ft leader could be embraced by Joe's eager hands.

In fading light, the spiderweb line was increasingly difficult to see. Positioning was crucial to making an effect on the fish and, even with the assistance of two overhead spotlights, by the time it became totally dark, the moonless Fijian night became both magical and frustratingly problematic. Despite several very close misses, the fight was now squarely in the fish's favour.

After more than five hours of gruelling pressure, the line parted and we set a course for home. The trip – and our chance to set a new world record – was over.

The most satisfying achievements are often the ones you strive hardest to accomplish. The week had been packed with more fun and exhilaration than either of us had experienced in a long time. We – and fellow enthusiast, *BlueWater* columnist Bill Boyce – are now all eagerly awaiting the 2008 season and our next quest for the record. 📝