

Blue-Water Albacore Fishing with the *Tequila*

This All-Girl Crew Kicks Butt on the High Sea

BY LORNE FINLAYSON

You just couldn't help but get caught up in the infectious enthusiasm of the three young deckhands from the albacore troller, *Tequila*. Chelsea Howich, Kirsten Knutson and J.J. Gjertson were sitting around the living room table in their skipper's Campbell River home, overlooking the glassy waters of Georgia Strait. The skipper, Chelsea's father Dave Howich, was seated with them, clearly proud of his all-girl crew. Recounting the jibes he took when he set out with the young women as crew, Howich chuckled, "I had total confidence in them, but there were many negative people saying, 'you're a fool.' The best part about the whole thing was when we were in Hawaii. Just before we left, my buddy comes over and he has three young boys on board, roughly the same age as the girls. The boys were saying, 'You're awfully brave for taking those girls out. We're going to kick their butts.' Well, it didn't happen that way. It was the other way around," smiled Howich.

There were hoots of laughter, and a few choice words from the girls directed towards anyone who had doubted them. "My dad says that women are better at pulling fish than men because women have hips, and it's all in the technique," said a grinning Chelsea.

"Yeah, we totally scooped those guys," smirked J.J.

The tuna that these fishers love to chase is the Pacific albacore, *Thunnus alalunga*. The Food and Agricultural Organization states that, Albacore are found in tropical and temperate waters, including the Mediterranean sea, extending north to 45 degrees to 50 degrees and south to 30 degrees to 40 degrees, but not at the surface between 10 degrees N and 10 degrees S. Albacore feed on other



The Crew: Chelsea, Kirsten, J.J.

fish, squid, shellfish and a variety of planktonic organisms. They are perfectly adapted for strong, fast swimming so that they can catch their prey easily in the open sea.

Like mackerel and sharks, tuna must keep swimming for their entire lifetime in order to move water over their gills for respiration. They depend on forward momentum to bring in a current of oxygen-bearing water. This is called "ram ventilation," and it allows the tuna to get more oxygen simply by opening its mouth wider. Tuna use only about one to three percent of their energy for respiration while non-ventilators like trout and salmon use up to 15 percent.

Another unique adaptation is the albacore's ability to maintain its body temperature above that of the surrounding water by as much as 14 degrees C (56 degrees F). It regulates its temperature through a network of blood vessels beneath the skin. Howich stated that they're actually warmer at the core than they are on the skin. "I think they generate heat from their rapid movement. They are so fast... I would say they are the fastest fish in the ocean. I've heard that they can do up to 60 knots. Everything is retractable on them. There is not one edge that catches any resistance at all."

Because of the speed at which they move around the oceans, and the distances covered, albacore are termed a "highly migratory species."



The Tequila ready to leave, June 2004.

Atlantic albacore tend to be larger than the Pacific variety. For example, the record for the largest angling-caught albacore is a 40 kg (88 lb) monster that was taken in the Canary Islands, eastern Atlantic. On the other hand, Pacific albacore are smaller. Last season Tequila had a 6.8 kg (15 lb) average weight overall, though they did have some trips



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where fish averaged over 9 kg (20 lb). Chelsea felt that this was because some of the bigger fish they caught were 13 to 23 kg (30 to 50 lbs), and Kirsten backed her up by describing the work it took to pull them over the railing: "It was, well, it was really hard." Howich adds, "Those bigger fish have their place in the market, but the smaller sized albacore have the highest value. The Japanese market prefers the 15 to 20 pounders, which are optimum size for the sashimi (raw fish) market."

Because fisherman from both Canada and the United States serve the same market, and both claim 200-mile offshore zones called their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a Tuna Treaty was created between the two neighbors early on. Fishing vessels from either country are allowed to fish in the other's EEZ, and are permitted to land their fish in the others' country at designated landing locations. Vessels that fish inside the EEZ range from California to the north end of Vancouver Island and are referred to as the coastal fleet. These are usually the smaller albacore vessels, from 35 to 60 feet. The amount of effort many of these boats spend fishing albacore is directly linked to the strength of salmon runs and markets, and has become an alternate means of revenue for many trollers. Department of Fisheries and Oceans claims that there are as many as 230 Canadian vessels operating within the EEZs of this "dual" coastal fishery.

The high seas fleet operates beyond the Canadian and US 200-mile limits, out as far as the International Date Line and beyond. These are the "home waters" of Tequila and 50 to 70 other larger Canadian vessels. Last season Tequila fished as far west as the Emperor Seamount, which is a lot closer to Japan than it is to Canada. It's hard to believe that a fishing vessel from Campbell River works that far from home, but there we are.

The high seas fleet also goes south of the equator in search of albacore. Some vessels leave Canadian ports as early as April to take part in a fishery on the Wake Island grounds. Others, like Tequila, will move south after they have participated in the North Pacific fishery. "40 degrees North or 40 degrees South is where we fish, and believe me it's not 'tropical' in any sense of the word," said Howich.

Kirsten nodded in agreement, "Like, it gets very rough out there sometimes. There's mist all the time; soaking wet no matter what. And to top it off, we get covered in fish blood every day!"

So how does one find fish in that huge expanse of water? There are keys to finding albacore, and one of the best known is that they like to travel in surface waters ranging in temperature from about 16 degrees C (60 degrees F) to 19 degrees C (67 degrees F). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

regularly publishes, by weather fax and Internet, maps showing the surface temperatures all over the Pacific. Fishermen use these as a guide to finding possible areas where albacore are likely to be traveling. From there it is a matter of zeroing in on the schools of fish using logic and experience.

"It's an edge, a definite border that runs along there," explains Howich. "It could be that you've got 60 degree water on one side and 63 - 64 degree on the other. Where you've got what is called a 'sharp edge' is where you'll have only a half to one degree water temperature change. That's where the feed lies, and that's where the fish will be. You'll start seeing birds; you'll start seeing little fish jumping at night, stuff like that. Out on the Emperor Seamount the whole ocean comes alive at night, fish jumping out of the water everywhere. When you see that, then it's time to go fishing," he grins.



Chelsea and tuna

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Albacore trollers run 12, to as many as 20 lines of varying lengths, fastened to the outstretched trolling poles. At the end of each line is a rubbery lure called a jig that skips across the water. The jig comes in a variety of colours and has two barbless hooks embedded in it. When a school of albacore is spotted, the lines are put out and the vessel circles the school at about six knots. When an albacore is hooked, that line is hauled to the boat with the use of a hydraulic tuna puller. The puller gets the line and the fish up to the boat, and then the deckhand hauls it up onto the deck. There, the gills are slashed with a knife to start bleeding, the hook is removed and the line tossed back to catch another fish. After the fish is properly bled it is put into the blast freezer as soon as possible to ensure a top quality product. Albacore are frozen to minus 30 or 40 degrees.

Chelsea, Kirsten and J.J. became really excited when they started talking about hauling in albacore. Chelsea recounted, "I think, like our second day out, we got 390 fish, we were pulling for three hours straight. And they were big fish."

Howich cut-in, "180 fish in the first hour and a half these three girls pulled, and it was their first time out...they were greenhorns! And these were 18 pound average fish."

Kirsten remembered the day as well. "This other boat was beside us out there, and we could see the guys had binoculars, watching us, so we worked hard. The next day our wrists were swollen out to here, black and blue, but we got up and we fished."

Then J.J. chimed in, "Dave gets us up, and I look at my arms and I'm thinking, 'you expect us to work today?' We weren't expecting that. I figured cause we're just two days out of Hawaii we'll just catch a few on the way...you know, kind of work our way into it. Then there were 400 fish all at once, and we're saying, 'Hol-y-y-y'... We were just going hard as we could, pulling them in, pulling them in. I don't

even know how we did it. They were huge, but we're working like one, hauling them into the boat!"

Chelsea proudly summed it up: "Our biggest day out there was 587 fish. An 80-foot boat might pull 800 fish, and they may have a 6-man crew. There's only three of us here, and we've had to stop and not pull any more in because we didn't have any more freezer room, and you can't really stack soft fish, it just doesn't work."

Is it all fun and excitement out there? Well, not really, according to the crew. Kirsten remembered the traveling that must be endured. "If you're doing stuff it's not bad, but like for a month we were just straight traveling, and that was not a very good time. You're sleeping here, and sleeping there. You try to sleep as much as possible so you don't get bored."

"It also depends on who you are out there with. Like, we all got along," said Chelsea. "Nobody ever fought. You have to be a certain type of person to be out there because, I mean, how many crewmen did you go through before you hired us," Chelsea inquired, looking over at her father.

"The biggest problem with the offshore albacore fleet is crew," declared Howich. "I've been lucky. I've not had anyone actually quit, but you have to be very selective on who you take. When we left Honolulu last year, Chelsea was the only one on board experienced with a boat. These other girls had never been out. Ever. So we were kind of winging it. But not one of them even got seasick and they all worked out really well. Kirsten never got off the boat for the whole season. J.J. and Chelsea only took one trip off."

"Yeah, you get a bit weird, that's all there is to it," laughed Kirsten.

Howich continued, "It all sounds very romantic, but once you've spent 30 days on the boat to get to somewhere, like Tahiti for instance, you're going to want to spend a few days off the boat. A problem is finding some-



Chelsea and Dad, Dave Howich

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JJ and Kirsten with Friends

one, especially a young person in this country, that doesn't have a criminal record. Drunk driving or anything to do with drugs and they're confined to the boat when you get into these places. That's it. They're not allowed off. Our young people are not used to that kind of confinement.

"There are instances of guys coming into the United States ports and saying they're fine, no criminal charges against them. Then, the authorities come to the boat later,

declaring, 'You've got a hand on board that has a criminal record. This boat leaves the harbour. You've got one hour.' You're done. Everyone on board suffers."

Tequila is at sea now, far out in the North Pacific chasing the elusive albacore. But she doesn't have her all-girl crew from last year. JJ is staying home to work with a veterinarian, but it was easy to see that her heart would be out there somewhere, chasing tuna with Chelsea, Kirsten and Skipper Dave.

Reminiscing over her attraction to the blue-water fishery, Chelsea put it all in perspective. "You're totally at peace out there. All you have to worry about is doing your job. And if you're with people you love there is nothing better because nothing can bother you out there. You're almost in a different world. That's like it is for me. Of course, I love to come home and have the luxuries of being on land and everything, but honestly...I couldn't ask for a better opportunity than this."

It's hard to argue with her, isn't it?



JJ sets jigs in a heavy sea

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