

# Just Punch it!

By Brett Craik

It had certainly been a while since the lads and I had ventured to the magnificent coral reefs north of Brisbane. With the advent of winter and all that entails, being less productive Brisbane waters but generally more reliable weather patterns. This coincided with the arrival of some keen spearo buddies prompting us to organise another trip to the phenomenal Great Barrier Reef. Unfortunately the weather gods were in a bad mood as it packed itself in for us the entire trip, but since we had blokes arriving from all over it had to be done, we had to just punch it!

We awoke on the first morning with the sun still fast asleep while the dreadful sound of rustling foliage could be heard, yep it was windy alright. That sound in the trees managed to dull the mood somewhat as we all knew we were in for some pain this morning, some of us more than others as it would pan out. Breakfast seemed to take much longer than usual as everyone almost hoped in vain the wind would abate.



After allowing the sun to rise we then launched the boat and rounded the corner at the headland to face a swell rolling in and an ominous looking squall up ahead. The trip would cover about 60 kilometres and it was looking like it was going to take around 2 ½ hours based on the sloppy nature of the ocean. After failing to gain enough sleep that night and the night before I knew it was almost inevitable I would fall sick and sure enough only 20 minutes in to the ride it hit me hard, the next two hours of my life felt like two years as I was hurling up things I did not even remember eating, from there I moved to the yellow and quite disgusting bile, not a pleasant taste on the pallet. We passed through squall after squall, the heavy boat with seven blokes on boat was still being thrown airborne the waves were that sharp. At one stage the sea almost turned sideways sending the boat lurching madly to one side, everybody ending up in one pile. It was a miracle nobody fell out, although Doug did have his foot cut up pretty bad which was going to plague him later in the day as the fin pockets are not very forgiving. Finally as I was lying in my early grave down the back of



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the boat wishing I was dead, I could here the motor rev down as we approached the reef and sanctity from the relentless slop. I rested while the other got ready my condition rapidly improving seasickness is funny like that it comes and goes so fast, and when it does go away you almost experience a euphoric and delirious state of mind.

Immediately we were met with 30 metres vis, that is fairly standard around these parts but it was a little dark and colourless as the sky was heavily overcast which is not standard for around these parts. Still no matter what shade it is, a trout is a trout and a mackerel is a mackerel, they can and will still take steel.

There was a fair amount of current as we began to work a drop-off loaded with fish, the lack of sun was making filming a little difficult for me as the colours were getting washed out especially over the distances we could see, I did still pick up some nice footage of manta rays and a school of Mangrove Jacks and red bass, meanwhile the boys pinged a few trout down at 20 metres, sadly I was not well enough to dive the 20 to stay with them. After riding along with the manta's for



a while Dan and I came across some thick bait activity right on a point where the current was the strongest, drifting with the frenzied bait we knew mackerel would turn up it was only a matter of time. The first two approached Dan reacted and dropped down on them I could see they were not really large maybe 10 kilos but then as Dan dropped below 10 metres a second school of 5 or so with one fish closer to 20 kilos moved in behind the other two. Dan shaped to go towards the second school when the largest of the five mackerel decided to back away; I guess that is why he is bigger than the rest. Dan wasn't going to return to the surface without a fish on so he plugged one of the others and let it run, the fight did not take long. As fate would have it just as Dan was busy handling the fish in came another school of 6 – 8 mackerel all over 20 kgs, they were in such good condition that from behind they looked like barrels, half a dozen barrels around and no loaded gun, arrrhhhh! It frustrating being a camera man sometimes. The drift continued beyond the point where we came across some deepish bommies that were just covered in red bass, some of these fish were pushing around the 10kg mark. There were some Mangrove Jacks mingling amongst them which is quite common, with red bass being a no take fish finding the jacks is what it's all about. Dan tried in vain to put himself in a position for a shot with the jacks amongst the school of red bass but they kept their distance. Several dives later a mackerel appeared and Dan began pursuing that fish to no avail as it moved beyond the range of the small reef gun, but as is often the case on the reef just when all seems lost a plan B appears right in front of you. Suddenly Dan was encircled by an entire school of mangrove jacks coming in close enough for an easy shot unlike before, it's a fickle game at times. With the boys picking up a few more trout the weather began to close in once more so we decided to head home a little early, the trip was expected to be long and wet better to get an early start. While the return leg was still a bit bumpy it did not compare to the pain of the morning trip, pretty happy about that. Upon arrival a quick clean up was organised before everyone crashed out quite early in

preparation for another hit early before sunrise in the next morning, only the committed survive in this game.

The second day presented much fairer weather although by Queensland standards it was still pretty damn crappy. Immediately we found fish they were however hanging around 20



metres which was proving to be a challenge for me as I was under the weather literally over this weekend. I had briefly traded the camera for a gun as we began to pull the fish from the reef below. The great thing about diving with those conditions is you could swim along looking down to the reef 20 metres below until you would spot a fish then you would have plenty of time to get right over top of it before slowly, and that's the key slowly, descending straight down on the target. That way I did not have to spend a hell of a lot of time on the bottom as it was not my day in the water, too bad so sad. This practice was working well although it did require swimming a lot at the surface which I despise; after all we are freedivers not snorkelers.

As time passed and the esky began to glow red with trout, we happened across a large bommie while working the 20 metre depth. This bommie was about 15 metres, by 10 metres rising 5 or so from a sandy gutter. It was the perfect setup for a multitude of life,

with good sized fish of all types hanging around especially some nice trout. The area was so productive four of the divers with guns congregated on this one bommie and began a series of vertical drops onto an unsuspecting trout congregation. With two or three fish pulled clear I watched from the surface as Doug descended on a nice trout plugging it swiftly but unfortunately he did not get the incapacitating shot he had hoped for, leaving the trout with the strength to run and make it under and into the bommie. I decided to lend a hand so I dropped down on the bommie and approached the cave where half of the gun was protruding from, as I got closer I could see the shaft but I noticed something very strange, the shaft was moving towards me. I couldn't think why that would be as the fish then appeared and continued to move as best it could towards me. The whole situation was a little weird but I had to capitalise on it, just as I extended my hand to grasp for the end of the shaft the reason the trout was swimming into my grasp became abundantly clear as a massive mouth engulfed the entire fish and with two or three wild shakes tore it free from the spear before the huge grouper disappeared back into the cave. I returned to the surface with Doug's empty spear and to questions of what happened?

It's funny how things slip your mind when there is so much happening as several minutes later I found myself down there once more looking for some prey, completely forgetting what had just happened. I found yet another nice sized trout and swimming clear of the bommie, I plugged it and held it briefly to keep it clear of the structure when out came flying the massive grouper again he lunged forward taking the fish in his mouth determined not to lose this one I yanked hard and somehow wrenched it free from its grip. They give up pretty easily as once I had yanked the coral trout free from the huge mouth it hurried back into the bommie, leaving me shooting for the surface in search of air. That trout was pretty much scaled after that experience. The boys and I continued to work this

productive location for a further 20 minutes or so still continuing to pull fish, it was amazing and one that would be locked away in the GPS for sure.

Eventually the activity on and around the bommie decreased and one by one the divers moved away, I ended up following Pierre-Jean with the camera as we moved into some shallow patchy reef area where we came across several school of very large squid. Unfortunately PJ was only diving with a 1.1 metre gun and he found it hard to approach the squid they would always move just out of range as he made a horizontal approach. It is generally much easier to swim above squid and bomb dive them as a lateral approach tends to scare them off, the problem with that was we were in very shallow water and getting above them did not seem possible. With the Squid moving away PJ turned his attentions to a trout that had been hanging around watching the whole time. PJ lined up on the fish and let fire it was then I realised that the gun he was using was severely underpowered as the spear over a short distance failed to punch through the fish. Remarkably the shot was superb as the spear tip had entered the brain and that's not a particularly large target on a 3kg fish not bad for a hopelessly uncoordinated Frenchman. With the flopper not engaged PJ precariously pulled up the rig so as to not jolt the spear free from the fish and possibly reconnect a synapse or two which can happen. He grasped the fish and let out a shout of joy followed by a slightly evil laugh that he normally reserves for his dealings with women, I think he enjoyed that one.



Doug and I then moved away together and started drifting along a nice drop-off where I began to burley a shark mackerel he had just shot. This was not easy as I was holding the camera in one hand and trying to cut up the fish in the other all this was done while the whole time I had three or four sharks coming within 2 or 3 metres of me, but it was loads of fun. Fins would appear through the mist of blood and fish bits, it was awesome I love that sort of diving, not to mention what happened further below. At first it was mostly shark action that we attracted but we waited through that then in came a mackerel, Doug shooting that one and reeling it in fairly quickly, best not to leave them hanging around in this situation it was then placed in the boat. Next up a trout on the reef which was about 18 metres below us, that was quickly despatched before a second mackerel appeared from nowhere on the burley Doug managing to stone that one. With the burley continuing to filter down to the reef attracting a large amount of smaller activity, I expected we would see some jobfish especially as the terrain began to change to more of a sandy bottom with patches of coral rubble, the perfect environment for jobfish. Sure enough almost on cue two appeared, Doug wasted no time beginning to fall down through the thick burley he approached the usually wary species confident of victory. The Jobfish was so engrossed in getting a feed it did not react to the threat and Doug was able to get within a metre from spear tip, placing a shot right through the jaw of the fish. The subsequent fight not surprisingly attracted the attentions of the sharks as they made darting runs in towards the jobbie but I was able to fall down after Doug surfaced to guard the fish, usually that's all you need to do just stay with it. As time



progressed the action in the water attracted the attentions of a small tiger shark around 2 ½ metres that came in close to a fish but did not take it, the tiger was just more or less curious to see what all the fuss was. Once the curiosity had been satisfied the tiger slowly ambled away thankfully, it was good to see one again as I had not seen a tiger for a couple of years. The drift then carried us over a much shallower and predictably less productive section of reef, prompting us to pull the pin and head in but not before checking out one last spot.

Jumping in on a wreck lying in 30 metres was a bit daunting but fishy. We were immediately surrounded by thousands of trevelly, barracuda and rainbow runners, they were so thick it was difficult to pick out the desirable species. After about 20 minutes we had noticed there were a few cobia down a little deeper mingling around with the trevelly as they do. Greg was able to get close enough to spear one while doug and I looked for other prey. It was great to watch other divers as they descended they would be swallowed up by the encircling fish, then upon surfacing a twister of fish forms around the diver, looks really great. Doug picked up a rainbow runner and some type of Nannygai, while Greg decided to chase a coral trout on the wreck the top being some 27 metres down. Greg hit the surface a little worse for wear, I think sometimes he forgets just how old he is no matter how much the guys in the boat remind him.

The wreck was in exposed waters so we were getting the crap belted out of us, knowing we had a long trip back to brizzi to deal with we decided to get a head start and it a day. So all in all weather was not that crash hot, but we still did alright, got a feed and some footage to boot but above all we had a great time its hard not to.

