

Bounce-Ball for Halibut and Slow-Troll for White Seabass

By: Capt. David Bacon

The dangdest thing happened while bounce-balling for halibut... I hooked up with a white seabass! That prompted me to experiment with the bounce-ball technique and to my happy surprise, it did not turn out to be a lone incident. That was many years back and now I, along with other halibuteers are bending the rules on bounce-balling – just a bit – to hook up with WSB.

The primary differences are: Where to bounce-ball... work closer to kelp edges because that's where WSB cruise and peruse for baitfish and daytime resting spots. Lift the weight up off the bottom a foot or two. This is funny because I'm always harping on people to hold the rod and lower it frequently to bounce the bottom. I hate to see people use rod holders. But when it comes to using the same rig for WSB, putting it in the rod holder works. Otherwise, the rigs are pretty much the same and hoochies entice strikes from WSB as well as they do from halibut.

I'll provide some tried & true rigging tips and fishing technique notes to improve your catch of both species. Then we'll go over some notes from Rick Ferguson of Best of Big Game, who has pioneered some variations which are proving effective for halibut. Remember, most of these notes about halibut will also apply to slow-trolling for WSB, just work outside the edges of kelp spots.

How to rig up: While not the only rigging method, most (but not all) bounce-ballers begin with a three-way swivel. The main line from the rod is tied to one of the three rings on the swivel. I recommend 60 to 80 pound white Spectra braided line. From a second ring, run a 24 inch light leader (I use 12 pound mono) to a heavy weight (from 1 to 3 pounds, depending upon the speed of the current and the speed of the boat). From the third ring, run a 3 to 4 foot heavy leader to a dodger or flasher blade. From the dodger or flasher, run a 12 to 24 inch medium weight leader (I like 30-40 lb Seaguar fluorocarbon) to a hoochy and grub (I use 6" Gulp! grubs inside the hoochy) or perhaps a rat trap rig with a live or dead bait (sardine, anchovy, whole squid, mackerel, etc.). The length of each of these leaders is a matter of

personal preference. I noted my own preferences, however I'll change up leader lengths and offerings at will, in order to draw a strike. The rig terminates with single or treble hooks and my own favorite is a sturdy Owner Aki Twist hook.

Pick your hotspot: Fish places where a halibut's opportunities outweigh its risks. Let's look at this issue from a halibut's perspective. Opportunities include plenty of food, water clarity sufficient to spot and chase food, and water temperature comfortable enough to induce active metabolism. The main risk to minimize is the customary risk in the food chain... that of being eaten. If an area looks great, but there are a dozen sea lions or harbor seals actively hunting in the vicinity, then look elsewhere because a big halibut doesn't get big by making itself an obvious target for foraging pinnipeds.

Halibut are consummate masters of ambush. They lay half buried in the sand and wait for forage fish to swim close enough to allow a halibut to blast up off the ocean floor and capture prey with dagger-like sharp teeth. Halibut often lie in the sand adjacent to a break zone such as a pipeline covered with rocks, a rocky ledge, or a current break. Those are great ambush spots where they can wait for small fish to swim just far enough away from the safety of the structure to be an easy catch. When fishing these spots, troll alongside and around the structure.

Whether targeting WSB or halibut, another prime area is anywhere huge concentrations of baitballs are milling about. It is common at this time of year to find tonnage of baitfish in relatively shallow water. That's right where a hungry fish wants to be and will readily chase huge baitballs. Most predators out there are searching for concentrations of baitfish. By doing the same thing, we are sure to find the WSB and halibut we want to catch.

Pick your time: Upward changes in water temps really put halibut and WSB in the mood to eat. Any jump of three degrees or better will do the job nicely. At this time of year there is plenty of room for a series of positive temperature adjustments which will drive good bites throughout the coming months. The presence of great concentrations of their favorite forage foods is another strong enticement for our favorite quarries. Kinda like most biological species, including us humans... give us comfortable place and an appetizing smorgasbord, and we're likely to tie on the feed bag in a serious way!

Slow troll at just the right speed: Move the boat along, under power and in gear, at a speed through water sufficient to give the dodger or flasher some action. That will usually be 1.5 to 2.5 knots, depending upon current direction and speed relative to trolling direction. When trolling with the current, a faster speed is necessary to impart action to the flasher blade, compared to trolling against the current, because it is the speed through water that affects the action of the flasher, not speed over ground. Bounce the weight on the bottom every twenty seconds or so, by lowering the tip of the rod. Nearby halibut can feel the bump and see the cloud of sand or mud kicked up by the bouncing weight. That gets their attention and tempts them to take the bait.

Fish with finesse: I like to see people work hard at bounce-balling, so it is a fair statement that I'm not a fan of rod holders for halibut. It is another matter however when lifting the rig a bit off the bottom and slow-trolling for WSB. The distinction to remember is that bouncing the bottom gets the attention of halibut because they are lying in contact with the bottom and they can feel nearby bumps. But when slow-trolling for WSB, bumping the bottom is not necessary because the fish are up off the bottom in the water column.

When bounce-balling for halibut, keep the rod in your hands and your focus on the line and rod tip. The angle of the line should not be much greater than 45 degrees. If it is, add more weight or slow the boat. As noted above, lower the rod every 20 seconds or so to bump the bottom with the weight, then lift it back up about two feet. Repeat as necessary until a strike occurs or the line loads up with weeds or worse. These days, a substantial percentage of halibut derbies are won by fisherfolk employing the bounce-ball technique. It is that effective.

When slow-trolling for WSB, don't worry about bouncing the weight on the bottom. Instead, just slow-troll at the same speed (enough to give the dodger blade some action) with the weight a couple of feet up off the bottom. Should your fishfinder show you a school of WSB higher up in the water column, bring up your trolling rig to the depth the fish are traveling.

Another valuable perspective: Rick Ferguson has his own ideas on bounce-balling for halibut. Ideas bred from years of experimentation. He has perfected his own bounce-balling rigs. Hook, Line & Sinker carries various bounce-balling rigs, set up and ready to go.

Rather than a 3-way swivel, Rick hangs his weight from a sliding sinker assembly (sliding on his main line) by Danielson so a halibut doesn't feel the weight quite as soon. Rick first modifies this device by replacing the brass snap with an easy-to-use cross-lock snap. Then he ties his main line to a number 5 ball bearing swivel and from there he runs 40 inches of 100 lb mono leader to a dodger blade (silver prism with UV stripe, made by Luhr Jensen or Silver Horde). His terminal leader is just 14 inches and Rick explains that the short leader forces some of the action from the dodger to the lure, which draws strikes. For a lure, Rick uses a 6" hoochy. He slides his leader line through it and through a gumpucky (a bullet-shaped piece of rubber that slides on the line) by Silver Horde to expand the hoochy head. He ties on a red 2/0 octopus hook by Daiichi and pins on a white 5" curly-tail grub. When he runs a rat trap rig he also adds a 1/0 Daiichi treble behind the octopus hook. Once fully rigged, Rick's methods mirror my own.