

# Slow Pitch Jigging Basics

## Lesson Brief for Trip

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### Concepts

Slow Pitch Jigging is like a cat playing with a string. Your jig is a dying baitfish, think of the goldfish in your tank floating around. It's an easy meal, like someone offering you a slice of pizza while you are watching TV. SPJ creates a reaction strike. Keep it moving. Keep it vertical. SPJ is not like any other fishing you may have done in the past. SPJ is unique in many ways, there are many details, and we will go over it all during class. We focus on SPJ and not speed or vertical jigging. The main difference is a fleeing baitfish versus a dying baitfish.

### Knots

Only a small line to line knot works because of the size of the guides on the rod. The old go to knot, a double UNI won't work, it's too fat. The Alberto and FG knots catch on the guides and eventually will come lose. The PR knot is perfect for SPJ. This is the only knot you should be using. Once you get it, you won't tie anything else. It works and doesn't break. With that said it's very difficult to tie and takes lots of practice. You will need a bobbin and the line has to have tension on both sides, so you need four hands. There are a few shortcuts that make it easier, but it will take time and practice to master.

### Jigs

Weight matters, and so does shape. In my opinion, color, not so much, but glow is good. I choose my jigs based on the current and depth, not necessarily the fish I am targeting. Almost all fish go for all jigs. When you pull a 8" vermilion snapper up on a 12" 340 gram Stryke you will see what I mean. The presentation is key, keeping it moving and vertical. I want to get my jig to the bottom as fast as I can while staying as vertical as possible. A big fat jig that floats longer might look tasty to a fish, but if you can't get it in front of the target, or it's scoped out, what good is it. When choosing jigs, it's important to know where you will be fishing. In south Florida we have deep water and strong currents. Even when the surface current isn't moving all that fast, there are undercurrents that may be moving at entirely different speeds and directions. Local knowledge is key to selecting a jig.

### Rod selection

Light weight, about 6' and sized to handle the jigs you will be fishing. Spiral wrapped guides are important to keep from getting tip wrapped. Most rods are rated PE 1-6. This is an example from one manufacturer.

|      |             |      |              |
|------|-------------|------|--------------|
| PE 1 | 30G – 100G  | PE 4 | 160G – 430G  |
| PE 2 | 80G – 220G  | PE 5 | 400G – 700G  |
| PE 3 | 120G – 320G | PE 6 | 400G – 1000G |

I generally fish with a PE 3 or 4. On the low end my jigs are 200 grams and on the high end 400 grams. I have my electric on a PE 6 and I typically use 800 gram jigs.

## **Reels**

Shimano Ocea Jiggers and Accurate BV SPJ Ns are two of the leaders in the field. According to the spec the Accurate is more powerful and lighter, but those numbers may not be as important as how the reels fit in your hand. Most of the time I am using 20-pound braid or less, so is 30 pounds of drag needed? The narrow spool is necessary for controlled dropping and level winding. When fighting a big fish balance is everything. 4000 vs 2000 vs 1500, 300 and 500 BV vs BV2. Compare line capacity and how deep are you fishing. Single or 2 speed reels, star or lever drag. These are all important questions. The only way to know is to try them out. Think about weight and comfort, how does it fit into your hand. The 4000 is much bigger and heavier, that doesn't necessarily mean you need it for bigger fish but possibly for deeper fish.

## **Hooks**

The hook size needs to be appropriate for the jig you are using and the fish you are targeting. I like a bigger hook when fishing for pelagic fish. The reason is that they do not always swallow the jig. Much of the time they try to cut the jig in half and the hookup is not as clean. In my opinion the 4 bigger hooks give you some extra opportunities for these kinds of strikes.

## **Braid**

Depth and not the size or weight of the fish should determine braid strength. It's not uncommon to see sailfish tournaments where anglers are using 12-pound braid on 100-pound fish. Being able to cut vertically through the water is one of the most important parts of slow pitch jigging. Metered colors are great as your skill level increases and you can count the colors and easily target fish at all depths not just the bottom. I like the lighter blue color. It allows me to see what the braid is doing on the surface, which in turn keeps me from tip-wrapping and helps me see the strike. The most common strength braid being used now is 20-pound. It cuts through water very well at depths close to 900'. If you are consistently jigging that deep you may want to look at lighter braid.

## **Leader**

The rule of thumb is length as long as the fish plus an extra couple of feet. The main reason is to keep the fish off the braid. I use 20' of leader because I am looking for really big fish, LOL. Because I am working with people on the boat, I have found it's faster and easier for me to cut the leader and retie the jig that already has the 4 hooks and swivel setup. Many people will rig a swivel, hookset and split ring to the leader and just connect the jig to the split ring and add the second hookset on the bottom. This method would be better for jig storage and saves on leader. I like 50-pound pink fluorocarbon. Pink mainly so I don't mistake it for mono. The 50-pound fluorocarbon is your protection. I know people that use small amounts of wire. I can't personally say it doesn't work, but I will stick to what I know. You could drop to a 40-pound leader but be careful, fish have teeth.

## **Summary**

Jigs, hooks, rods, reels, braid, leader selection will vary depending on where you fish and what you are targeting. Current, depth, bottom structure will all play a significant role. My recommendation is to buy the best reel you can afford and a decent quality rod. Purchase a couple of jigs and try out your local waters. Once you have a better feel for your local conditions, then start loading up on jigs.

## **Stance**

The first thing you will need to learn how to do is stand on the boat without holding on. Sounds easy right? It's not always and you will need your hands for other things. Hand position during jigging, dropping and fighting is precise. It takes time to master this but when you get it you will be able to jig longer and manage bigger fish. There are two positions for the rod. The butt under the forearm for jigging and dropping. The butt under the armpit for fighting and retrieving. Your right hand should be on the handle, it helps balance out the reel and the extra second it takes to grab the handle to react to a hit will cost you fish. It takes time to master the stance but keep at it and you will notice the difference every time you jig.

## **Jigging**

There are many different variations or movements of the rod. These movements are always meant to make the jig flutter and are similar but timed differently. Remember the rod is not meant to fight the fish, but to make the jig move. If you think about the tea bag in the cup you are right on the money. Lift and let it settle on its own. Some people do multiple small movements while others do one long stroke, and others mix it up. Rod position is key, the rod balances under your forearm with your hand around the reel and your index finger on the trigger, your thumb over the spool. Your other hand on the handle for balance and fast response to the hit. When correctly done the weight of the rod, reel and jig are distributed evenly and the pressure is on your forearm. There should be little body, neck, and shoulder movement. It takes practice to master the position but once you get it you can comfortably jig for hours.

## **Dropping**

You will need to learn to control the speed of the drop so the jig does not turn and flutter during the drop. Turning of the jig during the drop creates excess scope. The trick is feeling the braid by slight thumb contact on the spool. Also, maintaining that slight contact will stop you from getting a bird's nest. On the occasional hit during the drop, you will feel the change and be able to react and set the hook. The hand position is the same as the jigging hand position. I almost always start at the bottom unless I see something on sonar. Getting down to the bottom fast helps eliminate scope. Lock it up the moment you feel the bottom, press your thumb down on the spool to avoid the bird's nest and flip the lever. Crank it up a little, jigging in the sand doesn't work and scopes you out much faster.

## **Scope**

Scope is a terrible thing. Jigging is a vertical form of fishing and the more scope (angle) you have in the line the less effective the technique. Scope is the distance the jig moves away from the boat or away from vertical while in the water. Think about a right triangle with you being the top point and the location directly below you being the bottom point and the actual location of the jig being the third point in the triangle or the amount of scope in your line. If your jig is vertical, you will get the most action, or flutter verses scoped out you get almost no action. When you are jigging with a scope it's more like trolling. There is no flutter, just a shuffle. You can feel the difference.

## **Retrieving Line (without a fish)**

The rod goes under the armpit and the left-hand slides forward. Remember to level wind. Unless I see fish on the sonar at a specific depth I am moving up to, or I am really scoped out, I don't come straight up. I use a formula like 10/10 that I will vary based on scope and depth. 10 jigs 10 turns that way you are

covering different water depth and don't waste the trip up. Try to always know your jig's location. Keeping track of the turns or the line color is tricky with everything else going on. As you get more confident it will come easier. Sometimes fish show up on the sonar and you can easily move to their position if you know your jig's location relative to the bottom and you can do some quick math. As an example, you are on the bottom vertical at 400' and a school of fish start to mark at 200'. You will need to quickly move up about 200' to hit the school. You can estimate 3' per turn of the crank and crank up 65 turns in be right there. Remember to level wind, you are not fishing with a Zebco.

## **Feeling The Bite**

This is the hardest part of SPJ. Many people fish for hours and complain of not getting hits, only to look at their brand-new jig and see it has teeth marks and is bent. The hit should be described as "I don't feel anything". That's the hit. Slow pitch jigging has a rhythm. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, lift, drop, repeat. Those 2 seconds while the jig is floating down are where many of the hits happen. The fish will come up from under and take the jig and carry it up. The only indication you may see is the braid puddling on the water and an extra second or two before you feel the jig. When something in your timing feels wrong, you should instinctively switch to the fighting position, butt under your arm pit, left hand forward and reel. Alternatively, you may get the freight train hit, where the reel just starts spooling out, but that's not the most common. It's all about feeling and subtle changes. The height of waves, jig weight, depth and current can change the feel and timing. These are all little things you will need to adjust to.

## **Setting The Hook**

Reel, Reel, Reel, Reel, did I say REEL! Don't lift the rod and try to set the hook. Remember what I said about the fish coming up from under. Imagine a fish grabbing the jig at 25 mph and moving toward you at 36 feet per second. In 2 seconds if the fish continues straight there is 70 feet of slack in the line. If he starts shaking his head or drops the jig, you lose the fish. If you lift the rod at best, you will get 6 feet of slack out. But if you reel you may be able to pull the slack and set the hook. The reels are designed to retrieve up to 4 feet per turn. That means 17 turns will take out all the slack and pull the hook into his mouth. Once you get your balance and hand positions down you can expect 10 turns in 3 seconds or close to 40 feet. This is why you must keep in position. Your reaction time and the speed you crank matters.

## **Fighting**

Think of the expression "tight lines" during the fight, speed in the sense of controlling the slack and keeping the fish tight is more important than powering or horsing the fish up. You are only using 20-pound braid. You can only put so much heat on the fish. Point the rod toward the fish. Never lift past horizontal and be prepared to reel down fast if you do come up high. The key to efficiency is keeping your hands in position and maintaining a steady balance on the gunnels. Slow and steady retrieval and don't overuse the drag. You can easily manage a 50-pound fish on 20-pound braid. If your fish decides to turn at you and create slack, then turns back, and charges off and you didn't manage the slack correctly or your drag was set too tight he can easily break the line. An important note, I have broken off fish by inadvertently putting too much thumb pressure on the spool. With bottom fish around structure the first few seconds, getting the fish off the bottom can be critical. If given the opportunity a grouper will run to the structure and cut, you off. If you can pull him 20 feet off the bottom you will have a better chance of bringing him up. Once the bottom fish is 50 feet up, most of the fight is over. A particularly important note while fighting is if the line goes slack, reel faster. Our average fishing depth is 300' and it can be much deeper. When you hook a fish and start dragging him up, he could decide the swim up. The line will

go slack, and you may think you lost the fish. Most likely if you don't respond by reeling in the slack you will lose him. Don't stop reeling until you see the fish or the jig or you are sure that all you feel is the weight of the jig on the line.

## **Gaffing**

Lots of people get overly excited and attempt to reel the jig up into the guides. Sometimes they forget how many feet a turn moves the jig, and they just keep going. Obviously, this is not good for the rod, but you will also lose fish this way. You need to slow down and if the fish is still fighting to the surface circle him as he comes closer. This continues to tire him out and gives the gaffer a chance to get into position. The fish will not fight if he is moving fast in circles in the water. Groupers, snapper and other fish with swim bladders will stop fighting at some point and start floating up. They will eventually pop onto the surface sometimes far away. Again, never pump the rod. Point at the fish and reel him in without giving him slack. Sometimes when they are floating, they will just fall off the jig. Don't forget to loosen up the drag as soon as the fish is up on the gaff.

## **Sonar**

Sonar doesn't always show the entire picture. Think of looking through a paper towel tube. You only see a small area. Sometimes right on the edges of your sonar there are fish. I almost always work around known structures and up and down the water column even if the sonar shows nothing. Watch the sonar while jigging and if you start marking fish at a different depth than you are currently working, move the jig up or down to that area. Pelagic fish are constantly moving and if you are targeting a Grouper over structure and not having any luck, jig the tuna that's 110' over the Groupers head.

## **Snags**

Sometimes you just lose jigs. When you first start out it will happen more often and as you get better you will lose less. Sharks and big toothy fish along with the bottom and wrecks are where lots of the jigs go. If you stay away from wrecks as you are learning, you will eliminate a good percentage of snags. The same goes for staying off the bottom. You can get your jig back sometimes by releasing the drag for a few seconds and reeling up fast or driving the boat in circles. Don't worry as you get more accustomed to the feeling you won't lose as many jigs. Eventually you will be able to drift through the wrecks and work around them without getting snagged. If you react quick enough to a shark or a wahoo you will bring him in instead of losing a jig. When working the bottom, you will learn to stay a foot off without dragging across the rocks or sand, which is a sure way to lose a jig.

## **Alternate Setups**

Everyone asks, can I use my spinner or bait caster. You can jig with anything, and it will work to a certain extent. With spinners you can't control the drop. With bait casters there is no leverage on the fight. With a standard conventional it will be hard to level wind, and you won't have the leverage. One of the biggest advantages to the correct gear is the weight and balance. Another advantage is the power and speed. The correct setup is light, and you can feel everything which is important to knowing if you get a fish. The weight of the rod and reel will help with fatigue. If you choose the correct gear and learn how to use it, you will get much better results.

