

Down Riggers

John Adams

In the days when fishing boats were powered by sail, fishermen found that by slowly trolling a heavy weight, deep below the water surface, with a bait, lure or jig attached, they could catch different types of fish to those commonly caught close to the bottom. This fishing technique is today known as downrigger fishing.

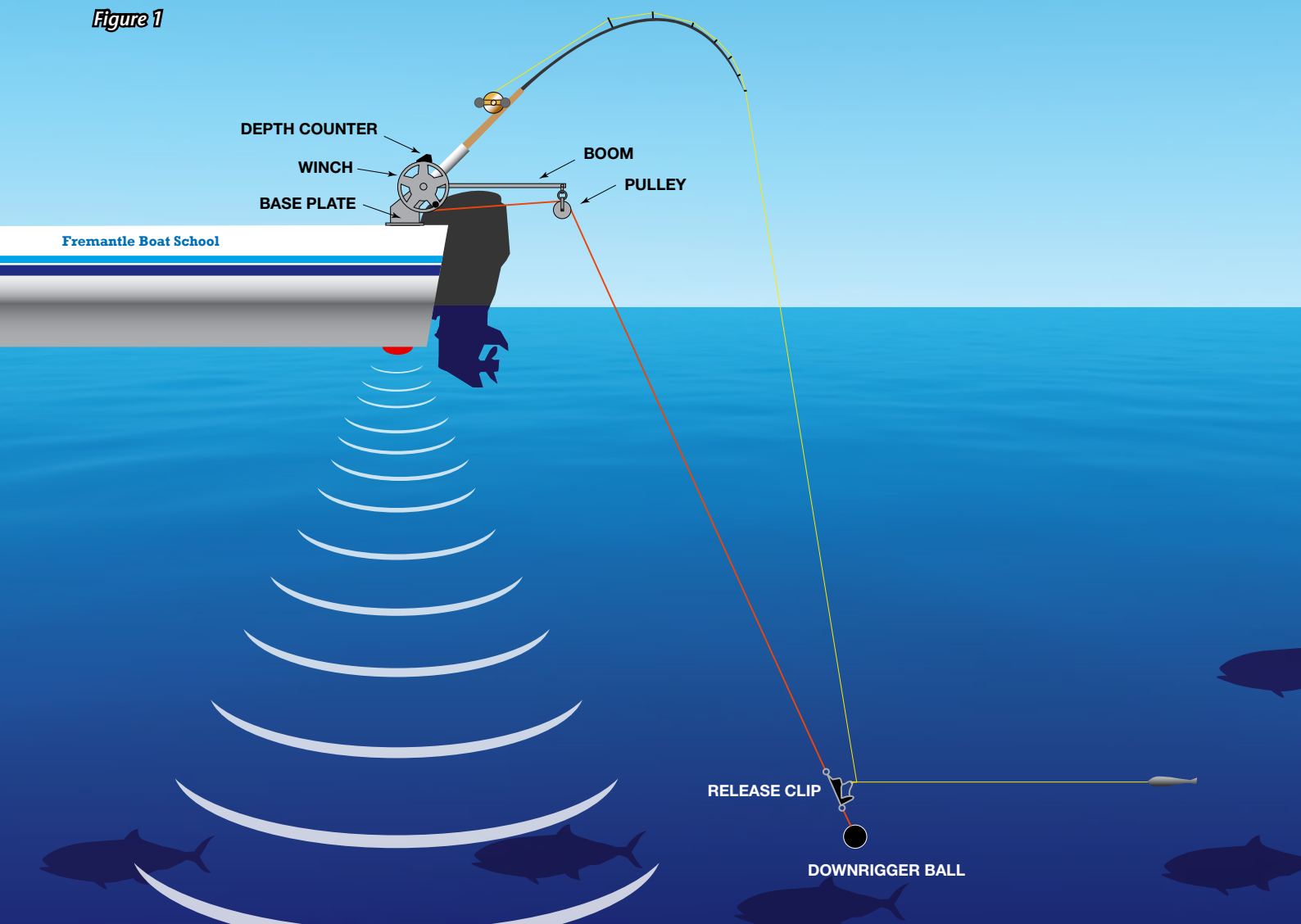
Figure 1 shows a basic diagram of a down rigger system: the main components are a base plate, winch, sort boom, pulley, release clip, down rigger ball or weight, and a depth counter. The assembly is fixed to the stern of the boat and attached to a mounting plate, which allows the assembly to be removed and stowed when not in use.

The down rigger ball weight can range between 1 to 5 kg, and can be either manually cranked with a winch handle, or driven by an electric motor. The water surface conditions when trolling a down rigging, need to be reasonably calm, because the speed at which the ball is trolled through the water is between 2-3 knots. If the boat speed is any faster the ball will rise up in the water column, which is something you don't want to happen.

The down rigger is often used to target fish that live in the pelagic zone, which is neither close to the surface nor the bottom. Fish found in this mid-water zone are often referred to as the speeders of the deep, who will frequently swim slowly, drifting in the ocean currents, searching for food, and herding up schools of small bait fish. These fish include Tuna Mackerel, and Billfish. The oil content in the body of these fish is much higher than fish that are found in the demersal zone, which is just above the bottom. Bottom dwelling fish often taste nicer, having a much lower oil content and whiter flesh.

The idea behind down rigging fishing is that the angler finds the ideal fishing depth. As the water depth increases, the water temperature decreases and the oxygen level in the water rises. These types of conditions will support higher concentrations of nutrients and marine life - ideal conditions for pelagic fish to live and feed in. Fish position themselves within a sections of the water column that suits their body temperature. This not only applies to ocean fish, but also to fish that live in rivers, lakes and dams, where fish will stay close to the bottom to find shade in the weed beds to keep their bodies cool, and because oxygen levels are higher. In these conditions, and to

Figure 1



catch bottom-dwelling fish, the down rigger should be trolled close to the bottom.

I first came across down riggers many years ago, when I visited a tackle shop in Copenhagen, which had a whole section dedicated to down rigger fishing. Traveling around Denmark I noticed recreational fishing boats, including canoes, had down riggers fitted to their boats. I did not think much more about downriggers, until I visited Florida, United States, where I noticed many boats had up to three down riggers fitted to their sterns. I was amazed at how many boats had them, and wondered whether they do actually use them or whether they are just for show. Before heading back to Australia I decided to buy a 3kg down rigger ball, which I put in my suit case, not knowing what I was going to do with it.

Later that year before heading to Ningaloo Reef for a fishing trip, I decided to put the down rigger ball to some use, and make a below water teaser out of it, which I would use when surface trolling for Mackerels. To make up the teaser, I searched through all my old tackle boxes and the garden shed, and gathered all the old silver spoon lures I could find, which totalled about 20. I joined them up on a mono line (I should have used wire) to make a long teaser which I attached to the down rigger ball. When surface trolling, I would lower the down rigger ball, with teaser attached, to a depth of 9-12

meters below the surface. It looked beautiful, with all these silver spoons flashing away in the blue of the ocean, and I thought, if it does not attract any fish it certainly looks good. The outcome was that it definitely did attract fish. Fish relentlessly attacked the teaser until there was nothing left of it. The teaser had worked like a treat, and then I decided it was time to go and buy a down rigger .

The first and only down rigger I bought was a Scotty. I still have it today and it still does the job. I first had a practice run in Cockburn Sound, off Fremantle, spending at least 3 hours getting used to using it and making a few minor adjustments. It was a worthwhile exercise, to my surprise I even caught some fish using it .

The following week, the weather was good, and Peter Goulding (who I have been fishing with most of my life) and I headed to the west end of Rottnest Island. At a water depth of 38 meters, a school of fish was detected on the sonar, approximately 5 meters above a bottom structure. The signal strength and colour intensity, which echoed back from these fish, showed a high target strength, indicating reasonable size fish targets. We decided to give the spot a go, and the down rigger ball was set at 20 meter below the surface, trolling a sardine bait at a boat speed of 3 knots. Within 30 seconds of trolling we had our first strike - a Yellow Tail Kingfish. We

“The charm of fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive but attainable, a perpetual series of occasions of hope.” Scottish author John Buchan (1875-1940)

Keeping an eye out for baitfish should always be a priority on any fishing day. Find the food, find the fish.



trolled around the same structure for about an hour and lost count of how many fish we caught and released. We were both totally surprised how well the downrigger worked, and it gave us a real confidence boost to keep using it.

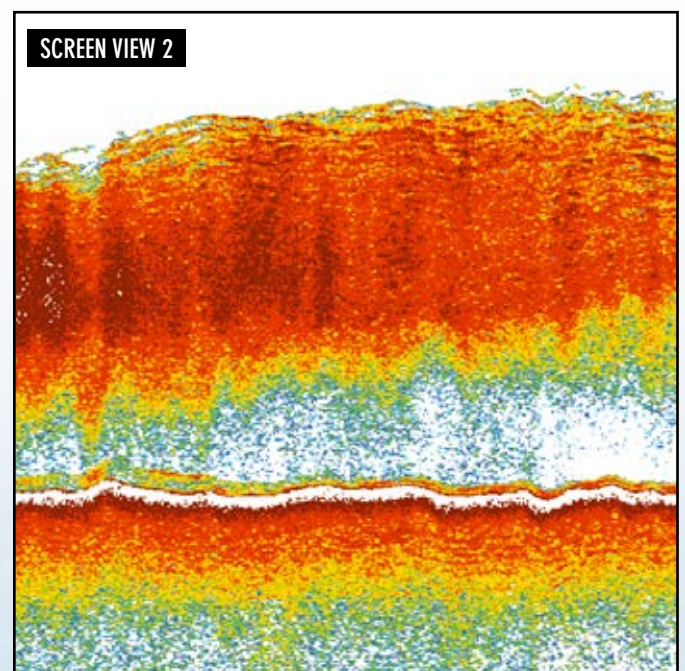
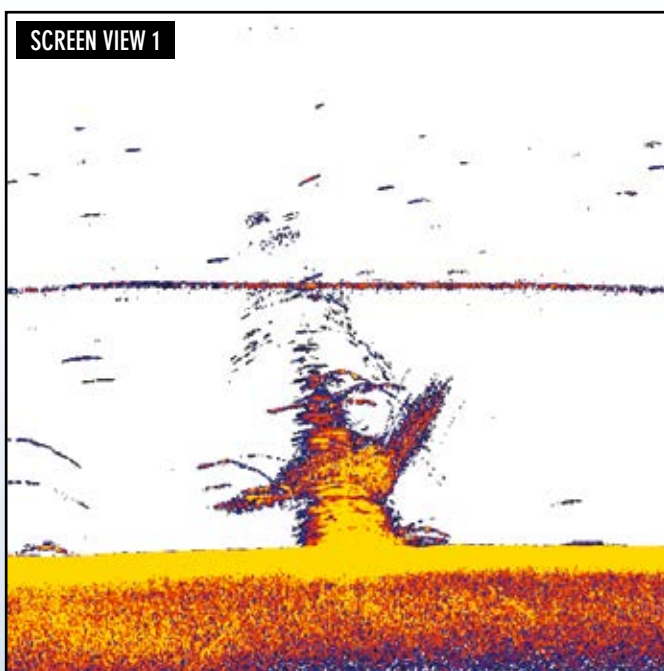
Next time the down rigger got used was at the back of Ningaloo Reef. The same thing happened, except the fish we caught this time were Spanish Mackerel, Yellowfin Tuna, Dolphin Fish and Sailfish. When the down rigger ball got dangerously close to the bottom, species such as Spangled Emperor were caught. Our normal trolling depth was between 30 -60 meters, mainly trolling mid-water. Ningaloo Reef proved to be a good testing ground. On several occasions we trolled the down rigger while with a group other boats who were surface trolling. Each time the down rigger consistently out-caught them. I was fascinated at what I had been able to catch, and was by now confident about using this technique.

Before trolling with the down rigger, a plan is needed as to where you are going to use it. So the first step is to have a look at a marine chart, and to check the depths you intend

to fish. Because I fish out of a small boat I troll between 20 and 60 meters, and I normally set the ball at between 15 and 35 meters below the water line. Anything deeper becomes hard work to crank the ball up and down manually. I would probably troll deeper if I had an electrically operated device.

A typical fishing trip for me, using the down rigger, would be to head out to a depth contour line between 30 and 60 meters, then find some fish above a bottom structure, as shown in screen view 1, and commence trolling above and around it. The continuous line seen in the middle of screen view 1 is the echo signal from the down rigger ball, positioned on the outer edges of the sonar beam. As you can see, the down rigger ball has been set at a depth to troll just above the structure. These kind of structures can be very productive.

Birds hovering, diving or feeding on a school of bait fish near the surface, as in picture 1, is another good sign to look for. In these circumstances I will troll the down rigger 15 to 30 meters out from the outer edges of the bait school. Predator fish will follow the bait fish schools, patrolling around the edges, waiting to strike any unwary fish that has moved away from





John Adams daughter Helen, with fish caught, using a sardine rig, at the edge of a bait school, using down rigger.

the safety of the school. If no birds are sighted, concentrations of bait fish located below the surface can be detected using the sounder. This will look similar to the view in screen view 2.

When trolling for pelagic fish, either on the surface or with a downrigger, I rarely will ever troll in a straight line. If a depth contour line has a north south direction, I will troll across it in an east west direction, doing lots of short turns over the edge of the contour, and keeping the ball deep in the water column. Often when coming out of the turns, strikes occur. Some of my best Yellowfin Tuna have been caught this way. If you see fish on the sounder, do a tight turn (try a figure 8), keep your eyes on the sounder the whole time and keep checking your depth. To avoid running the ball into a bottom structure, put the sounder's depth alarm on. If the ball is set at a depth of 20 meters below the surface, then set the depth alarm at 30 meters, because nothing is more annoying as when the ball hits the bottom and it breaks off. It will happen to you when you first start trolling, but after a while you will become very savvy at not losing them.

Because the trolling speed is dead slow, lures that require a high speed action will not work. I found trolling sardine plastics or silver spoons works best. I normally set the bait/lures 5 -9 meters back from the release clip - this is known as the lead. When the down rigger ball is set at the required depth, I tension up the drag on the reel, and tension the rod as in diagram 1, and wait in anticipation for a strike.

This method of fishing is not as much part of our

fishing culture as it is in many other countries. It requires the fisher to think outside the box. Persistence and patience are a prerequisite to becoming a down rigger fisherman, and only with practice will it become an extraordinary experience, and a lot of fun. It has been my experience that the down rigger fisherman will always out-fish the surface troller, because fish don't live on the surface.



Having the rod loaded up will help set the hook when the lure or bait is attacked when using the downrigger.