



# Reef DOGS

MEAN AND MENACING, SOUTHEAST FLORIDA'S TACKLE BUSTING CUBERA SNAPPER WILL ROCK YOUR WORLD!

By Orlando Muniz

Cruising south over Triumph Reef, nestled just offshore between Key Biscayne and Key Largo, I could feel the pleasant southeast breeze hitting me in the face as I admired the sun sinking behind the Ocean Reef Club. I, like many others this evening, was in search of a single target, one that's recognized around the equator for its killer instincts.

Only a short ride later, and we were already setting up for our first drift of the evening. Situated comfortably just outside of the Whistle Buoy, we proceeded to deploy a pair of baits. These were not your typical baits; they were actually something you might find on the menu at your favorite restaurant. Right about now, you may be wondering what in the world I am talking about. Please read on...

Drifting over the jagged ledges and crusty coral heads some 180-ft. below, we had our sights set on one of South Florida's most elusive bottom denizens, the mighty and revered cubera snapper. Fierce cubera look like a hybrid between an enraged bull dog and an overgrown mangrove snapper on steroids. This powerful fish pulverizes its crunchy prey with muscular jaws armed with penetrating canine fangs. From juveniles weighing in the teens to mature adults approaching the triple digit mark, cubera put up the kind of brawl you would expect from such an intimidating looking creature.

Like many of you, I began my fishing career concentrating my efforts along our distinct reef lines for the likes of yellowtail and mangrove snapper. During those early years, these popular fish provided me with more than enough of a challenge. One day though, someone told me about a little known fishery not far from shore that produced giant cubera snapper, some of which pushing the hundred pound mark. Immediately I was intrigued and knew that I would have my work cut out for me if I was to be successful. I went on to read every word I could find that was associated with these somewhat mysterious fish. My break actually came when two buddies booked a trip with a local

captain considered to be a cubera guru. Fishing with someone who was familiar both with the area and the finer points of this fishery provided a first hand account of the most productive techniques used to locate, entice, and land these prized reef dwellers.

On their first outing, they had about a dozen strikes, but only managed to land two fish. Sadly for me, I wasn't able to join them on that adventure, but after hearing their war stories of ferocious strikes and aching battles, I was even more eager to get in on the action.

## CUBERA WHAT?

Anyone who has ever come face-to-face with a big cubera knows that they look like the Man Upstairs played a cruel joke with some sort of prehistoric predator. In reality, cubera snapper are the largest member of the entire snapper clan, and although these fish range from Massachusetts to Brazil in the western Atlantic, they are primarily a tropical species and are rare north of Florida. Most of the fish landed average twenty-five to fifty pounds with an occasional bruiser tipping the scales at eighty plus. The current all tackle world record is just over one hundred twenty one pounds. That's one humongous snapper!

Hooking and landing brutally strong cubera not only requires the proper skill, determination, and tackle, but also a strong, healthy back. Unlike their smaller cousins, attempting to target cubera on light tackle will prove to be a futile effort. Unless you are fishing for the record books, I wouldn't recommend anything less than 50lb. class gear. Cubera prefer to take up residence near structure and have a fondness for jagged ledges. These fish are notorious for charging straight for their holes the moment they feel the sting of the hook. The key to landing one of these nearly unstoppable freight trains is applying the emergency brakes from the instant the fish strike. Designed by nature with exaggerated broom like tails and beefy, broad shoulders, angry cubera will pin you to the gunwale and rock you up faster than you can shout, "I'm hooked up!"



*This determined angler does his best to stop a big cubera.*

Pursuing these muscular monsters requires preparation and a little luck with the always-unpredictable Mother Nature. Every summer, I block off dates around the full moon of July and August in hopes of an opportunity to tangle with these fish. During these periods, large specimens roam from their usual haunts further offshore below hundreds of feet of water to just under two hundred feet where they temporarily take up residence in and around overhanging ledges and rugged pieces of broken bottom. It's here where they gather in anticipation of their yearly spawn. Over the years, I have experienced the greatest level of success in August, though the cubera season typically runs from July through September. August is also a favorite month because that's when the most appealing cubera bait becomes available. You see, cubera's favorite meal is off limits to anglers during July due to the closure of lobster season.

You heard me right, I said lobster season. It seems these mighty fish have the same strong liking for tasty bugs as we do. Anglers in the area have experienced some level of success with blue crabs and large live baits, but nothing invites a big cubera to come out and play as much as a live lobster.

One of the obstacles of this highly specialized fishery is getting your hands on enough prime bait to give it a go. Some anglers prefer the challenge of catching their own bait, but I find catching my own lobster makes the whole

cubera fishing process that much more difficult and physically strenuous. I would advise those considering one of these trips to contact a seafood wholesaler that stocks live spiny lobster. Experience has also proven that unless you have used the bait supplier in the past, make absolutely sure that he will have the bait when you need it.

Now, everyone knows that lobster don't come cheap, and that is especially true for live ones. Putting a gourmet delicacy that costs in the range of \$15 on a hook requires a special level of commitment that many anglers can't seem to justify. If you're fishing on a budget, don't give up on the fishery, because as I mentioned earlier, there are alternatives.

One area in South Florida that continues to prove itself for bagging these behemoths is directly off northern Key Largo. Depending on where you are launching your boat, you will probably have at least a fifteen to twenty mile run to reach the fishing grounds. When conditions are ideal, don't be surprised to see dozens of boats employing the same tactics. Check the weather carefully. Treacherous reefs along this stretch are riddled with nasty coral heads and other jagged protrusions. Many a cubera fisherman's night has ended on the rocks. Make sure you have an exit plan if the weather takes a turn for the worse. Even though seas are relatively calm during peak season, intense thunderstorms can quickly turn things chaotic. Many of these unpredictable storms pack a punch with quite a bit of lightning.

In addition to the foul weather, make certain your boat is also in top shape since cubera fishing is primarily a nighttime fishery. Yes, locally, cubera are in-fact taken incidentally during the daylight hours, but nighttime is the right time to specifically target these ferocious fighters, and they seem to snap best during the evenings leading up to the full moon.

### GEAR UP!

Besides having your boat in tip-top shape, your tackle should be equally up for the challenge. Typical cubera gear involves stand-up outfits capable of holding at least three to four hundred yards of 50lb. line. Many cubera fishermen are turning to ultra-thin braid to help keep baits down in the swift currents. With zero stretch, braid also offers the advantages of increased sensitivity and a much greater level of abrasion resistance.

Thankfully, today's anglers can take advantage of stand-up style harnesses and rod belts which are usually intended for other formidable opponents such as giant tuna and swordfish. Take it from me; you really don't want the butt of the rod digging into your gut when one of these ferocious fish makes a run for the hills.

Live lobster are usually hooked onto a twelve to twenty ounce jig, depending on the velocity of the current. Occasionally, it is necessary to add more weight in order to present the bait correctly. As a rule, use enough lead so that you are fishing straight up and down. The less slack line and freedom the fish has, the better your odds of winning that all important initial tug-of-war.

I prefer to hook the jig into the lobster from the bottom of the head up, though I know other captains who prefer to tail hook the crustaceans. Since lobsters don't come cheap, I also attach a trace of 200lb. wire from the jig head to a 3X 8/0 treble hook. The jig and treble are united via a haywire twist, creating an effective stinger rig. Finally, I prefer six feet of 200lb. fluorocarbon leader connected to a 200lb. quality ball-bearing swivel. The ball-bearing swivel helps prevent line twist from the bait spinning during the descent and retrieve. It is also imperative that you break off the lobster's antennae so that they don't spin in the current like a pair of helicopter blades. Crucial to your overall success is having at least one or two extra outfits rigged and ready in the event a fish breaks you off. Time is of the essence; sometimes the cubera bite heats up for only a few minutes and then



*Fishing a \$15 bait requires a level of commitment. (inset) Fairly stout conventional tackle is a must!*

quickly shuts down. You do not want to be re-rigging while hungry cubera are directly under the boat searching for their next meal.

### SUCCESS IS ALL ABOUT LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Now that the rods are rigged and the lobsters are kicking in the well, it is time to deploy the critters on a suicidal reconnaissance mission. We know cubera prefer to hang around ledges, wrecks, and ridges off southern Miami/Dade County and northern Monroe County. This means fishing in 170 – 200 feet of water up and down this entire stretch will put you in prime territory. Since the prevailing winds during the summer are usually out of the east or southeast, you will usually have to set up in the deeper water and drift up the edge into shallower areas.

Many times you will see multiple boats fishing a particular 'hot spot', and you can join in on the fun by drifting along the same line. Deploying a sea anchor will help slow your drift and help prevent your lines from tangling. After experimenting with multiple configurations, I have found that fishing two rods generates the best results. If you get greedy and try to fish too many baits, you'll end up reeling up something resembling a bowl of spaghetti ala' lobster.

Another key element to successful bottom fishing in these depths are quality electronics. Cubera snapper show up distinctly as inverted Vs on a color machine, and this helps the angler locate them much faster. Once you have marked the fish, you want to be able to return to the areas where you have enjoyed success. Pinpointing productive stretches requires a good GPS and plotter. Last but not least, is a VHF and antenna combination so that you can stay safe and monitor nearby activity. Fishing for cubera at night without the proper equipment will usually limit the enjoyment and greatly reduce the time spent over the most productive areas.

### PATIENCE PAYS

Proper etiquette is something I can't stress enough. Nobody knows exactly where the fish are going to be concentrated on any given night. Please don't motor up to other boats that are drifting or hooked up. Make sure you provide the other fellow plenty of breathing space so that everyone has a positive experience. Sometimes if boats are constantly racing around, the fish below tend to turn off and action becomes hard to come by. Experienced cubera crews drift quietly in the night, sipping on their favorite beverages while sharing stories of the ones that didn't get away. Patience is the one thing you can't afford to leave at home if you plan on being successful.

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*Captain George Clark, Jr. proves "Reef Dogs" can also be taken during the day.*



A positive attitude will not only keep everyone focused, but it will provide you with the energy to get through the slow periods.

Most people don't care to eat these frightening looking fish. Part of the reason is that large cubera have been associated with ciguatera poisoning which is no laughing matter. I don't personally care to eat these fish, but I have harvested a few at the request of friends who insisted on it. So far, everyone is still alive and kicking. Today, the vast majority of anglers targeting these fish consider this a catch-and-release fishery, and are releasing them unharmed to fight another day. Whatever you plan to do, make certain you review the most recent rules and regulations.

Every spring I look forward to the upcoming cubera run. Battling one of these magnificent creatures leaves you with memories that are difficult to forget. Unfortunately, they are not readily available all year, nor are cubera available in big numbers in any one locale. This may actually be nature's way of protecting the species from over-harvesting. I would advise anyone who has never tangled with one of these powerful fish to give cubera fishing a try. If an evening on the water enticing giant snapper with live lobster doesn't excite you, what does?

## **CUBERA SNAPPER REGULATIONS (JANUARY 2006)**

-Florida State regulations indicate cubera snapper not less than 12-inches or more than 30-inches are included within the ten per person per day snapper aggregate bag limit.

-Two additional cubera snapper over 30-inches are permitted per vessel per day which are not included within the snapper aggregate bag limit.



Orlando Muniz grew up in Miami and was drawn to fishing at a very young age. Today, he is a graduate of Barry University with a degree in education. He is also a licensed realtor. On his time off, Orlando enjoys spending time aboard his 25 ft. SeaVee, Nomad, of course, primarily fishing with live bait.

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