

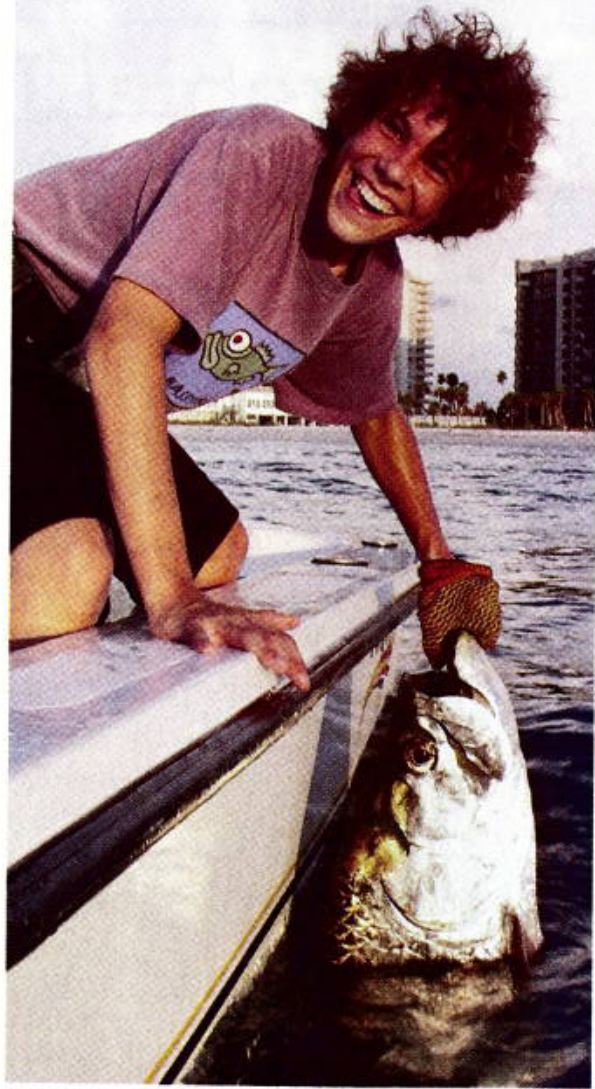
Target Tarpon

Prior to 2008, the **Suncoast Tarpon Roundup**—the state's longest running tarpon-catching contest—took a lot of heat for allowing competitors to kill tarpon for weight awards, including weekly and overall big-fish awards. But last year the Suncoast tournament switched to an all-release format. The organizers did away with the weight division and judged only by releases. This year's event, which started in May and concludes this month, promises to keep the tarpon, and the new traditions, alive and strong.

In fairness, state regulations say that licensed anglers who also purchase "kill tags" can harvest two tarpon a day. Nevertheless, live release has been the overwhelming preference—a point that all tarpon tournaments now embrace.

In Boca Grande Pass, the multi-week **Pro Tarpon Tour** offers release and weight competition, but the latter is conducted by briefly lifting captured fish in a scale sling hung from an official weigh-in boat anchored just minutes from where the majority of the fish are caught. Televising the action, says tournament director Joe Mercurio, helps publicize the conservation message.

With live release the standard for tarpon tournaments statewide, all captured 'poons will return to the sea—ideally to someday fight again. According to Kathy Guindon, fisheries biologist with the state's Fish and



Kasey O'Donnel gets a big fish by the beach at last year's Suncoast Roundup.

Wildlife Research Institute in St. Petersburg, sonic transmitters attached to tarpon through 2007 have proven that most tarpon survive catch and release. Of course, that begs the questions of recapture frequency and fish movement.

To this end, Guindon heads up the Tarpon Genetic Recapture Study, a joint research project between FWRI and Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota. DNA samples taken from captured tarpon are analyzed to determine basic details of what happens after an angler the release.

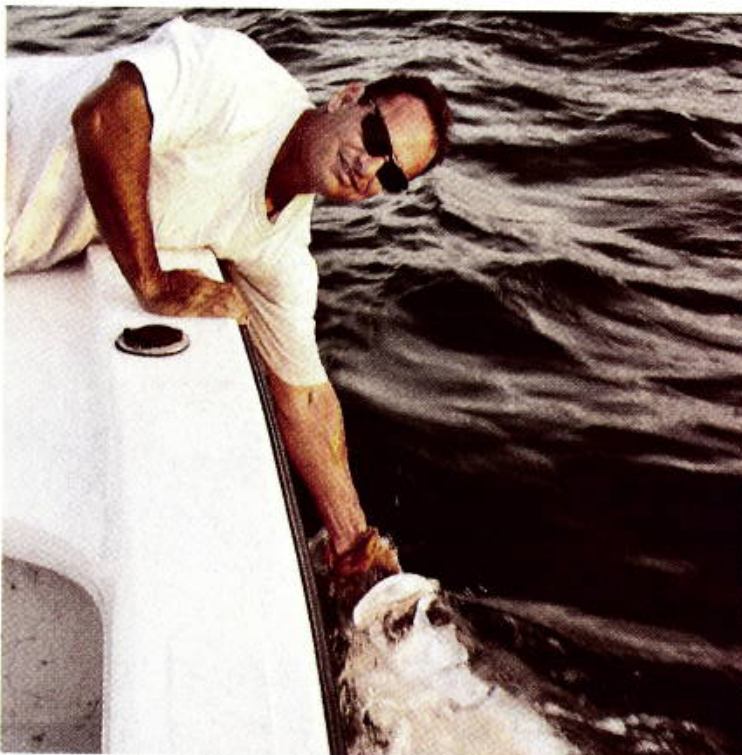
"Tarpon are hardy fish and the data shows that they do survive after being released,"

Guindon said. "The next question was: 'If most of these fish survive, How many are caught again and where?' We're now looking at this so we can see recapture rates and movement."

Last year, the Roundup required participants to take DNA scrubs as proof of release and coordinated with Guindon's crew for verification. In Fort Myers Beach, the **Silver King Classic** (leg 2 of southwest Florida's **Triple Crown Series**) offers an optional prize division for the angler who turns in the most DNA scrubs.

For running tabs and results of the Suncoast Tarpon Roundup, see www.suncoasttarpon-roundup.org.

—David A. Brown



Charlie Crisp, current President of the Suncoast Tarpon Roundup, revives a tarpon prior to release.