

Suncoast Tarpon Roundup has improved attitude

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The Tampa Bay area has always embraced tarpon fishing, but tournaments have moved from “kill” to “all-release” formats.



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In the spring of 1934, people didn't have much to smile about. Unemployment peaked at 21 percent. Massive dust storms tore through Oklahoma. Bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde shot and killed two lawmen in Texas. And over in Germany, this little fellow named Adolf Hitler was stirring up all kinds of trouble. Here in St. Petersburg, however, folks had at least one thing going for them. The fishing was good. Tarpon, the silver king of game fish, were thick and feisty.

Sure, there was a fishing village down the coast called Boca Grande that had captured the imagination of the sports writers from New York City. But the local anglers knew the waters of Tampa Bay had just as many fish as Charlotte Harbor — and none of the crowds.

In fact, the schools of these chrome-bodied brutes were so large off the downtown pier that you could probably herd the fish just like cattle. That's when somebody decided to get the whole town in on the fun and have a tarpon roundup.

The rest is history.

Tomorrow, the Tampa Bay area will again host the annual Suncoast Tarpon Roundup, billed as the world's oldest and largest tarpon tournament.

A lot has changed in 75 years. The tournament, once criticized for its "kill" format, has gone to "all release."

Last year, anglers caught and released unharmed more than 350 fish. The anglers also worked with biologists from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission on an ongoing genetic study.

These anglers, who for years endured the criticism of conservation groups and outdoor writers (this reporter included), are now models for us to follow: anglers who pursue their sport with passion while protecting it for future generations.

The roundup is a not-for-profit organization that promotes sportsmanship, research and education. The tournament has divisions for both adults and juniors, and it is the latter group that has kept this event going for more than seven decades. It is not uncommon to find two, three and even four generations of anglers in the same family who have fished in the Suncoast Tarpon Roundup.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I have signed up my children, ages 5 and 7, for this year's event, though I doubt either will actually get a chance to fish.

I hope their \$25 entry fees will help keep the event going for another year and perhaps even encourage anglers, outdoor enthusiasts, environmentalists, conservationists, and even those who love history, to keep this institution alive.

In its heyday, fishermen from across the United States came to St. Petersburg to fish for tarpon. An advertisement in the June 1936 issue of *National Sportsman* magazine urged anglers to head south: "For the thrill of a lifetime, come to Florida's Gulf Coast ... and fish for the gamest fish that swims ... fast as greased lightning."

Before Tampa Bay had professional baseball, football and hockey, the two biggest sports in town were fishing and sailing. The Suncoast Tarpon Roundup was the social event of the season. They even crowned a "Tarpon Queen," who rode a parade float down Central Avenue.

But by the early 1990s, angler attitudes had changed. "Catch and release" for nonedible sportfish became the norm, and sponsors would no longer back a tournament in which fish were killed for sport.

So last year, the roundup changed course and became all release. Organizers expected the sponsors to return. Most did not. But a few who believe in the future of the sport have come to the roundup's aid.

"I was happy to help them," said Herb Quintero, whose Complete Angler bait shop is just a block away from the Seminole Boat Ramp in Clearwater. "We practice catch-and-release, and think it is great that they made the change. We hope other people will come around and show their support."

fast facts

Suncoast Tarpon Roundup

When/where: 6 a.m. Saturday to 6 p.m. July 18. Fish must be caught in the Gulf of Mexico and inland waters adjacent to Pasco, Pinellas, Hillsborough, Manatee and Sarasota counties.

What else: There is a regular division as well as specialty divisions for juniors, women, landlubbers and more. There are weekly trophies and prizes, too. Partial proceeds will benefit the Pediatric Cancer Foundation. To become a sponsor or to get an entry form, go to www.suncoasttarponroundup.org. For information, call Charlie Crisp at (727) 244-9095.