

## Tarpon Tools – Onshore Offshore June 2009

By Jackie Otto

Many times we write about how, where and when to catch our Tampa bay fish and forget the most important part of being successful at our task at hand. The right equipment and specialty tools make this task easier and less stressful, inclusive of and more importantly, safer. So I'm not going to write an article about how to catch tarpon, rather to list the tools from my experiences that I have on y boat when tarpon season arrives. Just last week the boat go pulled out of the garage and I specifically took out anything that was unnecessary, e.g. trout lures, leaders, tackle cases for flats fishing, landing nets, small anchor and anything I wouldn't need to catch a tarpon with. The best thing to have is uncluttered space when fighting tarpon. There is a lot of fast footwork when a tarpon hits, then things slow down to a fish/human tug-of-war and not much running around is done, just that back-aching pulling.

Let me start with rod and reel requirements. I won't delve too much into it or brand names, as many of you have your favorites and know what to use for the type of fishing you do. Tarpon require heavy tackle which will allow you to not wear him down until he is close to death or too tired to get away from the sharks. The faster you catch a tarpon the better chance he or she has of survival. Rods, whether they are spinning or conventional, should be able to handle- 30 to 60 pound test lines. Spinning, I use 50 to 60 pound braid and on my conventional I use 40 pound mono. I use my conventional when I'm bridge fishing and when I'm "deep-hole" fishing as in Egmont Key or Boca Grande Pass. I prefer mono as it has stretch which helps when tarpon are airborne. I use the braid on my spinner as you need 200 to 250 yards of line to fight a tarpon properly and braid is a thinner diameter so I can get more line on a spinner than monofilament. Reels should be comparable to the rod and the line you are going to use, spinning usually in the 6000 and larger size, or conventional (choose one that is light in weight) that holds 30 to 60 pound test and 250 yards of mono.

Tackle should consist of good quality hooks, meaning sharp and strong. Don't forget that your average Tampa Bay tarpon is 80 to 100 pounds. Early in the season they are much larger and you may luck into a 200 plus female and then you're in for a fight. A strong hook that won't pull out or straighten is a must for success. I prefer and use a 5/0 wide gap circle hook. Daichi, Owner and Gamakatsu are the best made and sharpest. Circle hooks 99 percent of the time hook the fish in the mouth, never gut hooked, which helps in the survival of this great sport fish. On my hooks I use a small green bead, sometimes a piece of rubber band, slid onto the hook before I hook my live bait. This will help the bait from re-hooking itself and dying faster than you want it to.

Leaders are a personal preference when it comes to fluorocarbons or monofilaments. Me, I will only use fluorocarbons. The fluorocarbon is invisible and I will take that over any other leader when doing all types of fishing. I will use from 60 to 80 pound test but this depends on what the conditions are. I truly go as small as I can for more bites. To actually get one to the boat I am usually using 60 to 80 pound test 100% fluorocarbon leader. I tie a uni-to-uni knot on my conventional rigs as I am tying mono to fluoro. I tie an 80 pound Spro swivel onto my spinning gear as I am tying braid to fluoro. That's just me. I'm not telling you this is what you should do. Bait is easy to get when tarpon season arrives and is everywhere. You have to decide if you are going to sabiki it or throw a cast net on it. The way I like to catch my bait is with a sabiki, (#8

with green head). I prefer a sabiki 'd bait over a cast-netted bait any day. The bait stays alive longer and is a stronger swimmer. Cast netting sometimes removes scales from the bait and they don't survive as long. If you choose to sabiki, purchase enough to make it worth your while. There are plenty of mackerel out there that are going to attack your sabiki and then you're left with nothing to catch bait, or a tangle from hell that will take you hours to un-do while everyone else is baited up and catching fish. If you choose to use a cast net, get the right size to be successful, at least an 8 to 10 footer,  $3/8$ th to  $1/2$  inch mesh will do the trick. There is one other type of bait that tarpon love and that's the pass crab that flushes out of the bay on full and new moon tides. These little half-dollar sized crabs require a long handled crab net with small mesh and a bucket of water to keep them alive. Threadfins, scaled sardines and pin fish need a good operating re-circulating bait well to stay frisky and alive.

One of the most important pieces of boat equipment specifically used for bridge or beach fishing tarpon is an anchor ball. I use an actual anchor ball but most use anything that is going to float your anchor rope once you have hooked a tarpon. You have to follow it quick before he spools your reel. To do this, you don't have time to pick your anchor up from 30 feet of water. You should have your excess rope attached to a float (one big enough to do this) so you can just throw everything overboard and come back to your float and re-anchor for another fish. This also lets other fisherman (some) know that you are and were at anchor in that spot. I also use a Velcro strap to wrap up my excess rope so that when I toss it all out, it's all in one spot, not stretched out away from where I was at anchor. You will also need a glove to handle and revive the fish once boat side, and a good pair of pliers to remove the hook. Most importantly, you should have a good camera to capture and relive the catch of a lifetime.

One last tool you all should have out there is patience. There are many folks out there trying their luck at a tarpon. Tempers flare and that doesn't make for a fun day. Have patience. What comes around goes around. Knowledge is another key to success. If you've never tried to catch our Tampa Bay Tarpon, hire a guide. You will learn so much from them, you will become successful and you will know how to do this on your own, the right way. Drink lots of water, Gatorade, Powerade, or other liquids of that type. When the tarpon are biting the air temps are usually in the 90s so stay hydrated, especially during and after a long, hard tug-of-war with the Silver King. Remember, always be courteous, safe and know your regulation.