

Handle with care...

By: Captain Ted Wilson

In the Keys March madness is the “tip off” for tarpon season. The silver kings have been hanging around the outskirts of town for a few months now, just waiting for the water temperature to hit that magical 75 degrees to move in. It is still early, but now that we’re starting to see rising water temperatures we’re starting to see fishable numbers of tarpon around town. Local bridges are always hot spots. Bait fishing while floating live mullet, pinfish, blue runners, even grunts with 5-10 feet of 80-100# leader on sturdy hooks is a time proven technique.

Make sure you’ve got enough rod for the job when you tarpon fish. Conventional reels (Shimano TLD - 15 is what most use) strung up with 30# line is the norm. Large spinning reels will work as well, but keep in mind it always takes longer to land a large fish with a spinning reel than a conventional reel. While it might seem kind of cool to say you fought a gazillion pound tarpon for three days on zero-pound test line then pulled it up on the boat for a picture, it really isn’t cool at all. That fish will probably die. It may appear healthy and swim off into the deep blue, but it will eventually perish. If a shark doesn’t eat it in the next few hours from exhaustion, the effects of gravity pulling on its vital organs while out of the water will eventually cause those organs to fail and the tarpon will die a slow death. Match your tackle to your quarry, keep the fight as short as possible and under no circumstances lift a large tarpon out of the water unless you want to kill it.

Many inexperienced fishermen feel a fish is not considered “caught” unless it is flopping around the bottom of the boat or completely subdued in some way. Part of this mentality stems from the notion that fish are caught in order to eat them. Well, that’s a good argument if that is your plan, but tarpon are of little or no good on the table. Realizing this, in 1993, Florida law prohibited the harvesting of tarpon without a special permit purchased in advance of the taking of the fish. This created a problem for tarpon tournaments and “sportsmen” that historically required fish to be killed and brought back to the dock to qualify as a catch. In response to this new law and in an effort to preserve this mighty fish, tournament directors and guides established new rules themselves. Now a tarpon is considered “caught” once either the guide touches the leader or the nail knot (fly fishing only) passes through the tip-top of the rod. That same mentality has carried over into all styles of catch and release fishing whether in a tournament or not.

Most experienced tarpon fishermen make no attempt to handle a tarpon at all. Instead, when the fish is along side the boat, they simply grab the leader (with gloves) and take a wrap around their hand a few feet above the hook. At this point, generally one of two things are going to happen. One, the fish lunges and the leader breaks right at the hook or the hook pulls/straightens out. Always angle the leader away from yourself and other people in the boat so if the hook comes flying out it doesn’t hit anybody. This way the fish is in good shape, needs no reviving and everybody is happy. The hook will rust out in a few days as long as you’re not using stainless steel hooks, which you shouldn’t be using anyways. The second thing that might happen is the fish gives up. If this happens, grab (don’t gaff) the fish by the lower jaw, remove the hook, roll the tarpon upright and revive it until it swims away under its own power. If you must get a picture take it at this point. Take it with the fish along the side of the boat with the overwhelming majority of the fish still in the water. Have your photographer ready and positioned in advance of

the shot. It's really a three man job. One to man the rod, one to leader and secure the fish and one to take the shot. If the photo opportunity is there for the taking, take it. If not, let it go, there will be more. Pictures are nice to have but please don't take them at the expense of these great fish.