

Big bucks on the line



Jigging gear, including breakaway jigs, are standard tackle for catching big tarpon at Boca Grande.

Big-money tarpon tournaments offer six-figure payouts — and hefty entry fees.

By FRANK SARGEANT
of The Tampa Tribune

"Anybody could catch it."

That's Jack Harper's message for those considering entry into the richest tarpon tournament on the planet, the "Mega-Money" fish-off on July 8-9 at Boca Grande.

Harper's theory is that because jig fishing takes considerably less finesse than drifting a live bait for the silver kings stacked deep in the giant pass each year, just about anybody capable of holding a stout rod might luck into the winning fish.

And the angler who brings the big one to the scales wins \$400,000 — or at least what's left of it after the on-site IRS agent takes his divot. Second place earns \$200,000, and third place gets \$100,000. The total prize money is expected to approach \$1 million if the 60-boat field sells out — at \$8,500 a pop! The entry fee includes a guide and boat for the tournament, and a week of beachside accommodations on the island.

The basic technique is fairly straightforward.

"Most of us are using 40-pound-test monofilament on two-hand baitcasting outfits," captain James Goodwin said. "We've found that both 50- and 30-pound

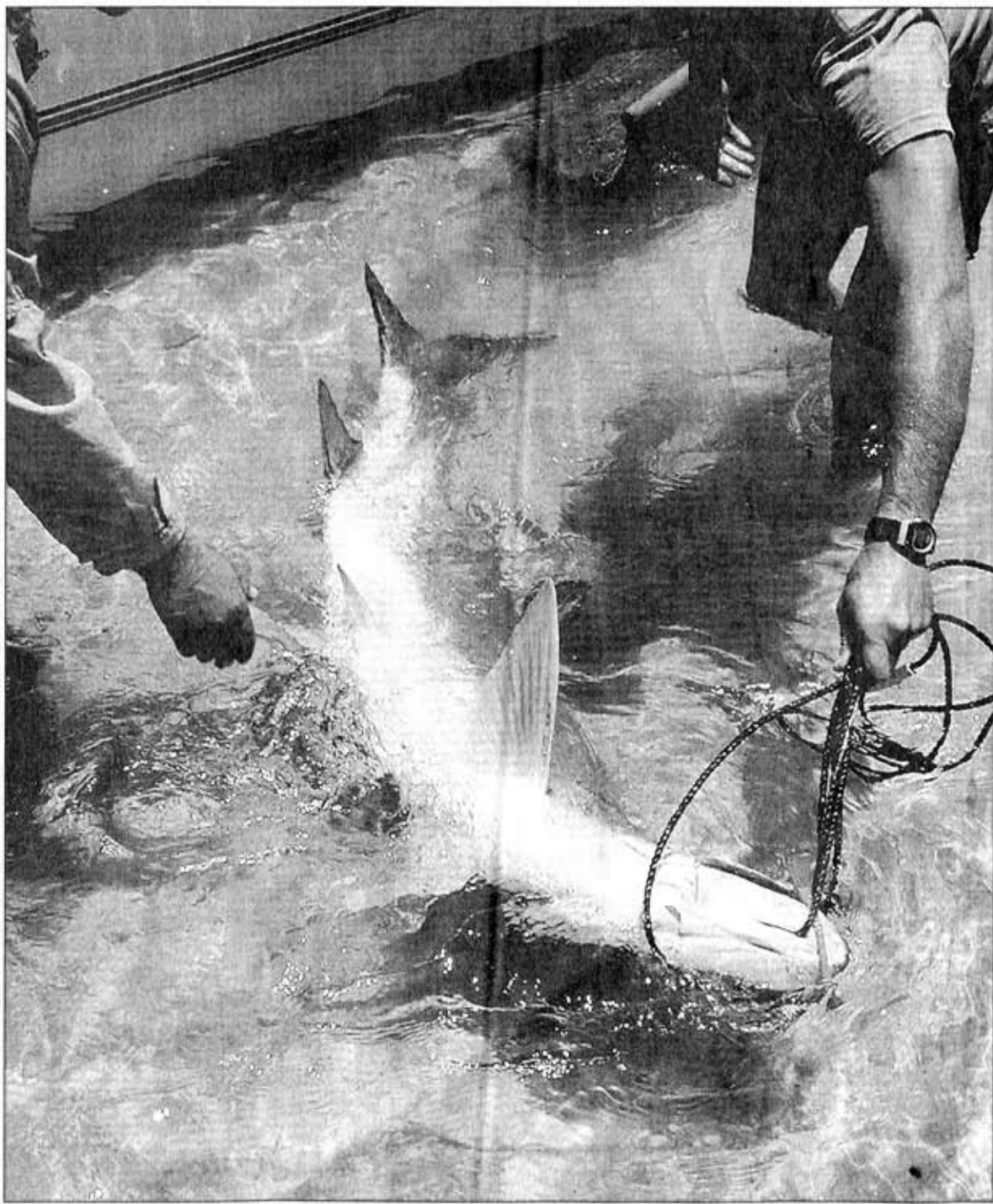
mono tend to have harmonic vibrations in the tides here at the depths we're fishing, and they seem to put the fish off a little."

Goodwin said 60-pound test doesn't vibrate, but appears to be heavy enough that the fish notice it and don't bite as frequently.

The jigs are ball-head, in weights from 4-6 ounces, with the heavier weights used when there's a stronger tide flow. The hooks, secured to the jig head with nylon tie wraps, are 8/0 Mustads. Most guides use three feet of 80-pound-test mono as leader. The plastic jig tails, about 4 inches long, usually are chartreuse, yellow or gold flake, with a tail fin that causes them to vibrate in the current.

"The biggest mistake most people make is to jig the jig," Goodwin said. "The fish ignore it if you jerk it up and down. You just put it down there and let it drift with the current, and when you feel anything different — a pull or a bump — you crank."

The fleet waits for a pod of tarpon to surface, and when they do, everybody rushes to get on top of them. They then send their jigs plummeting to bottom, take up one crank to keep from snagging bottom, and let the jig drift through



FRANK SARGEANT/Tribune photos

A Boca Grande tarpon is taken to the weigh-in scales at the side of the pass. The fish are weighed in a "wet sling" to allow for accurate weights without damage to the fish, which are released alive.

Want More Information?

- MegaMoney tournament: (941) 964-8080, www.thetarponclub.com
- World's Richest tournament: (941) 964-0568, www.bocagrandefishing.com
- James Goodwin: For tarpon tactics or to book a charter, call Goodwin at (727) 781-5339.

the school.

Each drop lasts only about 30 seconds to a minute. After that, you're through the school and it's time to crank up and try to get positioned uptide from the mass of fish again. The guide keeps tabs on where the fish are by watching his depthfinder.

"It seems like a lot of times the fish that bite are on the uptide edge of the school," Goodwin said. "As you drift toward the tail of the school, you rarely get hit."

It also seems that when one fish in a school bites, the others are stimulated to hit at the same

time. Goodwin and I commonly saw as many as seven fish hooked up within seconds of each other, with long lulls of no bites at all in between.

Getting a hook into the fish is the major challenge in jig fishing.

Because there usually is a bow in the line reaching down to the bottom of the pass, as deep as 72 feet, it's impossible to jerk the rod and set the hook.

"We've found the only successful way to get the hook into the fish is to reel as fast as you can when you feel a hit," Goodwin said. "That takes up slack, and the fish

will swim off and set the hook itself when the line comes tight."

Getting a hookup is only a small part of the battle here, however. Because up to 100 boats drift along only 10 feet apart, getting your fish out of the spiderweb of hanging jigs and whirling props requires a huge helping of luck along with considerable skill. Tangles — and arguments — are a normal part of the action, which some have dubbed "combat fishing."

If the jig tournament is too costly to enter, an option is the "World's Richest" tournament, now apparently the world's second-richest, hosted by the Chamber of Commerce at Boca Grande. The event, limited to live bait fishing only, awards \$174,000 to the top catch.

Entry is \$5,200. It's a 60-boat field, so once again, the odds are pretty good with the payout extending through third place. The tournament is July 11-12.