

## Bow To The King

It was the middle of May – spring break time in Florida. Not the week long revelries he had indulged in at Lauderdale and Miami Beach as a student, but the 2 1/2 day break he and his son had taken the last three years on the West coast – in Boca Grande – in search of tarpon. Tuesday, midday flight to Atlanta – then on to Sarasota. Rent a car, stop at a Publix to get power bars, double coffee shots, and sandwiches for the boat. Drive to Boca Grande, late check in. Leave the dock in the dark at 6 on Wednesday, fish until one or two – do it again on Thursday, check out, reverse the transportation – and back home late Thursday. The man treasured these trips with his only son.

Why the middle of May? That's when the Florida shores and bays teem with migrating tarpon. Why only two days? As the man who interviewed the empty chair once said: "A man's got to know his limits."

Each trip with Captain Phil had provided challenges, thrills, and surprises which the man now replayed in his mind after he tipped his seat back and mentally turned off the here and now. No cell phone. No e-mails. On purpose he had forgotten his brief case. Although he noticed his son fire up a laptop after the captain said it was okay. The man guessed that's what the captain said. He was long past understanding what anyone said over a plane's intercom. Before turning off the overhead light he said:

"I'm ignoring my 'to do list' in favor of my bucket list. Don't wake me up when they pass the peanuts."

"What's a bucket list?" the son asked.

"I guess you didn't see the movie. It's a list of things you dream about doing sometime in your life, but haven't done yet because of monetary – or physical – or family restrictions. Generally some risky physical activity. Like sky diving. You think about it more often the older you get."

His son understood. "Okay, Dad. You've already jumped out of airplanes when you were in the Army. I know you like to catch big fish.

You're telling me that 140 pounder that almost killed you the first year didn't make the list?"

"It made the tarpon list, but now I'm thinking about Marlin – say, out of The Black Star Lodge in Panama -- you game?"

As he morphed into vacation mode, the man did review the first three years in order – a series of learning experiences – disappointments – and one horrifying image forever burned into his brain.

Before the first trip, the man had done research on tarpon. He learned that they grow from 5 to 8 feet long and can weigh up to 280 pounds. Spawning takes place in late spring or early summer. They inhabit the Gulf of Mexico and the Florida shoreline. The spring migration concentrates the largest number of tarpon in the Western Hemisphere at the Boca Grande Pass where the ocean flows back and forth with the tides between Charlotte Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Tarpon are caught and released - not good eating. Sportfishing in Florida provides 80,000 jobs and much more revenue than commercial fishing. As the man was to learn, Boca Grande Pass was a popular venue for outdoor television programs from around the country in the spring.

He was surprised to learn that tarpon have a swim bladder which is adapted for breathing air. A pseudo-respiratory organ. When a tarpon rolls on the surface it takes in a breath of air. Its mouth opens as it surfaces and air is taken in. As the tarpon rolls back into the water, its mouth closes and air is forced back into the swim bladder. Oxygen passes from the swim bladder into the blood stream to supplement the oxygen taken through the gills. An angler can tell that a fish is tiring when it surfaces for air more often. The hook in the mouth also keeps a tired fish from closing the mouth and forcing the air back, thus tiring the fish faster. The quicker the fish is brought in and released, the better chance for it to leave to fight another day.

Next to the tarpon website, the man noticed information about the great hammerhead shark which patrolled the same waters. He learned that a great hammerhead can be as big as 20 feet and weigh well over 1000

pounds. Their color ranges from gray brown to olive green. The lifespan is 20 to 30 years. He was startled to read that the heaviest great hammerhead ever caught and measured was a female weighing 1280 pounds caught off Boca Grande in 2006. Hammerheads are often the first to reach newly baited shark lines, suggesting a particularly keen sense of smell. Although rare, sharks have been known to attack a swimmer -whether or not provoked. The shark mistakes the swimmer for a seal - its natural prey. As of 2009, the International Shark Attack List recorded 34 hammerhead attacks, 17 of them unprovoked, and only one fatal. Small comfort to that person.

The man also read information about a fishing show, which he remembered seeing several times over the years. Billed as a fishing show with “attitude,” it was called the "Reel Animals" fishing show, airing throughout the Southeast states. The man had seen it on WFLA, an NBC affiliate in Tampa. It aired Saturday mornings at 6:30 AM. The programs were filmed on a colorful 45 foot boat named "Reel Animals." The boat couldn't be missed - adorned with stickers, logos, advertising as much as on any NASCAR vehicle. Billy Nobles captained the boat, fishing Boca Grande. Billy had provided many exciting tarpon shows throughout the years. Often he combined filming with paying clients who might or might not make final edition of the program. It turned out that Billy and Phil knew all about each other. Unlike other charter captains, however, Billy never shared hot spots with Phil, and vice versa. Their tenuous friendship would be tested that first year.

Another outdoor show which caught the man's attention was hosted by and featured Cindy Garrison shown on her website battling a tarpon in a turquoise shirt and skimpy white shorts. She started her show known as “Get Wild with Cindy” on ESPN in 2006, and the show was later moved to KHOU, a station out of Houston.

The man learned that tarpon travel in groups called “pods.” Hence the name of Captain Phil’s website – “Podzilla.com” and the name of his boat – “Podzilla.”

Unlike Lake Michigan fishing where the limit is set by the state – eg. Five salmon per person – there is no limit on tarpon – no governmental limit that is. But there is a practical limit set by an anglers endurance, ability to turn the fishes’ head at the critical time to break its spirit, and the time it takes to land the fish. So the practical limit is three to four fish on a good day.

The man found his limit on that first trip – a trip which almost got scrapped. On the drive from Sarasota to Boca Grande the son looked at the weather map on his phone.

“Oh no, look at this,” he said. The entire West coast covered with heavy stuff, nasty orange and red cells heading Southwest towards Boca Grande.

The man called Phil from the car who confirmed the bad weather. "It's going to be rough," he said, "and if there's lightning in that stuff, we're not leaving the dock. By the way, How strong is your stomach?"

“Don't worry Phil,” the man said, “I've never puked and if I do, it will be over the stern and you can consider it chumming. And, I'll have a jar of olives. How big will the waves be?"

“Could be 4 to 6 footers and my boat's only 32'.” The man said, "Hey, in my book, 4 to 6 is better than 9 to 5 any day. We're going."

Capt. Phil was waiting at six the next morning. His 32 foot center console Morgan with a high tower was perfect for tarpon fishing. The gear was stowed. The bait wells filled with excited crabs. Expectations were high as they left in the dark. The weather was bad, but no lightning. Through the no wake zone, under two causeways, and West into the Gulf of Mexico along Boca Grande beach.

Most of the charter captains fished in the Boca Grande Pass where the tarpon congregate on the bottom 80-100' down where they find crabs hunting their food. But they did not really fish. With weighted lures, they merely snagged a tarpon that might brush against the line. Phil was a

purist. He disdained the charter captains who misled their clients into thinking they were really catching the fish.

After moving through the tide line and heading south along the Boca Grande beach, Phil gave the rookies the lesson plan. Tarpon is sight fishing. You don't troll or cast blindly. You have to see the fish. The critical skills are seeing the tarpon, catching up with the tarpon, and presenting the bait where the tarpon will be.

Phil asked the man what kind of fishing he had done. He described a lifetime of catching bass, pike, perch and salmon in fresh water. Phil said, "You may have to forget that type of fishing."

Phil demonstrated the equipment. Spinning rods with 50 pound test line and 80 pound leaders with a single hook. On the hook, a crab larger than a silver dollar impaled in one corner so that it did not lose its ability to wiggle its legs and try to swim like crazy when it spotted a tarpon. The crab has sufficient bulk so the angler, without other weight added, can cast the crab up to 50 or 60 yards depending upon the wind.

The man, his son, and Phil each had a rod. Phil on the elevated steering platform had the advantage of seeing the fish and their direction more quickly, using the wind when it was favorable. Consequently, Phil's crab often was chosen before those of his clients. But not always.

Phil explained that good eyesight and knowing what you're looking for is critical. Especially in rough weather. Tarpon don't necessarily travel in a straight line. They surface and dive much like dolphin. They go through their gyrations either because they are feeding, or taking oxygen, or flirting. The trick is to find the pods, figure out which way they are going, being there first, and having the crab waiting in their path.

After the crab hits the water, allow the line to be slack but with your finger on the line. When you feel a bump, surprisingly gentle, reel in quickly taking up the slack, and set the hook. Then, be prepared. The first thing the fish does is rip off up to 30 yards of line. Then it will jump high above the surface shaking its head back and forth to dislodge the hook. Which it will always succeed in doing unless you quickly lower your rod tip

to the water, to put slack in the line, the move known as “bowing to the king.” As soon as the fish is back in the water, lift the rod to 11 o'clock and try and get some line back. Pressure as you lift the rod, and rapid reeling as you lower the rod. A series of pumping moves.

If you jerk back when the fish jumps, you provide the leverage to the tarpon to flip the hook as it shakes its head. Phil recalled what Archimedes had said about moving the earth once he had a lever and a place to stand. Tarpon understand the principal well, Phil explained.

He said that often he and his wife went out just to “jump tarpon.” When the tarpon takes the bait and jumps they would keep the tension on enabling the tarpon to exert the leverage to dislodge the hook. The tarpon's jaw is so bony that it is rare to set a hook deep enough to keep it from being thus flipped out.

On the first day the bad weather passed over and Phil was able to fish along Boca Grande beach. He explained how to find the tarpon – looking for the tail fins, overhead bird activity, and often spotting other boats with a battle in progress.

They soon found the fish on that first day. The son learned how to spot them and to present the crab. He also learned how to bow to the King. Dad did not. He could not resist the temptation to jerk back, when a tarpon jumped, as he had done all his life with fresh water fish.

Finally, later that first morning, the man did remember, with his son, coaching him, to bow to the King and brought a fish to the boat for Phil to wire. When the tarpon is within 5 feet of the boat, the length of the leader, the battle is over and the Capt. with a gloved hand can grab the leader, known as “wiring,” bring the fish close enough to free the hook, hold the tarpon to stabilize it, and then release it.

On the second day, the rain was gone but the wind from the west made it impossible to fish along the beach. Phil explained that they would have to fish in the pass and into Charlotte Bay, which was somewhat protected. Unlike fishing along the beach, fishing in the bay was crowded.

It was there that the man learned to stop pointing when he spotted fish. Phil was adept at spotting the pods from his high tower. His 32 foot Morgan with its turquoise shell was distinctive. The other captains kept their eye on Phil because he often was the first to a new pod. When he moved they followed.

After learning how to spot the tarpon, the man would excitedly point to a new pod – excitedly yelling “There they are.” After a few such episodes, Phil said, “Hey, cut out the damn pointing. All these guys have binoculars. We want to get there first.” Thereafter, the man merely said, for example: “There's a pod at 9 o'clock and kept his hands down.”

Soon after they entered the bay Phil's phone rang with a buddy's tip on location of a pod. When Phil arrived he found a handful of boats already there. Phil moved his boat into the circle around the pod. The boat to the left was none other than “Reel Animal” with Capt. Billy Nobles, five anglers in the cockpit, and a cameraman ready to film another show.

Many tarpon surfaced gracefully, but none were was hooked. The boats circled the pod. With the wind at his back, Phil from the tower put a crab just short of the stern of “Reel Animal” and connected. He handed the rod down to the man who, with coaching, remembered to drop the rod tip on all the jumps.

Billy Nobles yelled some bad words at Phil as his clients enviously watched the man do battle. The cameraman did not film the action. " I don't think you will see this on Saturday's show," Phil said laughing.

The tarpon was the strongest fish yet encountered. The man could get it within 15 feet of the boat, but once the tarpon saw the boat it took off again, despite the tight drag. It dragged the man clockwise around the center console boat. He was powerless to stop it. The 2 foot waves made balance treacherous. After seven circles, the son offered some help.

"Dad, you have to apply enough pressure to turn the fish's head so that you are not fighting the side of the fish, but the front of the fish. That way you break its spirit."

So the next time around, the man gritted his teeth, dug deep into his core, and stopped the fish at the bow of the boat and successfully turned its head. Whereupon the tarpon, with unbroken spirit, proceeded to make seven counterclockwise circuits around the boat. When the captain finally wired the fish. The man gratefully put down his rod and decided that he had caught enough fish for one day. Whose spirit had been broken?

The first day of fishing on the second year's trip went smoothly. They left the dock at 6 in a heavy fog, the first boat under the causeway, soon along Boca beach. The son had learned well. He knew how to spot the fish, how to bait the hook, how to present the bait, how to respond to the bump, and most importantly how to bow to the king. He did everything right and had a nice tarpon to the boat before daybreak. Phil was delighted. He had the days first bragging rights. The rest of the day went well and the man and his son brought five tarpon to the wire.

The second day, however, again had a weather problem. The West wind with 3 to 5 foot waves prevented Phil from fishing along the beach. Instead of going under the causeways into the Gulf, Phil had to go behind Boca Grand Island, out to Charlotte Bay.

A number of boats followed the same strategy. The waves were 1 to 2 feet. As usual Phil was on his game and put Podzilla on a series of pods. Other boats followed him. The tarpon were there. Surfacing, rolling, looking like dolphins, and moving from one spot to another. He found lots of fish who were playing, not eating. That's when Phil explained to his frustrated clients the difference between "fishing" and "catching." In mid-morning, Phil pointed out a gleaming white custom made 42' boat heading towards them .

"That's the boat from Houston. Been here for a month. Looks like they are filming Houston Outdoors. Hot dog, there's Cindy Garrison."

All eyes on all the boats turned to watch the tanned blonde athlete in turquoise shirt, short white shorts. The captain swung the bow towards the tarpon. Cindy grabbed a rod and, expertly placed a crab in front of the active pod. She was good. She waited. Nothing happened. The camera

whirled. The guy with the mike bantered with Cindy – she looked terrific on the bow – and still nothing happened.

Twenty minutes later, something did happen, but not on Cindy's boat. On Podzilla. The son had hooked up and Cindy was quickly forgotten. The reel screamed – the fish leaped often – the son never failing to bow to the king – and the man thought that his strong boy would triumph in at least 30 minutes. But, after an hour, they realized something was different. Each time the son worked the fish in sight of the boat, it would strip off another 50 yards. The fish did occasionally surface, open its mouth, gulp air, and disappear. A normal sign that with the lack of oxygen, the fish was tiring. But not so with this creature.

Then Phil's phone rang.

“Hey, Jack – What's up?” Phil said, listened and responded, “You're right, we've got a dandy one on. Really taking a long time even though my guy knows what he's doing.” “Wait a minute – I'll see what they say.”

Phil turned to the anglers and said: “This guy's a friend of mine. He's got a Marine Biology Professor from University of Miami – Bruce Unger – on his boat with a grad student. They want to put a satellite tag on a mature tarpon to find out where it spawns. Been here for two days without any candidates because nobody's catching fish. Word is out that we have a good fish on. Okay with you if they come on board to tag the fish? Can you believe the tag costs \$6,000?”

The clients agreed and soon a 20' outboard appeared with Jack at the wheel. Professor Unger and his student came on board with bags of equipment. Introductions around – except the son couldn't shake hands because he was otherwise occupied.

“Wow,” said the Professor, as he watched the fish roll. The size indicated the fish was a mother. Female tarpon grow bigger than males. “That's just what we're looking for. How long has she been on?” He was

amazed at the answer. “Looks like she’s not ready yet – so we have time to set up.”

As they unpacked their devices, the Cindy's boat pulled up to the fight scene. Cindy still in the bow – but no longer fishing. The producer yelled over. “We haven’t caught anything, but heard that you have a good one on. Can we put our cameraman on your boat to film the action for our next show?”

The answer was yes, so Jack ferried the young man with camera to Phil’s boat – which was filling up rapidly. The camera guy edged in front of the man who was trying to record the action on his little Canon – and started filming – with mike on the camera turned on to catch the sound of battle. The son stopped muttering 4 letter words each time the fish stripped off more line and he had to start all over – pump up, reel down.

Everyone was puzzled. What was going on? This fish was big, but not that much bigger than a few caught before. 2 hours and 15 minutes after hook up, the mystery was answered when Phil finally wired the creature. The hook was in the eye socket – so no leverage had been placed on the mouth – no turning the head – no taking water when the fish surfaced for air. Phil and the student cradled it underwater in their arms while the Professor took various measurements, and jammed the barbed satellite rod in the back of the fish, just ahead of the dorsal fins.

The fish was about as long as her conqueror and outweighed him by ten pounds. The TV boat cheered, retrieved their cameraman, and said what a great show it would make. The man called out his son’s name to use on the show, but they weren’t interested.

Professor Unger and student held the pregnant tarpon upright for at least five minutes to stabilize her before she finned her way down – now \$6,000 more valuable. They gave the son the satellite tracking number. He followed her that summer and saw that in the fall she swam no further than an estuary in Charlotte Bay – to spawn.

The third year, the man and son thought they might again encounter Billy Nobles and Cindy, but neither boat appeared. If only they had known. The weather cooperated on both days so Phil could work his favorite territory – close to the Boca Grande beach – sometimes really close depending on the tide. Fishing was decent the first day – and started the same way on day two. In between hook ups, searching for pods, the man had a chance to scan the homes along Boca Grande, definitely in the 1% category. But public access to the beach at various points allowed many 99%ers to also enjoy its wide shores – especially at low tide when people with poodles, joggers, waders, and some kayakers frolicked in the shallow water. He even spotted a strong swimmer quite far off shore swimming parallel with the shore. Probably a triathlete, the man thought.

Close to noon as they thought about timing for the trip home – how long it would take to check out and drive up the sometimes dangerous 75 to Sarasota, they came upon a feeding pod in quite shallow water, close to the beach. Three crabs went skyward. The son’s crab was inhaled and the fight was one with what the first jump revealed to be one of the biggest tarpon yet encountered.

Nevertheless, the son skillfully applied maximum pressure at the right time, turned the head, broke its spirit, and in less than 25 minutes, had it close to the boat. Phil pulled on his glove and prepared to wire the fish - probably the last of the day. Suddenly the fish, perhaps because it saw the boat, stripped off 100’ of line with its strongest run yet.

“Wow” said Phil. “I thought he was done.”

The fish then stopped, and headed straight for the boat the line cutting the water, at top speed.

“Reel. Reel” Phil yelled. “Don’t let it go under the boat.” The son raced to the bow and was able to move the rod tip around so the line didn’t snag on the boat. The reel screeched as the fish easily overcame the drag. The line started to rise, and for a moment they thought the tarpon would jump

again. Instead, a dark brown hammerhead shark, about half as long as the boat, surfaced with the tarpon crossways in its jaws. The son recoiled in horror, but held on to the rod. The man yelled.

“Break it off – break it off!” yelled Phil. “Give the fish a chance.”

Realizing that Phil meant for him to somehow grab the leader and release the tarpon, the son said “I’ll try to bring it close so you can break it off.”

Surprisingly, he was able to retrieve enough line for Phil to grasp the leader (well above the water line) and snap the hook off. Immediately the shark surfaced close to the boat with the huge tarpon – looking more like a minnow – sideways in its mouth, blood streaming. The shark looked the team in the eye, rolled over and was gone, towards the beach the man thought. He looked at the beach, ready to shout a warning. A lady with a small child waded in the water. Two joggers ran in ankle deep water. The swimmer was gone, and so was the shark.

“Dad. Wake up.” the son said. “We’re about to land.” Noticing moisture on his father’s brow he said, “Did you just have a bad dream?”

“Well son, “ the father said, “It was bad, but it wasn’t a dream. And you were in it.” He hugged him and said, “Now let’s go Bow to The King.”

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