

## Tarpon Fishing On Kayaks

*Gladiator fishing at its toughest, on the ocean's margin.*



**By Zsolt Takacs**

The last time we chased tarpon along Northeast Florida beaches, we watched a guy who was fishing alone fight a fish for so long that we hooked and landed two fish and a blacktip shark while watching the guy's silhouette get fuzzy on the horizon.

"I hope he brought his passport," quipped kayak partner Jeremy Ackermen.

I had to laugh, but almost felt sorry for the guy. When fishing from a kayak, if you can't reach pliers or a knife, or bring the wrong tackle or use it incorrectly, it becomes almost impossible to part ways with a giant tarpon short of tossing the rod overboard.

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Fishing in kayaks on the ocean has become very popular in Florida, for species including snook, tarpon, king mackerel, jumbo jacks and bonito (false albacore to anglers from North Carolina northward). A few determined yakkers launch from Outer Banks beaches to catch stripers in numbingly cold waters. Down South Texas way, Capt. Brandon Shuler and friends also chase kings, bonitos and 'poons. But the sport has really exploded here in the Jacksonville area, where I live, and for good reasons. For one, fuel's a bargain. Last time I checked you can still buy a box of macaroni and cheese for 99 cents. But seriously, stealth is the key to success. Nothing puts these fish down more quickly than an outboard, or hull slap on a skiff. And there isn't a more furtive approach to this fishery than from a kayak.

It doesn't get much more sporting than fishing for big tarpon, sharks, jumbo stripers and other large gamefish from a kayak. Talk about a level playing field, or even one slanted in the quarry's favor. What I call the "gladiator aspect," the challenge of taking on a dangerous animal in its element without many technological advantages, is one of the main reasons why kayak fishing in the ocean is growing substantially. But it's a sport you should enter into carefully, with forethought, in order to land fish without doing harm to yourself or the fish.



First "stick up" a bit. For tarpon and sharks, I like a 7-foot rod with at least a medium-heavy action for two reasons: It is easier to cast an un-weighted, live baitfish and when your hooked fish decides to travel from one side of your kayak to the next, that 7-foot rod makes it easier to get the line past your kayak's bow. I prefer conventional reels without levelwinds because they cast farther than reels with levelwinds and offer greater torque than spinning reels. That said, one of the most heartbreaking moments that I've had on the water was having a rod and reel ripped from my hands while trying to right a backlash. I wouldn't have had that problem if I hadn't wound the line on unevenly or if I was using a spinning reel. So if you tend to backlash when the action is hot, maybe you should consider that spinner.

Reels need to hold at least 300 yards of 40-pound test mono line. Braid may help with casting distance and line capacity. However, the downside to using braid in this application is the lack of stretch. You can feel everything, which normally wouldn't be so bad but when you are dealing with a 100-pound-plus fish while sitting down, a jump and a head shake could vibrate you right off your kayak. Also with braid, you really have to bow dramatically (in a tippy kayak) to the tarpon when he jumps. Without any stretch in the line, the leader and sometimes the braid will snap like string.

Terminal tackle can vary depending on your preferences, but if you go with braid then you need at least 3 feet of shock leader. I have found that 80-pound-test fluorocarbon works fairly well. When using monofilament line on your reel, increase the leader length to 4 or 5 feet. I like to attach the leader to the line with an Albright knot, although using a swivel hasn't seemed to do much harm. There are many different hooks that have been tried and tested and there are a lot that work, however, a local captain and friend turned me on to the only two hooks that you need when tarpon fishing. One is a Daiichi 13/0 circle hook. It is extremely light and allows a less hardy baitfish, such as a poggy, to swim around longer without getting tired. These hooks are expensive, and you'll lose a few to sharks.

Range is one of the the limitations that makes big-game fishing from a kayak so sporting. Kayakers can't simply unload their boats, fire out of the nearest inlet, and head north or south depending on the latest and greatest reports. Our approach is patient and observant. I like to drive my kayak to various beach accesses and look for signs of bait fish. Look for diving pelicans and other birds, dimpling bait or best of all, explosions that send bait flipping into the air. If you see any of those signs, launch. If you pull into an access and the ocean seems lifeless, wait and watch for 15 minutes. If still nothing happens, move to the next access. (The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has a digital map of all saltwater access points around the state.) Places where driving on the beach is permitted is obviously a huge advantage.



When kayak fishing, finding a poggy pod is like finding a golden nugget. You want to hold onto it all day long and never lose it. The large fish will come in and out of it all day long, so be prepared to spend the time. When you find a hot poggy pod, pack and launch quickly. I bring three rods: A main rod to fight large fish as described earlier, a backup to the main rod and a poggy snatch rod (a 15-pound test light- to medium-action rod), along with a minimum amount of tackle (extra hooks, swivels, pliers, gloves). Since one poggy is all that you'll need at any given time, and a bait bucket would cause too much drag, snatch the bait by using a No. 4 treble hook with a 3/4-ounce egg sinker slipped down right above the hook. When the poggies are thick, snatch hooking one takes less than a minute.

Reel the poggy in quickly or tarpon, sharks and cobia may take the baitfish right from the hook. When you bring the poggy into the kayak, switch it as fast as possible to the hook on the larger outfit. Hook it right behind the nose and cast the lively bait right back into the bait school. Using a circle hook in the bait, I place my rod in my holder and paddle every so often to keep my baited line in the bait school. If there are tarpon in the bait pods, you'll soon know it. They usually explode into the schools, sometimes coming completely out of the water. Most of the time, when they show up, you can pattern them. Some will explode on the bait school just on the outside corners, while some will almost always explode right in the middle. They will do this in unison, sometimes for hours, sometimes not long at all.

When fighting a tarpon or any other large fish from a kayak, it is essential that you have a place to secure the paddle easily. Typically, the first couple of seconds will be filled with out-of-control leaps. In that time, it is imperative to store your paddle. When the fish starts to run, lower your rod tip and use it to steer your kayak. By using your rod as the steering wheel, utilize the pressure that you have on the fish to keep your kayak at a 45-degree angle to the fish. This is very important because if you lift your rod tip too high, it will cause your kayak to lie sideways. The 45-degree angle will cause the fish to pull the kayak, but give resistance at the same time and allow you to better control the situation.

I have had tarpon drag me for over an hour and almost two miles offshore. Near the end of the fight, tarpon do not seem as intimidated by a kayak as they are of a boat. They don't surge away so frantically. But the fight usually ends in an up and down battle, which puts the kayaker at a disadvantage due to the inability to use one's legs. One helpful addition is a small fighting belt that serves as a fulcrum. Here's where you appreciate every pound of the 40-pound test. Lifting the fish becomes a game of inches.

After a tarpon has been worn down, they will almost always lie on their side. Timing is of the essence because you have to release the fish unharmed. I wear a pair of gloves (if I have a chance to put them on), and grab the tarpon by the lower lip. Take extreme caution when lipping the fish, until you know exactly where that hook is. I do not like to use a lip gaff because I believe that it

hurts the fish. By puncturing the membrane in the tarpon's mouth I feel they lose some of the suction power which they use to feed. A lip-grabber, however, is very useful. The reviving process takes about 10 minutes and consists of the angler moving the tarpon in a way that rushes water through its mouth and past its gills. This can be compared to lifting and pushing a 5-gallon bucket in and out of the water. The tarpon will let you know when it is ready to go, as inevitably it will spring to life, by gradually flipping its tail, righting itself and swimming away. Once the tarpon rights itself you can release your grip on his lower lip and it is time for the "victory paddle" back to the bait pod to do it all over again.

Kayak fishing for large fish should never be done alone. You should always have a whistle or another loud noise-making device and a life jacket either on your body or easily accessible in your kayak. If you are an inexperienced kayaker and would like to chase giant gamefish, go with a more experienced angler/kayaker who knows the local waters and has done it before. The ocean is a wonderful place full of wondrous sights and it is very easy to get up that creek (out to sea) with only a paddle!

### **SWA**

