

Spearfishing in the St. Pete Open



By Adam Wilson
Water LIFE Diving

This year's St. Pete Open went off without a hitch. Almost every contestant weighed in a fish and it was great to see hundreds of divers be able to hunt the Gulf of Mexico without any incidents. Just goes to prove the safety of our sport when people dive within their limits and training.

As planned, team WreckReation consisting of Carl Gill, Charlie Gill, Mike "Dago" Muscato, Paul Wagenseil, Heidi Schwarz and myself headed out late Friday night with the full moon to dive our newly found deep hole off Venice. Dropping down early Saturday morning visibility was choice as I could clearly see the rim of the hole 160 feet below from just under the surface. Although the vis had increased greatly since our last trip, the bottom temps are still in the low 70s out deep, a little warmer than last month, but still chilly for this time of year.

We were swarmed by big amberjacks on our descent, but no one pulled the trigger. I know I was waiting to see what the bottom of the hole had to offer first. All of the big snappers we encountered from our scouting mission earlier last month were gone. Scouring the deep 5-15 foot high ledge I thought we would surely find a big lobster, but no such luck. The large resident goliath groupers may explain that, they do love crustaceans. About a third of the way around the perimeter of the hole a grouper shot out from the undercut limestone and instead of bolting, stared at me head on from twenty feet away. A shaft right between the eyes and he weighed in at 23 pounds and was our biggest grouper on the boat for the day. The lack of monster sized bottom fish was a little disappointing. Had we spooked them last trip or had someone else fished the area in the passing weeks? We did have a large commercial boat working around us that entire morning.

The amberjacks were more cooperative and with our



time to surface at over 20 minutes they gave us as many shots as we were willing to take all the way up to 100 feet. These were good sized jacks, with most in the 50 pound range or even bigger. These are the kind of quality fish we usually see in the winter and I knew we all had a great shot at placing high in the tournament if we could each land one. Rather than pulling anchor and coming in shallow to let our less experienced teammates hunt, we took turns escorting each one down to where the big jacks were hanging, giving everyone a shot at these strong fish. Shooting big fish high in the water column presents a whole new danger and can be sketchy at best, but one by one we each beaded down on the size fish we felt comfortable handling and filled the fish box.

On a side note, I have to give the Gulf Council credit for raising the minimum size limit of amberjack to 30 inches and not taking away our one fish per person. The smallest jack we took that day was 36 inches and this seems to be a new regulation we can live with. Unfortunately red snapper season was closed early last month and the looming grouper limits and closures aren't going to seem so progressive when they take effect early next year.

We spent more time than we had planned bounce diving down the anchor rope to take in the huge amount of life swarming over the sink-



clockwise from top left: Snorkeling a weedline in the Gulf, Jim Joseph of FantaSea Scuba in Port Charlotte with a 4th place 45 pound gag taken from 200 feet, one of the bigger AJs, the winning lobster and Heidi Schwarz' 2nd place sheephead.

hole. On my last dive a school of stingrays each the size of a large picnic table came in off the sand and swam over the hole. They didn't have any cobia behind them, but just watching them fly effortlessly across the bottom was amazing.

Your hometown crew did great at the weigh-in with everyone placing high on the scoreboard. No top three fish for us older guys, but 2 teammates did stand out above the rest taking home the coveted glass trophies. Heidi grabbed 2nd place in the women's division and Paul took 2nd in the juniors division. I placed fifth for a 52 pound amberjack. Jim Joseph of FantaSea Scuba, a big Open sponsor, just missed the glass with a fourth place, 45 pound gag grouper taken from 200 feet.

Competition in the St. Pete Open is tough. Some guys spend months putting together a solid dive plan just for tournament day. Some just wade off the shore or under a bridge and shoot a sheephead. Regardless of your skill level, experience or preparation it's a great tournament with the highest level of camaraderie in the sport. If you have never entered a tournament but always wanted to, you must check out next years 'Open.' It is bound to be bigger and better than ever.

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