





Readying for a friendly rumble.



Jennifer Thomas joins the fun.

friendship in Florida

At the JAX Classic, the grand gathering of the sport, the focus is on fun and family, not cut-throat pro competition

STORY and PHOTOS BY KENDAL LARSON

IT'S MAY 8, 2010, tournament day for the Columbia Sportswear Jacksonville Kayak Fishing Classic, where a record 430 anglers are signed up to chase after bragging rights as the best of the best. This is the largest such competition in the United States, perhaps even the world.

And the best of the best isn't an exaggeration, because this year many kayak fishing silverbacks have covered great distances to attend the tournament. Storied names like Sammons, Thomas, Herman, Spencer, Rinando, Suber, Stubblefield and many more—a veritable Who's Who of kayak fishing are here to compete.

Kayak anglers from across America have traveled untold miles to converge on Jacksonville; license plates from Minnesota, Mississippi, Michigan, Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana—even a gang of more than 20 from Texas join the fun. To underscore the prominence of the tournament there's even a team of three from the United Kingdom; David Martin of the Anglers Afloat U.K. website, as well as Martin Hurst, and Paul Fennell of the U.K. Ocean Kayak fishing team.

What's of great interest to the rest of the kayak fishing nation is—why? Why is this particular tournament so popular? It doesn't take long after meeting JAX Classic tournament director Mike Kogan to understand. "This tournament isn't really about the competition. It's about having

fun," Kogan remarks. "We try to make this tournament a family-friendly affair, and we think that's apparent by the tournament's heavy focus on the raffle."

That raffle and other donations will combine to raise close to \$40,000 this year for the supported charities—The Daniel Memorial, the Down Syndrome Association of Jacksonville and the Guy Harvey Foundation. "We've raised over \$100,000 for our charities through the years," says Kogan.

While the focus is on the charities and having fun, the anglers are still pretty serious about the fishing. It's only fair. The Jacksonville area boasts amazing opportunities for kayak anglers, with great fishing areas within minutes of downtown.

One such location is Mill Cove, and on tournament day there are 28 kayak anglers lined up at the ramp awaiting the six a.m. launch. Located just northeast of downtown Jacksonville, it offers excellent redfish, trout and flounder fishing—the combo sought by anglers hoping for a slam of all three fish. If an angler is lucky enough to catch one of each, their lengths will be totaled to give the angler the maximum possible score.

We find a good selection of the Texas contingent here on tournament morning, including Dean and Jennifer Thomas of Aransas Pass, Texas, operators of Slowride Guide Service. They launch, hoping to find that magic trio of fish.

Dean's a lifelong angler, having spent much of his youth fishing both fresh and saltwater. His guiding and rental operation is nearing its tenth anniversary, and he's fished in over 20 kayak fishing tournaments. In Jacksonville, he uses a tactic commonly employed by shallow water anglers to seek out active water.

"I fished where I saw mullet, baitfish and surface activity," Thomas later quips.

The tactics may be the same as in Texas—but conditions aren't. The tannin-stained waters of Jacksonville are substantially different from the gin-clear flats of Texas where Thomas normally fishes, and Florida experiences large four- to five-foot tidal swings. "It was cool man. I always like to see something different. Even though it was similar terrain under the water, the tides put a definite twist on how you fish it," Thomas adds.



NO SPIN REQUIRED TO WIN. Although the raffle's chock-a-block with prizes, keeping JAX Classic main man Mike Kogan busy calling numbers for hours, the sport's biggest party is its own reward.



If You Go

You won't go wrong if you choose Jacksonville as your kayak fishing destination. In addition to incredible paddling and fishing opportunities, you'll find it an excellent locale for viewing wildlife from your boat.

Don't forget to visit the Jax Kayak Fishing site and their forums for tips at: www.JaxKayakFishing.com

The Jacksonville Convention and Visitor's Bureau website has excellent information on other goings-on in the city: www.VisitJacksonville.com

For any Jacksonville trip, but especially for close proximity to JAX tournament activities, consider the Radisson Hotel at Salisbury Road.

A twist indeed; signs warning paddlers of rapid tidal changes that can strand a paddler for four hours or more are common.

Florida anglers are known to be competitive, and sometimes guard their favorite fishing spots with the secrecy of a government three-letter agency. But there's another, kinder, gentler side to that coin that involves helping fellow anglers, and it's on display front and center at the Classic despite the stakes.

Jennifer Thomas singles out two of the locals, Jeff Suber and John "Chappy" Chapman. "It was nice when Suber and Chappy were really trying to explain what's going on out there," she gushes.

Chapman is a 20-year U.S. Navy rescue swimmer and Hobie pro staffer, while Suber, a Wilderness Systems pro staffer himself, runs a tournament south of Tallahassee via the Forgotten Coast Kayak Angler site that benefits the county's Meals on Wheels program.

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Tournament day finds Suber on the water with Cameron Barton, advising her on bait selection as the day wears on. They switch from topwater baits to paddletails when the early morning bite ends and start catching flounder. Suber's big fish, a 20-plus incher, throws the hook at the net, while Barton manages a small slam. They aren't disappointed.

Meanwhile, Chapman plays the family man, sharing the tournament experience with his young son Dru and father John Sr. And while Chappy falls short of the podium, the other two Chapman generations hit it big. Chappy is ecstatic. "Putting both my son and my dad up on the stage the same weekend was better than any of the other hardware I have up on the wall," Chapman says.

Jacksonville natives Charles Ganoe and his wife Melita and their son Daniel—the Drag-On Kayak Fishing Team—are another family enjoying the great outdoors together. Charles is tending to the antenna farm array of live-bait rods sprouting from his bow when he catches a good one. He finesses his camera, but can't fit the entire fish into the viewfinder until he stands precariously in his kayak. As a result, he loses a good half inch of length. It isn't important. Melita sums up the tournament's family-friendly attitude. "We don't measure our success by the length of our fish but by the memories we make," she says.

That spirit says everything the kayak nation needs to know when they wonder why the Columbia Sportswear Jacksonville Kayak Fishing Classic is so enduringly popular.

KENDAL LARSON is a fisherman and professional photographer who feels most at home on the water. Find his work at www.KendalLarsonPhotography.com.