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The Michigan "caddis"



"Lefty" Kreh prepares to boat a defeated giant tarpon

Ordinarily, Lefty Kreh is a clean-living, God-fearing type, beloved among men. But — get him in the stern of a skiff in the Florida Keys with a saltwater novice and he turns into a vicious drill sergeant . . . a man who has been in the front lines and must prepare his men to make the same trip. Witness the demise, and rise, of top fresh-water fly-rodder Doug Swisher in his first encounter with the salt . . . and the tarpon.

BIG TARPON

Lefty Kreh

I WON'T LIE TO YOU. Taking a really big tarpon on a fly rod is not the same game you play with a brown trout, steelhead or salmon.

Nothing in fishing thrills me more than to stand on a casting platform on a skiff, armed with a sturdy fly rod, and see a bag log-of-a-tarpon coasting toward me across the flats. The big ones — more than 100 pounds — make you feel inept and foolish as you stand there, poised with a three-inch streamer fly in your hand, wondering how in hell you're going to win over this six feet of scale-encased muscle — so big that you can describe the fish by its width.

Legs become rubber stilts and arms inoperable; eyes misjudge. Worse, if the fish sucks in the fly, you strike hard, and the tarpon catapults from the water like a huge jack-in-the-box, throwing water everywhere.

Fresh-water tackle is useless: reels disintegrate in your hands, and salmon rods bend over at the butt like a flopping hinge. You need special gear for this work, and it's work that can go on for hours before the contest is decided — often in favor of the fish.

Unlike many articles that try to seduce you into trying for these monster fish with your heavy bass or salmon sticks — articles that give you the illusion that you can come to the Florida Keys with your fresh-water tackle and go home a conquering hero — this one's going to tell it like it is!

The very experienced guides want to furnish the angler tackle for such sport. The reason is simple — fresh-water gear of the northern fishermen just can't do the job. If the tourist-angler insists on using his own tackle, the guide will, with qualifying remarks, allow him to test it on one big fish — usually that's enough evidence. I have seen fresh-water fly rods, on which the snake guides were not double-wrapped, tear loose. Tarpon put what you think is going to be a permanent bend in your rod, and the glass and all the hardware have to take the strain.

Rod guides should be very large, larger than any you've seen on any fresh-water rod. One good reason is that when a tarpon is struck and dashes madly away, the line coming off the deck moves like a striking snake and often tangles. Extra big guides allow the tangled mess to flow through — standard-size guides would catch and break the leader.

The reel seat should be stout and not prone to work loose, allowing the reel to fall off during the battle.

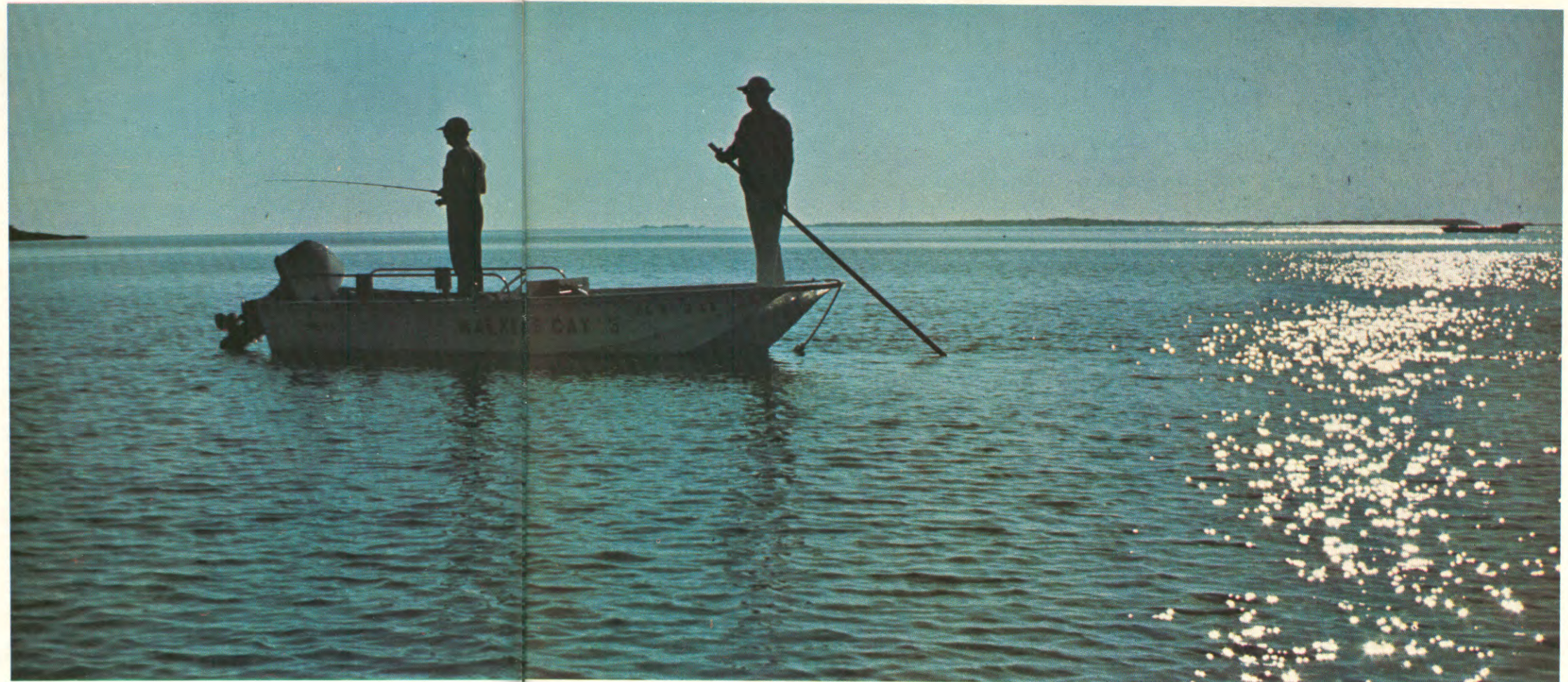
The most critical demand on a tarpon fly rod is that it be capable of lifting a giant fish. Once a huge fish has been completely tired and is brought to boatside, it usually remains several feet away, out of range of the man who is gaffing it. The angler must, with brute strength, lift the tarpon near the surface where the gaffer can strike the fish. It takes a rod of great lifting power to do this. Rods designed especially for this kind of fishing will lift a five-pound weight from the floor with six inches of leader extending beyond the tip — and there will still be some reserve power in the stick. Try lifting that much with your stoutest salmon or bass rod — you can't do it.

Few casts are made during a day to a tarpon, so a light rod that casts exceptionally well is not needed. Casts are only made to present the fly to a fish that has been sighted, which may be one to 20 times a day. A rod that is tiring to cast is really no problem, since repetitive casting is never done.

Reels have to be made for salt-water work, and should hold a minimum of 250 yards of 30-pound-test Dacron backing, plus fly line. The drag must be ultra-smooth. Most tarpon are fought from a leader that does not exceed 15 pounds. If the tarpon is running at top speed away from the boat and the drag lurches or catches, the fish will be lost. Salmon reels may do the job — some have, and some have failed. The most inexpensive reel on the market today that does an adequate job is the Pflueger Supreme 578 that lists for about \$60. If the angler can afford it he should buy a Seamaster or large Fin-Nor; both sell for roughly \$130. They are handmade and will serve anywhere in the salt.

For most fishing situations the angler should first select the line that will properly present the fly to the fish. Then, the rod should be matched to the line; not true for tarpon fishing. In tarpon fishing the reel and the rod are more important than the line, so the line must match the rod. Since large, powerful rods are used, rarely can a big tarpon angler use a line that is smaller than a WF-11. Some anglers have custom #12 or heavier lines made for them (#11-12 saltwater tapers are available commercially). Brilliant-colored lines, especially white ones, are bad. Light reflections from the line will spook a giant tarpon. Like most big salt-water fish when they get in the shallows, the tarpon is easily alarmed. Line reflections, or the slap a leader or fly down on these big fish, are poor techniques.

Flies — it is here that more misconceptions have arisen than anywhere else. I have fished with many of the great tarpon guides and some of the top anglers, such as Stu Apte. None of these people uses tarpon flies longer than four



Tarpon hunters still on the prowl in Florida Bay sunset

inches. The flies are sparse, a few saddles hackles at the rear, one or two wraps, palmer-style, around the hook shank, and that does it. Big, bulky flies you often see advertised are difficult to cast, sink too slowly and don't take tarpon as well as smaller flies. All flies used by these experts are constructed so that the wings are attached at the rear of the hook shank and won't foul on the cast.

During the giant tarpon season in South Florida, which runs from sometime in March through most of June, I take many good fresh-water fishermen from the north after these marvelous fish. I have never had one of these men who could do the job immediately. This is not meant unkindly, but is a simple fact. The northern angler must prepare himself for this demanding sport, and he can do much of it at home.

Let me give you an example: Doug Swisher, who co-authored the now-famous book, *Selective Trout*, is one of the two or three best trout fishermen I have ever fished with. He has been fly fishing most of his life, and among northern anglers he stands tall. His casting has deceived all sorts of difficult trout, under some really tough conditions. Certainly, he would be considered an expert in Michigan, where he lives.

A few years ago Doug came to southern Florida and he asked me to take him after giant tarpon. Naturally, I agreed, and on the way to Flamingo, in Everglades National Park, I tried to sneak in a few of the ideas that I knew he would have to understand to master this sport. Doug is unassuming, eager to learn, and the type of guy who delights in finding new challenges in fishing. He welcomes criticism, and I am sure that he will not be offended by the tale I'm going to tell.

We put my 18-foot Hewes Bonefisher boat in the water at the park ramp. This area of the Everglades lies in the north-east corner of Florida Bay. The area is mostly shallow, less than a foot of water at low tide, filled with grass carpeted mud flats. Channels lead in and out of the flats, and here and there are some basins that hold deeper water. We headed for Palm Key Basin, several miles away. Cutting through channels that only a local angler would know, we arrived at the east end of the basin and I killed the motor. I picked up the pole and stuck it into the soft, grassy bottom, holding the boat as I looked over the water. It was early in the morning, and even though it was March, the air was warm and the basin was calm and flat.

"There they are!" I whispered, although the tarpon couldn't have possibly heard me, they were 200 yards away.

I checked the drag on the reel and handed the outfit to Doug. The rod was a Great Equalizer, weighing nearly nine ounces — nearly four times as much as Doug's favorite trout stick. The line was a #12 weight-forward; the fly — a stainless steel 4/0 hook dressed with eight saddle hackles, tied at the rear.

Doug stripped line from the reel to the casting deck, which is a platform that is free of obstructions. Intent on stalking the fish I forgot to watch Doug. We were lucky and after a silent poling job we got within 40 feet of the school. The big green checkerboard backs of several tarpon rose above the surface as the giant fish came up to breathe.

"Throw the damn fly, quick!" I urged Doug.

He made several false casts, then shot the line — it went 20 feet and stopped. I thought he was standing on the running line. Instead, he had committed the basic sin of a freshwater fisherman new to giant tarpon fishing. When

Doug had stripped the line from the reel spool into the boat, readying himself for the fish, he dropped the forward part of the line on the deck first. As he pulled the rear running line from the spool it fell on top of the pile. When he made the cast to the fish, the forward section of the line had to come from underneath and it tangled, killing his cast. What he should have done was to strip off the line he needed from the reel, then make a false cast. When he retrieved the line, the rear portion would have fallen to the bottom of the pile. Simple — sure, but it's just one of the little things that a fresh-water fisherman would never think about.

Sheepishly, Doug now straightened the line properly and we advanced toward the rolling tarpon again. The first tarpon we saw was a loner, not 25 feet away from the boat. It came up, rolled and disappeared. Doug knew that you had to get the fly ahead of the fish, so he hurriedly made six or seven false casts and then shot the line. Again, no fish. Why? The ten or 15 seconds that Doug spent in false casting allowed the fish to swim far enough away that Doug had no firm idea exactly where the fish was. Chances are that after that long a period the tarpon was nowhere near where the fly landed.

If you are fishing a river and see an Atlantic salmon lying on a gravel bar, or resting in a tidal pool, you have plenty of time to get into position for the cast. The fish isn't going anywhere. I know that Doug has often found a rising trout, made several presentations that failed, then finally took time to assay the situation. Coming up with an answer may have taken five or ten minutes. But with his great skill and knowledge he figured it out and caught the fish.

That luxury doesn't exist when fishing for big tarpon. For

most shallow salt-water species you have about five or six seconds to get the fly on its way. If you think that's a long time, stand with the fly in your hand, count one thousand and one, one thousand and two, and see how many seconds it takes to get the fly into the air, make enough false casts to built line speed with a heavy fly, then make the forward cast.

Doug and I had another session. Again, being a great fisherman, he quickly understood the problem. I poled after the tarpon, for the school had moved several hundred yards away. Instead of working slowly, as they had been doing, the fish were swimming at a faster speed, and it was difficult to catch them.

Finally, I got within 70 feet and whispered for Doug to cast. He did. The fly fell thirty feet short. I raised hell with him, and poled after the moving fish as he stripped in line. I finally got within 60 feet, and Doug cast again. Remember, Doug is an expert at home and a superb fly caster with trout tackle. The cast fell 20 feet short. We repeated this several more times in the next half hour. I could never get closer than 60 feet of the moving fish. And, Doug's best cast was maybe 45 feet with the nine-ounce rod and number 12 line.

Finally, Doug had had enough. "Damn it," he said, "I can't cast that far with this boat pole of a rod and this rope you call a fly line, and I don't think anyone else can, either."

"Give me that rod," I said, as I stuck the boat pole in the bottom and tied the anchor rope to it.

Doug handed me the rod. I stripped the full 90 feet of line from the reel, made two false casts to extend the line, and shot the fly 90 feet over the water. Doug was astonished and then delighted.

I explained to Doug that the whole approach and concept of fly fishing in salt water is different than in fresh water. A trout fisherman, for example, attempts an unhurried and delicate cast, with a tiny fly attached to the thinnest leader he thinks he can use to fool the trout and still land the fish.

Salt-water fly fishing asks for none of this. The concept is almost the reverse. Most fish in salt water are on the move, rarely remaining more than a few moments in any one place. The most important thing to master in salt-water fly fishing is a fast delivery of the fly. If you cannot present the fly to fish within six or seven seconds, starting from scratch, then you're not going to catch many fish.

Second in importance, and actually about as important as speed, is accuracy. No matter how quickly you cast, if the fly doesn't land at the proper spot, you fail.

Leaders are also a different matter. Tarpon anglers use a 60- to 100-pound monofilament shock tippet right against the fly to prevent the rough mouth and gills of the tarpon from chaffing through the tippet. Solid or braided stainless steel wire is used on some sharp-toothed salt-water species.

Flies are big, wind resistant, built on heavy stainless steel hooks, and are tough to cast into the wind. Popping bugs range in size across the face of the lure from $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch to the size of a lemon.

The tackle is different, too. Lines have to be large enough to carry the fly to the quarry. For salt-water fly fishing a man needs two outfits. One that will throw a size eight or nine line — another that will toss a number 12, 13 or even a 15 line, if he can get it. Instead of double taper being the predominant lines, as with trout fishing, lines are almost always weight-forward in construction, with a specially concentrated short, heavy belly.

Because the bulky lines and heavy flies used in giant tarpon fishing offer such air resistance, I explained to Doug how important it was to learn to throw a tight loop. A narrow loop radically reduces the air resistance. Most trout fishermen throw a wide, slow-moving, inefficient loop, which is fine for that kind of fishing. But such a loop can't be thrown a long distance and it won't easily transport bulky flies.

Author Kreh with friend

Doug and I worked for more than two hours on tightening the loop and building line speed. Doug is a natural fisherman with great reflexes, and it was pure pleasure to work with him. He immediately began improving, and after two hours I figured he had already graduated well beyond the "tourist-angler" status.

We went looking for tarpon. Unfortunately, the fish must have been watching Doug and observed his new talents. They had disappeared. We never found another school of big fish that day, but Doug kept casting, asking questions and learning.

The next winter I gave a talk in Michigan at the Trout Unlimited annual state banquet. Doug picked me up at the airport, hustled me home and put me into a warm, heavy coat. We went outside — the wind was blowing 20 mph and it was colder than a mother-in-law's heart. Doug stripped off the entire line from the reel, and with a triumphant gleam in his eye he began to cast effortlessly 90 feet of fly line into the teeth of the chilly gale. I knew that he had done his homework, and I was actually more pleased that he was. I realized that he was now ready for those big tarpon.

There's some lessons to be learned from Doug's experience. I would rate Doug, as a fresh-water fisherman, above almost any man I've ever met. Yet, here was an obvious expert in his own field who wasn't prepared to properly fish for giant tarpon with a fly rod. Certainly, if someone as highly qualified as Doug didn't measure up, then the average angler is not going to.

Here are some recommendations that will ready you for battling giant tarpon on a fly rod. Learn how to throw a long line. A lot of writers will tell you that it's not necessary, or quote figures to prove that most people catch their fish within 50 feet of the boat — maybe that's because they can't cast any farther. But remember a very vital point. A cast with a 70-foot "potential" may only carry 30 feet *upwind*. And, you're not throwing a number 20 jassid or a Muddler Minnow — that 4/0 salt-water hook weighs something! Add a foot of wind resistant monofilament of 80- or 100-pound monofilament test to the fly and you further complicate the casting.

A tight loop will reduce air friction and increase line speed. Before you come down, learn to throw such a loop, with a nine-ounce rod and a number 11 or 12 line. Timing is a little different than with lighter tackle.

Practice speed casting. Stand on your lawn, holding the fly in your hand and allowing most of the belly section to hang outside the rod tip. Then see how quickly you can cast to various nearby targets.

Bear in mind that it takes a great deal of skill to take fresh-water trout from hard-fished waters. The fellow who has fished only in the salt will have a helluva time on a trout stream. He will cast too quickly, with a line and rod too heavy, and he won't know the first thing about matching the hatch.

This article is not meant to poke fun or discredit the fresh-water fly fishermen, for I'm one of them. But too many writers have misled people into thinking they can come to salt water with their regular tackle and boat these monsters. It just ain't so. ■

Bernard Kreh, who casts left-handed so people will call him "Lefty" instead of Bernard, is an accomplished fresh-water fly fisherman who now directs the Greater Miami Fishing Tournament, is associate editor of the *Florida Sportsman* magazine, and is one of the country's top saltwater fly-rodgers. Having run through Lefty's manual of arms, we can sympathize with Doug (No Hackle) Swisher, a recent rookie in Kreh's Irregulars.

