

Catch-and-release sturgeon fishing derby emphasized fun, education

By Dana Guzzetti
Correspondent

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The sixth annual Diamond Classic Catch & Release Sturgeon Derby is a wholesome outdoor experience for kids and adults, respectful of fish, and winners walk away with prizes, trophies and a big chunk of cash.

At the Jan. 28 event, 76 kids under age 16 signed up for free, and 411 adults paid \$25 to match their fishing skills and luck against the reportedly wily local sturgeon.

The challenge to the hundreds of participants from across the region was to catch and release as many sturgeon -- from 46-66 inches in length -- between 6 a.m. and 4 p.m., Saturday. Eight sport fishing captains served as roving weigh masters who were summoned by radio to verify each legal fish caught and safely released from participants in about 150 boats.

Weigh masters distributed a ticket for each fish, and all of the tickets went into a drawing for cash, trophies and prizes at the end of the day.

Children won a prize for participation and the top three who caught fish were awarded rod and reels. Winning adult anglers received a percentage of the more than \$10,000 collected in entry fees.

First-place winner Shawn St. Germain of Martinez took home \$3,586.

"I was lucky," he said. "We caught six sturgeon, and only one was a keeper."

Second-place finisher Chris Kane said, "It takes experience to find a fish that is feeding and catch it. You can find fish on your Fish Finder, but sturgeon is one of the most difficult fish to catch.

"There were a lot of good captains out there," Kane said. "Winning the drawing is luck."

He owns Outcast Sport Fishing and has been fishing out of Martinez and Berkeley for 17 years. However, some winners had never been in a derby before. Kane said the appeal of the Diamond Classic is the catch and release aspect of it.

"I tell people it is OK to catch and eat fish, but you don't need to kill every fish you catch. It takes too long for them to grow," he said.

Local sturgeon do not mature until they are 16 or 17 years old and may live to 100 years of age, according to Steve Talmadge, event co-founder and owner of Flash Fishing.

The Diamond Classic has more than doubled in size since it began six years ago.

"There were so many boats out that it looked like Fleet Week," said Lynda Abbott, former Derby winner and the www.diamondclassic.org webmaster.

Organizers have focused on introducing sport fishing to youth for the past two years.

"We want to teach kids to fish in an environmentally responsible and safe way while they are having fun," Talmadge said. "We are not worried about getting adults. They know about it. I had enough support from sponsors this year, so that even if they don't catch a fish, no kid has to go home without a prize and they have fun out there."

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Young people under 16 participating in the sixth annual Diamond Classic Catch & Release Sturgeon...

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Derby co-founder Jordona Santiago said, "It is really family friendly. You have a fair shot to win a prize and have fun with good people."

Volunteers, Talmadge and Santiago produce the event with help from the fishing community, local businesses and Harbor Master Craig Paulsen.

The 2012 derby featured a Friday night supper and a fishing seminar, a raffle for gear and fishing boat trips, and a review of the rules.

Charles Gibson, Contra Costa Community College District police chief, was also there to share the story of his near-death sport fishing experience. The boat capsized and sank in the Sea of Cortez last year. His story premieres as the biography segment, "I Survived" on A&E on Feb. 12.

Enthusiastic anglers crowded the Martinez Event Center to check out prizes, share tips and analyze the nature of sturgeon. Fishing techniques, theories and stories were laced with plenty of good humor.

One fisherman asked the expert panel of Bay Area fishing boat captains, "Why does god hate me? I have been fishing for two years and have only caught three shakers and one keeper." (A shaker is sturgeon less than 46 inches long, and those over 66 inches are not keepers.)

There was consensus that god did not hate him, but he should keep the following in mind: The sturgeon is a challenging fish. It is a good idea to fish with an experienced group to learn about leaders, bait, books and maps, learn to wait, and when someone fishes consistently, they catch more fish.

There was also discussion of the sturgeon's ability to detect electrical currents and whether or not to go where sturgeon are seen jumping.

Boats loaded with informed and optimistic anglers left before dawn Saturday to find fishing spots from the Carquinez Bridge to the crane at Port Chicago, east to the Suisun Bridge and Montezuma Slough and around the diminishing Mothball Fleet.

After spending a day out on the Strait, a sun-drenched stream of exhausted, but smiling sturgeon fishers flowed into the Martinez Yacht Club to compare experiences and determine the lucky derby winners.

"The real payoff is teaching kids to catch and release because it helps turn their lives in a positive direction," said Santiago, the former Martinez Bait & Tackle manager, who is currently completing psychology studies that will lead to work with troubled children.

luck of derby draw

Winners in Diamond Classic Catch & Release Derby:

Under age 16:

First place: Tanner Austin, 15

Second place: Alec La Pierre, 15

Third place: Hannah Rezentes, 11

Fourth place: Fariah Shah, 6

Under age 16 catching a legal sturgeon:

Tanner Austin, Corina Medinas, Brooke Sutton

Adults:

First place: Shawn St. Germain, Martinez, 49 inches, \$3,596

Second: Chris Kane, Martinez, 51 inches, \$2,569

Third: Victor Grajeda, Vallejo, 59 inches, \$2,055

Fourth: Darren Anderson, Fairfield, 58 inches, \$514

Fifth: Jason Russey, Pleasant Hill, 56 inches, \$514

Sixth: Mike Christie, Auburn, 46 inches, \$514

Seventh: Dave McKinnon, Vacaville, 64 inches, \$514

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Shawn St. Germain of Martinez took home the first-place prize of \$3,596 for his 49-inch "catch"...

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