

LOCAL FISHERMAN TAKES ON TOURNAMENT TRAIL



Local fishing guide and professional bass fisherman Roger Crafton and his friend Wes Thomas spent most of their childhood and teenage years fishing together in southern Indiana. Crafton moved to Florida over 25 years ago while Thomas remained in Indiana, yet both made careers of fishing.

All these years later, the two fishing buddies have teamed up again to participate in the first ever FLW Redfish Tournament Trail.

Stump Pass Marina in Englewood will host the \$1.9 million Wal-Mart FLW Redfish Tournament for the third tournament stop of the year on July 22 – 23, 2005. This is the inaugural year for the Wal-Mart FLW Redfish Series, the largest and most lucrative redfish tournament trail in the world. The final tournament of the East Division will be held in Titusville beginning August 19th.

Up to 150 teams will be competing for a share of as much as \$200,000 cash, including a top award of as much as \$50,000 for first prize in each of the four tournaments. The two-man teams compete for two days to determine the winner based on accumulated weight. Each team is after a limit of two redfish and each fish must fall within the 18- to 27-inch slot limit.

Through the years, Crafton and Thomas kept in touch and also fished other national tournament trails, but as competitors, not as a team. Fuji Film, Ranger Boats, Minnkota Trolling Motors and Evinrude Outboards sponsor both Crafton and Thomas, which helps to defray costs.

Both Crafton and Thomas recalled fishing together years ago and now.

“Wes was about four years older and I remember him telling me to wake him up in the morning to go fishing,” Crafton recalled. “He had a car and I would ride my bike about three miles and he wouldn’t be awake. He could have come and picked me up in his car, but he would have me ride all the way down there. But I didn’t care; I was excited to go

fishing. There were no ponds or lakes untouched,” Crafton added.

“The first tournament we fished was on the Ohio River. We had a stick steering bomber boat with a 40-horsepower motor and we rode about 20 miles down the river with all the other boats passing us. Things have changed a lot since then. They don’t allow stick steering now in tournaments because it is so dangerous.

“We did so many things together. There weren’t many ponds we didn’t fish or woods we didn’t go hunt in. But then we really didn’t see much of each other for years until we started fishing the tournament trails,” Thomas said. “My wife can’t believe we did all those things as kids and we are fishing together again after all these years. We both kind of taught each other about fishing, which type of baits or what kind of line to use. Roger has been helping me out a lot with catching redfish, since he has fished saltwater a lot more than I have. We still compete and try to one up each other, but we still help each other out. I guess you could say we’ve come full circle.”

The first Wal-Mart FLW Redfish Series, Eastern Division kicked off on March 4, 2005 in Sarasota. Crafton and Thomas ended that tournament in 42nd place, catching two fish weighing 13 pounds, 2 ounces.

The second tournament was held at Mayport Marine near Jacksonville on April 29, 2005. This time the Thomas-Crafton redfish team had a two-day catch of three fish weighing 13 pounds, 13 ounces, earning the team \$1,250 and landing them in 27th place overall. The top 50 teams from each of the Wal-Mart FLW Redfish Series two divisions, East and West, will advance into the no-entry-fee \$300,000 Wal-Mart FLW Redfish Series Championship in Mobile, Alabama, October 27 – 29 for a shot at \$100,000.

In qualifying events, teams will compete for two days to determine the winner based on accumulated weight. Every team that receives weight credit in a tournament earns points that determine angler standings.

Take off for the local July competition will be at 6 am each morning with weigh-in at Stump Pass Marina each day at 4 pm.

Coverage of the FLW Redfish Series will air as part of “FLW Outdoors” on Fox Sports Network on Sundays at 11 a.m. EST. Check local listings for exact air dates.