





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.

