

So you are new to fishing the greater Jacksonville area.

While I am no expert, I have learned some good information that will help the novice. Part 1 is all about "NUMBERS"

So you are new to fishing the greater Jacksonville area. Here are some tips and hints that will help you actually catch fish.

I have only been fishing here for the last 8 years. I moved back after 30 years in Northern California, where I was considered an exceptionally good fisherman. I got here and I couldn't even hook the bottom and lose a weight or hook. The members of the Jacksonville Offshore Sport Fishing Club have taught me a lot about fishing here, and now I lose gear every time out, and occasionally catch a fish or two.

For starters, here is the skinny on the numbers. Numbers are the GPS coordinates for the reefs, ridges, drop-off's, live bottom and wrecks that we fish. Numbers are like a religion out here. If you are invited on someone else's boat, it is considered VERY RUDE to bring your hand held GPS unit and copy or capture their numbers. One charter boat has a big 2" X 12" board mounted right beside the cabin door. On that board are about 12 or 15 hand held GPS & Cell Phone units with a large spike driven right through them. The Captain points out that if he catches you using a GPS or Phone, to capture his numbers, that is where it will end up!

If you ask where someone caught a fish, you will get an answer like "East of here." or as they put their finger in the corner of their mouth and pull out and up "Right here in the corner of the mouth." Lots of people believe that they are the ONLY one with the numbers for that secret spot or spots they like to fish, and they defend them with their life. They will give you the shirt off their back, or their last dollar, but don't mess with their "Numbers".

My thoughts are that there are no "private" numbers, if you found it, then the odds are that at least 10 other people have that spot in their GPS's. On the other hand, there are people here off Florida that think they own their secret number, and when they are anchored up and fishing, you had better stay a mile or more away or they will just about start shooting. They will throw weights, cuss you over the radio, run over your lines and be down right nasty. SO.... If someone is anchored near where you are planning on going, when you get near, call them on the VHF and ask if they mind you fishing near them, **on numbers you have**. Usually that will work, and who knows, you might make a life-long friend.

The JOSFC has a book of Numbers that we sell and give away in our raffles. (*It is worth getting just for the history of the reefs. Very interesting reading. The Histories have been compiled by the Club Historian Charlie Hamaker. "Jax Wreck" was a WW II Tanker that was sunk by a German U-Boat, and could be seen from shore burning. Charlie has interviewed BOTH the Tanker Captain, and the U-Boat Captain!*) The numbers are from over 11 years ago now, and at that time the GPS units used a map datum of WGS 73. BUT they were in the process of switching to WGS 84. That is the map datum that the book's numbers are done in. Now most GPS units do an automatic set-up and get it at WGS 84. HOWEVER some still set things up with

the old WGS 73. You need to check your set-up under Map Datum and make sure it is on WGS 84. That will put you on most of the numbers. If you use WGS 73 you can be as far as a third of a mile away from the actual spot. About a quarter of the GPS numbers were converted from the old LORAN TD's, and while close, you can still be 50 yards or more off. **The trick is go to a number, if you don't find anything, start a spiral out from that spot, and 95%+ of the time you will find something within 5 or 6 circles. Mark it and then erase the old number that didn't have anything under it.**

A GPS unit will take you BACK to the exact spot you marked on it, but using numbers from another GPS unit on your GPS and you can be off 10 to 50 feet.

NOW, over the last 10 years, some of the spots are ridges that run for 10 to 50 yards long or longer, and where we had a number marked has sanded in, and the other end of that ridge or drop-off is now uncovered. Others are what we call "Live Bottom" and don't really show any structure on the bottom. **You need to learn how to read your bottom machine, and know which is hard bottom and which is soft or sand or mud.** Over the years, some of the hard bottom spots have sanded over, and opened up hard bottom 30 to 50 yards away. If you find a hard bottom, nothing will show at first but if you drop a bait on it quite often you will see it start to show fish, after you start fishing it.

If you want some good current numbers, the Club also has Chart we sell, and have at the club house. That Chart was updated in 2008, and every number on it was physically verified with a GPS unit. Bring your book, and copy the numbers from a chart!

Still talking about numbers.

Always have a pencil and note book, and watch your bottom scope as you are trolling or running to another spot. When you go over a reef or show fish on the bottom, circle back and check it and if it looks good, hit your "Mark" or MOB button, then mark in your book roughly where "Waypoint # XX" is so you can later name it and copy the numbers into your book. Your "Book" is your backup for when you lose your electronics! Your "Book" is a book of numbers that you have found that are not on a chart or in a commercial book. Remember, your GPS is (A) a computer, and (B) an electronic device being used around saltwater. **It is going to fail,** crash, lose all its data, go Bottoms up, it is going to lose every waypoint you have stored in it at some time, so keep a hardcopy "Book" of your numbers!

Part 2 is all about "Anchoring."

In this part I will give you the other critical part of actually catching fish, and that is anchoring!

You need to realize some of the spots are no bigger than your boat, so you have to learn how to anchor to put your boat on the spot. It sounds easy, but it does take some practice to get it right. I have been with experienced club Captains that have re-anchored 3 or 4 times before they are happy and we could catch fish.

I have been on boats where the people on one side of the boat were catching fish, and the people on the other side were just drowning bait. Anchoring is that critical sometimes.

The first thing you need to do before you go is make 3 or 4 "Float jugs" (*An empty Clorox or similar jug with a light nylon line with about a 5 pound weight on it.*) with lines for the different depths. (*Don't forget to mark the line length on the bottom of the jug.*) When you mark a spot on your bottom machine, toss the jug with the right length line for the depth behind your boat to get it as close to the spot as possible. You want the jug floating as close to directly over the spot as you can get it. Offshore there is always a current caused by the wind and tide. You can drift for a couple of minutes to get a line on your GPS to find the anchor lay. Go directly up current and drop anchor (*If in doubt as to the direction, Call Captain George Strate on the Mayport Princess, on Channel 6 and he will give you the compass heading, or "Anchor Lay" to use.*) and then back down to your jug. **Don't drift, power back to your jug**, stopping short and making sure that your anchor has set, or is holding, then let out line until you are showing the bottom on your scope, or you are by your jug.

You can adjust your location by turning your engine or rudder to port or starboard to make the boat move some in the current. You can also tie the anchor line off on the port or starboard cleat and that will adjust your location in the current. You can also adjust your anchor line by letting some out or power up and pull forward some to shorten up your line.

Another thing I learned that surprised me is that you can fish 10 spots within a 500 yard radius, 9 of them will be holding Grunts, and Sharks, and the 10th will have Grouper, Snapper, Trigger fish and good fish all over it. So if you are not catching good fish at one spot after 15 minutes, MOVE, try that other spot only 100 yards away. It just might have good fish on it. Some times the difference between catching Sharks or good fish is switching from fishing the low side of a ridge or drop-off to fishing on the high side or vica-versa.

Finally, go fishing with other members or take a longtime member fishing with you and pay attention to what they say!

That will get you started . . . Bill