



Words:  
Brian Irwin

«ABOVE»

Adult tarpon  
and jack crevalle  
lurking beneath the  
marina docks in  
Islamorada, Florida.  
Photo: Matt Jones.

GRANDPA HAD A 32-FOOT WELLCRAFT cabin cruiser moored in a slip just outside his retirement apartment towers in Delray Beach, Florida. He was a bait fisherman, who casted away his former life from the washed-up mill town of Steubenville, Ohio and settled here, on the water, where he could fish greater horizons.

His boat, *Liquid Assets*, dangled from whippings, and two tarpon resided underneath. They were probably 100 pounders.

The first time I fed these fish, I didn't use a fly. I used a tuna salad sandwich. My cousin Matt and I would play in the boat, lean over the gunwale, and literally feed the 110-pound minnows peanuts, chips, and our sandwiches. My father played shuffleboard just across the green, but

if he knew we were hand-feeding what are arguably the most prized fly-rod gamefish, he would have thrown a hook into the harbor and wrestled the king.

Matt and I kept our tarpon a secret. We were two cousins in cahoots. I was learning how to flyfish at the time, but the idea of fishing for such a beast never crossed my mind. A feat so immense seemed like science fiction to my young mind. It's impossible to catch that *on fly*.

I didn't think much about tarpon for years. Later, I occasionally thought back to those bizarre fish and how they ate my lunch and I would look up tarpon in a family heirloom—my father's old copy of *McCLane's Standard Fishing Encyclopedia*. It was more worn and tattered than our family dictionary, encyclopedia set, or even the Good Book itself. I spent entire nights at

a shallow desk reading about roosterfish or fly-pattern namesakes. *McCLane's* had a great section on tarpon. Complete with a picture of one jumping. But again, luring, hooking, and landing a fish weighing more than 100 pounds seemed impossible to do on a fly.

My experience at the time was limited to hauling green, slimy largemouths out of my barber's pond in rural Maryland. My barber, whose name coincidentally was actually John Barber, opened his farm pond to my father and I every Sunday following a Saturday haircut. Pay for a haircut and you earn a pass to fish his thick-water, algae-infested, cattle-field septic tarn.

Grotesque water, it was saturated with hydroflora fibers—a stagnant slurry of algae and warm fluid cradled in a small depression at the base of a cow field. Deerhair buggers and poppers were the only options on Barber's pond. Wet flies dredged up a heaping tablespoon of algae with every cast. We didn't look for feeding fish. Open pockets of water were our casting targets.

A thrashing three-pound bass on a five-weight rod felt like a spastic combat boot, accentuated by a tangled sphere of algae twine with each run for cover. But I learned from Barber's pond. I learned how to hit holes. That pond contained so much vegetation that if you didn't place a fly in a specific pocket, it sat atop the grass. Hit the holes and a bigmouthed fish would emerge from the deep and suck up the bug like a Hoover.

When the need for moving water called, I clumsily pranced up the round boulders of the blue-ribbon streams of the Catoctin Mountains, throwing buggers into plunge pool after plunge pool. My waders were hand-me-downs and my wading shoes were Chuck Taylors. I spent all day fishing through those hills, literally skunked for three full years before catching an honest fish. Prior to that, I'd only foul hooked a rainbow that had one eye.

Ten years later, I finally came back to saltwater fly-fishing and found a steep learning curve. This wasn't trout fishing; this was big lines with big rods against big winds, but eventually my accuracy improved. I struggled with the open water and its lack of texture. The ocean is flat, and the flats are flatter. There aren't any holes on the surface. Your bullseye isn't an eddy awaiting a perfect cast, it's a moving target, and, in most cases, like with tarpon fishing, it's under the surface.

**THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS** are stunning. Half-moon bays ring the islands and cliffs separate the

idyllic beaches. Heavily vegetated hills rise out of the azure sea like giant, fuzzy gumdrops and create coves that appeal to immense schools of resident tarpon.

The dark water was a giant school of one-inch bait-fish pressed up against the bank that fluctuated and shifted whenever one of the dozens of giant tarpon rolled into the bait ball. These roaming patches were our targets—literally moving holes in the water.

On my first shot, I hauled back against the wind, and fired a Clouser Minnow just ahead of a hole and attracted a four-foot fish to the edge of the bait ball where he rolled and disappeared. My heart pounding, I shot again, this time firing the fly deep into my right elbow.

My guide snapped off the hook with a pair of rusty pliers and ordered me back to the bow with a new fly. The fish were twisting and breaching, seemingly unaffected by the fact that the edge of the bait ball drifted closer to our anchored boat. I pulled up the line, snapped the stiff rod and launched the fly at the edge of the hole. The hole turned and swam away but I retrieved slowly and pessimistically. As the fly exited the bait ball, a 35 pound tarpon opened its hinge-like mouth and latched onto it with a swift head thrash.

The tarpon headed out of the school, took a strong 10-second run, and then eased pressure on my rod just before shooting out of the water like a cruise missile, thrashing four feet in the air. A lifetime later, I angled the exhausted fish to the boat's side, the guide freed the hook from the bony plate, and slid it back into the water. The fish glided to the bottom and rested. Someday, it may make another boyhood dream come true.

**MY OLDEST SON** is close to the age I was when I learned how to flyfish, and I took him to the overstocked pond behind the local farm museum. He flipped out some line over the cattails and into the dark water.

"Now, Andy, take your other hand and pull the line back in, dragging the fly so those trout think it's food they have to chase."

A fish rose to the surface off to the right, leaving rings and a bubble.

"Andy, let's throw our fly over there. Pretend those rings surround a hole and you have to cast your fly into it, just like playing basketball at home."

He didn't hit the bull's eye, but landed just on the outside of the rippling rings. With that, a tiny emerald brook trout tore through the surface, grabbed his fly and pulled the line tight. ☞