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SPECK-ULATION RAMPANT AT RODEO: RUMORS OF RECORD FISH SPICE SLOW DAY AT DOCKS

By Aaron Kuriloff, Staff writer

Big Trout

They whispered about it all morning at the 79th Grand Isle Tarpon Rodeo.

"Did ya'll hear about the fish?"

TV news had said the speckled trout weighed 14 pounds. A trout that big didn't break the state record so much as devour it like bait. TV said the fish came in after the rodeo scales closed at 8 p.m. Thursday. By 4 a.m. the next morning, anglers had formed three lines before the aerated tanks at Bridge Side Marina, buying live shrimp, minnows and croaker. Speck baits.

By 6 they lined the beaches, piers and seawalls. An armada joined the chase. Outboards roared. The big trout became The Fish that Launched a Thousand Boats.

At 8 a.m. officials opened the weigh station at the Sand Dollar Marina for the second day of competition at the state's most prestigious fishing tournament. They waited for the big trout to arrive.

At 4:20 p.m., they were still waiting.

"I even started the paperwork on a state record application," said Martin Bourgeois, a fisheries biologist and tournament weighmaster. "I was thinking this guy was coming in any minute."

On shore, the temperature climbed to 98 degrees. The fan cooling the weigh station burned out. Competitors brought in a few wahoo, some large drum. Three tarpon hit the dock, none large enough to take the lead. So the weigh-in crew kept waiting for the big trout.

"If you'd caught a fish like that, you'd want to be recognized right away," Bourgeois said. "The longer you wait, the more weight the fish is going to lose."

That afternoon as the wind continued to die, the three weighmasters settled into a slow afternoon. With the weather optimal for evening fishing, they expected anglers to fish well into the night. The phone rang. Someone asked what the first-place speck weighed. The card on the leader board read "6 pounds."

"This big trout thing sounds kind of bogus," the caller said.

Several couples drove in from Lockport to see it. They left unsatisfied.

"The ghost trout," Bourgeois said.

The wind died. The sun set. The day's last anglers unloaded their catch. Few positions changed. Terry St. Cyr's 48-pound red, caught Thursday, remained the only record fish on the board.

At 8 p.m., the scales closed. No 14-pound speck arrived.

Grady Lloyd, who has been working the scales at Grand Isle for 36 years, shook his head.

"It's not going to show today, and I'd be surprised if it showed tomorrow," he said. "But I keep up hope. Hope is the greatest Christian virtue."

"The unseen trout. That would just shut this rodeo down. It would be the biggest thing in the tournament. Without a doubt."

He smiled.

"This has all the ingredients of a fish story."

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