
THE CHICAGO CARP CLASSIC

by Craig Clayton



Backleads essential!

In the wake of our British Carp Championships and the World Carp Classic at Madine in France, both of which are fairly new competitions; is a relatively little publicised carp tournament run by our cousins across the Atlantic.

The Chicago Carp classic has now been running for six years, and is held along the Chicago

River which runs straight through the metropolis of Chicago itself before it spills into the massive Lake Michigan.

Now, for those who are not familiar with the growing carp movement in the United States, the equivalent of our Carp Society is the C.A.G - The Carp Anglers Group, which has around one thousand members spread across

North America, along with a handful of members like myself who live in Europe.

Each year at the end of September around one hundred members make the pilgrimage to Chicago to compete in the Chicago Carp Classic, which will include a few ex-pats such as Bernie Haynes and Nigel Griffin who are now based in the States in carp-related businesses; and this year there was a representative from Germany in the shape of Mike Koster and a few anglers from good old Blighty; including myself and Max Cottis. Max, representing Fox International, came with a battery of equipment to sell to the eager North American carpers, and was accompanied by his lovely wife Pat.

The competition is simple. The river is fished in three sections; each of which has a section winner on the day, and the overall champion with the biggest weight.



A passing car!



*Lake Michigan
½ mile
downstream.*

Another prize is the Chicago Carp King, which goes to the biggest fish of the day. Realistically, you are fishing for doubles with the possibility of a twenty and an outside chance of something bigger. Four good doubles would probably win the tournament, and a good twenty would probably win the biggest fish prize. However, with Lake Michigan only half a mile away, the stock in the river is changing throughout the year, and anything is possible

in terms of size and numbers of fish present on the day.

Many years ago the Chicago River was generally regarded as a sewer which drained into Lake Michigan, but this was addressed by treating sewerage and running it into the Illinois River, leaving the Chicago River extremely clean and now filled with fish. The banks of the river are concrete and depths are fairly uniform throughout the city centre with a shelf each side of about twelve

feet depth which extends about ten to fifteen yards, dropping down to about twenty feet in the middle to accommodate large boat traffic.

I had decided to arrive in the Windy City a day early to meet up with a good friend from Phoenix, Brian Nordberg, who is possibly Arizona's only serious carp fisherman!

The idea was to have a days practice on the river before the main event, and gain as much knowledge as possible on how to extract its resident carp population. This proved extremely useful as I realised what I'd be p against when my days fishing results were as follows. Four fish hooked, three lost to cut-offs from snags and one-cut off by a passing boat! The Chicago river is a very busy highway of boats during the day, with tugs, pleasure cruisers, barges, gin palaces, yachts and even the odd car to get in your way. With the most productive area tending to be the far bank which is about 60-70 yards away, the importance of using backleads



Temporary village set up by C.A.G.

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Max Cottis plays a fish to the net.

think I used to complain about noisy ducks!

After a days practice, I'd managed to loose a mountain of leads, backleads, hooks not to mention most of my treasured Fireline which I use as main line, and is bloody expensive in the U.K! Luckily for me, the C.A.G have an annual meeting the evening before the match where

properly cannot be stressed enough.

When playing a fish, inevitably a boat will pass by requiring the angler to immerse the rod vertically down so at least half of the rod is underwater to keep the line below the underside of a boat. This however brings the line into contact with snags along the river bed and inevitably across zebra mussels! The worst scenario is getting a screaming run just as a boat passes by. The line lifts off the bottom and along the boat's bottom and into the propellers - lovely!

Another shock to the system is being located in the centre of a large city, surrounded by

Craig Clayton with an average river carp.



skyscrapers and concrete, with constant noise from cars, helicopters, police sirens, boats etc. I grew up on the lower Thames but this was something else, and to

you can buy tackle and accessories. Fox International was well represented and Max Cottis managed to relieve me of a small wedge of dollars, and I was ready for the next few days tournament.

Bait for this competition is kindly supplied by the organiser, Paul Pazalla, who generously throws a 'Maize Boil' Barbecue for out of town visitors such as myself. Whilst huge amounts of maize and a smattering of hemp boil away, guests partake in a few 'Hydraulic Sandwiches' from the local brewery, and enjoy the superb hospitality our American brethren are famous for.

The match itself was well organised and efficiently marshalled by stewards along the three sections of river. Like many matches, some areas which were expected to produce, didn't and other less fancied parts of the river did. The match was won from an area that didn't produce the previous year, with a four fish

Brian Nordberg with typical sized fish.





Winner, Gary Gillis (centre) with match organiser Paul Pazalla (left) and presented by C.A.G. editor Mike Keyes.

bait is maize, and 99% of anglers adopt their baiting strategy around this with hemp and various flavouring and sweeteners to the maize. These fish are far from being bait or rig shy, and I would imagine most food sources would be accepted, indeed, last years competition was won on boilies.

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“Unlike most of North America, the Chicago media and populace in general have accepted carp fishing.”

catch total of 46½lb to American carper, Gary Gillis, from Michigan.

It was interesting to note that despite a very low representation from Britain in the competition, all the section winners were Brits, or ex-Brits. Yours truly even managed a section win of four fish for a total of 29½lb. A total of 124 fish were caught for a weight of 804lb which shows that the average size was not massive but a fish of 22¼lb was caught during

Yours truly sneaks in a section win.



the match to secure the Chicago Carp King Trophy. All fish by the way are commons, but there are mirrors present in the river and lake system.

As mentioned earlier, the going

the Chicago media and populace in general have accepted carp fishing, and seem educated to accept it as a legitimate form of fishing alongside bass and trout. Even the local TV station covered the match for the evening news magazine and the sunday papers had reports in the sports sections. Full marks must go to the Carp Anglers Group for not only staging a great competition/festival for their members, but also in promoting the species to the American public, who have traditionally considered carp to be unworthy to be fished for.

I have fished in many parts of the States for carp and am usually met with polite ridicule and laughter, but in Chicago, Illinois this is not the case. The inquisitive passers by being genuinely interested in this form of fishing and seem hungry to learn more. Talks given on the bank during



A brace of Marina caught fish.



Nice common of 21½lb from Marina.

I personally would like to thank all the people involved in the Chicago Carp Classic who made me so welcome, and if the wife can be persuaded, I'll be back for more next year.

Craig Clayton



Enormous fish of 37+lb to Max Cottis.

the practice day by Mike Koster from Germany and Nick Young of Leeda-Carp Match Fishing were well attended by eager Americans keen to try this form of fishing. Of course the Chicago River is not the only place to catch carp in the Chicago area, and of great interest to the specimen hunter are the many marinas and harbours along the banks of Lake Michigan. These areas hold some large fish and are only just being discovered by carp anglers.

On a short morning session before returning home to England I fished with Brian Nordberg and Max Cottis in one such marina where we all landed commons in excess of 20lb, topped by a magnificent fish of 37lb to one of Max's rods. The potential of these areas is clearly immense if anyone decided to fish them on a regular basis, and most of these areas are a short taxi ride from the city.

Obviously Chicago, and indeed all the other cities on the Great Lakes are a long way from England, and I doubt many will make the long journey from Europe, not to mention the expense of it all. However, it is worth noting that Mr Branson is starting flights to the Windy City of Chicago, which will probably drive down prices to a more affordable level in the future.

The growth of carp fishing continues to grow on a global basis and areas in the States along with many other countries, are just waiting to be discovered.

