

Carlson lands cash on fishing Web site

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Rockford, Ill. -

A local orthopedic surgeon isn't ready to quit his day job, but his bank account has grown thanks to a new online fishing tournament.

Dr. Mark Carlson earned \$3,000 in the first of six weekly tournaments on BountyFishing.com.

The Montreal-based Web site offers cash to the top anglers in eight categories.

Fishermen pay a \$7 one-day entry or a \$19 weeklong fee and can fish anywhere. First place pays \$1,000, second \$200 and third \$100. Additional cash prizes are given to top anglers at the end of the season.

The total payoff exceeds \$125,000, organizers say.

Carlson initially was skeptical about the site.

"I looked at it and thought I wasn't going to give them any money. That's crazy," he said. "But the first week was free so I tried to catch a smallmouth."

He didn't hook a smallmouth but instead boated the winning walleye — a 24-incher he caught in Ontario.

The next week he won a first-place check for a 23-inch largemouth bass out of Windsor Lake in Loves Park. Four weeks later he won with a 52 1/4-inch muskie from Ontario.

To verify lengths, anglers photograph themselves with their fish, and take a photo of the fish next to a ruler and that week's special numeric code written on a piece of paper. The photos are e-mailed to the tournament Web site.

BountyFishing.com staffers use state-of-the-art forensic imaging computer software to examine the digital photos' pixels and determine the fish's length. They also can determine if the fish was alive when the photo was shot, and if the photo had been altered.

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The online tournaments were the brainchild of Richard Shafter, a 58-year-old Canadian entrepreneur.

“I was looking over the 2001 U.S. Fish and Wildlife survey and I was blown away by the size of the (fishing) industry,” he said in a telephone interview last week.

“It really caught me off guard. More people fish than play tennis and golf combined. There are over 40 million recreational fishermen in the U.S. alone, taking off 500 million days for fishing a year. It’s huge.”

He also discovered hundreds of thousands of fishing tournaments are held each year around the world.

Shafter then came up with the idea to provide online tournaments that all anglers in North American could compete in. He gathered a panel of experts, such as fishing guides, fish biologists and forensic experts, to develop the format and verification system.

The first weekly tournament began July 2.

The site has 2,500 members who have fished in at least one tournament, said Shafter, who promotes his venture with Web ads.

The number of participants each week has been in the hundreds.

Carlson said the level of competition has increased since the first week.

“I won with a 24-incher because there weren’t many people doing it. Now it takes about a 30-incher (to win),” he said.

The user-friendly site provides photos and information about the winners, plus forums and schedules.

Carlson has found a benefit of the site besides the cash prizes. The verification system provides an “honest” database, where anglers can learn where big fish can be caught.

“These aren’t just fish stories,” said Carlson, who is fifth on the site’s list of money winners.

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