MLF
MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING

Bass Fishing™

DECEMBER-JANUARY 2025



THINGS WE LOVED IN 2024

+

- DAMIKI RIG TRUTHS
- THE-MUST-HAVE BAITS OF THE 2000s
- TACKLE STORAGE SOLUTIONS
- THE LEGEND OF DALE HOLLOW



AVAILABLE NOW!

NEW V6 - 200 HP



SUZUKI MARINE 5 YEAR LIMITED WARRANTY

SUZUKI MARINE

5 YEAR LIMITED WARRANTY applies to qualifying purchases of Suzuki outboard motors sold and delivered to the retail purchaser, for pleasure (non-commercial) use only, from April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2025. See Suzuki Limited Warranty for additional details.Suzuki, the "S" logo, and Suzuki model and product names are Suzuki Trademarks or ®. © 2024 Suzuki Marine USA, LLC. All rights reserved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECEMBER-JANUARY 2025 | VOL. 24 | ISSUE 1



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

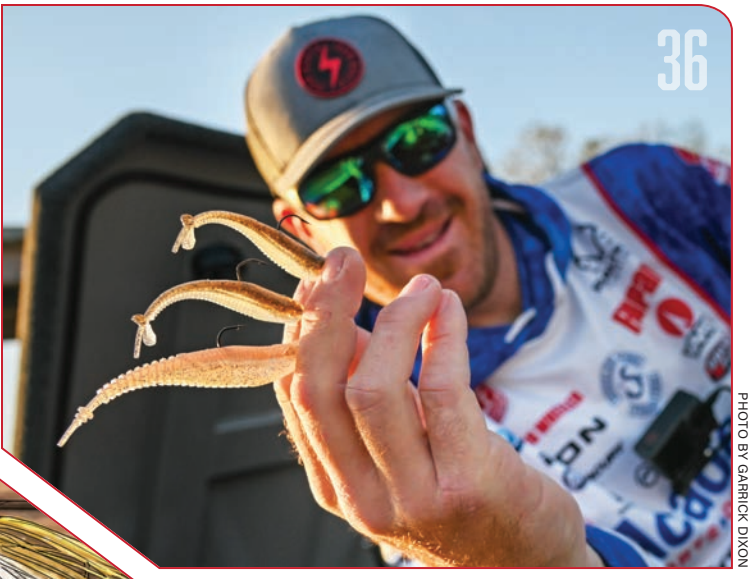


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER



COLUMNS

20 BALOG ON BASS FISHING
Putting their heads together
— Joe Balog

24 THE TINKERER
Make yourself stand out
— Sean Ostruszka

COVER ART BY
BRANDON ROWAN

FEATURES

28 THE 24 BEST OF '24
Standout storylines from the year that was
— Mitchell Forde

36 THE SIMPLICITY OF THE DAMIKI RIG
This simple rig is changing the way we fish.
— Michael Pehanich

44 THE MUST-HAVE BAITS OF THE Y2K ERA
The sickest Western lures of the early 2000s
— Rob Newell

52 DALE HOLLOW: STILL LEGENDARY
Tennessee's smallmouth fishery part of the Bill Dance Signature Lakes program
— Joel Shangle

THE JUICE

56 PRODUCT REVIEW:
ABU GARCIA ZATA LP BAITCAST REEL
— Matt Williams

58 GRADUATE YOUR JIGHEAD MINNOW GAME
Two pros share components and tips that can make you more effective at mid-strolling
— Tyler Brinks

63 GEARING UP:
TACKLE STORAGE SOLUTIONS
— Mitchell Forde

TOURNAMENTS

70 CO-ANGLERS OF THE YEAR
— Mitchell Forde

72 TOURNAMENT REPORT
— Mitchell Forde

75 GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES
— Mitchell Forde

76 FISHERY SPOTLIGHT: LAKE CONROE
— Tyler Brinks

80 Q&A: HAYDEN MARBUT
— Matt Naber

83 THE BASS FEDERATION
— Mitchell Forde

We reserve the right to refuse any material we feel is not in the best interest of MLFLW, LLC, (DBA"MLF") and its members/subscribers. The items advertised herein are warranted by the advertiser. Bass Fishing is published six times per year by MLF, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025, 270.252.1000. Kathy Fennel, Executive Vice President and General Manager of MLF. Copyright 2025 by MLF. All rights reserved. None of the content of this publication may be reproduced, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Advertising rates available on request. We welcome manuscripts but will not be held responsible for loss of manuscripts, photos or other materials. All manuscripts should include a self-addressed stamped envelope. *Bass Fishing (ISSN 1543-6179) is published six times a year (February/March, April/May, June/July, August/September, October/November, December/January) by MLF, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025. Periodicals Postage Paid at Benton, KY, and at additional mailing office. Rates: one year (6 issues) $10.00; two years (12 issues) $20.00; three years (18 issues) $30.00. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Bass Fishing, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025. For questions regarding your subscription call 270.252.1000 Monday thru Friday, 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. CT.*

Printed in the U.S.A.



ANCHORED IN POWER.

Engineered for power and performance, the **ATLAS™ Jack Plate** by T-H Marine delivers unmatched speed, strength, and reliability for the heaviest outboard engines.

Shop all performance products here: **thmarine.com/MLFpower**

MARINE

MLF Bass Fishing™

MLF *Bass Fishing* Magazine

VICE PRESIDENT, DIGITAL MEDIA & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF | *Joel Shangle*
MANAGING EDITOR | *Mitchell Forde*
PRODUCTION MANAGER AND GRAPHIC DESIGNER | *Michelle Dowling*
LEAD DESIGNER AND ILLUSTRATOR | *Brandon Rowan*
GRAPHIC DESIGNER AND ILLUSTRATOR | *Phoenix Moore*
FIELD EDITOR | *Matt Williams*

MajorLeagueFishing.com

SENIOR MANAGER, WEBSITE EDITORIAL | *Jody White*
SENIOR CONTENT MANAGER | *Justin Onslow*
MANAGER, DIGITAL CONTENT PROGRAMMING | *Matt Naber*
DIGITAL CONTENT MANGER AND PHOTO EDITOR | *Maggie Russell*
CONTENT PRODUCER AND EDITOR | *Rob Matsuura*
VIDEO CONTENT PRODUCER AND EDITOR | *Jarrett Johnson*

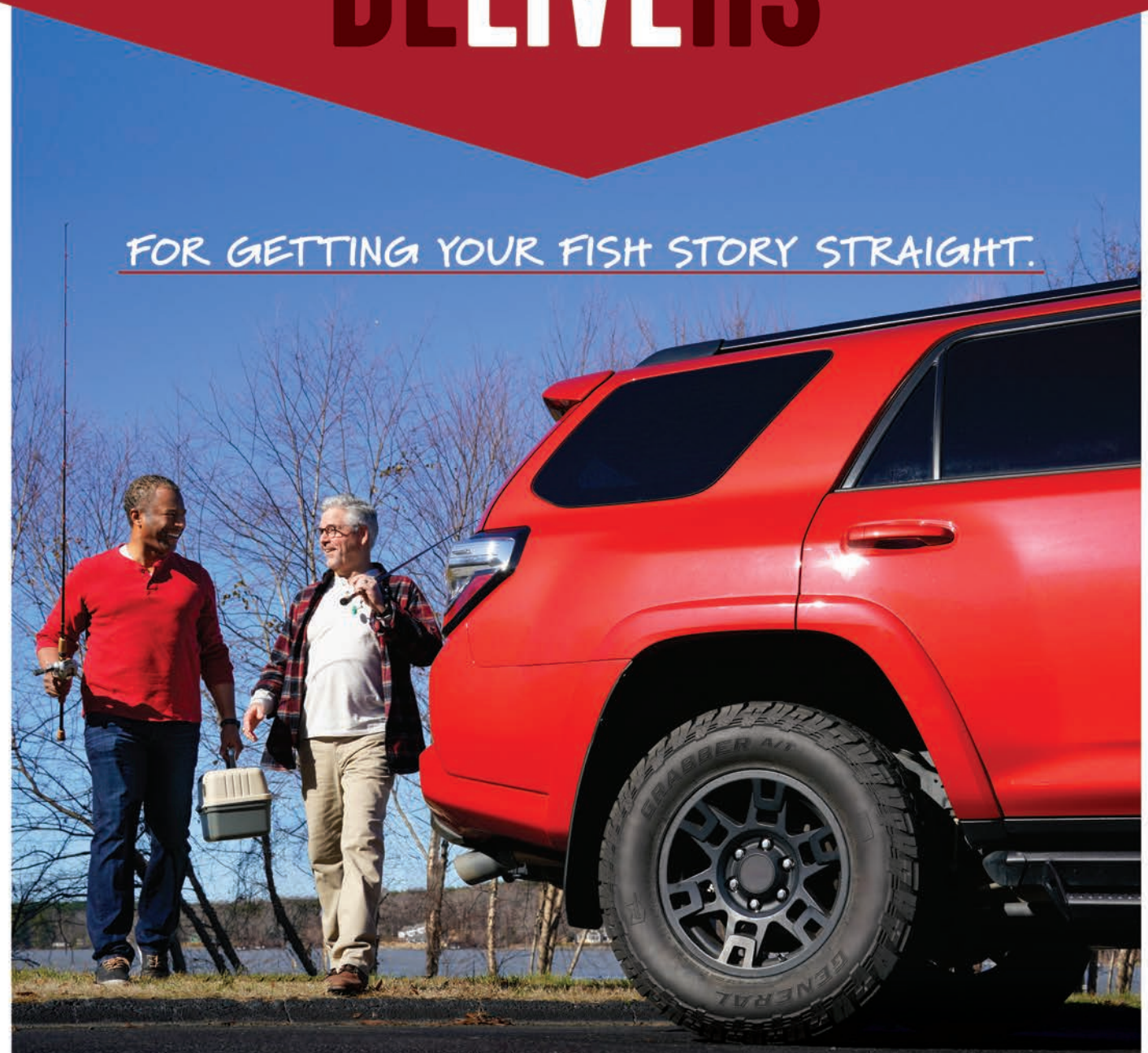
Major League Fishing

PRESIDENT AND CEO | *Boyd Duckett*
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT AND GENERAL MANAGER | *Kathy Fennel*
PRESIDENT, SALES | *Jim Wilburn*
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, SALES | *Tom Lawrence*
VICE PRESIDENT, OPERATIONS | *Dave Washburn*
VICE PRESIDENT, SPONSORSHIP AND SALES DEVELOPMENT | *Chris Bork*
VICE PRESIDENT, SPONSORSHIP AND SALES DEVELOPMENT | *Jake Wittkop*
VICE PRESIDENT, SPONSORSHIP AND SALES DEVELOPMENT | *Michael Mulone*

SENIOR DIRECTOR OF ACCOUNT SERVICES | *Jenn Sonnek*
jenn.sonnek@majorleaguefishing.com
651.235.4770

GENERAL TIRE GT™

DELIVERS



At General Tire, we know making the most of every moment can be demanding. That's why we make tires that deliver the right combination of performance, durability, style and value for the tire experience you need. For whatever life demands, **General Tire Delivers.**

SCAN HERE LEARN MORE

GENERALTIRE.COM

#GTDELIVERS

CELEBRATING THE LOCAL LEGENDS AS WE END '24



When we went to work on this issue of *MLF Bass Fishing* magazine's cover package – "24 Things We Loved in '24" – our contributors naturally engaged in some hearty debate about which moments qualified as being among the 24 best. There was a lot to discuss: Major League Fishing runs over 250 tournaments a year, and there were a LOT of genuinely interesting, impressive, list-worthy performances at all levels of competition.

I think we did a pretty good job of choosing 24 noteworthy things from the year that was, and MLF scribe Mitchell Forde did an excellent job of summing up those notable moments in the feature, which can be found on page 28.

But what I took out of the project (and the 2024 season as a whole) is a deeper understanding and appreciation for the level of fishing excellence that runs through circuits with names like Illini, Ozark, Mississippi, Shenandoah and Choo Choo. I did a lot of poking around Phoenix Bass Fishing League and Toyota Series records this year (with the enthusiastic, astoundingly thorough help of the inimitable Tom Evers, MLF's Guru of Facts and Figures). What I unearthed boggled my mind a little, to be totally honest.

It's natural to focus on the alpha-level performers we see on the *MLFNOW!* livestreams and on both cable and network television. The Jacob Wheelers, Dustin Connells, Alton Jones Jrs and Ott DeFoes of the world are, bar none, the most impressive catchers of bass in the modern era. However, it's worth noting that the local and regional circuits are peppered with anglers who would likely take Wheeler's, Conell's, Jones' and DeFoe's lunch money in tournaments held on the waters they fish for BFL and Toyota Series events.

Most of you who read this magazine know some of the hotshots I'm referring to because you fish against them. You know I'm not blowing smoke when I hype the tournament excellence of anglers like Mike Brueggen, Adam Wagner, Roger Fitzpatrick, Mike Felderman, Dick Shaffer, Robert Walser and David Wright (all of whom have collected 10-plus BFL wins). You know I'm laying down truth when I point out the 11 BFL anglers who have cleared $300,000 in winnings and the 15 more who have banked $200,000 or more.

Our circuits are filled with competitors like those mentioned above, not to mention the 100-plus BFL anglers who have won over $100,000 fishing close-to-home tournaments. I'm delighted that the year provided me the opportunity to delve deeper into those tournament records, because it's given me a nudge to explore a new content program coming in 2025 that I'll fondly refer to as "Local Legends" for the time being.

In July, MLF started sending commemorative Century Club coins to the 1,200-plus anglers who have fished 100 or more tournaments with the organization. That number is astounding, and it highlights the legacy of anglers fishing tournaments on lakes and river that they love. That is, after all, how one becomes legendary.

Thanks for reading *MLF Bass Fishing* magazine. Here's to a legendary 2025.

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF


ONLY AT
TACKLE
WAREHOUSE
We have hundreds & hundreds of unique, high-quality baits, rods, and reels, as well as other exclusive items that can only be found at Tackle Warehouse.
ORDER NOW AT TACKLE WAREHOUSE
TACKLEWAREHOUSE.COM
GUARANTEED LOWEST PRICES | FREE GROUND SHIPPING ON ORDERS OVER $50 | FREE RETURNS

SOLUNAR TABLES

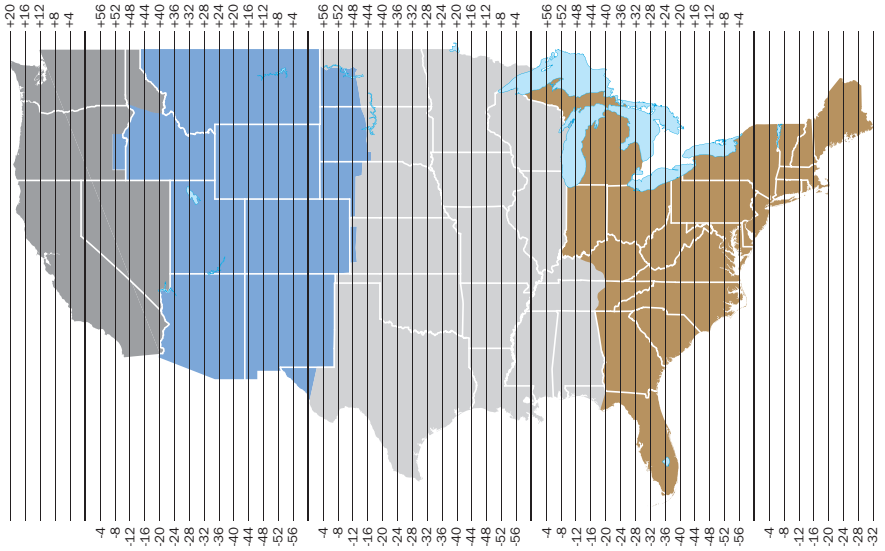
JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2025

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME

CENTRAL STANDARD TIME

EASTERN STANDARD TIME



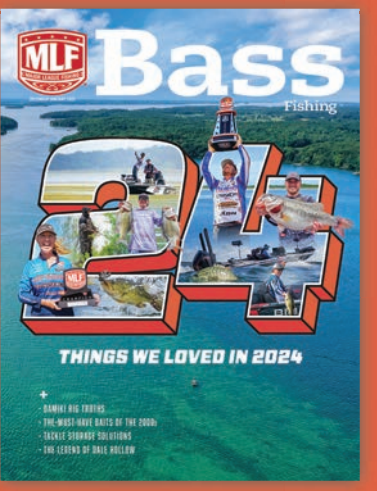
JAN. Date	Day	AM Minor	AM Major	PM Minor	PM Major	Moon Phases
1	Wed	6:00	--:--	6:25	12:10	
2	Thu	6:50	12:40	7:25	1:10	
3	Fri	7:50	1:40	8:20	2:05	
4	Sat	8:40	2:30	9:10	2:55	
5	Sun	9:35	3:25	10:05	3:50	
6	Mon	10:25	4:15	10:55	4:40	
7	Tue	11:10	5:00	11:40	5:25	
8	Wed	11:55	5:45	--:--	6:10	
9	Thu	12:25	6:35	12:45	7:00	
10	Fri	1:15	7:25	1:35	7:55	
11	Sat	2:10	8:25	2:35	8:55	
12	Sun	3:10	9:20	3:30	10:05	
13	Mon	4:20	10:15	4:25	10:45	
14	Tue	5:00	11:15	5:25	11:45	
15	Wed	6:00	--:--	6:25	12:10	
16	Thu	6:50	12:40	7:15	1:00	
17	Fri	7:35	1:25	8:05	1:50	
18	Sat	8:25	2:15	8:50	2:35	
19	Sun	9:05	2:55	9:30	3:15	
20	Mon	9:50	3:40	10:15	4:00	
21	Tue	10:35	4:25	11:00	4:45	
22	Wed	11:10	5:00	11:35	5:20	
23	Thu	11:50	5:40	--:--	6:05	
24	Fri	12:20	6:25	12:35	6:50	
25	Sat	1:05	7:15	1:25	7:40	
26	Sun	1:55	8:05	2:15	8:35	
27	Mon	2:50	9:00	3:10	9:30	
28	Tue	3:45	9:55	4:05	10:20	
29	Wed	4:35	10:45	4:55	11:15	
30	Thu	5:30	11:40	5:50	--:--	
31	Fri	6:25	12:15	6:55	12:40	

FEB. Date	Day	AM Minor	AM Major	PM Minor	PM Major	Moon Phases
1	Sat	7:15	1:05	7:45	1:30	
2	Sun	8:10	2:00	8:40	2:25	
3	Mon	9:00	2:50	9:30	3:15	
4	Tue	9:55	3:45	10:25	4:10	
5	Wed	10:55	4:45	11:25	5:10	
6	Thu	11:45	5:35	--:--	6:05	
7	Fri	12:20	6:30	12:40	7:00	
8	Sat	1:15	7:25	1:35	7:55	
9	Sun	2:10	8:20	2:30	8:50	
10	Mon	3:05	9:10	3:20	9:40	
11	Tue	3:55	10:00	4:10	10:25	
12	Wed	4:40	10:45	4:55	11:05	
13	Thu	5:20	11:30	5:40	11:55	
14	Fri	6:10	--:--	6:30	12:15	
15	Sat	6:50	12:40	7:15	1:00	
16	Sun	7:35	1:25	8:00	1:45	
17	Mon	8:15	2:05	8:40	2:25	
18	Tue	9:00	2:50	9:30	3:15	
19	Wed	9:50	3:40	10:15	4:00	
20	Thu	10:40	4:30	11:05	4:50	
21	Fri	11:25	5:15	11:55	5:40	
22	Sat	--:--	6:05	12:15	6:30	
23	Sun	12:45	6:55	1:05	7:25	
24	Mon	1:40	7:50	2:00	8:15	
25	Tue	2:30	8:40	2:50	9:10	
26	Wed	3:25	9:30	3:40	10:00	
27	Thu	4:15	10:20	4:30	10:45	
28	Fri	5:00	11:05	5:15	11:35	

SOLUNAR TABLES® are designed to forecast the daily active feeding periods of fish. They are formulated from the position of the earth in relation to the sun and moon.

The major periods last for approximately 2 to 3 1/2 hours, and the minor periods last for approximately 3/4 to 1 1/2 hours. To determine the start of major and minor times for your area, find the bold time-zone rule on the map. If you are located in the area left of the time-zone rule, add the number (in minutes) at the top to the corresponding time on the chart. If you are located in the area right of the time-zone rule, subtract the number (in minutes) at the bottom from the corresponding time on the chart. Add one hour to all times during daylight saving time.

SUBSCRIBE NOW



Now it's even easier to sign up and receive a full year's subscription (6 issues) to *Bass Fishing* magazine. Join the country's most successful and avid anglers who enjoy all that *Bass Fishing* has to offer.

For quickest delivery, visit MajorLeagueFishing.com/join or call 270.252.1000

MLF Bass Fishing™ MEMBERSHIP

Please allow 4-8 weeks for delivery of first issue.

BASS BOAT TECHNOLOGIES

BassBoatTech.com

"THERE IS BBT ELECTRONICS MOUNTS, AND THEN THERE IS EVERYBODY ELSE"

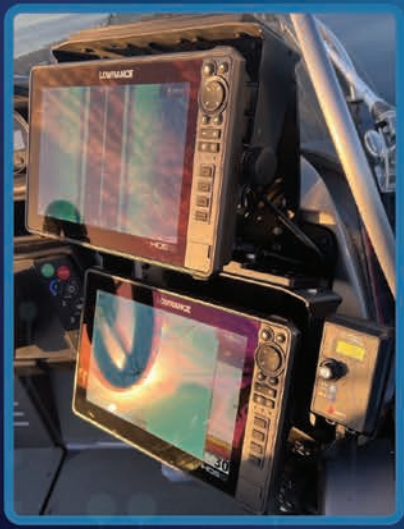


BBT HAS YOUR MOUNT

MOST ANY BOAT, ANY GRAPH, ANY CONFIGURATION



TRIPLE BOW MOUNT



RANGER DUAL FS
SLIDER DASH MOUNT



HOOD MOUNT

BASS BOAT TECHNOLOGIES BASSBOATTECH.COM (706) 217-6161

WEST TEXAS HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECTS BOOST FISHERIES AT BROWNWOOD, EARLY TOWN CENTER LAKES

By Steven Bardin & Gary Klein

Throughout the summer, the MLF Fisheries Management Division embarked on a comprehensive, two-part Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project in West Texas with invaluable support from MossBack Fish Habitat and American Feeder. This project focused on Lake Brownwood and the City of Early Town Center Lake, two water bodies that offer vital resources to the West Texas bass fishing communities.

SHINING A LIGHT ON BROWNWOOD

Lake Brownwood stands out as a rich ecological and recreational hub, boasting 6,800 surface acres of water since it began impounding the Jim Ned Creek and Pecan Bayou in the 1930s. Managed by the Brown County Water Improvement District (BCWID), this lake is more than just a reservoir – it's the lifeblood of the community, providing municipal water and serving as a cherished destination for bass fishing enthusiasts.

Recognizing the strong community interest in bass fishing, BCWID recently constructed a weigh-in stage, ensuring local tournaments have top-tier facilities to support the anglers and their events. This commitment reflects the lake's role as a gathering point for anglers, local families and competitive fishing teams alike.

As with many West Texas lakes, Lake Brownwood's water levels can be unpredictable, subject to dramatic fluctuations during periods of drought. In particularly dry years, water levels may drop by as much as 10 feet, leaving areas of bare shoreline and open water. However, during high-water years, the lake is a vibrant sanctuary with an abundance of habitat: Rock boulders, lush water willow, pockets of submerged plants and a scattering of boat docks all contribute to the lake's rich biodiversity.

In the past decade, the presence of zebra mussels has increased water clarity, bringing a new layer of complexity to the ecosystem. Unfortunately, as water levels drop during dry seasons, the habitat recedes, leaving expanses of exposed shoreline that lack shelter and structure for fish populations.

With the General Tire Team Series selecting Lake Brownwood as a competition site this fall, the MLF Fisheries Management Division saw an ideal opportunity to address these habitat challenges and restore critical fish habitat. Our focus was on enhancing areas around the BCWID weigh-in stage and regions that become particularly habitat poor during droughts.

In August, we began the groundwork by teaming up with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), the Deleon High School Bass Fishing Team and a group of dedicated volunteers to map key areas using BioBase technology. This innovative system allowed us to capture real-time topography and bottom hardness and create detailed side-imaging maps, revealing the lake's most critical restoration zones. After assessing multiple areas, we identified seven key locations where habitat improvements would provide the greatest ecological benefit.



Ott DeFoe and Alton Jones Jr. were among the tandems who found plenty of biting bass living among Lake Brownwood's shallow habitat.

In October, we convened a team from TPWD, the Tarleton State University chapter of the American Fisheries Society, Texas Pro Lake Management staff and Gary Klein to construct MossBack Fish Habitat 40-inch Conservation Cubes and 60-inch Safe Haven XL units. TPWD added Reef Balls from the Reef Ball Foundation, funded by conservation license plate revenue, to create additional structure, while BCWID contributed concrete culverts to diversify the habitat array.

Following the November Team Series event, we deployed these structures into the reservoir using TPWD's specialized habitat barge, completing the first phase of our restoration efforts at Lake Brownwood.

A BOOST FOR EARLY TOWN CENTER LAKE

The second location, City of Early Town Center Lake, presented a different yet equally exciting opportunity for restoration. This seven-acre lake recently underwent a complete overhaul through a partnership with TPWD and the City of Early to transform it into a premier fishing destination for the community. Over the past year, the lake has received support from numerous partners contributing to its habitat, stocking and management.



American Feeder donated a pair of directional fish feeders to be deployed in the City of Early Town Center Lake, which should benefit the catfish, sunfish and trout populations.



MossBack Fish Habitat structures were installed along the entire shoreline and beneath the lake's three floating docks to enhance fish shelter and angling success. Additional habitat improvements included the creation of gravel spawning beds in coves, planting of native shoreline vegetation and the installation of bottom diffusion aeration and an algae pulsar to maintain high water quality. These features, coupled with the lake's recent stocking, should offer an ideal environment for both fish and anglers alike.

TPWD stocked Early Town Center Lake with a diverse fish community, including bluegill sunfish, redear sunfish, largemouth bass and channel catfish. Last fall, the lake welcomed rainbow trout for the winter fishing season, attracting anglers eager for a unique catch. TPLM further enriched the lake by adding adult largemouth bass sourced from private fisheries, providing immediate angling opportunities for visitors.

With the fish populations flourishing, forage species such as threadfin shad and additional redear sunfish were introduced this year to support a healthy food web.

THANKS TO AMERICAN FEEDER

One last element remained to complete the lake's transformation: fish feeders. Recognizing this need, American Feeder generously donated two aluminum directional feeders to support the lake's growing populations of catfish, sunfish and trout. During the Team Series event, several professional anglers hosted a "Fishing with the Pros" day for the local community at Early Town Center Lake, fostering a sense of excitement and community engagement. Following this event, Klein, Ott Defoe, Alton Jones Jr. and I had the privilege of presenting the two American Feeders to the City of Early.

These feeders, mounted on the docks, will ensure a steady food supply to promote growth and keep fish congregated near fishing areas, enhancing the angling experience for all.

The Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project, made possible by the unwavering support of MossBack Fish Habitat and American Feeder, brought together community members, conservation groups and dedicated volunteers. Each phase of the project highlighted the power of collaboration, demonstrating the collective commitment to enhancing and sustaining local fisheries. As we look to the future, the planning for the 2025 Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project is already underway.

We're excited to unveil the next steps in this journey at the kickoff of the 2025 Bass Pro Tour season on Lake Conroe, where we'll continue our mission to enrich Texas waters for generations to come.

MORE INFORMATION: You can find information about all the MLF Fisheries Management Department's activities on the FMD landing page at MajorLeagueFishing.com/fisheries-management.

A YEAR OF IMPACT: MLF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIVISION'S 2024 CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

Each winter, we pause to celebrate the achievements of the Major League Fishing Fisheries Management Division (MLF FMD) from the past tournament season. This year was no exception. With a steadfast commitment to our four pillars — fish care, fisheries enhancement, research and education — we worked tirelessly to elevate the sport we love while improving bass fishing nationwide.

But we didn't do it alone. Our success stems from the incredible support of partners like Minn Kota, Berkley Labs, Mossy Oak, Kubota, Humminbird, Alabama Power, MossBack Fish Habitat, American Feeder and the Kevin VanDam Foundation. We were thrilled to welcome Kubota, Mossy Oak, Alabama Power and American Feeder to our team this year. At the same time, Minn Kota, Berkley Labs, Humminbird, MossBack, and the KVD Foundation have continued their unwavering support since our inception in 2022.

Here's a recap of our 2024 initiatives and a glimpse at the year to come.

REVOLUTIONIZING FISHERIES WITH DATA

At every Bass Pro Tour event, our unique catch-weigh-release format provided critical data for fisheries biologists for every fish weighed, including species, weight, habitat type, depth, time, date and GPS location. In 2024, we expanded our efforts by incorporating forward-facing sonar (FFS) data as well, creating a treasure trove of insights shared with state agencies to better understand fish behavior and population dynamics.

Across seven regular-season events plus REDCREST, Heavy Hitters and four General Tire Team Series competitions, our anglers tallied an astounding 12,456 scorable bass. Among them were 9,274 largemouth, 3,076 smallmouth and 106 spotted bass, with significant contributions from marquee events like Heavy Hitters (477 largemouth) and REDCREST (1,038 total fish). Our historic totals now sit at 117,844 fish logged into SCORETRACKER® totaling 278,094 pounds.

The introduction of the BUBBA Pro Series Smart Scale this season marked a new chapter, enabling us to collect data from Tackle Warehouse Invitationals anglers for the first time. While currently raw, this data holds exciting potential to uncover trends like culling rates at various fisheries, a metric that could inform future conservation strategies.

RESTORING HABITATS, REVITALIZING ECOSYSTEMS

Our Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Program continues to shine as a beacon of conservation success thanks to invaluable partnerships and tireless volunteers. This year alone, we completed five unique projects, bringing our total to 12 over the past three years.

❖ SAM RAYBURN RESERVOIR

Supported by Kubota, our first 2024 project focused on creating Bass Recovery Zones near Umphrey Family Pavilion, a popular tournament weigh-in site on Sam Rayburn. Partnering with Texas Parks and Wildlife, we deployed MossBack Fish Habitat structures to ensure a safe recovery area for released bass. Texas A&M graduate student Brian Metz will rigorously study this effort moving forward using advanced tools like Aqua-Vu cameras and electrofishing.

❖ LOGAN MARTIN LAKE

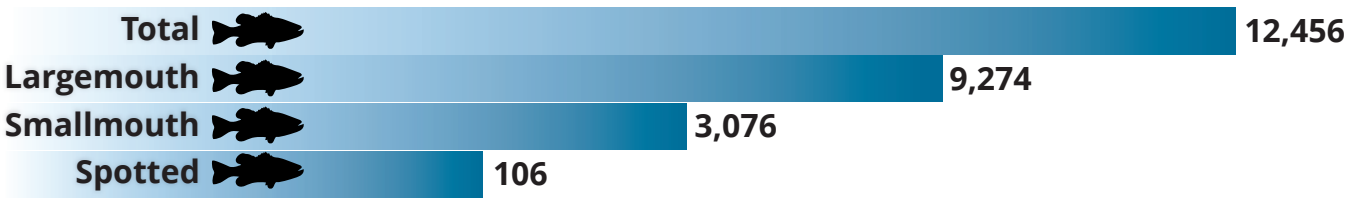
In partnership with Alabama Power, the KVD Foundation and MossBack, we took our habitat efforts to Logan Martin during REDCREST. The project included a hands-on Habitat Walkthrough Experience at the expo showcasing a massive,



MLF anglers and staff helped clean up Logan Martin Lake as part of Alabama Power's "Renew Our Rivers" initiative.

PHOTO BY KANYAN KLEIN

BASS PRO TOUR LOGGED SCORABLE BASS IN 2024



800-square-foot Bass Recovery Zone. Following the event, the habitat was deployed with the help of two habitat barges, volunteers and MLF staff alongside a park cleanup to kick off Alabama Power's "Renew Our Rivers" initiative.

❖ CENTER HILL RESERVOIR

On a cold, rainy day in Tennessee, Humminbird supported our restoration efforts with the help of the DeKalb County High School bass fishing team and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. Together, we deployed 20 conservation cubes, and for the first time, MLF anglers mentored youth on the importance of conservation, fostering a new generation of stewards.



Members of the Oologah-Talala High School bass fishing team (coached by BPT pro Edwin Evers) helped build and deploy habitat in Eufaula Cove.

PHOTOS BY STEVEN BARDIN

❖ LAKE EUFAULA, OKLAHOMA

One of our most ambitious projects to date, this effort brought together MLF anglers, the Oologah-Talala High School bass fishing team, the Choctaw Nation and the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. By targeting the Eufaula Cove area, we contributed to a broader initiative to improve this massive reservoir's ecosystem, paving the way for enhanced catch rates and fish abundance.



The high school anglers also learned about the importance of fisheries management.

ADVANCING CONSERVATION EDUCATION

Our conservation journey extends beyond the water. The annual Berkley Labs Virtual Summit inspires collaboration among anglers, agencies and experts. This December, our summit will explore the power of partnerships featuring speakers who will share the challenges and triumphs of improving their favorite fisheries. Last year's summit attracted 173 participants from 25 states, and we aim to surpass that in 2024.

LOOKING AHEAD

As we reflect on the strides made in 2024, it's clear that the MLF Fisheries Management Division is profoundly impacting the waters we cherish. Our work this year — grounded in collaboration, innovation, and dedication — has been a testament to the power of united efforts. Yet, what excites us most is the road ahead.

In 2025, we aim to build on this year's successes by tackling even more significant challenges and expanding our conservation initiatives. With plans to complete five additional habitat projects, continue our cutting-edge DNA collection on 7-pound bass and enhance our data collection methods, we're poised to deliver even more actionable insights to fisheries biologists and state agencies. These efforts will help improve fish populations and empower anglers to understand and protect their favorite fisheries like never before.

We are also committed to fostering the next generation of conservationists. From mentoring high school anglers during habitat projects to hosting our Berkley Labs Virtual Summit, we're building a legacy that extends beyond the water. This year's summit will further amplify voices from the angling and scientific communities, sparking new ideas and partnerships that will ripple across the fishing world for years.

But our work is far from over. With SCORETRACKER® approaching the historic milestones of 125,000 fish catches and 300,000 pounds, we are reminded of our sport's vast potential for continued improvement. Every fish caught, every habitat restored and all data collected is a step toward ensuring that bass fishing remains a vibrant and sustainable pursuit for future generations.

We couldn't achieve this without the steadfast support of our partners, volunteers, anglers and fans. Together, we are not just improving fisheries but redefining what's possible through conservation. As we dive into 2025, we invite everyone who loves this sport to join us in our mission, whether by participating in a habitat project, sharing your insights or simply spreading awareness of the critical work being done.

The future of bass fishing is bright, and it's only getting better. Let's continue to innovate, inspire, and collaborate to create fisheries that sustain life and enrich the lives of all who experience them. Thank you for being part of this incredible journey — we can't wait to share what comes next. ■

ADVERTISEMENT

BOAT/PWC

navigating peace of mind



THE IMPORTANCE OF BOAT INSURANCE

Embarking on the open water is an exhilarating experience, filled with the promise of adventure and relaxation. Whether you're a seasoned sailor or a weekend cruiser, protecting your vessel with proper insurance is not just a choice—it's a necessity. Explore the reasons why every boat owner should prioritize boat insurance for a worry-free voyage.

Unpredictable waters
The open water can be unpredictable, with unexpected storms, collisions, or other potential accidents. Boat insurance can give you financial protection if there is damage to your vessel, providing coverage for repairs or replacement.

Damage and injury
Accidents on the water can result in damage to other boats, docks, or even injuries to passengers. Boat insurance offers liability coverage, which can pay for damages or injuries you're liable for while boating, up to specified limits, and lawsuit costs if you're sued. This includes damage you cause to another watercraft or if someone on or near your boat is injured and you're found to be legally responsible.

Theft and vandalism
Unfortunately, boat theft and vandalism are realities that boat owners face. Boat insurance has comprehensive and collision coverage that can protect you against events outside of your control, including theft and vandalism.

Incurred medical payments
Accidents on the water may lead to injuries for you or your passengers. Boat insurance offers a range of optional medical payments coverage limits, helping to cover medical expenses if you are in an accident or someone is hurt on your boat, regardless of fault.

Peace of mind for financing
If you financed the purchase of your boat, most lenders require insurance coverage to protect their investment. Having boat insurance not only fulfills these requirements but also gives you peace of mind knowing that your financial interests are safeguarded.

Navigational flexibility
Some water municipalities and marinas may require proof of insurance for docking or accessing certain areas. Boat insurance allows you the flexibility to explore different destinations without worrying about entry restrictions.

Emergency towing and assistance
Progressive boat insurance can include optional Sign & Glide® On-Water Towing coverage. If your boat is disabled or breaks down on the water, Sign & Glide® pays for on-water towing, jump starts, soft un-groundings, and fuel delivery.

Wreckage removal
If your boat sinks, Progressive boat insurance will cover the cost of removing your boat from the water (if removal is legally required).

Investing in boat insurance is not just about protecting a valuable asset; it's about safeguarding the memories, experiences, and joy that come with your on-water adventures. Don't let unforeseen circumstances disrupt your journey—navigate with confidence, knowing that Progressive boat insurance has you covered. Ensure a smooth and worry-free voyage, because when it comes to your boat, peace of mind is the ultimate luxury.

PROGRESSIVE®

Scan to get a quote in as little as 4 minutes

Go to progressive.com to learn more.

Progressive Casualty Ins. Co. and affiliates
Coverages subject to policy terms and conditions.

Vitamin D-stress



When time on your boat is like medicine for the soul, rest assured that every precious moment is protected by America's #1 boat insurer—day after day, cast after cast.

1-800-PROGRESSIVE | PROGRESSIVE.COM

PROGRESSIVE®

Get a quote in as little as 4 minutes

Progressive Casualty Insurance Co. & affiliates. #1 rating based on 2022 boat market share. Data is sourced from Ratefilings.com.

By Mitchell Forde

FISHING CLASH REWARDS 32 AOY WINNERS ACROSS FOUR LEVELS

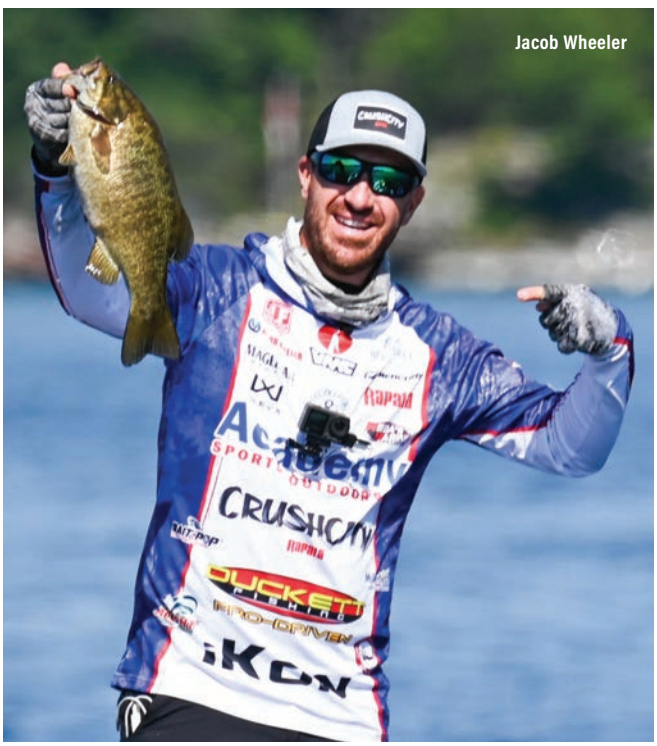
Angler of the Year program paid out $204,000 in 2024

The ultimate goal for just about anyone who competes in a tournament circuit is winning Angler of the Year. It's the true measuring stick of who performed best across the course of a season, demanding success amid different fisheries and/or conditions.

At every level of MLF competition, from the Bass Pro Tour to the Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine, those who prevailed in the points competitions got more than just bragging rights, also earning prize money from Fishing Clash.

The Fishing Clash Angler of the Year program awarded Jacob Wheeler $100,000 for his third points title in the past four years on the Bass Pro Tour. Alec Morrison, meanwhile, earned $50,000 for his stellar Tackle Warehouse Invitationals season. You can find plenty of coverage of Wheeler and Morrison's triumphs in the October-November issue of this magazine as well as MajorLeagueFishing.com.

While those were the two most lucrative and high-profile AOY wins of the year, they were far from the only anglers to cash in thanks to their season-long excellence. The points winner in each of the six Toyota Series Presented by Phoenix Boats divisions earned $5,000, while all 24 division winners at the BFL level earned $1,000. Here's a rundown of each of those AOY winners.



Jacob Wheeler

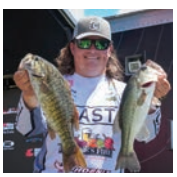
PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



Alec Morrison

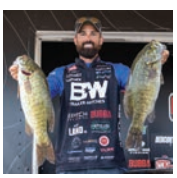
PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

TOYOTA SERIES



CENTRAL DIVISION:
Matt O'Connell

In his first year fishing the perennially stacked Central Division, Matt O'Connell looked right at home. He started the season with a second-place finish at Lake Guntersville in February, then followed it up with a 15th-place showing on Smith Lake. He iced the points title by finishing 13th on Lake Chickamauga, topping Hayden Marbut by 18 points. O'Connell also added two wins and eight more Top 10s in BFL competition in 2024.



NORTHERN DIVISION:
Kyle Cortiana

Originally from Oklahoma, Cortiana has found a kinship with northern smallmouth in recent years. Exceptional showings on two of the most iconic smallmouth fisheries in the country – a win on Lake Champlain and a runner-up finish at the St. Lawrence River – propelled Cortiana to the Northern Division points crown by a single point over Casey Smith. Cortiana now joins an exclusive club as an AOY winner in multiple Toyota Series divisions, as he topped the Southwestern Division in 2016.





PLAINS DIVISION:
Jake Lawrence

The Plains schedule might have been the most diverse of any division, but that proved no problem for Lawrence, who simply dominated at every level he fished in 2024. The Tennessee native outdueled fellow Kentucky Lake local Matthew Robertson for a win on his home pond to start the year — one of his four victories on Kentucky/Barkley in the past two years. He finished second in a spawning shootout on Grand Lake, then clinched the AOY title by finishing seventh in a fall grinder on Lake of the Ozarks.



SOUTHERN DIVISION:
Jessie Mizell

A Lake Okeechobee local, Mizell put his expertise on the Big O to good use, winning in wire-to-wire fashion on his home lake for the second year in a row to start the season. He proved he can catch 'em elsewhere, too. Mizell finished 10th at the Harris Chain of Lakes. Then, he iced the points victory with a solid 18th-place showing in a tricky fall tournament on Santee Cooper.



SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION:
Cole Moore

After starting the Southwestern Division season with a fourth-place finish on Sam Rayburn and a runner-up showing on Toledo Bend, Moore looked like the runaway favorite to win the points crown. However, a trip to Oklahoma's Lake Eufaula proved a tough hurdle to clear. After rallying on Day 2 to make the cut, Moore caught only one bass for 3-1 on Day 3. That lone keeper proved just enough, as he edged Levi Thibodaux by a single point.



WESTERN DIVISION:
Cristian Melton

Melton left no doubt about who was the best in the west in 2024. The southern California native finished fifth in the season opener on Clear Lake, then nearly beat Roy Hawk on his home pond of Lake Havasu, finishing second. He clinched the AOY crown in convincing fashion, blowing away the field at the California Delta by nearly 5 pounds and earning his first MLF win in the process.

PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE

Each of the 24 BFL divisions saw anglers compete in five tournaments — four single-day events plus a season-ending, two-day Super Tournament. Of note, this year's crop of AOY winners included two anglers who claimed the title in multiple divisions (Joe Anders in the Savannah River and South Carolina Divisions and Chris Brummett in the Piedmont and Shenandoah) as well as three anglers who won their respective points crowns for the third straight year: Tater Reynolds (Cowboy), Jeff Ritter (Great Lakes) and Joseph Thompson (Northeast).

ARKIE DIVISION: *Chris Darby*

BAMA DIVISION: *Robert Robinson*

BUCKEYE DIVISION: *Sean Wieda*

BULLDOG DIVISION: *Michael Wilder*

CHOO CHOO DIVISION: *Dillon Falardeau*

COWBOY DIVISION: *Tater Reynolds*

GATOR DIVISION: *Ryan Crowley*

GREAT LAKES DIVISION: *Jeff Ritter*

HOOSIER DIVISION: *John Melton*

ILLINI DIVISION: *Adam Brookman*

LBL DIVISION: *Levi Kohl*

MICHIGAN DIVISION: *Nolan Mandel*

MISSISSIPPI DIVISION: *Dakota Fleming*

MOUNTAIN DIVISION: *Bailey Gay*

MUSIC CITY DIVISION: *Jacob Woods*

NORTH CAROLINA DIVISION: *Scott Hamrick*

NORTHEAST DIVISION: *Joseph Thompson*

OKIE DIVISION: *Camden Kozikoski*

OZARK DIVISION: *Eric Olliverson*

PIEDMONT DIVISION: *Chris Brummett*

SAVANNAH RIVER DIVISION: *Joe Anders*

SHENANDOAH DIVISION: *Chris Brummett*

SOUTH CAROLINA DIVISION: *Joe Anders*

VOUNTEER DIVISION: *Corey Neece*

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

MLF NOW!

Live Stream at MajorLeagueFishing.com or MyOutdoorTV.com

Jan. 30–Feb. 2: Bass Pro Tour Stage One @ Lake Conroe
Feb. 13–16: Bass Pro Tour Stage Two @ Harris Chain of Lakes

TV BROADCASTS

Outdoor Channel — Saturdays **2–4 p.m.** (ET)

Jan. 4: General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Elimination Round Match 1 @ Lake Erie
Jan. 11: General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Elimination Round Match 2 @ Lake Erie
Jan. 18: General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Elimination Round Match 3 @ Lake Erie
Jan. 25: General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Knockout Round Match 1 @ Lake Erie
Feb. 1: General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Knockout Round Match 2 @ Lake Erie
Feb. 8: General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Championship Round @ Lake Erie

Outdoor Channel — Saturdays **4–4:30 p.m.** (ET)

Jan. 4: *All Angles* – General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Elimination Round Match 1 @ Lake Erie
Jan. 11: *All Angles* – General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Elimination Round Match 2 @ Lake Erie
Jan. 18: *All Angles* – General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Elimination Round Match 3 @ Lake Erie
Jan. 25: *All Angles* – General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Knockout Round Match 1 @ Lake Erie
Feb. 1: *All Angles* – General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Knockout Round Match 2 @ Lake Erie
Feb. 8: *All Angles* – General Tire Team Series Challenge Cup: Championship Round @ Lake Erie

CBS Sports — Saturdays **9 a.m.** (ET)

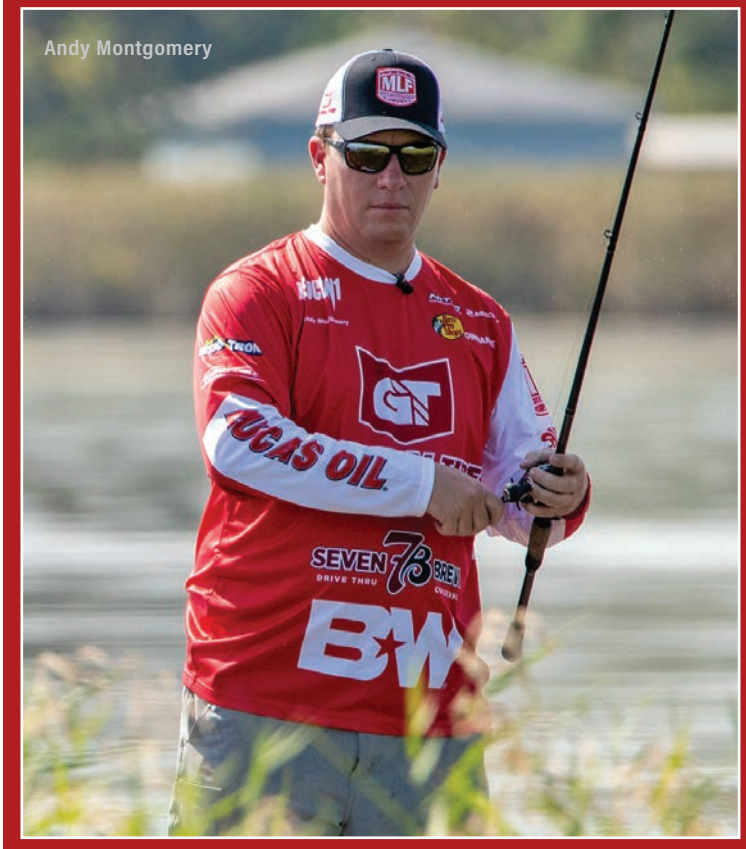
Jan. 25: Toyota Series Championship Presented by Bass Boat Technologies @ Wheeler Lake

FOLLOW MLF ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The broadcast schedules are for episode premieres. Complete schedules are available online.




Columbia
YETI
YETI BUILT FOR THE WILD.


Andy Montgomery


Stephen Browning

PUTTING THEIR HEADS TOGETHER

The strategy behind forming the perfect team

PHOTOS BY PHOENIX MOORE

MLF's General Tire Team Series Presented by Bass Pro Shops has provided a breath of fresh air to top-level tournament fishing. With superstar anglers paired together as they attack a lake with little previous knowledge, viewers are treated to a master class in bass fishing puzzle solving.

We've seen notable anglers excel, while others stumbled. Without question, adaptation to the format is vital, as anglers must charge out of the gate in these every-fish-counts events.

With zero pre-event practice or information, on the water decision-making is paramount. But what's the strategy for picking the best angler to compete alongside you?

Andy Montgomery thought he knew. At his first Team Series tournament under the new structure, the Heritage Cup in Neenah, Wisconsin, Montgomery was selected by best friend Ott DeFoe. The two have fished together a bit in the past, but their friendship superseded any need for etiquette.

"If he crowds me, I can tell him to get out of the way," Montgomery laughed.

More so, the pair's comfort with one another resulted in seamless adaptation as they won each of their three days on the water en route to lifting the trophies.

"We feed off each other," Montgomery added. "You need to think out loud. Like, in Wisconsin, Ott got hot flipping reeds, so I deferred to him."

During the Championship Round, Montgomery showed his strength skipping docks.

"I told Ott, 'Just give me 10 minutes on those docks.' He did, and it was off to the races."

Montgomery also highlighted the need for complementary tactics.

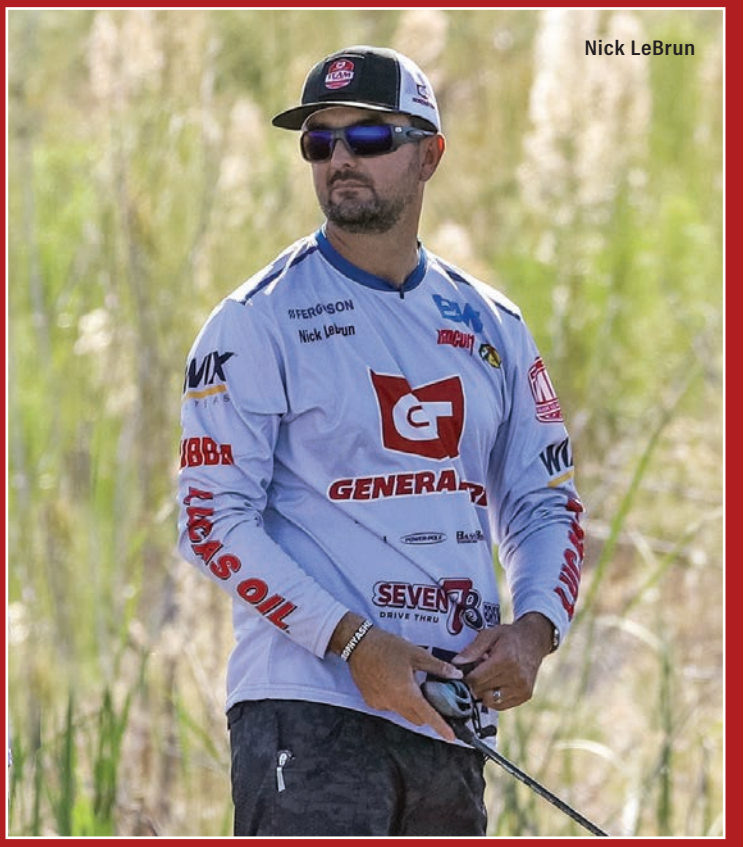
"Ott is deadly with a spinning rod, and that's a perfect follow-up to me (power fishing)," he said. "We determined whatever 1-2 combo was best in each scenario."

Montgomery's second installment of the Team Series paired him with Todd Faircloth at the



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more than 20 years, **Joe Balog** has made his living in the fishing industry on and off the water. A successful tournament angler from the Great Lakes region, Balog now lives in Florida, where he continues to work in product design, marketing and outdoor media when he's not chasing trophy largemouth.


Nick LeBrun

Patriot Cup in Early, Texas, and the results weren't quite as stellar. The tandem failed to advance past the Elimination Round on O.H. Ivie Lake.

"I picked Faircloth because I like him, and I knew there wouldn't be any breakdowns in the boat," Montgomery said of the rock-steady Texan. "But neither of us had any experience (on the tournament waters), and we both missed the boat on what to look for."

In the end, perhaps the team's power fishing preferences kept them from discovering an offshore bite. Here, a bit more diversity may have made a difference.

SHARED EXPERIENCE + DIFFERENT STYLES = SUCCESS

Stephen Browning excelled alongside Anthony Gagliardi during the Challenge Cup in Erie, Pennsylvania, where the two finished second by targeting offshore largemouth. Browning's success at team events likely comes from experience. Still active in numerous levels of competition, he's been competing in some sort of team format for over four decades.

A handful of those competitions featured him in the boat alongside Gagliardi. He noted that the two had fished "15 or 20 times together" prior to the Challenge Cup.

"I think that makes all the difference in the world," Browning confirmed.

Thanks to that previous history, the two anglers knew that each prefers a different style.

"Anthony is more of a finesse guy and likes smaller baits, where I'm a winder," Browning confirmed. "I feel like it's the best of both worlds."

Here, again, we see the 1-2 punch. The team utilized both approaches, moving quickly as they threw Browning's favored ChatterBaits to find a population of fish within the fields of offshore grass, then slowing down with spinning rods and finesse worms to catch as many as possible.

But, while different, Browning divulged that he and Gagliardi do share a few key similarities

"We both like to figure out an area and settle down — try not to get too fancy," he said. Both also like to gauge their performance based on SCORETRACKER®, resisting the urge to get rattled.

STILL SEARCHING FOR THE RIGHT STRATEGY

Nick LeBrun hasn't gotten the Team Series format quite as dialed in, but he's having a great time trying. LeBrun teamed up with Gerald Spohrer at the Challenge Cup, and his most recent event saw him fish alongside Randy Howell, a bass fishing hero, in the Patriot Cup.

"I admit there was a bit of legendary childhood aura going on," LeBrun said with a chuckle. "It transcended any amount of money we might win."

Once in the boat, though, it was all business. LeBrun noted that both Spohrer and Howell are "winders" like himself, which made them comfortable together. However, both times, he and his partner fell just short of advancing out of the Elimination Round.

During the Patriot Cup, LeBrun and Howell were breathtakingly close to advancing. With about two seconds left before lines out, the Louisiana native hooked a bass that would have eclipsed their 6-ounce deficit to second place, but by time he swung it into the boat, it was too late.

Did he feel like he let down his hero? Would Howell storm off in disgust?

"That never even crossed my mind," LeBrun acknowledged. "Randy is legendary as an angler and a man, and that's why I picked him as a partner."

LeBrun noted that he only has one season of experience with the Bass Pro Tour's "every fish counts" format, so he had a longer learning curve than many of his peers when it came to adjusting to the intricacies of the Team Series. He plans to review online footage of each tournament and learn the winner's strategy to gain even more knowledge.

"If I could go back and change one thing, it would be that we'd fish faster," he said. "That goes for both of my team events. It seems like we were begging them (the fish) a bit too much."

All three of Montgomery, Browning and LeBrun agreed: The Team Series is the most fun they've had in competition since their early days.

"It's way more laid back than the BPT," LeBrun confirmed.

Still, these are competitors who want to win every time they take the water, so they'll be thinking about and tinkering with their strategies until Team Series competition resumes in 2025 — including searching for the formula to pick the perfect partner.

As the game continues to evolve, one team may rub the bottle just right, unleashing a genie that divulges the secrets to this exciting new format. ■

ALL NEW 721 ZXL



$76K*

Tournament-Ready Fishing Packages

Both Packages Include: 4 Bank Charger, Custom Cover and Mercury Prop

PACKAGE 1:

- Garmin w/Livescope
- Two Helix 12's
- Ultrex QuestTrolling Motor
- Phoenix E2 Wiring

OR

PACKAGE 2:

- Dual 8' Power Poles
- Two Helix 12's
- Ultrex Quest Trolling Motor
- Phoenix E2 Wiring

** Nationally-advertised price does not include dealer prep, batteries, freight, taxes, registration and licenses and is for 2025 model year. Phoenix Boats reserves the right to make changes in products and pricing without prior notice. Dealer determines final price. Dual color deck, polyflake hull and gelcoat pinstripe upgrade fees will apply.

/PhoenixBassBoats

PHOENIX BOATS





Find your local Phoenix Dealer at
phoenixbassboats.com

#builtbyanglersforanglers





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If it's creative, national award-winning writer **Sean Ostruszka** is all about it. He combines mad ingenuity with 20 years of knowledge and experience in the fishing business to design lures for professional anglers and top brands in the bass industry.

MAKE YOURSELF STAND OUT

At-home tricks to give your baits a boost

Sometimes, it pays to stand out. And sometimes, it really doesn't.

For instance, being the nature nerd I am and raising two future nature nerds, I love watching nature documentaries like Planet Earth or The Hunt with my daughters. Doing so makes us stand out from most, not only in our nerdiness but also because my daughters ace just about every science test involving animals.

I tell you this not to brag but as a long-winded introduction to my point.

You see, watch any nature documentary for 10 minutes and you'll learn a simple truth about predators and prey: If you're prey, standing out can get you in trouble. Fast!

There might be a herd of 1,000 wildebeest for a lion to drool over, but it's the one with a limp that the lion fancies for dinner. That baby seal who strays a little too far from shore and the rest of the pups? Best believe a shark is watching. And guess what happens to the sardine that gets separated from the bait ball when a hungry sailfish is near.

Yes, standing out can set you apart in good ways, but in the predator/prey dynamic, it's usually an invitation to be eaten.

Hence, it's important for your lures and presentations to stand out — not just from the actual shad, crayfish or frogs they're trying to represent, but also all the other imitation shad, crayfish and frogs bass see every day.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to do it, and many don't necessitate advanced art degrees. Here's a look at different at-home methods to try with your lures and presentations to make them stand out from the rest.

SOUND

It's hardly ground-breaking news that a lure's ability to make noise can attract (or deter) fish. And if it is ground breaking for you … you may need to read this magazine more often.

Fortunately, lures come in so many different variations that you can usually choose rattling or non-rattling versions or switch between two different lures with different-sounding rattles to see which bass prefer on a given day.

But what if you want to make a rattling lure silent?

The easiest way is simply rubber-band the hooks. Take a clear-plastic hair tie (I have about 265,851 all over my house if you need a few) and band it around the body of a crankbait and shank of the belly hook, thus pinning the hook to the belly. Suddenly, any noise from the hook clanging against the body during the retrieve (which is actually more than you think) is gone, creating a truly silent-running crankbait (provided it has no internal rattles).

If you're feeling a little fancier, the same effect can be accomplished with a magnet drilled and glued into the belly. Just be careful, as the magnet will add weight and can alter the action or cause the lure to leak if not sealed properly.

On the flip side, drilling a small hole in the top of a hard-plastic lure, dropping in a couple BBs and then sealing it up can turn a silent lure into one with some extra drawing power in dingy water. I actually create a VERY loud one-knocker using a steel ball and a section of plastic pen with small pieces of metal taped to the ends. It looks ridiculous, but when hidden inside the body of a lure, the fish can't see it. They sure do hear it, though.

If you don't want to Frankenstein together a rattle, there are obviously pre-created rattles you can buy and hang from O-rings or stuff into soft-plastics. In fact, many of the best frog fisherman will sneak them into their frogs, adding extra weight for casting and drawing power with sound.

That's a trick you've probably heard before. But what about adding a rattle to your drop-shot? Take the clackers from your Carolina rig and add them to the drop line of a drop-shot. They'll shake and rattle while you work your lure, which can often draw fish from farther away. If they won't commit, have a second, silent version handy to quickly flip down once you have a fish's attention.

COLOR

Why do zebras have stripes? Because when they're all together, it makes it very hard to pick out just one.

Now, imagine of one those zebras had a giant red dot on it. Suddenly, not so hard to pick that one out.

You can achieve the same effect using an assortment of markers. Whether they're permanent markers, paint markers or dye markers, adding stripes, dots or accents is an easy way to set a lure apart.

Have a shad-colored crankbait with the typical dot on the side? Use a permanent marker to make the dot even bigger (aka a bigger target). Is everyone on your fishery throwing pearl soft-plastic jerkbaits? Use a chartreuse dye pen and draw lines along the sides. Have a jig or frog with light-colored skirts/legs? Use a marker to add stripes and create a cool contrast effect that helps it stand out, especially in stained water.

I could go on and on about markering up your lures, but what about something more subtle?

Well, just like I always have a ton of hair ties around my place thanks to my daughters, I also have plenty of nail polish. And some of those glitter clear coats look amazing when added to all number of lures. They come in more colors than you could imagine; plus, they're even durable enough to serve as a sealant in a pinch. Try coating an entire hard bait to add extra sparkle or a colored tint — I've seen it make quite the difference at times.

Remember, it doesn't take much for prey to stand out and a predator to take notice. And knowing that can help you stand out in a good way. ■

IF YOU'RE PREY, STANDING OUT CAN GET YOU IN TROUBLE. FAST!

2024 MLF5 SPONSORS



THE ONE & ONLY LIGHTWEIGHT CHAMP



The Power-Pole Dual Blades powered by One Pump is the most advanced system out on the water. Top level quality, performance, and innovation are the foundation of this one of kind workhorse that does the job of two.

POWER-POLE® | Blade™ POWERED BY ONE DUAL ANCHOR PUMP | Power-Pole.com

THE



BEST OF ’24

Big bass, MLF firsts and other storylines that stood out from the year that was

By Mitchell Forde

It didn’t take long after the calendar flipped to 2024 for the big bass to show up on Major League Fishing weigh-in stages.

On Jan. 6, East Texas hammer Hayden Heck brought in a 9-pound, 14-ounce kicker, which anchored his limit of 29-3 at the season-opening Phoenix Bass Fishing League Cowboy Division event on Sam Rayburn Reservoir. That was enough to earn Heck’s fourth BFL win on Sam Rayburn in less than two years. Then, five days later, the Adrian College duo of Braylon Eggerding and Lucas Washburn weighed an 11-7 lunker en route to claiming the Abu Garcia College Fishing National Championship on Lake Toho (more on that shortly).

That set the tone for a season that continued to deliver plenty of massive fish (both in size and importance) and compelling events across all seven levels of MLF tournaments. The *MLF Bass Fishing* Magazine editorial team put our heads together to come up with our favorite storylines from the past year, listed in chronological order.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

2 BIG BASS GALORE DURING INVITATIONALS OPENER ON SAM RAYBURN (FEB. 9-11)

Heck’s near-10-pounder was a sign of things to come; as usual, Sam Rayburn kicked out some giant bass in 2024. During the first event of the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals season, they showed up in bunches. That tournament saw three 11-pounders weighed during a single day, one each by Alec Morrison, Cole Breeden and Marshall Hughes. Hughes’ 11-12 kicker anchored a 38-7 monster bag, the fourth-biggest ever from Sam Rayburn in MLF competition. Oh, by the way: Morrison’s 11-pounder wasn’t even his biggest bass of the week. He caught a 13.82-pound Share-Lunker during practice. Throw in the fact that the event marked Drew Gill’s first national win (more on Gill to come), and the event deserves a prominent place in Sam Rayburn Reservoir’s illustrious tournament lore.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

1 11-POUND KICKER HELPS ADRIAN WIN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP BY 1 OUNCE (JAN. 10-11)

The first 2024 tournament livestreamed on *MLFNOW!,* the College Fishing National Championship set quite the high bar. Eggerding and Washburn started the second day of the weather-shortened event in 10th place, more than 8 1/2 pounds back of the leaders, but they made up that deficit in one swing of the rod when Eggerding caught their 11-7 kicker – the biggest bass ever weighed during the college national championship – on a lipless crankbait. That anchored a 23-7 limit, which brought their total to 42-4 – just enough to top the Campbellsville University duo of Carter Doren and Ryan Lachniet by a single ounce. The first ever national title for Adrian, it also earned Eggerding and Washburn trips to the Toyota Series Championship, where Eggerding punched his ticket to REDCREST 2025.

3 JUSTIN LUCAS PUTS TOGETHER EPIC KNOCKOUT ROUND AT SANTEE COOPER (FEB. 24)

South Carolina's Santee Cooper lakes are known for producing lunker bass, and they showed up during Stage Two of the Bass Pro Tour season. While Jacob Wheeler ultimately won the event, no one dialed in the big-fish bite quite like Justin Lucas. During the Knockout Round, Lucas boated six bass weighing 42-6 – an astounding 7-1 average. His biggest five weighed a combined 37-3, which would have been the heaviest five-fish limit of his decorated career. He caught four bass of 7-plus pounds and two over 8, including the 8-15 that won Berkley Big Bass honors. While Lucas, who caught all those fish shaking a Berkley Flatnose Minnow over brushpiles, couldn't replicate the bite during the Championship Round, he described the magical Knockout Round as "the best day of fishing I've ever had in my life." PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON





4 DUSTIN CONNELL WINS REDCREST ON HOME LAKE (MARCH 14-17)

In hindsight, Dustin Connell's REDCREST victory on Lay Lake felt inevitable. But he had to make several clutch adjustments to pull it off. Competing on one of the Coosa River impoundments he grew up fishing, Connell rallied during the second half of the Knockout Round to make the final-day field. Then, during the Championship Round, he pulled a 180: Instead of fishing beneath Logan Martin dam again, he decided to venture down the lake, where most of the Top 10 targeted suspended, schooling spotted bass. After a slow start, he ran to a pocket near Lacoosa Marina and landed on the mother lode. In a little more than 2 hours, Connell stacked 14 bass totaling 41-12 onto SCORETRACKER®, which gave him a lead he wouldn't relinquish. His final tally of 83-0 was easily enough to make him the first repeat winner of MLF's championship event. PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

5 DALE HOLLOW PRODUCES FURIOUS ACTION IN FIRST NATIONAL EVENT (APRIL 9-14)

Dale Hollow Lake has long held a reputation as a bucket-list destination – it produced the world-record smallmouth, after all. However, due to the lake's smallmouth slot limit, top tournament trails have traditionally avoided the Tennessee fishery. The Bass Pro Tour's catch-weigh-release format allowed the anglers to showcase the lake's healthy bass population, and it didn't disappoint. It took more than 70 pounds in both Groups A and B to qualify for the Knockout Round. Then, during the Championship Round, Wheeler rocketed out of the starting blocks at an unprecedented rate, boating 14 bass for 43-3 in the first hour and 23 for 70-6 during the opening period. While both Michael Neal and Drew Gill also eclipsed the 80-pound mark on the day, they couldn't catch Wheeler, who cruised to a 116-6 total – the highest winning weight of the year.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON





6 BANKS SHAW DOMINATES CHICKAMAUGA IN RECORD FASHION (MAY 2-4)

Plenty of young anglers have impressed in recent years, but none can claim an accomplishment quite like University of North Alabama angler Banks Shaw. Shaw blew the field away during the Toyota Series event on Lake Chickamauga in early May, sacking up 82-12 across three days to win by 24-5. That broke Morrison's record for the largest margin of victory in Toyota Series history. While most of the field found the postspawn conditions challenging, Shaw used his knowledge of Chick (his home lake) and his electronics prowess to target fish that were moving from spawning areas to their summer haunts. The 20-year-old dialed in his bite more each day, weighing 23-11 on Day 1 and 26-13 on Day 2 before adding an exclamation point with a 32-4 monster bag on Day 3. PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

7 ZACK BIRGE BREAKS THROUGH ON EUFAULA (APRIL 30-MAY 5)

Across four years competing on the FLW Tour and six on the Bass Pro Tour, Zack Birge established himself as one of the most consistent anglers in the world. His first national win, though, eluded him. Finally, after 11 Top 10s without a victory in BPT competition, Birge broke down the door at Stage Four on Oklahoma's Lake Eufaula. With thunderstorms and tornadoes causing the lake level to spike and throwing much of the field for a loop, Birge leaned on his shallow-water, power fishing skills and Oklahoma roots. During the Championship Round, he used a bladed jig around flooded bank grass to jump out to an early lead, then a topwater frog to protect it – all within earshot of the launch ramp, where his family and friends cheered him on.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

8 JAKE LAWRENCE BOUNCES BACK WITH EUFAULA WIN (MAY 10-12)

Finishing 24th in a 150-boat field can rarely be labeled a disappointment. But that was the case for Jake Lawrence when the Invitationals visited Kentucky Lake in April. Lawrence entered the event as a heavy favorite thanks to a Toyota Series victory the month prior plus two wins on his home lake in 2023. Instead, Lawrence simply had to wait a few weeks for his first national win. At the following event, he took his Tennessee River ledge fishing skills south and rode them to victory at Alabama's Lake Eufaula. Lawrence used a fairly unique presentation – a 3/4-ounce scrounger head with a soft-plastic jerkbait – to boat 21-0 on Day 1 and 22-6 on Day 2, then survived a tough Day 3 with 16-4. That proved just enough to hold off Paul Marks Jr. by 11 ounces.



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

9 HEAVY HITTERS TURNS INTO FROG FEST (MAY 18-23)

With several contenders using topwater frogs and heavy tackle to haul big bass out of thick grass on Florida's Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, General Tire Heavy Hitters lived up to its name. A unique set of conditions – low water combined with hydrilla mats that were topped out enough to grow "cheese" but not too thick – made for an epic frog bite that Jordan Lee rode to victory. Lee and Brandon Coulter found the frog pattern early, both using Berkley Swamp Lords to lap the competition in their respective Qualifying Rounds. While the bite slowed as more anglers caught on, Lee still paced the field in both the Knockout and Championship Rounds, boating seven bass for 27-14 on the final day. He narrowly held off a hard-charging Keith Poche, who also wielded a Swamp Lord but in a totally different environment in a shallow canal.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

10 KVD WALKS OFF WITH $100,000 BASS (MAY 23)

As impressive as Lee's Heavy Hitters victory was, he didn't leave Florida with the biggest paycheck. That honor, as it has so often during his career, went to Kevin VanDam. VanDam earned $18,000 for finishing fourth plus a $100,000 bonus for catching the biggest bass of the Championship Round – a 7-12 lunker that ate a vibrating jig. Making the moment even more special was the fact that VanDam won the coveted big bass bonus on the final day of his final national-level event. VanDam announced his retirement following the 2023 campaign but qualified for REDCREST and Heavy Hitters in 2024. He fished his last event in true KVD fashion, burning a Strike King Thunder Cricket around offshore grass. The resulting $100,000 bass provided a fitting end to his unparalleled career.



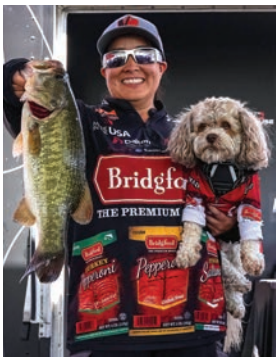
PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

11 MARKS DOMINATES ALL-AMERICAN (MAY 29-31)

While finishing just behind Lawrence on Eufaula surely stung, Marks, too, didn't have to wait long for his breakthrough moment. The 23-year-old unlocked a tough bite on Tennessee's Cherokee Lake and lapped the field during the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American. The Georgia native used his electronics to find sweet spots on rocky, windblown points, then used a finesse swimbait to catch the smallmouth living there.

Marks surpassed 12 pounds all three days, finishing with a total of 38-6 and winning by 4-5. A lifelong tournament angler who's had plenty of success at the local level, Marks could well be the next in a long line of winners to use the All-American to launch a successful national career.





PHOTOS BY JOHN ZEOLLA

12 DEANNA MORENO, RACHEL URIBE FINISH 1-2 ON CALIFORNIA DELTA (JUNE 5-7)

It's rare that a co-angler competition upstages the boaters, but that will happen when MLF history is made. During the final Toyota Series Western Division event of the year on the California Delta, Deanna Moreno topped the Strike King co-angler standings with 40-15, becoming the third woman ever to win a Toyota Series event and the first since 2001. Making her victory even more notable was the fact that she beat out Rachel Uribe, who totaled 36-10, marking the first time ever that two women have finished first and second at an MLF/FLW event. Both Moreno and Uribe used the resulting spotlight to encourage other female anglers to get involved in tournament competition.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

13 CHOWAN RIVER SHOWS OUT IN DEBUT (JUNE 4-9)

While just about everyone had *heard* of Dale Hollow before the BPT's debut event on the fishery, North Carolina's Chowan River represented a complete mystery to much of the field. The tidal river delivered, producing big bass and a lot of them at Stage Five. During each of the six competition days, the Berkley Big Bass weighed at least 6-15, and three 8-pounders hit the scales. Both picking apart the plentiful shallow cover and targeting submerged wood offshore produced solid days, none better than Drew Gill's Championship Round performance. Gill used a drop-shot in tandem with forward-facing sonar to catch 10 bass for nearly 32 pounds during the second period. His 58-14 total earned his first BPT victory.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

14 SKEET REESE CLAIMS FIRST BPT WIN (JUNE 25-30)

Skeet Reese has achieved just about all there is to accomplish during his professional career, as evidenced by his recent induction into the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame. Until June, however, he'd yet to hoist a Bass Pro Tour trophy. Reese ended that drought on the James River, where he held off Jeff Sprague by 3-11 in a thriller. Like most of the field, Reese started the event fishing in the Chickahominy River but called a clutch audible during the Knockout and Championship Rounds, starting near the mouth of the Appomattox River and running the tide from there. He used his wizardry with a shallow crankbait to pick apart manmade cover and amass a big lead on the final morning, then held off a hard late charge from Sprague to earn an emotional celebration.

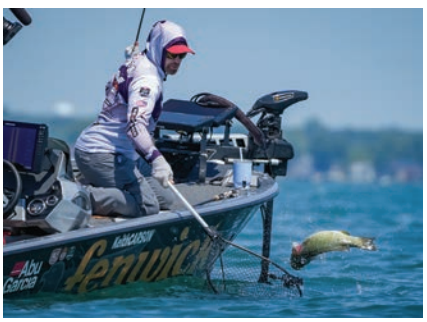


PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

15 KEITH CARSON WINS A SMALLMOUTH 'SCOPE TOURNAMENT (JULY 26-28)

Keith Carson is probably best known for two things: his shallow-water prowess and his friendship with John Cox. So, the Florida native wasn't exactly on the short list of favorites during the Invitationals season finale on the Detroit River. However, Carson proved that he could use forward-facing sonar to catch offshore smallmouth with the best of them. Fishing Anchor Bay in Lake St. Clair but avoiding the crowd by targeting single fish, Carson didn't get many bites, but he got the right ones. He took the Day 1 lead with 22-15, then followed it up with 21-15 and 22-8 to edge Morrison by 10 ounces. Not bad for a Florida boy.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

16 MORRISON WINS THRILLING AOY RACE (JULY 28)

The top Tackle Warehouse Invitationals performers set a breakneck pace and never really slowed down, making for a captivating Fishing Clash Angler of the Year battle. In the end, Morrison edged Lawrence by 16 points to earn both the AOY and Rookie of the Year titles. Morrison made all six Day 3 cuts, including four Top-10 finishes and three in the top five. His average finish of 8.67 was the best by any angler on the Invitationals/Pro Circuit since Bryan Thrift in 2010. Lawrence, who himself made every cut, held the lead for much of the season, but Morrison's exceptional northern swing, which saw him finish third at Lake Champlain and second at the Detroit River, netted him $50,000 and a new Polaris.



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

17 JACOB WHEELER RETURNS TO AOY THRONE (AUG. 11)

A year after narrowly missing out on an AOY three-peat, Wheeler returned to the top spot in the Fishing Clash Angler of the Year standings. The world's No. 1 angler started the season with a fourth-place finish on Toledo Bend, then knocked out back-to-back wins at Santee Cooper and Dale Hollow. Despite a tough first day, he avoided a bomb at Lake Eufaula, finishing 17th – which he's identified as perhaps the key moment in his AOY conquest. He went on to finish fourth at the Chowan River, 11th at the James River and 14th at the St. Lawrence River to clinch the crown. As a result, Wheeler became the 10th angler ever to win three national-tour AOY titles – and at age 34, it seems reasonable to expect he has plenty left in the tank.


PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

18 DREW GILL SOARS TO NEW HEIGHTS (JANUARY-AUGUST)

It would be easy to make the case that no angler across all MLF circuits had a better 2024 than Gill. After bursting onto the scene in 2023, when he finished ninth in the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals points standings and earned a Bass Pro Tour invite, the 22-year-old took his game to a new level this year. Gill finished third in his debut BPT event on Toledo Bend, then earned his first national win on Sam Rayburn a week later. He would go on to notch four more top fives on the BPT (including his win on the Chowan) en route to a runner-up Angler of the Year finish, as well as three more Invitationals Top 10s. All told, Gill finished among the Top 10 in nine of 12 tour-level events, racking up $390,000 in the process.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE


PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

19 COLBY MILLER BREAKS OUT IN A BIG WAY (JANUARY-AUGUST)

Colby Miller started the new year strong, finishing ninth in the season-opening BFL on Sam Rayburn then notching his first career win on Lake of the Pines in the second Cowboy Division event. He kept the momentum rolling from there. Miller would go on to add a Toyota Series win on Sam Rayburn, which saw him romp to victory by nearly 15 pounds. He logged three top-five finishes during the Invitationals season and finished third in the Angler of the Year race, earning an invitation to join the Bass Pro Tour. He concluded his stellar campaign with a fourth-place finish in the Toyota Series event on the St. Lawrence River. Throw in Miller's victory in the Brandon Belt Grand Slam, which earned him and teammate Cole Moore $150,000 each, and he cleared $300,000 in earnings on the year.

20 ST. LAWRENCE RIVER CONTINUES TO SHOW OUT (AUG. 6-24)

The St. Lawrence River's seemingly endless supply of big smallmouth is no secret. Yet despite heavy fishing pressure that increases annually, the New York river continued to kick out massive weights in 2024. First, two pros notched 100-pound days during the Bass Pro Tour season finale, which Michael Neal ultimately won with 88-14 in the Championship Round. Then, when the Toyota Series visited the river, three anglers eclipsed the 70-pound mark over three days, led by Casey Smith, whose 26-4 final-day limit boosted his total to 72-1. That marked the second-heaviest winning weight across 11 three-day Toyota Series events on the river and the heaviest with Lake Ontario off-limits. By the way, the angler who finished third in that Toyota Series event, Dante Piraino, broke the New York state record a few weeks later when he caught a 9-pound smallmouth from the river.


Built for speed, the newly redesigned Revo® Rocket features a 17% larger machined aluminum main gear to drive the rocket-fast 7.6:1 gear ratio, which means more casting and more fishing in every moment on the water.
FISH LIKE THE BOAT'S ON FIRE.
AbuGarcia
REVO
FISH TO WIN
Revo RKT Reels
©2023 Pure Fishing, Inc.

21 BECKER, SHUFFIELD DOMINATE IN FIRST TWO-MAN TEAM SERIES EVENT (AUG. 25-30)



The first event of MLF's revamped General Tire Team Series, which featured pairs of pros competing from the same boat, proved to be a smash hit. The Challenge Cup in Erie, Pennsylvania, included several 100-pound days, angler shenanigans and even an on-the-water extraction of a hook from a hand. By the end of the six-day competition, Matt Becker and Spencer Shuffield had left no doubt about their dominance. The Team B&W Trailer Hitches duo (who dubbed themselves the "Brownie Boys") got on a sweet topwater bite early during their Knockout Round win on Chautauqua Lake. Then, they found a school of largemouth chasing bait amid offshore grass in Presque Isle Bay and stacked up 113-5 on 64 bass during the Championship Round, cruising to the win by nearly 35 pounds as their significant others cheered them on from a nearby boat. PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



22 CHRIS BRUMMETT HONORS LATE FRIEND WITH INCREDIBLE RUN (APRIL-SEPTEMBER)

You'd be hard-pressed to find an angler who had a better season at the local level than Chris Brummett – or one who had a better source of motivation. The Virginia native racked up three wins and seven Top 10s across 10 events in the BFL Piedmont and Shenandoah Divisions, claiming Angler of the Year honors in each. His victories came on three different fisheries: Smith Mountain Lake in April, the James River in August and a two-day Super Tournament win on Kerr Lake in September. Brummett dedicated his season to honoring his friend Rick Tilley, who passed away from pancreatic cancer in February, and he attributed some of his success to emulating Tilley's fish-for-the-win mindset. Safe to say Tilley would be proud.

23 BEST BUDDIES EDGE FATHER AND SON IN HERITAGE CUP THRILLER (SEPT. 15-20)



While the weights weren't quite as gaudy during the second Team Series event, the fisheries around Neenah, Wisconsin, delivered several dramatic days. That culminated in a neck-and-neck race down the stretch of the Championship Round, with Ott DeFoe and Andy Montgomery fending off Alton Jones and Alton Jones Jr. Representing Team REDCON1, DeFoe and Montgomery used their shallow-water skills to pick apart the docks lining Green Lake and led for most of the day. The father-son duo found the same bite a bit later and got hot, closing their deficit to as little as 2-3 in the final minutes. But DeFoe and Montgomery – best friends who have long roomed together on the road – made a few clutch catches late to edge the Joneses by 5-7, prompting an emotional celebration. PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



24 HAYDEN MARBUT BOOKENDS BREAKOUT SEASON WITH WINS (FEBRUARY-NOVEMBER)

There was no shortage of early-20s anglers who made waves in 2024. Hayden Marbut deserves a spot on the short list. The Auburn University standout started the year by notching his first solo win in the Toyota Series event on Lake Guntersville in February. Nine months later and just a few miles down the Tennessee River, Marbut delivered an encore by winning the Toyota Series Championship on Wheeler Lake. The 21-year-old used his aptitude with forward-facing sonar and a jighead minnow to grab the Day 1 lead with 21-6. He followed it up with 19-10 on Day 2, then sacked 16-12 on a tough Day 3 to pass veteran pro Keith Poche. The victory not only brought Marbut's 2024 Toyota Series winnings to a ridiculous $345,555 but earned him a spot in REDCREST 2025 on Guntersville, where he should be a legitimate threat. PHOTO BY JACOB FINE


TACKLE
WAREHOUSE
CLICK.
SAVE.
FISH.
GUARANTEED LOWEST PRICES | FREE GROUND SHIPPING ON ORDERS OVER $50 | FREE RETURNS

THE PROFOUND SIMPLICITY OF THE DAMIKI RIG

By Mike Pehanich

No vibe, no chatter, no lip and barely a tail. Yet the dirt-simple Damiki rig is changing the way we fish.

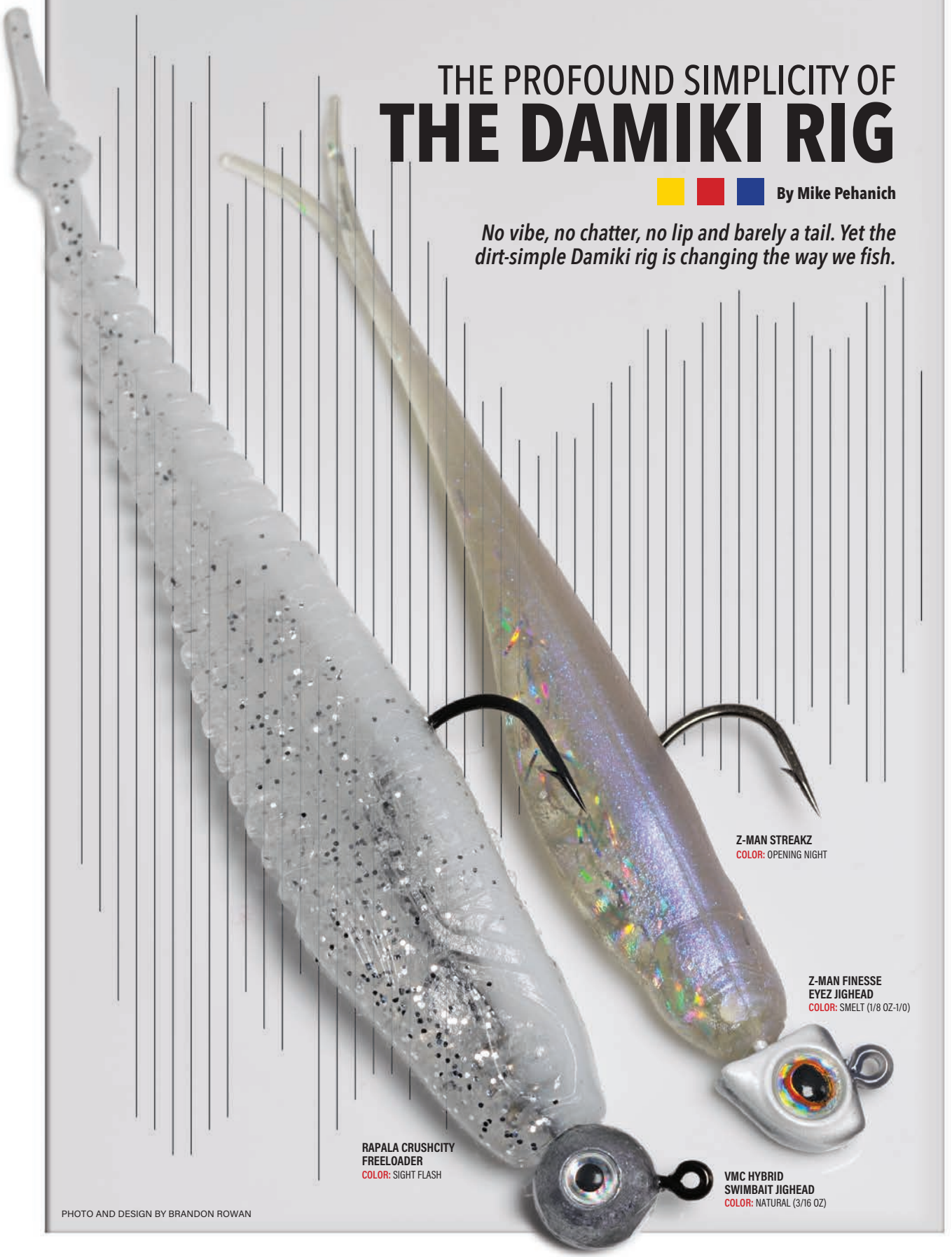


PHOTO AND DESIGN BY BRANDON ROWAN



BAITS FOR BIG BASS
Jacob Wall caught numerous Lake Guntersville giants while developing the new Duckett Sway Minnow and jighead.

For all the recent debate surrounding live sonar, there's no denying that it's altering our understanding of bass behavior and the "whys" and "whats" of how they react to baits. And from this technology-driven well of learning, a decades-old bait type and technique has ascended to surprising — almost unimagined — prominence.

It goes by different names, but it's known best today as the "Damiki rig." It consists of a jighead and a small to mid-sized minnow-style soft plastic (usually a fluke-type bait, though "drip tails" and other designs are increasingly coming into play) and displays the subtle action of a baitfish at rest. It's morphing into more refined iterations every day.

"(The Damiki rig) imitates a shad – a prominent baitfish – exactly," says Tennessee pro John Murray. "You can work it at the precise depth you need or want. It has become a bass fishing staple now, and it never was before."

The name itself derives from the teaming of the Damiki Armor Shad with the Damiki Rig Jighead, a combination that Tennessee anglers fished for years in relative secrecy in cold water conditions.

As rudimentary as the rig itself may be, the styles of presentation that have elevated the status and popularity of the rig are simpler still – "hovering" or "strolling" the bait in motionless or slow, tantalizing fashion over the head(s) of grouped or targeted bass.

"WHILE SIMPLICITY IS ITS SOUL, VERSATILITY IS ITS STRENGTH."

Simple yet versatile, it's a rig that can draw bass from deep, clear water or turbid shallows, paired with forward-facing sonar or used without technology.

"I learned early on (in my career) how effective minnow-shaped (plastics) can be for bass," says Jacob Wheeler, the Bass Pro Tour's 2024 Angler of the Year. "Tight-lining, Damiki rig fishing is a crazy effective technique, a technique you've got to learn

TERMS OF ENDEARMENT: DAMIKI RIG MONICKERS

DAMIKI RIGGING
Collective term for techniques employing jig and plastic minnow bait combinations similar in design and function to the Damiki Armor Shad and Damiki Rig Jighead.

MOPING
Dubbed by the late Ron Lindner for this pretty much do-nothing vertical manner of presentation, "moping" consists of hovering a jig and minnow imitation over the heads of bass locked on schools of baitfish. Fished most often in 15- to 30-foot depths.

SCRUBBING
Another Northwoods name for fishing similar jig and minnow plastics over deep-water bass, whether suspended or hugging bottom.

STROLLING
An umbrella term for generally slow, horizontal presentations of Damiki-style jig/minnow combos; more active than moping.

MID-STROLLING
Employing a strolling technique somewhere in the mid-depth range of the water column. It generally employs a heavier jighead and more aggressive movement of the rod tip to draw a strike

HOVER STROLLING
Similar to mid-strolling, the rig is modified, substituting the jighead for a weightless hook to keep forward movement of the bait to a minimum. Generally fished when bass are positioned in shallow water or within 10 feet of the surface, it's a slower presentation that relies on the bait's natural gliding action and spiral fall or a gentle rod shake executed with slack line.

TIGHT-LINING
First earning recognition as a winter smallmouth technique in eastern Tennessee, tight-lining employs light jig and straight-tail plastic combinations and is executed with a slow reel coupled with steady rod shakes.



PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

"IT'S A NEUTRAL, NATURAL PRESENTATION THAT SEEMS TO WORK IN SO MANY SITUATIONS."

to fish whether or not you use forward-facing sonar – or any kind of electronics at all."

The rig's simple design, light weight and subtle swimming action enable the angler to serve it up to bass in tantalizing fashion and extend its presence in the fish's strike window.

Part of the rig's growing popularity and accelerated evolution stems from its ease of use and deadly effectiveness when coupled with live sonar. Anglers seem to value it as much as a learning tool as a fish catcher.

"Ultimately, the technique has evolved with technology," says Bass Pro Tour pro Jacob Wall. "Together they've taught me so much about bass fishing and bass behavior, ... how lethargic or complacent bass can be, how much they suspend. And when a lot of bass are suspended, it's hard to catch them any other way."

"It's dynamite," adds Matt Stefan who grew familiar with the rig on Northwoods waters near his Wisconsin home. "It's not just that we're catching suspended bass on the rig. We're catching fish we really couldn't catch before."

THE NUTS AND BOLTS

HERE ARE SOME PROVEN COMPONENTS OF THE JIG-HEAD MINNOW SETUP:

Berkley PowerBait Drip Minnow (berkley-fishing.com) – Features a "drip" tail alternative to conventional fork-tail plastics. Available in 3-, 4-, and 5-inch sizes and eight realistic baitfish patterns.

Z-Man Graph ShadZ (zmanfishing.com) – Luke Clausen calls this bait "the most refined jighead minnow yet designed for FFS," pointing to its advanced sonar reflection properties, balanced design and highly realistic look. The pre-rigged jig/minnow features a line-through jighead; recessed, 90-degree line tie and buoyant, durable, shad-scale ElaZtech soft plastic.

Z-Man Finesse EyeZ (zmanfishing.com) – A low-center-of-gravity StabilTrack design keeps baits on track when retrieved and in a horizontal position when worked vertically. Welded wire keeper holds ElaZtech plastics in place. Available in two hook sizes and 1/12-, 1/8-, 3/16-, 1/4- and 3/8-ounce weights.

Z-Man Scented Jerk ShadZ (zmanfishing.com) – Infused with salt and Pro-Cure Super Gel, this tough, forked-tail ElaZtech minnow draws fish with its profile and shivering movement.

Yamamoto Scope Shad (baits.com) – A forked-tail minnow, the latest additions to the line include 3.5- and 4-inch models plus five new colors among its 23 offerings.





Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm (baits.com) – Versatile bait has proven popular in moping and strolling applications in addition to its original function as a drop-shot offering. Available in 3- and 3.75-inch sizes.

Rapala CrushCity Mooch Minnow (rapala.com) – The latest addition to the CrushCity line, the 3.5-inch bait is Jacob Wheeler's self-designed choice when bass zero in on smaller baitfish. Available in 19 colors.



Rapala CrushCity Freeloader (rapala.com) – The 4.5-inch bait Wheeler strolled to wins at Guntersville in 2023 and Santee Cooper in 2024. Offered in 17 colors.

VMC Hybrid Swimbait Jig (rapala.com) – This screw-lock jighead features a round, wide-gap hook for better hook-ups. Available in 3/16-, 1/4- and 5/16-ounce sizes.

Duckett Fishing Sway Minnow (duckettfishing.com) – Jacob Wall designed the "Wall-Hanger" combination of Sway Head Jig and Sway Minnow soft plastic specifically for hovering and strolling presentations and FFS. Soratobu Wing Technology gives this durable bait the rolling, swaying motion of an injured baitfish. Currently available in a 4.5-inch size and four colors.

ORIGIN: NORTH, SOUTH ... AND FAR EAST

The origins of "Damiki rig" fishing significantly predate live sonar, with some roots reaching back decades. Fact blends with rumor and myth when tracing the origins of the Damiki rig and the techniques that gave it birth.

Some southern anglers point to "lazy" jig and plastic minnow techniques employed by Tennessee anglers during cold weather seasons as far back as the 1950s and '60s.

"They called it 'tight-lining' there in eastern Tennessee, and they employed it in cold water situations with crappie-sized baits," West Coast pro Luke Clausen says. "They also fished the rig vertically."



DAMIKI RIG JIGHEAD AND ARMOR SHAD
COLOR: RP BLUE PEARL 3"

THE OG
The Damiki Armor Shad is responsible for the term Damiki Rig.

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

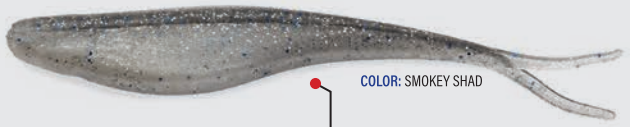
Northern anglers trace the rig to Ron and Jim Lindner, who lured Canadian Shield smallmouth feeding on suspended smelt and tullibees with a jig and fluke-style bait as early as 2003 to record tournament wins on Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake. Ron dubbed the technique "moping," referencing the lazy style of presentation.

Murray traces the rig to more recent seasons.

"It started originally on Tennessee's South Holston Lake using the Damiki Armor Shad, dropping it vertically on smallmouth resting on the bottom. They used it on Cherokee and Douglas, too," he says. "They've done a lot of things with the rig – things that prompted the terms 'strolling' and 'hover strolling.' But the term 'Damiki rigging' came out of eastern Tennessee."

Of course, with finesse being a crucial component of the technique, Japanese anglers helped advance the rig, too. Jacob Wheeler points to Shin Fukae's 2006 FLW victory on Arkansas' Beaver Lake as the earliest proof that "mid-strolling"– the Japanese form of "tight-lining" that Fukae brought to America – could win top-tier pro bass tournaments. Wheeler himself would win his first national event with the astonishingly simple minnow rig on Cherokee Lake in 2017. Since then, during his 2024 Angler of the Year season and beyond, Wheeler has ridden the technique to multiple victories.

"I won events at Guntersville and Santee Cooper with my (Rapala



COLOR: SMOKEY SHAD

Duckett Fishing Sway Head Jig (duckettfishing.com) – Head shape is tailored to Sway System techniques with flat keel bottom and centered weight distribution. Features a large eye and double-pronged bait keeper. Currently available in 1/8-, 3/16-, 1/4-, and 3/8-ounce sizes.

Great Lakes Finesse Hanging Head Jig (greatlakesfinesse.com) – Balanced to keep its companion plastic in a horizontal position, this finessey head features a fine-wire Gamakatsu hook and 3D eyes. Available in six colors.

Great Lakes Finesse Hover Minnow (greatlakesfinesse.com) – Made to mope and stroll, the bait has a lifelike, random darting action when mated with its companion Hanging Head Jig. Available in 14 color patterns.

Strike King 3X Z-Too Soft Jerkbait (strikeking.com) – Another minnow that is buoyant and durable thanks to its ElaZtech material, the original Z-Too measures 5 inches while the Baby Z-Too offers a downsized option at 3.5 inches.



COLOR: TENNESSEE SHAD

Dirty Jigs Guppy Head (dirtyjigstackle.com) – Unique head design blends with a stacked cone keeper to spread weight for improved bait presentation. Available in 1/8-, 3/16-, 1/4-, and 3/8-ounce weights, six colors and 1/0 and 3/0 VMC hook options.

Damiki Armor Shad (damiki.com) – Teamed with the Damiki Rig Jighead, this shad-shaped bait with forked tail set the trend and thus lent its name to the category. Available in 2.5-, 3-, 5-, and 7-inch sizes.

Damiki Rig Jighead (damiki.com) – Extended underjaw and 90-degree line tie delivers center weight balance to deliver the horizontal bait presentation that is key to Damiki rigging. Features a Viper hook and 3D eyes. Jighead offered in seven weight/hook combinations with 1/8-, 3/16-, 1/4-, 3/8-, and 1/2-ounce sizes.

Core Tackle Hover Rig (coretackle.com) – Unique jig designed by Matt Stefan distributes weight along the hook shank in cone-like segments, enabling a gliding fall and namesake "hovering" effect when teamed with a minnow-style plastic. Available in 12 weight/hook combinations ranging from 1/32 to 1/8 ounce.

Deps Sakamata Shad (optimumbaits.com) – Available in five sizes from 4 to 8 inches, this plastic has become arguably the most popular among touring pros.

Queen Tackle LS Tungsten Rollin' Strollin' Jig (queentackle.com) – Designed for powerful sonar signal returns and side-to-side bait action, this roundball jig is available in sizes ranging from 1/16 to 1/2 ounce.



Owner Range Roller Jig (ownerhooks.com) – Made for mid-strolling, the jig enables baits to deliver side-to-side action via its top-heavy ballhead. Wide range of offerings includes three different hook sizes and seven weights.

Bass Pro Shops XPS Shad Bod (basspro.com) – A compact, 3-inch offering with a forked tail that carries a cheaper price tag than most plastics on this list. Offered in six colors.

CrushCity) Freeloader," says Wheeler. "I even caught bass on it in Italy this October. Largemouth, smallmouth, spotted bass: I've caught them literally all over the world!"

COMING IN FROM THE COLD: THE FFS FACTOR

Moping, strolling, tight-lining and related presentations excel in cold water conditions. During late fall, winter and early spring, bass commonly huddle in numbers in open water – often high in the water column – beneath schools of pelagic baitfish like gizzard and threadfin shad, smelt, ciscoes and tullibees, or even sunfish or perch.

But, as live sonar has demonstrated repeatedly, those bass are often reluctant to bite, no matter the season. Hence, the turn to baits and presentations able to tease a bite from wary fish any time they suspend.

Vertical presentations (moping, dead-sticking) have branched into horizontal presentations (strolling, mid-strolling, hover strolling) that enable anglers to cover water and reach fish anywhere in the water column, whether shallow or deep.

"We learned years ago that bass group up in winter and trail baitfish, and that if you have the right profile bait, you could get them to bite," says Wheeler. "But, with FFS, we've learned that the technique is not limited to the cooler months. Any time the fish group up and focus on baitfish, you can hover a bait over their heads and get them to strike."

Like other cold-weather techniques, less is often more when it comes to Damiki rigging. "Moping" practitioners learned early on that the subtle quivering of their fork-tailed baits at rest was often as enticing as any action they could impart to the lure.

The principles of "moping" largely carried over to horizontal presentations with the rig as practiced pros armed with FFS expanded the range at which they could detect bass and their bait on the sonar screen. Experience proved that even a moving bait had to be kept above the fish's head and kept in the fish's strike zone as long as possible.



GO FOR A STROLL
Hover strolling is a Japanese technique that can be deadly on bass higher in the water column.

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

ROCK 'N ROLL

Vertical presentations like moping established the basic bait combination and less-is-more principle of Damiki rig fishing. But FFS encounters called for longer casts and more active presentations.

Weight, size, shape and bait buoyancy are key factors when assembling bait combinations. Jighead selection favors those that present the minnow plastic in a natural, horizontal fashion.

"The key to the technique is presentation, keeping the bait running parallel to the surface or lake bottom," says Wall. "You don't want the bait varying too much in the water column. You want to keep it running flat."

Typical presentation keeps the bait well above the head(s) of the fish. Stefan prefers to work his bait 5 feet or more above the fish initially, trying always to draw them upward to strike.

"A lot of guys try to suspend the bait a foot above the fish, but I find that often spooks them," he says.

Hover strolling, which targets bass in shallow water or high in the water column, employs an unweighted hook (preferably one with a 90-degree line tie) within the minnow plastic. Weight may be added to the bait body as needed to adjust for casting distance, drop rate or retrieve speed.

"It's a Japanese technique that came here about five years ago, but it really took hold only two years ago," says Stefan.

Hover rigging inspired Stefan to design the Core Tackle Hover Rig, a hybrid design with conical weight segments on the hook shank and a bullet head. The rigs are available in five weights ranging from 1/32 to 1/8 ounce and five hook sizes.

When conditions call for a jighead, his choices are the Queen Tackle L.S. Tungsten or the Owner Range Roller.

"I choose a jig that allows the bait to rock side to side," Stefan says. To keep his bait suspended without drawing it out of the fish's strike zone, Stefan employs "fast, rapid shakes" of his rod tip.

As for plastics, Clausen opts for buoyant minnows like the Z-Man Scented Jerk ShadZ, which hang in a natural, baitfish-like, horizontal position.

"The bait is more balanced coming through the water due to the ElaZtech," explains Clausen, who pairs the bait with the Guppy Head jig from Dirty Jigs. "Guys are looking for jigheads that keep the bait horizontal. So many refinements are taking place today."

The latest addition to Clausen's strolling arsenal is the Z-Man Graph ShadZ, a realistic, fork-tail shad imitation with the head integrated into the plastic. Its flat head, deep body profile, scale pattern and air cavity combine to create a strong sonar response – the driving principle behind the design.

In addition to increased FFS returns, other recent trends are toward jig/minnow combinations that produce a subtle rolling action.

"I need a bait with flatter sides, a baitfish profile that allows the lure to roll," says Wheeler, who uses a pair of minnow-style baits of his own design – the aforementioned Freeloader and Mooch Minnow from the Rapala

"NEW"

FRESH CUTS FROM YOUR FAVORITE MEAT MARKET.

— RAPALA BRINGS LEGENDARY LIFELIKE ACTION TO SOFT PLASTICS —





DESIGNED BY Jacob Wheeler

CRUSHCITY™ RAPALA

SMART INJECTION TECHNOLOGY®



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

MONEY MINNOWS
Jacob Wheeler has won multiple Bass Pro Tour events and titles by fishing with Rapala CrushCity soft plastics.

"I NEED A BAIT WITH FLATTER SIDES, A BAITFISH PROFILE THAT ALLOWS THE LURE TO ROLL."

CrushCity line – with the VMC Hybrid Jighead. He, too, shakes his rod tip during the retrieve to impart a gentle, side-to-side rocking motion to his bait.

Wall designed the Duckett Sway Minnow and Sway Head Jig together to generate the kind of rolling action that he deems most effective in drawing strikes. He adds "subtle shakes" during his retrieve.

"You want a slack line while you're shaking it, getting it to roll," he says. "You don't want to be jumping it. The shakes can be quick or slow, but they are just subtle shakes, always keeping the bait above the fish."

The weight and buoyancy of the jig and plastic and speed of retrieve are the key variables.

"It's a speed thing more than anything else," Wall says. "I'll vary the weight of the jig and speed of retrieve with the mood of the fish.

Tackle choices for Damiki Rig techniques are relatively simple, with most pros opting for a 7-foot to 7-6 medium or medium-light power spinning rod with a fast or extra-fast tip.

"I like a very fast tip because I am throwing slack into the line as I am shaking the rod," says Wheeler, who directed a 2.0 redesign of his Wheeler Series 7-foot spinning rod from Duckett Fishing, set for winter release. "Think of it like walking the dog with a topwater bait. If you don't throw it slack, the bait doesn't have the freedom to rock, to swing side to side."

Light braid tipped with an 8-pound fluorocarbon leader, upgraded to 10- or 12-pound test as conditions dictate, serves most situations.

SO MUCH TO LEARN

Damiki rigging – or whatever you choose to call it – is evolving rapidly. While simplicity is its soul, versatility is its strength. Pairing so well with forward-facing sonar has made it nearly indispensable.

While the technique is generally associated with clear, deep waters and shad-based lakes, it is proving daily to have broader application. Wheeler emphasizes the effectiveness of the rig in depths ranging from 2 feet to 60 feet, with FFS or without any electronics at all – even in stained water.

"Shad lakes, perch lakes – the forage doesn't seem to matter where smallmouth are concerned," says Clausen. "On a lot of lakes in my area, the bass are feeding on kokanee salmon."

And while anglers most commonly link the rig with suspended fish, it draws strike from bottom huggers, too.

"A lot of the fish we were catching on Guntersville while we were developing the Wall-Hanger combination (Duckett Sway Minnow and Sway Jighead) were right on the bottom," says Wall, claiming an abundance of 6- and 7-pound bass and 30-pound days last winter. "They were so close to the bottom that you couldn't see them on your electronics until they came up for the bait."

Given how quickly the technique has emerged and taken over the tournament scene in recent years, Clausen thinks its evolution is just getting started.

"It's a neutral, natural presentation that seems to work in so many situations," says Clausen. "And it has evolved to where we are doing a lot of different things with that style of bait – rigging two or three together, fishing them on Alabama Rigs – and into a myriad of techniques, from fishing vertically to even fishing fast across the lake surface. ... It's evolving so fast, we don't know where it is going." ■



FINISH WORK. START FISHING.

A PARTNER YOU CAN DEPEND ON? NO CONTEST.

You know what they say. When the work is finished, the fishing can start. That's why it's important to choose a partner built for it all. RANGER is equipped with the ground clearance, horsepower, and class-leading towing capacity to take you from work, to water, to the places in between.

POLARIS RANGER

Explore the full lineup at:

RANGER.POLARIS.COM

Warning: Polaris off-road vehicles can be hazardous to operate and are not designed for on-road use. Driver must be at least 16 years old with a valid driver's license to operate. All riders should always wear helmets, eye protection and footwear. Read, understand and follow your owner's manual. Ride within the limits of your own abilities and never engage in stunt or exhibition driving. Never ride under the influence of drugs or alcohol. All riders should take a safety training course. Call 800-342-3764 for additional information. Unless noted, trademarks are the property of Polaris Industries Inc. © 2024 Polaris Industries Inc.



the must-have bass baits of the Y2K era

A NOSTALGIC LOOK AT HOW THE WEST COAST INFLUENCED Y2K BASSERS

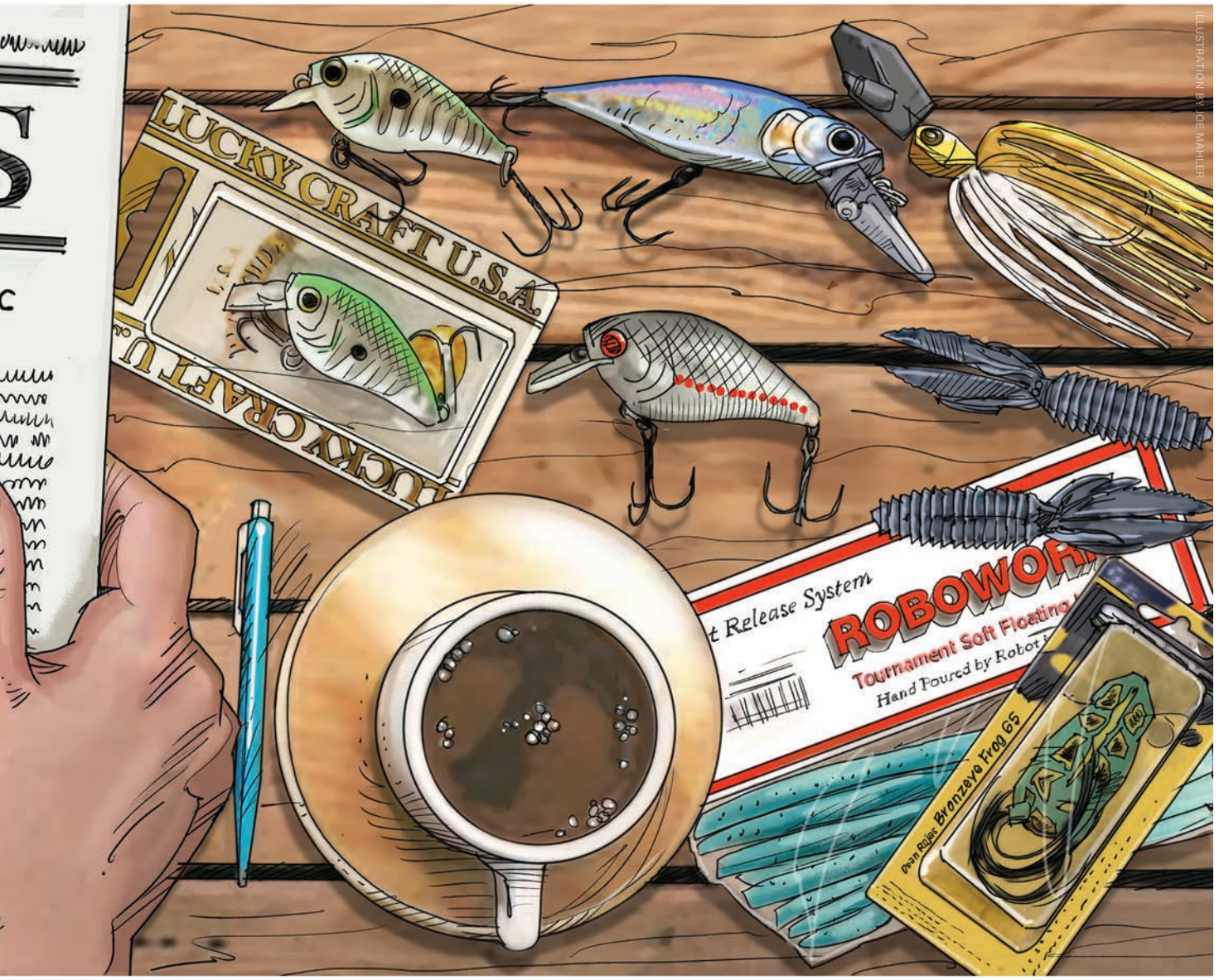


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

MLF reporter *Rob Newell* examines the sickest Western lures of the early 2000s

In Part I of the "Must-Have Lures" trilogy, we looked at Sluggos, Carolina-rigged lizards and neon-colored floating worms for the decade of the 1980s. In Part II, we revisited the '90s, when popular fish catchers included Rattle Back Jigs, flipping tubes, Flukes and Senkos.

In Part III, we'll move into the 2000s to see what bass were biting after the turn of the century. But before we get into the must-have lures of the 2000s, it's important to look at a couple of larger influences that shaped the bass lure market in that decade.

THE KEY INFLUENCERS IN THE Y2K YEARS

First, two innovations on the terminal tackle front influenced the popularity of lures: the advent of fluorocarbon line and the introduction of tungsten as a fishing-weight material.

Fluorocarbon had been around during the '90s, but it was extremely expensive and usually sold as leader material. In the late '90s, fluorocarbon production ramped up and the line became more affordable. In the early 2000s, fluorocarbon's popularity exploded among tournament bass anglers due to its advantages as a sinking line considered to be "invisible" to fish. Instead of the buoyancy of traditional monofilament, which "fought" certain lures and hindered their action, fluorocarbon sank with the bait, offering more depth.

These two elements allowed anglers to maximize the use of suspending jerkbaits, crankbaits and swimbaits.

At about the same time, tungsten weights became more affordable. Drop-shot experts had used tungsten since the mid-'90s, but its incorporation into the punching technique opened the door for a new class of soft plastics.

THE WESTERN INFLUENCE

In addition to these terminal tackle improvements, a new crop of Western pros began storming the national tournament scene in the East with cutting-edge lures and techniques. In the '80s and '90s, West-side OGs such as Gary

Klein, Jay Yelas, John Murray and Mike Folkestad found tournament success across the country with finesse techniques like doodling and split-shotting. Then, starting in the late '90s, another wave of Western wonders began turning heads by taking a large share of tournament payouts in the East. Names like Skeet Reese, Ish Monroe, Byron Velvick, Dean Rojas, Luke Clausen, Andre Moore, Brett Hite, Brent Ehrler and, of course, the unforgettable legend Aaron Martens all ventured east and asserted themselves in B.A.S.S. and FLW Tour competition. Their collective influence had a huge impact on the tournament fishing lure market. As a result, many of the must-have lures of the 2000s originated in the West.

With that in mind, let's look at some of the most popular lures from the 2000s.

FEELING LUCKY?

First up is a lure company that had to come the farthest to shake up the U.S. bait market. In the late '90s and early 2000s, long before scrolling through the newest lures in the world on an iPad was a thing, the West Coast was the primary entry point for Japanese lures coming into America. After a long boat ride across the Pacific Ocean, these Japanese gems then hitchhiked their way across America in the tackleboxes of Western pros.



This is the lore of how Lucky Craft stamped its name into thousands of post-tournament write-ups in the early 2000s. Lucky Craft's topwater Sammy turned some heads in the late '90s, but their Pointer 78 and Pointer 100 suspending jerkbaits became must-haves in the early 2000s.

Before the Pointer revolution, pros would take traditional American jerkbaits like Long As, Rogues and Rapalas and glue flat weights to their bellies to make them suspend. Some pros even drilled holes in these lures and filled them with lead. But getting them to stay balanced and suspend perfectly became a trial-and-error nightmare. Also, casting a modified jerkbait was like slinging a marshmallow with a thumbtack pinned to it into the wind. The old lures helicoptered through the air and caused horrific backlashes.

Lucky Craft changed all that with its ingenious weight transfer system, which utilizes internally shifting weights made of tungsten. The centrifugal force of loading up a cast would "shift" the weight to the tail, making casting distance and accuracy far better. Once the lure hit the water, the weight would shift back into the belly of the lure to help it suspend.

These innovative changes gave anglers jerkbaits that would cast far, then flash, slash and suspend (or "point") perfectly in the water column. In addition, these lures were durable – no more broken lips or split bodies due to cracking a bait against a console or smacking a rock with an errant cast.

Fluorocarbon line was a big help in making these baits reach their maximum depth and performance as well. Add to that the realistic color schemes on these innovative baits, and everyone who tournament fished had to have one (or five). Their $15 to $20 price tags didn't stop anglers from buying them, either. I know plenty of pros who had entire flat tackleboxes dedicated to Pointers.



Several years after the Pointer craze, Lucky Craft again demanded more space in anglers' tackleboxes with the iconic Lucky Craft RC 1.5 squarebill crankbait designed by decorated veteran Rick Clunn.

Clunn, who had previously sworn by wooden squarebills, broke his allegiance to balsa and switched to hard-plastic molded crankbaits with the help of Lucky Craft's innovation. These hard baits were far more durable and consistent than their balsa forefathers yet maintained the critical cover-deflecting action Clunn demanded from a wooden crankbait. With the RC 1.5, Lucky Craft ended an era of broken bills, battered balsa and constant tuning of wooden plugs.

Since the introduction of the RC 1.5, other companies have produced their own versions of the 1.5, making the words "one point five" a generic term for a shallow-running squarebill crankbait.

THE ROBOWORM INVASION

Ask any tournament angler who comes to mind when they hear the word "Roboworm," and there's a good chance they will say Aaron Martens. Indeed, Martens and Roboworm – the famous hand-poured worm manufacturer out of California – are synonymous. Martens is often credited with bringing the deadly drop-shot technique to the East, and he usually tipped it with a Roboworm.

During his first few years competing nationally, Martens shocked the tournament fishing world by catching fish on

... MARTENS SHOCKED THE TOURNAMENT-FISHING WORLD BY CATCHING FISH ON DROP-SHOT ROBOWORMS ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE.



drop-shot Roboworms anywhere and everywhere. Florida lakes, Texas reservoirs, tidal rivers, TVA current-driven fisheries, murky backwaters – it didn't matter. At times, I believed his drop-shot Roboworm was better than live bait.

I can remember hardly seeing a Roboworm in the East in the late '90s, and by the mid-2000s, bags of them filled tackle lockers in boats of anglers who had suddenly become drop-shot aficionados. On several occasions, I asked pros why the Roboworm was the best drop-shot bait. They responded, "Because Aaron said it was."

The worm's hand-poured process gives it a consistent, natural action with the slightest twitches of the rod. Even dead-sticking the worm on a drop-shot in light current makes it look alive. Plus, Roboworm's injection process for colors makes the worms thin pieces of art. The lamination of purples, browns, greens, blues and reds is alluring. I reported on Roboworms so many times in the 2000s, I can still remember some of their best colors: Aaron's magic, morning dawn, oxblood, margarita mutilator, prism shad and purple punisher.

ZOOMING IN ON THE SHAKEY HEAD

In addition to the drop-shot, the shaky head technique was certainly another '90s rage. The origins of a worm on a jighead in bass fishing date back to at least the 1960s, so to assert exactly which part of the country a shaky head originated from is opening Pandora's box. I know they used darter heads in the West in the '70s and '80s. Charlie Brewer from Tennessee unveiled the slider worm in the '70s. Fred "Taco" Bland from Alabama sold the first "shaky heads" I knew about in the early '90s.

No matter where it originated, a shaky head has proven to be a fish catcher in every state that holds bass. The technique reached a mania phase in the 2000s largely due to the co-angler boom at that time.

Just about any 4- to 6-inch straight-tail worm will work for a shaky head. However, Zoom's 4-inch Finesse Worm and 6 1/2-inch Trick Worm certainly made up the shaky-head varsity squad for worm choices. If there was some way to add up the total pounds of bass caught in tournaments in the 2000s, it would be scary to know what percentage were caught on a Zoom Finesse or Trick Worm.

The salt-laden bass noodles come in every color imaginable and can be fished in many ways. When rigged weedless on a shaky head, they work on any type of lake in any type of cover for any species of bass. No wonder tackle lockers are still filled with Zoom's signature red-and-yellow packages to this day.

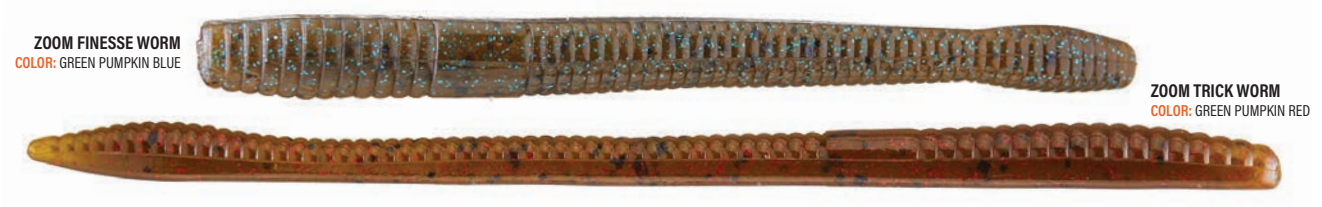


THE BEAVER BOOM

In the early 2000s, a young pro angler named Andre Moore in Scottsdale, Arizona, became frustrated with the limited selection of soft-plastic shapes in the tournament bass fishing lure market. That drove Moore to create his own shapes and pour plastics that suited his fishing style. One prototype was a 4.2-inch ribbed oddity with a flat, beaver-shaped tail.

In 2002, Moore used his prototype lure to win several hundred thousand dollars, including the FLW Tour Open on Beaver Lake. After using his beaver-tail bait to win $200,000 on Beaver Lake, Moore decided to call his creation the Sweet Beaver. He took his financial windfall from the win and created a lure company called Reaction Innovations.

A few years later, Moore would win the FLW Tour Open again on the Sweet Beaver. By then, the Beaver boom had





SPRO BRONZEYE FROG
COLOR: NATURAL GREEN

blown up big. Moore used the Sweet Beaver as a sight-fishing bait for his lucrative wins, but he had designed the soft plastic to be a flipping and pitching lure. The advent of tungsten punching weights around this same time helped propel the Beaver as the go-to punching bait of the era, making it a jack-of-all-trades that covered many bases.

Eventually, anglers even began using Sweet Beavers as jig trailers and on football heads. At weigh-ins during the mid-2000s, it was common to see Sweet Beavers tied onto four or five different rods in each boat, especially during the spring. The immense popularity of Moore's Sweet Beaver eventually created a whole new category in soft plastics, spawning the generic term "beaver-style bait" or, simply, a beaver.

While the Sweet Beaver put Reaction Innovations on the bass fishing map, Moore struck gold again a few years later with another creation called the Skinny Dipper, which helped fan the flames of the paddle-tail swimbait craze of the mid-to-late 2000s. The Skinny Dipper is deadly when rigged weedless and slinked over and through thick vegetation to reach untapped bass with the thump of a paddle tail.

Reaction Innovations would go on to make dozens of other effective soft-plastic designs, but the Sweet Beaver and the Skinny Dipper became staples of tournament anglers in the 2000s.

TRIX ARE FOR BASS



Speaking of Western influence and paddle-tail swimbait designs, the unique Basstrix swimbait from California lit up the national tours in 2007. During that tournament season, it was the hottest must-have bait on the Bassmaster Elites and the FLW Tour. Jay Yelas won his 2007 FLW Tour Angler of the Year title mostly with the Basstrix, which worked at nearly every lake the Tour visited that season. Top pros could only keep it quiet for so long before the Basstrix demand skyrocketed.

The official name for the Basstrix swimbait is the Basstrix Hollow Paddle Tail. That's important because the midsection of the lure is hollow, like a tube lure, which helps make it more buoyant, giving it a unique swimming action. The soft swimbaits were handmade and hand-painted, providing an incredibly lifelike appearance. The two most popular sizes were the 5-inch and the 6-inch, which made them appealing to bigger bass.

The bait can be used on a lead jighead in open water or teamed with a weighted, extra-wide gap hook to make it weedless in cover. The magic of the Basstrix is to waddle it slowly through cover like flooded bushes, laydowns, stumps, shallow riprap, flat rock or docks. The trigger point bass cannot seem to handle is contacting cover with the bait, especially during shad-spawn season.

KERMIT UNVEILED

It's safe to say that if you love bass fishing, you also love frog lures. There's something inherently fascinating about a bass eating a frog – it's a display of the apex predator abilities of a bass. Anglers from the '80s can probably remember purchasing those vintage green frogs with realistic legs – they looked like bullfrogs with hooks.

Since then, frogs as tournament bass lures have evolved for the better. Vast improvements to frogs were made in the 2000s thanks to western pro Dean Rojas and his pet frog Kermit.

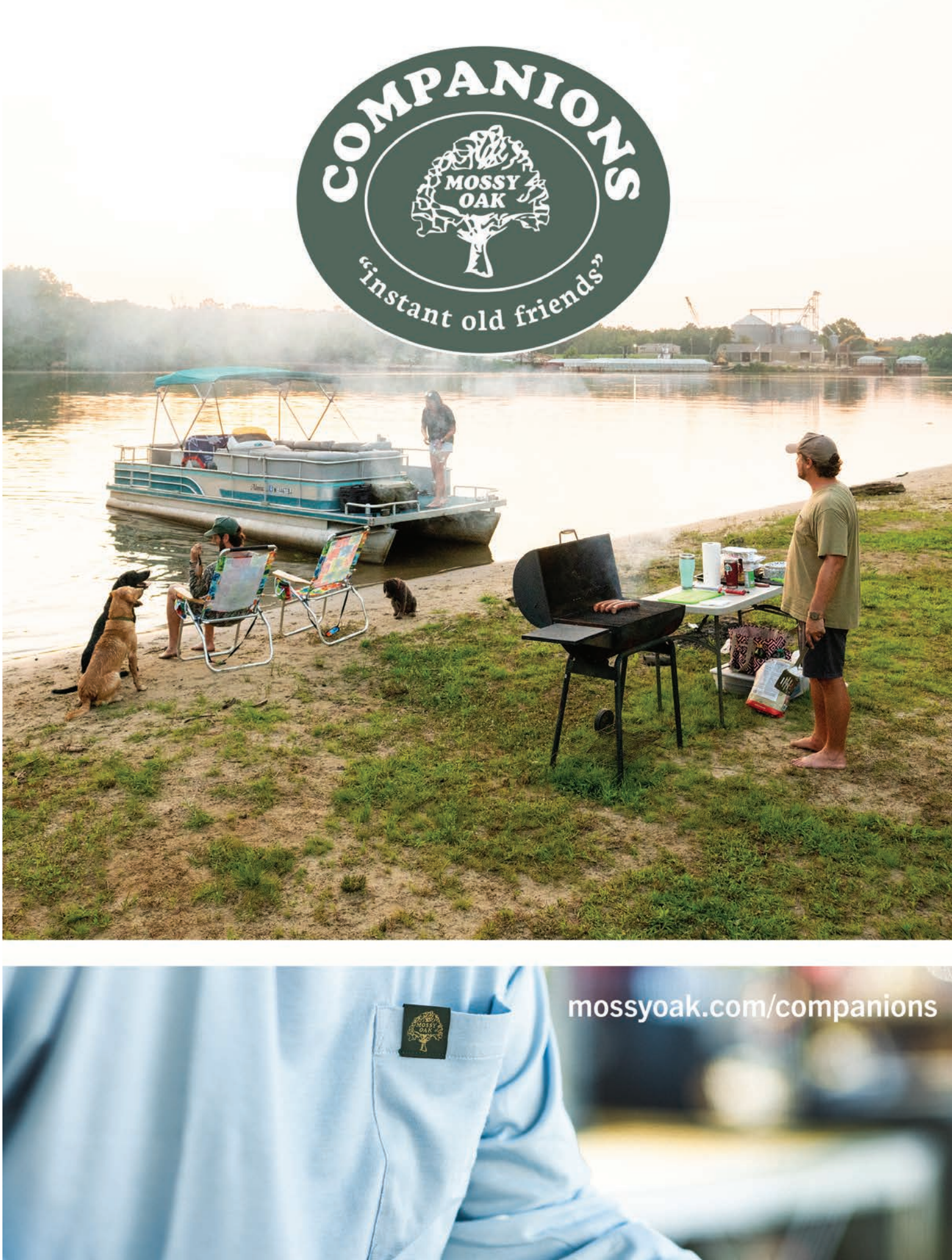
In the early 2000s, Rojas realized that frog fishing was not relegated to just surface vegetation or mats. Instead, he discovered that a weedless frog was deadly when "walked" on the surface in more open water situations, more like a spook. But these small patches of open water were much better if they were closely guarded by low, overhanging trees, flooded bushes, docks or tall vegetation. Getting a topwater walker like a spook into these places was impossible because of the treble hooks. Rojas wanted to design a weedless frog that could be cast or skipped into these tight, gnarly places and walked effortlessly in spots other anglers could not access. So, in 2005, the SPRO Bronzeye Frog 65 was born, a.k.a Kermit.

Rojas designed the frog to be more of a side-to-side walking bait rather than a mat hopper. It would still work on mats, but Kermit really shined when skipped into small windows of water bordered by thick cover and then twitched side-to-side, worked over and through cover where other lures could never venture. In the same way, the Bronzeye 65 is also excellent for casting right up onto the bank to avoid splashing and spooking ultra-shallow fish then slithering quietly into the water for a natural presentation bass can't handle.

All it took was one tournament highlight reel of Rojas feeding Kermit to bass in explosive percussions on the surface, and the Bronzeye 65 became a must-have lure in the 2000s.

TOPWATER TOADS

If we're going to talk about frogs in the must-have lures of the 2000s, we have to also include toads – as in Horny Toads from Zoom. Released in about 2003, the Horny Toad


COMPANIONS
MOSSY OAK
"instant old friends"
mossyoak.com/companions



ZOOM HORNY TOADS COLOR: WATERMELON RED

set the standard for the topwater "buzzing toad" category of soft plastics. When reeled across the surface, the Horny Toad's flapping feet make a subtle pitter-patter that drove bass crazy. Rigged weedless on a large offset hook, the Toad could be fished efficiently over the thickest matted cover without a problem.

Anglers soon learned that the Horny Toad was also effective in open water around shallow cover, like a buzzbait. The Toad could be skipped under docks and fished along shallow seawalls on developed lakes.

Eventually, anglers in Alabama and the Carolinas began using a Horny Toad as a buzzbait trailer, and more Toad magic was formed. Skirts on buzzbaits became obsolete as more anglers began fishing a buzzbait with just a "naked Toad" as a trailer. This duo made buzzbaits easier to cast accurately and skip under docks.

With the Toad as a trailer, the buzzbait and Toad combination became known as a buzzing toad, furthering the Horny Toad's status as a must-have bait of the 2000s.

THE CHATTER THAT MATTERED

When it comes to which bait made the most chatter in the first decade of the 2000s, the ChatterBait gets to do the mic drop. Indeed, it was the must-have of all must-haves in the 2000s.

After decades of the same old designs in the bladed bait market, lure designer Ron Davis of Greenville, S.C., shattered conventions with the ChatterBait in 2003. At first, Davis' off-the-wall blade-and-jig combination raised a few skeptical eyebrows. But Once North Carolina native Bryan Thrift used it to score a dominating win over a field of Floridians at Lake Okeechobee in January of 2006, the rest of the bass fishing world wanted to know exactly what the Carolinians were cooking up. One particularly nosy outdoor writer who covered Thrift's Okeechobee win let the ChatterBait cat out of the bag in a post-tournament write-up. From there, the ChatterBait craze was fully activated.

Who could have guessed that putting a blade in front of a jig would create a vibration that would call in giant bass like live bait?

Ron Davis, that's who.

Turns out, Davis didn't come up with the ChatterBait concept by accident – it was a design he had worked on for over a decade. Once he perfected it, Davis had the foresight to patent and trademark his unique creation. His words, "A blade attached to a weighted hook in a manner where the oscillation of the blade is restricted," constituted an enforceable patent. That patent came in handy when dozens of lure companies attempted to produce and sell bladed, vibrating or cranking jig knockoffs over the next few years.

The ChatterBait continued its big-bass dominance in 2008 when Western pro Brett Hite won back-to-back FLW tournaments on a vibrating jig: first at Florida's Lake Toho, then a couple weeks later at the California Delta, where he posted a winning weight of 106-11 over four days.

Hite would string back-to-back ChatterBait victories again in 2014 with an FLW Tour win on Okeechobee and an Elite Series win on Lake Seminole. In all, Hite estimates he has won $1 million on a ChatterBait since the mid-2000s.

In 2008, Z-Man Fishing acquired the ChatterBait brand from RAD Lures (Davis' company) to help ramp up production and meet the ever-growing demand for the unique blade-and-jig creation. To this day, Z-Man continues to improve and innovate the ChatterBait with different variations of the popular lure. From the extra-large ChatterBait Big Blade to the smaller MiniMax and Micro ChatterBaits, the creation now comes in every size for any fish species. In addition, they are always updating their vibrating jigs with the best materials available.

Speak with competitive anglers who fished tournaments during the decade following the turn of the century, and there is a good chance they owned – or borrowed – every lure on this must-have lure list of the 2000s. Of course, many of these lures are still very relevant in tournament competition to this day. ■





14 LAKES. COUNTLESS FISH.

REEL 'EM IN THIS SPRING.

Learn more at BillDanceSignatureLakes.com


PHOTO BY CHRIS SHANGLE

DALE HOLLOW LAKE: STILL LEGENDARY

Tennessee's legacy smallmouth fishery part of the Bill Dance Signature Lakes program

By Joel Shangle

It's impossible not be impressed when you walk in the door at the Pickett County Visitors Center in Byrdstown, Tennessee, and get your first look at the town's most famous resident. There he lurks in the corner, hanging on the wall in all his glory: the 11-pound, 15-ounce smallmouth bass that helped make this small town north of Nashville – and nearby Dale Hollow Lake – famous the world 'round.

On a warm early July day in 1955, Leitchfield, Kentucky, resident David Hayes was trolling a pearl-white 600 Series Bomber between weed beds on Dale Hollow, north of Trooper Island. Hayes was hunting for walleye at the time, bumping his plug on the bottom with 300 feet of line out on a 6 1/2-foot metal rod, when history arrived at the end of his line in the form of a brown-and-bronze smallmouth the likes of which he'd never seen before.

2025 BILL DANCE GIANT BASS OPEN

FOLLOWING A TREMENDOUSLY successful first season in 2024, the Bill Dance Giant Bass Open series will return to Sunset Marina at Dale Hollow on March 29-30. That's one stop in a six-event schedule that will offer Volunteer State and visiting anglers opportunities to cash in on youth and adult hourly cash prizes while fishing on Bill Dance Signature Lakes.

- **March 8-9 – Pickwick Lake**
  Pickwick Landing State Park
- **March 29-30 – Dale Hollow Lake**
  Sunset Marina
- **April 12-13 – Douglas Lake**
  199 Public Drive, Dandridge
- **June 14-15 – Kentucky Lake**
  Paris Landing State Park
- **June 28-29 – Lake Chickamauga**
  Bluewater Resort and Marina
- **Sept. 20-21 – Douglas Lake Super Tournament**
  199 Public Drive, Dandridge

Sign up at

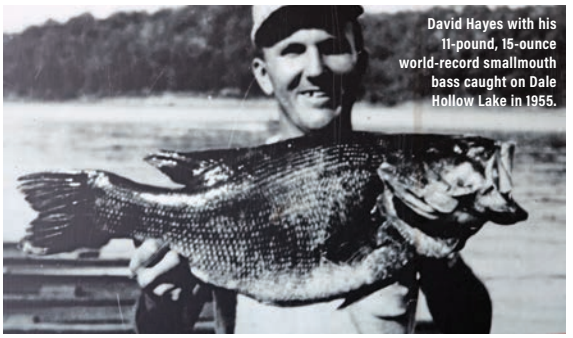
www.giantbassopen.com

Measuring 27 inches with a 21 2/3-inch girth, that fish – a world record that still stands nearly 70 years later – was part of a run of giants that made sleepy little Dale Hollow Lake a Mecca for bass anglers hunting for personal-best smallmouth.

"That fish got the best of the best for growing conditions," said Mike Jolley, a regional fisheries biologist for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA). "Dale Hollow Dam was completed in 1943, and that big fish was aged to be about 12 years old when it was caught in 1955, so it lived in the best conditions possible. Reservoirs are at their richest when they're new, and that fish really showed off the richness of Dale Hollow in the early years after it was impounded."

TODAY'S DALE HOLLOW

Now one of a handful of large Tennessee reservoirs selected as a Bill Dance Signature Lake, contemporary Dale Hollow still carries an air of "it could happen to me" hopefulness for visiting anglers chasing the dream of catching their smallmouth of a lifetime. Byrdstown and its businesses embrace that dream: Two signs at the opposite ends of town proclaim, "Welcome to Byrdstown, TN, Home of



David Hayes with his 11-pound, 15-ounce world-record smallmouth bass caught on Dale Hollow Lake in 1955.



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

A replica of the world record hangs in the Pickett County Visitors Center in Byrdstown.



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

Shin Fukae displays a chunky smallmouth during Bass Pro Tour Stage Three on Dale Hollow Lake.

Dale Hollow Lake and the World Record Smallmouth Bass."

The likelihood of another 11-plus-pound bronze monster is admittedly small in the 81-year-old reservoir, but the strength of Dale Hollow today lies in the overall health of the bass population and the sheer number of quality brown fish swimming in the 43-mile-long impoundment of the Obey River.

A key management decision made nearly 25 years ago has benefitted that population greatly, according to Jolley. In 2000, TWRA enacted a slot limit on Dale Hollow that prevents harvest of smallmouth in the 16- to 21-inch range, allowing the lake's adult age-class fish to prosper.

"(The slot limit) added a layer of protection for adult smallmouth and allowed people who like to catch a lot of trophy smallmouth to really enjoy the abundance of those big smallmouth," Jolley said. "That slot limit has done well for the reservoir. Smallmouth bass are really resilient because they put out good classes of fish, but protecting those adults has really made a difference."

Bass Pro Tour Stage Three in early April of 2024 served as a showcase for the productivity of both the smallmouth and largemouth fisheries. MLF's unique catch/weigh/immediate-release format allowed the field to access slot-limit-sized smallmouth in a tournament setting, along with the lake's underappreciated population of largemouth. The results were eye-popping: Over six days of competition, the 79-angler field caught and released 2,022 scorable bass that averaged 2.14 pounds. On the final day of the event – with just 10 anglers on the water – Dale Hollow produced the highest catch per unit of effort (CPUE) of the 2024 Bass Pro Tour season, with 2.95 fish per angler hour. The average size of a scorable bass on SCORETRACKER® in the Championship Round was 3-0.

> *"(THE SLOT LIMIT) ADDED A LAYER OF PROTECTION FOR ADULT SMALLMOUTH AND ALLOWED PEOPLE WHO LIKE TO CATCH A LOT OF TROPHY SMALLMOUTH TO REALLY ENJOY THE ABUNDANCE OF THOSE BIG SMALLMOUTH."*

Alton Jones Jr. finished fifth in that event, which was won by Jacob Wheeler. Jones boated 23 fish for 74-0 during the Championship Round. Eighteen of those bass were smallmouth, including three over 4 pounds and nine over 3.

"It's not unrealistic to catch 20 smallmouth in a day at the right time of year," Jolley said. "When we survey people who are traveling to fish here, that's why they come. The draw to Dale Hollow is by far for smallmouth bass fishing. It's a very valuable economic asset to state and local communities."

THE BILL DANCE SIGNATURE BENEFIT

Future visitors to Dale Hollow will soon see the benefit of the Bill Dance Signature Lakes designation. Plans are currently underway to improve access, boat launch and parking facilities in key areas like Sunset Marina. Plans are also in place to build a multi-use venue where tournaments like the Bill Dance Big Bass Open can launch boats, conduct weigh-ins and enhance various other tournament activities.

"For the smaller lakes in the Bill Dance Signature program, we're trying to intensively manage them with stocking of forage fish and habitat improvements, but larger lakes like Dale Hollow are more targeted for improving access areas and facilities," said TWRA Fisheries Division Chief Jason Henagar. "We have projects in the works at Dale Hollow that will benefit visiting anglers as well as tournaments." ■

TOYOTA AND THE GOAT

Long before Kevin VanDam was labeled pro bass fishing's greatest of all time, aka "The GOAT," he was best known as the highly competitive skinny kid from Kalamazoo — and even back then, he was driving a Toyota T100.

"Fans who have been around a while may remember a time in the mid-1990s when the Tracker Marine team all towed their boats with Toyotas. So, not only have I been towing with a Tundra for a long time, but the powerhouse relationship between Bass Pro Shops and Toyota has been in place for decades, too," VanDam said.

The ability to count on Toyota to keep him and his family safe plays a huge role in the fact that the VanDams and their extended family own enough Toyota vehicles to fill up a boat ramp parking lot.

"My nephew Jonathon, my sons, Jackson and Nicholas, and several of the ladies in our family all bought and drive Toyotas. We appreciate their quality, first and foremost, but equally as much, we appreciate the fact no automaker in the world gives as much to bass fishing as Toyota. Period," VanDam emphasized.

KVD announced his retirement from professional tournament competition in 2023, but his consistency on the water qualified him to compete in two final events in 2024, including General Tires Heavy Hitters on the Kissimmee Chain in Florida.

It was there the GOAT put an exclamation point on his unparalleled competitive fishing career. He caught the biggest bass of the Championship Round, which awarded VanDam a $100,000 prize and deserved walk-off celebration on his last day as a tournament angler. VanDam has achieved just about every accolade in bass fishing, but he had never caught a single fish worth $100,000 until the last hours of his illustrious career.

He may not be competing anymore, but don't expect him to slow down much. KVD is currently filming a brand-new television show, "The VanDam Experience," that will air on The Outdoor Channel in 2025, where VanDam will continue to educate and entertain fishing fans for years to come.

More than 30 years after the skinny kid from Kalamazoo was towing with a Toyota T100, his 33 seasons as a pro are indeed incomparable. Eight Angler of the Year titles, four Bassmaster Classic victories, 29 pro tournament wins and nearly $8 million in prize money, including his swan-song $100K bass: It's a career that will likely never be surpassed, and certainly not with the level of class and loyalty VanDam has showcased every mile of the journey. ■



Kevin VanDam — the GOAT and long-time Toyota Fishing Team Pro/Toyota Truck Owner




Redefine epic outdoor adventure with the All-New 2024 Tacoma. Learn more at Toyota.com/Tacoma.

TOYOTA
MLF
MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING

THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

By Matt Williams
PHOTOS COURTESY ABU GARCIA



ABU GARCIA
ZATA LP BAITCAST REEL

Abu Garcia's newly designed Zata LP is a sweet little baitcast reel that even the most consummate angler can appreciate for the money. Available in two gear ratios and both left- and right-hand models, the low-profile reel is built around quality components to ensure silky smooth casts and retrieves along with plenty of backbone when you need it.

First Impression

I got my hands on the ZATA2LP-HS, the higher speed of the two models at a 7.1:1 gear ratio. It's a handsome reel with a low-profile design that fits snugly in the palm. At 7.4 ounces, it's not the lightest baitcaster in the stable, but it is packed with plenty of goodies for top level performance and durability:

- Duragear brass gears
- Rigid graphite frame/sideplates
- Infini braking system
- 20-pound Carbon Matrix drag
- 10 ball bearings and one roller bearing
- Bent carbon handle with big EVA grips
- Lube port on the lower left of the gear housing
- Wrapped in a durable matte grey finish that stands out nicely against the black handle and satin red accents

In Action

Internally, the reel feels exceptionally smooth, while the Infini braking system allows for trouble free casting/flipping once set for the bait size and conditions. The magnetic brakes can be easily tuned using a clickable dial with 27 points of adjustment, while the four centrifugal brake pins beneath the left side plate are set manually. Pushing the pins inward towards the center of the spool disengages the brakes; outward engages them. I loaded the reel with both braid and fluorocarbon, and it cast and flipped beautifully with baits as light as a 1/4-ounce spinnerbait and as heavy as a 1-ounce Berkley Choppo or Texas-rigged creature matched with a big tungsten weight.

Other features I really liked about the reel are the big handle, oversized grips and 20-pound Carbon Matrix drag. Together, they help provide plenty of control, power and leverage for wrestling fish out of heavy cover or wearing down the big girls in open water.

Final Thoughts

If you're looking for a quality reel that's affordably priced, the Zata LP is definitely worth checking out. It's a sharp looking reel packed with a long list of high-performance features — all at a price point under $200.

Performance Advice

You can upgrade to a rod/reel combo for about $40 extra. The combo includes a color-coordinated, 7-foot, medium-heavy, fast rod fashioned from 24-ton graphite with a split EVA handle and Texas rig hook keeper. Abu Garcia also produces a number of other high quality casting rods, including several signature series models, at a variety of price points ranging from $59.95 to $449.95. Check them out at abugarcia.com.

Applications

(For 7.1:1 model):

- Frogging
- Flipping
- Topwaters
- Texas rigs
- Stickbaits
- Soft jerkbaits

Hits and Misses

+ Good price point
+ Smooth casts, retrieves
+ Solid drag and gears
+ Durable matte finish
+ Pleasing to the eye
+ Big, beefy EVA grips
+ Easy-to-tune braking
+ Rigid graphite frame/sideplates
– No low gear ratio model

Details

Stainless Ball Bearings: 10 plus 1 roller bearing
Available Gear Ratios: 6.4:1 and 7.1:1
Weight: 7.4 ounces
Left and Right Models: Yes
Drag: Carbon Matrix, 20-pound
Line Capacity: Mono, 110/12; Braid, 110/30
Braking: Infini (Magnetic/Centrifugal)
Gearing: Duragear Brass
Lube Port: Yes
MSRP: $189.95



❖ ZATA SPINNING REELS

The Zata family also features a series of spinning reels available in three sizes — 2500, 3000 and 4000. Design features include:

- ❖ 10 stainless steel ball bearings plus 1 roller bearing
- ❖ Lightweight aluminum frame
- ❖ Rocket Line Management™ system provides better control of all types of fishing lines
- ❖ Rocket spool lip design™ allows better control of line coming off the spool
- ❖ Everlast bail system offers improved durability
- ❖ Stainless steel main shaft and components for improved corrosion resistance
- ❖ 14-pound front drag

FRAME AND SIDEPLATES:

Graphite frame and sideplates reduce weight without sacrificing rigidity.

BRAKING SYSTEM:

The Infini braking system operates using four internal centrifugal brakes beneath the left sideplate and a clickable knob on the outside with 27 different magnetic settings so you can quickly dial in after swapping baits or if wind conditions change.

REEL WRAP:

The reel is wrapped in a durable, matte grey finish that looks really sharp against the black carbon handle and satin red accents.



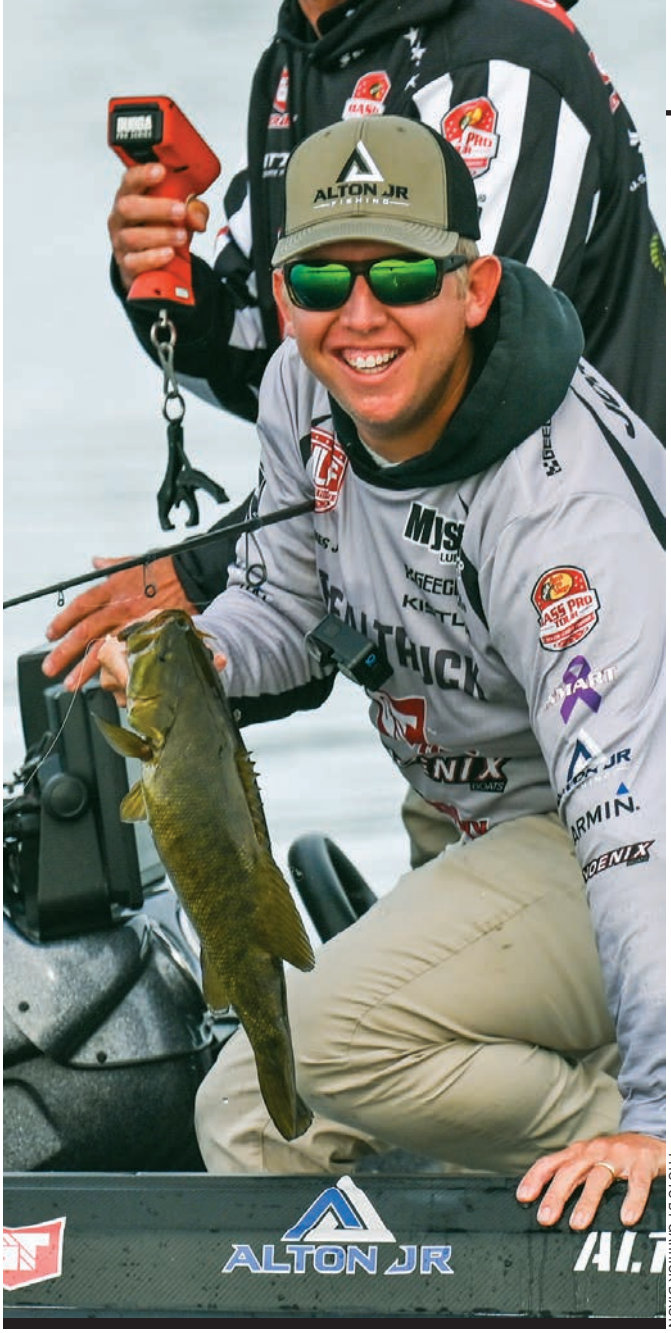


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

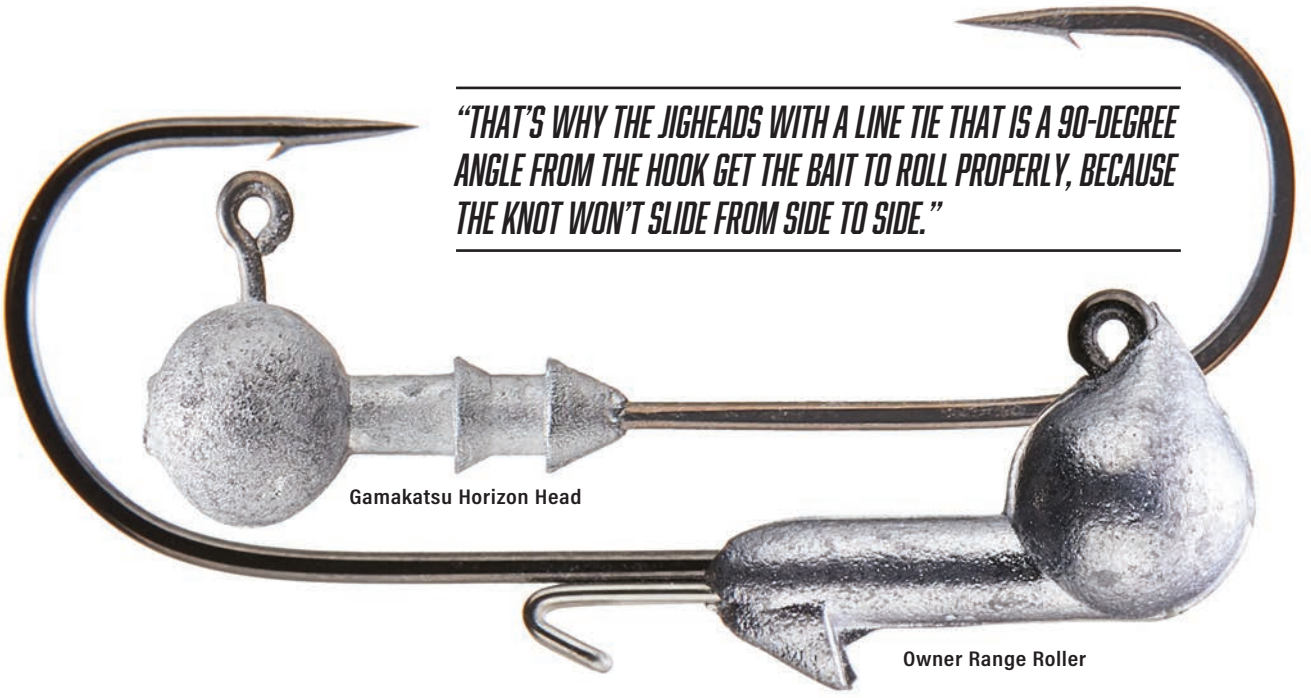


PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

GRADUATE YOUR JIGHEAD MINNOW GAME

With new heads and plastics seemingly arriving by the minute, two pros share a few components and tips that can make you more effective at mid-strolling

By Tyler Brinks



Gamakatsu Horizon Head

Owner Range Roller

"THAT'S WHY THE JIGHEADS WITH A LINE TIE THAT IS A 90-DEGREE ANGLE FROM THE HOOK GET THE BAIT TO ROLL PROPERLY, BECAUSE THE KNOT WON'T SLIDE FROM SIDE TO SIDE."

The hottest trend in bass fishing is a simple jighead and minnow (as detailed further in the "Damiki rig" feature on page 36 of this issue). While far from a brand-new way to fish, the rig has exploded in popularity thanks to its effectiveness and ease of use when targeting suspended fish, particularly when paired with live sonar. As a result, companies have flooded the market with new jigheads and minnow-style baits that produce more action when mid-strolling (the official term for shaking a bait through the middle of the water column).

Sometimes, just about any jighead and fluke-style bait will do just fine. However, those anglers most adept at "shaking a minnow" have branched out and experimented with different products intended to give the bait a more pronounced rolling or wobbling action and thus trigger more bites.

A pair of pros finding success with minnows at high-level tournaments include Bass Pro Tour standout Alton Jones Jr. and Jacob Walker, winner of the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals event on Lake Champlain. Both have tinkered with different configurations and learned how slight changes can make a big difference in coaxing bass to bite.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE ROLL

No matter which jighead he uses, a properly tied knot is part of the equation that Jones feels many overlook.

"The more straight up and down you can keep your knot, the better it's going to roll," he said. "In Japan, they even make a little silicon tube that goes over the knot and the eye of the hook to keep everything straight to get extra roll. That's why the jigheads with a line tie that is a 90-degree angle from the hook get the bait to roll properly, because the knot won't slide from side to side."

Many anglers turn to the loop knot to give the bait more freedom of movement, but Jones advises against it for those reasons.

"I know many anglers swear by it, but I'm against using it," he said. "It's a great knot for a walking bait or even a jerkbait, where you want that action from side to side. But that's not what your jighead is doing, and you want it to be straight instead of leaning left to right."

The line used can also affect the bait and how easily it rolls, and Jones and others have settled on heavier fluorocarbon leaders of much shorter lengths than they use for other spinning rod applications.

"I've learned that if you can keep the bait up higher in the water column and moving slower, you will get more action out of the bait," Jones said. "It all depends on where the fish are in the water column, and I'll use anywhere from 10-pound test and up depending on the conditions. At REDCREST, I was throwing a 16-pound leader because the thicker diameter line created more drag, and I could fish the bait slower for fish up higher toward the surface."

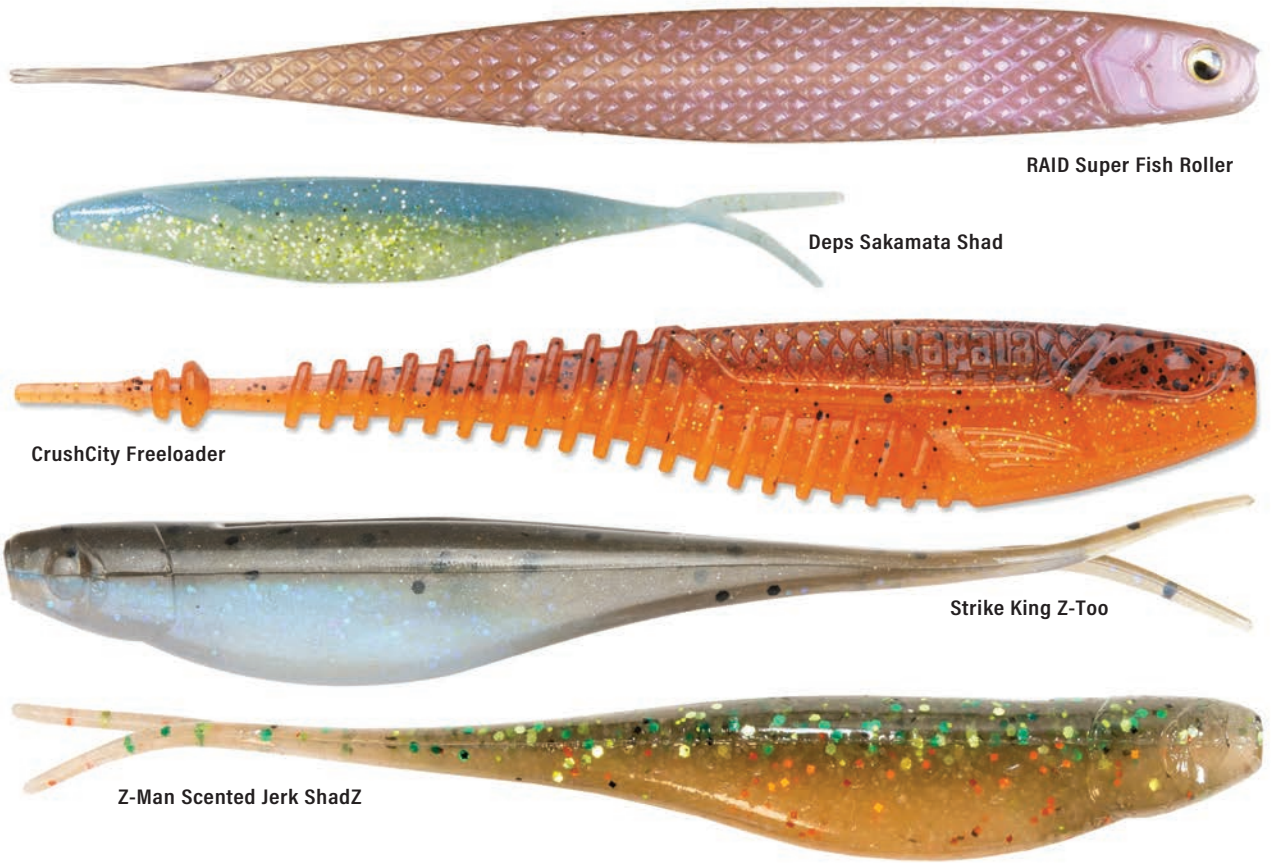
POPULAR JIGHEAD PLAYERS

A standard ball head will work for fishing with a soft-plastic minnow, but more refined options exist. According to both Jones and Walker, each has specific qualities that change the bait's action, and no single head fits every need. Here is a closer look at two of the most popular jigheads and where they shine.

❖ **OWNER RANGE ROLLER**

One innovative jighead designed especially for mid-strolling is the Range Roller. It has a molded, cone-shaped design with more weight toward the bottom to get the bait to roll more. Both Jones and Walker utilize this jighead often.

"I've tried all of them but really like the hook in the Range Roller," Jones said. "It seems like a finesse tactic, but you are also dealing with big bass, so this hook is great because it's not too light and not too heavy. Plus, the roll is great from this head."



Walker has also used just about every head out there, and the Range Roller is his favorite for most situations.

"The weight is molded with the line tie at the top of a tapered head, giving the bait much more movement than a standard, round bass jighead," he said.

❖ **GAMAKATSU HORIZON HEAD**

Another technique-specific jighead is the Horizon Head, which features weight molded along the hook shank to give the bait a perfectly horizontal position when rigged. Although Jones has limited experience with it thus far, he's looking to experiment with it more.

"When I was in Japan this fall, that was the most popular one and the jighead that most of the anglers I fished with used," he said. "One benefit to them is how many hook size options they have for different weights, where some jigheads, when you use a light one, the hooks are very small. This head allows you to fish bigger soft plastics on lighter heads, which they do a lot in Japan – use very light heads to get a more natural rolling action."

Jones has tested other popular jigheads and is a fan of tungsten versions such as the Queens Tackle L.S. jighead and Ryugi Vespa Tungsten Finesse Ball. Tungsten is effective because it shows up slightly better than lead on sonar screens, and Jones also prefers the reduced size when using smaller minnows.

MEET THE MINNOWS

Of all the popular soft plastics anglers are using for the technique, Jones has found that each has a time and place. His decision often comes down to the specific lake and forage he's trying to imitate.

"The RAID Super Fish Roller is good when the fish are feeding on a longer and thinner bait, whether it's herring, smelt, or alewives," Jones said. "For times when the bass are eating shad, the Deps Sakamata Shad is very good. So is the CrushCity Freeloader, which is a perfect shad profile and rolls really well."

Jones will also employ the DStyle Virola Shad and Strike King Z-Too or Z-Man Scented Jerk ShadZ.

"If I'm in really clear water, I love the Virola Shad because of the tail action that sometimes gets bites when they don't want anything else," Jones said. "The Z-Man and Strike King baits have the elastomer plastic that is also very buoyant and still rolls very well. This allows you to work slower and in really shallow water, and it's so durable you can catch 20 fish on the same bait, so it's a good budget option."

For Walker, it's all about the Sakamata Shad, the bait that helped him earn victory on Lake Champlain.

"One of the biggest reasons is that they have their plastic dialed in; it's a soft material that does tear more easily, but the action is very natural in the water," he said. "The other key to it is the wings on the sides of the bait, which keeps the bait horizontal even when it's falling. The head movement shines on structure-oriented fish, and you must draw them to the bait."

The Sakamata Shad comes in several sizes, but Walker starts with the 5-inch version.

"You can mimic threadfin shad, herring or perch with that size," he said. "When fishing a place with more gizzard shad, I'll go up to the 6- or even 7-inch version. The larger baits pull fish to the bait from farther away."

As the jighead minnow continues to evolve and gain steam, fishing brands are taking notice and producing more specialized gear. While the technique is not new, this is just the beginning of the innovation in tackle as this way of fishing continues to evolve. ■

TOYOTA

Official Vehicle

TOW LIKE SHOW
REEL IN DOUGH



Terry Scroggins

Terry Scroggins, Team Toyota Major League Fishing Pro

TOYOTA **BONUS BUCKS**

TERRY "BIG SHOW" SCROGGINS WANTS YOU TO MAKE THE BIG BUCKS. He's the go-to guy in bass fishing and the real MVP of everything DIY. So when he says get signed up for the Toyota Bonus Bucks Program, you know it's a tip worth taking. Tow with Toyota and you could win payouts at more than 600 supported Select Bassmaster, MLF and Team Tournament Trail events across the U.S. Just register your vehicle and earn one of the two highest placing finishes at a qualifying event. **Learn more at toyotafishing.com**

Vehicle shown with options. Vehicle shown may include accessories not designed, manufactured or evaluated by Toyota nor covered by vehicle warranty. Never tow beyond a vehicle's published towing capacities. To qualify for contingency payment, you must be a registered participant in the Toyota Bonus Bucks Program and place within the top 50 percent of the total field in qualifying tournaments. Only specific Toyota models (For the 2024 Bonus Bucks Program: 2020 or newer) are eligible and must be registered in your name individually or jointly. For complete rules and official registration form, please visit Toyotafishing.com. Vehicle loaned to paid talent. Non-Toyota trademarks and trade names appearing on the vehicles are those of their respective owners. PAID ADVERTISEMENT. ©2024 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A. Inc.





With a Major League Fishing Bass Fishing Membership, you'll join the largest tournament-fishing organization in the world and have immediate access to expert-level fishing tips sourced from the sport's best anglers.



ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP OPTIONS STARTING AT JUST $10.

JOIN TODAY

MajorLeagueFishing.com/join

GEARING UP

TACKLE STORAGE SOLUTIONS

By Mitchell Forde

Most anglers can never get enough new tackle — after all, "Gearing Up" exists to break down the latest must-have equipment each issue. Too often, however, how we store that tackle becomes an afterthought.

Investing in the right tackle storage products can not only extend the life of your lures but also make you more efficient, both in how much gear you can carry in a backpack, kayak or bass boat as well quickly finding and extracting the right bait from your stash. Nowadays, tackle storage is more customizable than ever, so it's easy to find products that fit your individual needs. Whether you own an entire garage full of lures or a few trays' worth, here are some storage options to consider.

PLANO EDGE FLEX SERIES BOXES



Plano's EDGE lineup represents the gold standard in tackle trays, and the Flex Series gives anglers that protection with increased customization ability. The Flex Series boxes, which are available in both 3600 and 3700 sizes, come with 38 Quik-Set dividers that can be inserted in whatever configuration anglers choose: Use all 38 to stash all your terminal tackle, opt for longer slots to stow hard baits or ditch most of the dividers entirely to store umbrella rigs. Like the rest of the EDGE lineup, these boxes are made of super durable material and feature rust-prevention technology built into the base plus a waterproof seal to protect contents. The clear lid makes it easy to see what's inside, and there's a label built into the latch for easy organization.

$44.99-54.99 | plano.com

SPRO 3500 REVESIBLE BOX



Perfect for the angler who only owns or wants to bring a handful of hard baits on the water, Spro's reversible 3500 box allows you to store the maximum number of plugs in a small tray while minimizing the headache of tangled trebles. The box features seven V-shaped slots on each of its two sides. All those slots should be able to fit two hardbaits apiece, depending on the size of the baits, and keeps them oriented with the hooks on the bottom. That allows anglers to pack enough crankbaits/topwaters/jerkbaits for a day of fishing into one small package without having to cram too many baits into the same slots, which can result in damaged or tangled hooks.

$18.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

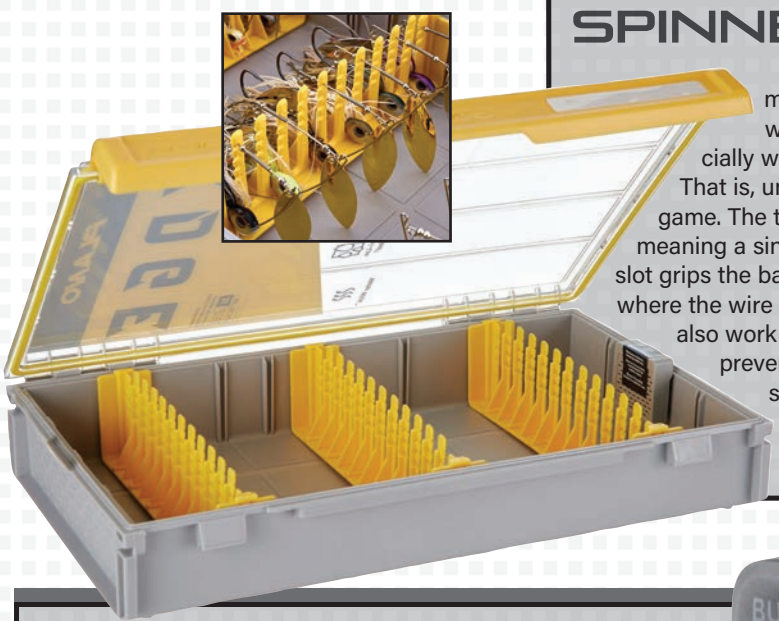
RAPALA RAPSTACK 3600 OPEN FOAM TACKLE TRAY



Speaking of tangled hook messes, this member of Rapala's new RapStack line presents a solution for storing trebles, jigheads, flies and other hooks. The bottom of the tray is lined with slit foam, which holds small hooks securely in place so they don't bounce around in a box, thus tangling and/or dulling. The fact that hooks won't move also makes it easy to organize them and know exactly where to reach for the thing you need. Like all of the RapStack trays, this one comes with an oversized single latch, making one-handed operation easy, and two re-writable labels. Its foot system is also designed to lock into place when stacked atop or beneath other 3600-sized RapStack trays.

$11.99 | rapala.com

PLANO EDGE SPINNERBAIT BOX 3700



Despite spinnerbaits being one of the oldest and most universally owned lures in bass fishing, finding a way to store them has long been a challenge — especially without taking up a ton of space or bending wires. That is, until the Plano EDGE spinnerbait box changed the game. The tray features three rows with 12 lure slots apiece, meaning a single 3700-sized tray can hold up to 36 baits. Each slot grips the bait just below the head and features four notches where the wire arm can be tucked in, thus securing it in place. It can also work well for buzzbaits, although the bulkier blades might prevent you from fitting as many in the box. The EDGE series offers a full lineup of technique-specific trays, but this gets our vote as the most handy and unique.

$34.99 | plano.com

BUZBE QUIK QUBE



A wave of soft-sided tackle storage products has hit the market in recent years headlined by Buzbe's Quik Qube. The Quik Qube's soft sides make it easy to squeeze into boat compartments or luggage, while its handle makes it a light, convenient way to tote a small amount of gear for a bank-fishing or wading adventure. It comes in four sizes, giving anglers options based on what they want to store inside. Perhaps its most obvious application is storing bags of soft-plastic baits, but Buzbe touts the Quik Qube as also being ideal for holding fishing line, dry clothes, sunscreen, tools and more. And just because the packaging is soft, don't think you're skimping on protection. The Quik Qube is puncture-resistant and weatherproof with a water-resistant zipper.

$33.95–39.95 | tacklewarehouse.com

BKK OCD TACKLE STORAGE SYSTEM



This new product, which won Best of Show for tackle management products at ICAST in July, represents the ultimate terminal tackle storage solution for anglers who are obsessive about organization. The storage box itself is built from durable polypropylene and features a watertight seal to keep moisture out, but it's the interior that really sets it apart. The lined compartments are designed to hold BKK's OCD Accessory Boxes in place. These see-through boxes, which are sold separately in both small and medium sizes, can be easily labeled on the top or side. The OCD tackle storage system can hold up to 80 small accessory boxes, 44 medium boxes or a combination of the two, allowing anglers to get incredibly detailed about their terminal tackle organization and find what they're looking for in a flash.

$24.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

SEAGUAR LEADER FEEDER



Another product that debuted at ICAST, Seaguar's new Leader Feeder not only tackles the challenge of fishing line storage but makes it easy to quickly pull line from a spool without tangles. The nylon pouch makes for a snug fit for either three or six spools of leader line (depending on the size), which are fastened in place with a Velcro strap. Dual grommets then allow anglers to pull line off a spool without ever opening the pouch. Seaguar offers the Leader Feeder in three different sizes: a 3x3" model that fits three spools of 8-pound test or smaller line; a 4x4" that fits three standard-sized spools; and a 7x4" that holds six standard spools.

$18.99–24.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

LEW'S MACH HATCHPACK



A backpack is an efficient, hands-free way for anglers to carry gear while fishing from shore or a buddy's boat. The Mach HatchPack from Lew's is one of the largest and most feature-packed on the market. The main compartment can hold up to five 3700-sized trays. In addition, there are sizable top and front pouches that both could fit a smaller utility tray, rain gear or several bags of soft plastics, plus four side pouches. One of the side pouches features a grommet for easy line spooling. Rounding out the list of features are a molded sunglasses case, a tool-holder perfect for pliers and a "juice pouch" that can hold line conditioner, sunscreen, scent or any other liquid you don't want to risk spilling inside the bag.

$159.99 | lews.com

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER

Always In Season







Gateway To The St. Lawrence River

There's nothing more relaxing than time away in a place that truly lets you unwind. Massena, NY, nestled on the St. Lawrence River in beautiful St. Lawrence County, offers visitors a rare escape filled with tranquility, stunning scenery, and countless activities to recharge. Enjoy world-class fishing in pristine waters, camping under the stars, and savoring delicious local cuisine at charming eateries. Whether you're casting a line, roasting marshmallows by the campfire, or exploring the great outdoors, Massena provides the perfect backdrop for relaxation and adventure. Step away from the hustle and bustle, find peace amidst nature, and immerse yourself in the serenity of Massena. Here, you'll discover the ideal spot to unwind and reconnect with yourself in a world that's always on the go. Come experience the beauty and calm that only St. Lawrence County can provide!

MASSENA
Est. 1802

SCAN FOR MORE







Plan your trip at www.fishmassena.com

TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

HUNTSVILLE, AL — NOV. 9, 2024

AN UNFORGETTABLE FAMILY REUNION

Hayden Marbut ended his breakout 2024 season the same way he started it: Hoisting Toyota Series trophies in his home state of Alabama. While those triumphs – the latter of which, at the Toyota Series Championship on Wheeler Lake, earned the 21-year-old a whopping $235,000 – marked the first two solo wins for Marbut, he was far from alone.

As fate would have it, the Marbuts had scheduled their annual family reunion for the weekend of the championship at nearby Guntersville State Park. With Hayden in contention to win, the reunion relocated to Ditto Landing to watch the Day 3 action, a few family members wielding cardboard cutouts of his head that would have fit in behind a College GameDay set (he competed collegiately at Auburn, after all). After Hayden clinched victory with a three-day total of 56-12, the roughly 40-person cheering section piled onto the stage in celebration. Look for that support system to show out again when Hayden competes in REDCREST 2025 on Lake Guntersville (his home fishery) and, while perhaps not always in quite the same numbers, as his burgeoning career takes him across the country.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA




MLF
MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING
TOYOTA SERIES
TOYOTA SERIES CHAMPIONSHIP
WHEELER LAKE
PROFESSIONAL WINNER
$235,000
BASS BOAT TECHNOLOGIES
PHOENIX BOATS
Bonus
CHAMPION

By Mitchell Forde

2024 STRIKE KING CO-ANGLERS OF THE YEAR

CO-ANGLER PROGRAM ONCE AGAIN OFFERED ANGLERS BIG PAYOUTS, INVALUABLE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

When Justin Parchman signed up to fish the Okie Division of the Phoenix Bass Fishing League as a Strike King co-angler in 2023, he didn't have his sights set on lifting trophies or cashing five-figure paychecks. Parchman, who had been competing as a boater, saw it as a learning opportunity — a chance to observe other successful anglers up close, especially how they utilized forward-facing sonar.

Fast-forward two years, and Parchman feels like he achieved that objective. Along the way, he just so happened to rack up two huge wins, including the 2024 BFL All-American Presented by T-H Marine, and more than $105,000 in prizes.

Parchman serves as proof of the benefits of the Strike King co-angler program. Competing from the back of the boat lowers the cost for aspiring anglers to compete in tournaments, but the payouts can still be lucrative. Parchman won $50,000 apiece for his victories at the 2023 Region 5 championship and the All-American. He's now one of 23 anglers to amass six figures in earnings from co-angler competition alone across the Toyota Series and BFLs.



Justin Parchman

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

In all, MLF awarded $636,500 worth of prizes to co-angler event winners in the Toyota Series and well over half a million to BFL winners. The biggest beneficiaries were Parchman and David Bozarth, who won the Toyota Series Championship Presented by Bass Boat Technologies on Wheeler Lake.

"Competing as a co-angler is an easy way to get into tournament fishing, but you still get a chance to fish for a big payout," Toyota Series tournament director Mark McWha said. "You can just show up, not even practice and hop in the boat with some of the best local and even touring pros."

Perhaps even more valuable: Observing experienced anglers from the same boat provides an unmatched learning experience. Parchman plans to use the knowledge and confidence he's gained across the past two seasons to return to the boater side next year.

"(Forward-facing sonar) was probably my biggest weakness, and I learned a lot more confidence in it by watching these guys do it and seeing what they're doing instead of just going out there without having any knowledge of it at all," Parchman said. "So, I would say it helped. But also, doing it gave me a boost of confidence that I did have some skills that are pretty good."

PARCHMAN RIDES SPINNING ROD TO ALL-AMERICAN TITLE

Prior to arriving at Cherokee Lake for the All-American in late May, Parchman knew "zero" about the East Tennessee fishery. Practice didn't provide a lot of clues — like most of the field, he found the bite extremely tough.

So, Parchman did something he rarely does in his home state of Oklahoma: He picked up a spinning rod and wouldn't let himself set it down.

"I knew that there was probably only one or two baits I could get bit on," he said, "so I just locked them in my hand and didn't really venture out at all."

After catching three keepers for 7-4 on a Texas-rigged creature bait on Day 1, Parchman switched to a Ned rig, using it to fill a limit that weighed 10-3 on the second day. That vaulted him to the lead. And while he found the fishing tougher on Day 3, he still managed to boat a pair of bass that weighed 3-10. His three-day total of 21-1 topped Caleb Welch by 1-5.

Parchman emerged from the final day feeling like he'd achieved both of his goals — learning from LiveScope whiz Paul Marks Jr., the pro winner, while doing enough to claim the coveted title of All-American champ.

"Knowing that he was going to be LiveScoping, as a co-angler, that's kind of your fear, but it's also the reason why I wanted to fish as a co-angler," Parchman said. "I wanted to fish with these younger guys that do that so I could learn, and then winning was the byproduct."



David Bozarth

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

BOZARTH RALLIES FROM 150TH PLACE TO WIN TOYOTA SERIES CHAMPIONSHIP

Co-angler standings are notoriously volatile. But even by back-of-the-boat standards, Bozarth's rally from 150th place after Day 1 to win the Toyota Series Championship represented a rare feat.

Bozarth, a Texas native who had never been to Wheeler prior to practice, mustered just one keeper for 1-8 on the opening day, which had him nearly 12 pounds off the lead. He didn't count himself out, though, saying "all you can do is keep fishing."

Competing behind Tennessee River veteran Mickey Beck on Day 2, Bozarth made a key bait adjustment that sparked his comeback. With Beck targeting submerged stumps on flats, Bozarth started fan casting a swimbait rigged on an Owner Flashy Swimmer. Once he dialed in the right weight (3/8 ounce) and color, he started getting bit in bunches. His Day 2 limit of 17-3, easily the biggest bag of the event on the co-angler side, rocketed him to fifth place.

Bozarth stuck with the Flashy Swimmer on Day 3 and used it to put three keepers in the boat early. However, his bite died after that. It wasn't until the final few minutes before weigh-in that he added a 13-inch keeper. Though his smallest of the day, that fish would prove to be the winner — Bozarth's 10-9 tally boosted his total to 29-5, which edged Keith Honeycutt by a single ounce.

"I really didn't think I had enough, because he had five fish in his bag and I had four," Bozarth said. "So, I really didn't think I had enough, and it worked out that I did."

The win earned Bozarth a new Phoenix Boats prize package worth $33,500. Even more important to the tournament veteran was tasting his first MLF victory.

"To win one is really, really hard, and to win at the championship is even harder," Bozarth said. "That's the first one I've won. It's pretty amazing." ■

2024 STRIKE KING CO-ANGLERS OF THE YEAR

TOYOTA SERIES
Presented by Phoenix Boats

Central Division *Chris Bensel*	Southern Division *Keith Honeycutt*
Northern Division *Mike Mueller*	Southwestern Division *Justin Overstreet*
Plains Division *Dennis Young*	Western Division *Blaine Christiansen*

PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE
Presented by T-H Marine

Arkie Division *Jonathan Dotson*	Mississippi *Thomas Smith*
Bama Division *Reid Hale*	Mountain *Johnny Suratt*
Buckeye Division *Brent Jones*	Music City *Adam Radovic*
Bulldog Division *Steven King*	North Carolina *Jean Lacerte*
Choo Choo Division *Todd Mowery*	Northeast *Lenny Baird*
Cowboy Division *Allen Musser*	Okie *Kaleb O'Brien*
Gator Division *Evrett Hunter*	Ozark *Kirk Short*
Great Lakes Division *Jason Olson*	Piedmont *Mekye Barnes*
Hoosier Division *Ryan Cannon*	Savannah River *Todd Huntley*
Illini *Ryan Murphy*	Shenandoah *David Williams*
LBL *John Lovin*	South Carolina *Trent Killian*
Michigan *Scott Davis*	Volunteer *Keith Gunsauls*

By Mitchell Forde







1. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS

PLAINS DIVISION

Lake of the Ozarks

Sept. 26–28

The fall transition made for a tricky bite on Lake of the Ozarks, but Jared Lintner managed to string together three solid days and take the trophy. No surprise, the veteran pro keyed on the lake's plentiful boat docks, picking apart at least 40 to 50 docks each day. The docks he targeted, though, were far from random, as he keyed on isolated ones close to main-lake points.

Wielding a swim jig on Day 1, Lintner sacked up 16-3. He adjusted to overcast conditions on Day 2 by switching to a bladed jig, which produced 19-6. He stuck with the ChatterBait on Day 3 while adding in a flipping jig, with his 15-15 bag bringing his total to 51-8, which topped Dennis Berhorst by nearly 4 pounds. Lintner earned $33,650 for the victory.

2. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE

REGION 1

Pickwick Lake

Oct. 3–5

High water and strong current flowing through the Tennessee River made for a shootout in the Region 1 championship. With four pros topping the 70-pound mark, Matteo Turano took the top spot with a three-day total of 78-1.

Turano caught most of his fish on a jighead minnow, although not quite in the traditional manner. Instead of targeting individual fish with forward-facing sonar, he cast at any cover or structure that provided a current break. The 22-year-old stacked up 26-1 on Day 1, 27-12 on Day 2 (the event's largest limit) and 23-15 on Day 3 to earn a berth to the 2025 All-American and a prize package worth $60,000.

3. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE

REGION 2

Kerr Lake

Oct. 3–5

Jake Monti went wire to wire for the win in the Region 2 championship on Kerr Lake, totaling 38-12 across three days to claim a prize package worth $63,429 and a spot in the 2025 All-American.

Monti got off to a blistering start. During the first couple hours of competition, he found a shallow flipping bite and sacked up 21-0, easily the largest limit of the event. However, he stumbled on Day 2 with just four bass for 6-5. Monti then pulled a 180, trading out his flipping sticks for spinning rods and heading offshore, where he used a jighead minnow to catch 11-7 and seal the victory.

4. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE

REGION 3

Mississippi River

Oct. 10–12

The Upper Mississippi River has produced a slew of exceptional anglers through the years, but Mike Brueggen bolstered his case as the king of the Big Muddy with a win at the Region 3 championship. Brueggen sacked up 42-8 on Pools 13-17 to earn his 11th MLF victory and 10th trip to the All-American.

Brueggen targeted small, current-related pieces of cover with a Texas rig, shallow crankbait and spinnerbait. He weighed 13-3 on Day 1 then 15-1 on Day 2 to move into the lead. While he found the bite tougher









on Day 3, a late cull brought his total to 14-4, which earned him the victory by 3-7.

5. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE

REGION 4

Santee Cooper Lakes

Oct. 10–12

Mother Nature challenged the Region 4 contenders on Santee Cooper. Not only was Day 1 canceled due to high winds, but the lake level dropped about 5 1/2 feet then spiked again prior to the start of the event. South Carolina native Wade Grooms adapted best, totaling 33-8 to eke out a win by 8 ounces over Scott Wiley Jr.

While most of the water became muddy, Grooms found a cleaner stretch and used a Zoom Speed Worm to sack 19-0 during his first day on the water. While his water got dirtier and the bite tougher the next day, Grooms' 14-8 bag proved just enough to earn his second victory of the year, a prize package worth $58,344 and a spot in the All-American.

6. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE

REGION 5

Watts Bar Lake

Oct. 17–19

Tanner Hadden entered the Choo Choo Division to have a shot at the Region 5 championship, initially scheduled for Clarks Hill in his home state of South Carolina. While flooding from Hurricane Helene forced a move to Watts Bar instead, Hadden still prevailed with 47-0 over three days.

Hadden targeted suspended, offshore bass with a jighead minnow. He did all his damage in one creek arm but had to wait for a bite window each day, catching most of his weight in short flurries. With largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass all represented, he weighed 18-11 on Day 1, 14-11 on Day 2 and 13-10 on Day 3 to earn a $65,805 prize package and All-American berth.

7. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE

REGION 6

Wright Patman Lake

Oct. 17–19

Zack Fogle avoided the crowd during the Region 6 championship. Instead of targeting Wright Patman's ample shallow cover, the Texas native made a milk run of brushpiles and offshore stumps that produced 48-8 over three days, enough to claim the $67,000 first-place prize package and a spot in the All-American.

Fogle spent the first few hours each morning on a spot near takeoff then ran isolated targets from there. That produced bags of 17-4 and 17-0 on the first two days. On Day 3, the bite got tougher, but he scrounged up 14-4, which was enough to hold off Cody Ross by 10 ounces.

8. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE

WILD CARD

Cherokee Lake

Oct. 25–26

Tennessee native Gavin Clevenger used his lifetime of experience on Cherokee to come through in the last chance for anglers to qualify for the All-American. Clevenger targeted smallmouth — which had been protected by a slot limit from June 1–Oct. 15 — to amass a two-day total of 26-14.

The bite was slow each morning, but Clevenger stayed patient and made key upgrades during his last





PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

hour on the water both days. Utilizing a jighead minnow in conjunction with forward-facing sonar, he bagged 12-8 on Day 1 and followed it up with 14-6, earning the win by nearly 3 pounds.

9. GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES PRESENTED BY BASS PRO SHOPS

FOLDS OF HONOR PATRIOT CUP PRESENTED BY RECTEQ

O.H. Ivie, Lake Brownwood

Oct. 24–29

The third installment of the new-look Team Series brought 12 tandems of anglers to Early, Texas. They found the fishing tough on O.H. Ivie during Elimination Round matches, but a super-shallow bite amid the lake's flooded cover made for some entertaining action. While shallow targets remained key, the pace picked up at Lake Brownwood during the Knockout matches.

Finally, when a strong field returned to Brownwood for the Championship Round, Texas native Jeff Sprague and partner Bryan Thrift, representing Team Coign, won the single-day sprint for the trophies. Targeting water willow and other emergent shallow cover, Sprague and Thrift took the lead early then did just enough to keep Ott DeFoe and Alton Jones Jr. of Team Builders FirstSource at arm's length. Their total of 51-7 on 28 bass topped DeFoe and Jones by 8-1.

10. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS

CHAMPIONSHIP PRESENTED BY BASS BOAT TECHNOLOGIES

Wheeler Lake

Nov. 7–9

If there was one theme to the 2024 season across the entire MLF tournament network, it was young anglers winning big — and typically doing so by leaning on forward-facing sonar and jighead minnows. So, it seems fitting that 21-year-old Hayden Marbut used his electronics mastery and the hottest technique going to take home the Toyota Series Championship on Wheeler Lake.

Marbut, an Abu Garcia College Fishing star at Auburn University, had ample time to prepare for the season-ending championship after he punched his ticket by winning a February Toyota Series event just up the Tennessee River on Lake Guntersville. During his first day of pre-practice on Wheeler in October, he found what would be the winning pattern: targeting bait-chasing bass along channel-swing bluff banks. He further dialed in his gameplan during practice, when he realized the lower end of the lake would be crowded and thus settled into a zone around the mouth of the Elk River.

There, Marbut claimed the Day 1 lead by sacking up 21-6 of mostly smallmouth. He followed it up with a solid 19-10 bag but fell behind veteran pro Keith Poche entering the final day. While Poche faltered on a tricky Day 3, Marbut weighed 16-12, which brought his total to 57-12, enough to top Poche by 5-2.

For the win, Marbut took home a whopping $235,000, including a $35,000 Phoenix Bonus. Just as important to him, he earned a berth in REDCREST 2025 on Guntersville – his home lake where he's already won once. Watch out for Marbut to continue his rapid rise by contending for the $300,000 championship win.

FOR ALL THE MOST RECENT TOURNAMENT HIGHLIGHTS, ACTION AND RESULTS, VISIT MAJORLEAGUEFISHING.COM



GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES

By Mitchell Forde

The third event of the fall 2024 General Tire Team Series Presented by Bass Pro Shops took 12 two-angler teams to west-central Texas for the Folds of Honor Patriot Cup Presented by recteq. And while the lunker bass that call O.H. Ivie Lake and Lake Brownwood home proved elusive, *MLFNOW!* viewers were still treated to several days of close competition, angler antics and a stacked Championship Round field.

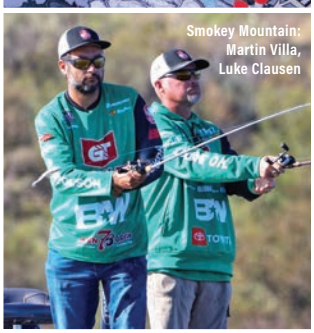
Power fishing around shallow cover – often in mere inches of water – proved to be the most popular tactic on both bodies of water. That made for some explosive visual strikes and entertaining fish-landing rodeos. Jeff Sprague and Bryan Thrift of Team Coign ultimately found the winning recipe winding swim jigs, bladed jigs and swimming worms amid emergent vegetation in Lake Brownwood during the Knockout Round, then rode that same bite to victory during the Championship Round. Their total of 51 pounds, 7 ounces on 28 bass proved just enough to top a hard-charging Team Builders FirstSource (Ott DeFoe/Alton Jones Jr.), who finished 8-1 back.

PHOTOS BY PHOENIX MOORE AND TYLER BRINKS



Coign: Jeff Sprague, Bryan Thrift





Smokey Mountain: Martin Villa, Luke Clausen

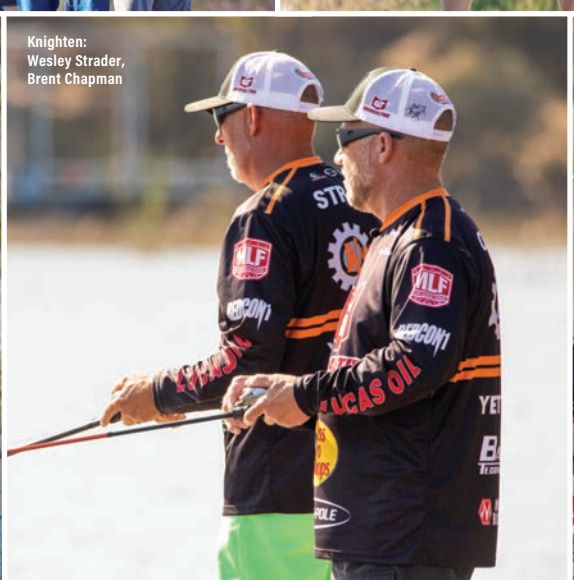


Builders FirstSource: Alton Jones Jr., Ott DeFoe

U.S. Air Force: Stephen Browning, Anthony Gagliardi



7Brew Coffee: Brent Ehrler, Justin Lucas



Knighten: Wesley Strader, Brent Chapman



Lucas Oil: Jacob Wheeler, Dustin Connell

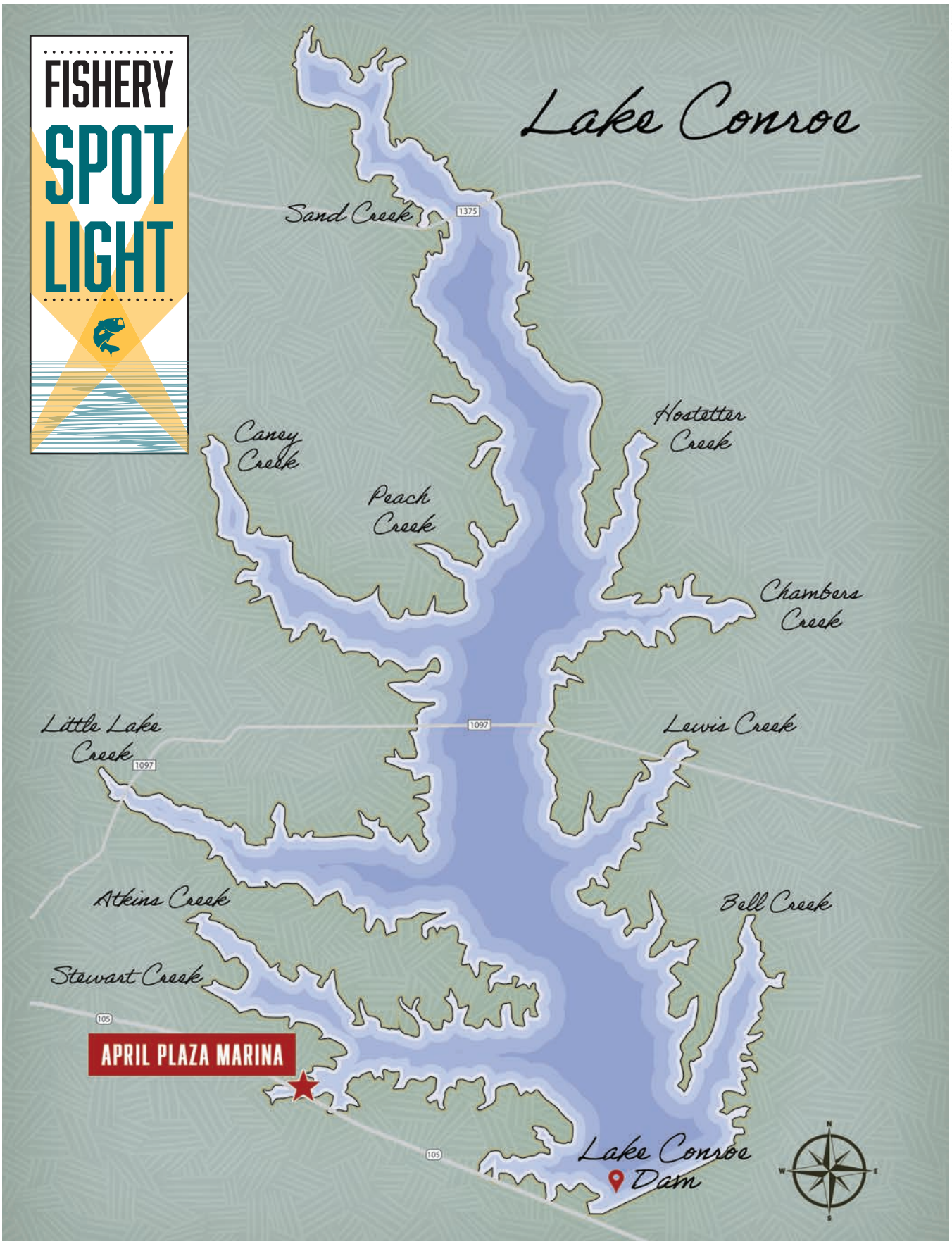


ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROWAN

LAKE CONROE

By Tyler Brinks

The Bass Pro Tour has visited several Texas fisheries in six seasons, but you must go back to the league's second-ever event to find the last time a major national tour visited Lake Conroe. That will change Jan. 30-Feb 2, 2025, as Conroe will host the first tournament of the seventh season of the Bass Pro Tour.

The 2019 event was held slightly later – in mid-February of 2019 – and won by Edwin Evers. A lot has changed since then for both the tour and the fishery, which is expected to produce some giant bass to kick off the 2025 campaign.

HOW LAKE CONROE SETS UP

Located an hour north of downtown Houston (the fourth-most populated city in America), Lake Conroe is a popular recreation lake that also serves as a water supplier for the metro area. Homes and docks line much of the lower section, and nearly all those docks are home to various watercraft. Thankfully, it's much less busy during winter and early spring – prime times for bass fishing at Conroe.

Conroe is smaller than many nationally known fisheries, covering just over 20,000 acres, but features no shortage of cover, be it manmade docks and seawalls or multiple types of aquatic vegetation. The northernmost section is fed by the San Jacinto River and bordered by the Sam Houston National Forest, keeping it undeveloped and wooded.

According to Texas tournament standout and five-time Major League Fishing winner Russell Cecil of nearby Willis, Texas, the entire lake has potential to produce.

"There's a lot of different stuff to fish, from the grass in some of the creeks and then obviously all the manmade stuff like docks, riprap and seawalls and the marinas," Cecil said. "The lake is an excellent offshore lake in the summertime, but the grass is a big player in the early spring to postspawn. There's plenty of native grass in almost all the creeks and some good hydrilla in Caney Creek. I expect vegetation to be a big factor in this one, and it'll make the lake fish bigger since there's so much of it now."

California's Brent Ehrler has only fished Conroe a handful of times but may have the best resume on the lake of anyone in the field. He finished third there in the 2017 Bassmaster Classic and fourth at the 2019 BPT stop. Ehrler believes that the lake's multitude of options make it such a good tournament fishery.

"About two-thirds of the lake is completely developed, and there's so much available cover that it can be hard to pinpoint the fish," he said. "It's completely covered with docks, seawalls and dredged-out canals that it can almost be hard to figure them out because there's so many potential targets. The northern section is the same but undeveloped and all rock, brush and trees. That's not counting the marinas and offshore brushpiles; the lake has almost everything."

STATE OF THE FISHERY

Cecil said the 2019 Bass Pro Tour event occurred while Conroe was recovering from Hurricane Harvey in 2017. The lake has bounced back since then, and vegetation is becoming more prevalent.

"When I was a little kid, there was a ton of vegetation, and then it went away and was strong around 2008 before they eradicated the hydrilla," he shared. "Right now, it's coming back. There's more native grass than I've ever seen in my fishing lifetime, and the hydrilla is starting to come back, too."

Niki Ragan-Harbison, a Texas Parks & Wildlife Department fisheries biologist who handles Lake Conroe and surrounding waters, confirmed the additional vegetation compared to 2019 even though it's down slightly from the past few years.

"The total vegetation acreage is down a little from two years (ago) because of drought in 2023 and flooding in 2024, but it's still expanding in some areas," she said. "Hydrilla is mainly in the Caney Creek arm, but native emergent species are spread around the entire upper end of the lake and in the backs of some of the coves on the lower end. We don't break them out by species, but native emergent grass includes water willow, torpedo grass and smartweed. Water celery, various pondweed species and coontail comprise most native submerged species."

In local events last season, five-fish bags in the mid- to high-20s were the norm for winning weights, proving the caliber of fish in the lake. While the number of true giants seems to have dwindled from 15 years ago, it's improving, according to Cecil.

"There's still a lot of 7- to 10-pound bass in there – this place has got them," he said. "You're just not seeing the top-end fish, those fish around 13 pounds. It's like the class is missing, but the lake is absolutely full of 3- to 5-pounders right now."

Ragan-Harbison and her colleagues conduct various surveys on the lake, and while they don't tell the whole story, they show glimpses of a healthy fishery.

"The last two surveys (2021 and 2023) had lower catch rates, especially the young-of-the-year class in 2023, but that probably has more to do with our random sites falling in the lower end, where there's not as much habitat," she said. "We don't see too many of the bigger fish in our surveys no matter where the stations fall, but we saw a decent amount of legal-sized fish. Most fish in our latest survey were between 10 and 15 inches long, and the body condition was good. "

Ehrler hasn't been to Conroe sine the BPT event in 2019, but he knows what the lake is capable of.

"It's known as a big-fish lake, and that time of year, we're likely to see the biggest bass we'll see all year," he said. "It's never been a numbers lake in my experience, but the chance to catch a huge one is always there."

POINTS OF INTEREST

Some in the field have previous experience at Conroe, either on the Bass Pro Tour, Bassmaster Classic or at the Toyota Texas Bass Classic events held there, so many will know where to begin. And even if they weren't in those fields, the BPT event and Classic featured plenty of live coverage, so Cecil doesn't think there will be any secrets.

"These guys are smart and will do their research," he said. "In that 2019 event, several guys caught fish around the bridge at Little Lake Creek fishing the pad stems, and it will have pad stems again. That place will be good again, but it'll get a lot of pressure. There's also a place they call 'the jungle'

at the north end with a very healthy fish population, but it can get covered up and pressured pretty fast."

According to Cecil, another potential community hole will be Caney Creek.

"Everyone is going to check (Caney)," he said. "Some big fish came from there the last time these guys were here, and I expect that if it's going well, a big portion of the anglers will be there the first day. Another popular area will be the Wildwood Shores neighborhood. It has a bunch of canals and docks and warms up the fastest in the spring because of how shallow it is."

TACTICS IN PLAY

With various forage species swimming in Lake Conroe, a host of shad and panfish imitating baits should work. Ragan-Harbison says there is plenty for the bass to eat right now.

"Threadfin shad is the primary forage species in Lake Conroe, followed by bluegill, then gizzard shad and then longear sunfish," she said. "Currently, Conroe has phenomenal shad and sunfish populations."

Ehrler expects many different techniques to be a factor. Nothing should be off the table at this event.

"Dude, you name it – you can catch them on just about anything that lake and that time of year," he said. "You can crank or throw a ChatterBait or jerkbait there, but you can also fish a shaky head or drop-shot. There will also be guys throwing a jig and Carolina rig and catching fish."

Ehrler expects forward-facing sonar to play a factor, but the new rules limiting its use to just one period each day should mitigate that.

"I'm sure guys will catch them with LiveScope, and it's never really been a factor here because all of the other tournaments were before we all had it," Ehrler said. "I know it won't be won solely with forward-facing sonar because we're now limited. You'll have to find ways to catch some in those other two periods."

With so much available habitat, both natural and man-made, Cecil also expects the patterns in play to run the gamut.

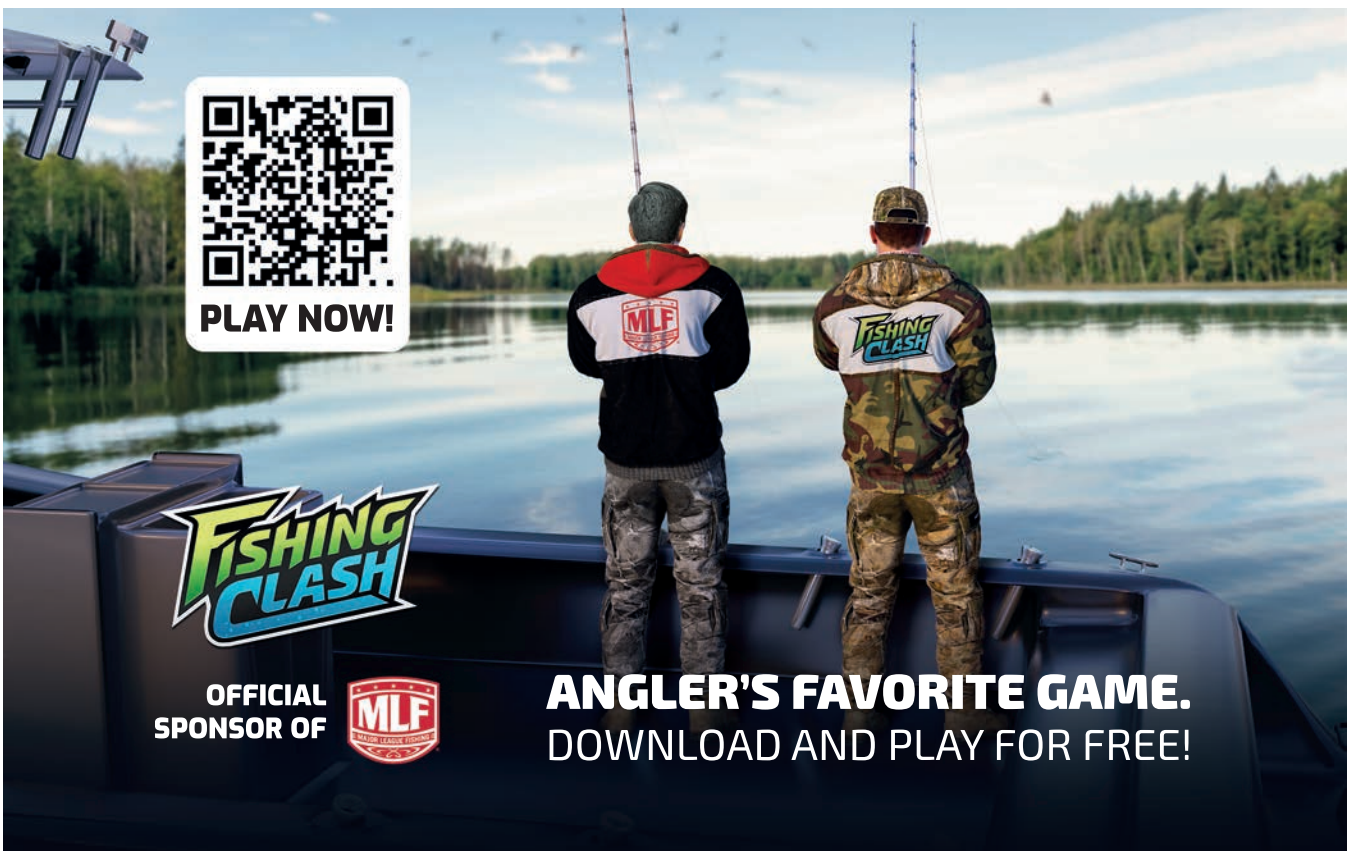
"There's going to be your typical East Texas springtime stuff with ChatterBaits, lipless crankbaits and that kind of stuff," he said. "You'll see all of what typically plays in the grass. They'll find ways to catch them with swimbaits, swimming worms and maybe medium-diving crankbaits or jerkbaits on the grass edges."

As a fishing fan who will watch some of the best in the world on his home waters, Cecil is excited to be shown some new tricks during the event.

"I know the rules changed, but these guys are the best in the world with this forward-facing sonar," he said. "I think you'll see some stuff catching fish that aren't traditional Lake Conroe patterns and that you'll see a few things exposed just because of the anglers' abilities. Guys that have been fishing tournaments here for 25 years will probably see fish caught in ways they've never even thought of trying."

Overall, Cecil predicts an excellent event with plenty of solid fish caught.

"The lake is in great shape for numbers, " he said. "From fishing here and keeping up with local tournaments, I'm telling you they'll have fun." ■




2025
Bass Pro Shops
BASS PRO TOUR CHAMPIONSHIP
REDCREST
MLF
MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING
APRIL 3–6, 2025 | LAKE GUNTERSVILLE
HUNTSVILLE, AL
POWER HOUR
REDCREST OUTDOOR SPORTS EXPO
APRIL 4–6, 2025
11 A.M. – 6 P.M. | FREE ADMISSION
VON BRAUN CENTER | HUNTSVILLE, AL
DON'T MISS THE BIGGEST PARTY IN BASS FISHING!
LEARN MORE AT: REDCRESTEXPO.COM

PROFILE: HAYDEN MARBUT

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

If sticking to your guns is the key to bass-tournament success, then Alabama pro Hayden Marbut is primed and ready for RED-CREST 2025 on Lake Guntersville. The Auburn University angler had a banner season in 2024, capped off by a $235,000 payday and winner's trophy in November at the Toyota Series Championship on Wheeler Lake. We caught up with Marbut a couple of days after he raised the trophy for a revealing Q&A.

Q&A

By Matt Naber

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

You had a pretty astounding 2024 season: You won more than $350,000 and topped a stacked field of pros at the 2024 Toyota Series Championship on Wheeler Lake. Does it all feel like a dream, or has the reality of a phenomenal season sunk in yet?

It feels like a dream really. I've dreamed about it and have worked toward it since I was 10 or 12 years old – especially the last seven or eight years. I've worked toward this every day, so it's kinda hard to believe. I'm actually out here (at Guntersville) fun-fishing today. It's just what I love to do, and it seems like a dream since I've been dreaming of something like this happening for so long. For it all to just start coming together is unbelievable.

How did you feel about your chances heading into the Toyota Series Championship?

I felt good. I spent a good bit of time out there pre-practicing, but I didn't know how it would go once we got 200 boats there. It ended up fishing relatively small, and after practice I felt pretty confident.

On the first morning of the tournament, I got two pretty good ones pretty fast, and it all just kind of started coming together and got rolling.

It was just like I was fun-fishing, and I went back out the second day and culled another for almost 20 pounds, and it just didn't even seem like a tournament for me. I was just out there

having fun and enjoying it, just fishing around. I was able to stay super calm the whole tournament.

I was a little bit nervous after seeing Keith (Poche) drop that 27-pound bag (on Day 2), but I figured if I could catch 17, 18, 19 pounds on the final day, I could put myself in position to win. I knew that if I lost it, it was just not meant to be. So, I just went out there and went fishing, and it all came together. I'm just super thankful.

You had the lead on Day 1 with 21 pounds, 6 ounces and then slid down to second place on Day 2 with 19-10. How did you mentally prepare during the evening between Day 2 and Day 3 knowing that you had a legitimate chance to win?

I just tried to stay calm. I prayed a lot, and I just rigged my rods. I knew that if it was meant to be that it would happen, and it's all part of God's plan. I tried to get some good sleep, and I tried not to let my nerves get to me. I tried not to overthink it too much. I just tried to go out there and have fun.

Did your pattern evolve as the event went on, or did you pretty much follow your game plan from practice?

I followed my game plan from practice to a certain degree. But throughout the event, I kind of narrowed down a section of the lake that I thought was fishing better. I had several places, and there were a couple places I had further down the lake that were getting a lot more pressure. The water was a little bit more clear than the area that I eventually ended up settling into for the final two days of the tournament.

Running back to weigh-in on the final day, did you feel like you'd done enough to win?

I'd be lying if I didn't say I teared up a little bit and was a little bit emotional. I don't really know if it was because I'd come so close to winning or if I thought I was going to win. In the back of my head, I kind of thought I lost. I thought I was one bite short. I had one 2-pounder left in my bag, and I felt like if I got rid of that one with another 3- or 4-pounder, then I would have a good shot at winning.

We may have gone over whatever weight capacity the stage was rated for once the entire Marbut fan club gathered. How cool was it having so many supporters there?

Yeah, it was crazy! We do a family reunion at the state park every year, and I found out probably six months before the tournament that our reunion was the same week as the tournament, and I thought I would miss the first day of our family reunion on Friday. And if I made the final day, then I'd probably miss that day at the reunion, too. But, if I made the final day, I wanted all of them to be there, so it really drove me even more. I knew that I would never have an opportunity like that this close to home for everyone in my family to be there and experience that with me. It just made it that much more special.

You've had a lot of success on Lake Guntersville. How are you feeling about REDCREST 2025?

I'm looking forward to it, man. I don't know what it holds for me – it's a format I've never fished before with a lot of different rules and stuff like that. I'm going to have to get used to that and start practicing. I don't know how it'll shake out. I'm just blessed to be able to fish a tournament of that caliber.

You seem pretty unflappable on the water. Have you always been that way, or was it something you have learned?

I do get a little nervous sometimes, but I get more nervous off the water than I do on it. I've spent so many days on the lake – like 200 days a year for the last five years – and I just feel so comfortable. It's where I find peace and comfort. So, when I was on the water, I wasn't stressed out. The most stressful part was sitting at the dock.

You had a pretty decorated college and high school career, and you haven't missed a beat at the Toyota Series level. What are some ways that fishing in school has helped you?

Big fields are something that I've gotten used to by fishing college tournaments. I've gotten used to practicing with a big field around and trying to find stuff a little bit off the beaten path. Then just getting experience all across the country was super instrumental for me. Getting to fish tidal fisheries up north, in Florida and all over the southeast has been super beneficial.

Auburn was a student-ran team, so I learned the business side of fishing and traveling like booking your own hotels and managing expenses and negotiating sponsor deals.

In school and beyond, you've had a lot of success on Tennessee River reservoirs. Why do you think you understand them so well?

My grandparents and great-grandparents had a house on Guntersville while I was growing up, so I spent a lot of time here in the summertime. And Guntersville is super diverse – you've got a lot of grass, a lot of offshore structure and everything like that. So, I got to learn things like how fish set up in current and on offshore places and how they relate to all of these different changing conditions. It's something I've gotten to take with me all over the Tennessee River and apply my knowledge on Guntersville to different lakes on the Tennessee River.

Do you feel like you have any weak points you need to address?

I need more experience, and more experience up north. I worked on it a little bit last year, and I look forward to working on it more this summer – fishing Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence River and going to Cayuga, Saint Clair and all of those lakes up north. New York, Michigan, everywhere like that – I want to get really familiar with that smallmouth territory.

Any plans for that $235,000 Toyota Series Championship paycheck? You could probably buy out Tackle Warehouse with your winnings.

Yeah, I'll definitely be spending a good bit on tackle. I'm just going to try to use it to push forward with my career and fish as much as possible. I don't plan to blow it. I'm going to need it in the next couple years as I start trying to get a house one day. I'll use it for my fishing career to make it to the next level. I plan on fishing in the Invitationals next year and a bunch of Toyotas, and I'm just really looking forward to it. ■

2024 MLF SPONSORS

Abu Garcia
Bass Pro Shops
Berkley
General Tire
Lowrance
Mercury
Suzuki Marine
Toyota

B&W
Fishing Clash
Kubota
Lucas Oil
Nitro Performance Fishing Boats
Power-Pole
Redcon1 The Highest State of Readiness
YETI

Builders FirstSource
Costa
Ferguson
Humminbird
Millertech Performance Lithium Batteries
Minn Kota
America's Original Smokey Mountain Herbal Snuff & Pouches
Sqwincher
Star brite
U.S. Air Force

Barbasol
Bubba
Crockett Premium Beef Jerky Creek
EPIC Baits
Garmin
Mossy Oak
Onyx
Optima Lithium
Plano
Rapala
St. Croix Best Rods on Earth
Zoom Bait Company, Inc.

By Mitchell Forde

LINDER'S LEGACY

Oklahoma Federation President Don Linder is retiring after more than 50 years of service



Retiring Oklahoma Federation president Don Linder.

Don Linder became president of the Oklahoma Bass Federation the same way he first landed a position on the state's advisory board – somewhat reluctantly. In 1978, Linder was working as the secretary for TBF's Oklahoma chapter when he got a message from the national office stating the then-president and the rest of the officers had their membership revoked as a disciplinary measure. Linder was the only board member left, so the national office figured he'd take over.

While Linder insisted on putting it to a vote of the state's bass clubs, he was indeed elected. Forty-six years later, after spending more than 50 years holding at least one leadership position within the Oklahoma Federation (including 29 as state president), Linder is finally retiring at the end of 2024.

While he may not have sought out the position and certainly never worried about his legacy ("My philosophy is if you have to tell people that you did something great, you probably aren't so great," the 86-year-old said), Linder will leave a lasting impact on both the Oklahoma Federation and TBF, as he helped guide both through numerous changes and into their current iterations.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Growing up in south Texas, Linder's introduction to fishing came walking the banks of farm ponds. After college, he moved to Ponca City, Oklahoma, for his job as a chemical analyst for Conoco, and he and a coworker bought an aluminum boat together.

Linder first heard about TBF through a different coworker who sold him a used reel and who happened to be the vice president of the Oklahoma Federation. He urged Linder to join his local bass club. New to the area and wanting to learn more about the local fisheries, he did so.

However, this being the 1970s, the early days of bass clubs, Linder found the group a bit disorganized. There was no constitution, no bylaws, no written tournament rules. Linder took

it upon himself to write those. Then, around 1974, the club wanted the state to adopt similar frameworks, so they sent Linder to the state office. The president at the time asked him to join the state board. Unsure, Linder returned to his club and presented them with the idea, and they insisted he take the position. He's held at least one role with the state office ever since.

"When I got on the board, I realized that there were like four or five guys, and they were just making decisions," Linder explained. "If they were going to have a state tournament and the weather wasn't good, they would just call it off. They wouldn't ask anybody, they'd just call it off, and that may be on the Tuesday before the weekend tournament. And so, I presented them the same way I did with our club: rules, constitution, bylaws."

Linder served as president through 1992, then ceded the position to Robert Cartlidge, who would go on to become the president and CEO of TBF's national office. When he didn't hold the presidency, Linder continued to serve in various roles, including conservation director, a position that meant a lot to him given his background in environmental science. After retiring from Conoco, he resumed the role of Oklahoma president in 2011.

EVOLVING WITH THE TIMES

Linder noted with a chuckle that he's lived through just about all the changes competitive bass fishing has ever undergone – he learned long ago that a good leader has to be willing to evolve. Perhaps his biggest contribution was helping shape the current qualification processes at the state and national level.

He altered Oklahoma's state qualifier structure from one or two multi-day events each year to three weekend events on different fisheries, with each day counting as a separate tournament. Linder believes that format boosts participation and makes for a team comprised of the best, most well-rounded anglers.

The result: Of the 36 years TBF held division championships, the Oklahoma team finished among the top three in its eight-state division nearly half the time. An accomplished angler himself who has qualified for a pair of National Championships, Linder fished on 35 of those 36 teams.

Linder is also one of eight members of TBF's national Board of Directors and plans to continue in that role after he retires as Oklahoma president. He helped shepherd the Federation from that previous division model, in which seven division championships were held to determine National Championship qualification, to the current format, with 22 districts containing two to four states apiece, each hosting a National Semi-Final. That has allowed more anglers to fish National Championship qualifiers closer to home.

In fact, one of the last things Linder wanted to make sure he accomplished during his tenure as Oklahoma president was combining the National Semi-Finals for District 6 (Arkansas and Oklahoma) and District 7 (Kansas and Missouri) into a single event. Each district still holds a separate competition, and each state's top boater and co-angler still earn National Championship berths. But the fact that the event will rotate between four states instead of two makes for more diversity, a larger field and less burden on each state.

"This last year is the first time we've combined two districts, so I went to run the tournament, strictly because I wanted to make sure it was run properly," Linder said. "We had some good comments from some of (the anglers), because they were fishing and would only have like 12, 15 boats. Now, you're talking about 60 boats on the water."

A STEWARD OF THE SPORT

Cartlidge, who considers Linder a mentor, called him "no-nonsense" – a straight shooter who "tells it like it is." Yet he's always been most impressed by Linder's ability to foster camaraderie in the midst of competition. Linder said it was important to him to run the Oklahoma Federation like a big club: Everyone knows everyone, and everyone who wants a say has one.

"He always ran the Federation for its principles," Cartlidge said. "He never ran the Oklahoma Federation about money or any of that. It was all about camaraderie, it was about supporting our mission of youth, conservation and fishing and those founding principles of the Federation. ... I think that's really a steady hand over the decades that has driven the Federation was his leadership in that arena, to keep it what it's supposed to be."

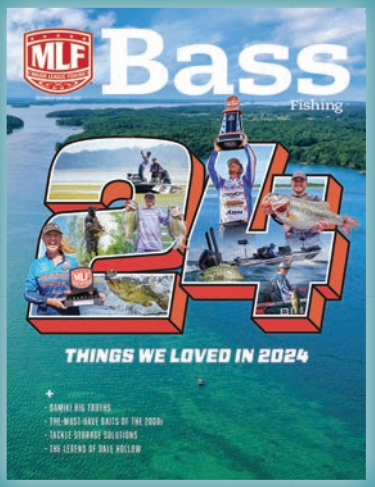
While Linder may never have worried about his legacy, he's always been conscientious about preserving both fisheries and the Federation for the next generation – literally, in his case. Linder's sons Jody and Justin have both competed alongside him in TBF tournaments. All three qualified for the Oklahoma state team in 2005, representing the state together at the division championship. Jody, currently the state's tournament director, will succeed his father as president.

If he has a legacy, Linder hopes it's that he played a part in making sure his children, grandchildren and other young anglers can have access to the competitive opportunities and relationships offered by TBF that meant so much to him.

"I just did what I thought was the right thing to do," Linder said, "and when I'm gone, if people say, well, we enjoyed doing some of these things, that's good, because that's what is set up for the next generation." ■

Scan this QR code to stay up to date on The Bass Federation tournament schedule, results and news.

SUBSCRIBE NOW



Now it's even easier to sign up and receive a full year's subscription (6 issues) to *Bass Fishing* magazine. Join the country's most successful and avid anglers who enjoy all that *Bass Fishing* has to offer.

For quickest delivery, visit MajorLeagueFishing.com/join or call 270.252.1000

MLF Bass Fishing MEMBERSHIP

Please allow 4-8 weeks for delivery of first issue.

'MEMBERS APPRECIATION TOURNAMENT' A BIG HIT FOR VIRGINIA REGION 8





How does a tournament trail make a season-ending awards banquet more enticing for anglers? Turn it into a day on the water, of course.

That's been the idea behind the annual "Members Appreciation Tournament" hosted by Region 8 of the Virginia Federation, which held the fifth edition of the event in October. With anglers competing for a day on the Chickahominy River, enjoying food and door prizes afterward and introducing guests to TBF, it's become a smashing success and a concept Cartlidge recommends other chapters emulate.

Region 8 director John Flicek explained that participating anglers need only donate two new baits or packs of soft plastics to participate in the event. Those baits are combined into tackle packages that are raffled off each spring, allowing Flicek to offer a $600 purse at the no-entry-fee event.

"It's been a real successful event," Flicek said. "We do a little cookout; we do hot dogs and snacks and different things. And then we gave out probably $2,000 worth of product this year with rods and reels, a couple free memberships for the following year, things like that. We just go out and have a day of fall fishing on the Chickahominy River and have a little fellowship afterwards."

Members of the seven clubs that comprise Region 8 are not only allowed but encouraged to bring guests, and Flicek said quite a few anglers who have been introduced to TBF at these events wound up becoming members.

"That also serves the purpose of introducing the Federation to other new anglers, and from that, we've ended up with several new members over the years," he said.

While the on-water competition, which doesn't carry any season-long points implications, often takes a backseat to the cookout afterward, the Chickahominy showed out this year. Jeff Valentin and Moose Wells won with a stout 18.48-pound limit, which included a 7.84-pound lunker that easily took home big bass honors.



NATIONAL SEMI-FINAL STATE WINNERS

District 1: St. Johns River
Florida
Boater: Doug White (29.98 lbs.)
Co-angler: Josh Williams (26.83 lbs.)

Georgia
Boater: Michael Deen (36.50 lbs.)
Co-angler: Larry Atkins (13.30 lbs.)

District 2: Jordan Lake
North Carolina
Boater: Chandler Todd (23.47 lbs.)
Co-angler: Wes House (17.02 lbs.)

South Carolina
Boater: Jimmy Vining (28.67 lbs.)
Co-angler: Shelton Yonce (15.03 lbs.)

District 3: Green River Lake
Kentucky
Boater: Wil Rigdon (26.33 lbs.)
Co-angler: Delmar Kouns (13.55 lbs.)

Tennessee
Boater: Darrell Adams (14.81 lbs.)
Co-angler: Brett McHaney (12.35 lbs.)

District 5: Cedar Creek Reservoir
Louisiana
Boater: Skip Rayborn (32.74 lbs.)
Co-angler: Austin Abadie (22.89 lbs.)

Texas
Boater: James Biggs (37.05 lbs.)
Co-angler: Mike Casanova (20.53 lbs.)

District 6: Grand Lake
Arkansas
Boater: Blake Wilson (30.74 lbs.)
Co-angler: Greg Dennis (20.10 lbs.)

Oklahoma
Boater: Bradley Sullivan (32.05 lbs.)
Co-angler: Charles Lawrence (20.86 lbs.)

District 7: Grand Lake
Kansas
Boater: Justin Russell (21.69 lbs.)
Co-angler: Sam Heckman (24.54 lbs.)

Missouri
Boater: Jordan Williams (28.79 lbs.)
Co-angler: Kyle Klein (21.37 lbs.)

District 8: Missouri River
Iowa
Boater: Dustin Sperling (19.84 lbs.)
Co-angler: Jamie Taylor (22.00 lbs.)

District 8: Missouri River *(Continued)*
Nebraska
Boater: Bryan Bittner (27.24 lbs.)
Co-angler: Terry Hussey (21.70 lbs.)

South Dakota
Boater: Travis Seitzinger (30.16 lbs.)
Co-angler: Tanner Hart (21.97 lbs.)

District 10: Lake St. Clair
Indiana
Boater: Jeff Claar (35.21 lbs.)
Co-angler: Tim Stillions (22.10 lbs.)

Illinois
Boater: Ryan Winstead (30.17 lbs.)
Co-angler: Brad Waller (24.53 lbs.)

District 11: Sandusky Bay
Michigan
Boater: Pat Upthagrove (23.85 lbs.)
Co-angler: Joey Elliott (24.31 lbs.)

Ohio
Boater: Frank Arthurs Jr. (30.42 lbs.)
Co-angler: Joe Harmon (27.69 lbs.)

District 12: Kerr Lake
Virginia
Boater: Clay Ross (29.10 lbs.)
Co-angler: Larry Whitt (14.52 lbs.)

West Virginia
Boater: Andrew Goins (20.50 lbs.)
Co-angler: Bill Harmon (14.76 lbs.)

District 13: Potomac River
Delaware
Boater: Mike Morris (24.20 lbs.)
Co-angler: Darrin Toth Sr. (24.68 lbs.)

Maryland
Boater: Jonathan Lang (21.61 lbs.)
Co-angler: Chris Lang (21.42 lbs.)

Washington, D.C.
Boater: Jason Wiseman (22.07 lbs.)
Co-angler: Martin Blanchet (21.27 lbs.)

District 14: Lake Champlain
New York
Boater: Casey Casamento (35.87 lbs.)
Co-angler: Jason Mordhorst (23.99 lbs.)

Ontario
Boater: Andrew Shufelt (30.95 lbs.)
Co-angler: Andrew Munro (20.20 lbs.)

Pennsylvania
Boater: Keith Houseknecht (37.17 lbs.)
Co-angler: Kade Wesner (31.42 lbs.)

District 15: Lake Champlain
Connecticut
Boater: Keith Cleary (40.53 lbs.)
Co-angler: Paul Bossardet (27.02 lbs.)

New Jersey
Boater: Ian Martin (32.89 lbs.)
Co-angler: Tyler Schulte (21.02 lbs.)

District 17: China Lake
Maine
Boater: Nick Deering (43.24 lbs.)
Co-angler: Toby Cross (24.51 lbs.)

New Hampshire
Boater: Matt Thoin (34.70 lbs.)
Co-angler: Jeremy Arnold (24.10 lbs.)

District 18: Lake Wallula
Oregon
Boater: Ronnie Wiseman (32.39 lbs.)
Co-angler: Steve Gausnell (21.23 lbs.)

Washington
Boater: Rich Craft (29.57 lbs.)
Co-angler: Avery Miller (34.31 lbs.)

District 19: Cascade Lake
Idaho
Boater: Justin Soppe (31.32 lbs.)
Co-angler: Loren Torok (31.75 lbs.)

Montana
Boater: Yeej Moua (34.74 lbs.)
Co-angler: Jason Anderson (17.72 lbs.)

District 23: Lake Millerton
Arizona
Boater: Brandon Morton (12.37 lbs.)
Co-angler: Hunter Hillburn (11.19 lbs.)

California
Boater: Tim Wells (15.01 lbs.)
Co-angler: Andy Morita (13.89 lbs.)

ABOUT THE BASS FEDERATION

THE BASS FEDERATION INC., (TBF) is a member of the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame. TBF is owned by those we serve, and dedicated to the sport of fishing. The Federation is the largest and oldest organized grassroots fishing, youth and conservation organization. TBF, our affiliated state federations and their member clubs conduct more than 20,000 events each year and have provided a foundation for the entire bass fishing industry for more than 50 years. TBF founded the Student Angler Federation and the National High School Fishing program to promote clean family fun and education through fishing, and are proud partners in fishing with MLF. For more information, visit bassfederation.com or highschoolfishing.org.

Have an EPIC® Christmas



35% OFF *

FROM DEC 3rd TO JAN 31st 2025

Use discount code 'Christmas2024'
at checkout to get 35% off entire order

BE EPIC TODAY®

* For online store - 35% off entire order - No minimum purchase requirement - All customers - One use per customer - Can't combine with other discounts

PERFORMANCE DISCOUNT IS NOT YET ACTIVE

epicbaitsfishing.com

by Jay Chuppe



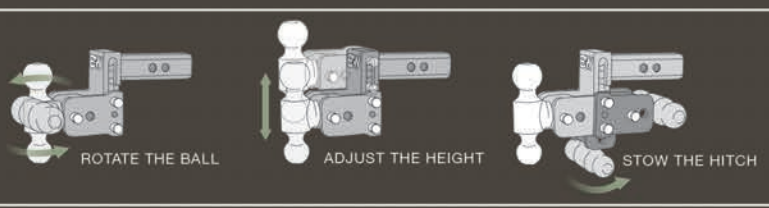
B&W

TOW & STOW®

ADJUSTABLE BALL MOUNT



THE ULTIMATE HITCH FOR
EVERY OUTDOORSMAN.



TOWING ADVENTURE

PART GLIDE BAIT. PART SOFT BAIT.

A WHOLE NEW DOMINANT BREED.

POWERBAIT® NESSIE

No longer a myth, the Berkley PowerBait® Nessie delivers filthy glide bait action for any retrieve style. Chop it, kill it, twitch it. Part glide bait. Part soft bait. It swims in all the right ways with a single mesh jointed design that brings big-time action for every angler. Available in three sizes and 10 colors, there's nothing Nessie won't help you put in the boat.

Berkley-Fishing.com





RAINBOW TROUT



5 inch, 7 inch & 9 inch lengths

INFUSED WITH Berkley PowerBait

Fusion19™ HOOKS

©2024 Pure Fishing, Inc.

YOUR FISH. OUR SCIENCE.™

3 SIZES | 10 COLORS



GOLDEN SHINER



BURNT BONE



HITCH



SHAD