



APRIL-MAY 2024

# Bass

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**DUSTIN CONNELL**



*Dustin Connell*

DUSTIN CONNELL

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COVER ART BY BRANDON ROWAN



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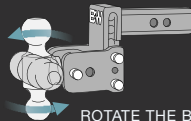
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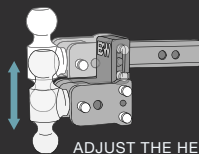
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## REDCREST NOTE: CONNELL'S WIN ON LAY LAKE SEEMED UNDENIABLE

There was no denying that Dustin Connell was going to win Bass Pro Shops REDCREST Powered by OPTIMA Lithium. As I walked up to Connell's boat at Beeswax Landing shortly after he won the Knockout Round with 52 pounds, 15 ounces, the Alabama pro was already surrounded by family and friends while water from Lay Lake dripped from his boat.

Connell nodded his head at me and said, "You all knew I was going to do that, right?", referring jokingly to the performance he had just completed in the next-to-last day of REDCREST.

Connell had started the Knockout Round slowly, boating four scorable fish for 10 pounds, 3 ounces in the first period. The first hour of the second period wasn't much hotter (two more fish), and Connell headed into the second half of the day with a lot of real estate between him and SCORETRACKER® leaders Michael Neal and Jesse Wiggins. Although probably not in danger of finishing outside of the Top 10 and out of the Championship Day cut, Connell didn't seem like the favorite to win the round at that point in time.

As you probably know by now, the kid from nearby Clanton, Alabama, hit a higher gear for the rest of the day as he torched 12 fish for 36-3 over the final four hours of competition.

In the couple of minutes after he pulled his Triton out of the water – as friends, family and fans swarmed around Connell's boat and he engaged in a high-energy, rapid-fire chit-chat with all of them – I surmised that the 2021 REDCREST champion was going to repeat. Right then and there, I had the feeling that Connell would be unbeatable in the Championship Round.

He had entered REDCREST as the runaway favorite to win, thanks to a lifetime of fishing on the Coosa River and career momentum from five Bass Pro Tour wins in three years. He had exploited a new pattern and location late in the day in the Knockout Round, and it seemed almost certain that he would do the same in the Championship Round the following day (he actually didn't, but that's a whole 'nother story).

More than all of that, though, Connell projected the kind of championship swagger and competitive confidence that only top-level athletes possess. *He was going to win*, and it didn't matter what the other nine anglers might do.

I first saw that dominator personality face-to-face during a post-fight interview I conducted with a young Oscar De La Hoya, immediately after one of his first professional fights. It was clear to me then that, no matter what else happened around De La Hoya in the ring or what his opponent did, *he was going to win*. He went on to claim his first world title a year later and didn't lose a fight for five years afterward.

Connell performed in the REDCREST Championship Round like a dominator. He roasted the rest of the field by 31-plus pounds en route to becoming the first and only repeat REDCREST champion. Needless to say, if Connell had asked me the same question on Championship Sunday that he asked me after the Knockout round – "You all knew I was going to do that, right?" – my answer would've been "Oh yes. I knew."

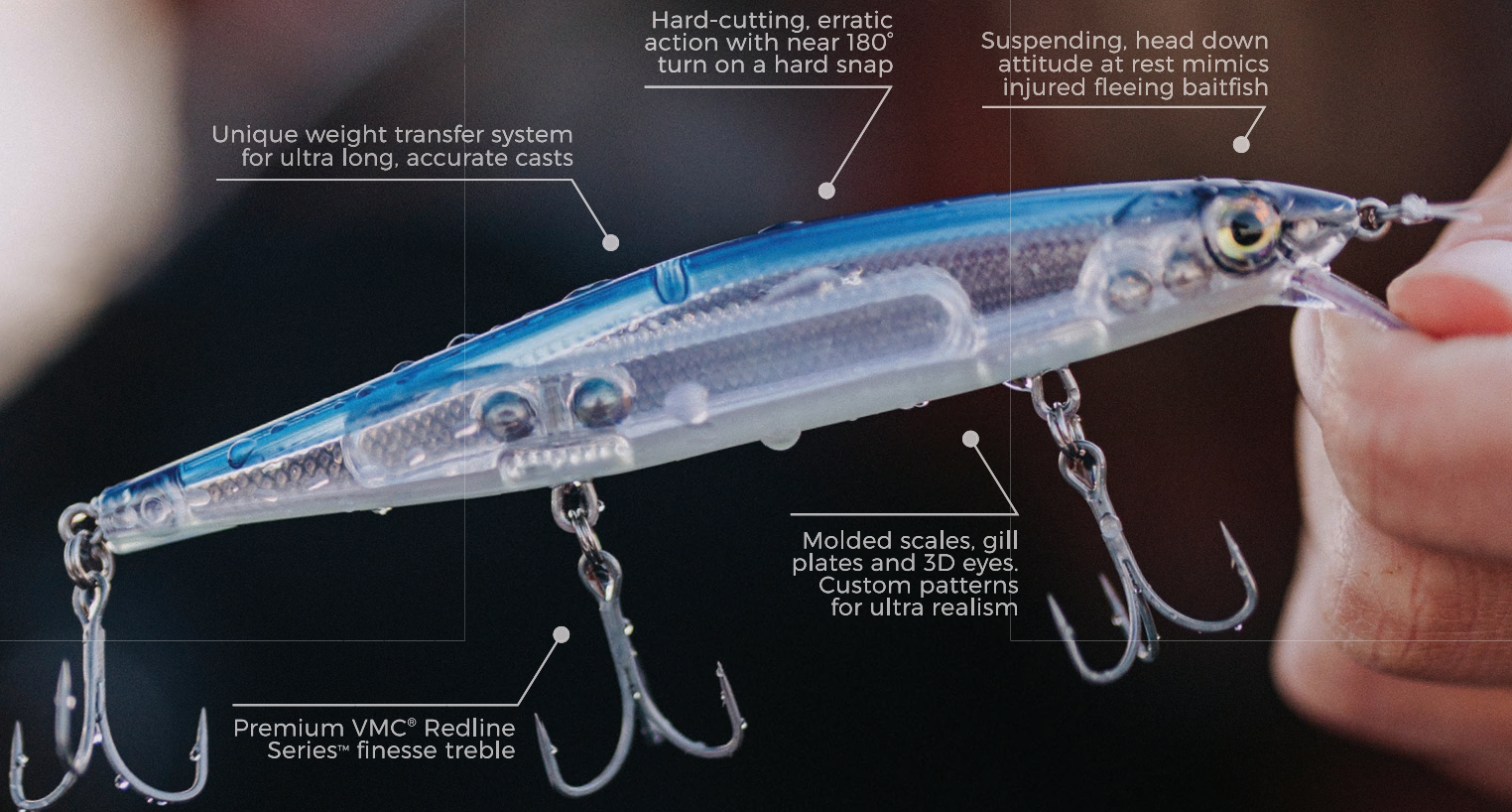
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JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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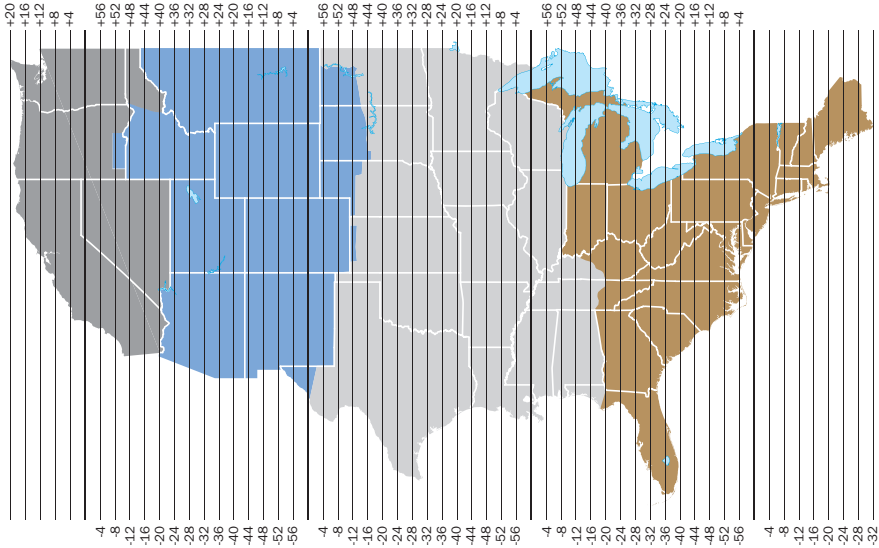
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# SOLUNAR TABLES

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 MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME  
 CENTRAL STANDARD TIME  
 EASTERN STANDARD TIME



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

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# FMD HABITAT RESTORATION, BUBBA SCALE INFORMATION WILL BENEFIT SAM RAYBURN FOR YEARS TO COME



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

**S**am Rayburn Reservoir is a historic Texas fishery. Hosting an estimated 300-plus bass tournaments each year, the 114,500-acre reservoir has earned a reputation as a big-fish factory.

For good reason: The lake record is a 16.8-pound giant caught in 1997 by Tommy Shelton. Sam Rayburn has produced 32 fish over 13 pounds that have been donated to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Toyota ShareLunker program, including the 13.82-pound fish that Alec Morrison caught and donated during practice for Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Stop 1 this year. *(There's an excellent article about that fish by Jody White on MajorLeagueFishing.com)*

## STARTING OFF BIG AT BIG SAM

Given its prominent status within the tournament fishing world, it should come as no surprise that Sam Rayburn played a key role in how the Major League Fishing Fisheries Management Division (FMD) kicked off its 2024 schedule. During Bass Pro Tour Stage One at nearby Toledo Bend Reservoir, we completed the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Kubota Tractor Corporation on Rayburn — a project that featured a new idea in habitat restoration, the Bass Recovery Zone. This effort narrows down large reservoirs and focuses exclusively on where bass likely recover following their release after tournament weigh-ins.

We know through generations of research that fish released after a tournament will spend up to a year within 0.5-3 miles of their release site. We also know that their ability to recover is improved with increased forage availability

and reduced stress in the release area. Habitat can meet both of those needs by concentrating forage and providing year-round stability.

For this project, we started by identifying the parks where the most tournaments are held. For Sam Rayburn, we found Umphrey Family Pavilion and the associated boat ramp to fit our target area for a Bass Recovery Zone.

The Umphrey Family Pavilion is home to several MLF events per year, including Stop 1 of the Invitationals this season plus numerous other high school, college and club tournaments. It has two courtesy docks, four boat lanes and a pavilion for weigh-ins, all of which are used by tournament anglers year-round. Thousands of fish are released from the docks or from live release boats into the area immediately around the park.

The park sits at the southern end of the reservoir, just to the east of the dam, and is partially protected by an island. The habitat immediately within the cove and around the island is fairly limited, so we knew we could improve this area and the recovery of released fish.

## THE SCIENCE OF BASS RECOVERY ZONES

To start building a Bass Recovery Zone near Umphrey Pavilion, we evaluated the topography of the area around the park and focused on a depth range of 12-15 feet, knowing that some seasonal drawdowns could occur for dam repairs or during drought. The Bass Recovery Zones use MossBack Artificial Fish Habitat and specifically consist of two 60-inch Conservation Cubes placed next to each other and flanked by three 60-inch Safe Haven trees and one 80-inch John Godwin Crappie Tower tree.

The cubes are stuffed with tree limbs to provide dense habitat with a highly defined edge. This provides a shelter area for forage fish, which are essential for bass recovery. The artificial trees provide additional ambush points. The MossBack products are made using recycled PVC that doesn't decompose. Brushpiles made with natural materials do not have the longevity we need, while vegetation is seasonal and fairly unpredictable annually. Artificial habitat allows us to install a Bass Recovery Zone we know will be there for the long term.



Hammer Equipment of Jasper, Texas, lent a Kubota tractor to assist the MLF FMD in creating a Bass Recovery Zone on Sam Rayburn.

PHOTO BY KANAN KLEIN

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

On the day of the installation, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department staff joined the MLF FMD, Invitationals pro Kyle Cortiana and Bass Pro Tour anglers Brent Chapman and Greg Vinson to construct and deploy the habitat. TPWD provided its state-of-the-art hydraulic habitat barge for precise deployment of the structure, and Hammer Equipment of Jasper, Texas, provided a Kubota B3350HSD tractor to aid in transporting concrete blocks and the habitat down the ramp and onto the barge.

The first three hours of the morning were spent constructing the MossBack products; once they were all completed, we marked the four preselected locations and used the tractor to load individual pieces onto the barge. The barge can precisely deploy two cubes at one time, ensuring they are next to each other. All four locations were marked by TPWD, and the GPS locations will be available on their habitat maps of Sam Rayburn.

This habitat was put to immediate use the following week, when 150 Invitationals anglers launched and weighed in at Umphrey Family Pavilion. Drew Gill won the event a three-day total of 69-6. There were 305 five-fish limits weighed in, with a total of 1,525 bass across the event. Those fish cumulatively weighed 4,237.06 pounds, with the average fish running 2.63 pounds. The biggest five-fish bag was Marshall Hughes' whopping 38-7, and the big fish of the event was Cole Breeden's 11-12.

Those numbers illustrate the productivity of this big-fish factory and the importance of fish recovery in keeping it that way. All fish weighed in during the tournament were immediately placed into MLF live release boats and released throughout the cove near the newly installed Bass Recovery Zones.



PHOTO BY KANYAN KLEIN

MossBack Fish Habitat was deployed around Umphrey Family Pavilion, a popular tournament weigh-in location.

This project highlights an extraordinary ability for MLF to ensure that every fish has the best possible chance to recover following our events and demonstrates Minn Kota's and Kubota's hearty support of the fishing community.

## BUILDING THE BUBBA DATA SET

Sam Rayburn was also important for the MLF FMD as we started to expand our data-sharing efforts beyond the BPT and onto the Invitationals. In the past, the FMD has been able to provide state agency biologists with the species, weight, habitat type, GPS location, time and date for every fish caught in any Bass Pro Tour event or others contested under the catch, weigh, immediate-release format. This data collection and sharing is unparalleled, but until this season was only available when MLF officials could be present in anglers' boats, manually entering the data into SCORETRACKER®.

For traditional weigh-in events, we've only been able to provide states with the daily five-fish total bag weight per angler and the biggest individual fish weighed in — the standard for the industry until MLF introduced SCORETRACKER®. This season, we have the potential to utilize a



PHOTO BY KANYAN KLEIN



new data collection opportunity made possible by the introduction of the BUBBA Pro Series Smart Fish Scale.

With this scale, we can collect vital information for every fish weighed by an Invationals angler, even if it's later culled. With the support of Berkley Labs, Mossy Oak and BUBBA, we can provide that catch data to local state fisheries biologists following each Invationals event. This information is kept strictly confidential, for scientific/management purposes only.

Thanks to BUBBA scale data collected during the Sam Rayburn event, we know that 2,169 fish were caught and weighed by anglers for a total of 5,069.19 pounds. That includes an additional 644 fish weighing 832.13 pounds that historically wouldn't have been unaccounted for. The average weight was 2.34 pounds, which might sound low but includes the cull fish not actually weighed in for anglers' five-fish bags.

The best part is that we were able to provide some critical information to TPWD for 2,169 fish that the agency wouldn't have had otherwise. And thanks to the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Kubota Tractor Corporation for Sam Rayburn, we know where those fish will be recovering. We truly believe that MLF FMD has successfully integrated all four of our guiding pillars - fish care, research, education, and fisheries enhancement - into one large project that can serve as a model for years to come. ■

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# FISHING CLASH AOY UPDATE: WHEELER ASCENDING

By Joel Shangle



**W**ith two regular-season events complete in the 2024 Bass Pro Tour schedule as of press time for this issue, a familiar name sits atop the Fishing Clash Angler of the Year standings: 2021 and 2022 AOY Jacob Wheeler.

The Tennessee pro finished fourth at Toledo Bend to start the season and took home his seventh Bass Pro Tour champion's trophy at Santee Cooper for Stage Two, putting Wheeler atop the AOY standings heading to Stage Three at Dale Hollow Lake with 157 points to Jesse Wiggins' 150.

While there's still plenty of fishing ahead before MLF crowns the 2024 Fishing Clash Angler of the Year, Wheeler's familiarity with the No. 1 spot and his astounding success over the past five seasons marks him as a favorite to take home his third AOY trophy and \$100,000 paycheck in four years. If he pulls it off, it'll put Wheeler in some exclusive company.

Here's how a Wheeler AOY win in 2024 would stack up against some of the history makers of the sport.

## ALL-TIME AOY STREAKS

Roland Martin and Kevin VanDam's careers are the high bars by which bass fishing Angler of the Year performances will be judged forevermore.

Martin won an astounding nine AOYs between 1971 and 1985, including six in nine years from 1971 to 1980.

VanDam won eight AOY races in his 33-year career (seven with Bassmaster, one with MLF/FLW). He was an absolutely juggernaut from 2008 to 2011, when he claimed four straight Elite Series AOY trophies. But a third AOY for Wheeler in four years would equal Martin for the second-best four-year run in major-tour history.



## ONE FOUR-TIMER

While there are a handful of three-time AOY winners on the major-tour level, only one angler aside from Martin and VanDam has put together four AOY-winning campaigns: Bass Pro Tour competitor David Dudley, who claimed four FLW Tour Angler of the Year trophies (2008, 2011, 2012 and 2019).

## THE THREE-TIMERS

If Wheeler pulls off a third AOY campaign, he'll join a list of three-time winners that reads like a Who's Who of bass fishing: Andy Morgan, Mark Davis, Clark Wendlandt, Aaron Martens and Bill Dance.

## WHEELER IS A FINISHER

With the second half of the 2024 Bass Pro Tour campaign looming, Wheeler's AOY odds will likely rise based on his recent late-season performance. In the previous four full seasons on the BPT (not counting the COVID-shortened 2020 season), Wheeler has finished in the Top 5 at 11 of 16 tournaments in the second half of the season (including four wins).



## CASTLEDINE IS KING OF THE TOYOTA SERIES AOYS

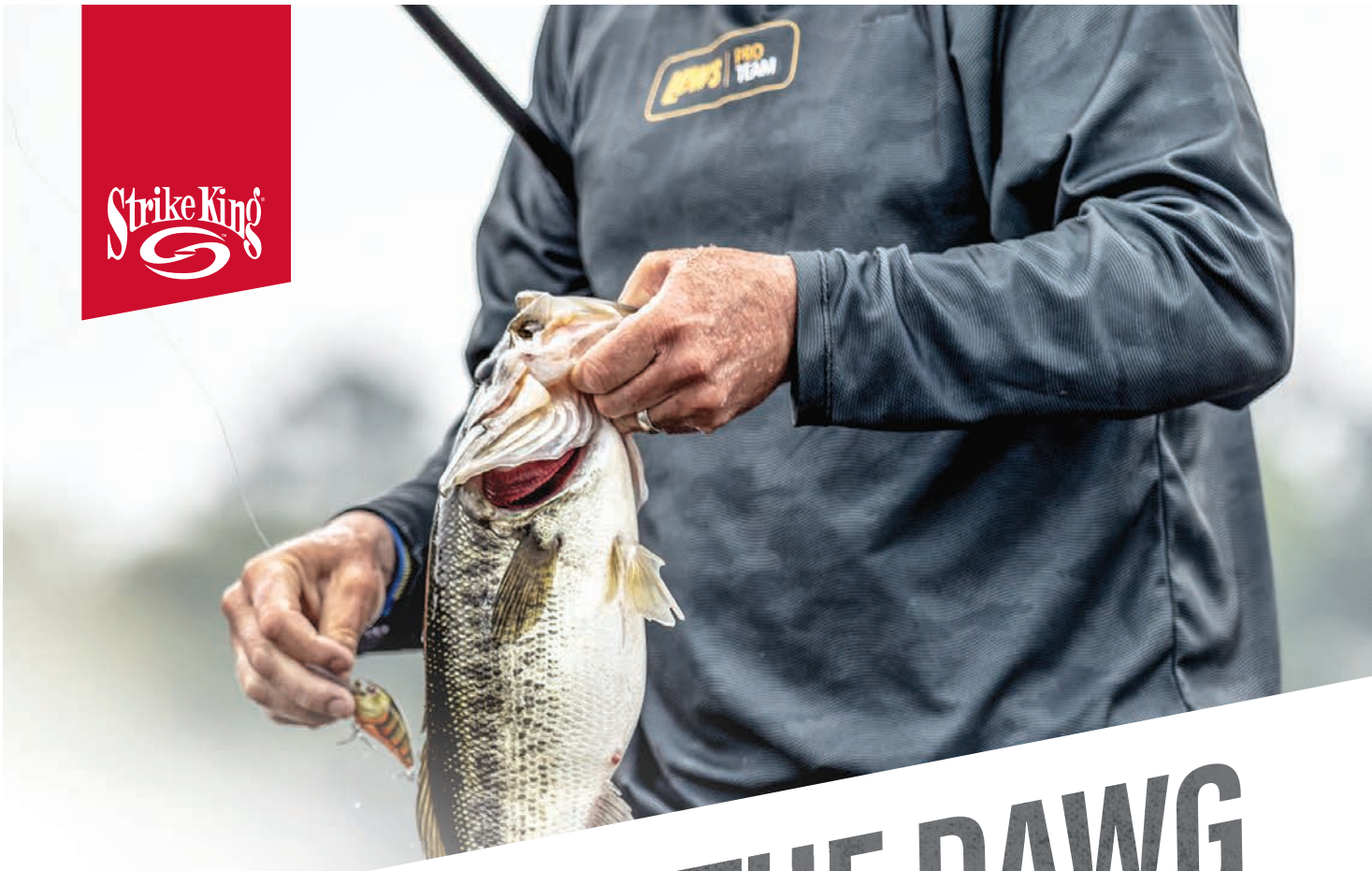
If there was a betting pool for Fishing Clash Angler of the Year honors for the Toyota Series Southwestern Division, it would be a fool's bet to choose anyone other than Todd Castledine. The Texas pro has collected five Southwestern Division AOYs in 12 seasons (including two of the last three trophies). Castledine also owns an AOY trophy from the Cowboy Division of the Phoenix Bass Fishing League in 2013.



## BRUEGGEN, CARTER, FREEZE LEAD BFL AOY COUNT

Three anglers own six Fishing Clash AOYs in the BFLs: Mike Brueggen (2009, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2020 in the Great Lakes Division); Kip Carter (2006, 2009, 2010, 2017, 2019 and 2022 in the Bulldog Division); and Maurice Freeze, who stacked up six AOY awards among the Piedmont, North Carolina and South Carolina divisions in 2004, 2006 (when he topped the points in two divisions), 2007, 2009 and 2010. ■





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- April 19-21: Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Stop 3 Presented by Phoenix Boats @ Kentucky/Barkley Lakes
- Apr 30-May 5: Bass Pro Tour Stage Four @ Lake Eufaula
- May 10-12: Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Stop 4 Presented by E3 Sport Apparel @ Lake Eufaula
- May 18-23: Bass Pro Tour Heavy Hitters @ Kissimmee Chain
- May 31: Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine All-American @ Lake Cherokee
- Jun 4-9: Bass Pro Tour Stage Five @ Chowan River
- June 15-17: Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Stop 5 Presented by 7Brew @ Lake Champlain

## TV BROADCASTS

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

- April 20: General Tire Team Series Builders First Source Qualifier: Semifinal Match 1 @ Lake Bob Sandlin
- April 27: General Tire Team Series Builders First Source Qualifier: Semifinal Match 2 @ Lake Bob Sandlin
- May 4: General Tire Team Series Builders First Source Qualifier: Wild Card Match @ Martin Creek Lake
- May 11: General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Elimination Match 1\*
- May 18: General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Elimination Match 2\*
- May 25: General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Elimination Match 3\*
- June 1: General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Semifinal Match 1\*
- June 8: General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Semifinal Match 2\*

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

- April 20: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Builders First Source Qualifier: Semifinal Match 1 @ Lake Bob Sandlin
- April 27: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Builders First Source Qualifier: Semifinal Match 2 @ Lake Bob Sandlin
- May 4: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Builders First Source Qualifier: Wild Card Match @ Martin Creek Lake
- May 11: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Elimination Match 1\*
- May 18: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Elimination Match 2\*
- May 25: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Elimination Match 3\*
- June 1: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Semifinal Match 1\*
- June 8: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship: Semifinal Match 2\*

\* All General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship events were held on Orange, Sante Fe, Rodman Reservoir, Lachloosa Lakes (FL)

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PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

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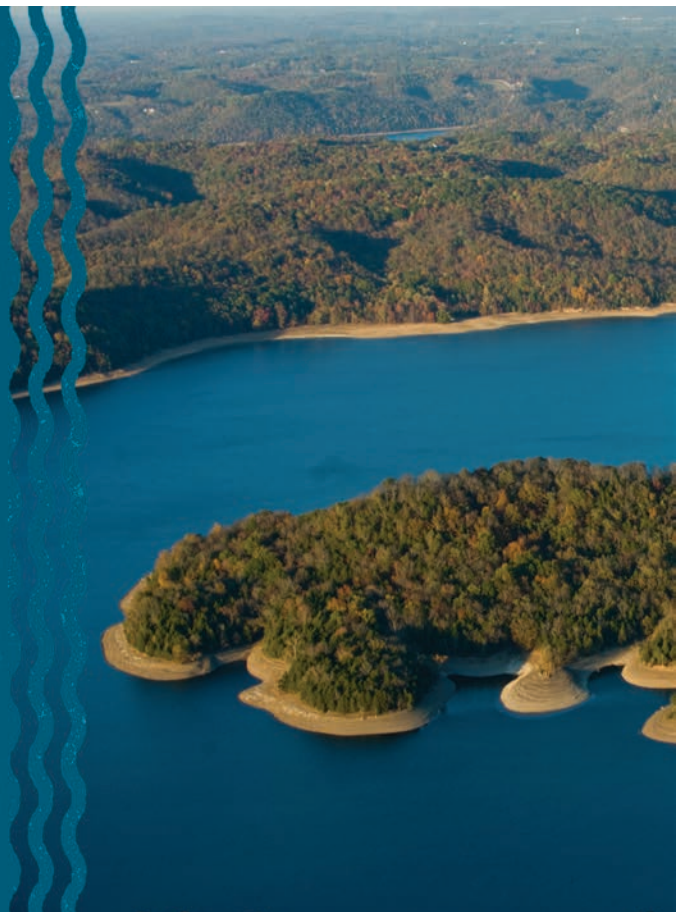
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## TECH MANAGEMENT IS A REQUIRED SKILL IN TODAY'S BASS TOURNAMENT WORLD



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a freelance writer and photographer, **Rob Newell** has been reporting on fishing tournaments for more than 20 years, finding the stories between fish and angler to be a stretched line of triumph, heartache, torture and inspiration.

**W**hen I first started bass fishing 30 years ago, the only thing I “managed” from a technology standpoint was a “smart” charger that I clamped to a 12-volt trolling motor battery after fishing. Yes, just a single 12-volt battery for a 12-volt, hand-controlled trolling motor.

When I watch the best pros on the water these days, I’m stunned at the sheer amount of technology they must manage on a daily basis. I would estimate that pros in the modern era spend almost as much time managing technology as they do actually fishing.

Logic would reason that someone who fishes for a living would not need near the technological skills as someone who works, let’s say, in the computer science field. But at this point in the game, I might beg to differ. The mental aptitude required to keep tabs on all the technology pulsing through a bass boat in the top tours is substantially more demanding than it was 20 years ago.

### NO SIMPLE SONAR

Let’s start with sonar. Don’t worry, this is not a forward-facing sonar topic, but rather the unspoken array of power and

network infrastructure you must install and manage to bring various kinds of sonar into clear view.

This first requires the installation of “clean power.” In the simplest form, clean power means each unit and sonar module box gets its own dedicated power from a battery – no sharing power wires among units, or with navigation lights or trim switches. To make this easier, fuse/power blocks can be run from the battery up to the console or bow. These power blocks provide individual terminals and fuse slots for up to three or four units. Then

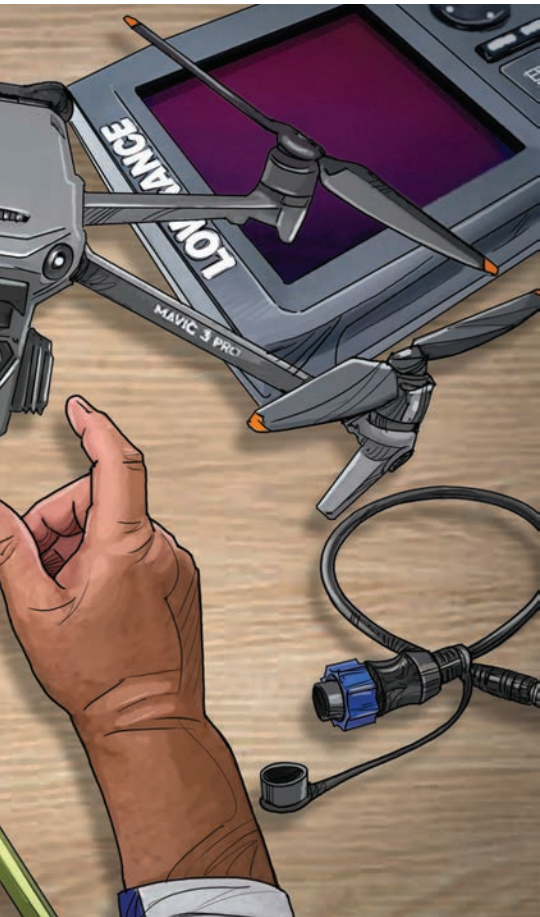


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

the sonar module box and perhaps a “network box” must be connected to each unit as well.

Did I mention the multiple transducer cables that must also be run neatly down the trolling motor shaft? Some pros actually run another pole or “turret” to attach extra transducers. Those cables must find their way to the units, too. Also, that 36-volt trolling motor is going to need some juice as well.

When it’s all said and done, there might be as many as 10 to 15 wires/cables running up through the bow cover. Some of these units require so much power, pros have gone to a dedicated battery for their electronics only. That brings the sum total of power supply to a cranking battery, a couple of trolling motor batteries and a battery for the electronics. Looks like a bigger charger might be in the cards as well, but you get the idea.

Basically, with just electronics alone, an angler is managing enough power

and network connections to keep a small town up and running.

In all, it’s a symphony of cords, boxes, units and batteries. With that comes the obligation to know the locations, functions, directions and connections of this conglomerate in order to troubleshoot it should something fail.

Most pros either rig these components themselves or are a close witness to how marine rigging shops do it. Some even take the extra time to label every single wire with a professional label maker so they know exactly what they’re dealing with in the heat of battle. Issues with these complex setups are usually something minor – a loose connection, a kinked wire – so knowing the blueprint to the whole system can produce a quick fix.

### THE INFORMATION FLOW

Once this sophisticated symphony is in synch, pros then must fine tune their electronics through a myriad of settings and screen configurations that fit their need for information flow from the units.

One of those information flows will be dedicated to mapping. Digital mapping is a huge part of the competitive fishing equation. Electronic and mapping companies procure their own mapping SD cards for major tournament lakes. Depending on the lake, some brands of cards will differ from others in terms of detail.

The solution, of course, is to own a couple different mapping SD cards for each lake. However, mapping does not end there. With each tournament, pros initiate hundreds of individual waypoints. A single season of touring can generate a thousand or more waypoints. Five years of touring can generate 6,000 to 8,000 waypoints. Keep accumulating all those waypoints into new units year after year and it can make for a tremendous juggernaut of unruly waypoints eating up memory in units.

Mapping and waypoint management alone is a part-time job for fulltime pros. While it could be argued that waypoint management is not really technology management, I will add that companies also have mapping and waypoint management software for laptops and

mobile devices that allow pros to organize their waypoints into individual files and onto SD cards. Hence, some pros dedicate entire SD cards to specific lakes. This leads to dozens of mapping and waypoints cards finding their way into SD card organizers, each neatly labeled for quick reference.

### LIGHTS, CAMERAS, ACTION!

Tech management, however, does not stop there. These days pros are required to run their own POV cameras in accordance with the rules of tournament trails. In addition, pro anglers have also become self-producers of their video efforts for YouTube and social media. This leads to an entirely different realm of technology management where multiple POV cameras are used to capture content during a day of fishing.

These cameras require plenty of TLC throughout the day in terms of powering and positioning for the best footage. This yields hours of content that must be gathered, labeled, edited and rendered. Bring in more SD cards and hard drives!

Finally, as if there isn’t enough on their tech plate already, now the onus of weighing fish and self-reporting weights is beginning to fall on anglers more as well. This is mostly for unofficial real-time leaderboards used in tournament reporting.

Thankfully, the BUBBA Smart Scale has made this chore as easy as possible. The BUBBA Scale is a digital weigh scale that also functions as a GPS, culling system and tournament scoring device when integrated with the BUBBA app on an angler’s phone. All this information is sent to a tournament administrator, who can keep up with a field of anglers’ weights and locations, rendering real-time scoring of the field.

But as easy as BUBBA scales make it, the angler must still initiate these inputs to get the ball rolling.

I’m not saying you need to be a graduate of MIT to be a professional angler these days. However, I think most true technology managers in any field would be surprised by the sheer amount of technology management that goes into a day of bass fishing for the top pros in the sport. ■

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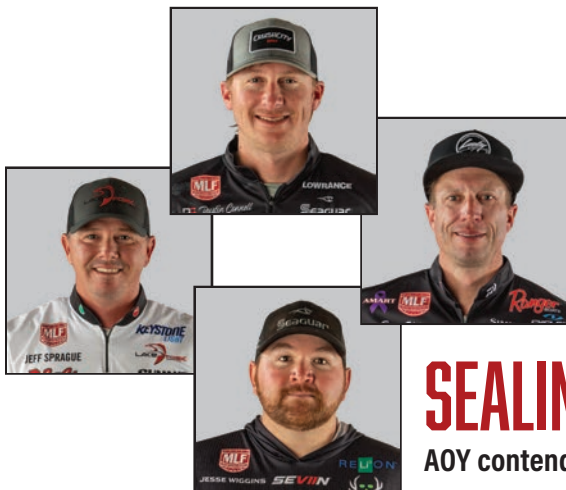
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.



# SEALING THE DEAL

## AOY contenders' quest to get over the hump

**C**onsidered by the top pros to be the most coveted titles in fishing, Angler of the Year awards separate the best from the rest. The Top 5 in the Bass Pro Tour Fishing Clash AOY race seem to perpetually trade places, with Jacob Wheeler being a repeat winner and Ott DeFoe always in the mix. Newcomer Matt Becker squeaked out a win in the final minutes last season, achieving the rare rookie-year AOY season, and he looks like he'll have a real chance to defend his title in 2024.

But what about the near misses? Each season, we've watched a handful of other BPT pros - including some with multiple tournament wins - get close to AOY but not quite finish the job. What might it take for these guys to get over the hump?

### DUSTIN CONNELL: "AOY has never been on my radar"

In the five years of the Bass Pro Tour's existence, Alabama pro Dustin Connell has never placed outside the Top 15 in AOY standings. He finished eighth, sixth, 14th, 13th and 15th, respectively, from 2019 through 2023, and he won the first event of 2024. He holds the No. 4 spot as of this writing.

Connell's consistency is undeniable, yet the Angler of the Year trophy has eluded him so far in his young career. Fans will recall the 2022 season when Connell won three events but still couldn't overtake his "Ding Crew" partner Jacob Wheeler for AOY. But why not?

Mostly because Connell aims to win every tournament he fishes, regardless of where he stands in the points.



Dustin Connell got off to a strong start in his pursuit of the 2024 Fishing Clash AOY, winning Stage One on Toledo Bend.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

"I've made some goofy decisions," Connell freely admitted. "I try to 'Tin Cup' everything. Angler of the Year has never been on my radar, honestly. As long as I made REDCREST, I was trying to win (individual events). There's inherent risk involved in trying to win tournaments. And when you go for it, sometimes you risk too much."

Connell recalls several events over the past five seasons where he's gambled and made a big run late in the day rather than staying put and scratching out a few more keepers. While the "big risk/big reward" plan is admirable when the gamble pays off, exercising patience and adding to SCORETRACKER® is usually better for overall finishes and valuable AOY points.

Connell also admits that he's previously been resistant to consider fish

management in the Bass Pro Tour's "every-fish-counts" format, a nuance that Wheeler understands better than anybody in the business.

"I always want to make sure I make the Knockout Round," Connell said. "When it came to groups of fish, I didn't care if I have to burn through 'em. I'd catch all I could. I'm starting to rethink that. Jacob teeters on the cut line (through the early rounds), but just look at how his fishing's evolved. You're not going to see him make a 50-mile run to try and find a gold mine."

Connell plans to modify his approach beginning this season.

"To win AOY, you need to fish for AOY," he admitted. "I never did that previously. I always figured that, if I won two or three tournaments in a year, I'd

win Angler of the Year. This is one thing I have left to do (in this sport), and I'm looking at AOY very seriously now. I'm more stable as a fisherman, and I've realized that sometimes you can't go for it. You just risk way too much."

## BRENT EHRLER:

### Still striving for the ultimate prize

With 11 Top-10 AOY finishes over the course of his 19-year career, California pro Brent Ehrler has been on a dogged chase for what he considers "the ultimate thing to win." No stranger to close calls, Ehrler once missed the FLW Tour AOY crown by a single point.

His reasoning for the lack of an AOY trophy on his mantle is simple: "I haven't been able to link all the events together. I always have one or two bombs."

Ehrler blames those small flashes of inconsistency on an overlooked – and often misunderstood – variable of a quality that's typically very beneficial to a high-level pro.

"I became a very versatile fisherman, and most of the better guys are that way these days," Ehrler said. "But (versatility) can be both a blessing and a curse. It can lead to getting spun out, trying a bunch of baits and techniques, and still never finding the fish. When I hit the panic button, I try to do too many things. Guys are more productive doing one thing confidently."

This season on the Bass Pro Tour, Ehrler plans to take a bit of his own advice and work on fine-tuning his strengths.



Brent Ehrler has come close but never taken home an AOY trophy.

PHOTO BY COBI PELLERITO

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



After finishing sixth in the AOY race two years in a row, Jesse Wiggins has kicked off the 2024 campaign with consecutive Top-10 finishes.

## JESSE WIGGINS:

### "I know AOY is possible"

Alabama pro Jesse Wiggins started his Bass Pro Tour career with 51st- and 68th-place AOY finishes in 2019 and 2020 but has since blossomed into a legitimate Angler of the Year threat, finishing 13th in 2021 and then reeling off two straight sixth-place finishes in 2022 and 2023. He's back in the hunt in 2024, too: As of this writing, Wiggins is second in the Fishing Clash AOY standings with 150 pounds, trailing only Wheeler (157).

Wiggins freely admits that he started his tour-level career in 2017 just hoping to survive. He turned his attention to what he considers "the number-one trophy in fishing" after a stout 2021 campaign, in which he finished in the Top 20 in three of the season's final four events.

"The year I finished 13th (in AOY), I had a few bad tournaments," Wiggins said. "That's when it dawned on me that, if I can aim for a Top 10 every time, AOY is possible."

Wiggins never considered himself a particularly consistent finisher, but a notable change in his day-to-day tournament strategy has seemingly paid off. A trio of wins in the Bassmaster Opens in 2016 and 2017 gave Wiggins the financial stability to begin "swinging for the fences," a change in his approach that's produced a win (at Lake of the Ozarks in 2022) and a slew of Championship Round appearances on the BPT.

"You have to set your mind to winning tournaments," Wiggins said. "I guarantee that these big-name guys out here – the ones that are winning tournaments – are not just fishing for paychecks."

Wiggins has determined that he has to locate multiple schools of fish in each fishery in order to contend for a win, and those fish are often relating to different patterns. Finding multiple fishing areas is the secret sauce.

"That's more key than using new methods," Wiggins said. "I used to stick in one area, now I move around more. You have to get yourself in a position to get lucky. If I go in my primary area on the first day of a tournament and don't catch 'em, I'm not going back there thinking I can somehow grind it out. I see guys that do that, and it never works out. There are always more areas where fish are biting."

Equally comfortable fishing both shallow and deep, Wiggins admits that lure selection plays an additional part in his strategy (and is a key to winning in general).

"I determine what (technique) the tournament is going to be won on, and (fish that technique) first," he said. "If you look at the other top-performing guys like Wheeler and Alton (Jones) Jr., they're always doing what wins the tournament, even if they don't win. That way, you don't have to second-guess your technique. Besides, you can always fall back on your strengths if it doesn't work out."

**JEFF SPRAGUE:**

**Adding a new weapon for AOY hunt**

Close followers of the Bass Pro Tour have probably expected Jeff Sprague to win the Fishing Clash AOY since he finished second to Edwin Evers in the league's inaugural season in 2019. The AOY hardware has narrowly evaded Sprague so far, though, to the tune of four Top 10s in five years.

"I'd like to say there's something I can put my finger on, but I can't," Sprague said. "I would love to win AOY, more than anything."

Sprague says that fisheries in transition make up a stout percentage of the Bass Pro Tour schedule, and that it's necessary to stay fluid on the water, admitting that a high-speed style is the only way he's ever fished. That pace has earned Sprague one of the most consistent places in the Top 10, but the Texas pro sometimes wonders if it has also cost him.

"I cover so much water that I find fish in pods, and sometimes I leave fish that maybe I shouldn't (to go to other



Jeff Sprague hopes mastering forward-facing sonar can help him finally get over the AOY hump.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

schools)," he admitted. "Maybe I should just buckle down more. I've (also) had several times where I decided I wasn't going to fish around a lot of other boats. I left places that I should have stayed with, and it cost me."

Sprague plans to stay the course with his high-speed style. Still, a recent technique modification may finally bring AOY to reality.

"I spent the entire offseason utilizing forward-facing sonar," Sprague confirmed. "If (Angler of the Year) is meant to happen, it will. Until then, it's still one fish at a time, cast by cast."

While Wheeler, DeFoe and Becker will likely occupy spots near the top of the 2024 Fishing Clash Angler of the Year standings, the odds are that Sprague, Wiggins, Connell or Ehrler will also make a run at the title. Will their altered mindsets pay off, or does the final AOY outcome rely a bit on luck? We're still months away from learning the outcome; until then, sit back and enjoy watching the drama unfold. ■

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## THE WEIGHTING GAME

Subtle shifts in weight can make big differences in bait performance



### 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.

**I**f I mention weight, what comes to mind? First might be the dreaded number on your scale (apologies!). So, I'll specify. What do you think about weight in terms of fishing?

More than likely, you picture the extraordinarily heavy box of lead and tungsten you bring along any time you go fishing: your bullet weights, drop-shot weights, nail weights and various cousins, all coming in a variety of weight increments and materials.

Yet, while we often think about and put a lot of emphasis on actual weights, there's another weight/fishing connection that can often get overlooked. It's one I was reminded of the other day.

I was tossing around the Berkley Nesses 9, playing with cadences and seeing how I could get it to dance, glide and swim. I was impressed, but being the tinkerer at heart that I am, I wanted to

see if I could get it to do more. So, I initially tried inserting nail weights. Then, I beefed up the hook, replacing the stock hook and swivel with an O-ring and giant musky hook.

Now THAT made a difference! Both good and bad.

The good: The added weight of the beefier hook not only allowed the bait to get deeper, but also gave me even more control over the action, acting as a better keel. However, while I lined up the hook size to still perfectly fit in the belly slot of the lure, the keeper that comes on the Nesses didn't really work with the bigger hook. Thus, every so often, the hook would pop out of the belly slot during the cast or retrieve, and the action would go from "my-god-this-thing-looks-insanely-real" to "my-god-a-pinecone-has-more-action."



PHOTO BY BRANDON HOWMAN

Mind you, that is not a knock on the Nessie. Big fan here. More so, it illustrates the importance of proper weighting for your lures beyond selecting the right sinker from your weight box. Because while we love to pore over the shapes and colors of baits, it's weighting that often represents the unseen difference in what makes one lure great and another not.

## WEIGHTING WINNERS

Look no further than the Keitech Swing Impact FAT for a shining example of the power of weighting.

Paddle-tail swimbaits have been around for decades with little extra thought about them. Then Keitech comes out with this lure, and suddenly everyone is throwing it. Why? Because it swam better at slower speeds than any other swimbait out there, especially on an Alabama rig. And why did it swim better? In part, shape; but even more so, weight.

You see, Keitech uses a dual-injection process that allows it to put heavier, denser plastic (aka plastic with more salt) in the bait's belly than what is on the top. This belly weighting creates a natural keel to allow the tail to kick more freely, which is why no matter how many lures look identical to it, the Keitech will always swim differently.

Same could be said for the Yamamoto Senko.

For years, people have been trying to replicate the shimmy and fall of a Senko, with no one really being able to get it as perfect as this bait. Why? Well, sources have told me that Yamamoto uses something a little different than most to increase the density of its soft plastic. Thus, while other baits may perfectly replicate the shape or softness of the plastic, the weighting inside a Senko is different, which creates the special action.

These are just a couple among countless examples of how weighting

plays a bigger role in your lures than you may realize.

Designing a crankbait means a mind-boggling number of adjustments to get the weighting just right in order to get a desired action.

## OTHER WEIGHTY ISSUES

Glide baits have come a long way, with some pretty remarkable mass-produced versions on the market today. And yet, people still shell out a lot of money for Roman Made glide baits, because when the wood and weight are balanced just right, the action is almost too beautiful to comprehend. On the flip side, we all know some glide baits that don't glide hardly at all because the weighting is off.

And these are just examples when the weight is static. Sometimes the weight's ability to move makes a difference, like with the Megabass Ito Vision 110. The bait's internal casting system was the first to really allow an angler to make a decent cast with a suspending jerkbait, but those moving weights also add extra shimmy and action, even while at rest.

Sticking with jerkbaits, many pros will actually keep lead golfer's tape in their boats. This allows them to stick extra weight on the belly of a bait to get it to run a little deeper, dart a little harder or suspend better in different water temperatures.

Which brings me back to my fun with the Nessie. You see, one of the simplest and most effective things you can do to enhance (or mess up) the action on a lure is swap out the hooks. Beefing up the gauge or size of a hook – or, vice versa, downsizing – can have a dramatic effect on a lure, as you're actually changing the weight of it.

For walking topwaters, upsizing the back hook can add more weight and even more side-to-side motion. On suspending jerkbaits, try swapping just the middle hook for a heavier gauge, and you might be surprised how the action gets far more erratic, or the bait sinks a little. And as for the Nessie, the bigger hook definitely enhanced the action ... and killed it when it wasn't in the right place.

Weight wisely. ■

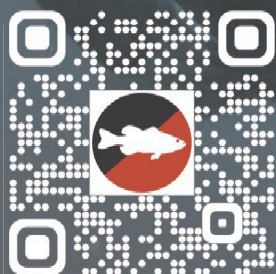
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REDCREST 2024 champion Dustin Connell shows off one of the 28 spotted bass that solidified his emphatic win on Lay Lake.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



With this triumphant hoist of the REDCREST trophy, Dustin Connell became the first angler to win the Bass Pro Tour Championship twice.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

## Alabama native claimed sixth Bass Pro Tour trophy, became first repeat REDCREST champion

By Mitchell Forde

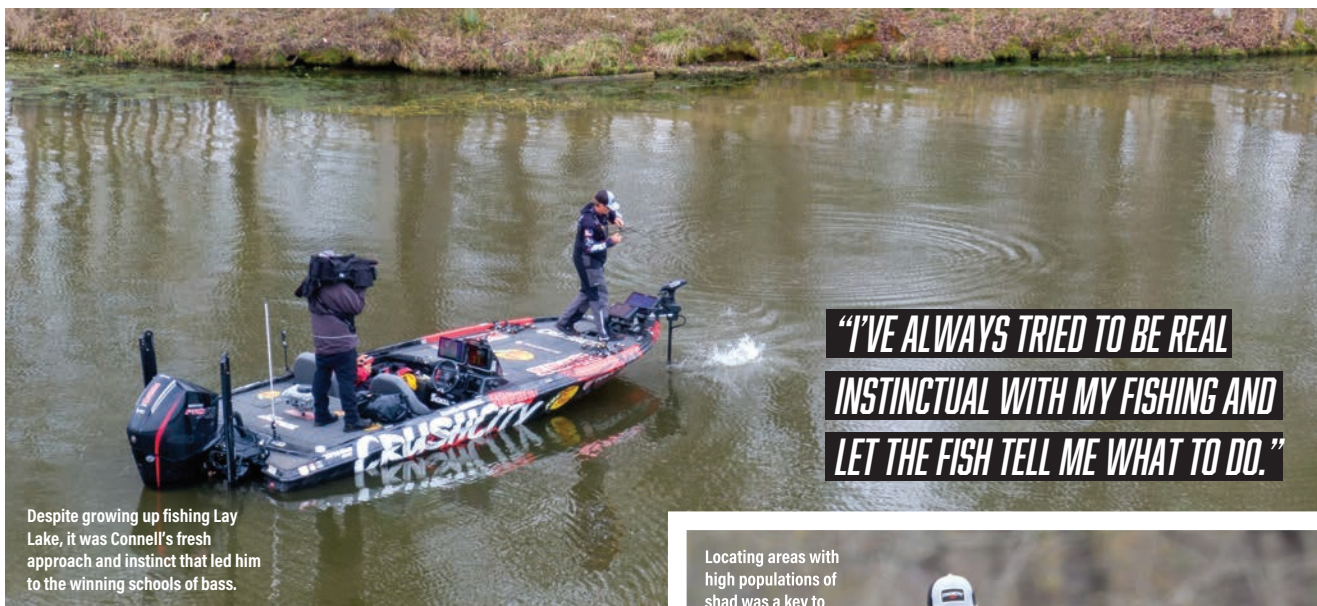
**BIRMINGHAM, Ala.** — As he waited for the final few minutes to tick by before his crowning moment officially arrived, Dustin Connell's mind drifted more than 20 years but just a few miles away. Twelve or 13 years old, Connell and his brother, James, launched their aluminum boat at Flatlands ramp on the lower end of Lay Lake and tied it to a piling with the number 5 on it (yes, he still remembers the number.) The two cast walking topwaters to schooling spotted bass, awed by the ferocious blow-ups.

For more than a week, Connell had tried to stifle such thoughts, to avoid dwelling on the memories that greeted him as traversed the Coosa River impoundment during Bass Pro Shops REDCREST Powered by OPTIMA Lithium from March 14-17. But by the last 10 minutes of the Championship Round, even Connell acknowledged that the 30-plus-pound lead he'd amassed over his nearest competitor was insurmountable. Tears flowed as he absorbed the moment, appreciating his journey from the kid in the aluminum boat to the first ever two-time winner of Major League Fishing's championship event.

"That lake is very sentimental to me — the whole Coosa River system," he said. "I grew up fishing that way, fishing those lakes and catching those big spotted bass, and it just meant a lot to win it."

***"BUT NOT ONLY DID HE MAKE HISTORY AS THE FIRST TWO-TIME REDCREST WINNER, HE JOINED AN ELITE GROUP IN TOURNAMENT ANGLING ANNALS."***

Connell's final day on Lay was one for the ages — 28 spotted bass for 83 pounds even, 30-14 clear of runner-up Alton Jones Jr. and more than 40 pounds ahead of third place. Prior to that, no angler had eclipsed 55 pounds in a day. He pulled it off largely by ignoring his previous success on the fishery, by incorporating the open-minded approach that has made him one of the most accomplished anglers on the Bass Pro Tour.



Despite growing up fishing Lay Lake, it was Connell's fresh approach and instinct that led him to the winning schools of bass.

**"I'VE ALWAYS TRIED TO BE REAL  
INSTINCTUAL WITH MY FISHING AND  
LET THE FISH TELL ME WHAT TO DO."**

But the fact that he earned the championship trophy and \$300,000 first-place prize on one of the fisheries where he'd fallen in love with the sport — with his wife, Victoria, James and other family and friends congregating at Beeswax Creek Park to wish him luck every morning and greet him each afternoon — made for Connell's new favorite Coosa River memory.

"I was a train wreck this morning at the boat ramp," he said with a chuckle. "I looked over and I saw my brother and my mom and all my family there. I was like, gosh, this is tough on me. I was walking through the boat ramp, and I was shook up. Because this lake means a lot to me.

"It wasn't my favorite, but now it is."

## SEARCHING FAR AND WIDE FOR THE WINNING FISH

During the nights leading up to REDCREST, Connell couldn't sleep. It wasn't so much that the Clanton, Alabama, native worried about living up to his billing as the pre-tournament favorite — although between his knowledge of the fishery and his recent track record, with five Bass Pro Tour wins in the past three years, he made for an overwhelming favorite.

But Connell recognized what a rare opportunity it would be to fish a championship-level event so close to home. Rarely in the year leading up to the tournament did a day pass without him thinking about his strategy. When he did so, all the different ways and places he'd caught Coosa River bass crowded his brain — an oft-cited reason for anglers struggling during competition on a home body of water.

Connell decided he'd be best served approaching the tournament with fresh eyes, not trying to replicate past success. With the lake's current and water clarity fluctuating daily and fish on the move for their prespawn-to-spawn transition, he made it a point to run all over the reservoir and try a variety of techniques, not only during the pre-tournament practice period but the two-day Qualifying Round.

"When I'm running down the river, I've caught 'em on so many different places, and I'm like, 'golly, I need to stop, I need to stop,'" Connell said. "But I told myself before I fished this tournament, I said, 'I'm going to fish this lake like I would

Locating areas with high populations of shad was a key to Connell's success on Lay Lake.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

any other one, not run off of history.' I wanted to fish it brand new. And I did all week. I did really, really good practicing and just trying to find new areas."

Connell caught most of his fish on Day 1 in what proved to be the most popular area on the 12,000-acre impoundment, a main-lake eddy where schools of spotted bass chased baitfish. But even as he loaded 38 pounds onto SCORETRACKER® and climbed well inside the 20th-place cut line, he knew he needed to find something new.

"I don't think this is going to win the tournament," he said following the first day. "I think it's going to fizzle out. But this is a good way to advance, and we're doing just that."

Needing just another scorable fish or two to advance to the Knockout Round, Connell spent Day 2 with a smorgasbord of rods scattered across his front deck, sampling a bit of everything — using a jighead minnow and forward-facing sonar to target suspended fish, swimming a jig through bank grass, rolling a spinnerbait alongside laydowns, picking apart

current seams with a scrounger. One of his stops took him into a bay near Lacoosa Marina, where he caught a 4-pounder. Seeing a healthy population of shad, he made a mental note of the spot.

But after weights zeroed overnight, Connell instead opted to start the Knockout Round up the river, in the tailrace below Logan Martin dam. For a while, it looked like the wrong decision. At noon, Connell found himself outside the Top 10 and below the elimination line. Meanwhile, several of the anglers plying the area where he'd caught his fish on Day 1 rocketed to the top of SCORETRACKER®.

Connell knew he needed to make a move. But, still believing there would be too much pressure in that area for the event to be won there, he stayed in the riverine portion of the

reservoir, running about 10 miles to a shoal that formed a current break. There, he caught 12 spotted bass for 36-3 using a Rapala CrushCity Freeloader on a scrounger head in about three hours, leaping from outside the Top 10 to first place.

"There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to get some bites here and there, but the speed at which I was going to get a bite was just slow," Connell said after the Knockout Round. "It was just dead. So, finally, I made a decision: I pulled the plug. ... I pulled up on a place and stomped 'em right off the rip."

## A CLUTCH CALL ON CHAMPIONSHIP DAY

On the eve of the Championship Round, as he drove from Lay Lake to the REDCREST Expo in Birmingham, Connell declared himself "all in on the river." Not only had he found a productive spot with no other competitors in sight, he relished the idea of winning the way he'd fished growing up, without using forward-facing sonar.

But the more Connell mulled it over, the more he realized that, while nostalgia urged him to return to the river, the morning success of those anglers chasing suspended fish on the main lake suggested they could stack up even heavier weights during the final-day shootout, when there'd be no reason to ease off the proverbial throttle.

When he arrived at the launch ramp Sunday morning, Connell still wasn't sure whether to run upriver or down the lake. He settled on a compromise of sorts, planning to start the day fishing the lower lake, then, if need be, returning to the current in the afternoon, when the bite had been better the previous two days.

Rapala CrushCity soft plastics were a big part of Connell's game plan at REDCREST 2024.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Dustin Connell works a hard-fighting spotted bass toward the boat during the Championship Round of REDCREST 2024.



**"ALL THE CLOUDS AND THE RAIN HAD ALL THE BAIT PUSHED UP, AND I SAID, 'IT'S ABOUT TO GO DOWN.' AND IT DID, BIG TIME."**

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

Connell started in his Day 1 spot, where half the anglers in the Championship Round field milled within sight of one another. But when all he could garner during the opening 30 minutes were short strikes, Connell realized that the school had finally scattered. And this time, it was an angler fishing below the Logan Martin dam, Ron Nelson, lighting up SCORETRACKER® to start the day.

Before committing to the 35-mile trek up the river, Connell decided to check a couple more offshore holes. The first got him on the board with a few scorable bass. When he arrived at the second — the bay where he'd caught the 4-pounder on Day 2 — he knew he'd found something special before even making a cast.

"I set the boat down, and I saw on my 2D (sonar) immediately, there was just a wall of shad right there," Connell said. "And I said, 'oh boy.' And all the clouds and the rain had all the bait pushed up, and I said, 'It's about to go down.' And it did, big time."

Connell started the second period 6-7 behind Nelson. It took him all of 12 minutes to erase that deficit with consecutive 4-pounders. Over the next hour, he seemed to reel fish in at will, boating eight more weighing 31-2, each addition further deflating his competition.

In all, Connell piled on 41-12 during Period 2. That extended his total to 63-2 and his lead to more than 20 pounds, all but cementing his victory. He caught all that weight on a Mooch Minnow — a new, soft-plastic bait from CrushCity set to be unveiled at ICAST this summer — affixed to a 3/16-ounce VMC jighead.

"I didn't plan on this happening," Connell said. "It was just a collision with those big spots. And it was one of the funnest days I've ever had on Lay Lake. Magical day."

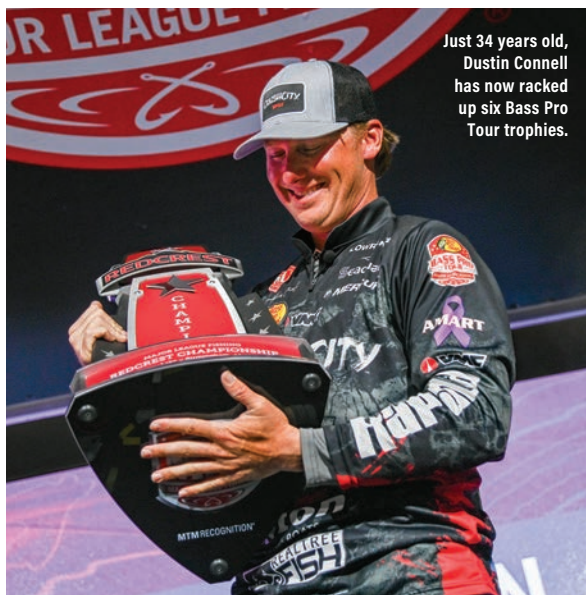
## A SPECIAL ADDITION TO A FAST-GROWING TROPHY COLLECTION

While he's never won a tournament there before, Connell had caught fish from his winning spot in the past. Thousands of hours spent on Lay prompted him to check it out during the Qualifying Round, just like his experience helped him know how the lake's baitfish and bass would behave amid the changing conditions and the best ways to trigger the latter into biting.



Dustin Connell celebrates his second REDCREST win with family and friends in Birmingham, Alabama.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



Just 34 years old, Dustin Connell has now racked up six Bass Pro Tour trophies.

PHOTO BY GARRICK OXON

But it wasn't his local knowledge nearly as much as his intuitive approach and savvy strategy that produced Connell's final-day domination. He embraces a "fish to win" mindset, focusing on finding the winning fish during an event rather than just getting to the Knockout or Championship Rounds. He's also unafraid to buck the old fishing axiom "never leave fish to find fish" if he believes he can find more fish.

That approach has become Connell's biggest strength — the reason he's not just bested but buried the rest of the Top 10 in two of the first three events of 2024 and worked his way onto a short list of the most accomplished tournament anglers ever.

"I've always tried to be real instinctual with my fishing and let the fish tell me what to do," he said. "I don't try to force stuff. I know they're biting somewhere, and I move around a lot. And when I move around a lot, I know what I'm looking for, and when I find the right recipe, then I'll settle. So, it's all about making good decisions."

In the minutes after his REDCREST triumph became official, Connell had no interest in talking about his place among bass fishing's all-time greats. He still gets starstruck when he sees the likes of Kevin VanDam and

Edwin Evers at tournaments, he said. It's easier to think of himself as the 12-year-old kid in the aluminum boat than one of their peers.

Age 34 now, Connell's list of career accolades is far from written. But not only did he make history as the first two-time REDCREST winner, he joined an elite group in tournament angling annals. Connell is now one of eight pros all time — along with two of his heroes, VanDam and Evers — to win multiple national-tour championships and at least seven total tour events.

Given the rate at which he's won lately (five victories in his past 21 events), it seems a safe bet that Connell will continue to climb the all-time list. But no matter how many trophies he accumulates, earning one on Lay Lake and hoisting it in front of family and friends will always hold special meaning.

"It's been a dream for me," he said. "I live my dream every day. ... And it's just all the support, that's what helps me. My wife, my family being there this morning, it just means a lot to me."



Alton Jones Jr. cruised into a second-place finish with 52-3 on Day 4 of REDCREST 2024.



## THE BEST OF THE REST OF REDCREST

By Mitchell Forde

**I**n hindsight, it almost seems inevitable that Dustin Connell would prevail on Lay Lake. But while the final results make it look like he cruised to victory, a handful of anglers appeared positioned to nab the championship trophy at various points during REDCREST. Look no further than the Knockout Round for proof, when eight competitors finished within 10-2 of Connell's total, just about all of them occupying the top spot on SCORETRACKER® at some point during the day.

While chasing suspended spotted bass with forward-facing sonar proved to be the dominant pattern, it was far from the only way to contend. Current, spawning fish and traditional, shallow power techniques all contributed to Top-10 finishes. Here's a rundown of how the rest of the Championship Round field got there.

### 2<sup>ND</sup> ALTON JONES JR. – 52-2 (19)

While Connell became the first ever two-time REDCREST champion, Jones earned the bitter-sweet distinction of being the first multi-time runner-up, finishing second for the second year in a row. After finding practice challenging and trying to start the event shallow before eventually committing to using forward-facing sonar offshore, he was happy with the result.

Jones used a 5-inch Deps Sakamata Shad for aggressive fish and a 4-inch Geecrack Revival Shad for those that needed more coaxing, rigging both on 1/8-ounce Owner Range Roller jigheads. Patrolling a different area than everyone else, slightly farther up the lake and on the other side of the main channel, he seemed to figure out the fish a bit better every day.

"They changed a little bit every day based on the current," he said. "The first day, they were tucked closer to the bank and became more spread out later in the event. You

had to keep scanning around to find them, and it also seemed like they were grouped by size. If you were catching smaller fish, you had to move around a little to find groups of better quality fish."

### 3<sup>RD</sup> RON NELSON – 39-9 (12)

Aside from brief stints on the first morning and final afternoon, Nelson spent the entire event dissecting the turbulent tailrace below Logan Martin Dam. His sweet spot (when he could get to it, as Ryan Salzman and a few local anglers also fished there) was right next to the concrete wall separating the spillway from the generators.

Rotating between various Z-Man Evergreen JackHammer ChatterBaits and Keitech Swing Impact FAT swimbaits, Nelson got bites in flurries, with afternoons being the most productive. In addition to largemouth and spotted bass, he caught just about every other species that lives in Lay: drum, striped bass, white bass, catfish and more.

"I'd cast up there with the JackHammer and fish it erratically to get the most aggressive fish first," Nelson said. "I'd make some casts up close to the wall and then slide parallel and pitch to the eddies with the swimbait, because the fish were stacked top to bottom. I was using a Strike King Squadron Swimbait Head because it has a stouter hook, and you could give them the meat with 20-pound Sunline FC Sniper fluorocarbon."

### 4<sup>TH</sup> TAKAHIRO OMORI – 36-11 (13)

Omori took a simple approach to the changing fishery. He spent virtually the entire event with just two rods on his front deck, both casting setups with vibrating jigs. His bait of choice was a 3/8-ounce JackHammer ChatterBait with a 5-inch Z-Man DieZel MinnowZ trailer, either in white or a gaudy chartreuse.

Putting on a casting clinic, Omori fished his vibrating jigs around whatever bank-related cover he could find in pockets of Waxahatchee Creek.

"I was beating the bank and fishing shallow cover in 1 to 5 feet of water," Omori said. "It was all for prespawn and spawning largemouth, and I caught them on stumps, lay-downs, grass and docks. The key was fishing my instincts and experience."

### 5<sup>TH</sup> JESSE WIGGINS – 32-8 (12)

Another angler who found his comfort zone, Wiggins caught Lay Lake's spotted bass the same way he does around the spawn on his native Smith Lake. Wiggins started each morning fish-



ing a current outflow with a 2.8-inch Jackall Rhythm Wave swimbait on a darter head and a Jackall Flick Shake worm on a 3/16-ounce shaky head. He then ran banks where spots were bedding, dragging the shaky head to catch them.

"I never caught a single bass during the tournament with my ActiveTarget, just one scorable in practice," Wiggins said. "I had two things going: A morning bite in the river on a pipe with water running out of it, and the rest of the time, it was fishing for spawning spotted bass in the Paint Creek area. They were spawning on 45-degree banks out of the current."

While Wiggins has tasted victory before on the Bass Pro Tour, at Lake of the Ozarks in 2022, a return to the winners' circle seems like only a matter of time. His best ever REDCREST finish marked his fifth straight Top 10 dating back to last year.

## 6TH JACOB WHEELER – 29-13 (11)

As always, Wheeler gave himself a chance on the final day. He's now finished in the Top 10 at four consecutive REDCRESTs and an astounding 30 times in 44 total Bass Pro Tour events. But he'll have to wait at least one more year to add a REDCREST trophy to his seven BPT wins and two Fishing Clash Angler of the Year titles.

Wheeler primarily chased schooling spotted bass with a Rapala CruschCity Freeloader and Mooch Minnow, scanning three different mile-long stretches where the baitfish and bass would move around. He mixed in a bit of sight fishing, too.

"The water clarity and current flow changed every day, and the fish moved, of course, so you had to relocate them within those areas," he said of his offshore fish. "The main deal was finding where the baitfish were each day."



## 7TH GERALD SPOHRER – 29-9 (11)

Spoher notched his first Top 10 since 2021 with a unique pattern. Starting the event among the forward-facing sonar crowd, he ran upriver to escape the pressure and ended up cycling between a few spots that featured flats adjacent to drop-offs.

Spoher's primary tool was a 1/2-ounce Nomad Design Swimtrex Max lipless crankbait in the red craw color. He also rotated through a handful of other baits, including a Missile Baits Spunk Shad on a jighead.

"That's a special bait for spotted bass because it's small and compact for its weight with a lot of vibration, almost like a vibrating jig," he said of the Swimtrex Max. "I focused on small flats with direct impact from the current and would fish it on top of the flats or the sides. I also had one island head where I could catch them quickly and then explore more areas if I felt I was safe on SCORETRACKER®."



## 8TH COLE FLOYD – 25-5 (10)

Floyd kept his approach simple, riding one bait to the Championship Round in his REDCREST debut. One of several anglers chasing schooling fish in the same main-lake zone, Floyd used a Strike King Baby Z-Too in blue glimmer on either 3/16- or 1/4-ounce jigheads to catch all his weight.

"It was a one-rod deal," he said. "I was targeting those spotted bass at the mouths of creeks. That section of the lake had tons of baitfish, and the bass were congregated everywhere, feeding up before the spawn."



## 9TH NICK HATFIELD – 24-2 (9)

Another REDCREST rookie, Hatfield narrowly snuck into the Championship Round, nudging Emil Wagner by 1-8 for 10th place in the Knockout Round. He, too, leaned on the popular main-lake eddy where schools of bass chased shad.

While Hatfield caught a few fish on a Neko rig, his primary tool was a jighead minnow — either a Scottsboro Tackle Co. Sniper Shad or a Strike King Baby Z-Too, both of which he affixed to Hellfire Finesse Swimbait Heads from Scottsboro. Hatfield was one of several anglers who noted that, while bottom depth didn't matter, the bass seemed to suspend unusually close to the surface.

"All week, I never caught one down deeper than around 12 feet of water, but the boat was always in 20, 40 or 60 feet," he said. "The main deal was following around the bass and baitfish."



## 10TH MICHAEL NEAL – 18-1 (7)

While Neal never got on track on the final day, he represented the biggest threat to Connell for most of the event. Fishing the community area on the lower end of the main lake with a Big Bite Baits Scentsation Slim Minnow on a Big Bite Baits Swimmer Head, Neal appeared better in tune with the fish than anyone else. He stacked up 52-9 on Day 1 and 42-0 in the first two periods of the Knockout Round before switching to practice mode.

Neal believes it was a combination of a current change and fishing pressure that caused the bite to shut down during the Championship Round.

"In practice, the baitfish were very concentrated because of the current, but it got less and less as the week went on," said Neal. "The fish also got pressured so much that they were terrified of your bait the last day. Instead of going towards it to look at it, they'd swim away the other way as fast as they could." ■



**"THE MAIN DEAL WAS FINDING WHERE THE BAITFISH WERE EACH DAY" – JACOB WHEELER**

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## BEST BAITS FOR

# Forward-Facing Sonar:



## MID STROLLING

Utilizing a lightly weighted swimbait head with a soft-plastic jerkbait or finesse swimbait, mid strolling allows anglers to maintain control of the bait's position and entice fish with a naturalized, horizontal presentation.



## HOVER STROLLING

Around light-feeding, seasoned bass, there's no substitute for the effectiveness of hover strolling. Pair your favorite finesse plastic with a light-wire 90-degree hook and a touch of weight, and the most discerning predators will let their guard down.



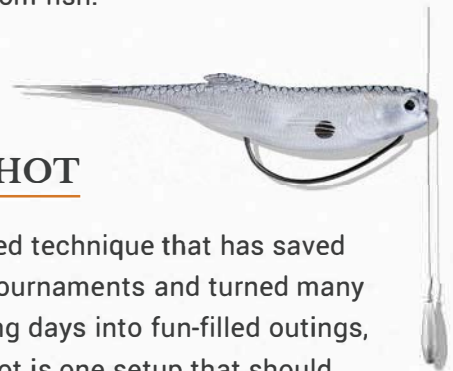
## JERKBAIT

A tried-and-true baitfish imitation, the jerkbait becomes lethal when paired with forward-facing technology. The erratic action of a jerkbait allows anglers to gauge fish reaction in real time and adjust their cadence, pauses, and retrieve speed to match the mood of fish.



## GLIDE BAIT

The large, oversized profile of glide baits make them ideal for targeting fish on forward-facing sonar for two reasons: They produce an easy-to-read return on your graph, and their drawing power is second-to-none, making it easy to illicit a response from fish.



## DROP SHOT

A time-tested technique that has saved countless tournaments and turned many rough fishing days into fun-filled outings, the drop shot is one setup that should never leave the rod locker. When fishing vertically with live sonar, the drop shot's non-invasive yet lifelike appeal is lethal around hungry bass.



## UMBRELLA RIG

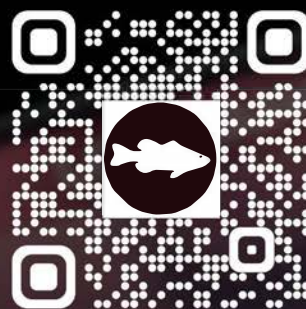
Like a cheat code for bass fishing, the umbrella rig is a powerful tool by itself. Pair it with forward-facing sonar, and you have a killer combo that will give any angler a leg up on the competition, especially when dealing with stubborn, suspended bass.

# FORWARD-FACING SONAR

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Whether you love it or hate it, forward-facing sonar continues to take hold of the bass fishing industry as manufacturers rush to improve live sonar technology and make lures specifically designed to enhance returns, making them easier to track for increased precision. Beyond the ability to quickly locate fish, forward-facing sonar unlocks new ways of fishing, helps anglers easily identify sweet spots in offshore structure, and provides unique opportunities to cast at fish that you wouldn't have otherwise. In this article we have outlined some of our favorite lures to tempt fish with your forward-facing sonar!

Read our full article



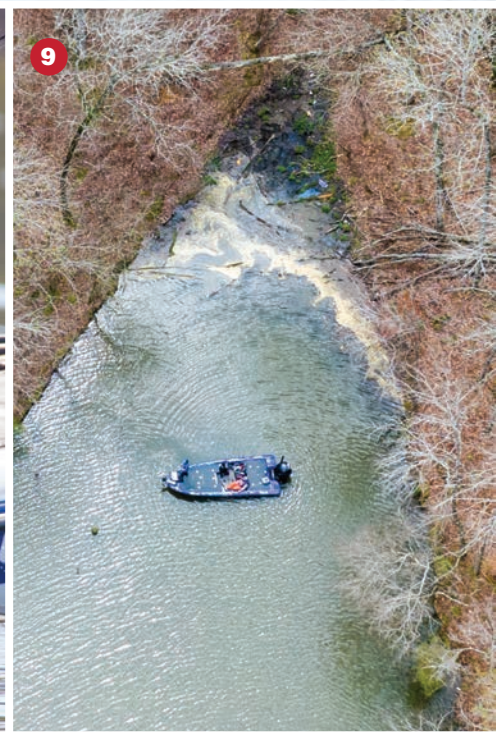
# BEST OF REDCREST

## ON THE WATER AT THE 2024 REDCREST COMPETITION ON LAY LAKE

PHOTOS BY GARRICK DIXON & PHOENIX MOORE



1. Lay Lake Aerial
2. Kevin VanDam
3. John Cox
4. Waiting for takeoff
5. Takahiro Omori
6. Jacob Wheeler
7. Takeoff
8. Anthony Gagliardi
9. Takahiro Omori
10. Dustin Connell





1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9

1. Keith Poche
2. Ron Nelson
3. Michael Neal
4. Emil Wagner
5. Dalton Head fan club
6. Dalton Head
7. Gerald Spohrer
8. Jesse Wiggins
9. Ryan Salzman
10. Cole Floyd



10

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# SMALL BAIT, BIG REWARDS!

Thanks to finesse trends, tackle refinements and forward-facing sonar discoveries, small lures have never been more powerful.

*By Mike Pehanich*



**B**

ig baits catch big fish. No question.

Yet a look at new lure types and prevailing techniques shows the bass world suddenly getting smaller. "Mini-Me" jerkbaits and crankbaits are doing yeoman's service. Ned-sized plastics are frontline players. Micro versions of popular baits — and even crappie jigs — are more frequently summoned for bass duty.

Downsized baits of all types are clearly in vogue, and the trend has little to do with fashion or a shrinking world. High-level tournament pros regard the downsizing trend as an outcome of intense fishing pressure. Innovations in tackle, technique and technology have accelerated its development and validated its effectiveness, all while expanding our understanding of bass behavior.

Of course, targeting bass with small — even panfish-sized baits — is nothing new. If you're old enough to recall Charlie Brewer and his do-nothing "Slider" grubs, you know the early history of small baits for bass. Northern smallmouth anglers have caught

cold-water giants on small hair jigs for generations. Quiet cells of Midwest and West Coast anglers counted coup on bass with 3-inch Reapers and the Jackall I-Motion and I-Shad. Then came the Ned rig.

Until recent years, however, small baits played a minimal role in most tournament angler arsenals. Often, they were relegated to specialty situations or dire-emergency service.

But, not so coincidentally, small baits have become mainstream as forward-facing sonar (FFS) has advanced and taken over the sport. Watching how bass — even big bass — respond to smaller baits has weakened any lingering resistance to spinning rods and downsized presentations.

Why fish small? Reasons abound!

## BITE-SIZED SNACKS

Simple science and plain logic lay at the foundation of the "small stuff" trend. Small forage in the form of baitfish, insects, tadpoles, small crustaceans and the fry and young of any fish that swims comprise an abundant food source that is readily available to bass and seldom far away.



## MATT STEFAN'S LITTLE NUGGETS

Matt Stefan likes to downsize when the bite gets tough. That's when he pulls out his "little nugget box." Inside are the new Berkley Finisher 5, Berkley's Frittside 5 Jr. crankbait, a 1/8-ounce buzzbait, 1/4-ounce spinnerbait and #0 and #1 Mepps inline spinners, as well as the following:



COLOR: HD BLACKNOSE SHINER

### BERKLEY POWERBAIT POWER SWITCH

The bait's pre-rigged, weight-forward design makes for fast fall and accurate placement. One of Berkley's new "FFS Optimized" creations designed to maximize control, the Power Switch offers bite-sized 1.75-, 2.5-, 3- and 3.5-inch offerings along with more standard 4.25- and 5-inch meals. "It matches a lot of baitfish species and has a fast, darting action that elicits a lot of strikes," says Stefan.



COLOR: BONE

### DON IOVINO SPLASH-IT

This compact, 2 1/4-inch popper with a feathered tail treble is a favorite when bass are corraling small baitfish at the surface.



COLOR: PURPLE SHINER

### BERKLEY GULP! MINNOW

Nothing new about this longtime cult favorite! With 1-inch, 1.5-inch and 3-inch options to choose from, it's a scent-rich, small bait that fish never seem to tire of. "I absolutely love it as a drop-shot bait," says Stefan, "especially on smallmouth fisheries."

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJIMA

## JOSH BERTRAND'S LITTLE BUDDIES



### BERKLEY SPY 70

"The 70 mm Spy is one of the smaller spybaits on the market, but it is heavily weighted and it casts well on spinning tackle," says Bertrand. "No bait has a more natural-looking shimmy. It's another small bait that works when others won't."

### BERKLEY FRITTSIDE 5 JR.

This 2-inch, 1/4-ounce, flatsided crankbait, delivered with BFS tackle, is a Bertrand favorite when bass are keying on young-of-the-year baitfish. The bait has balsa-like action and reaches depths of 2-5 feet.



COLOR: KENTUCKY BLUE

COLOR: STEALTH PERCH

COLOR: PINK PEARL

### BERKLEY POWERBAIT MAXSCENT LIL' GENERAL

This 2.75-inch half-worm bait has the added advantage of potent MaxScent attractant. Fish it Ned style or on a drop-shot.

COLOR: BABY BASS

### BERKLEY FINISHER

This FFS-optimized sinking jerkbait is available in three sizes (#5, #7, #9). "I can get it to sink down to the fish's suspended depth, but I can also fish it just sub-surface," says Bertrand. "The #7 is my go-to when bass are relatively active. But the #5 is a little killer when fish are on really small baitfish."

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

## "SO MANY SEASONS, I CATCH MY BIGGEST BASS ON MARABOU JIGS AND PANFISH BAITS."

"I'd say 90% of the fish key on smaller forage simply because it's easy to find and feed on," says Tristan McCormick, an MLF pro from Burns, Tennessee. "A lot of the time, I'm matching the baitfish they're feeding on."

Bass like the little stuff, too. Bass Pro Tour veteran Luke Clausen believes small forage comprise a big portion of bass' diet. It's easy for them to find and easier to eat. He recalls feeding aquarium bass at a tackle store. Those fish often ignored crawfish, but they scarfed up maggots immediately.

"For bass, all that small forage is like having bowls of M&Ms out there,"

says fellow Bass Pro Tour pro Matt Stefan. "I may not make a meal of them, but I'll grab a few if they're right there."

To buttress his claim, Stefan points to his 10th-place finish on Lake of the Ozarks in 2023, where he threw little trout-sized worms fished wacky style at beds and cruising fish.

Cory Schmidt, who brings a biologist's background to his Z-Man marketing role, believes bass anglers are largely unaware of how often bass feed on tiny forage in the 1 1/4-inch to 2-inch range.

"Insects, larvae, leeches, baby everything, even cannibalizing their own fry: All are part of a centrarchid (bass/sunfish family) diet," Schmidt says. "So many seasons, I catch my biggest bass on marabou jigs and panfish baits."

### MATCHING THE HATCH (LITERALLY)

Small baits excel year-round, but small forage is most abundant in the postspawn period, when clouds of fry from multiple species offer bass easy pickings. Most freshwater fish species

spawn in spring. Some, like bluegill, spread their spawn throughout the summer season.

"Most of our fish spawn in the spring, and lots of young of the year are swarming the water," Stefan says. "But you also have bass fry, and bass are chasing off anything trying to eat them for a period, so bass are paying more attention to smaller prey."

Though he regards prespawn, winter and fall as the times when small profile baits make their biggest impact, Jacob Wheeler likes a Ned rig with his newly designed Rapala CrushCity Ned BLT during the period of postspawn abundance.

"Bass don't always need a big meal," Wheeler says. "I've caught a lot of bass on small Ned baits during the postspawn, especially smallmouth and spots."

Josh Bertrand points to fall as prime time for small baits when small shad hatched in spring reach inch to inch-plus length.

"That's when I pull out the Berkley Frittside, Jr. crankbait," says the Bass Pro Tour pro from Queen Creek,

Arizona. "Shallow cranking in the fall is like peanut butter and jelly. When I am trying to match the smaller shad, I am quick to adjust to the junior if I'm not getting the bites I think I should."

Bertrand adds that "speed is your friend" when fishing small crankbaits and jerkbaits. Fish 'em fast, he advises. Don't give bass a chance to examine them.

Baitfish aren't the only itty-bitty critters available. Small bug and craw baits can be deadly when a major bug hatch is on or young crayfish are crawling. Wielding small topwater or subsurface baits during a mayfly hatch can ignite a hot bite when the entire bass population is ignoring conventional lures.

## FOOLING PRESSURED FISH

The consensus among pros is that a prime reason small baits have proven so effective in recent years is because of fishing pressure.

"We do a lot of downsizing out West for pressured fish, and in the East, too," Bertrand confirms. "When we have to generate bites, going to smaller baits really helps."

A tough smallmouth bite enlightened Clausen to the power of downsized baits more than 20 years ago.

"I faced a hard bite at Havasu one year," he recalls. "Caught all of my fish on crappie jigs. You can out-smart a fish better with small baits. They are harder to see."

That may be why bass seem not to get conditioned to soft plastics resembling abundant "snack" items.

"Bass don't get wise to little things," says Schmidt. "They just don't seem to get educated to small baits."

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

The "small stuff" trend has had no greater catalyst than forward-facing sonar. FFS

observations of bass trailing schools of small baitfish show that even big bass will reach into the popcorn bowl.

"Before, we assumed you needed big baits to get big fish," says Lucas Murphy, brand manager for Strike King. "We're seeing an influx of super-small-profile baits worked in conjunction with FFS and still catching big fish. Small baits like the 2.75-inch Rage Swimmer catch big fish. Even Mr. Crappie baits are taking tournament-quality fish."

Forward-facing sonar has given anglers confidence with baits they might not have even considered presenting to bass before.

"We can see how fish respond to a bait and how it's presented," says Kyle Peterson, bait designer for Pure Fishing. "Today, we can judge a bait not just by our catches but by how we see the fish react to it."

Historically, tournament anglers might have been reluctant to use valuable time casting a small bait, which could generate the occasional big strike but generally seemed to appeal to fish too small to make them money. Now, an angler experienced reading an FFS screen can get a real-time read on the size of his target.

"From a competitive standpoint, we need visual confirmation that we are not throwing little baits to little fish," Clausen says. "When you're fishing with FFS, you want to know what size fish you are casting to."

This spring, Berkley released a series of "FFS Optimized" lures. No surprise, among the new baits were a pair of offerings with miniature size options: the PowerBait Power Switch, a soft-plastic "hover" bait, and the Finisher, a hard bait that comes in 2- and 2 3/4-inch models.

## LUKE CLAUSEN'S



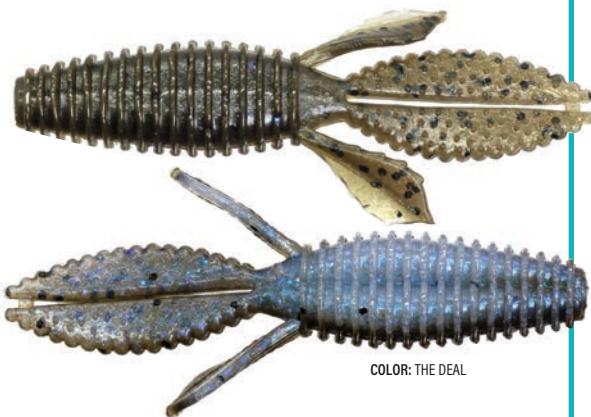
# MIGHTY MINIS!



COLOR: GOBY BRYANT

### Z-MAN NED TRD

Made from tough, buoyant, ElazTech material, this stubby worm swims horizontally in the water column and quivers tail up on a lake bottom.



COLOR: THE DEAL

### Z-MAN TRD BUGZ

Clausen ranks the 2.75-inch, beaver-style BugZ among his favorite bottom baits. "On a 3/16-ounce jig, I've fished it 30 and 40 feet down," he says. "Great, too, trailing a skirted finesse jig like a Dirty Jigs Finesse Jig."



COLOR: PURPLE DEATH

### Z-MAN BABY BALLERZ

Finicky bass readily hit this 2-inch, ball-tailed "panfish" bait aboard a 1/32-ounce Micro Shad HeadZ jig.



COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN GOBY

### Z-MAN TRD GOBYZ

Already overtaking the walleye world in the Northwest, Clausen expects this new goby/sculpin imitator to be a "smallmouth killer" in 2024.



## TRISTAN MCCORMICK'S DEADLY DIMINUTIVES



### STRIKE KING BITSY SEXY DAWG

The "Dawg" got downsized treatment but delivers big-time results when bass are herding small baitfish and feeding on top.



### STRIKE KING KVD FILLER WORM

A favored finesse offering, switching to a slim plastic worm often turns the tide when facing highly pressured or stubborn bass.



### STRIKE KING BABY Z-TOO

Perhaps the most popular mini plastic in the Strike King line, the 3.5-inch, Y-tailed baitfish imitator presented on a ballhead jig is ideal in FFS face-offs or any Damiki-style presentation.

## "ARE SMALLER BAITS SIMPLY BETTER BASS CATCHERS THAN WE PREVIOUSLY SUPPOSED?"

FFS observations have also influenced Strike King to downsize a number of popular baits. A new series of hard bait offerings includes the 1/8-ounce Bitsy Jerkbait, 1/8-ounce Bitsy Shad lipless crankbait and a pair of tiny topwater baits — the Bitsy Sexy Dawg walking bait and Bitsy Splash walker/chugger.

While FFS has ignited this "small bait" renaissance, the phenomenon is also expanding our awareness of how bass act and feed in their underwater world.

"We use FFS as a tool to understand fish as much as for making or selecting baits to catch them," notes Murphy. "We didn't realize how much bass feed on much smaller forage."

"Before when we witnessed fish blowing up on small baits at the surface,

we waited to throw quickly to the next boil," says Bertrand. "Now, with LiveScope, we can follow the fish. When they go down, we can follow their movement on the screen and chase them between those surface feeding frenzies."

For a look at additional lures designed with FFS in mind, see "New Tools for a New Age" in our February/March 2024 issue.

## WINNING WAYS WITH SUSPENDED FISH

The most striking revelation of FFS may be that bass suspend in the water column, tailing schools of roaming baitfish, far more than we once thought. Targeting these fish has become the most popular strategy on just about every tournament trail, even accounting for the entire Top 10 at Bass Pro Tour Stage One on Toledo Bend.

When targeting suspended fish, Berkley pro Justin Lucas stresses "control" as the biggest advantage of small swimbaits and minnow imitators like the Power Switch and Finisher. He calls them "365-day baits" — good in stable, consistent weather, great in tough, post-frontal conditions.

"We can target these fish that are suspended, fish we weren't able to target before," Lucas says. "Being able to drop a cast on these fish and keep a bait in their face goes a long way. We can keep these baits in their strike zone for a lot longer."

Tristan McCormick believes that combination of pinpoint presentation with the bite-getting power of small baits is the reason Damiki-style rigs have taken over the fishing world. He keeps a Strike King Baby Z-Too on a ballhead on his deck at all times.

"It's a finessy rig that can catch those suspending fish we call 'floaters,'" he says. "You force feed them by putting the bait in front of their nose to make them bite."

The jighead minnow technique, referred to by a range of other monikers including mid-strolling, moping and hover-rigging, places a premium on buoyant baits that can hold to a decided depth and hover with subtle, tantalizing action. Lucas' go-to is Berkley's PowerBait MaxScent Flatnose Minnow. While the 4-inch bait has a slender profile, he proved its ability to generate giant bites when he used it to stack six bass weighing 42 pounds,

## JACOB WHEELER'S COMPACT CRUSHERS



COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN

### RAPALA CRUSHCITY FREELOADER

After an auspicious 2023 debut, this pintail minnow with ribs and tail rings carried Wheeler, its designer, to a win and fourth-place finish at the first two BPT events of 2024. Wheeler fishes it on 3/16- or 1/4-ounce VMC Hybrid Swimbait Jigheads with shakes of his rod tip. "If I want more rock, I throw more slack into my line," he says. "If I want less rock and more finesse, I throw less slack."



COLOR: ALBINO SHAD

### RAPALA CRUSHCITY THE MAYOR

Compact, paddletail swimbaits are universal fish producers, and this new offering is no different. "The 3-inch Mayor is a fish catcher," says its creator. "It's a bait that produces numbers of bites."



COLOR: BAMA CRAW

### RAPALA CRUSHCITY NED BLT

Wheeler added subtle touches to this "turtle-backed," Ned-style worm, made with a tough, buoyant TPE (thermoplastic elastomer). He also fishes it on a drop-shot rig with a #2 VMC Finesse Neko hook.



6 ounces on SCORETRACKER® during the Knockout Round of Stage Two on Santee Cooper.

Wheeler favors a bait of his own design, the Rapala CrushCity Freeloader, for these encounters. Worked on a light jighead with shakes of his rod tip, the pintail minnow-style bait allows him to adjust his presentation to the observed response of his quarry.

"It's a natural presentation that fish haven't seen that much," he says. "It is super finessy."

## FAVORABLE TACKLE TRENDS

Delivering small stuff to suspended bass takes tackle tailored to the task. Light and medium-light spinning rods with reels spooled with light braid and thin fluorocarbon leaders have become standard tools — and as more tournament pros have turned to them, manufacturers have delivered rods with refined actions and reels with smoother drag systems.

That said, presenting a bait to a distant fish represented by a virtual screen image calls for the kind of precision casting many anglers think only baitcasting combos can deliver. In

recent years, bait finesse system (BFS) have added a new wrinkle to the game.

Developed initially in Japan, BFS brings highly specialized baitcasting reels and rods into play to deliver lures too small for effective presentation with conventional baitcasting gear. Picture pitching a 1/16-ounce Texas rig with a Ned-style plastic or throwing a crappie-sized crankbait on a casting setup spooled with 6- or 8-pound line.

Bertrand says his Abu Garcia Zenon BFS rod and LTX reel combination — a 7-foot-1 rod and 6.8:1 gear-ratio reel — enables him to get remarkable distance and accuracy even with 1/8-ounce crankbaits.

"BFS started more for anglers looking to add a fun new dimension to their bass fishing, but it's turning into something that can be really useful in the tournament fishing world," Bertrand confirms. "When it came to small baits, you had limitations on what you could throw them on until BFS became a thing. One missing link was the really small crankbaits you might throw in the spring and fall, though. It's been pretty neat to take that BFS rod and reel and throw a little bait as well as you could throw a more standard-sized bait."



Has added fishing pressure made our fish more wary of standard-sized bass baits? Are smaller baits simply better bass catchers than we previously supposed? Or is it just easier to keep a small bait hovering enticingly in the compact strike zone of a reluctant bass? Anglers and lure makers will continue to ask such questions as they explore the intersection of FFS, finesse gear and little lures.

One more factor inviting small baits into the bass fishing arena has been a modest bend away from the once prevailing "five good bites" mentality — and it is not just the every-scorable-bass-counts format of the Bass Pro Tour that's pushing the trend.

"Even in five-fish tournaments, I may want to catch 100 bass to get my biggest five of the day," says Murphy. "More guys are thinking that catching as many fish as you can might get you five big ones, too."

As the bass-fishing world is fast finding out, there's often no better way to get numbers of bites than by tying on baits that, until recently, would have been viewed as too tiny. ■



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# THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS





## ST. CROIX PHYSYX CASTING ROD

By Matt Williams

**S**t. Croix is legendary for producing some of the best fishing rods money can buy. The company calls its PHYSYX family “the new master of matter, motion, energy and force on the water.” The roster includes 17 casting and 8 spinning models made available for sneak peek at REDCREST 2024.

We asked the rod builders at St. Croix to send us a stick that could juggle several different power-fishing tasks, and they didn’t disappoint.

### First Impressions

I’ve never handled a St. Croix rod I didn’t like, and the 7-foot, 1-inch PHXC71MHF I recently put to the test is no different. Here are a few key features that caught the eye:

> **SCIV + carbon fiber blanks:** The hybrid carbon fiber blanks are fashioned from the same blend of materials — SCIV and SCVI — used in the company’s Legend series tournament-grade sticks. The special blending process is said to result in super strong blanks that are lightweight and precision tuned for technique-specific presentations.

> **Handle/butt:** There’s no cork or foam to grip. Instead, St. Croix’s engineers took the agglomerated cork TRIGON handle design introduced in 2023 on its Mojo Bass Series and modified it with a more rigid carbon fiber material advertised to improve comfort and control. The handle and butt feature chemical-resistant, thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU) grip lines.

> **Rear trigger:** Another nice touch is the rear trigger on the handle base, which lends itself to improved casting control and accuracy.

> **Molded carbon DYNAMIX reel seat:** St. Croix calls it the “next generation” DYNAMIX because it’s stronger, lighter and transfers energy better than the former DYNAMIX seat made from nylon. An aluminum nut keeps your reel cinched down snug.

> **Premium guides:** The lightweight titanium guides are fitted with silicon carbide rings suitable for all line types.

### In Action

With a medium-heavy power and fast-action tip section, the PHXC71MHF is just what the doctor ordered for making precision casts tight to targets, making snap

hook sets with a Texas rig or driving single hooks home with reaction baits like vibrating jigs, swim jigs, spinnerbaits, small swimbaits and even a Senko. I can’t skip worth a darn, but I suspect that the PHXC71MHF would be a good choice for skipping jigs and creatures into tight places, too. You could even use it rip a ‘Trap in grass.

I found plenty to like about the rod outside the obvious talking points of balance, sensitivity, strength and light weight. The handle/grip/butt sections are especially intriguing; there’s no cork or EVA in the mix.

The rigid carbon fiber split grip utilizes St. Croix’s proprietary TRIGON design, which follows the natural contours of the palm to bolster comfort and limit

## UNIQUE GRIP:

Unique grip lines are strategically molded into the handle and butt using thermoplastic polyurethane, or TPU. The material is advertised to resist sunscreens, bug sprays and other chemical substances to ensure durability while helping reduce slippage.



## ROD BUTT:

The rod butt features a rear trigger intended to promote better casting control and accurate bait presentations, which are essential when fishing tight to visible targets and narrow cone angles afforded by forward-facing sonar transducers.

## TRIGON HANDLE:

The new TRIGON handles offers similar advantages with respect to angler comfort and control as the agglomerated cork model introduced in 2023 on the Mojo Bass Series, but it's crafted from molded carbon fiber with high-tactile TPU accents for improved energy transmission and balance. The handle is fitted with a molded carbon fiber DYNAMIX reel seat.



fatigue. The feel is certainly different, as are high-tactile TPU grip lines molded into the bottom of the grip and butt.

As castability goes, the rod was truly a blast to fish with. While it's not one I'd recommend taking to the grass mats, it has plenty of guts for wrestling with big fish around docks, brush and scattered vegetation.

## Final Thoughts

The PHXC71MHF is a great multi-purpose rod equipped with all the right goodies to satisfy even the most discerning angler. Not only is it

a pleasure to fish with, it's also pretty darn nice to look at, with a charcoal finish and silvery accents.

## Carbon Fiber + S-Glass Options

Three of the PHYSYX rod blanks are designed with a blend of SCIV+ and 100% linear S-glass materials. The forgiving iACT Glass blanks are designed with moderate actions specific to reaction baits like square-bills, 'Traps and bladed jigs.

**PHXC72MM\*** - 7-2 medium power, moderate action for small/medium squarebills

**PHXC72HM\*** - 7-2 heavy power, moderate action for bladed jigs and medium/large squarebills

**PHXC74MHM\*** - 7-4 medium-heavy power, moderate action for lipless crankbaits

## Applications

A good choice for 3/8- to 3/4-ounce baits and 12- to 20-pound-test line. Can be used for:

- > Swim jigs
- > Vibrating jigs
- > Spinnerbaits
- > Texas rigging
- > Senkos
- > Skipping docks
- > Ripping lipless baits over grass

## HITS & MISSES

- + Great multi-purpose rod
- + Solid backbone for driving single hooks home
- + Premium components
- + Lightweight
- + Super sensitive
- + Well balanced
- + Handcrafted in USA
- + Excellent warranty
- Premium price

## DETAILS

**Model:** PHXC71MHF  
**Length:** 7 foot, 1 inch  
**Power:** Medium heavy  
**Action:** Fast  
**Rated for:** 3/8- to 3/4-ounce baits, 12- to 20-pound line  
**Guides:** 9 plus tip, titanium/silicon carbide ring  
**Reel Seat:** DYNAMIX, molded carbon fiber  
**Warranty:** 15 years  
**MSRP:** \$380  
**Contact:** [stcroixrods.com](http://stcroixrods.com)

## >> MORE FROM THE PHYSYX FAMILY

In addition to 17 casting rods, the PHYSYX family includes eight spinning models ranging from 6-8 to 7-10 in length with varied powers and actions — bringing the lineup to 25 models total. All are designed to deliver high performance for technique-specific applications. Price points are premium: \$365 to \$415.

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# TUNGSTEN TRUTHS

By Mitchell Forde

The fishing tackle market is in the midst of a takeover — a tungsten takeover. Over the past decade, tungsten weights have steadily replaced lead. These days, you'd be hard-pressed to find a touring pro throwing a lead bullet sinker, and tungsten is even encroaching in categories beyond terminal tackle.

Turning to tungsten offers a few clear advantages. It's more dense, meaning a tungsten sinker that weighs the same might be half the size of a lead version. It provides increased sensitivity. It's also less harmful to the environment — a handful of states, particularly in the Northeast, have banned lead weights.

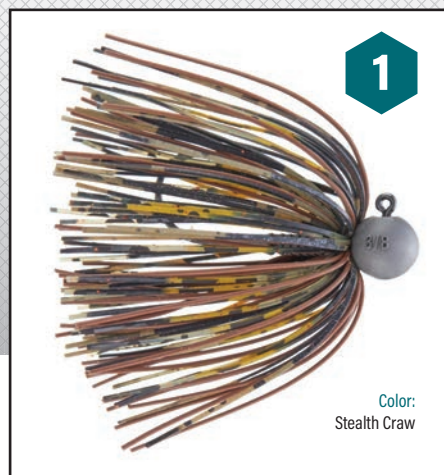
But there's one major drawback: cost. On a per-sinker basis, a pack of tungsten worm weights can cost 10 to 20 times more than lead weights of the same size. If you're bassin' on a budget, it can be tough to justify that extra expense, especially if lead has gotten the job done just fine in the past.

There are several instances, though, when most avid anglers find the benefits of tungsten to be worth the extra bucks. Here's a handful of tungsten products that offer clear advantages over their lead counterparts.

## 1. BEAST COAST TUNGSTEN COMPOUND O.W. SNIPER FOOTBALL JIG

\$5.64–6.49 | [tacklewarehouse.com](http://tacklewarehouse.com)

Outside of terminal tackle, one of the categories tungsten has overhauled quickest is finesse jigs. It makes sense; the density of tungsten allows for a much smaller head and thus overall profile for those fishing in deep water or current. Plus, it aids in sensitivity as the bait is dragged along bottom. Beast Coast has created several such jigs, its most popular being the O.W. Sniper. Designed by St. Lawrence River hammer Travis Manson, it doesn't have a weed guard (the O.W. stands for "open water") and features a hand-tied skirt and double-barb hook keeper. It even comes in a "hybrid" version that features both marabou hair and a silicon skirt. It's offered in an impressive array of hues — 12 regular colors and four hybrids — in sizes of 1/4, 3/8 and 1/2 ounce.



Color: Stealth Craw

## 2. EPIC BAITS TUNGSTEN FLIPPING WEIGHT

\$6.99–13.99 | [epicbaitsfishing.com](http://epicbaitsfishing.com)

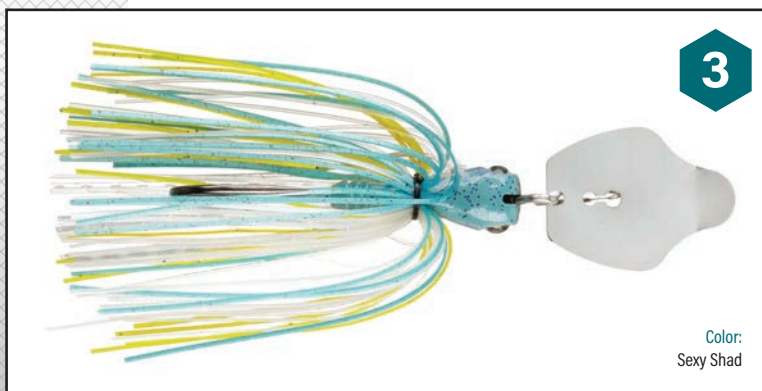
Tungsten has almost universally replaced lead among high-level flippers, especially when they turn to heavier weights. The density of tungsten, and the fact that it's typically available in an array of painted colors, makes a Texas-rigged plastic look more natural than a bulky, shiny lead weight. So, with a plethora of tungsten weights on the market, what makes some better than others? Epic Baits pro Scott Suggs said the biggest factor is line abrasion, or lack thereof. Tungsten weights have developed a reputation for wearing out line, leading to breakoffs. But Epic's tungsten is polished all the way through the line hole so that, even without an insert, it will never fray your line. The weights are available in eight colors and 11 sizes ranging from 1/4 ounce to 2 ounces.



## 3. STRIKE KING TUNGSTEN THUNDER CRICKET VIBRATING SWIM JIG

\$17.99 | [strikeking.com](http://strikeking.com)

Suggs raved about the newest version of Strike King's bladed jig. No surprise, he noted that its tungsten head creates a loud, unique sound when contacted by the blade. It's also smaller than the original Thunder Cricket — not just the head, but the entire bait. That results in more bites on pressured fisheries and also allows the tungsten Thunder Cricket to swim a bit deeper than a regular model of the same weight. While Suggs said the Tungsten Thunder Cricket has become his go-to bladed jig for most scenarios, he's particularly excited about its smallmouth-catching prowess. "When they came out with that bait, they came out with the best smallmouth vibrating jig that's ever been on the market," he said.



Color: Sexy Shad

#### 4. ARK FISHING NO CHIP INSERT TUNGSTEN PUNCHING WEIGHT

\$3.99–10.99 | [tacklewarehouse.com](https://tacklewarehouse.com)

You might be able to get away with dragging or pitching a lead sinker. But when it comes to punching a soft-plastic bait through matted vegetation or other heavy cover, tungsten is a must. A 1- to 2-ounce lead weight might be as large as your creature bait, resulting in an unnatural presentation and low hookup rate. While flipping weights can also be used to punch, this weight from Ark is designed specifically for punching, with a collar that will hold a punch skirt in place. It features an insert to prevent line wear and a heat-finished, matte black coating that won't chip or erode. It's available in six sizes from 3/8 ounce to 1 1/2 ounce.



#### 5. EPIC BAITS TUNGSTEN BARREL WEIGHT

\$6.99–13.99 | [epicbaitsfishing.com](https://epicbaitsfishing.com)

If you throw a Carolina rig, reigning Fishing Clash Angler of the Year Matt Becker advises switching to tungsten to take your ball-and-chain game up a notch. A tungsten barrel weight offers a couple benefits over lead: It's louder, attracting fish from farther away even without a clacker, and it offers more sensitivity, so anglers can tell whether they're dragging through soft bottom, rock or grass. Epic's version is once again engineered to eliminate line fray. It's offered in four sizes, from 1/4 ounce to 1 ounce.



#### 6. STRIKE KING TOUR GRADE TUNGSTEN SWING FOOTBALL HEAD

\$7.99–11.99 | [strikeking.com](https://strikeking.com)

Tungsten offers many of the same benefits in a swing head as in a Carolina rig weight. In this case, the increased sensitivity is particularly important, as it can be challenging for an angler grinding a wobble head through cover to discern what's a bite. One plus of Strike King's model is that you can easily attach or remove any hook to perfectly match the size of your bait. The head comes in four sizes, from 1/4 ounce to 1 ounce.



#### 7. QUEEN TACKLE L.S. TUNGSTEN JIGHEAD

\$8.99–11.99 | [tacklewarehouse.com](https://tacklewarehouse.com)

As the jighead minnow technique has exploded in popularity, so has this ball head. While sensitivity isn't quite as important when it comes to mid-strolling, the smaller diameter of tungsten makes for a more natural presentation, when a heavier head is necessary to reach bass in deep water. Many anglers also believe the density of tungsten makes for a brighter return on forward-facing sonar. The Queen Tackle jighead is offered in a variety of hook sizes and features a 90-degree line tie and a bait keeper that works well with ElaZtech. It comes in nine weights ranging from a tiny, 1/32-ounce version up to 1 ounce.



#### 8. EPIC BAITS TUNGSTEN TEAR DROP SHOT

\$6.99–8.99 | [epicbaitsfishing.com](https://epicbaitsfishing.com)

Becker acknowledged there are times anglers can get away with lead drop-shot weights, especially when targeting individual fish with forward-facing sonar. But for those who drag drop-shots around rock, the increased sensitivity of tungsten can be beneficial. Becker especially prefers it when bed fishing, as he can feel when his weight enters the gravelly substrate that usually comprises a smallmouth bed. Epic offers three styles of drop-shot weight — cylindrical, round and tear drop — but the tear drop is most versatile. It also comes in a tie-on version, which Becker prefers (and also uses for free rigs). Even when using a weight with a line-grip swivel, he advises tying a couple overhand knots; casting off tungsten weights or having them fly off the line when fish jump can get expensive in a hurry. ■





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# TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA





## NELSON WAS DAM CLOSE TO STEALING REDCREST

**I**f ever there was a statement that perfectly summed up Bass Pro Tour pro Ron Nelson, it was the quirky Michigander's response to a question asked of him at takeout after the Knockout Round at REDCREST.

"If you win \$300,000 tomorrow, what's the first thing you're going to buy?" Nelson was asked - a fair question, since he had finished third in the round with 51 pounds, 12 ounces. The retort was classic Ron Nelson: "I don't fish for money. I fish because it's fun."

Anyone who watched the livestream of the final day of REDCREST and who heard his postgame rundown of how he spent his final two days of the tournament - fishing the heavy current of the tailrace below Logan Martin Dam - could see that he was indeed having a ball. Nelson spent the bulk of his tournament casting a JackHammer and various swimbaits tight to the face of the dam and into its eddies, working his way through just about every species of fish that swims in Lay Lake.

Nelson walked away with a \$40,000 payday in his first REDCREST, but his animated descriptions of his days fishing below the dam - and his repeated use of the word "fun" to sum up his tournament - seem to prove that he's true to his word. He does indeed fish for fun (but will happily cash that \$40,000 check).

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON





## RAINY DAY CAN'T KEEP MARSHALL AWAY

**A** persistent downpour during Day 1 of the Tackle Warehouse Invationals stop at West Point Lake made for a cold, soggy day on the water and prompted many spectators to watch weigh-in from their cars or on MajorLeagueFishing.com. But it didn't deter Marshall, Kyle Cortiana's furry fan. Decked out in snazzy orange boots, Marshall didn't seem to mind the rain as he and Cortiana's wife, Miranda, greeted Kyle in the bag line. They got to see the Oklahoma pro load more than 13 pounds of bass into his sack, which put him on his way to making the final-day cut and earning a \$10,000 check.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



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PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



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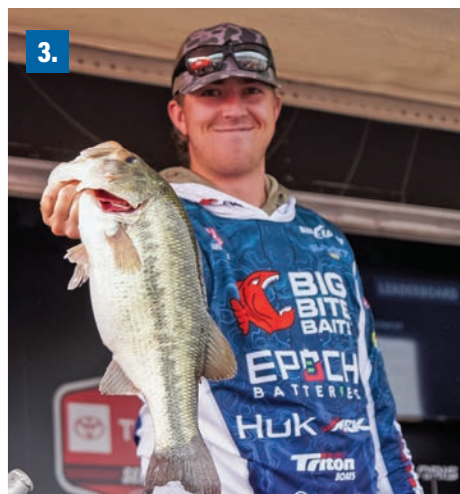


PHOTO BY MATT PAGE



PHOTO BY JOEY WHITE

**1. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHERN DIVISION Lake Okeechobee**

Jan. 25-27

Jessie Mizell removed any doubt that he's the local to beat on Lake Okeechobee. Not only did Mizell win his second consecutive Toyota Series event on the Florida bass factory, he did so in wire-to-wire fashion. Mizell sacked up 24 pounds, 8 ounces on Day 1, then backed it up with bags of 24-4 and 23-13. His 72-9 total topped Brody Campbell by 2-15.

Mizell took advantage of a warming trend to catch most of his fish on topwaters. Several ate a popping frog, while his biggest fish of the event hit a Rapala X-Rap Prop. He focused on isolated clumps of vegetation on the north side of the lake, doing most of his damage in the morning. For the win, Mizell earned \$44,000.

**2. BASS PRO TOUR B&W TRAILER HITCHES STAGE ONE PRESENTED BY POWER-POLE Toledo Bend**

Jan. 30-Feb. 4

Dustin Connell started practicing for Stage One long before he arrived at Toledo Bend. Connell correctly assumed the event would be dominated by anglers using forward-facing sonar to target suspended bass and spent the winter learning the nuances of enticing such fish with a jighead minnow — in his case, a Rapala CrushCity Freeloader.

While virtually the entire Top 10 employed the same technique, Connell separated himself thanks to a key move on Championship Day, running to a pocket where he'd caught two fish earlier in the event. There, he found clearer water and bunches of bass. During the two-hour final period, Connell put 20

scorable bass for 58 pounds, 6 ounces on SCORETRACKER®, bringing his total to 112-4 for the day — easily enough to claim his fifth Bass Pro Tour trophy.

**3. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS STOP 1 PRESENTED BY POWER-POLE MOVE Sam Rayburn Reservoir**

Feb. 9-11

Though just 21 years old, Drew Gill had already put himself on the national radar by finishing third in his Bass Pro Tour debut. He added his first professional win to his resume a week later. Gill sacked up 26 pounds, 4 ounces on the final day to bring his total to 69-6 and clear Jake Lawrence by 1-7.

Gill described his practice as "horrible," but he still managed to top 21 pounds on Day 1. His bags got bigger each of the next two days, with

the key adjustments being moving farther back into short, main-lake pockets and switching from a jighead minnow to a Neko-rigged Big Bite Baits Shaking Squirrel Worm. The victory earned Gill \$80,000 and a spot in REDCREST 2025.

**4. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS CENTRAL DIVISION Lake Guntersville**

Feb. 14-16

Hayden Marbut proved that his name needs to be mentioned among the host of young anglers taking the tournament world by storm, topping a 260-boat field for his first professional win. The 20-year-old Auburn student weighed in 70 pounds, 1 ounce across three days, just enough to edge Matt O'Connell by 2 ounces.

Marbut did most of his damage on the now-ubiquitous jighead minnow, but he had to adjust to make it

PHOTO BY GARICK DIXON



5.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



6.



7.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



8.

PHOTO BY JOHN ZEOLLA

work. With an influx of water rolling through Gunterville, he said the key was fishing clean-water areas away from the main current, which he located thanks to the thousands of hours he's spent on the lake. Including a \$35,000 Phoenix bonus, Marbut pocketed \$100,00 for the win.

**5. BASS PRO TOUR SUZUKI STAGE TWO PRESENTED BY FENWICK Santee Cooper Lakes**

Feb. 20-25

While much of the field went shallow in search of Santee Cooper's big bass, Jacob Wheeler avoided the crowd by running offshore brush-piles and stumps. The decision, which allowed him to better manage his fish, paid off in the form of his seventh Bass Pro Tour trophy.

Relying mainly on a Rapala CrushCity Freeloader, Wheeler got off to a fast start on Day 1 with 53

pounds, 8 ounces, allowing him to spend almost all of Day 2 scanning new water. He did just enough to survive the Knockout Round. Then, during a tough Championship Round, he outdueled Dean Rojas, catching five fish for 14-2 in the final period to bring his final-day total to 47-4 and beat Rojas by 5-0.

**6. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION Sam Rayburn Reservoir**

Feb. 21-23

Colby Miller took his 2024 heater to a new level with a dominant performance on Sam Rayburn. The Louisiana native, who had already notched a win and a ninth-place finish in BFL competition during the young year, sacked up 77 pounds, 7 ounces across three days, which gave him a nearly 15-pound victory over second place.

Miller mixed up techniques, starting on a grass depression each morning with a bladed jig and a Strike King Hybrid Hunter before hitting staging spots with an Alabama rig and deep-diving crankbait. The victory added more than \$72,000 to his rapidly ballooning 2024 earnings total.

**7. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS STOP 2 PRESENTED BY SUZUKI West Point Lake**

March 1-3

Finding and triggering big large-mouth proved key all tournament at West Point Lake. No one did it better than Tyler Stewart, who landed his first professional win and a trip to REDCREST 2025 as a result.

Like much of the field, Stewart reported a tough practice on the mysterious fishery. However, he got one big bite skipping marina docks, so he committed to that strategy,

with a ChatterBait as his lure of choice. It paid off to the tune of 21-5 on Day 1, the biggest bag of the event. Stewart stumbled with 9-10 on Day 2, and the standings tightened, remaining close throughout the final day — until Stewart made a clutch cull with about 10 minutes left. That 3 1/2-pounder brought his three-day total to 45-3, enough to clear Todd Walters by 7 ounces.

**8. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS WESTERN DIVISION Clear Lake**

March 6-8

Long considered one of the best out west, Ken Mah finally broke through for his first Toyota Series win. Mah started a bit slow with 21 pounds on Day 1, but as the weather warmed up, so did his flipping bite. Mah sacked up 29-12 on Day 2, then



9.

PHOTO BY MATT PAGE



10.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



12.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



11.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJIRA

slammed the door with 31-10 on the final day — the biggest bag of the event, anchored by its biggest bass, an 11-pounder.

While most of the field fished offshore, Mah flipped shallow cover with either a black and blue jig trailed by a Big Bite Baits YoMama or a Texas-rigged YoMama. He didn't get many bites, but he got the right ones, and he won by more than 6 pounds and earned \$26,261 as a result.

**9. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS**  
PLAINS DIVISION  
Kentucky-Barkley Lakes

March 7-9

It might be time to consider whether Jake Lawrence is actually unbeatable on Kentucky Lake. The Buchanan, Tennessee, native won his second consecutive Toyota Series event on his home fishery and his third multi-day tournament there in the past 11 months by weighing in 63 pounds, 2 ounces over three days.

Lawrence's latest triumph came in wire-to-wire fashion. The LiveScope

expert fished at the south end of the lake on Day 1, where he sacked up 24-2, then moved north for Days 2 and 3, wielding a jighead minnow all the while. He edged fellow Kentucky Lake local Matt Robertson by 1-5, earning \$74,500.

**10. BASS PRO SHOPS REDCREST 2024 PRESENTED BY OPTIMA LITHIUM**  
Lay Lake

March 14-17

Dustin Connell lived up to his billing as the pre-tournament favorite and then some. The lifelong Alabama native routed the rest of the Championship Round field with 83 pounds on 28 scorable bass. That topped runner-up Alton Jones Jr. by more than 30 pounds, earning Connell \$300,000 and the distinction of being the first ever two-time REDCREST champion.

Balancing leaning on local knowledge with approaching Lay Lake with an open mind, Connell fished all over the reservoir during the Qualifying Round. He won the Knockout Round plucking spotted bass out of current seams in the

riverine section of the lake but shifted gears during the Championship Round. Targeting schooling fish with forward-facing sonar, Connell revisited a bay he'd marked on Day 2 and found it loaded with baitfish and bass, which he caught one-after-another on a jighead minnow.

**11. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS**  
SOUTHERN DIVISION  
Harris Chain of Lakes

March 19-21

After three previous runner-up finishes, Mikey Keyso broke through for his first Toyota Series win. He didn't see this one coming, especially after trailing leader Bobby Bakewell by nearly 15 pounds after Day 1. But Keyso switched from Lake Griffin to Dora on Day 2 and rocketed to second with 24-14, then bagged 13-7 out of Eustis on the final day. With Day 3 tough on just about everyone, his 51-4 total earned him a 4-pound win and \$44,000.


A notable outlier these days, Keyso doesn't have forward-facing sonar on his boat. He did most of his

damage with classic Florida staples: a swimming worm and a ChatterBait.

**12. GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES COSTA QUALIFIER PRESENTED BY TOYOTA**  
Summersville, Stonewall Jackson Lake

Feb. 18-March 24

Tough fishing greeted the nine teams at West Virginia's Summersville and Stonewall Jackson Lakes, but three trios still punched their tickets to the Bass Pro Shops Team Series Championship. Team Crockett Creek (David Dudley, Bradley Roy, Greg Vinson) won Semifinal Match 1 with 11 bass weighing 15-11, with Vinson accounting for more than half that weight. Kevin VanDam, David Walker and Kelly Jordon of team Star brite then pulled out a narrow victory in Semifinal Match 2. Their total of 13-6 on eight fish topped team Builders FirstSource by 1-3. Finally, Casey Ashley put team Smokey Mountain on his back in the Wild Card Round. Ashley boated 14 bass for 34-12, helping his team amass a total of 50-7. That easily topped team Builders FirstSource's 27-7. ■



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# PROFILE: DREW GILL

MOUNT CARMEL, ILLINOIS



*"You can fail, but still gain some experience out of it so it feels like a win even when you fail."*

The only way to truly lose is to not gain something from an experience, according to Bass Pro Tour rookie Drew Gill. Whether it's reaching a personal goal of making the Top 10 or learning something new that can lead to future success, every improvement is a win in Gill's book – and despite his young age, the 21-year-old Illinois pro's book contains volumes.

Gill started making tournament waves at the Abu Garcia College Fishing level, where he used his time to learn the ins, outs and nuances of different kinds of fisheries than he'd fished in his home state. While Gill is on the cusp of finishing his business marketing degree, he's put that on pause so he can focus on competitive bass fishing – and it's paying off in spades.

## Q&A

By Matt Naber  
PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

**Your 2024 season is off to a roaring start: You finished third in your Bass Pro Tour debut at Toledo Bend, and then earned your first tour-level win just a few days later in the Tackle Warehouse Invitionals Stop 1 at Sam Rayburn. You then finished fifth at West Point and are leading Fishing Clash AOY in the Invitionals. Can you try to describe the "zone" you seem to be in?**

Like anything in life, but especially with sports, momentum is a big factor. We view it as some sort of spiritual or magical property, but in my opinion, it's more of a mental aspect. You get in a rhythm with your ways of thinking and processing information and strategizing to complete a task. So, in bass fishing, (the fish's) behavior is on a spectrum, and it's a process. If you fish enough in similar conditions, you can get your rhythm right and predict what will happen at any tournament. Lately, I've been running my process of breaking anywhere down in the prespawn, then showing up and applying that process and figuring them out. Once you get there, it's pretty much unstoppable.

### **How hard do you think it might be to stay in that zone?**

The hardest time to sustain that rhythm and keep it going is during the spawn – that’s the most 180-degree change in a month that the fish go through all year. They’ll go from winter behavior to summer within a month. April is the most dynamic month of bass fishing all year. If you survive April and stay in tune with the fish, you can keep up with it.

### **Your career stats only go back to 2021, when you started competing in some College Fishing events; just three years later, you’re knocking down BPT Top 10s and leading AOY races. Doesn’t that blow your mind at least a little bit? And if not, why?**

It absolutely blows my mind. Ultimately, we’ve only been truly learning about and understanding bass behavior at the rate we have been for three to four years. We don’t know where that horizon or plateau is because it keeps getting higher. It’s like when you’re a kid and there’s a hill you hit the brakes on, but every time you raced with your buddies you never hit the brakes. You get up to a speed where you’ll crash if you stop, and we’re at that level with bass fishing. I wasn’t expecting it, and now it’s a keep-pedaling thing.

### **Everybody went on notice that you were an angler to watch when you finished third in the 2022 Toyota Series Championship, but then you followed it up with three Top 10s in your rookie year on the Invitationals in 2023, two Top 10s and an AOY in the Plains Division, and another third-place finish in the Toyota Series Championship that same year. Was there anything in your previous fishing experience that contributed to that mega-year, or was it a case of “right place, right time, right baits?”**

Oh man, it really was just a continual progression. The more I fish, the more little situations I see and understand what makes each one different. That’s what I do; it’s measurable learning experiences. The more of those you get, the faster you’ll get better, because you can understand why a certain time, place or thing was what it was.

I hope if I can continue at this pace of learning and expanding, then the incremental growth should continue – but right now, the potential increases I can have are getting more marginal every day. As you get close to the top, the steps get a little more tricky. Luck doesn’t play out on a seasonal basis, but it does on the difference between finishing fourth and winning (an event). It’s all about creating incremental growth and discovering what makes a winner a winner.

### **I think most of the fishing world has heard your background story, but let’s get into it again quickly. When did you start, who got you started and how quickly did you tell yourself “Oh yeah, I now have the fishing bug?”**

I grew up fishing with my dad (Todd Gill) for as long as I can remember. I would go with him and fished for whatever bit, and that transitioned when I was about 14 and I figured out how to throw a casting rod. I was like, “Man, this is way more enjoyable and ‘figure-out-able’ than fishing for other species.” I have a competitive strain, and I wanted to compete at it, but the only way to do that is with a measurable system, and we have that – it’s all measurable. So, I did some local tournaments when I was 17 and went out and mowed yards and worked at the grocery store and bought a boat so I could fish tournaments.

I started up a club at Wabash Valley College (in Mount Carmel, Illinois) with my dad and I thought it was cool to fish and have the college pay for it. Then the moment I realized it was something I thought I could do, I fished my first major tournament of the spring at Lake Hartwell, and I was eighth or ninth. After that, I put all my time and attention into bass fishing as a whole.

### **What is it about competitive bass fishing that draws you to it – basically, what made you say, “this tournament deal is the thing for me?”**

The thing that drove me to competitive fishing is I played sports growing up and I enjoy winning. I enjoyed the feeling of working through something and discovering you did what was necessary and you win. The thing that makes fishing so different from team

sports is: In team sports winning is winning, there is no other win than winning. You can hit home runs or shoot the lowest round of golf, but in bass fishing it comes down to how you define it – whether it’s a learning experience, making a check or making the Top 10. I can set the bar for myself; the tournament doesn’t set the bar for what a win is.

It’s an incremental system, so I could win in my own mind and kept increasing that goal to where we are now. You can fail, but still gain some experience out of it so it feels like a win. Over time, I was able to win every event because there was something to gain from it.

### **Speaking of learning, you’ve been an astoundingly fast study with LiveScope. Did you have a true “aha moment” when you first looked at a LiveScope screen? How quickly did you start to pick up on that skill, and why do you think you absorbed it so quickly?**

I really enjoyed it when I first got it. It’s cool to see my bait, the fish, the targets. I understood when I started using it that it was something to spend time on because it was a direct learning thing; you knew you learned something, and you knew you didn’t just misread a situation.

People view LiveScope as a skill, like (what) Dustin (Connell) did at RED-CREST, but in reality, that’s just a portion of the pie. It allows us to do things we never could before. The majority of the pie is fishing for fish we previously fished for, but forward-facing sonar allows us to do it efficiently and understand all that is going on. I see it as a separate skill. ... There’s so many young guys doing well so fast because they understand bass have rules. Believing fish can do whatever they want stunted the sport for so long, but the young anglers succeeding understand that bass have rules and they studied them to know what those rules are. Nature has rules, animals have to make their decisions based off the conditions around them, and that’s what drives them to do what they do. Once you figure out what makes them do what they do, you’ll be ahead of the curve. ■



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# FLORIDA TBF OFFERS A DIFFERENT TOURNAMENT EXPERIENCE

## PRESIDENT AJ WILLEQUER BUILDING AN “ANGLER ORIENTED” GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATION



**F**lorida’s reputation as a bass-fishing Mecca is well established and well earned. Few other states, if any, feature so much bass-inhabited water, just about all of it fishable year-round and having the potential to produce double-digit lunkers.

Yet for anglers who live in the Sunshine State, proximity to such prime bass real estate comes with a cost. Fishing pressure, which has increased across the country, can feel suffocating, especially on tournament fisheries. As AJ Willequer, president of The Bass Federation’s Florida chapter, put it, “people don’t understand what fishing pressure is until they look at Florida.”

Tournament circuits from other states, high school and college trails and national tours all visit Florida on an

annual basis. Plus, grassroots derbies are usually packed with boats. Each of the first two Phoenix Bass Fishing League events of 2024 in the Gator Division drew 140-plus boats, and Willequer said it’s not uncommon to have more than 200 in local team events.

That’s where Willequer is offering anglers a new option. After taking over as president of the Florida federation in 2022, Willequer is rebuilding and rebranding the organization as a circuit for those anglers who don’t want to throw down big entry fees or mix it up with massive fields.

“Some of the grassroots fishermen wanted to just fish some local tournaments,” he said. “They didn’t want to get involved with the 200-boat tournaments. We do 15, 20 boats at our tournaments, and we’re co-angler friendly.”

# “PEOPLE DON’T UNDERSTND WHAT FISHING PRESSURE IS UNTIL THEY LOOK AT FLORIDA.”

## REBUILDING A FOUNDATION

After serving 25 years in the military, Willequer retired in 1997. In the 27 years since, he said, “fishing’s pretty much what I’ve done.”

He’s kept himself plenty busy. Willequer took on his first leadership role with TBF around 2003. In the years since, he’s held a variety of positions within the Central Region, plus served as the vice president for his local bass club and assumed a regional director role with the National Bass Anglers Association. He competes in about two dozen tournaments each year.

Despite his full plate, when the previous Florida federation president revealed he’d been diagnosed with lung cancer in 2021, Willequer took on the challenge of stepping into the role — and it was a challenge.

During his battle with cancer, the previous president had stopped maintaining the chapter’s website, and the domain ultimately got purchased by someone from the United Kingdom. Willequer had to set up a new site, which launched in January. He also had to recruit new clubs, as the chapter’s membership had .

“I said, ‘You know, I’ll give it a couple, three years and see if I can’t get the tide to turn and increase the membership,’” Willequer said. “If I can, I can, and if I can’t, well, at least I can say I gave it the good ol’ try.”

Willequer brought a new, 10-angler club under the TBF umbrella in 2023, then two more new clubs already in 2024. He’s also added a tournament to the schedule — the state will host six in 2024, plus the National Semi-Final event for Florida and Georgia — and gotten a few local bait companies on board as sponsors.

“I’m getting some intermittent local sponsorship, so I’ve got some stuff to raffle at all our tournaments now,” he explained. “Just doing the little things to try to get people back.”

## A MORE COLLEGIAL CIRCUIT

Willequer’s recruiting pitch has centered around the fact that the TBF offers less crowded, less cutthroat competition. The first-place payout might not be as lucrative as on other trails, but anglers have a far better chance of earning their money back and contending for a trophy. Plus, the TBF schedule doesn’t focus solely on the months bass are bedding, when the lakes are at their most crowded. Like all state federations, it also offers a path to the

TBF National Championship and the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American.

“The trail itself is relatively inexpensive compared to the other ones that are out there,” Willequer said. “Those will run you \$400, \$500 plus per tournament, and you’re fishing 200 boats. So, the TBF provides you an avenue that’s reasonable, and the competition, while it’s strong, it’s not as many numbers-wise. You’re fishing against 25 other anglers instead of 225, so your chances are magnificently increased when you fish a TBF tournament. And we don’t only fish the spawn. We fish all year round.”

Willequer wants to keep growing the club — he doesn’t have any plan to cap membership. But he wants to do so while remaining “angler oriented” rather than sponsor or profit oriented. The biggest challenge, he said, has simply been spreading the word among the crowded Florida tournament landscape that TBF can offer anglers a different experience.

“Getting the word out is the most important thing, and letting them know that we’re still here,” he said. “I’m kind of riding on my credibility. The people have known me for 25 years, and they know that if I say I’m going to do something, I’m going to do it. So, I’m sort of beating that bandwagon and saying, ‘Look guys, I told you when I took over, this is what I wanted to do. I’m doing it, so come join me.’” ■



AJ Willequer, FBF President, presents Robert Miller III, co-angler, with his plaque for a 4.08lb Big Bass at the 1st FBF Qualifier January 13, 2024 on Lake Shipp, Florida.



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

## NEW YORK FEDERATION CHAPTER RAISES MORE THAN \$8,000 TO BENEFIT VETERANS

The New York TBF chapter has had to wait a bit longer than the Florida federation to kick off its tournament season, but some of its members still came together recently for an important cause. New York TBF and the Bergen Bassmasters sponsored a booth at the Empire State Outdoor Sportsman's Show from Feb. 29-March 3, where they held a charity auction to benefit veterans.

Nick Albano, president of the Bergen Bassmasters and secretary for the New York federation, said the auction raised \$8,180. The proceeds were split 50-50 between the Wounded Warrior Project and Tunnels to Towers.

Albano, a veteran himself, has put on a charity auction and hosted benefit tournaments through his club since 2009, but this year, he took it up a notch, raising money for two organizations instead of one. Sponsors donated products for the auction, such as a Humminbird Helix 7 unit and a pair of combos from Favorite Fishing, and 12 renowned local anglers offered day-on-the-water experiences. Those included excursions with three-time IGFA world-record holder Burnie Haney (on Lake Ontario) and two-time Bassmaster Classic qualifier Ed Cowan (on a private Pennsylvania lake), plus saltwater trips and more.

Albano stressed that 100 percent of the proceeds went to the two charities, with volunteers staffing the booth to minimize overhead.

"We also promoted our state federation with applications, but we didn't make any money for our state," Albano said. "We just made money for the two organizations. We're fundraising, not for us, but for the two organizations."



New York TBF volunteers handing out Dick's Discount Coupons. (L to R) John Hart, Bob O'John, Tom Luciano (President NYTBF) and Nick Albano.

## REGISTRATION OPEN FOR HIGH SCHOOL FISHING WORLD FINALS

It's time to register for the biggest high school fishing event of the year, the High School Fishing World Finals. The no-entry-fee tournament will be contested in conjunction with the Abu Garcia High School Fishing National Championship on South Carolina's Lake Hartwell June 19-22.

While National Championship participants must qualify via their finishes in Student Angler Federation events, the World Finals is open to all SAF members. All teams are guaranteed at least three days on the water. Between the two events, more than \$3 million in scholarship money and prizes will be up for grabs.

Arizona teammates Jeff Giffen and Dylan Mladick took home the hardware at the 2023 High School Fishing World Finals on the Mississippi River.



Contact TBF: Send us your club stories. If you have a question or want to know more about TBF, which is YOUR organization, drop us a line at [FAQ@bassfederation.com](mailto:FAQ@bassfederation.com). Above all else, thank you for being a member of The Bass Federation.

# SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING STATE CHAMPIONS

## Alabama | Lake Jordan

Easton Morris, Carson Underwood  
Hewitt-Trussville Fishing  
14.77 pounds



## Louisiana | Toledo Bend

Zachary McMillan, Ethan Thrash  
Ruston High Bearcats  
16 pounds, 2 ounces



## South Carolina | Lake Murray

Jackson McLesky, Jackson Pruettt  
Dorman High School Cavaliers  
17 pounds, 15 ounces



## Florida | Harris Chain of Lakes

Whaylon Bracken, Jayden Shumbera  
Osceola Anglers  
13 pounds, 8 ounces



## Missouri | Lake of the Ozarks

Danny Swallow, Nick Whitney  
De Smet Spartans  
16 pounds, 15 ounces



## Virginia | Smith Mountain Lake

Blaine Miller, Hunter Musick  
Lebanon High School  
10 pounds, 15 ounces



## Georgia | West Point Lake

William Altizer, Kadin West  
Adairsville Bass Fishing Team  
17 pounds, 3 ounces



## Mississippi | Ross Barnett Reservoir

Jameson Rayner, Carter Townsend  
Basstactix  
20 pounds, 10 ounces



## 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 in 2007 to promote clean family fun and education through fishing, and are proud partners in fishing with MLF. Visit [bassfederation.com](http://bassfederation.com) or [highschoolfishing.org](http://highschoolfishing.org) and "LIKE US" on Facebook.



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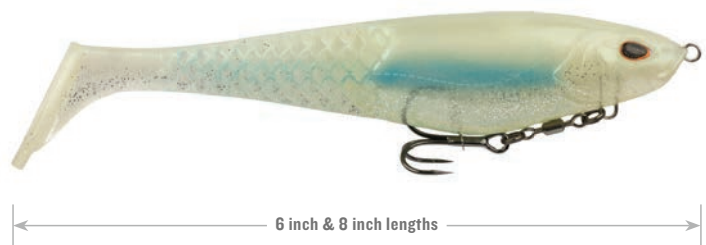
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