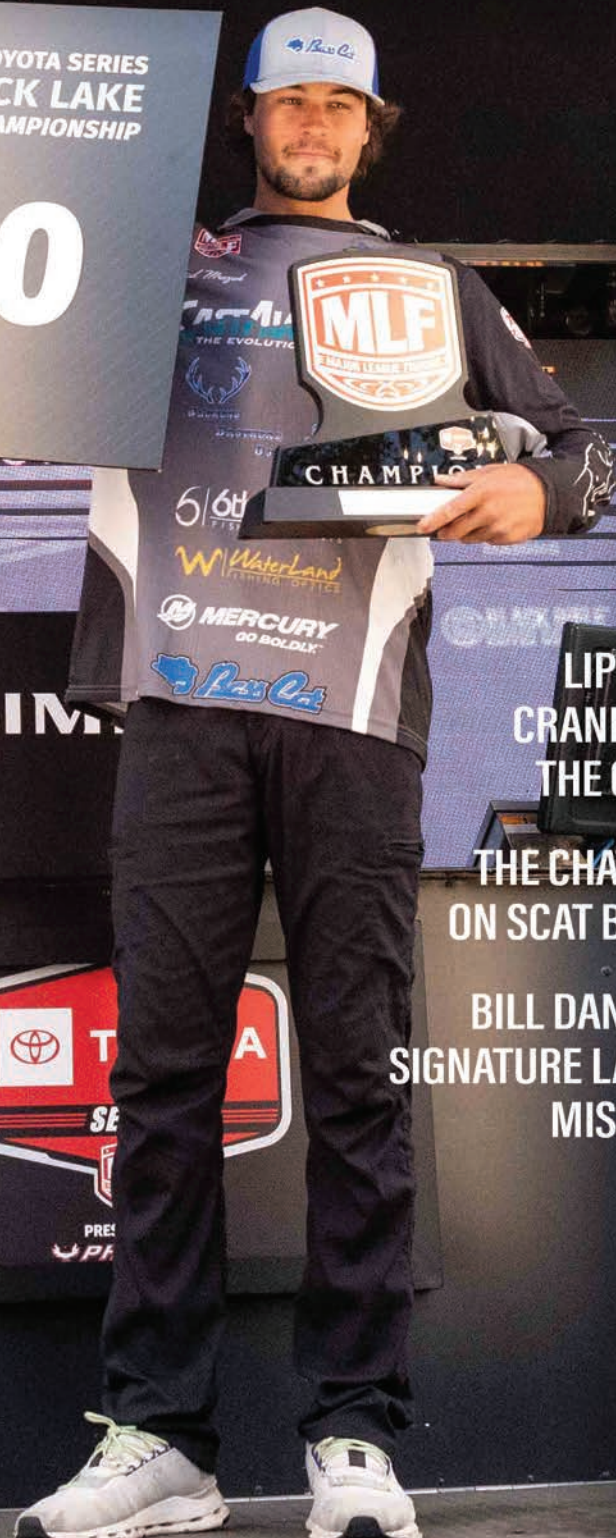




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(RE)EMBRACING THE ACTION

If you're even a passing fan of sports in North America, you're probably aware that most successful leagues — and the games they play — have fascinating, complicated and sometimes improbable origin stories.

More than 100 years before the National Football League became the multi-billion dollar international juggernaut it is today, it was born in a Hupmobile auto showroom in Canton, Ohio, where four teams from Ohio met to form the American Professional Football Association (the precursor to the NFL). Since then, the game's scoring standards have changed noticeably and consistently — touchdowns and field goals were both worth 4 points at one time — and game play has evolved to match the times and technology as both the viewing audience and participation in the sport have expanded.

Sound familiar?

Roughly a month before this issue of *MLF Bass Fishing* magazine went to press, Major League Fishing announced a handful of notable changes to both the game play and roster structure of the Bass Pro Tour. The scoring standard of the five-year-old league returned to the original MLF format, where every fish over a certain agreed-upon weight — a “scorable” fish, in our parlance — counts toward an angler's daily total. That's a departure from the five-fish-limit competition standard utilized in 2023 and a return to the DNA of MLF — the adrenaline surge of the “every fish counts” format that the league brought to the public in 2011.

This change was far from arbitrary.

The transition to a five-fish format in 2023 occurred after careful consideration of requests from both anglers and fans, who were interested in how the slower-paced, five-fish game would look, sound and feel on SCORETRACKER® and on a livestream. The beauty of the catch/weigh/release format and the revolutionary live scoreboard is that it's always lent itself to creative ideas and adjustments to the scoring of a tournament, and 2023 seemed like the right time to lean into a different method of scoring.

While the 2023 season certainly produced some drama and intrigue — Chris Lane's “Hail Mary” win at Stage One on the Kissimmee Chain is one of the greatest moments in the history of the sport — the facts are impossible to deny: The Bass Pro Tour pace slowed considerably in 2023. Anglers were more prone to go into “practice mode” earlier, and the dynamics of the six-day competition changed. Analytics tell us that fishing fans would come to the *MLFNOW!* livestream or check SCORETRACKER® for live updates, bounce, and then return throughout the day in shorter windows.

The reasons why aren't complicated. While the five-biggest-fish game is established, beloved and deeply ingrained in tournament fishing — including Major League Fishing's highly popular MLF5 circuits and just about every club tournament you all fish — it's just not as action-oriented, dynamic and watchable for a broad-based live viewing audience as the “every fish counts” structure. Notwithstanding the furious debates on social media between five-fish fans and supporters of “every fish counts,” the numbers and trends don't lie: In a live sports viewing environment where action is the norm and attention spans are more mercurial by the day, a quicker-paced game is just more binge-worthy.

Hence the NBA shot clock, the MLB pitch timer and the play clock in the NFL. Viewers of live competitions like their games fast, and in 2024, the Bass Pro Tour will deliver that pace.

I'm always interested in your thoughts, dear readers. If you'd like to skip the chaotic queue on social media and chat about the plusses, minuses and in-betweens of competition formats (or any other bass-related subject, really), please drop me a line: Joel.Shangle@MajorLeagueFishing.com.

Here's to the year that's passed, and to a healthy, fruitful 2024.

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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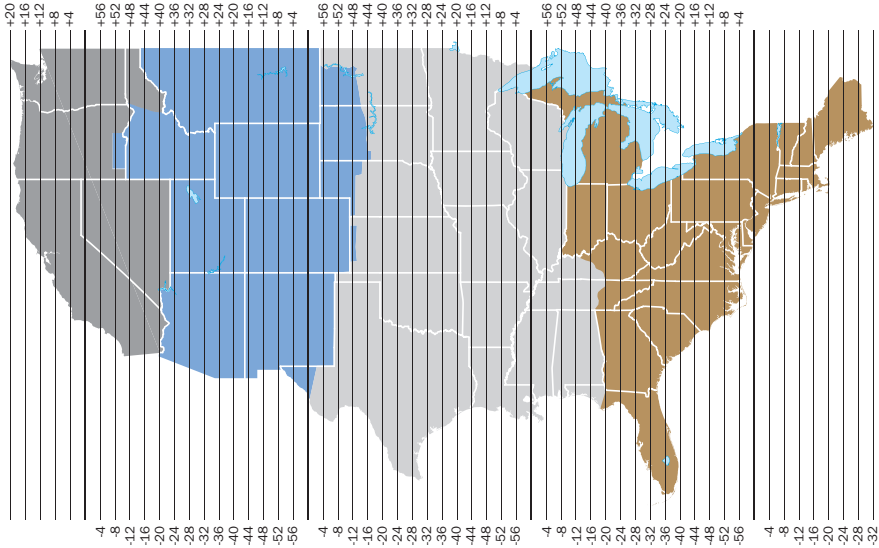
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SOLUNAR TABLES

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2024

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 MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME
 CENTRAL STANDARD TIME
 EASTERN STANDARD TIME



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

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LOOKING FORWARD TO FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIVISION SUCCESSES IN 2024



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

Preparation for the upcoming Bass Pro Tour season is well underway for the MLF Fisheries Management Division in Partnership with Berkley Labs.

Fall and winter might mark the offseason for most tournament trails, but it's a busy time for us biologists. Just like anglers often use this time of year to scout and research the competition venues for next season, the MLF FMD is hard at work preparing for a 2024 campaign that is chock full of new fisheries.

With the start of the sixth Bass Pro Tour season right around the corner, one task at hand is determining the minimum scorable bass weight for each event.

When Major League Fishing first started – way back in the Cup days of 2011 – all bass added to anglers' total weight. That quickly evolved to 1-pound fish or better being scorable; in 2019, when the BPT started, that was the minimum weight used. Anglers and fans wanted to see tougher competition, so in 2020, the variable minimum weight system began. This system provides a science-based minimum scorable weight for each event. Decided by factors like average weight of a legal bass in the fishery, time of year and competition format, the minimum weight has ranged from 1 pound, 4 ounces to 2 pounds.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

The MLF FMD will continue its science-based process to set Bass Pro Tour scorable bass minimums in 2024.

The MLF FMD has developed a mathematical way to determine the suggested minimum weight using survey data from state agencies. Starting with a data set that may include several hundred fish caught via electrofishing in recent years, we filter out all fish that are not of legal length for anglers to possess. That usually leaves us with a few hundred. From there, we determine average weight at legal length, average weight overall and variance from legal to heaviest fish. The results go into a formula that produces a minimum weight designed to target around 75% of legal fish. We then submit that to the anglers and let them debate and approve the final number.

SETTING HABITAT RESTORATION IN MOTION

That's not the only project being tackled by the MLF FMD during the offseason. Each fall, we also begin planning for the following spring's REDCREST and submit proposals for the upcoming year's Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Projects.

It might surprise most anglers to know that your state fisheries biologist likely doesn't have complete control over the habitat within your favorite fishery. Instead, each waterway has an "authority," or owner. This could be a river authority, the U.S. Corps of Engineers, a power company or a city. Those organizations hold the final say on most habitat-related questions, including where, when and what can be used as habitat, as well as vegetation management.

As a result, planning a Habitat Restoration Project is not as simple as showing up to a lake with some new cover. The first step is working with state fisheries biologists to identify opportunities in or near a community hosting a BPT event. Our criteria are simple: We want to do projects on fisheries that need improvement, have measurable outcomes or regular surveys, focus on specific types of habitat (like recovery habitat for fish released following tournaments), and the ability to publish the GPS location of the project for public access. If we find something promising, we take our proposal to the organization that has authority over the fishery.

That organization might have a permitting process. If so, to plan the project, we'll need to hold a couple of meetings, fill out the permit and potentially wait a few months to get it approved. If there's no permit needed, a standing permit, or a project in place, we can usually get approval right away.

Once we're approved, the excitement begins. We work with both biologists and the water authority to select materials and locations plus set dates for the build and deployment. With BPT pros often volunteering to help during their days off from competition, we prefer to find a build site within an hour of competition waters.

MossBack Fish Habitat has been a key partner in these projects for the past three years, providing recycled PVC materials that are plasticizer free and extremely effective at holding fish. But these have to be weighed so that they sink, which requires a large amount of concrete and cinder blocks. So we must find community partners that can support the projects by providing those materials. The past two seasons, local Lowe's Home Improvement stores have been a huge supporter, providing cinder blocks for all our projects.

each tournament. Fisheries like Toledo Bend that straddle two states will allow us to share data with both (in that case, Louisiana and Texas).

As a biologist and fan, this is the fun part. We get to engage the managers of fisheries like the Chowan River, where few professional events have ever been held, and hear the challenges unique to that fishery. Breaking down those challenges — or, say, the great history of Dale Hollow — create many of the best stories for the Fisheries Management

Division page of MajorLeagueFishing.com. Additionally, the 2024 schedule will feature two repeat locations — the Kissimmee Chain for General Tires Heavy Hitters (May 18-23) and the St. Lawrence River for Stage 7 (Aug. 6-11). These repeat fisheries allow us to create comparison data that can be used in scientific presentations or further refine minimum scorable weights in the future. Last season, I spent a lot of time analyzing data from the Kissimmee Chain in anticipation of a five-fish limit. Based on that research, I determined that the minimum scorable weight had a greater impact on the total number of scorable bass caught during an event than the format (five fish vs. every fish counts). We will see if that holds true after a fourth visit to the fishery.

The work for 2024 is just beginning within the MLF FMD, and we anticipate a season full of successful partnerships, collaborations and scientific discussions. We continue to strive for

ways to improve our fisheries resources, engage anglers in stewardship and improve the lives of the fish we all love to catch. ■



MossBack Fish Habitat provides key materials for FMD habitat projects.

PHOTO BY KANYAN KLEIN

SHARING RESEARCH WITH STATE BIOLOGISTS

Planning for the season ahead also includes working with the scientific community to assess fisheries. In 2024, the Bass Pro Tour will visit six new fisheries in the regular season and another for REDCREST. This means meeting with at least seven biologists and providing them access to our state database.

Our partnerships with local biologists are a two-way street. While they offer us information on the fisheries prior to events, SCORETRACKER® provides an unbelievable amount of information relevant to them that we can share afterward. With the BPT returning to the every-fish-counts format in 2024, we should see more fish catches and thus even more data. State biologists will receive a data set following their event that will include species, weight, time, GPS location, habitat type and depth range in five-foot increments for every bass caught — likely more than 1,500 at



Volunteers and MLF pros work together to build habitat for placement in local lakes.

PHOTO BY KANYAN KLEIN

2023 MLF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIVISION IMPACT REPORT

Partnerships buoyed successful efforts to protect and enhance fisheries resources



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

The founding principle of the MLF Fisheries Management Division was the idea that conservation work is about partnerships.

The 2023 Bass Pro Tour season saw our previously established partnerships continue to flourish. The Ferguson Habitat Booth at REDCREST and Minn Kota Habitat Restoration program both expanded to new heights, and our collaboration with state agencies as well as angler groups continued to develop. As a result, the MLF FMD experienced another successful year living out its mission of protecting and improving fishery resources.

REDCREST 2023

While BPT anglers battled for the championship trophy on Lake Norman, the MLF FMD led several events at the 2023 REDCREST expo to promote conservation. One of them saw the instruction of 24 Boy Scouts, resulting in them earning Fish and Wildlife merit badges.

MLF FMD co-director Steven Bardin earned certification as a Scout

merit badge instructor and used his background as a fisheries biologist and college professor to write a curriculum for the Scouts. They received daily instruction on the principles of fisheries management, surveying methods, fish anatomy, fish identification, habitat restoration and angler recycling programs. Instructors included Bardin, MLF co-founder Gary Klein, state biologists from North Carolina and South Carolina, the American Eagle Foundation and Chris Pitsilos from Berkley labs.

A primary requirement for earning the merit badge is creating a fisheries improvement project. With the help of Ferguson, the MLF FMD provided the materials and instructions for the Scouts to build 75 line-recycling tubes. These tubes were donated to be installed in public access areas in North Carolina and South Carolina, encouraging anglers to responsibly discard fishing line. Passing an exit exam, during which the Scouts had to demonstrate their knowledge in fish

and wildlife management, represented the final step in earning their badges.


Educating the Scouts wasn't the only goal for MLF FMD at REDCREST. We wanted to give the public insight into MLF's conservation efforts, as well as what the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission and American Eagle Foundation were doing locally. Each day, Bardin and Klein led three 30-minute conservation seminars. These seminars allowed fans to engage and ask questions about their favorite fisheries, how fisheries management works and what our MLF FMD programs do. They covered topics such as reservoir aging, fish care and habitat management.

Our final REDCREST project was to facilitate conservation donations from the Kevin VanDam Foundation. VanDam started this program in 2022 by making donations to the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

In 2023, the foundation partnered with MossBack Fish Habitat to support the Boy Scouts' merit badge projects by providing materials for the scouts to build artificial fish habitat during the expo. This habitat was then donated to the NCWRC to be installed on Lake Norman. The Kevin VanDam Foundation also donated \$5,000 for the stocking of F1 largemouth bass into Gaston, Norman, and Jordan lakes. The state matched the donation three times, bringing the total to \$20,000. These lakes have experienced an invasion of Alabama bass, which, without management, will completely replace native spotted and smallmouth and reduce largemouth to historically low population densities. VanDam's donation marked the first step in a long restoration process and a significant example of conservation leadership from one of the best anglers in the world.



Local Boy Scouts participated in an FMD habitat project at REDCREST 2023.



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Kevin VanDam and his foundation were big supporters of FMD projects in 2023.

PHOTO BY KANAN KLEIN

MINN KOTA HABITAT RESTORATION

The MLF FMD does quite a bit of hands-on habitat work each season. This year was no different, with Minn Kota Habitat Restoration projects occurring while the pros competed in Stage Three at Lake Murray and General Tire Heavy Hitters at Caney Creek and Bussey Brake. The largescale projects focused on improving smaller nearby impoundments that have high recreational value.

The first project focused on South Carolina's Lake Greenwood. The project originally began in 2019, when the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Greenwood County Lake Management installed 300 structures on 19 sites within the 11,400-acre reservoir. Later, an additional 225 structures were provided to registered dock owners. Supported by MossBack and Mercury Marine, the MLF FMD donated 99 additional structures. BPT pros Greg Vinson, Kelly Jordon and Michael Neal helped construct and deploy the habitat at sites designated by the state, the locations of which can

be found on the SCDNR website. The Louisiana project took place on Lake Claiborne, a 6,400-acre fishery currently undergoing intense management efforts. The lake had recently been restocked with 80,000 Florida-strain largemouth bass and 20,000 bluegill. Supported by Humminbird, the MLF FMD provided 80 MossBack structures to protect these newly stocked fish. Duck Dynasty star John Godwin joined volunteers Dakota Ebare, Klein and VanDam in building the habitat. That same day, they deployed the structures into small cluster sites, proving that with a motivated group of anglers, habitat restoration can be a quick process.

The contributions made during REDCREST, Heavy Hitters and Stage 3 will offer long-term benefits to those reservoirs. A new program launched in 2023, Minn Kota Habitat Rewind, offered proof. In May, VanDam visited Alabama's Duck River Reservoir, where the MLF FMD had deployed 85 fish structures in 2022. VanDam spent a day on the water interviewing anglers, graphing the structure and, of course, catching bass. The video can be found on the MLF YouTube channel and Fisheries Management Division webpage at MajorLeagueFishing.com (scan QR code to watch).

Scan here to view video.



STATE AND ANGLER PARTNERSHIPS

The Bass Pro Tour doesn't only showcase the top anglers in the country. Since its inception, the tour has been an invaluable source of fisheries data. Across six days of competition, a BPT event can provide data equivalent to 10 years of electrofishing surveys.

The numbers are impressive. During the 2023 regular season, BPT anglers logged 13,565 scorable bass, plus an

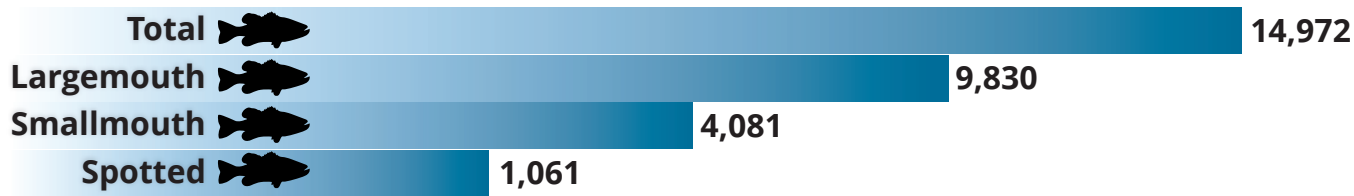
additional 1,105 at REDCREST and 302 at Heavy Hitters. Those nearly 15,000 catches included 9,830 largemouth, 4,081 smallmouth and 1,061 Alabama/spotted bass. This data was provided to state biologists following each event. In addition, we've already logged the fish catches from the General Tire Team Series events filmed this fall and will add those to the state database once they air in 2024.

Even more important than sheer numbers, the catch data also provides insight into advanced-size fish, which are often difficult to sample in meaningful numbers. The MLF FMD continued collecting DNA swabs from all largemouth bass weighing more than 7 pounds caught during Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Invitationals competition. In 2023, we totaled 62 samples from six states. That included a 7-pounder from Cayuga Lake in New York — the farthest northern fish we've ever sampled. Those samples are currently being processed at Auburn University. Once the results are in, we will publish an update online.

Our collaboration with and support of state agencies doesn't end with the data we collect. Each fall, we invite biologists to attend an online day of collaboration called the MLF FMD Berkley Labs Summit. This year, the December event will showcase the findings of several research efforts. We also support the conservation efforts of anglers, such as Cliff Crochet's Every Fish Matters project, and keep striving to educate the public about conservation via online content like the "meet your biologist" series.

Thanks to our great partners, the MLF FMD looks forward to continuing to find new ways to promote fisheries conservation in 2024. ■

BPT LOGGED SCORABLE BASS IN 2023



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BALLY BET ANGLER OF THE YEAR: REWARDING EXCELLENCE FOR BECKER, WHEELER, PAST AOYS

In December 2021, Bally's Corporation signed on as the title sponsor of the most coveted trophy on the Bass Pro Tour, the Bally Bet Angler of the Year. Over the past two seasons, the race to claim the crown has made for some compelling storylines — especially in 2023, when the top four anglers finished within five points of one another. Here's a look back at the highlights from the Bally Bet AOY era, plus a stab at a few anglers who could contend for the title in 2024.

CASH PRIZE AMPLIFIES PRESTIGE

Whether it's for a local weeknight series or a national tour, an angler of the year award represents the ultimate prize, as it rewards excellence across a full season. Bally's added some extra juice for Bass Pro Tour anglers by putting additional money on the line, too.

Each of the past two years, Bally's has presented the Angler of the Year with a \$100,000 payday. That meant Matt Becker left Stage Seven with two \$100,000 checks this year — one for winning at Saginaw Bay and the other for taking the points title in the process. Additionally, at REDCREST 2022, Bally's paid \$50,000 to the winners of the AOY titles that predated its partnership with MLF: Edwin Evers (2019), Jordan Lee (2020) and Jacob Wheeler (2021).



WHEELER STAYS DOMINANT, BUT BECKER PROVES A WORTHY CHALLENGER

Wheeler kept his momentum rolling into 2022, winning the first Bally Bet Angler of the Year award in convincing fashion. While he didn't win a BPT event (after winning three times in 2021), Wheeler made six of seven Knockout Rounds and never

finished worse than 11th. His unmatched consistency gave him a 70-point margin over second place and further stamped him as the top tournament angler in the country.



To the surprise of no one, Wheeler made another run at keeping his crown in 2023. Despite a rare dud at Lake Murray, where he finished tied for 77th, he entered the season's final event just seven points back of leader Alton Jones Jr. But a magical final day from Becker allowed him to leapfrog

Wheeler, Jones and Ott DeFoe to take the title in his debut season. Could Becker challenge Wheeler's claim as the perennial angler to beat in the points race? Time will tell.

TWO ANGLERS KNOCKING ON AOY DOOR

If history is any indication, we can expect Wheeler and DeFoe to contend for the 2024 AOY title. Each has finished among the top 10 at least three times during the first five Bass Pro Tour seasons. And it would come as a surprise if Becker doesn't make a spirited defense of his title.

But a couple other names who haven't received quite as much publicity deserve inclusion on the short list of candidates, too. Both Dakota Ebare and Jesse Wiggins have finished among the top six in the AOY standings each of the past two seasons, proving that regardless of location, conditions or species, they can catch 'em. Ebare finished fourth in 2022, his BPT debut, and fifth in 2023. Wiggins has been sixth both years. What's that saying about knocking on the door enough and eventually it'll open? Don't be surprised if either Ebare or Wiggins breaks down said door next season. ■



Jacob Wheeler Photo: MLF

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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.

BASS FISHING'S BLURRED LINES: THE EVOLUTION OF PRACTICING DURING COMPETITION

Many years ago, in the old-school derby era, anglers had two types of days: practice days and tournament days. Practice days were for exploring and fishing new water; tournament days were for competing – as in, go to the juice and stay put. The rule was, during the tournament, stick to familiar waters at all times.

Competition days – when entry fees slipped away as the clock ticked – were not the days to wander off to fish new, never-before-seen waters. Back then, just the thought of doing so seemed crazy. The idea was always to be fishing somewhere fish had been caught before, or at least where a bite occurred.

These days, bass pros have

no problem fishing new water during competition days. I'm talking about places they've never seen in their lives, in completely unfamiliar parts of a lake. I would venture to say it's much more the norm than the exception, at just about every tournament level. That old line between practice and competition has become increasingly blurred.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

THE NEW PRACTICE NECESSITY

On the Bass Pro Tour, where anglers get two days of practice prior to each event, practicing on the fly during competition is a necessity. It's a trend continued from the old MLF Cups, when there were no practice days at all – practice occurred during competition.

As a result, with SCORETRACKER® providing real-time scoring, pros have become quite adept at catching enough weight to get above the Toro Cut Line and then running new water to practice for the upcoming days. With weights resetting to zero after the qualifying round, there's no sense in racking up big weights early in the event, which used to be the goal in traditional,

cumulative-weight tournaments. On the BPT, the reward of boating a big bag early is getting more time to practice.

But even in standard, cumulative-weight formats, gambling on new water has become a better option than dying on the vine in an area that has nothing more to offer. The evolution of practicing – essentially, fishing new water – during the tournament makes more sense now than ever before, for several reasons.

FAST-CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS

These days, what's here today is gone tomorrow, a fact begotten by both manmade and environmental factors. Weather, water color, water level, bait presence and current velocities change in a matter of hours. With that, it's mandatory to keep a nose to the water to pick up the scent of new bite windows opening.

Plus, today's intense fishing pressure on popular tournament lakes means that traditional patterns are frequently fractured during events. The standard cover options central to pattern fishing — such as flooded bushes, rock transitions, laydowns, channel swing banks, isolated cover, riprap, clay points, matted vegetation and docks — all get throttled by a steady stream of lures. At some point it becomes a better strategy to fish something totally off the wall than to get in the same pattern rotation with everyone else.

TECHNOLOGY BROADENED THE HORIZON

Yesteryear's bass-fishing rig limited anglers' ability to cover water compared to modern fishing chariots. Boats are faster, trolling motors are far more powerful and, of course, electronics can now "see" in all different directions around the boat.

Dating back to the advent of 3D sonar in the form of side- and down-scan in the mid 2000's, pros began the trend of idling more than they fished during designated practice days. In time, that morphed into idling without fishing during competition. Once an angler secured a solid limit, he would spend hours staring at a screen in

search of better schools with bigger fish before making another cast.

Today, utilizing high-speed trolling motors in conjunction with forward-facing sonar has turned into the new-school way of supersonic sight-fishing – regardless of whether bass are on beds. Much like old-school bed-fishing anglers used to cruise the banks and look for new beds during tournaments, modern competitors troll around in the middle of the lake looking for bass and bait on the fly, at all times of the year. Twenty years ago, you would've had to poke around out there by aimlessly dragging a worm – far too inefficient to spend tournament time doing so. Nowadays, it's become more effective to idle, scan, troll and beam than to continue making casts.

MORE CONFIDENCE

Today's tournament bass anglers, as a whole, are far better than they used to be. Solid fishing information is disseminated at such a fast rate that anglers can glean in several years what it took the pioneers of bass fishing a lifetime to learn. Add to that the use of far better equipment, lures and the lightning-fast search capacity of electronics, and tournament anglers have more confidence now than ever before.

They know what fishy water looks like without wetting a line. They can run into tributaries, look at water color and know if it's fishable or not. Perhaps what was unfishable two days ago is prime habitat now – maybe a big wind blew out the banks during practice, but after a calm first day of the tournament, it's settling back down and getting right again. Regardless of the scenario, new windows are always opening up somewhere, and today's angler knows that staying glued to the same old spots for the sake of familiarity can be a hindrance to discovering these new, potentially winning opportunities.

It's no coincidence that some of the best pros in the game today are also the best at gambling on new water to show them the way to the next fish. Indeed, the line between practice and competition continues to dissolve. ■



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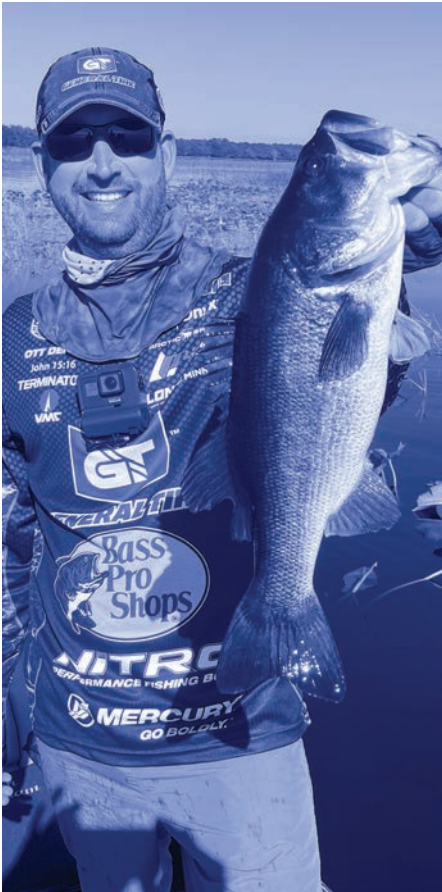


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.

WHEN NOT TO USE FORWARD-FACING SONAR

How (and why) three Top 20 Bass Pro Tour pros have continued to succeed with limited live sonar usage

Forward-facing sonar has quickly become a crucial tool for tournament bass-fishing success. It's now ubiquitous on the top-level tours, with seemingly every recent champion crediting the technology for helping bring about their wins. Just as quickly, it's become a lightning rod for controversy. Plenty of fans and viewers have voiced the complaint that pros spend entire tournaments with their eyes glued to their depth finders, endlessly scanning.

I was relatively surprised to learn that, for at least a few

anglers, that's not entirely the actual reality.

I questioned three long-time veterans, all of whom placed in the Top 20 of the Bass Pro Tour standings in 2023, on their use of forward-facing sonar (FFS). Specifically, how much of their season did they devote to watching fish react to lures on screens?

Three-time FLW Tour Angler of the Year Andy Morgan came in at around 20% by his estimation; Forrest Wood Cup champion Brent Ehrler about the same. Three-time BPT winner Ott DeFoe claims 10%, at most. Turns

out, while it might seem like everyone these days fishes with their heads down and eyes locked on a screen, these bass-fishing icons just aren't that into it.

It's worth noting that this sample of pros likely falls on the low end of FFS use among BPT anglers. Each has been touring nationally far longer than the technology has been around. Then again, their success, even in the 'Scope era, is inarguable. The panel of experts explains why they haven't gone all-in on FFS and when it does have a place in their tournament arsenals.

WHEN AND WHERE TO UNLEASH THE BEAM

A true student of the game, DeFoe always has a way to explain the “why” behind the bite.

“When it comes to looking at actual fish, I’m only using FFS where and when bass suspend,” he explains. That primarily occurs in highland reservoirs, clear water and “anywhere there’s small-mouth.”

He also leans on it more at certain times of year — fall through prespawn. Or, to be more specific, the season that sees more fish leave the bank and venture into open water in pursuit of baitfish.

Ehrler agrees with the smallmouth angle but sprinkles some FFS into his offshore summertime largemouth program as well.

“For me, it’s about seeing targets,” Ehrler says. “Being more effective with my casts and making sure my bait is in the strike zone is (paramount) in the summer. I know where the fish live, and I want my bait there.”

Morgan stays old-school for a reason that’s hard to argue with: success. The majority of his nearly \$2.8 million in career earnings has come in the shallows.

“If I can make a shallow game work, that’s my program,” he says. “It’s hard to turn your back on what’s worked in the past.”

However, FFS occasionally plays an important role in Morgan’s bank-beater approach, too.

“I call it ‘fine-tune scanning,’” he says. “An example is dock fishing. I’ll scan docks and look for fish reacting to my casts in places that other guys miss.”

Morgan points out that “everybody has the same technology and finds the best stuff,” and a key is often discovering a hidden hotspot that doesn’t look good when quickly side-scanned. Docks void of brush in lakes that feature an abundance of planted cover represent one example.

Using FFS, Morgan can sometimes out hustle the rest of the field and unearth a hidden gem.

DIALING IN LURE CHOICES

It doesn’t take firsthand experience with FFS to understand its efficacy for selecting the best lure. Live shots of pros with 20 rods on deck have become the

norm, confirming that high-level tournament bass fishing is a game of fine tuning. But does it really take that much gear to trigger a bite?

Ehrler doesn’t think so.

“There are three bait options in my offshore program,” says Ehrler. “A soft bait like a drop-shot or Neko, or like the shad bait on a jighead that’s so popular right now. Then there’s a jerkbait and a crankbait. Those are the three categories that I’m going to try on any offshore spot.”

If one of Ehrler’s core lure groups doesn’t trigger a response, he’s most often on to the next spot. However, FFS can help him dial in which rod to pick up first. Take Douglas Lake, for example, where Ehrler finished 14th last season. He discovered his primary bait thanks to FFS.

“Those fish wanted nothing but a jerkbait,” Ehrler says. “So even in places where they would simply follow a jerkbait (and not strike) in practice, I marked those fish.”

During the tournament, Ehrler cycled through all his waypoints until he located a biting group. Sometimes, three stops on the same location were necessary before triggering a strike. Live sonar put him ahead of the curve by giving him confidence in his bait selection, allowing him to tinker with variables like casting angle, cadence and timing.

SEPARATING BITERS FROM NON-BITERS

DeFoe further expounded on the mysterious subject of timing. Catching bass isn’t just about finding them. Fish have to be in the right position, ready to feed.

That’s always been true. But in the FFS age, when DeFoe can see that he’s fishing in locations where fish live, it’s become important for him to stick to his traditional run-and-gun approach. (“More places, more fish,” he says.) When bass are actively feeding, he’s able to trip their trigger quickly, without much adaptation to his techniques. When they aren’t, it’s time to move.

“Forward-facing sonar showed me how many fish won’t bite,” DeFoe says. Ehrler wholeheartedly agrees.

“When I first put (FFS) on my boat, I spent a lot of time trying to catch fish I was seeing,” he says. “I learned pretty quickly that you’ll go crazy looking at

fish that don’t bite. Now, I move on pretty quick (when I’m seeing fish that won’t bite). A times, I just have to admit that what I’m viewing are non-biting bass, and I need to ignore them and fish.”

Morgan will take it a step further, turning his electronics off if he finds himself spending too much time trying to coax the same stubborn bass into biting. Since the start of his tournament career, Morgan has run his business based on numbers, and sometimes the numbers just don’t add up with FFS.

“It’s all about efficiency: Productive water, productive lures, keep moving, eventually you get the numbers right,” Morgan says. “You get caught looking and looking on forward-facing sonar, then, next thing you know, it’s like, ‘God, I’ve wasted five hours!’ In that same five hours (without FFS), more than likely, I would have found something. Seeing none and catching five is better than seeing a thousand and catching three.”

TOURNAMENT STRATEGIES IN THE FFS AGE

Can it still be done, winning a multi-day event without the use of FFS?

“Boy, it’s mighty hard to,” Morgan admits. “Now a one-day event, like a BFL? Heck yes you can win without it.”

Ultimately, DeFoe weighs personal efficiency when deciding how much (or whether at all) to incorporate FFS into his gameplan for a given tournament. He’d much rather run up a river or find some other scenario where he doesn’t need to lean on the beam. But that doesn’t mean he’s ignoring FFS.

“I fish through an area so much slower (with FFS),” he says. “Right now, I’m just not efficient with it. It’s not fast enough. I’ve found that I catch fewer fish in the long run (with FFS). The percentage of biters is irrelevant. But I remember how it was with Humminbird 360. I started slowly, and then adapted.”

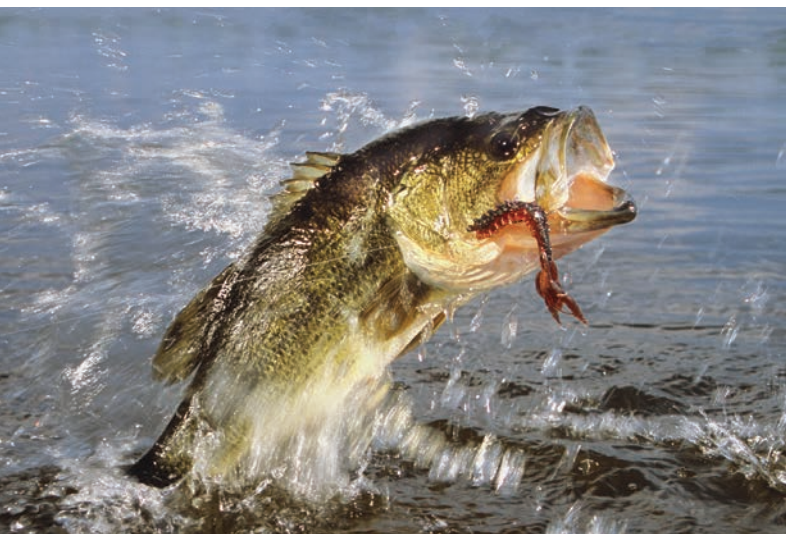
More than likely, the FFS revolution is just getting started. Manufacturers are already building clearer units with the ability to separate targets in nearly any depth of water, and anglers will continue to push the envelope by finding new applications for the technology.

But for the time being, the biggest key in using forward-facing sonar – at least for successful veterans like DeFoe, Morgan and Ehrler – may be knowing when to turn it off. ■



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The bend in Matt Stefan's rod is of his own creation: Stefan is one pro who builds his own rods.



PHOTO BY JOOY WHITE



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.

OF FISHING RODS AND WINE

Why building your own rods is not only attainable but will make you a better angler

Do you think you can tell the difference between a mediocre fishing rod and a great one?

More than likely, your immediate response is, "Pfft! Yes!" And if so, here's a follow-up question: How?

Sensitivity, right? Then there's the weight, with lighter often meaning better. And, of course, the action is super important, which we test with the old bend-the-rod-tip test.

But whether you realize it or not, there are probably two traits that play even bigger roles in your assessment – label and price. We've been conditioned to believe certain brands are better than others, and a \$400 rod is far superior to a

\$100 one. After all, it must be to better to warrant a much higher price ... right?

A guy by the name of Steve Levitt tested this theory with wine.

Levitt is a renowned economist known for co-authoring the best-selling book *Freakonomics* and its sequels. Yet, long before all that, he was invited to be a member of an elite Harvard club, The Society of Fellows. If the club sounds snobbish, you're not wrong. It was a group of Nobel Prize winners and other geniuses who would gather regularly for dinner, enjoying lavish meals and expensive wines.

Well, Levitt noticed he couldn't really taste a difference between the wines at those dinners

and the cheap ones he enjoyed with friends. So, he devised a test.

He took two of the most expensive wines from the society's cellars, then went to the local liquor store and bought the cheapest wine it had. He poured each into its own decanter, with one of the expensive bottles split between two separate decanters, so all the members believed they were drinking four different types of wines. Then he had them all taste each wine and rate them.

You know what the results were? All "four" wines received nearly identical average ratings, and surprisingly, the two different decanters that contained the same wine were rated as being most different from one another.

Basically, take away the label and even the most experienced wine drinkers couldn't tell the difference between an expensive wine and cheap one.

Hate the break it to you, but it's probably the same with fishing rods.

Even most professional anglers, when being honest, will admit that at a certain point, all rods are quality rods, regardless of price point. That's not a knock on them or rod manufacturers. The reality is they just don't truly know all that goes into making a quality rod, just like the fellows didn't know what all went into a quality wine.

Unless you actually make them yourself, it's almost impossible to know — something pros like Matthew Stefan figured out only once they started building their own rods.

"Honestly, it changed everything," the Bass Pro Tour rookie-to-be says. "Learning about rod blanks and how they function, how guide placement and line sizes effect performance, ... you develop a deeper understanding of the rod-reel-line-lure sequence. Building your own rods gives understanding on how all the pieces of the puzzle affect one another."

So, if you truly want to answer "yes" to the question at the start of this column, you need to start building your own rods. Fortunately, Stefan has some tips for doing so, starting with ...

IT'S EASIER THAN IT SEEMS

Most anglers, myself included, have typically regarding building rods yourself

as a complicated, mysterious process — one that couldn't be done at home without an advanced degree in engineering or something.

Turns out, all you need is a kit and the ability to watch YouTube. Seriously, that's how Stefan learned.

He bought a rod-building kit from Mud Hole Tackle, which included all the guides, reel seat, threads, epoxies and, of course, the MHX rod blanks. Then he sat down and watched a handful of tutorials on Mud Hole's website. Before he knew it, he not only had a rod, but a dang great one, thanks to his improved understanding of what actually makes a rod great. Which then lent itself to another realization ...

IT SETS YOU APART

In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

Well, most anglers are blind to how to build (and just as importantly, repair) fishing rods. Thus, by learning how to do it, Stefan inadvertently became the go-to guy for advice on rods because he actually understood what made a good one. He also found himself better able to pair rods to lures and techniques, which is something he says has been a key to his growing success in recent years.

Oh, and remember that repairs part? Once other anglers find out you build rods, Stefan says, don't be surprised if everyone from the local bass club to fellow professionals come calling to help

repair broken rod tips and guides. Not a bad way to make a little extra money, especially considering ...

IT'S FAR CHEAPER THAN BUYING RODS OFF THE SHELF

Let's do a quick math equation.

Say you want a high-end rod. Option A is to buy a premade one, which may run you \$400. Option B is to make one, which may cost you \$200 for the rod-building kit and another \$150 for the blank.

So, for the one rod, you save \$50 going with Option B.

But say you love the rod and want a second one. Option A means shelling out another \$400, but Option B now requires only \$150 for the blank and maybe another \$50 for components, since you still have all the thread, epoxies and other materials from the original kit.

For two rods, Option B has now saved you \$250. Now imagine doing that for five or 10, and it quickly becomes clear how much money you can save by building your own rods. That goes for guys buying \$150 rods, too, as the cost of blanks and components goes down with your price point.

Throw in the ability to customize a rod's handle style, length, colors, action, sensitivity and weight to whatever you want — and actually know why you're doing these things — and you'll finally be able to truly answer "yes" to that question at the beginning. ■



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TIPS FROM TIGHT LIPS ON FISHING

LIPLESS CRANKBAITS IN THE COLD

THE SAME LIPLESS CRANKBAITS YOU SET ASIDE AFTER PRESPAWN MAY
BE THE DEADLIEST TOOLS IN YOUR TACKLE ARSENAL THIS WINTER

By Mike Pehanich | PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN



*"IT STAYS CENTERED ON THE FALL, AND IT ALSO HAS
MORE SHIMMY, A MORE ENTICING ACTION ON THE FALL."*

— Brandon Coulter on the Berkley Warpig | PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA





BERKLEY WARPIG
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**BOOYAH
ONE KNOCKER**
COLOR: YELLOW PERCH

**RAPALA
RIPPLIN RAP 05**
COLOR: CHARTREUSE SHAD

ADD SOME COLOR

Shad and crawfish patterns are lipless crankbait staples, but don't overlook perch and bluegill colors for lakes where these fish are the primary forage. Chartreuse can excel in muddy water conditions.

Perhaps the worst sin of omission in bass fishing is stowing away one's lipless crankbait collection after prespawn. Just about every angler knows the power of cranking and ripping lipless baits through grass each spring, yet most proceed to bury their lipless boxes under half a dozen tackle trays for the rest of the season.

It's a mistake that stems from underestimating the versatility of a lure category that can do far more than trigger strikes around growing grass. These baits can catch bass from a foot of water to 40. Most importantly, their tight action makes them one of the deadliest tools in your tackle arsenal once your lake catches a chill.

"A lipless bait is always a staple for me when the water is cool, starting in fall and right through prespawn, and sometimes even postspawn," says Texas pro Dakota Ebare. "It can get fish to bite that don't want to bite anything else."

So, why do no-lips get such little respect this time of year? Designation as a "crankbait" explains part of the misguidance. All too often, anglers expect the vibrating rattle baits to do all the work for them.

"A standard crankbait is down there rooting around, deflecting, doing its thing," says Ott DeFoe, who finished third in Angler of the Year points during the 2023 Bass Pro Tour season. "But a lipless doesn't deflect as much on its own. Rod tip movement gets it

to lift like a regular crankbait would deflect. I'm always twitching my rod tip, making the bait move erratically, but not like a jerkbait ... just adding subtle twitches."

Many anglers pigeonhole lipless baits solely as shallow grass fishing tools — another mistake.

"The lipless crankbait carries the stigma that it's a grass-oriented, shallow water bait," says BPT angler Jared Lintner. "I've managed a lot of wins and top performances with it in non-grass situations. I fish it at a lot of depths and with a variety of retrieves."

COLD-WATER KILLER

Indeed, versatility is the hidden virtue of lipless crankbaits. A quiet minority trust in them as four-season tools, but all agree that when water temperatures occupy the 40- to low 60-degree range, lipless crankbaits are tough to beat.

"Historically, a lipless crankbait is the last moving bait they bite in fall and the first one they bite in spring outside a jerkbait," says Brandon Coulter, a Bass Pro Tour pro from Knoxville, Tennessee. "When the season is winding down or picking up, it's a necessity. And the colder, the better!"

Boyd Duckett links their effectiveness in cold water to two traits.

"When the water is cold, the bait you need is one with a really tight wobble that you're still able to fish slow," he explains.

Extracting the cold-water magic of a lipless calls for an array of presentations

and attention to detail to dial in the day's pattern. The biggest key can be gleaned from that familiar springtime pattern, when a lipless bait ripped free from the tips of emerging vegetation is notoriously deadly.

That rod tip action produces a variety of lure responses that can trigger a reaction strike — sudden change of direction, a nervous rattle, increased vibration read by the sensory receptors of the bass's lateral line. All signal the desperate flight of a crawfish or forage fish. A bass senses an easy meal as the bait lunges, pauses, falls and then flees.

Any one or a combination of these stimuli can trigger a reaction strike — vegetation optional.

"Guys too often fail to experiment and change up their retrieve," Lintner says. "Stop it, lift it, burn it, twitch it, slow it down, change the cadence. What you do with your rod tip is critical."

Jacob Wheeler employs a wide range of retrieves with his lipless arsenal to match the mood of the fish, from a slow yo-yo to sweeping the bait to a traditional cast and wind. Same goes for Ebare, who warns that subtleties matter even more than usual during the cold-weather months.

"Every day you have to change up your presentation with a lipless," says Ebare, whose bait of choice is Strike King's Red Eyed Shad. "Pay attention to every bite. A subtle, dying action can be very effective. Sometimes it's stroking it, like a jig. Sometimes it's a small rip. Sometimes it's a sweep."



TACKLE TIPS FOR LIPLISS BAITS

GIVEN THE NUANCE involved with winter lipless fishing, carrying multiple rigs and baits in preparation for different conditions can pay dividends. That's Tip No. 1. Here are some other guidelines from top pros about their lipless setups.

ROD

A basic crankbait rod suits many lipless crankbait applications, as anglers need tackle that can make long casts and with enough "forgiveness" that fish can inhale the fast-moving bait and not have the treble hooks pull free during a fight. That generally translates to moderate-action rods, 7-0 to 7-6 in length, of medium to medium-heavy power. But depending on the scenario, you'll find some wiggle room within each tackle component, including rod selection.



PRO TIP: "If I'm fishing grass, I like a stiffer rod — I use a Lew's medium heavy with backbone."
— Dakota Ebare

PRO TIP: "I use my new vibrating jig rod for lipless. It is medium heavy power, but it has a parabolic bend. It has a graphite blank but the feel of a composite rod."
— Jacob Wheeler



REEL

Most pros interviewed for this feature opt for reels with gear ratios between 6.6:1 and 7.5:1.

PRO TIP: "When you're trying different things — working different baits and presentations — it's important that you are doing them all with the same reel. You need to keep variables consistent."
— Dakota Ebare



ROCK & RATTLE
Lipless crankbaits, like the Jackall TN 70 and Storm Arashi Vibe, are right at home around rock and gravel bars.

SPLENDOR IN GRASS AND GRAVEL

For many anglers, cold-water bass fishing might conjure images of plying deep guts or steep bluff walls. But those aren't always the best places to find big fish, especially on lakes with an abundance of aquatic vegetation.

When fishing his home waters of Lake Gunterville, Duckett focuses on inside grass lines when the water gets cold, targeting clumps or "broken grass."

"Big fish winter shallow on these Tennessee River lakes" he says. "When it gets cold, baitfish get disoriented, and bass are there to take advantage. They relate to that inside grass line, 10 to 50 yards from shore. Between that line and the bank is their feeding area."

If current is present — a condition Duckett took advantage of on his way to a Lay Lake Bassmaster Classic win — he seeks out rock and gravel bars and channel swings where opportunistic bass are waiting for baitfish to roll by.

LINE

Fluorocarbon line is preferable for most lipless applications, with 14- to 17-pound line a typical choice in water ranging from a foot to 6 feet deep. The heavier line generally excels in shallower water and grassy situations. Switch to 12- or even 10-pound fluorocarbon when working deeper water.



PRO TIP: "The switch from 14- to 17-pound line takes one foot off the dive."
— Ott DeFoe

HOOKS

Bouncing and crawling lipless lures over rock and other hard cover takes its toll on treble hooks. Check the sharpness of your hooks frequently and replace them if necessary, even during the course of a day.



PRO TIP: Jared Lintner substitutes Trokar #4 round bend treble hooks on baits he plans to work over rocky bottoms.

PRO TIP: "I switch out the hooks on my Arashi Vibe to short-shank VMC hybrid treble hooks. I may change out the front hook two or even three times a day."
— Ott DeFoe



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA

COLD WATER MAGIC

Experimentation with color and retrieve is the key to success when fishing with lipless crankbaits in the cold.

DeFoe finds lipless baits most effective in areas with little depth change, targeting mud flats and banks with a slow taper, preferably with a little gravel, chunk rock or wood mixed in.

"In fall, fish head to these areas to chase bait," he says. "I like areas less than 6 or 7 feet deep, relatively flat or with slow tapers, not bluffs or 45-degree tapers. But baitfish on that flat is the number one requirement."

Wind can help make a flat more productive, too. It generates current, breaks up sunlight at the surface and seems to make fish less spooky — all positives when you're wielding lipless baits.

Inside turns in bottom structure or grass lines can draw schools of bass on natural lakes, notes Wheeler.

"When it's cold, those inside turns harbor more fish than the tips of points," says the Indiana native. "That's true whether you're fishing lakes in Indiana, Michigan, or Wisconsin, or even Tennessee."

Lintner, who got his early bass fishing education on California waters before moving to Georgia, fishes the "freshest, greenest grass" on grass

lakes in fall, but finds his lipless baits equally effective when grass is nowhere to be found.

"I look for ditches when the water gets cold," he says. "Fish migrate to creek channel beds, the backs of creek arms or pockets or any other kind of ditch."

Depth doesn't limit the application either.

"It can be 5 feet, 20 feet, or even 40 feet deep," Lintner adds. "I can cast a lipless bait like the Jackall TN 60 or 70 and let it fall, whereas a billed crankbait would be limited to the depth the bill allows it to reach."

A BAIT FOR EVERY CONDITION

The Bill Lewis Rat-L-Trap popularized the lipless crankbait category, and it's hard to find a bass angler today who doesn't have at least a few "Traps" in his tackle arsenal. But several brands have delivered their own twist on the Trap in recent decades, resulting in a wide range of lipless options on the market.

Lipless baits today vary in nose width, size, weight distribution, wiggle,

rattle, falling action, vibration and drop rate, not to mention the countless colors manufacturers offer.

Wheeler seeks to match the characteristics of his bait to the conditions. He calls the Storm Arashi Vibe — a bait DeFoe used to win the 2019 Bassmaster Classic — his "everyday" lipless bait.

"I like its middle of the road wiggle and wobble. It is not too loud, not super subtle," he says. It's his starting point, but not necessarily his last stop. He will shift to an offering with different rattle, vibration, size or fall rate as needed. The Rapala Rippin' Rap, for example, is his choice when cold water calls for a lift-and-drop, yo-yo style of retrieve.

As their "rattle bait" moniker might suggest, the type of chatter each no-lip emits is a key point of distinction. A high-pitched rattle, such as those produced by multiple BBs in an original Rat-L-Trap, ruled the category for decades. But a defect in a Cotton Cordell Spot fitted with a lead slug decades ago created a niche for so-called "one knocker" baits — lipless

lures that produced a lower-pitched sound. About 15 years ago, this secret crept from hiding, sparking a one knocker renaissance. PRADCO now markets a Booyah One Knocker (originally sold under the now defunct XCalibur brand) beside its Hard Knocker series. Strike King has added a Tungsten 2 Tap version to its Red Eyed Shad line. Thanks to a tungsten weight in its body chamber, it is said to produce a “double tapping cadence.”

Bill Lewis, now part of GSM Outdoors, revealed its own twist on the one knocker at ICAST 2023 with the Hammer Trap, a lipless crankbait with a wider nose and hard thumping action. Meanwhile, Duckett worked with the Bill Lewis group to design a co-branded lipless bait, the Duckett Trap (five colors, 1/2 ounce), now sold through Duckett Fishing. He wanted a bait with a resonance somewhere between a one-knocker and the prevailing higher pitched rattles.

“It’s caught on, in part because it has such a different, unique sound,” Duckett says.

Sound is just one factor to consider when choosing between the myriad lipless options on the market. Baits with weights located closer to their noses generally possess faster fall rates and a distinct shimmy on the fall, suiting them well to a wider range of depth zones. They are particularly deadly when fish are responding to a yo-yo presentation.

The trademark of the Red Eyed Shad is its shimmying movement during its descent.

“That subtle dying action is very effective,” Ebare says. “When you kill it, the lure has a forward flutter.”

The blunt nose on the Berkley Warpig offers advantages on shell bars and other hard bottom structure, notes Coulter. “It hits and deflects better,” he says. “Even the 1/4-ounce version fishes ‘heavy’ for its size. The blunt nose allows me to be more efficient. If I’m hung (on grass) I can rip it free. It stays centered on the fall, and it also has more shimmy, a more enticing action on the fall.”

Lintner launches his lipless attack with a Jackall TN 70 an estimated 90 percent of the time. The versatile bait features a tungsten lip weight, which

helps deliver long casts and a stand-up fall. It excels with a lift/drop presentation, which is most effective in the coldest water conditions. In clear water or pressured conditions, Lintner will drill a small hole into the rattle cavity, fill it with water and plug the hole with a toothpick and epoxy.

“It totally changes the sound,” says Lintner, referencing a modification he accidentally stumbled upon during a winning tournament performance on California’s Clear Lake. “Water changed the pitch of that rattle. I out-fished other guys fishing lipless 5 to 1.”

Size may matter, depending on forage preference or performance. Standard 1/2-ounce lipless baits might hang up too frequently in shallow water or might not deliver as good a result in water deeper than 8 feet, where a 3/4-ounce or a nose-weighted bait could work wonders.

“WHEN THE WATER IS REALLY COLD, I JUST PULL THE BAIT ENOUGH TO FEEL VIBRATION, THEN LET IT FALL.”

The color palette is wide for most brands of lipless baits, and nearly unlimited for the Rat-L-Trap line. Shad and crawfish colors dominate among a wide range of match-the-hatch options, but be sure to add some perch/bluegill patterns for lakes and ponds in which these species are primary forage. Chrome baits shine — literally and figuratively — in sunny conditions. Red crawfish varieties rule during much of the early season. Chartreuse can be tough to beat in dirty water or low-light conditions.

“Swapping out colors is important,” says Wheeler, who emphasizes that preferences can change not only day-to-day, but hour-to-hour.

PRESENTATION TIPS

Shake the chuck-and-wind mentality. The first rule of fishing no-lips in the cold is to mix it up.

A “straight reel mixed with little pops” is a starting point for Coulter, who almost never fishes lipless baits solely by winding them back to the boat.

“If I’m fishing a shallow bar with rock, that bait must hit bottom,” he adds.

As water temperatures drop, bass’ metabolism slows, making them less aggressive. That’s when a slow bottom crawl comes into play, with variations on a yo-yo delivery popular among lipless experts. But one yo-yo isn’t necessarily identical to the next. Nuance matters even here.

“When the water is really cold, I just pull the bait enough to feel vibration, then let it fall,” offers Wheeler. “That’s my favorite retrieve when fish are lethargic. Often you find mud on the bass’ bellies. They pin the bait to the bottom. If the water is a little warmer, I will pull the bait with more vibration — larger pulls, say from 10 to noon — and let the lure fall on a semi-slack line.”

Duckett fishes his lipless baits in five feet of water or less in winter using a yo-yo presentation with its own touch of subtlety.

“I lift the rod and let the bait flutter back down, working it as slowly as I can stand,” he says. “If I hit grass, I feather it — just feather it — until it clears. That’s when they hit.”

Lintner often tackles the coldest water conditions by combing 10-foot-plus ditches with the TN 70.

“I let it hit bottom, then stroke it,” he says. “Let it hit bottom, pull it, follow the line back down, pull it again. It’s more like stroking a jig, not like your spoon technique.”

On the surface, lipless crankbaits might appear to rank among the simplest of hard lures, wiggling and rattling on their own when retrieved. But cold-water mastery calls for command of a wide spectrum of details regarding the baits themselves, as well as how, when and where you present them.

“Take advantage of the uniqueness of these baits,” advises Wheeler, emphasizing the importance of playing with variables. “The bass may want a faster rate of fall — a bait that drops like a rock. When the water is cold, they will react to it.”

Most importantly, don’t forget to put them back in your boat this time of year. ■

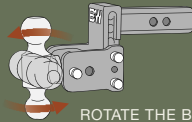


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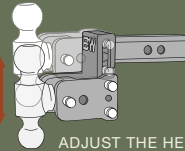
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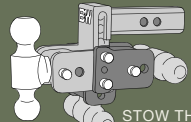
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23 STORIES WE LOVED IN 2023

In a year of firsts, records, big fish and memorable moments, these stories stood out

By Mitchell Forde

IT SEEMS LIKE ONLY YESTERDAY that the 2023 Major League Fishing tournament season started off with a thunderclap when Texas pro Hayden Heck dropped five largemouth weighing 28 pounds, 11 ounces on the scales at Sam Rayburn Reservoir at the first Phoenix Bass Fishing League event of the year in early January. Little did we know that Cody Pitt would one-up him less than a month later with a 39-15 megabag in the second Cowboy

Division tournament of the young year, just up Highway 96 from Rayburn at Toledo Bend.

From there, the compelling stories would continue to flow. The sport's G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time) announced his retirement from the game he had dominated for 26 years. Big bass were prolific throughout the MLF 5 and Bass Pro Tour circuits. Tournament participation was high and first-time champions flourished at all levels of competition. There were literally hundreds of interesting storylines that kept us intrigued throughout the season that was, but we challenged our editors to pick 23 of their favorites.

Here are 23 stories we loved in 2023.



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

EBARE LANDS FIRST (AND SECOND) WINS JAN. 27

Few, if any, anglers have been as hot in recent years as Dakota Ebare. From 2019 through 2022, the young Texan logged an astounding 15 Top-10 finishes in MLF competition, including four in his first seven Bass Pro Tour events. The one thing that eluded him, however, was a first-place trophy. Ebare rectified that by winning his first tournament of 2023 at a Toyota Series



CHRIS LANE BEATS BUZZER AT KISSIMMEE CHAIN FEB. 18

Viewers of the *MLFNOW!* livestream knew what Chris Lane didn't as the seconds ticked down at B & W Trailer Hitches Stage One Presented by Grundéns: If the bass he boated with less than two minutes remaining in the Championship Round weighed more than 4 pounds, 12 ounces, he would pass Mark Davis atop SCORETRACKER®. The scale read 5-5. But it wasn't until after the "lines out" call that Lane learned he'd erased an 11-8 final day deficit to the Hall of Famer and won the first event of the Bass Pro Tour season — to which he reacted with a disbelieving "You're kidding me!" followed by a signature "Powwww!" The last-minute cull, which boosted Lane's Championship Round bag to 26-1, put an exclamation point on a wild final day, which also saw him hand-line a bass to the boat after his reel malfunctioned.

event in late January on Sam Rayburn Reservoir, sacking up more than 32 pounds on the second and final day. He didn't stop there; about a month later, Ebare returned to the winner's circle with a wire-to-wire victory at Tackle Warehouse Invationals Stop 2 on Clarks Hill Lake. Ebare would keep the momentum rolling, notching four more Top 10s in BPT competition and finishing fifth in the Angler of the Year race. In all, he pocketed more than \$375,000 in winnings on the season.



PHOTO BY COBI PELLERITO

MONTEVALLO PREVAILS IN SHOOTOUT AT COLLEGE FISHING NATTY FEB. 23

If you have any doubt that the wave of anglers rising through the college ranks can catch 'em, check out the results from the Abu Garcia College Fishing National Championship on Lake Toho. The 10 tandems who took the water on the third and final day put on a show, with five of them bringing limits of more than 20 pounds to the scales and four topping 25. The University of Montevallo team of Peyton Harris and Dalton Head prevailed thanks to a 27-11 stringer, which included a 9-pound kicker. They would need just about all of it, beating Webber International University by 8 ounces. The win earned Harris and Head spots at the Toyota Series Championship, where Head clinched a berth to REDCREST 2024.

CLARKS HILL SHOWS OUT FEB. 28-MARCH 2

Prior to 2023, MLF had never hosted a tour-level tournament on Clarks Hill. The Savannah River reservoir proved that it's worthy of a return trip when the Invitationals visited last spring. Ebare won the event with 58-10 across three days (including the biggest bass of the event, an 8-2 largemouth), and he was far from the only pro to smash 'em. Travis Harriman nearly ran Ebare down with a 23-14 megabag on the final day, boosting his total to 58-0. Those two were part of a loaded leaderboard, which also included eventual Invitationals Angler of the Year winner Ron Nelson, Bass Pro Tour AOY Matt Becker and fellow BPT pro Spencer Shuffield within the top seven. In all, five limits over 20 pounds were weighed in, including three over 22. Eleven pros topped 48 pounds for the event.

THRIFT + LAKE NORMAN = A REDCREST TROPHY MARCH 12

Entering almost every tournament, a local favorite or two generates lots of buzz. It's far less common that said angler actually goes on to win, especially when competing against the caliber of field that comprised REDCREST 2023. But Bryan Thrift leaned on his lifetime of Lake Norman knowledge to rise to the pressure of being the home-state favorite. Thrift's championship win added to his decorated history on Norman, where he had previously won two FLW Tour events — including his first victory as a touring pro — and earned more than \$500,000. He leaned on that history to catch bigger than average bass from offshore drains during the first three days, then to protect his lead when that pattern fizzled, running upriver to an area he discovered a year prior. Thrift's five-day Norman master class landed him a \$300,000 payday and the REDCREST trophy that narrowly eluded him in 2021.

POCHE GOES 'OFF THE GRID' TO WIN MARCH 23

Entering the 2023 season, Keith Poche took a risk. Despite forward-facing sonar continuing to dominate the tournament trail, Poche went all in on his skinny-water style by opting to fish BPT events out of an 18-foot aluminum boat. The decision paid off in a big way at U.S. Air Force Stage Two Presented by Power-Pole, when Poche ran up a tributary of Cherokee Lake to a spillway that no one else in the field could access. The honey hole produced a mixed bag of smallmouth and largemouth that weighed 35-6 across two days. Poche had committed to the spot even before making a cast. Having discovered it during a Bassmaster Open in 2022, he dedicated all of his practice time to Douglas Lake, which hosted the Qualifying Rounds, knowing the spillway would be his destination if he advanced to Cherokee. Safe to say Poche's plan came together perfectly.

GAGLIARDI'S HOME COOKING LEADS TO MURRAY WIN APRIL 7

Speaking of local favorites conquering the pressure that accompanies fishing a national event on one's home body of water, Anthony Gagliardi came through with a massive final day at Lake Murray, which earned him a victory at Fox Rent A Car Stage Three Presented by Mercury. Given that he lives on the lake and has won more than \$700,000 there during his career, Gagliardi's win didn't come as a surprise. Yet he pulled it off not by fishing history but bucking traditional springtime patterns. Gagliardi eschewed the shallow bedding bite, focusing on points where bass chased spawning herring. Instead of using a fluke or other bait-fish imitator, he stuck with a 6-inch finesse worm on a drop-shot. The bait produced a limit of 26-13 during the Championship Round, including an 8-pound kicker — the biggest bass of the event — further bolstering his reputation as the angler to beat any time he's competing on Murray.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

VALDIVIA CONTINUES WEST COAST DOMINANCE APRIL 21

While quite a few Western anglers have moved east through the years to pursue fishing careers, there's still plenty of hammers in the area — none better than David Valdivia. Valdivia cemented his claim as the best out west by winning a second consecutive Angler of the Year title in the Toyota Series Western Division. It's his third such crown in the past five years. Valdivia finished seventh at Lake Havasu, ninth at the California Delta in March and 13th in a return to the Delta in April. He's now logged four Top 10s in his past six Western Division events. While Valdivia is still waiting for his first tournament victory, it feels like only a matter of time.



PHOTO BY TYLER BENNIS

ALTON JONES JR. DOMINATES HEAVY HITTERS APRIL 29

Expectations were high when the top BPT pros returned to Louisiana's Bussey Brake, where Randy Howell had previously caught a 12-14 largemouth, the largest bass in tour history. While Howell's big bass record didn't fall during the Championship Round of General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops, viewers were instead treated to one of the most impressive single day displays of tournament fishing in recent memory. Alton Jones Jr. made a key decision, pivoting from flipping bushes to fishing a spinnerbait through cypress trees. The result: 19 bass over 3 pounds weighing a total of 81-15. He beat runner-up Dakota Ebare by an astounding 59-1, the second-largest margin of victory in BPT history and by far the biggest on largemouth waters. It would serve as the crown achievement in a strong season, which saw Jones finish among the top 11 in six of nine BPT events, including runner-up at REDCREST and Stage Six.



PHOTO BY KORY SAVAGE

BUDDIES JOHN COX, KEITH CARSON FINISH 1-2 AT LOZ MAY 6

If you follow bass fishing at all, you've heard that John Cox and Keith Carson grew up two streets apart in Florida, that they used to fish team tournaments together, and that both are among the best sight-fishermen in the game. So to see the two friends duke out the win at the bed-fishing beat-down that was Invitationals Stop 4 on Lake of the Ozarks was almost too perfect. Both Cox and Carson primarily wielded weightless Berkley soft plastics on spinning tackle to catch spawning fish in and around the lake's many docks. Cox edged Carson by 1-1 for the win, earning a REDCREST berth in the process, but the result was big for Carson, as well — it helped him qualify for the 2024 Bass Pro Tour.



PHOTO BY KORY SAVAGE

MORRISON CONQUERS RAYBURN IN RECORD FASHION MAY 20

It's not often that an angler dominates a multi-day tournament in the fashion that Alec Morrison did at the May Toyota Series event on Sam Rayburn Reservoir, where the weights make it look as if the winner competed on a different lake than the rest of the field. It's even more rare on a well-worn fishery like Rayburn. For Morrison to do so as a 23-year-old from New York who had never been to the lake before? Unheard of. Morrison put his name on the national radar in a major way by making the 1,700-mile trip to Texas and earning his first pro win in a landslide. He sacked up 27-9 on Day 1 and backed it up with 29-9, ultimately winning by 24 pounds. That marked the largest margin of victory in Toyota Series history for a three-day event, breaking the previous mark by more than 6 pounds.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



CASTLEDINE EXTENDS TOYOTA SERIES AOY RECORD MAY 20

It's no secret that Todd Castledine is the man to beat in the Toyota Series Southwestern Division. No one managed to change that in 2023. Castledine took home the Angler of the Year win in the division for the second time in the past three years and fifth time in his career, extending his record. No one else has won more than three Toyota Series AOY crowns. Castledine, a former FLW Tour pro who has shifted his focus to dominating locally in recent years, lived up to his reputation by making all three cuts. He finished 12th at the January event on Sam Rayburn Reservoir, second at Lake Dardanelle and 25th at Rayburn in May (although he declined to compete the final day, dropping to 26th in the final standings).

WAGNER ANNOUNCES ARRIVAL WITH ALL-AMERICAN WIN JUNE 2

Perhaps a few years from now, bass fishing fans will look back at 2023 as the year that launched Emil Wagner's career. Wagner certainly showed that he can rise to the occasion in big tournaments. The Denmark native now living in Georgia edged fellow Bulldog Division pros Matt O'Connell and Buddy Benson to win the 40th edition of the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American on Lake Hartwell. A guide on Lake Lanier, Wagner used his blueback herring and spotted bass knowledge to earn more than \$120,000 and a berth in REDCREST 2024. He proved the performance wasn't a fluke, too. In his first ever trip to Table Rock Lake, Wagner finished second in November's Toyota Series Championship, just 7 ounces behind Chad Mrazek. He'll try to carry the momentum over to the Invitationals next season.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA

CROCKETT CREEK RUNS AWAY WITH TEAM SERIES TITLE JUNE 18

Major League Fishing unveiled a new tournament format in 2023, with a familiar result: Jacob Wheeler holding the championship trophy. The General Tire Team Series, which was filmed in the fall of 2022 and aired on Outdoor Channel in 2023, featured teams of three BPT pros competing against one another in the every-fish-counts format. Viewers got to hear teammates in different boats communicate with each other in real time while breaking down brand new bodies of water. Team Crockett Creek — Wheeler, Dylan Hays and Jason Lambert — pulled out a narrow victory in its first match of the Bass Pro Shops Team Series Championship. Then, Wheeler did Wheeler things in the Championship Round. He used a Rapala jerkbait to catch 56 of the team's 68 scorable bass, which totaled 133-4, more than 72 pounds better than second place.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

JORDAN LEE MAKES BERKLEY BIG BASS HISTORY JUNE 29

Usually, there's an element of randomness to winning the daily Berkley Big Bass awards. But during General Tire Stage Six Presented by John Deere Utility Vehicles at Lake St. Clair, Jordan Lee proved his ability to garner big bites is no fluke. Lee earned his third BPT trophy in emphatic fashion, catching the biggest limit of anyone on the water during both days of qualifying as well as the Knockout Round before sealing his victory with 23-4 on the final day. But no stat sums up his dominance like the fact that he boated the biggest bass during every one of the four days he took the water. No surprise, he also caught the biggest fish of the event, a 6-7 brute. No one else in BPT history had earned big bass honors even three times during one tournament. In all, Lee earned a tidy \$7,000 in big bass bonuses on top of his \$100,000 payday.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON





TIGHTEST EVER BALLY BET AOY RACE THRILLS JUNE/JULY/AUGUST

The battle for the Angler of the Year trophy, the ultimate prize for Bass Pro Tour competitors, is always intense. But most years, over the course of five or six events, an angler or two tends to separate from the rest of the field. In 2023, we didn't see just a one- or two-person race down the stretch but a four-way brawl. A quartet of contenders arrived at Stage Seven separated by less than 10 points at the top of the standings: Alton Jones Jr., Jacob Wheeler, Ott DeFoe and Matt Becker. The battle waged all the way to the wire, with Wheeler, DeFoe and Becker making the Championship Round at Saginaw Bay. Becker ultimately edged both Wheeler and DeFoe by four points, ending Wheeler's bid at winning the crown for a third straight season.

NELSON NAILS DOWN ANOTHER AOY JULY 27

Michael Neal nearly pulled off a rare three-peat. The 2021 and 2022 Angler of the Year winner on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit made it to the final day of the 2023 Invationals season with a chance at the points crown. But Neal couldn't quite overcome the lead Ron Nelson had built during a masterful season. Nelson logged three top-fives and never finished worse than 25th across the first five events. He finished fourth at Clarks Hill, third at Lake Eufaula and fifth at Lake of the Ozarks. While he stumbled at the Mississippi River, his cushion proved enough to put the trophy back in his hands, earning him a trip to REDCREST 2024 and adding his name to an elite list of multi-time AOY winners. That he dethroned Neal added to the impressiveness of his campaign.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

STEFAN SURVIVES BARGE SCARE, PULLS OUT WIN JULY 27

As exciting as Lane's last-minute cull was, the final Tackle Warehouse Invationals event of the season might take the prize for the year's most dramatic finish — even though none of the contenders caught a bass in the final hour. Along with much of the eventual Top 10, Matt Stefan ran from takeoff in Pool 8 to Pool 7 on the Mississippi River. During the final day, he put enough weight in his livewell to pass leader Steve Lopez but thought he might never get a chance to weigh it in, forced to wait for a barge to pass through the lock before returning to Pool 8. Thanks to an assist from the lockmaster, the anglers made it back with minutes to spare, and Stefan went from agony to ecstasy as he celebrated his first win. That capped a strong season for Stefan, who also qualified for the BPT.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

MARSHALL ROBINSON JOINS POPS ON BPT JULY 27

Amid the youth movement that has taken the tournament fishing world by storm, no young gun impressed more than Marshall Robinson in 2023. As a result, Robinson will not only be the youngest member of the Bass Pro Tour in 2024, he'll compete against his father, Marty Robinson. Just 19 at the start of the Invationals season, the younger Robinson showed he belonged by opening his 2023 campaign with a 14th-place finish at Lake Okeechobee. After missing a pair of cuts, he ended the year with three straight checks, finishing third at Lake of the Ozarks, 40th at the Potomac River and 24th at the Mississippi River. That gave Robinson a five-point cushion over Drew Gill for Polaris Rookie of the Year honors and a spot on the BPT roster. Don't expect him to back down from anyone at the next level, dad included.

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PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

VANDAM FAREWELL TOUR ENDS ON SEASON'S FINAL DAY AUG. 6

The top story all season on the Bass Pro Tour was Kevin VanDam's announcement that it would be his last as a full-time touring pro. In typical KVD fashion, he did not go quietly. VanDam, widely heralded as the greatest tournament angler ever after racking up 26 wins across his 33-year career, gave fans one last magical moment at Minn Kota Stage Seven Presented by Suzuki. Competing in his home state, he finished second in his group during qualifying, then sacked up 21-8 of smallmouth during the Knockout Round to position himself on the pole entering the final day. While a shift in wind and water clarity sabotaged his key area, the fact that everyone knew the Championship Round would mark his last day on the water in BPT competition allowed for a special day as family, friends and other anglers paid tribute, and VanDam himself even bared his emotions before and during competition.

BECKER'S EPIC FINAL DAY EARNS HIM TWO TROPHIES AUG. 6

Brutal conditions greeted anglers during the final day of the BPT season, with 20-mph winds roiling the wide waters of Saginaw Bay and rain increasing in intensity as the day progressed. Brutal for everyone except Becker, that is. The rookie not only braved the big water in search of Saginaw Bay's nomadic smallmouth bass, he caught them better than anyone else in the field all week. Becker's 22-11 limit rocketed him from fifth place to first. He caught four of his eventual five keepers after 1 p.m., when conditions had reached their nastiest. The triumphant day not only earned Becker his first BPT win but an additional trophy and \$100,000 check as the Bally Bet Angler of the Year.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

MRAZEK MAKES FIRST WIN COUNT AT TOYOTA SERIES CHAMPIONSHIP NOV. 4

Chad Mrazek fully committed to launching his professional career in 2023, fishing all six Invitationals plus two Toyota Series divisions. The grind paid off in his final event of the season, where the 23-year-old picked the perfect time to net his first win. Mrazek made a key adjustment on Day 2 of the Toyota Series Championship on Table Rock Lake, switching from wielding an ice jig and Damiki rig for suspended fish to throwing a jig in submerged timber. It yielded limits of 17-7 on Day 2 and 16-0 on Day 3 (all of it coming after noon), which proved enough to edge Wagner by 7 ounces. The victory should certainly give his fishing career a boost; he took home more than \$200,000 and a spot in REDCREST 2024.

LAWRENCE'S TENNESSEE RIVER REIGN OF TERROR APRIL 20-OCT. 1

There's fishing with momentum, and then there's what Jake



PHOTO BY MATT PAGE

Lawrence did in 2023. Lawrence won each of the first three tournaments he entered this year, a Toyota Series event and two Phoenix Bass Fishing League Super Tournaments. All three victories came on Tennessee River impoundments, establishing Lawrence as the prodigious river system's preeminent local. First, Lawrence caught more than 57 pounds of spawning smallmouth across three days to win a Toyota Series event on Kentucky Lake, his home waterway. He then traveled south to Pickwick Lake, where he sacked up 51-2 in two days, earning the win by more than 20 pounds — the second-largest winning margin in BFL history. Lawrence wrapped up the dominant campaign with another win on Kentucky Lake, which saw him once again focus on smallmouth and nip Matteo Turano by 13 ounces. ■



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SHAPELESS &

DANGEROUS!

*GRASPING THE GRAVITY OF
FORMLESS SOFT PLASTICS*

By Mitchell Forde | PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



These unsightly blobs of plastic are no joke. They're one of the hottest bait trends going, and they're here to stay.

Fletcher Shryock vividly recalls the first time he laid hands on the Yamamoto Yamatanuki. It wasn't that the bait looked like a fish-catcher at first sight — in fact, quite the opposite. His reaction: "What the hell am I going to do with this thing?"

A Bass Pro Tour angler and 13-year touring pro, Shryock has seen enough baits that he usually gets a pretty good idea how they're intended to be fished, even at first glance. But this bulbous, 3.5-inch cylinder with a small nub for a tail didn't look like any lure Shryock had seen before, or any kind of aquatic creature, for that matter.

He needed just four casts to discover the appeal.

Shryock, known for his shallow power-fishing prowess, figured the bait would skip well, so he took it to a marina on Lake Chickamauga. Within minutes, a 4-pounder inhaled it, and Shryock's curiosity was piqued.

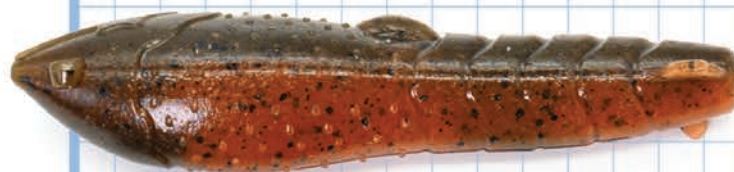
"I go into this marina and I start sliding it under some marina slips and literally caught like a 4, 4 1/2-pounder on my third or fourth throw," Shryock said. "I'm like, 'oh, hey.' And I start fishing with it more and I'm like, dude, this thing skips and does things that no other bait really does."

Shryock is far from the only American angler to have a similar experience in recent years. The Yamatanuki is part of a category of soft plastics born in Japan that has burst onto the scene in the U.S. The blob-shaped offerings aren't particularly eye-catching; many in the industry refer to them as "poop baits," for obvious reasons. A few manufacturers have even leaned into the moniker with the names of their baits — the Cover Scat from Deps, the Heavy Poop from Fish Arrow.

Yet as ridiculous as they might look and sound, the bite-getting power of these baits is no joke. And as fishing pressure continues to increase and natural presentations become more important, don't expect the trend to go away anytime soon.

OVERSEAS ORIGINS

Catching bass on baits that look like brown Cheetah Puffs might seem outlandish, but the concept of weightless, shapeless, do-nothing baits isn't new. As far back as 30 years ago, Shin Fukae remembers hearing about anglers in his home country of Japan cutting the tails off 4- and 5-inch grubs and Texas rigging their cylindrical bodies. The trend evolved when Yamamoto released the



SPRO CRAW NUGGET 3.5"

COLOR: RUSTY CRAW



DEPS COVER SCAT 3.5"

COLOR: PUMPKIN CHEESECAKE



MISSILE BAITS BOMBA WORM

COLOR: GHOST SHAD



YAMAMOTO YAMATANUKI 3.5"

COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN BLUE



REINS TANK WORM

COLOR: EBIMISO



FISH ARROW HEAVY POOP 3"

COLOR: SCUPPERNONG

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

Fat Ika. Rigged weightless and in reverse, with the skirt at the head of the presentation, it would sink backward slowly. But while the Fat Ika was more dense than most soft plastics on the market, it still didn't cast well without a weight and couldn't be fished very deep.

So, a few Japanese manufacturers created new, super-dense soft plastics to address those deficiencies. Among them was Deps, which in 2018 produced the Cover Scat: a 3.5-inch "worm" that weighed 3/4 ounce on its own, allowing it to be thrown on casting gear and bring a weightless presentation to new depths. The only potential pitfall: It looked less like a traditional worm and more like, well, scat.

Matt Paino, the owner of Optimum Baits — which distributes Deps products in the U.S. — remembers being skeptical when he first saw the Cover Scat (and heard its name). But his doubts were quickly assuaged by its sales. Japanese anglers fought to get their hands on the bait throughout 2019, when new shipments would sell out almost immediately. By 2020, the Cover Scat had become the best-selling plastic worm in Japan.

"You can always sell something once, but in order for it to get super popular, it's gotta work," Paino said. "And when I saw that — like, okay, the Japanese, they fish hard, and if it's selling that good, it's because it's working everywhere throughout the country. And I was like, okay, get ready. I better get this thing over here."

In 2020, the Cover Scat became the first product in its category (sometimes called "shapeless" or "gravity" baits) to be widely available in the U.S. While its popularity hasn't exploded quite as quickly as it did in Japan, it's been close.

Just three years later, at least seven other similar baits have hit the American market. In 2023 alone, four new ones have been introduced — the Yamatanuki, the Missile Baits Bomba, the Reins Tank Worm and the Spro Craw Nugget.

Fukae, who designed the Craw Nugget, believes the category has caught on in the U.S. for the same reason it boomed in Japan: These baits get bit, especially by pressured bass.

"Everybody wants to use the baits nobody's using, and they're trying to find something different to use," he said. "And then the bait, it works good."

WHY THEY WORK

The emergence of these shapeless baits flies in the face of the oft-repeated fishing axiom that most lures are made to catch fishermen, not fish. There's nothing sexy about these hunks of plastic — no tails, no appendages, no hyper-realistic profile. Even a Senko, which might not look like much out of the water, has that tantalizing shimmy as it sinks. Not so much with these baits, which fall horizontally but do so quickly, without much ancillary movement.

Yet reigning Bass Pro Tour Angler of the Year Matt Becker compares baits like the Yamatanuki to their stick-worm cousins in the sense that their natural fall and unobtrusive presence is the secret to their allure.

"I feel like it's kind of like the deal with the Senko — sometimes simple is better than everything that's extravagant," the Yamamoto pro said. "And then just the weightless nature of it. You're able to fish it weightless, and it just has a different finesse action, but it's still a big, bulky bait."

Bass Pro Tour angler Shin Fukae says that baits like the Spro Craw Nugget are no joke!



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

**“DUDE, THIS THING SKIPS
AND DOES THINGS THAT NO
OTHER BAIT REALLY DOES.”**

— Fletcher Shryock on the Yamamoto Yamatanuki

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJUBA

What, exactly, this category of baits is meant to mimic remains an open debate. The Cover Scat and Craw Nugget were both designed to imitate crustaceans (the Cover Scat is even imbued with crawfish scent). Shryock believes the Yamatanuki looks like a bluegill. And there's a growing number of anglers fishing the baits in shad patterns.

Ultimately, it seems less important that these baits imitate any one type of bass prey than that they simply look like something alive. Their heaviness without any central weight allows the baits to show bass living in deeper water the same type of natural action that has made the Senko a staple in just about every angler's arsenal. They move and dance in ways that only weightless baits can — Paino described the action of the Cover Scat when it's twitched on semi-slack line as walking the dog underwater. And when the bait falls to the bottom, it does so backward, toward any fish that might be following it.

“When you twitch it, it will have that left, right, left, right (movement),” Paino said. “But I think after that, it's that scooting action as it falls back. It's got to do a really good job of mimicking a crawfish or some kind of crustacean that's scooting away on the bottom.”

Shapeless baits are also about as weedless as it gets — that's the one key attribute apparent at first sight. They can navigate even the snaggiest rocky bottoms and brush piles, or be skipped and flipped around laydowns, docks, lily pads, etc. Pick a type of cover, and these baits can get in and out of it.

“It's a great vehicle,” Shryock said. “It's like a 4x4 truck. It'll go anywhere.”

MULTI-USE TOOLS

If there was a coming-out moment that put the “blob” bait category on the map in the U.S., it occurred in June of 2021. During a Bass Pro Tour event at Lake Chickamauga, Fukae won his group and went on to finish sixth, in part by throwing a weightless Cover Scat.

Fukae used the bait to pluck bass from the ultra-pressured schools living on the lake's offshore ledges. That's how most Japanese anglers employ the technique, fishing near the bottom in water as deep as 40 feet. Fukae designed the Craw Nugget to cast even farther and sink faster than the Cover Scat, thus making it more efficient for offshore use.

When fishing offshore, Fukae lets the Craw Nugget fall all the way to the bottom on slack line, moves it a few inches at a time with a couple pops of his rod tip (like twitching a weightless fluke, he said), then lets it sink again. It's not a technique suited for covering water. However, once an angler has located a school or a piece of cover that's holding fish, it's a great way to trigger even the wariest bass. It's a big-bite getter, too.

“Big fish will hit it,” Fukae said. “When I see fish on my ActiveTarget, I can tell which one is the bigger fish and the smaller fish (can be caught) easier using a crankbait, a hair jig and a spoon, but the bigger fish, they are so smart.”

Baits like the Craw Nugget might have been designed to fish deep, but that's far from their only use. As has been the case with most successful baits through the years, the

more pros have heard rumblings about the category, the more they've played around with it and discovered new applications.

One emerging trend that Paino has heard about from Deps customers is using the Cover Scat in the middle of the water column to catch suspended bass. Instead of allowing the bait to sink all the way to the bottom, anglers will let it fall to the level of the fish, then retrieve it with quick pops and twitches, imitating a fleeing baitfish.

Shryock is one of several pros who have taken the category shallow. Given its weight and compact size, the Yamatanuki has become his go-to skipping tool — he uses it “anywhere you would skip a frog or a Senko.” Unlike a Senko, he can throw it on baitcasting gear and heavy line, and its faster rate of fall makes him more efficient, especially around steeper banks or docks over deep water.

“You can catch them on this thing from 6 inches to 30 feet,” Shryock said. “That’s what’s kind of cool about this bait.”

Shapeless baits have four-season appeal, too. While Paino said the Cover Scat is most popular during the colder-weather months, Fukae proved that it can catch fish when they school up in summer. And anytime bass are feeding around shallow cover — prespawn through fall in most locations — a well-presented Yamatanuki should garner strikes.

Most poop baits come in similar, 3.5-inch profiles. But the Yamatanuki and Cover Scat are also available in other sizes, which offer additional diversity. The Cover Scat comes in 2.5- and 4-inch models, with a 3-incher set to hit the Japanese market this spring. The Yamatanuki comes in a 2.5-inch version that’s more slender than its big brother, making it a popular smallmouth offering. During his sixth-place finish at Cayuga Lake last season, Becker caught a few spawning smallmouth by affixing the 2.5-inch Yamatanuki to a Ned head.

TRICKS OF THE TECHNIQUE

To some anglers, the rise of these formless, do-nothing baits might feel insulting. How could bass ignore a skillfully twitched jerkbait or a jig with the skirt trimmed so that it flares just right and the perfect trailer pairing only to bite a blob of plastic?

There is, however, some skill required to maximize the effectiveness of these baits. The primary key is patience.

Both Fukae and Paino stressed that, especially when working the baits in deeper water, it’s imperative to fish slowly. If you think you’re fishing slow enough, slow down some more. It’s common for Fukae to spend five minutes making a single cast with a Craw Nugget. Many Japanese anglers who have adopted the technique will take as long as 10 minutes.

“I think Americans in general, we don’t fish as slow as that bait was designed to fish,” Paino said. “That’s the

biggest thing. It’s a bait where you light up a cigarette and just wait. Like, you let it fall out, slack line, twitch, twitch, let it fall back to the bottom and let it sit there. It’s like three- to five-minute casts.”

Patience is pivotal because not only does the weightless lure have to sink to the bottom, so does the line. If the line is at too steep an angle, Fukae explained, the bait will dart straight up when twitched instead of walking side to side.

For that reason, Fukae said fluorocarbon is a must when fishing the Craw Nugget offshore. He recommends using heavy line, around 20-pound test. While heavy line sinks slower than lighter line, it also stays down better once it has reached the depths.

“If you fish the shallow water, you don’t need to go 20-pound,” Fukae said. “But when you fish a little bit deeper, maybe 20 foot or deeper, then when you twitch the bait, it’s going to stay deep.”

Becker, Fukae and Shryock typically fish the baits on standard jig and worm rods — something in the 7-foot to 7-6

range, medium-heavy or heavy power. Given the amount of slack line necessary to make a proper presentation, a high-speed reel is key. Upon feeling a strike, Fukae turns the handle five to six times before setting the hook.

Rigging the bait is pretty straightforward. For shallow applications, Shryock has had success rigging the Yamatanuki on both an EWG hook and a weightless swimbait hook with a screw lock. He found the latter gave him a better hook-set-to-land rate but reduced the bait’s durability. Fukae Texas rigs the Craw Nugget on either a 6/0 or 7/0 offset, round-bend worm hook. Becker uses a standard EWG hook for weedless presentations, although he prefers threading the Yamatanuki onto a straight-shank flipping hook if he’s fishing rocky bottom with few snags.

“You thread that hook all the way up through the bait and it gives it a little bit different action,” Becker said. “You’ve got an exposed hook, so when one eats that, I mean, he’s getting hooked on it.”

They might not look or sound appetizing to anglers. But that’s all the more proof that the shapeless bait boom isn’t a fluke. Whether fished deep or shallow, on the bottom or in the middle of the water column, the lures simply get bit.

Paino doesn’t think this is a passing fad, either. Based on their continued success in Japan and the rapid expansion of the category in the U.S., he believes these baits are here to stay.

“This is a category that people have acknowledged that it works,” he said. “It’s going to stay around.”

“There are things like a swimbait, something that works and everyone makes it and copies it, fish get used to seeing that, and it does prevent it from working like it first came out. But worms, typically, like a Senko, everyone has a Senko, and they still catch a ton of fish. So in the long run, the effectiveness is still going to work.” ■

**“BASED ON THEIR
CONTINUED SUCCESS IN
JAPAN AND THE RAPID
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HE BELIEVES THESE BAITS
ARE HERE TO STAY.”**

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PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

Bill Dance admires the 8.4-pound monster caught by Camdyn Cranfill on Chickmauga Lake, one of the Bill Dance Signature Lakes.

FISHING TOWNS: TENNESSEE

Bill Dance Signature Lakes program boosts Volunteer State fishing opportunities, awareness

How a \$15 million initiative with 'America's favorite bass fisherman' will benefit anglers, local communities

By Joel Shangle

The pride in Bill Dance's voice as he chats about his beloved home state is unmistakable. It's a sunny fall day on the banks of Lake Chickamauga in Dayton, Tennessee, and the Volunteer State's most iconic fisherman – and some would say, most iconic citizen – is holding court. Perched comfortably on a dock at Bluewater Marina, where the first-ever Bill Dance Giant Bass Open is being held, "Uncle Billy" (as he's known to friends and family) has the attention of everybody within earshot.

And Uncle Billy is rolling like the Pride of the Southland Band.

On the docket: The Bill Dance Signature Lakes, Dance's namesake collaboration with three State of Tennessee agencies to introduce new anglers from around the country to the fishing abundance of a state that he's fished from one end to the next for a majority of his 83 years.

"A lot of people don't know this, but the state of Tennessee has 350 species of fish in our state – more than any other state in the United States," Dance says. "We hold three world records: the world record walleye, the world record smallmouth and the world record crappie. We have trout, muskies, stripers, smallmouth, largemouth, crappie, bluegill, catfish. If anybody ever wants to fish for any of the most popular species of fish, we've got 'em in every part of the state, and we've got a lot of 'em – north, south, east, west. And a lot of those fish go to bed hungry every night."



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SHANGLE

The Bill Dance Signature Lakes program includes enhancements both above and below the water line for multiple lakes throughout Tennessee.

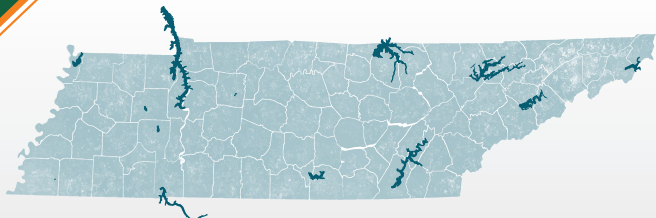
THE BILL DANCE SIGNATURE LAKES PROJECT

Dance's desire to spread the gospel of Tennessee fishing manifested in December of 2021 with the announcement of Dance's relationship with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA), Tennessee State Parks and the Tennessee Department of Tourism Development to develop the Bill Dance Signature Lakes program.

As revealed proudly by Dance and Tennessee Governor Bill Lee – himself an avid outdoorsman – the Bill Dance Signature Lakes portfolio of 14 “Phase 1” fisheries opened with a \$15 million initiative that had a straightforward core mission to enhance the Volunteer State's already-impressive fishing resources. The secondary goal (one that the camera-friendly Dance is uniquely qualified to help accomplish): to spread the word to an audience of opportunity-hungry anglers throughout the state, region and country that the Bill Dance Signature Lakes will provide an angling experience endorsed by the world's most beloved bass fisherman.

“If I'm going to lend my name (to this project), I want anglers of all ages – from experts to amateurs – to have a legendary experience,” Dance said at the time of the announcement.

The 10 large reservoirs and four small-water fisheries initially honored with the Bill Dance signature of approval stretch from one side of the state to the other and offer an impressive range of diverse fishing and recreational options. From trout, bass and panfish in 6,430-acre



BILL DANCE SIGNATURE LAKES

WESTERN REGION

- Reelfoot Lake (crappie, catfish, bluegill)
- Herb Parsons Lake (bluegill, catfish, largemouth bass)
- Lake Halford (largemouth bass, crappie, bluegill, walleye)
- Brown's Creek Lake (largemouth bass)
- Pickwick Lake (largemouth bass, catfish, crappie, bluegill)

CENTRAL REGION

- Kentucky Lake (largemouth bass, crappie)
- Old Hickory Lake (largemouth bass, striped bass, crappie, sauger, walleye)
- Tims Ford Lake (largemouth bass, striped bass, walleye, crappie)
- Fall Creek Falls Lake (largemouth bass, bluegill, catfish)
- Dale Hollow Lake (smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, crappie, walleye)

EAST REGION

- Chickamauga Lake (largemouth bass, crappie, walleye)
- Douglas Lake (largemouth bass, crappie, bluegill)
- Norris Lake (largemouth bass, striped bass, walleye, crappie)
- Watauga Lake (smallmouth bass, walleye, crappie, trout)



The 14 lakes in the first phase of the Signature Lake project include both large reservoirs and small lakes that provide access to anglers of all ages and interests.

Watauga Lake on the extreme eastern edge of Tennessee in Johnson and Carter counties, to whopper-sized bluegill in 10,247-acre Reelfoot Lake – the state’s largest natural lake, in the extreme northwestern corner of the state in Lake and Obion Counties – the Bill Dance Signature Lakes are equally divided among the three regions of the state (Eastern, Central, Western) to provide maximum accessibility to both Tennesseans and to traveling anglers passing through the state’s borders.

“We have a state that stretches more than 400 miles across, from east to west,” Dance says. “Chances are, if you’re coming down to the South from anywhere in the north – or if you’re driving north from Florida, Alabama, Georgia and those states – you’re going to go through Tennessee at some point. There’s a Signature Lake near wherever you’re going and fish there waiting for your hook.”

WHEN BILL DANCE TALKS TENNESSEE FISHING ...

Dance’s unabashed love of the Volunteer State’s fishing wealth should come as no surprise to the three generations of anglers who have spent endless hours watching the amiable Tennessean fishing, catching, teaching – and sometimes pratfalling – his way through more than 2,000 episodes of Bill Dance Outdoors. Dance’s show started quietly in 1968 on WHBQ in Memphis before elevating to ESPN, The Nashville Network, the Outdoor Life Network and Outdoor Channel, a 55-year on-air run that cemented the host as a the most well-known angler in the world, and a died-in-the-wool Vol; orange-and-white University of



Tennessee’s already-legendary bass fisheries will benefit from enhancement to both habitat and facilities thanks to the Bill Dance Signature Lakes program.

“WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, YOU COULD SAY THAT THE ENTIRE STATE OF TENNESSEE IS A FISHING TOWN,”

Tennessee hat perched on his head as he fished lakes largely inside the borders of his home state. America’s bass anglers have literally grown up with Bill Dance. And when Uncle Billy talks about fishing in Tennessee, we all listen. “There’s no other place you can go in this country that has better opportunities to catch fish on the number of great lakes we have in Tennessee,” he says. “We’re well

diversified with a multitude of fish across the state. I love Tennessee, and if you're a fisherman, there are lots of reasons for you to love it, too."

THE SIGNATURE LAKES EFFECT

Dance grew up wading and walking the banks of East Fork Mulberry Creek while on summer visits to his grandparents' home in Lynchburg, Tennessee. Those childhood experiences and core memories fueled Dance throughout his life, eventually leading to a career as a tournament angler in the late 1960s and, eventually, the debut of his namesake show on WHBQ in 1968.

In the seven decades since his days of catching smallmouth on Mulberry Creek, Dance has criss-crossed Tennessee innumerable times and fished virtually every nook, cranny and corner where bass, crappie, bluegill, stripers and catfish swim in the Volunteer State.

Dance emphasizes that easy access to good fishing spots is critical to the overall success of the Signature Lakes program, and that the function of the \$15 million initiative is as much about facilities as it is about the fish swimming in Tennessee's lakes.

"You know, there's plenty of good fishing spots in our state if you know where to look for 'em, but good fishing starts with good facilities and a well-managed fishery," Dance acknowledges.

That's a nod to the entire ecosystem of a Bill Dance-approved "legendary" fishing experience, which includes not only an abundance of fish, healthy habitat and clean water, but functional, well-maintained launch ramps, fishing piers, courtesy docks, restroom facilities and concessions where possible. In the two years since the launch of the Bill Dance Signature initiative, lakes in the program have already been stocked with more than 9 million fish, and have received hundreds of habitat structures to enhance fish survivability. In addition, multiple improvements to boat ramps and parking facilities have already been completed, with future construction of new parking facilities, fishing piers, access points and courtesy docks on the docket.

"We care about keeping lakes fertile and well-stocked so people can catch fish when they visit, but the fishing



BILL DANCE GIANT BASS OPENS SLATED FOR 2024

WHEN COREY MILES AND CAMDYN CRANFILL crossed the stage at the inaugural Bill Dance Giant Bass Open (Oct. 21-22) with 9.04- and 8.4-pound Lake Chickamauga studs, they became the first-ever grand prize winners in a series of events that will offer generous cash rewards in 2024 to adult and youth anglers throughout Tennessee. Miles and Cranfill were among 318 anglers who competed in the inaugural event, which doled out \$55,000 in hourly awards and \$6,5000 in grand prizes (\$5,000 for Miles, \$1,500 for Cranfill's youth-division prize).

Centered around the Bill Dance Signature Lakes, the 2024 Giant Bass Open series will again provide hourly cash prizes for biggest fish in both adult and youth divisions, and will lead to a championship event among the local winners.

2024 BILL DANCE GIANT BASS OPEN SCHEDULE

February – Pickwick Lake

March – Dale Hollow

April – Douglas Lake

June – Chickamauga

September – Kentucky Lake

Championship event – Location and dates TBD

INFO: giantbassopen.com

experience is about more than that," Dance says. "(We need) good docks, good launch ramps, good restrooms and concessions buildings. People have a good experience and word travels fast: 'So and so' caught big bluegill at Fall Creek Falls. Well, how big? My granddaddy caught a pounder, and somebody caught a 16-incher.' That word gets out and fishermen start talking about it, that generates a lot of interest."

"WELCOME TO MY FISHING TOWN"

Just moments before Dance takes to the Giant Bass Open weigh-in stage in Dayton to oversee the awarding of the \$5,000 grand prize for biggest fish, he speaks enthusiastically and affectionately about towns throughout the state that he thinks of as "fishing towns." He identifies several of those towns located on or near a Bill Dance Signature Lake – Dayton, Dandridge (Douglas Lake), Paris (Kentucky Lake), Tiptonville (Reelfoot), Pickwick (Pickwick Lake) and Watauga (Watauga Lake), to name a few.

As he draws an imaginary trail in the air that leads from Reelfoot Lake to the Mississippi River to Kentucky Lake to Pickwick Lake to Dale Hollow Lake to Douglas Lake – calling out each of these lakes' best fishing opportunities and some of the Signature Lakes stocking, habitat and facilities-improvements projects accomplished there – Dance emphasizes the importance of fishing to communities around the state. He's proud of that fact that the Bill Dance Signature Lakes could positively affect 39 counties, including 22 that have been identified as "at risk" or "economically distressed."

Dance embraces the notion that the entire state of Tennessee (with its half-million acre of lakes and deeply rooted fishing culture) could be viewed as a

"fishing town" that any angler in the country would be delighted to visit and fish.

"When you think about it, you could say that the entire state of Tennessee is a fishing town," he says. "What (makes) a fishing town? I think it's a multitude of things. I think it's the people, the location, the history. A fishing town is one of those places that you know is a fishing town when you're there – you can feel how important fishing is to that town. That's the entire state of Tennessee. Welcome to my fishing town." ■

tnvacation.com/bill-dance-signature-lakes



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THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS



BUBBA PRO SERIES SMART FISH SCALE

By Matt Williams

There's a passel of digital scales out there, but none are smarter or more versatile than the new Pro Series SFS from Bubba. The tournament-grade scale is loaded with cool, functional features that ultimately led to it being tabbed as the official scale Major League Fishing will

use for tallying weights during 2024 Bass Pro Tour events.

Mike Jenkins heads up the MLF officials program and knows the Bubba inside and out. He called it "one sharp cookie."

"I couldn't be happier with it," Jenkins said. "You can feel the quality the

moment you pick it up. The scale is comfortable to hold, simple to use, starts up fast and provides super accurate readings very quickly. It speeds up the weighing process so we're able get fish back in the water as soon as possible. Download the Bubba Mobile App and there are all sorts of neat things you can do with it."

It's built to protect your investment. Bubba even throws in a decal for display on your truck or boat.

In Action

I found the instruction manual and tutorial video to be very helpful in learning the buttons and navigating the operational modes. It takes a little time to get comfortable with the device, but the built-in perks are well worth the trouble. It's more than just a scale.

The start-up time is super quick. Just press the center hook button and the display lights up. Press the right arrow button for two seconds to access the settings, then use the up/down arrows to navigate the menu. Follow the prompts, and don't be afraid to punch buttons and feel your way around. I used household objects to simulate fish and practice logging weights in the different tournament modes before I ever took the scale to the lake.

Final Thoughts

Whether you're a tournament pro aiming to streamline the culling process or a recreational angler who just wants to keep accurate track of your heaviest five (or have some fun competing against friends), the Pro Series SFS is sure to be a welcome addition to your box of fishing tools. Easy to use and packed with high-tech features, this is one slick scale that gets even cooler when paired with the Bubba Mobile App, which is free for purchasers to download at the Apple or Google Play app stores. It's arguably the smartest hand-held scale out there.

First Impressions

It didn't take long to see why Jenkins is so smitten with the Pro Series SFS. This scale has high quality written all over it.

Shaped like a radar gun, the scale is designed with a comfortable, pistol-grip handle and reddish, textured skin for a non-slip grip. A lockable lip clip or weigh hook (both supplied) attach to the stainless split ring at the base of handle.

The face of the scale features a full-color LCD screen and a series of waterproof buttons for navigating the three operational modes, adjusting screen brightness, choosing battery type, erasing memory, adjusting sleep time, changing the bag limit and the desired unit of weight measurement. The battery compartment at the nose of the unit is designed to accommodate the supplied lithium battery or 3 AA batteries.

The scale's functions and features are clearly listed on the packaging, while detailed directions for navigating the different menus and operational modes are included in the paperback instruction manual. There's also a video rundown available on Bubba's YouTube channel.

Something else I really like is the rigid storage case.



CARRYING CASE:

The rigid carrying case is designed to float and carries an IPX-7 waterproof rating. The case, four-angler Competition Mode, rechargeable lithium battery and Bubba Mobile App/Bluetooth capability features are exclusive to the Pro Series model.



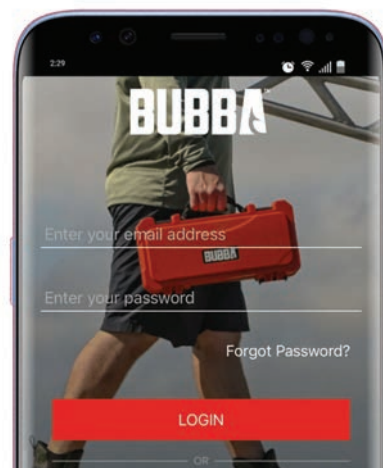
NON-SLIP GRIP:

The beefy, non-slip grip is ergonomically correct to help optimize control and stability while weighing fish.



BUBBA MOBILE APP:

The Bubba mobile app allows for all sorts of cool applications, like hosting or joining virtual tournaments, logging GPS coordinates of fish catches and noting catch details, conditions and more. Once activated, the app allows information from the scale to be automatically transmitted via Bluetooth and saved to your phone.



Performance Tips

- > The Pro Series SFS includes lots of bells and whistles, with multiple menu options to navigate. New users will be well served by checking out the 8-minute tutorial video on YouTube.
- > Be especially careful when fooling around with the erase memory setting. Once data is cleared, it's gone for good.
- > Like a cell phone battery, the life of Bubba's lithium battery between charges can be extended by reducing the sleep timer and dimming the LCD screen. The fully charged lithium battery is advertised to last 8 hours with the scale running continuously on full brightness. Three AA

batteries will last 4 1/2 hours.

- > A two-year Pro App membership (\$119.00 value) comes free with the purchase of the Pro Series SFS scale. Be sure to download the app to make full use of the scale. You don't need the app to weigh a fish or tally your heaviest five, but it allows users to log catch data and GPS coordinates, compete in virtual tournaments, utilize live map tracking features and share fish catches and other info on social media.

Applications

The Pro Series has three modes of operation. Here's a synopsis:

Tournament Mode

- > Allows for livewell management and

programmable bag limits of 2-8 fish

- > Smart Culling System displays the smallest fish and total caught
- > Displays weights of individual fish and total weight

Competition Mode

- > Allows for competition among four anglers on the same scale
- > Maintains a total weight and fish count for each angler
- > Automatically updates and displays the heaviest total weight

Rally Mode

- > Used by MLF officials in Team Series and BPT events to perform SCORETRACKER® updates
- > Maintains a total fish count and total weight of all fish
- > Displays largest and smallest fish.

HITS

- + Simple to use
- + Textured non-slip skin
- + 3 modes of operation
- + Fast start up
- + Accurate
- + Weighs fish up to 60 pounds
- + Full color LCD screen
- + Waterproof
- + Hard carrying case
- + Bubba mobile app included for two years with purchase
- + Rechargeable lithium battery and USB charging cord

DETAILS

Battery: 1 rechargeable lithium (provided) or 3 AAs (not provided)
Maximum Weight Limit: 60 pounds (per fish)
Accuracy: +/- 0.3 percent
Hard Carrying Case: Yes. IPX Waterproof Rated
Weighing Units: 3
MSRP: \$229.99
Contact: bubba.com ■

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TOURNAMENT-CALIBER ROD AND REEL COMBOS

By Mitchell Forde

Shopping for the angler in your life (or yourself, no judgment here) this holiday season? A new rod and reel are always welcome gifts.

That said, sifting through the hundreds of products on the market — many of them tailored for specific applications and just about all carrying triple-digit price tags — can get intimidating in a hurry. One way to simplify the search is to purchase a rod and reel together. That's not the only perk of buying a combo, either; doing so ensures the two products are compatible and typically saves money.

In the past, buying a combo has often meant settling for introductory-level gear, with high-end rods and reels rarely packaged together. Thankfully, that's starting to change. Here's a run-down of six feature-packed combos, a few of which you might even see on a national tour next season.

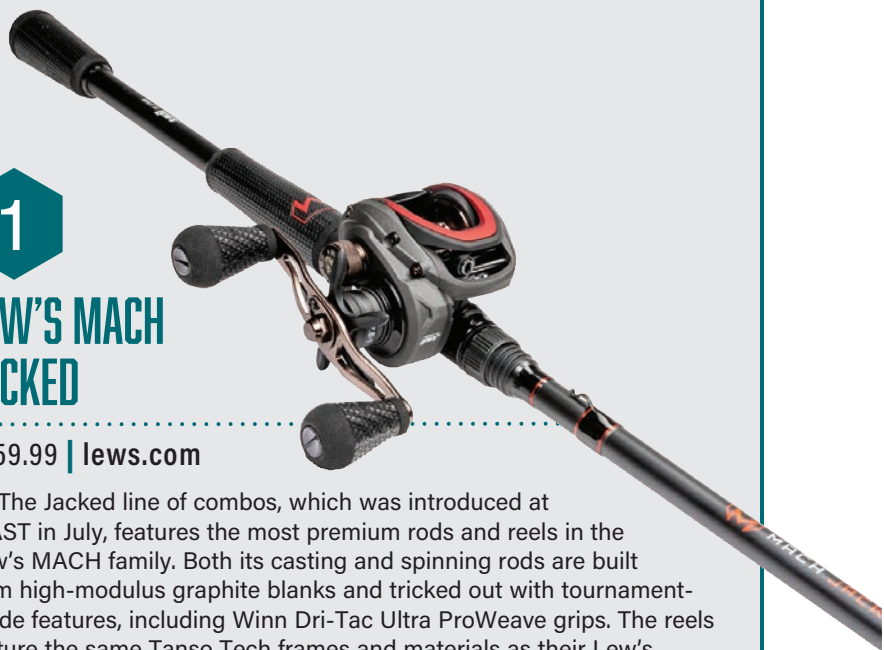
1

LEW'S MACH JACKED

\$259.99 | lews.com

The Jacked line of combos, which was introduced at ICAST in July, features the most premium rods and reels in the Lew's MACH family. Both its casting and spinning rods are built from high-modulus graphite blanks and tricked out with tournament-grade features, including Winn Dri-Tac Ultra ProWeave grips. The reels feature the same Tanso Tech frames and materials as their Lew's Custom Lite cousins, which retail for \$299.99 in baitcast and \$159.99 in spinning models.

It's not just the components that set the Jacked combos apart, but the fact that they're available in three different casting and spinning rod models, giving anglers different options for different techniques. Jacked baitcast combos are available with a 6-10 medium; 7-foot medium-heavy; or 7-3 medium-heavy rod (all fast action). Spinning rod options are 6-10 medium-light, fast action; 7-foot medium, fast; and 7-2 medium, extra-fast.



2

ABU GARCIA ZATA

\$229.95 | abugarcia.com

Abu Garcia revamped its Zata line with a slew of premium features, as proven by the Zata baitcast combo winning Best in Show at ICAST. The baitcast model offers anglers a pair of rod options made from 24-ton graphite — a do-everything, 7-foot medium-heavy, fast model or a 7-3 heavy, fast option, which should be well suited for techniques like pitching, frogging or swimming a jig. Both rods are paired with a reel that is the true star of the show. It offers 11 ball bearings and 20 pounds of drag in a low-profile package.

The spinning combo features a 7-foot medium rod with a size 3000 reel. The reel includes Abu Garcia's Rocket line management system and spool lip design for improved line control as well as a machined spool that allows anglers to tie braid directly without any slip.



3

FITZGERALD FISHING FX8

\$219.99 | fitzgeraldrods.com

Fitzgerald Fishing is looking to give anglers a taste of its quality at a lower price point by adding a combo to its rod offerings. The FX8 combo includes Fitzgerald's bestselling FX8 reel, which features a 7.2:1 gear ratio and 16 pounds of drag while weighing in at less than 7 ounces. The family-owned company built the accompanying 7-3 medium-heavy rod to match the reel and provide anglers versatility. The rod, which features a 36-ton graphite blank for extra sensitivity, can be used for worms, jigs, topwaters, spinnerbaits and even light flipping and pitching. Just because it's a combo, don't think it isn't tournament-grade.

Trevor Fitzgerald, the founder of Fitzgerald Fishing and winner of a 2020 Toyota Series event on the St. John's River, said he keeps three of these combos in his competition boat.



4

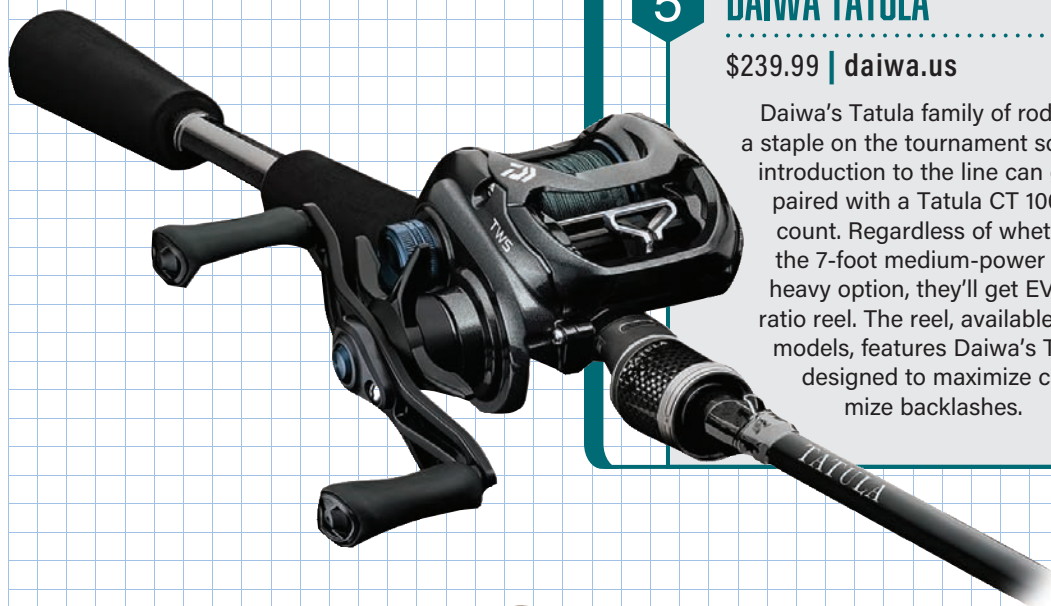
BASS PRO SHOPS JOHNNY MORRIS PLATINUM SIGNATURE SERIES

\$379.99 baitcast; \$299.99 spinning | basspro.com

Taking advantage of the combo offerings from Bass Pro Shops can allow anglers to get their hands on rods and reels used by the likes of Ott DeFoe, Edwin Evers and Chris Lane at a discount. You'll hardly have to sacrifice in terms of model options, either. Each of the five baitcast rod models offered in Bass Pro's top-of-the-line series are also available in combo form — 6-9 medium, fast; 6-9 medium-heavy, fast; 7-1 medium, fast; 7-6 heavy, extra-fast; 7-10 heavy, extra-fast. They can be paired with either 6.8:1 or 8.3:1 gear ratio reels. At 6.4 ounces, the reels are impressively light, especially considering they contain 11 ball bearings.

On the spinning side, buyers once again have several rod model choices — 6-9 medium; 6-9 medium-heavy; 7-1 medium; 7-1 medium-heavy and 7-4 medium. Each can be paired with a size 2000, 3000 or 4000 reel.





5

DAIWA TATULA

\$239.99 | daiwa.us

Daiwa's Tatula family of rods and reels has become a staple on the tournament scene. Anglers wanting an introduction to the line can get a graphite Tatula rod paired with a Tatula CT 100 reel at a bit of a discount. Regardless of whether consumers opt for the 7-foot medium-power rod or the 7-3 medium-heavy option, they'll get EVA grips and a 7.3:1 gear ratio reel. The reel, available in right- and left-handed models, features Daiwa's T-Wing System, which is designed to maximize casting distance and minimize backlashes.

6

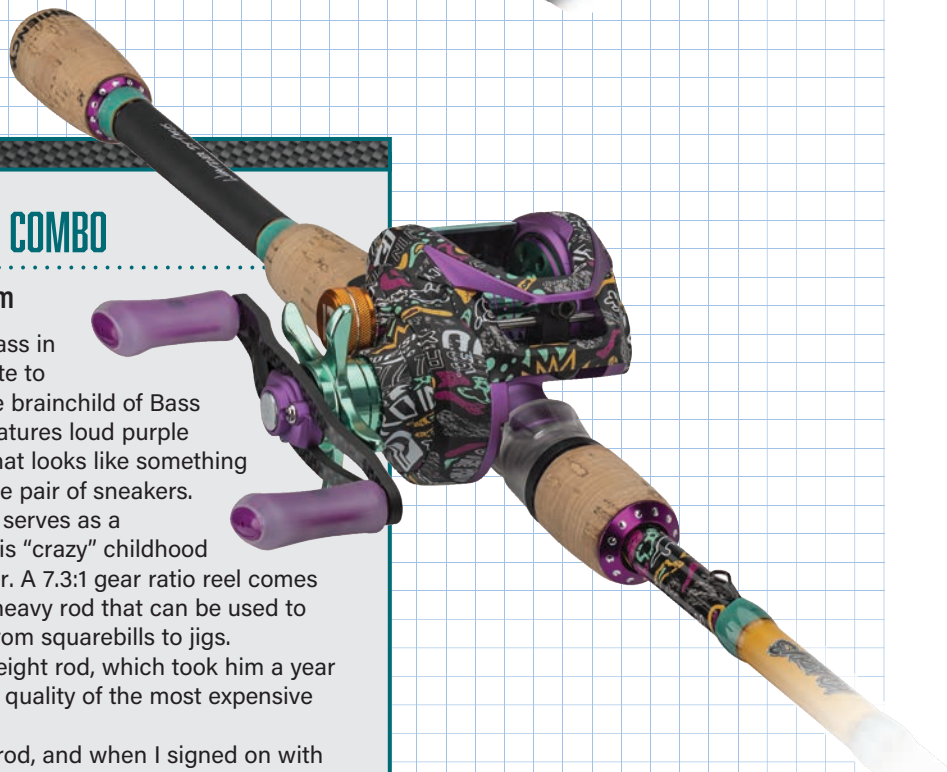
PROFISHIENCY KRAZY 3 COMBO

\$129.99 | profishiciency.com

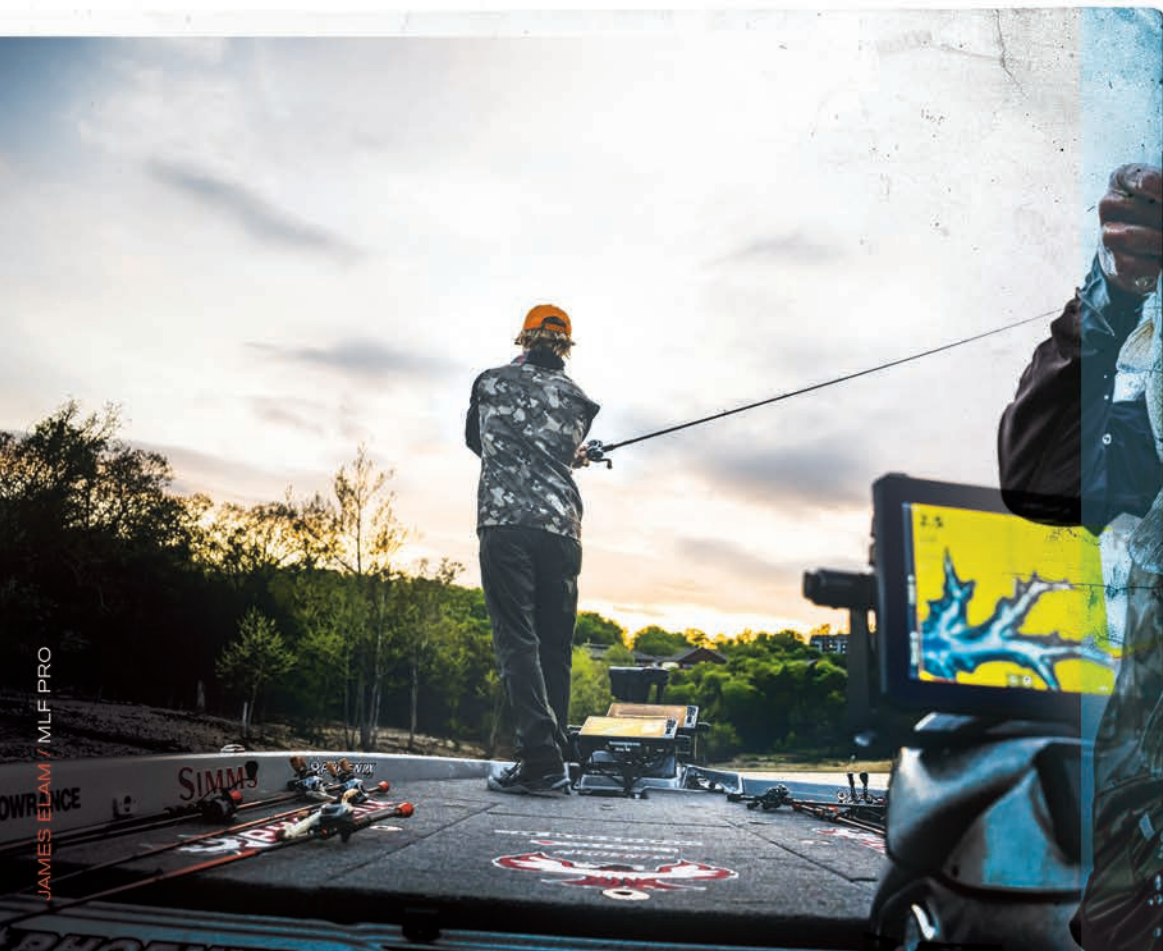
Anglers looking to catch bass in style will appreciate this update to ProFISHiency's Krazy line. The brainchild of Bass Pro Tour star David Dudley features loud purple highlights and a reel design that looks like something you might find on an expensive pair of sneakers. Dudley said the color scheme serves as a reminder that he's living out his "crazy" childhood dream as a professional angler. A 7.3:1 gear ratio reel comes paired with a 7-foot medium-heavy rod that can be used to throw just about everything, from squarebills to jigs.

Dudley believes the lightweight rod, which took him a year to design, can stand up to the quality of the most expensive offerings on the market.

"I was fishing with a \$350 rod, and when I signed on with (ProFISHiency), I asked to build a rod the way I want it," he said. "So it's a \$350 rod at an incredible price point. And I use it. ... I've got 30 of these rods in my boat right now. It's the only rod I use." ■



JAMES ELAM / MLF PRO



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TOURNAMENTS







OH CANADA!

One of the most compelling facets of the Toyota Series Championship – beside the whopping \$200,000 award to the highest-finishing pro and the REDCREST berths on the line – is the decidedly diverse, international flair that comes along with the trophies and fish.

In addition to the Toyota Series, Phoenix Bass Fishing League, Abu Garcia College Fishing and High School Fishing qualifiers from around the lower 48 states who annually compete in the event, a hearty group of anglers from MLF's International Divisions also make the journey to the championship site.

Among the Strike King co-anglers at the 2023 Toyota Series Championship Presented by Simms at Table Rock Lake in Missouri was Ashley Rae, an angler from Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Making her second appearance at the Championship (she finished 44th at the 2018 event at Lake Guntersville), Rae made the most of her time on the water in the Ozarks, finishing 33rd overall with 9 pounds, 5 ounces. That's a stout enough showing among a field of over 200 anglers, but it also earned Rae a new title: winner of the Strike King Co-Angler award in the International Division as the highest-finishing International co-angler.

Fishing fans might recognize Rae from shelovestofish.com, a popular website/blog that she created in 2009 to document her multi-species fishing experiences around her home in Canada.

Rae's Canadian teammates showed out as well, with four Canuck pros landing in the Top 20 of the 210-boat field. Oh Canada indeed!

PHOTO BY MATT BROWN





FREEZE IT!

If you haven't already, turn to page 31 of this issue, where you'll find a photo of some lipless crankbaits resting in a bed of ice. That feature story - "Tips from Tight Lips on Fishing Lipless Crankbaits in the Cold" by writer Mike Pehanich - highlights the effectiveness of an infrequently used wintertime bait that, according to the author and several MLF pros, should be a regular for cold-water bass.

One of those pros is Tennessee's Brandon Coulter, who the author interviewed for the story. Being from East Tennessee, Coulter is, of course, predisposed to love crankbaits of all varieties, and lipless baits like the Berkley Warpig in this photo are no exception. This sweet freeze-frame was captured by MLF photographer Rob Matsuura during a chilly fall day on the water with Coulter. It didn't make the lipless crankbaits story, but it's just too good NOT to show off.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

2023 STRIKE KING

CO-ANGLER OF THE YEAR

CHAMPIONSHIP WINS BY HOPKINS, TAYLOR HIGHLIGHT ANOTHER BOOM SEASON FOR PROGRAM

Think you need to own a bass boat to start fishing tournaments? Think again. The Strike King co-angler program offers the opportunity to compete alongside pros in both Toyota Series presented by Phoenix Boats and Phoenix Bass Fishing League presented by T-H Marine events.

Fishing as a co-angler allows participants to gain valuable experience while reducing the barriers to entering the tournament scene. More than 6,000 unique anglers took advantage of the program in 2023, nearly matching the record participation numbers from 2022. In total, the BFLs received 16,373 co-angler entries, while Toyota Series events had

3,435. Since 2019, co-angler participation has increased by 48 percent for the Toyota Series and 40 percent for BFLs.

"Co-anglers have great opportunities with MLF," said Senior Tournament Director Daniel Fennel. "Whether you are learning new lakes, new techniques or are out there competing for a spot in our championships, we've got you covered with the BFL and Toyota Series."

While it may be less expensive to compete as a co-angler, the rewards can be lucrative — including, potentially, a boat of your own. The co-angler winner of each Toyota Series event in 2023 took home a new Phoenix 518 Pro bass boat valued at \$33,500. The winners out of the back of the boat at the BFL Regionals and All-American each earned \$50,000. In addition, the Strike King Co-Angler of the Year in each of the seven Toyota Series divisions received a \$2,000 prize, while the points winners in the 24 BFL divisions landed \$500.

HOPKINS DISTANCES FIELD AT TOYOTA SERIES CHAMPIONSHIP

Having never been to Table Rock Lake, Al Hopkins didn't know what to expect from the Toyota Series Championship Presented by Simms. He didn't think his Day 1 limit of 10 pounds, 3 ounces was anything special, but given the prevalence of forward-facing sonar, which can make fishing challenging for co-anglers, the Indiana native figured it would put him in the hunt.

Turns out, it marked one of two 10-pound sacks caught on the first day and one of just six in the event. Hopkins landed two of them on his way to a convincing victory. His three-day total of 25-10 bested second place by 6-7.

"I come in with 10 pounds on Day 1 and everybody's patting me on the back, 'Man, can we take your picture?'"



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

Hopkins said. "And I'm thinking, I guess. I didn't know that 10 pounds was a good bag here."

After tinkering with bait selection, Hopkins caught most of his Day 1 keepers on a blade bait. The second day proved to be more of a grind, but two fish for 4-9 kept him in the mix. Fishing shallower on Day 3, he had to switch tactics, but he once again unlocked the tricky bite. Using a football jig and a tube, he sacked up 10-14, the biggest bag of the day by nearly 5 pounds.

After returning home, Hopkins celebrated his win with 75-year-old Ray Bowling. Bowling gave a young Hopkins his first tournament fishing experience, offering him a spot in his boat for local derbies. Now, Hopkins is excited to return the favor. He's also planning to return to Toyota Series competition in 2024, this time as a boater.

"I'm probably going to fish two or three divisions and just make a run for it," Hopkins said. "To be honest, all this did was leave me hungry, so I want more of it now. I want to get over on the boater side and play that ballgame. I've never taken the time to do it, but I think I'm going to take a couple years and just try to put my head down and see what we can come up with."



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJIRA

TAYLOR RALLIES FROM NINTH TO WIN ALL-AMERICAN

Entering the final day of the All-American in ninth place, Delaware native Larry Taylor figured he didn't have a shot at winning. That didn't really bother him, though. Paired with fellow Northeasterner and longtime friend Brian LaClair, he simply had fun fishing alongside a buddy.

Even after catching onto LaClair's program plying Lake Hartwell's bridge pilings with a micro jig and boating a 10-1 limit, Taylor didn't like his chances. But with just one of the eight anglers who started the day ahead of him catching five keepers and none topping 8 pounds, Taylor's stringer proved enough to vault him to the top of the standings, 1-4 ahead of Gary Haraguchi.

"We just went fishing," Taylor said. "I was happy with what I caught. I really wasn't expecting to pull it off."

Taylor, an occasional tournament angler who qualified for the All-American via The Bass Federation National Championship, knew right away what to do with his winnings. He used his \$50,000 prize to help his brother, who had lost his job while hospitalized for five months with COVID-19, start his own welding and fabrication business.

"I told myself if I won this tournament, I was going to back him and get him on his feet, get him anything he needed, and get in there and get his business started, get his people working," Taylor said. "So far, it's going good." ■

2023 STRIKE KING CO-ANGLERS OF THE YEAR



TOYOTA SERIES Presented by Phoenix Boats

Central
Alan Hults

Northern
Cooper Jett

Plains
Alan Bernicky

Southern
Stephen Draghi

Southwestern
Cedric Jackson

Western
Bruce Harris

Wild Card
Alan Woodford

PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE Presented by T-H Marine

Arkie
Blake Defoor

Bama
Chad Macks

Buckeye
Steve Sorrell

Bulldog
Tyler Mangum

Choo Choo
Justin Stephenson

Cowboy
JJ Matzke

Gator
Tyler Nekolne

Great Lakes
Hertz Skaer

Hoosier
Joe Gorham

Illini
Aaron Arning

LBL
Sean O'Brien

Michigan
Gavin Weted

Mississippi
Hunter Averett

Mountain
Allen Neal

Music City
Rocky Williams

North Carolina
Wes House

Northeast
Michael Bahnweg

Okie
Danny Giacomo

Ozark
Adler Odle

Piedmont
Robert Wedding

Savannah River
Chris Bensel

Shenandoah
David Decicis

South Carolina
Wesley Mullins

Volunteer
Lenny Bays



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

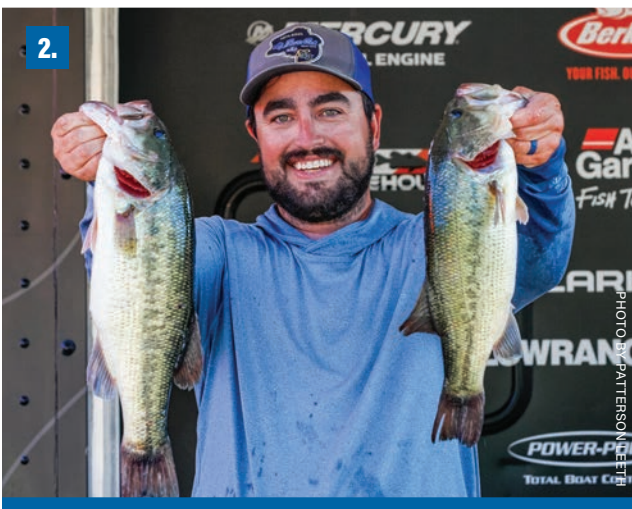


PHOTO BY PATTERSON NEELER



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

1. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS NORTHERN DIVISION PRESENTED BY RABID BAITS
Potomac River

Sept. 21-22

The arrival of tropical storm Ophelia canceled the event's third and final day, but it didn't dampen Christian Greico's week on the Potomac River. The Florida native rode a punching bite — his favorite — to a two-day total of 33 pounds, 10 ounces. That gave him a 1-3 win over newly crowned Tackle Warehouse Invationals AOY Ron Nelson.

Punching grass mats in a popular area of Mattawoman Creek where most other competitors were frogging, Greico didn't get many bites — especially on Day 2, when he caught his fifth keeper with about 10 minutes left to fish. But he stuck to his strengths, keeping the big stick in his hands. Most of his fish bit a Googan Bandito

Bug beneath a 11/2-ounce Epic Tungsten Flipping Weight. The victory earned him more than \$40,000.

2. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS PLAINS DIVISION
Lake of the Ozarks

Sept. 28-30

As he returned to weigh-in on the final day of the Plains Division season, Travis Harriman was sure he had blown it. The Arkansas native caught the largest limit on each of the first two days and led by nearly 5 pounds, yet he boated just one keeper on Day 3.

That lone fish, a 4-4, would prove just enough as Harriman's three-day total of 42-12 gave him a 14-ounce victory over Cody Huff.

Harriman probed the lake's omnipresent docks using a pair of jigs from Jewel Bait Company with a Strike King Scounbug as a trailer. He

got off to fast starts each of the first two days en route to sacking up 20-7 and 18-1. He would need just about every ounce to hold off Huff. The win netted Harriman a \$40,000 payday and a spot in the Toyota Series Championship, where he'd earn another check.

3. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS CHAMPIONSHIP PRESENTED BY SIMMS
Table Rock Lake

Nov. 2-4

Without a keeper in the boat at noon of the final day, Chad Mrazek pulled off a late rally to clinch the biggest win of his young career. The 23-year-old Texan shifted his game plan on Day 2 to target bass in timber submerged in 20 to 37 feet of water, and a big day vaulted him into second place. He struggled to recapture the success on Day 3, though.

That is, until about 1 p.m., when he caught a pair of 3-plus-pounders off a fallen, submerged tree.

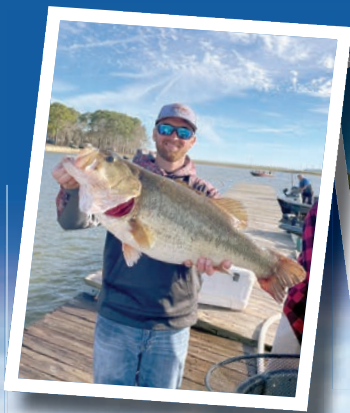
The consecutive catches sparked a 16-pound limit that gave Mrazek a 7-ounce win over All-American champion Emil Wagner. Like most of his keepers on the latter two days, Mrazek caught them by fishing a 7/16-ounce jig painfully slowly to entice bites from Table Rock's wary bass.

Mrazek went all-in to launch his professional career this year, fishing the Tackle Warehouse Invationals plus two Toyota Series divisions. While the results were up-and-down, the ending more than made up for any struggles along the way, as his championship victory earned him more than \$200,000 plus a berth in REDCREST 2024. ■

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FISHERY SPOT LIGHT



By Tyler Brinks

TOLEDO BEND RESERVOIR

Toledo Bend Reservoir needs no introduction in the bass fishing world – it’s a legendary tournament venue with decades of history. However, this Texas/Louisiana impoundment of the Sabine River deserves a refresher course, as it’s been several seasons since the last tour-level event there (John Murray’s Bassmaster Elite Series triumph in 2017).

The famed border lake known for its abundance of hearty largemouth will kick off the 2024 Bass Pro Tour season as the host of Stage One Jan. 30-Feb. 4.

The fishing has gotten better on the massive, 185,000-acre body of water since that last national-level event in 2017, and Toledo Bend could produce

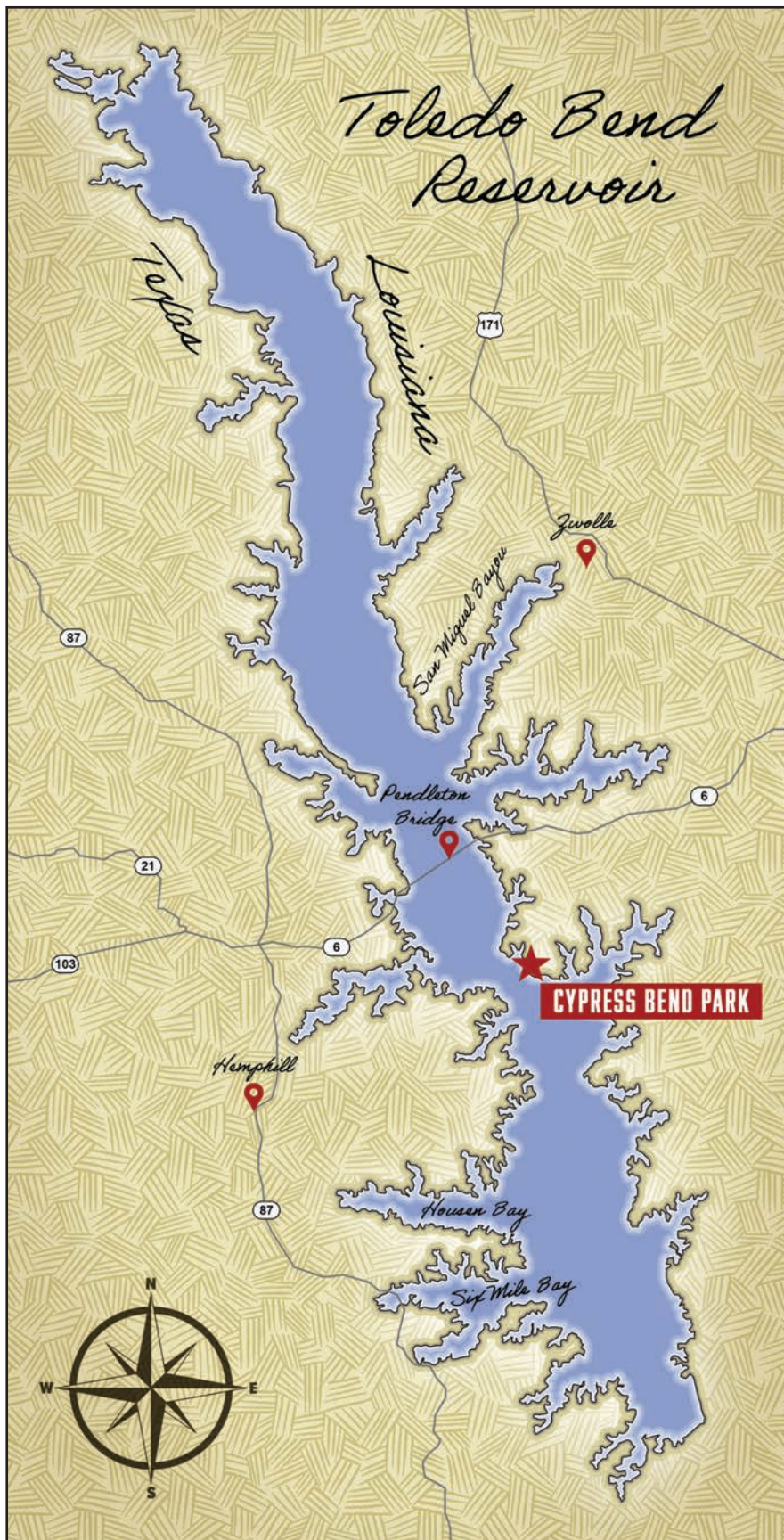


ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROMAN

fireworks at Stage One, according to Bass Pro Tour angler Dakota Ebare and local angler Marshall Hughes. Like almost all early season events, there will likely be some curveballs from Mother Nature; in addition, the return to MLF's "every fish counts" format from a five-fish daily limit may alter the approach for the 80 competitors.

EBARE LOOKING FORWARD TO BIG BASS

Ebare lives between Sam Rayburn Reservoir and Toledo Bend but has spent much more time on Rayburn in recent years because it's been a well-trafficked major tournament stop. That said, he's no stranger to Toledo Bend and is eager to reacquaint himself with a fishery that he believes has changed for the better.

"The hydrilla is back in some areas on Toledo Bend, and that's been the biggest difference in the improvement in recent years," Ebare said. "I think the fish have always been there because the big ones are so old, but we started seeing much bigger weights when the grass came back."

According to Ebare, the past two tournament seasons have shown what the big lake is capable of once again.

"The way that Toledo is fishing lately, we have the chance for some historic weights (at Stage One) because it has been fishing that good," he said. "This year in local tournaments, there have been several bags over 30 pounds and a few over 40 pounds for five fish. Even summertime events take 57 pounds to win for two days, to give you an idea of what the lake is kicking out."

The Phoenix Bass Fishing League Cowboy Division kicked off at Toledo Bend in early February each of the past two seasons. In 2022, Tater Reynolds took the win with 27-14 for five fish, and in 2023, Cody Pitt took first with an astonishing 39-15. While those weights are stellar, a look further down the standings shows a tough bite for others. Much of that was due to the weather, according to Ebare, which could also play a major role in the results of Stage One — the early February timing could have anglers experiencing just about any conditions.

"We could be out there sight-fishing in flip-flops, or it will be so cold that we could be wearing every piece of clothing

we own," he said. "The other big variable will be the wind, because this lake gets nasty early in the year. That will be a major variable to where we can fish."

A BIOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE

Covering Sam Rayburn and Toledo Bend (among others), Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist Todd Driscoll keeps close tabs on Toledo Bend and spends plenty of time fishing it. While many believe the fishery is experiencing a significant upswing, Driscoll is of the opinion that Toledo Bend's recent "surge" is more about a shift in attention back to the lake after other fisheries (like Rayburn) stole the spotlight in recent years.

**"WE COULD BE OUT THERE
SIGHT-FISHING IN FLIP-FLOPS,
OR IT WILL BE SO COLD THAT
WE COULD BE WEARING EVERY
PIECE OF CLOTHING WE OWN."**

"The big weights we've been seeing recently are the norm over the years, and that matches up with our electrofishing results," he said. "The years when there wasn't a lot of hydrilla, from 2015 to 2021, the fish would get off the bank after the spawn and become harder to catch, and many anglers started fishing other lakes. The lack of grass in those years was due to abnormal and prolonged high-water conditions, but that grass has started to come back in many areas."

Driscoll identifies four main factors that allow Toledo Bend to keep pumping out giant bass.

"One is the forage base and the abundant sunfish and both threadfin and gizzard shad," he said. "We also stock at least 500,000 Florida-strain largemouth and sometimes over a million, depending on how our hatcheries are doing that year. Spawning habitat is another benefit, and even during the years without hydrilla, there was hay grass, cypress trees and terrestrial cover to protect the zero-age-year class. The final reason is the sheer size of the lake — it really spreads out

anglers and can swallow up a lot of boats. It handles the fishing pressure very well."

HUGHES EXPECTS FIREWORKS

Hughes wrapped up the 2023 Toyota Series season in second place in points in the Southwestern Division. He lives on the Texas side of Toledo Bend in Hemphill and echoed Ebare's statements about how good the fishing could be when the Bass Pro Tour kicks off its sixth season.

"I think they're going to smash them, to be honest," Hughes said. "Historically, grass was everywhere, but it disappeared for around five years. Now, it's back, and the fishing has been incredible."

But even with the grass helping the overall bite, Hughes said the biggest bags during the prespawn usually come elsewhere.

"You don't see the biggest bags come from the grass; the guys who catch 40 pounds are usually offshore with forward-facing sonar," he said. "The biggest bass like to suspend, and I think some of the biggest fish caught during this event will come on jerkbaits and swimbaits. It's dang possible someone could catch a 12-pounder or even a new lake record in this tournament, but I'd guess we'll see at least one over 10 pounds caught."

On February 14, 2023, angler Bill Cook set the new lake record with a 15.67-pound fish using his forward-facing sonar during a Bass Champs tournament. However, with the BPT format returning to every fish counts, the suspended fish pattern could take a backseat to a few others.

"There will be a good bite in the grass with a lipless crankbait or bladed jig, and you can stack up some fish when you get in the right area," Hughes said. "There's also a chance for guys to go old school and fish a Carolina rig on the big stumps offshore and get into a lot of fish."

Hughes acknowledged that there's a chance for extreme cold, but that it shouldn't affect the bite much.

"When it's really cold, the bite gets even better," he said. "I don't know why, but (those fish) eat when it gets like that. Those cold prespawn days are the best time to be out there for big fish." ■

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PROFILE: **CHAD
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Just five months after earning his college degree, Texas pro Chad Mrazek knew he needed to make some changes to benefit his fishing career, so the 23-year-old Tackle Warehouse Invationals rookie left his new job in the insurance field. Three days later (in mid-October), he had a new title sponsor. Two weeks after that, he won the Toyota Series Championship Presented by Simms. "I'm a 'fly by the seat of my pants' kind of guy," Mrazek says simply.

Born in Indianapolis but raised in Texas, Mrazek considers himself a native of the Houston area, with Lake Conroe as his home. He fished his way up the ranks of MLF5 competition, including a stint fishing for Lander University, where he completed his marketing degree. Here's what the new Toyota Series champ had to say about his seat-of-his-pants flight path.

Q&A

By Matt Naber
PHOTO BY COBI PELLERITO

Let's start this with a bang: You really blew up at the Toyota Series Championship Presented by Simms. How does it feel to have won such a prestigious event?

It's the one I wanted to win, but obviously I want to win all of them. There are three tournaments in the world that are the biggest to win, and this is one of them [REDCREST and the Bassmaster Classic are the other two].

Heading into that event on Table Rock Lake, how did you feel about your chances?

I was a little leery. Missouri has treated me really good and really bad. I had a second-place finish in a college event there at a different time of year where I barely missed the win, and then came back for the Lake of the Ozarks Invationals and got my butt whooped and was late to weigh-in. When I got there (for practice), the water color was better than I imagined. I imagined it being more like the Ozarks, but I felt comfortable with the color. As far as how it set up, I didn't know there would be such a vast area of opportunity for fishing, and I could get into places I was comfortable with since every lake in that region is known for being steep and clear. I had to adjust to making what I do (technique-wise) work.

What was your practice plan for that event? Did you end up actually doing the things you practiced?

I spent a lot of time (looking) really, really deep. I tried to make fish bite that I shouldn't have tried to make bite. I also spent a lot of time in the main river channel and the mouths of major creeks. I felt comfortable and was catching fish. After the weather front came through, there were still fish there, but not as many, and they were hard to get to bite. I only caught like six keepers a day in the tournament. I went from 20 to 30 fish a day in practice to maybe seven or eight, so I learned that I needed to key into the smallmouth; that they'd be my bread-winner since they didn't change much or move much, but were tougher to get to bite with the weather.

On Day 2 you changed your location and your bait, and it paid off in a big way: Your 17-7 bag was the second biggest of the event at that point. Could you walk us through your Day 2 experience?

I went in swinging. I've never been a fan of saying I'm going to "fish for the win" or "fish for big ones" because you're always trying to win any time you hit the water; so I'm not going to say "I'm only fishing for big ones," and people might have misinterpreted that. It had a lot to do with my starting spot that I'd found in pre-practice. Fish slid up way shallower – up from 50 to 25 feet. When I realized they slid up (shallower), I caught a smallmouth just under 5 pounds and knew this was legit. I had about 13 pounds in the boat by 9:30 a.m. and I was like "Wow, this could happen today!" It's harder to get the big bags, but when you have from 9:30 a.m. to the end of the day to get a bag like that, I was a lot more okay with taking risks running up the river to check some spots.

I was really scared before the tournament about being spread out since I had stuff up the White River, but I had that bag and said, "let's go do it." The wind was blowing perfectly, and I stopped on the first one for a large-mouth that was almost 5 pounds and a smallmouth that was almost 5 pounds on the next one, and it was crazy.

At the end of Day 2 you were just 5 ounces behind Mike Raber with a two-day total of 31-2. What was going through your mind knowing that you were on the cusp of winning?

I didn't pay too much attention to the leaderboard. I would have if I wasn't preoccupied with some battery problems. I weighed in a little early and had to figure out battery issues and track (a new one) down. But I knew I had a shot, and that's always a good feeling. Then the Day 3 thing, that being my Achilles heel, it never crossed my mind.

What were you thinking and feeling as the championship progressed?

I was trying to keep it together. It was not at all how I wanted the day to go in the beginning. I was excited and expecting to do the same thing I did on Day 2, but it didn't happen. I don't know if they were walleye or carp, but there was a hostile takeover of some other species of fish on that starting area, and I didn't catch a single bass. I don't know if it was the "cameraman curse" or what, but I tried some other stuff before hitting my good stuff. At that point, you imagine anything you catch before hitting your good stuff is a bonus – but I had no bonus fish. I got my first one at 12:30 p.m. and ran to one of my better areas and filled the limit. Then I went to the next spot and got a big one. Those last-minute culls are what won me the tournament.

How about while the final weigh-in was underway?

My stomach was turning. I knew Emil (Wagner) had them, and everyone was talking. I know a lot of those guys, and like Drew Gill and Emil and Alec Morrison are all so good. They're phenomenal guys, and shoutout to Drew, he's one of the nicest guys. He's a heck of a character, and I'm proud to call him a buddy. He was telling me, "I think you got it, there's one other guy who could beat you, but I think you got it." I'm like, "I don't know if I want to know!" My stomach was just turning, and Drew kept me calm – calmer than if he wasn't there.

I knew Emil had a chance, and no matter what anyone said I knew it would be really close. Emil talked to me

for a bit, and I told him what I had on the scale, and I asked him and he said over 16 (pounds). I knew that's what he needed to beat me, but he had a last-minute keeper that he didn't know how much it weighed. I was on my toes for him to weigh in – he had 16-11. According to my scale we would have tied if my scale was dead on. If my scale is heavy, I'll lose. Thankfully my scale weighed light on the water, and we pulled through.

You were basically living tournament to tournament this season, just hoping to make enough money to go to the next one. Now you've earned \$200,000 – has that reality sunk in?

Oh my gosh, I don't know. One thing that kept playing in my head is Chris Jones said, "The money spends, but the hardware lasts forever." But, the money means just as much to me because I know I'm in a different situation than other guys since I had to quit for a year and work and hustle. Learning to flip a dollar anywhere I can and being a blue-collar guy ... money is crazy, you know.

I made a good chunk of change bass fishing between the Toyota Series and Invitationals and this win. I'm learning to deal with it and what to do with (the money). I don't want to overdo it. When you finally get the money you're like, "I don't know if I really need it," and trying to be smart with it.

At the end of the day, what did you learn this season that you'll apply in 2024?

Keeping a small circle helped me. I know a lot of people talk to a lot of people, and that's not a bad thing. But keeping a small circle and doing my own thing and trusting myself (is what I learned this season). Nothing against who I traveled with at all, but the tournaments where I traveled by myself and broke down bodies of water how I knew how was best for me. I put my boat in the water knowing I will look for different things than the other guys. I feel like dock talk hasn't really helped me much along the way. Moving forward, I want to trust myself and make decisions and calls myself. That's something I'll be doing in 2024 for sure. ■

2023 MLF5 SPONSORS





YOUTH PROGRAM FLOURISHING FOR MASSACHUSETTS FEDERATION

Massachusetts doesn't exactly carry a reputation as a bass fishing hotbed. Of the anglers that comprised the Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Invationals rosters in 2023, none hail from the Bay State.

And yet, there's a cadre of young Massachusetts anglers who are starting to make their presence known outside the state. Kaleb Brown and his Lander University partner Cole Moulton bested a 250-boat field at the Abu Garcia College Fishing tournament on Lake Hartwell in late October. Jacob Swanson is part of the loaded roster at Montevallo University and finished third in the co-angler competition of the Toyota Series event on Lake Champlain in June.

According to Joe McKinnon, the president of The Bass Federation's Massachusetts chapter, those two are part of a wave of impressive anglers who have emerged from the state in recent years. He also mentioned Nick Frumkin, who won the high school tri-state championship contested between Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island alongside partner Jack Houghton in May, as well as Cameron Chase.

Where's all this young talent coming from? McKinnon – currently nine years into his second stint as president of the state federation – credits youth director Seth McNary.



Massachusetts angler Kaleb Brown (right) and his Lander University partner Cole Moulton took home the hardware at an Abu Garcia college fishing tournament on Lake Hartwell.

McKinnon knows firsthand that it doesn't take much to get a young person hooked on bass fishing — the hardest part is typically getting them on the water for a tournament. He's been involved with bass clubs in some form since 1989, when he fished (and won) his first organized event, a big-bass tournament on the Charles River.

"I wasn't even a bass fisherman, I was a trout fisherman," McKinnon recalled. "And I won the very first tournament I ever fished in. I won \$1,000 for a big bass tournament. ... I said, that's it, I'm hooked."

McNary has a knack for convincing kids to give the sport an initial try.

"We were at a show last year, to give you an example, and we were talking with a young kid that, he's probably 14," McKinnon recalled. "And we kind of were trying to get him to sign up. Seth came over and talked to him, and five minutes later, the kid's all signed up, ready to go. He just has a way with kids."

The Massachusetts federation puts on three events each year for both youth (eighth grade and younger) and high school anglers, including the tri-state championship. Not only has participation increased under McNary's direction, so has retention. McKinnon has been heartened by the number of youth and high school anglers who have gone on to join one of the state's 14 bass clubs and participate in other TBF events. Each of the past three winners of the co-angler division at the state championship got their start in the federation's youth events.

"What we're finding is a lot of these kids are staying in their program," he said. "They go from the junior program and then they join a club. And then from the clubs a lot of them come in as co-anglers, next thing you know, they're boaters."

While the likes of Brown and Swanson have graduated from the youth and high school fishing ranks, they remain involved with those levels. They can often be spotted at tournaments, chatting with high school anglers and taking youth participants out in their boats. McKinnon believes their example will help foster even more passionate young anglers in the state.

"Last year when we had our youth tournament, ... there he is, Kaleb Brown taking kids out in his boat," McKinnon said. "Cameron Chase, taking kids out. Jacob Swanson. Those guys are fishing college tournaments and then they're coming here and helping us."

As happy as he is to see the young anglers remain involved with the federation, McKinnon has been more proud when they've left for college.

Brown and Swanson are both members of powerhouse fishing programs. Montevallo won the Abu Garcia College Fishing School of the Year title in 2022-23 and produced the winning duo at the College Fishing National Championship, while Lander sat No. 11 in the Association of College Anglers national rankings as of Oct. 25. Frumkin recently began his freshman year at Harvard. The university doesn't have a bass fishing team, but he's hoping to start one.

When it comes to tour-level bass fishing, Massachusetts might not have the most decorated history. But thanks to the health of the state's youth program under McNary and the trail being blazed by the likes of Brown and Swanson, McKinnon believes the future is bright.



PHOTO COURTESY LANDER UNIVERSITY BEARCAT ANGLERS

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP HEADED TO SAM RAYBURN

The Bass Federation National Championship represents the pinnacle of the calendar for all TBF members. Its date and location for 2024 have now been set.

The National Championship will be contested at Sam Rayburn Reservoir March 27-29. It will mark the event's first ever trip to the iconic Texas impoundment.

"It'll be a great fishery for the guys," said TBF President Robert Cartledge. "A lot of them have never been there. It's a big fish factory, and at that time of the year, the fishing will be outstanding."

The highest-finishing boater and co-angler from each state during this fall's National Semi-Finals earned a spot in the National Championship. The winning boater will earn the Living Your Dream prize package, valued at \$125,000. It includes a fully-rigged Ranger Z520L and paid entry fees into the circuit of the winner's choice. The top co-angler will earn a rewards package worth \$30,000.

TBF also announced that the High School Fishing National Championship and World Finals will be held at South Carolina's Lake Hartwell in June of 2024. The three-day national championship will take place June 19-21, with the championship day of the World Finals following on June 22.



PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

The big-bass-filled waters of Sam Rayburn Reservoir will play host to the 2024 TBF National Championship.

NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS DISTRICT WINNERS

Dist. 1: Florida | Lake Eufaula

Boater: Raymond Trudeau (21-15)
Co-angler: Jon Christian (6-1)

Dist. 1: Georgia | Lake Eufaula

Boater: Tyler Wilson (23-14)
Co-angler: Chad McMurrian (17-8)

Dist. 2: N. Carolina | Santee Cooper

Boater: Rusty Scopano (20.11)
Co-angler: James Williams (14.86)

Dist. 2: S. Carolina | Santee Cooper

Boater: Robert Taylor (32.38)
Co-angler: Royce Combs (13.74)

Dist. 3: Kentucky | Pickwick Lake

Boater: Brandon Staten (29-11)
Co-angler: Chase Preat (10-11)

Dist. 3: Tennessee | Pickwick Lake

Boater: David Rogers (25-6)
Co-angler: John Huntley (8-12)

Dist. 4: Alabama | Ross Barnett

Boater: Keith Glasgow (18.99 lbs)
Co-angler: Lonnie Hairel (9.66 lbs)

Dist. 4: Mississippi | Ross Barnett

Boater: Timmy Ming (18.49 lbs)
Co-angler: Craig Jackson (13.27 lbs)

Dist. 5: Louisiana | Red River

Boater: John Pecoraro (16.75 lbs)
Co-angler: Jeremy Harper (14.95 lbs)

Dist. 5: Texas | Red River

Boater: James Biggs (19.20 lbs)
Co-angler: James Moore Jr. (8.81 lbs)

Dist. 7: Kansas | Wilson Lake

Boater: Jeremy Montgomery (14.08 lbs)
Co-angler: Eric Ledger (9.11 lbs)

Dist. 7: Missouri | Wilson Lake

Boater: Darrell Ivey (21.10 lbs)
Co-angler: Troy Richter (7.11 lbs)

Dist. 9: Minnesota | Mississippi River

Boater: Jason Alldred (27.14 lbs)
Co-angler: Lee Butcher (14.10 lbs)

Dist. 9: Wisconsin | Mississippi River

Boater: Kevin Ruh (29.08 lbs)
Co-angler: Max Stawinoga (20.01 lbs)

Dist. 10: Illinois | Mississippi River

Boater: Pete Saele (28.69 lbs)
Co-angler: Chris Lally (14.72 lbs)

Dist. 10: Indiana | Mississippi River

Boater: Scott Bateman (27.40 lbs)
Co-angler: Jason Cross (11.38 lbs)

Dist. 11: Michigan | Detroit River

Boater: David Reault (31-12)
Co-angler: Jason Rinehart (28-8)

Dist. 11: Ohio | Detroit River

Boater: Justin Williams (32-2)
Co-angler: Joseph Chupp (30-2)

Dist. 12: Virginia | Monongahela River

Boater: Rick Mills (11.28 lbs)
Co-angler: Christopher Mills (7.59 lbs)

Dist. 12: W. Virginia | Monongahela Rvr

Boater: Chad Brinegar (13.90 lbs)
Co-angler: Trey Anderson (11.76 lbs)

Dist. 13: Delaware | Susquehanna Rvr

Boater: Amos Dixon (33.84 lbs)
Co-angler: Edward McGinness (25.67 lbs)

Dist. 13: Maryland | Susquehanna Rvr

Boater: Thomas Bavaro III (34.94 lbs)
Co-angler: Paul Badders (24.31 lbs)

Dist. 13: D.C. | Susquehanna River

Boater: David Barker (25.11 lbs)
Co-angler: John Wiseman (22.03 lbs)

Dist. 14: New York | Lake Erie

Boater: Brad Brodnicki (29.83 lbs)
Co-angler: Dustin Smith (17.52 lbs)

Dist. 14: Ontario | Lake Erie

Boater: Andrew Shufelt (29.92 lbs)
Co-angler: Sean McLaughlin (13.54 lbs)

Dist. 14: Pennsylvania | Lake Erie

Boater: Tony Dorman (31.08 lbs)
Co-angler: Kade Wesner (27.08 lbs)

Dist. 15: Connecticut | Hudson River

Boater: Keith Cleary (24.58 lbs)
Co-angler: Ronald Haag (12.83 lbs)

Dist. 15: New Jersey | Hudson River

Boater: Michael McMahon (30.39 lbs)
Co-angler: Jerry Vitiello (20.38 lbs)

Dist. 16: Massachusetts | Lake Champlain

Boater: Jim D'Ambra (35.16 lbs)
Co-angler: Josh Veloso (38.38 lbs)

Dist. 16: Vermont | Lake Champlain

Boater: Dave Morrisette (39.04 lbs)
Co-angler: Charlie Farrell (26.54 lbs)

Dist. 17: Maine | Lake Winnepesaukee

Boater: Nick Deering (30.56 lbs)
Co-angler: Conner Petropoulos (24.45 lbs)

Dist. 17: New Hampshire | Lake Winnepesaukee

Boater: John Levesque (33.07 lbs)
Co-angler: Peter Owen (25.13 lbs)

Dist. 18: Oregon | Columbia River

Boater: Dan Jordan (33.10 lbs)
Co-angler: Ronald Faircloth (27.99 lbs)

Dist. 18: Washington | Columbia River

Boater: Chris Lambert (30.94 lbs)
Co-angler: Joel Alinen (23.76 lbs)

Dist. 19: Idaho | Noxon Reservoir

Boater: Rick Funk (33.11)
Co-angler: Daniel Dobransky (25.01 lbs)

Dist. 19: Montana | Noxon Reservoir

Boater: Yeej Moija (36.57 lbs)
Co-angler: Mark Hilyer (29.67 lbs)

Dist. 23: Arizona | Roosevelt Lake

Boater: Brandon Morton (26.65 lbs)
Co-angler: Jesse Parks (21.18 lbs)

Dist. 23: California | Roosevelt Lake

Boater: Jimmy Young (35.84 lbs)
Co-angler: Jason Brooke (16.19 lbs)

High School Fishing National Championship and World Finals | Lake Hartwell | June 19–22, 2024

Visit MajorLeagueFishing.com for more information.

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New Hampshire | Conn. River

Jace Jewett, Zain Lent
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New York | Onondaga Lake

Dominic Bianchi, Ethan Hailey
Oneida Lake High School
19.60 pounds



Washington | Banks Lake

Will McEver, Jaiden Sobczyk
Eatonville High School
12.50 pounds



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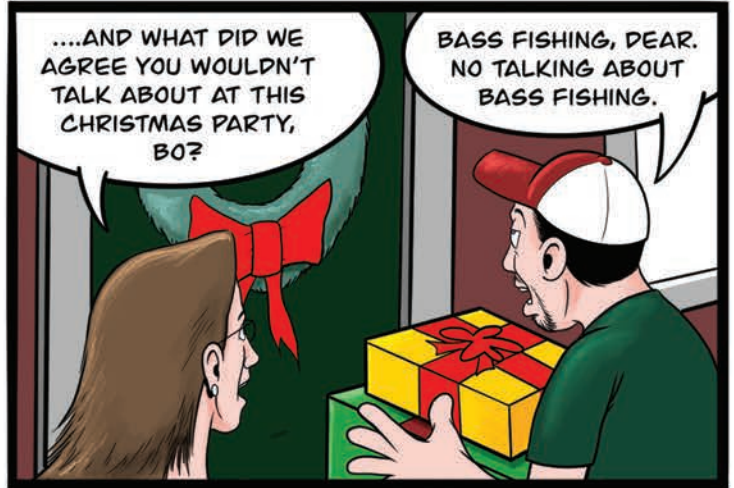
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