



FEBRUARY-MARCH 2024

REDCREST

Fishing™



Edwin Evers



Brett Lutz



Austin Carroll



Bryan Tift



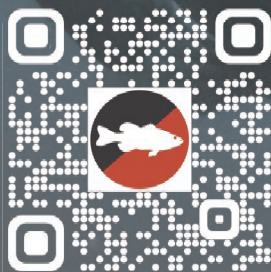
MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING
REDCREST CHAMPIONSHIP

REDCREST 2024 | MARCH 14-17 | BIRMINGHAM, AL | LAY LAKE



GEAR UP FOR SPRING BASSIN'

New Product Releases and More!



GUARANTEED LOWEST PRICES | FREE GROUND SHIPPING ON ORDERS OVER \$50 | FREE RETURNS




TOYOTA

Official Vehicle



WHERE THERE'S A TOURNAMENT, THERE'S A TUNDRA.



 TUNDRA

LIKELY TO BE SEEN AROUND AMERICA'S FINEST FISHERIES – There are lots of reasons more pros are stepping up to the 2023 Toyota Tundra. Like an available i-FORCE MAX Twin Turbo V6 Engine cranking out 437 HP/583 Lbs. ft. of torque, advanced towing technologies with up to 12,000 lbs. capacity. Plus the added stability of a boxed steel frame, and the ease and convenience of an available 14-inch multimedia touchscreen—all with the American-made* durability Toyota Tundra is known for. **Visit [Toyota.com/Tundra](https://www.toyota.com/tundra) to learn more about the 2023 Tundra.**

Vehicle shown with options. Before towing, confirm your vehicle and trailer are compatible, hooked up, loaded properly and that you have any necessary additional equipment. Do not exceed any Weight Ratings and follow all instructions in your Owner's Manual. The maximum you can tow depends on base curb weight plus the total weight of any cargo, occupants, and added vehicle equipment. "Added vehicle equipment" includes additional standard / optional equipment and accessories added by the manufacturer, dealers, and / or vehicle owners. The only way to be certain of your vehicle's curb weight is to weigh your vehicle without passengers or cargo. *Assembled in Texas with U.S. and globally sourced parts. 2023 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A. Inc.



*Assembled in Texas with U.S. and globally sourced parts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FEBRUARY-MARCH 2024 | VOL. 23 | ISSUE 2



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN



PHOTO BY KORY SAVAGE



PHOTO BY ROB MATSURA

COLUMNS

- 18 NEWELL'S NOTES
Five from five after five
— Rob Newell
- 22 BALOG ON BASS FISHING
The heaviest hitters
— Joe Balog
- 26 THE TINKERER
The land of the rising sun
(and lures)
— Sean Ostruszka

FEATURES

- 30 THE DRIVE FOR #5
The fifth edition of REDCREST arrives
on Lay Lake March 14-17
— Tyler Brinks
- 35 NEW TOOLS FOR A NEW AGE
Lure designers, anglers molding new
baits for the forward facing sonar era
— Michael Pehanic
- 42 HOMEWORK HABITS TO ACE YOUR
NEXT TOURNAMENT
Studying fisheries like the pros
— Mitchell Forde

THE JUICE

- 50 PRODUCT REVIEW
Rapala CrushCity softbaits
— Matt Williams
- 54 GEARING UP
Mid-strolling minnows
— Mitchell Forde

TOURNAMENTS

- 64 TOURNAMENT REPORT
— Mitchell Forde
- 68 FISHERY SPOTLIGHT:
Dale Hollow
— Tyler Brinks
- 72 Q&A: DALTON HEAD
— Matt Naber
- 75 THE BASS FEDERATION
— Mitchell Forde
- 80 THE LAST CAST
— Jay Chuppe

COVER ART BY BRANDON ROWAN



We reserve the right to refuse any material we feel is not in the best interest of MLFLW, LLC, (DBA "MLF") and its members/subscribers. The items advertised herein are warranted by the advertiser. Bass Fishing is published six times per year by MLF, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025, 270.252.1000. Kathy Fennel, Executive Vice President and General Manager of MLF. Copyright 2024 by MLF. All rights reserved. None of the content of this publication may be reproduced, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Advertising rates available on request. We welcome manuscripts but will not be held responsible for loss of manuscripts, photos or other materials. All manuscripts should include a self-addressed stamped envelope. Bass Fishing (ISSN 1543-6179) is published six times a year (February/March, April/May, June/July, August/September, October/November, December/January) by MLF, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025. Periodicals Postage Paid at Benton, KY, and at additional mailing office. Rates: one year (6 issues) \$10.00; two years (12 issues) \$20.00; three years (18 issues) \$30.00. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Bass Fishing, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025. For questions regarding your subscription call 270.252.1000 Monday thru Friday, 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. CT.

Printed in the U.S.A.

THE WORLD'S GREATEST BALANCING ACT



The four-in-one Power-Pole CHARGE automatically moves power between your house and trolling motor batteries. This bi-directional feature provides the perfect balance, so your fish and trolling motor stay alive. No trained seals necessary. Learn more at Power-Pole.com

POWER-POLE
CHARGE
MARINE POWER MANAGER



Bass

Fishing™

MLF Bass Fishing Magazine

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

MajorLeagueFishing.com

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

Major League Fishing

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

DIRECTOR, SPONSORSHIP FULFULLMENT | *Jenn Sonnek*
jenn.sonnek@majorleaguefishing.com
651.235.4770



Strike King



UNLEASH THE DAWG

NEW GRAVEL DAWG 10



NEW GRAVEL DAWG 8



Delivering a wide wobble action in a 1.5 profile, Strike King's Gravel Dawg 8 and 10 grinds through rock, wood, and grass better than any medium-diving crankbait in its class. Strike King pros Todd Castledine and Kevin VanDam worked diligently to design the ideal, "go to" crankbait for anglers across the country. The Gravel Dawg 10 features new craw patterns in addition to some of Strike King's most famous colors.

AVAILABLE IN 16 COLORS



SCAN TO LEARN MORE



A TALE OF TWO ANGLERS, REDCREST EDITION

While chatting with *Bass Fishing* magazine writer Tyler Brinks about the field for REDCREST 2024, it struck me how diverse and interesting this 50-man group of competitors is. As has been the case for the four previous REDCREST competitions, the 2024 field is loaded with a Who's Who of champions and Anglers of the Year – 14 of the 50 are major-tour-level AOY winners, and they've accounted for 20-plus world-championship-level trophies (REDCREST, Forrest Wood Cup, Bassmaster Classic).



But in addition to the AOY pedigree and championship-winning firepower that will be on display at Alabama's Lay Lake in March, two names jumped right off the roster at me because of the intrigue of their individual stories: 21-year-old Dalton Head from Moody, Alabama, and the greatest of all time, 56-year-old Kevin VanDam.

Head, a senior at the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, Alabama – just 23.4 miles west of REDCREST takeoff at Beeswax Landing – will make history on Lay Lake as the first college angler to compete in REDCREST. As you'll read in this issue's Q&A (page 72), Head is currently riding the momentum of a 2023 fishing season that saw him capture a share of the College Fishing National Championship in February and a golden ticket to REDCREST with his performance at the 2023 Toyota Series Championship.

He's remarkably calm for a 21-year-old college senior who's just days away from backing his boat into the same water as his tournament idols: "I've fished Lay Lake my whole life and I'm going to know a lot about the place, especially that time of year," Head says. "Whatever happens, happens. I just want to have fun with it."

For VanDam, REDCREST 2024 represents a potential exclamation point at the end of the most storied tournament-fishing career in history. The Kalamazoo Kid already owns four Bassmaster Classic trophies, eight AOY titles and more tour-level hardware than any bass angler who has ever picked up a rod. Knowing Kevin's competitive drive and "kill or be killed" tournament psychology, I'm 100% positive that he's approaching REDCREST and Lay Lake with the attitude that he's going to add yet another trophy to his collection.

Any why shouldn't he feel that way? VanDam won the 2010 Classic on Lay Lake and finished third there in the 2007 Classic. His track record in Alabama is unassailable, with 22 career wins in the Yellowhammer State (a handful of those from Lay and the other lakes on the Coosa River system). VanDam knows a thing or two about catching Alabama bass. He's also a veritable Michigan wolverine when a championship trophy is on the line, with 15 Top 10s in world-championship-level events.

Head was an 8-year-old third grader at Moody Elementary School when VanDam won on Lay Lake in 2010. He admitted to *Bass Fishing* magazine writer Matt Naber that he plans to chase the dream of fishing as a full-time pro upon graduation from Montevallo. VanDam, meanwhile, will turn his focus to the multitude of media opportunities he's exploring at the sunset of his tournament career.

One just starting a journey, the other finishing one. There are 48 other compelling stories to watch come March 9-12, but these are two that I'll be monitoring closely.

Check out Brinks' REDCREST preview on (page 30), and hit me up with any other storylines that you're looking forward to when action gets started on Lay Lake.

Joel.Shangle@MajorLeagueFishing.com

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

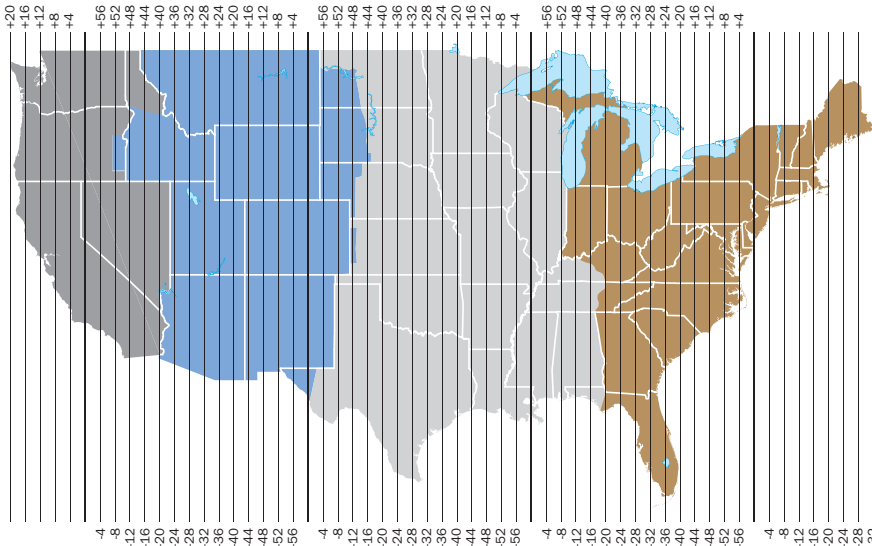


YETI BUILT FOR THE WILD.

SOLUNAR TABLES

MARCH-APRIL 2024

 PACIFIC STANDARD TIME
 MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME
 CENTRAL STANDARD TIME
 EASTERN STANDARD TIME

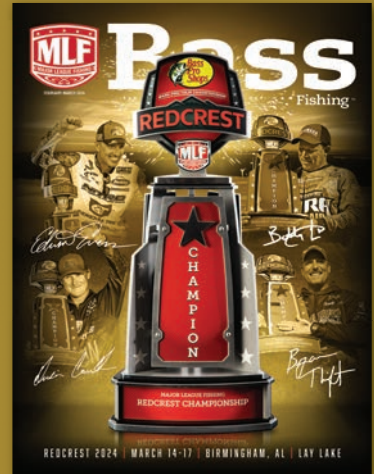


MAR. Date	Day	AM Major		PM Major		Moon Phases	APR. Date	Day	AM Major		PM Major		Moon Phases
		Minor	Major	Minor	Major				Minor	Major	Minor	Major	
1	Fri	9:00	2:50	9:30	3:15		1	Mon	10:25	4:15	11:00	4:45	
2	Sat	9:50	3:40	10:20	4:05		2	Tue	11:30	5:20	--:--	5:50	
3	Sun	10:45	4:35	11:15	5:00	☾	3	Wed	12:05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

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

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

SUBSCRIBE



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

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



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

explore outdoors

explore RIDGELAND

Shhhhh. No wake zone.



Protect your baby (and their toys) with coverage for fishing gear and personal property too.

1-800-PROGRESSIVE / PROGRESSIVE.COM

PROGRESSIVE

Progressive Casualty Insurance Co. & affiliates. Additional charge may apply. Prices vary based on how you buy.

IMPROVING THE HEALTH AND SURVIVABILITY OF TOURNAMENT-RELEASE FISH THROUGH FMD PROJECTS



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

Two 2024 Minn Kota habitat projects will focus on new “recovery zones” for released bass

Since the advent of tournament fishing, questions about bass behavior and biology have puzzled anglers and scientists alike. As tournaments continue to increase in frequency and participation, one of the more pressing questions is how fish recover and redistribute following weigh-ins.

An initial concern was that tournaments consistently releasing fish in the same site would create a highly localized population increase. This shift in population could in turn contribute to increased disease transmission, a crash in forage abundance and, in the long term, lead to the decline of tournament fisheries.

Studies from the early 1990s utilized simple methods of monitoring fish, including the marked recapture method, in which a fish is given a specific marking or tag at release so it can be individually identified during subsequent recaptures. These studies were limited by the tags available at the time and often experienced issues with tag retention and recapture reporting. But as they were refined and improved over the years, they began to show some trends in fish dispersal over several months. The only issue was that they could just provide a release point and a recapture point, with no way to know where the fish went in between.

Eventually the ability to track fish with surgically implanted internal telemetry tags became an available technique to track specific individuals. This unlocked true movement data and a much more in-depth knowledge of where fish went once released. The telemetry studies came with their own challenges, though, as the tags and monitoring receivers were expensive and had short battery lives. At times, the surgery itself could result in mortality. Thus, both marked recapture and telemetry studies have been combined to further improve our understanding.

WHAT HAPPENS TO TOURNAMENT BASS?

The results of tournament release studies have consistently indicated that once a fish is released, it will most often stay within a half mile of the release site for the first month and within 1 1/2 to 2 miles for six to nine months. Species of bass, size of the water body and release location characteristics can result in subtle differences in dispersal distance, but for the most part, we can conclude that tournaments displace fish.

We can also say that there's a low probability that a fish will return to where it was caught, even after a full year. It occasionally occurs, but there is not a repeatable pattern to



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

Survivability of fish weighed in at tournaments is a key area of focus for the MLF FMD in 2024.

predict which fish will be able and willing to return to where it was caught and put in a livewell. The good news is these studies have shown that, even on the most popular tournament reservoirs, there don't appear to be enough fish caught and released in a single year to create the catastrophic population issues we once feared.

The other big question about tournament release fish is how they recover. This is a harder question to answer, because to monitor an individual and assess true post-release survival, stress or recovery, you must first know how that fish was caught, transported and released and then be able to either monitor it constantly or recapture it in a way that doesn't alter your results.

Thus, it's almost impossible to provide a concrete, consistent answer about the fate of an individual fish. Instead, through decades of scientific research, observation and angler experience, a few guidelines have emerged as best management practices to maximize the successful release of fish during a tournament:

- The use of salt, ice and livewell pumps creates a proper livewell environment.
- Advancements in weigh-in procedures and live release boats provide the first steps to recovery.
- We know that released fish tend to seek cooler water temperatures, get out of current, position around habitat and capture forage. These components of recovery are essential to allowing released fish to thrive.

DEVELOPING “RECOVERY ZONES” FOR RELEASED FISH

The Major League Fishing Fisheries Management Division (FMD) views the live release of tournament-caught bass as an opportunity to improve fisheries. In 2024, FMD is focusing two of our Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Projects on release site locations – or “recovery zones,” as we like to call them.

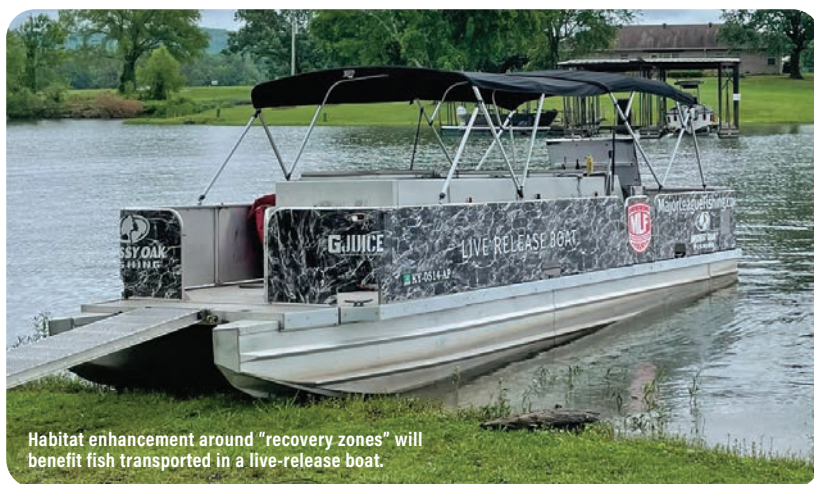
The bass recovery zone is a simple idea. Each will be located around a popular release site and feature dense habitat (to attract forage fish in high numbers) flanked by single ambush points that allow bass to escape current and hunt prey. Creating multiple recovery zones within a half mile of a release site will allow the area to support a greater density of fish and bolster recovery and dispersal of released fish.

Our first opportunity to test these new recovery zones will come during Stage One of the Bass Pro Tour season. While anglers compete on Toledo Bend, the FMD will be working with Texas Parks and Wildlife biologists, local volunteers and anglers to complete the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project Supported by Kubota on nearby Sam Rayburn Reservoir.

Sam Rayburn is home to Umphrey Family Pavilion, a 200-vehicle boat ramp that hosts numerous tournament weigh-ins each year. The park is located just off the dam, adjacent to an island and a small inlet creek that opens up to the main lake. Using multiple configurations of artificial cover from MossBack Fish

Habitat, the FMD will implement the high-density habitat and ambush components needed in a recovery zone within the surrounding area.

MLF will put the recovery zone to use during Tackle Warehouse Invationals Stop 1 on Sam Rayburn, which runs Feb. 9-11 out of Umphrey Park. MLF’s Mossy Oak live release boats will release fish in the recovery zone, and we hope to immediately see the success of the project.



Habitat enhancement around “recovery zones” will benefit fish transported in a live-release boat.

The recovery zone project will visit another popular tournament fishery later in the season, when the FMD joins the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and the city of Eufaula, Oklahoma, to complete the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Humminbird in Eufaula Cove. This is part of a much larger habitat improvement plan by ODWC and the city of Eufaula, which began with habitat being donated by MLF during REDCREST 2022 and built by the Union Sportsmen’s Alliance (with supplies donated by the KVD Foundation, MossBack Fish Habitat and Ferguson). In 2023, the city and ODWC joined forces to purchase their own habitat materials. MLF FMD, Minn Kota and Humminbird heard about the increased work on Lake Eufaula and offered to create a recovery zone. This habitat will mimic the Sam Rayburn plan and will be deployed before Bass Pro Tour Stage Four on Eufaula (April 30-May 5).

These Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Projects offer a new blueprint for evolving fish care and fishery improvement practices. If they prove successful, you’ll likely see the MLF FMD continue to expand our reach in an effort to improve every fishery that hosts our competitions.

INFORMATION: Check out the MLF FMD microsite at MajorLeagueFishing.com to see photos and news about these recovery zone projects as they are completed. ■



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

MLF tournament personnel load a bag of fish to a live-release boat.

TEN SQUARE GAMES CLAIMS MLF ANGLER OF THE YEAR SPONSORSHIPS

Fishing Clash signs on as official sponsor of MLF, MLF5 AOY awards

By Joel Shangle

The most prestigious prize in any tournament circuit – be it your local club or the highest level of professional bass fishing – is an Angler of the Year title. It's the ultimate reward for season-long performance, providing the winner with a lifetime of bragging rights and an unassailable title.

Under a new partnership announced in mid-January by Major League Fishing, the AOY trophy for three of its circuits will also come with a lucrative cash award. Ten Square Games – creator of Fishing Clash, one of the most popular mobile games worldwide – agreed to a partnership with MLF that includes Fishing Clash's title sponsorship of payouts to the Angler of the Year winners on the Bass Pro Tour, Toyota Series and Phoenix Bass Fishing League.

The Bass Pro Tour Fishing Clash AOY will earn \$100,000. Fishing Clash AOYs in the six Toyota Series divisions will earn \$5,000 each, while 24 Fishing Clash AOYs in the BFLs will take home \$1,000 apiece.

"Winning an Angler of the Year means you've done all the little things right every single day of the year: It's every single fish, every knot you tie, every hook you tie on," said 2023 Bass Pro Tour AOY Matt Becker. "It's extremely difficult to win that title – you can't have one bad day all year. And that amount of money will change your life. It's a heckuva bonus at the end of a long year where you've done your job well. I'm excited about the opportunity the Fishing Clash AOY provides all of us."

The Fishing Clash AOY partnership is an extension of a marketing campaign that developed at the end of the 2023 Bass Pro Tour season.



Bass Pro Tour



Toyota Series



Phoenix Bass Fishing League

While the 80-man Bass Pro Tour field competed on Michigan's Saginaw Bay, the 80-plus-million Fishing Clash players worldwide were provided the opportunity to participate in an MLF-branded special event on a virtual fishery programmed to resemble Saginaw Bay.

Through the new AOY arrangement, Fishing Clash will be visible throughout MLF's broad menu of media, including television broadcasts on Discovery and Outdoor Channel, *MLFNOW!* livestreams, social media, web and print – a comprehensive media spread that will connect the game and its players with the league's dedicated audience of anglers and outdoorsmen. Major League Fishing will also reach a broad international audience of game players who are already connected to the sport of fishing through Fishing Clash's best-in-class 3D game play.

"Through our continued partnership with Major League Fishing, we are not just sponsoring an event; we are showcasing our unwavering dedication to the sport of fishing," said Andrzej Ilczuk, CEO of Ten Square Games. "This collaboration serves as a bridge between the virtual realm of Fishing Clash and the passion shared by outdoor enthusiasts worldwide. It's more than a sponsorship – it's a commitment to bringing together the virtual and real-world fishing communities, creating an immersive experience that resonates with anglers everywhere."

For more information about Fishing Clash, visit FishingClash.game or download the Fishing Clash game on iOS or Android. For complete details and updated information on the Fishing Clash Angler of the Year races, visit MajorLeagueFishing.com. ■

ANCHORED
1975



ANCHORED IN ELECTRONICS.

HydroWave™ delivers the latest in sound-emitting technology, imitating sounds of baitfish and fish-feeding activities. Shop all fishing accessories here: thmarine.com/MLFHydroWave



FISHING CLASH ANGLER OF THE YEAR: THE ULTIMATE PRIZE FOR BASS PRO TOUR'S SIXTH SEASON

2024 AOY will join Evers, Lee, Wheeler, Becker on roster of winners

Matt Becker heads into the 2024 Bass Pro Tour season as the defending champion of the league's Angler of the Year title. Becker had claimed a Toyota Division Northern Division AOY in 2021, but his 2023 performance marked the first ever major tour-level AOY for the Tennessee pro — in his first year on the BPT, no less. It's an accomplishment he's still celebrating.

"There's something extra special about winning a season-long title," Becker said. "Some people are really into winning the major event, but I'd rather be the guy who was the most consistent for the whole year. I look at the tournaments as building blocks. You keep stacking the blocks together, hopefully by the end of the year, you've built a house."

The 2024 BPT Fishing Clash AOY race kicked off Jan. 30-Feb. 4 on Toledo Bend in Louisiana. If history is any indication, expect some significant shakeups to the standings in the months to come. Here's how the previous Anglers of the Year claimed their titles.



2023 – BECKER COMPLETES FINAL-EVENT SWEEP

As any historic race should, the 2023 Angler of the Year battle came down to the final day of the season, when Becker ran away with both the Stage Seven trophy and the AOY trophy thanks to a 22-pound, 11-ounce smallmouth showcase on the wind-blown, rain-soaked waters around the Charity Islands on Saginaw Bay.

Heading into the final event of the 2023 season – on the sprawling, 1,100-square-mile bay on Michigan's Lake Huron – the Angler of the Year race had been locked in the tightest four-angler grouping in the league's five-year history. Ten points separated then-leader Alton Jones Jr. (391.5 points) from Becker (381.5) in fourth place, with defending AOY Jacob Wheeler (384.5) and Ott DeFoe (382.5) in between.

Becker proved exceptionally well-wired to take advantage of the opportunity. Growing up in Pennsylvania and cutting his tournament teeth in the Great Lakes states (10 of his 22 Top 10s entering the event were on Northern fisheries), Becker didn't flinch at the gusting wind and waves that sent the rest of the Top 10 scurrying. He worked his way through 13 smallmouth during the Championship Round, putting together a bag of fish that all weighed between 4-0 and 5-5 and outlasting Kevin VanDam for the win.

Final AOY score: Becker 461.5, Wheeler and DeFoe 457.5, Jones 456.5



2022 – WHEELER GOES BACK TO BACK

There's no better way to describe Wheeler's 2022 Bass Pro Tour season than "utterly dominant." The Tennessee pro went an astounding 9-for-10 in Top 10s/Championship Rounds and won his second Angler of the Year trophy in as many years by a whopping 70 points over second-place finisher Jordan Lee (the unfortunate winner of the other AOY award – Any Other Year – after a stellar season of his own).

Wheeler and Lee stayed nearly neck-and-neck through the first three events of the year, but Lee stumbled slightly at Stage Four on Lake of the Ozarks with a 22nd-place finish. Wheeler, meanwhile, finished fifth there to open his AOY lead to 301-284, and then finished second at both Watts Bar and Cayuga Lake to blow open the competition. At 65 points, his cushion was nearly insurmountable heading into the season finale at Mille Lacs Lake.

Wheeler's Top 10 run ended there with an 11th-place finish, but he left Minnesota with another silver and red AOY trophy, which more than made up for it.

Final AOY score: Wheeler 529, Lee 459, Alton Jones 429.5, Dakota Ebare 415.5

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE



2021 – WHEELER, DEFOE STACK UP TROPHIES

The 2021 Bass Pro Tour season saw Wheeler and DeFoe exchange haymakers as they racked up trophies. DeFoe kicked off the season with a win at Stage One on Sam Rayburn Reservoir and added a second victory at Stage Four on the Harris Chain. Wheeler, meanwhile, escaped with a nail-biting, 2-ounce win over Bobby Lane at Stage Two Lake on Lake Travis, then added back-to-back \$100,000 payday and BPT trophies to his 2023 ledger on the St. Lawrence River and Lake Champlain at Stages Five and Six, respectively.

DeFoe entered Stage Seven at Lake St. Clair with a 12-point lead over Wheeler in the AOY race, hoping to hold serve on one of the country's most prolific smallmouth fisheries. But after two days of qualifying in different groups – DeFoe finished 17th in Group B with 66-10, Wheeler third in Group A with 131-13 – it became obvious to DeFoe that he didn't have the fish to keep Wheeler at bay. DeFoe threw a Hail Mary in the Knockout Round, trailering as far south as tournament boundaries would allow and fishing totally new water in a tributary of Lake Erie. The prayer fell short; DeFoe finished 30th in the round, while Wheeler motored on to the Championship Round to lock up his first career AOY trophy.

Final AOY score: Wheeler 464, DeFoe 430, Michael Neal 420, Brent Ehrler 413



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

2020 – JORDAN LEE LANDS FIRST CAREER AOY

There are very few trophies missing from the Cullman, Alabama, home of Jordan Lee. The winner of the first ever Bass Pro Tour event (2019), the first ever Heavy Hitters championship belt (2020) and two Bassmaster Classic titles, Lee entered the 2020 season finale lacking only a major-tour Angler of the Year title to complete a sweep of career accomplishments.

In a COVID-shortened season, Lee hung tough from the get-go, finishing ninth and seventh in the first two events to stay within range of Wheeler, who got off to a blazing-hot start by winning Stage One on Lake Eufaula. He then weathered the storm of a 31st-place finish at Lake Fork as DeFoe powered to the AOY lead. Lee made his move at Heavy Hitters, winning that event (and pocketing an extra \$100,000 in big-bass bonuses in the process). He sealed the deal a month later with a fourth-place finish on Sturgeon Bay, earning Lee his first AOY trophy.

Final AOY score: Lee 353, DeFoe 334, Wheeler 331.5, Jeff Sprague 308.



PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

2019 – EVERS DOUBLES UP WITH AOY, REDCREST TITLES

From the outset of the inaugural season of the MLF Bass Pro Tour, Oklahoma pro Edwin Evers performed like a man on a mission. After finishing second to Lee in the league's historic first event on the Kissimmee Chain, Evers dominated the Championship Round on Lake Conroe two weeks later. He went on to finish fourth, seventh and 16th at the next three events to create a little breathing room between himself and AOY pursuers Sprague and Ehrler.

Evers found himself at the uncomfortable mercy of SCORETRACKER® at Stage Eight, finishing 21st in Group A qualifying and needing the hard-charging Sprague to also finish below the Elimination Line in Group B to maintain his AOY lead. Sprague fell shy and finished seven spots below Evers in the event, securing the Oklahoman's first career major-tour Angler of the Year title. He completed the magical season by claiming the first ever REDCREST trophy at the Mississippi River two months later.

Final AOY score: Evers 510, Sprague 500, Ehrler 491, Wheeler 488 ■

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

MLF NOW!

Live Stream at MajorLeagueFishing.com or MyOutdoorTV.com

Feb. 20-25: Bass Pro Tour Stage Two @ Santee Cooper

March 1-3: Tackle Warehouse Invationals Stop 2 @ West Point Lake

March 14-17: Bass Pro Shops REDCREST Presented by Optima Batteries @ Lay Lake

FOLLOW
MLF ON
SOCIAL
MEDIA



TV BROADCASTS

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

Feb. 17: General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Elimination Match 1 @ Stonewall Jackson Lake

Feb. 24: General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Elimination Match 2 @ Stonewall Jackson Lake

March 2: General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Elimination Match 3 @ Stonewall Jackson Lake

March 9: General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Semifinal Match 1 @ Summersville Lake

March 16: General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Semifinal Match 2 @ Summersville Lake

March 23: General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Wild Card Match @ Stonewall Jackson Lake

March 30: General Tire Team Series Builders First Source Qualifier: Elimination Match 1 @ Lake of the Pines

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

Feb. 17: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Elimination Match 1 @ Stonewall Jackson Lake

Feb. 24: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Elimination Match 2 @ Stonewall Jackson Lake

March 2: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Elimination Match 3 @ Stonewall Jackson Lake

March 9: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Semifinal Match 1 @ Summersville Lake

March 16: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Semifinal Match 2 @ Summersville Lake

March 23: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Costa Qualifier: Wild Card Match @ Stonewall Jackson Lake

March 30: *All Angles* - General Tire Team Series Builders First Source Qualifier: Elimination Match 1 @ Lake of the Pines

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



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

INTELLIGENTLY

CHANGING THE WAY YOU FISH.



KASTKING
FUELED BY INNOVATION



WEIGH YOUR FISH LIKE A PRO

WHEN IT MATTERS MOST

Built for the ultimate tournament fishers, the new Pro Series Smart Fish Scale from BUBBA weighs every fish quickly and accurately, so you can spend less time logging your catches and more time fishing for the next big one.

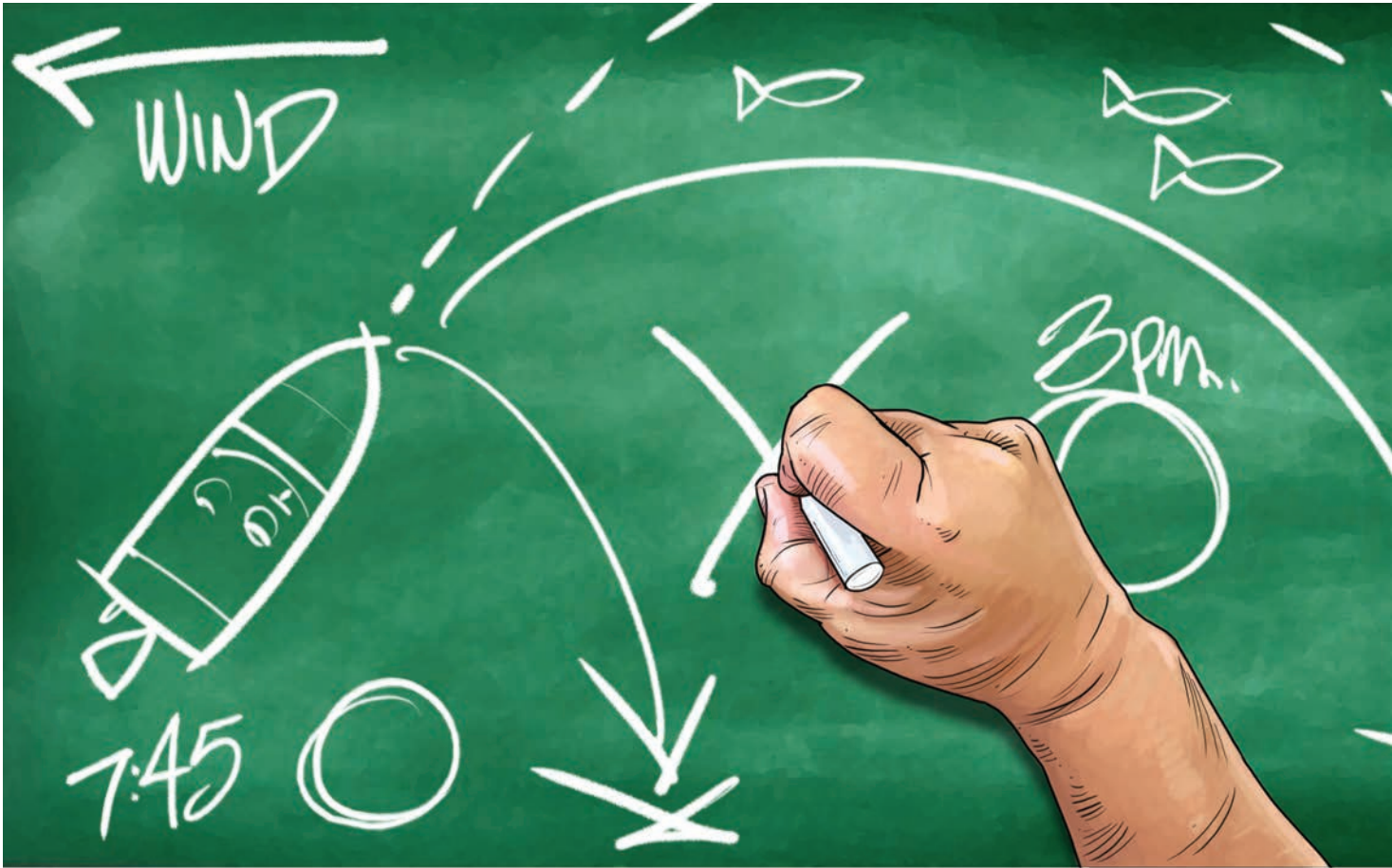
With the multi-point calibration system and easy-to-read digital LCD screen, this smart fish scale will always be fast and accurate, and will change the way you compete.



BUBBA[™]



UNLOCK THIS SCALE'S FULL POTENTIAL WITH THE ALL-NEW BUBBA MOBILE APP!



FIVE FROM FIVE AFTER FIVE

Lessons learned from a front-row seat to the first five years of Bass Pro Tour competition



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.

After covering the Bass Pro Tour for five years and watching some of the best bass pros in the world on the water from 50 feet away, I've learned a tremendous amount about the intricacies that set the top anglers apart. While many readers might be more interested in the "secret baits" of Dustin Connell, Dakota Ebare, Alton Jones Jr., Michael Neal and Jacob Wheeler, I don't believe that's what has led to their consistent success. These days, there aren't many secrets. Instead, I've observed five common denominators shared by these dominant pros. Some of

the commonalities are habits, while others are products of the demeanor they display during competition. In a way, all five attributes are connected and feed each other, so I have listed them in no particular order. Here are my five from five after five.

EFFICIENCY WITH PREPARATION

The top BPT pros spend an inordinate amount of time on research, equipment installation and tackle preparation. They're obsessed with maximizing efficiency in the heat of battle, and these proactive measures help them do so.

Pros will spend five to six hours prepping tackle and organizing the boat before a tournament. Some will rig up 25 to 30 rods — respooling line, sharpening hooks, making sure all knots are snug and secure. Rigging the same lure on multiple rods is a common practice to ensure a backup is ready should a breakout occur.

This same meticulousness can be seen throughout the boat. The bass boat is a pro's office, and the best ones keep theirs in immaculate order. To save time, everything has a specific place — rods, lures, tackle boxes, tools and accessories.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

Ebare, Connell, Jones, Neal and Wheeler all possess the discipline it takes to achieve efficiency through tedious preparation. Being able to put their hands on exactly what they need in a matter of seconds often translates to a couple extra fish in a tournament day.

PERFECTING A NEW STRATEGY

The Bass Pro Tour brought a unique format to the tournament fishing game. In turn, every fish counts, live scoring, weights resetting and multiple cuts across six-day events led to the emergence of novel strategies.

Using SCORETRACKER® as a barometer, the new blueprint became catching just enough fish to stay above the cut line during the Qualifying Rounds while simultaneously practicing for how the lake will fish during the final two days of competition. With this, I witnessed how top pros execute what they call “keeping up with the lake” in real time.

This approach often involves checking the areas of the lake that are changing the fastest to find new bite windows. Whether due to fluctuating water levels, wavering water color, emerging forage spawns, rising water temperature, varying current flow or the impact of fishing pressure, the amount of change that can occur over six days is pretty amazing. Even on the same fishery, one pattern rarely holds up that long.

Discovering these changes and figuring out how they’ll impact the bite while other competitors are trapped by the race to make the cut has become a cornerstone of all five anglers’ strategies. The reward for a strong start on Day One is extra time to practice, and those who practice the most during competition and keep up with the lake the best often give themselves the best shot to win at the end.

CONFIDENT DECISION MAKING

On-the-water decision making dovetails with tournament strategy. Carrying out an effective strategy requires decisiveness during a competition day, especially when it comes to making moves on the water. The downward spiral of self-doubt needs to be kept at bay, and the best pros do it with quick, crisp decisions.

The top performers know with absolute certainty when they’re ready to move, picking up the trolling motor with brisk bravado. There’s no lingering around, wondering if they should stay or go; no opportunity for the brain’s bid to stay to enter the gut and for the inner turmoil to begin. Instead, it’s a simple “we’re making a move.” The lure is secured to the rod, the rod is strapped down, and clack, up comes the trolling motor. No hesitation, no hands on hips, no sighs, no “maybe...”. Within seconds, all I’m left looking at is a boat wake.

SENSE OF URGENCY

You won’t find any moss growing under the feet of the top performers on the water. Even when they get out of the gates fast and climb to the top of SCORETRACKER®, they still move and fish like their hair is on fire. In fact, it’s almost as if they fish faster and cover

more water when they start strong and have a chance to practice during competition. They always have dozens of other places on their minds to check or different lure ideas they want to try to keep up with the changing lake. And they never run out of places or ideas. There’s always something to be accomplished while on the water, and there’s no time to tarry.

HANDLING ADVERSITY

Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from the top anglers on the Bass Pro Tour is how they handle adverse situations. Unfortunate developments like challenging weather, mechanical malfunctions, unexpected company on a spot, dock owners who order them to leave and (especially) lost fish might cause some anglers complete meltdowns. But the top names in the sport have a calm, collected way of dealing with such adversity. They understand that if they blow a gasket, they’re only hurting themselves.

Instead, when things go wrong, they immediately start thinking solutions instead of taking the incident personally or using it as an excuse. Finding a solution often circles back to preparedness and efficiency, which allows for expedient adaptation. Having a fully stocked toolbox at the ready can help quickly remedy things like trolling motor issues or broken wire connections. A spare prop and prop wrench can cost a guy just 10 minutes in fishing time as opposed to half a day.

Watching pros turn adverse conditions into advantages for themselves is impressive, too. What others might deem too windy or too rough or too muddy or too pressured are opportunities to these anglers. A lost fish is viewed as a clue rather than a crushing blow.

Efficiency, proper strategy, clean decision making, a sense of urgency and composure in the face of adversity are all connected and feed off each other. Together, they provide an indisputable advantage for the top performers on the Bass Pro Tour. I’ve seen it for myself; more than any bait or technique, these habits are what separate the top anglers in the world. ■

WE'RE BACK IN ALL

STEALTH BLACK





忍

STEALTH LINE™

SHINOBI - STEALTH (In Japanese)

The “ONE” that is quiet in nature yet strong in performance with exceptional endurance. Suzuki outboards have always been described in these terms, and finally our engines’ outward appearance reflects these standards of our legendary lineup of engines.



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.



THE HEAVIEST HITTERS

How Jones, Lucas, Roy, Birge have capitalized on MLF's big-fish bonanza event

Throughout the history of organized bass fishing, a number of unique showcase events have come and gone. Perhaps none has created the stir of General Tire Heavy Hitters.

Created in 2020 to serve as a big-event bridge when Major League Fishing moved its REDCREST championship from fall to spring, Heavy Hitters is a two-in-one major tournament: A six-figure payday is up for grabs for the tournament winner in addition to a whopping \$200,000 in big-bass awards. Minimum scorable weights increase to 3 pounds in the final round, adding unprecedented strategy to the game, while the big-fish focus means each angler is always one bite away from going zero to hero.

While some might argue that there's an element of randomness to catching big bass, a handful of anglers seem to have cracked the code across the first four iterations of Heavy Hitters.

ALTON JR. IS THE HEAVIEST HITTER OF ALL

Alton Jones Jr. has become synonymous with Heavy Hitters, and deservedly so. At Lake Palestine in 2022, Jones claimed the \$50,000 big-bass award in the Knockout Round, then followed that up a day later with a \$100,000 payday by boating the biggest fish in the Championship Round. For an encore, he blew away the rest of the field in 2023 on Bussey Brake, adding another \$100,000 to his Heavy Hitters wallet. That big check boosted the Texas pro's Heavy Hitters earnings to more than a quarter million dollars in just two events. Throw in the \$4,000 he earned at the inaugural event in 2020, and his running total is up to \$269,000.



No one has enjoyed Heavy Hitters as much as defending champ Alton Jones Jr., who has pocketed \$265,000 across the past two renditions of the event.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

It's safe to say that the importance of Heavy Hitters to Jones can't be understated.

"With big money comes a big desire to win," Jones confirms. "You're fishing for title that comes around just once a year. It's a no-entry-fee event and an exclusive club of winners."

The moment the Heavy Hitters location is announced, Jones goes into planning mode. Online research plays a big role initially — "I look at local events from that time of year and what it took to win big bass awards in those tournaments," he says — and Jones then determines what techniques will best fit his strengths while also appealing to big fish. A noted expert on spawning largemouth, the spring timing of Heavy Hitters often fits his skillset to a T.

While big bass are the focus, Jones also finds it necessary to generate numbers of strikes. His strategic mind is

always cognizant of his standing on SCORETRACKER® and what he needs to advance to the next round. He understands that not only do the big-bass payouts dramatically increase as the tournament progresses, so do his chances of winning them.

"I try to ensure advancement (in the event) before focusing on big fish," he says. "You have to make it to the last day to have the opportunity, and the odds go up (for a big bass win) every day. So I go in trying to win the tournament first."

LUCAS APPLIES SOME HOME COOKING

While he hasn't taken home the championship belt, Justin Lucas has a case as the most successful Heavy Hitters angler of all time based on average finish. The Alabama pro has placed in the top 20 all four times since the inaugural event on Florida's Kissimmee Chain in 2020, including two Top 5s.





After finishing in the Top 20 four years in a row, could Justin Lucas be due to take home a Heavy Hitters belt?

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

Lucas attributes his success in large part to his California upbringing.

"I enjoy fishing for big fish, and my time in California was when places like Clear Lake and the Delta were in their prime," Lucas says.

His Heavy Hitters approach starts with choosing high-potential areas and eliminating water that he considers unlikely for big fish to inhabit.

"I target more main lake or main creek areas, closer to channels, than what I might target for numbers," Lucas

says. "The far backs of a creek are probably not going to hold a bunch of big fish."

Lucas believes strongly that slow, methodical tactics appeal best to big bass. When conditions warrant a different approach, he still thoroughly combs the area from multiple angles (making "casts other guys may have missed," he says). The slower pace of Heavy Hitters allows Lucas to be thorough without fear of falling behind.

"It's not a numbers game," he says. "Minimum size is always 2 or 3 pounds, so it gives me a chance to slow down."

BRADLEY ROY: "BIG FISH ARE NOT RANDOM"

Another Heavy Hitters standout, Bradley Roy gets more detailed than usual in his method of eliminating water. Approaching these spring-season events, Roy strictly concentrates on figuring out what stage of the spawn the females are in. While his techniques can vary, from his first Heavy Hitters cast/flip/pitch to his last, the Kentucky pro is always chasing the big girls.

"I push all my chips in that direction," Roy says. "Big fish are not random. They're always in a place for a reason. [I'm always looking to] dial in that pattern. It's a mindset and an area thing. Whenever MLF takes us to a fishery where big ones live, my mindset changes immediately. I'm extremely aware that I might get less bites, but bigger bites. At that point, I'm not worried about just catching fish."

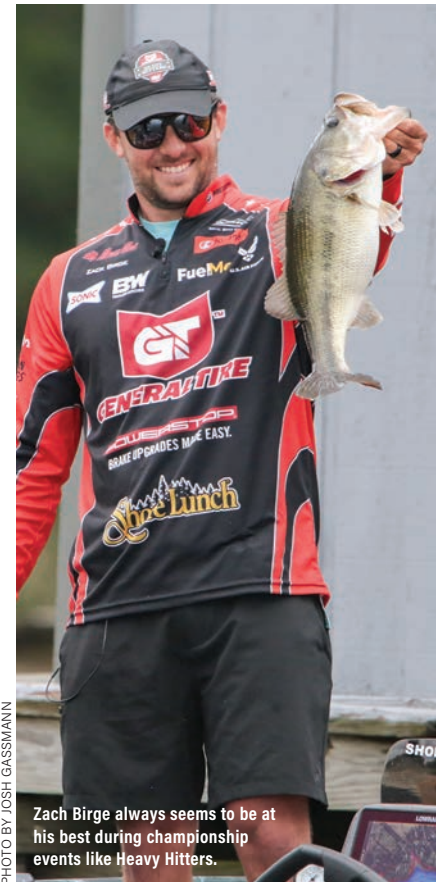


Bradley Roy's strategy for targeting big female bass paid off with a sixth-place finish at Heavy Hitters 2023.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

BIRGE GOES BIG ON THE BIG STAGE

Oklahoma pro Zack Birge has also made a habit of cashing big checks at Heavy Hitters, earning two Top 10s and pulling down Top 20 payday in all four events to date. Like Jones, Birge attempts to make each day's cut before going all in on big fish.



Zach Birge always seems to be at his best during championship events like Heavy Hitters.

PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

"I keep in mind that if I'm doing good (according SCORETRACKER), I'll then throw a big-profile lure, like a glide bait," Birge says. "But overall, my Heavy Hitters approach isn't much different than every other tournament."

Still, with a whopping 11 Top 10 finishes in MLF championship-level tournaments, Birge's record in premier events can't be ignored. While Birge admits he doesn't know exactly why he's performed so well on the biggest stages, he did say he's at his best "when there's an opportunity to make a whole lot of money." He's especially fond of one-off events like Heavy Hitters.

Perhaps bass fishing most powerful influence — confidence — is the secret to Birge's success.

THE BAITS (AND STRATEGIES) THAT GET THE BIG BITES

While lure choice plays a role in getting trophy bass to bite, the opinions of Jones, Lucas, Roy and Birge are all over the map when it comes to Heavy Hitters bait philosophy.

Lucas's fondness for big, slow-moving plastics showed when he pocketed a hefty Heavy Hitters check in Florida, where he alternated between Texas and Carolina rigs depending on the cover he was targeting. Many of his big paydays have resulted from throwing a magnum-sized Berkley Power Hawg, a substantial creature bait. Even his highly developed West Coast finesse tactics rely on upsized baits when big largemouth are his quarry.

"If I need to drop-shot, I throw a 6-inch worm," Lucas says.

When spawning bass present themselves, expect Jones to be there with a

Texas rig in hand. But according to the Texas pro, his "dream scenario" for the 2024 Heavy Hitters event on the Kissimmee Chain features a jig. Clearly, he's already played the scenario out in his head.

"Give me a 1-ounce jig on the outside Kissimmee grass and I'm happy," Jones says. "It's high risk, high reward, but everything in fishing is about risk assessment, Heavy Hitters especially."

Birge also admits to going magnum once he's confident of making the cut, while Roy dances with the date that brought him: "My bait choices don't change much (from start to finish)," Roy admits.

One thing all four anglers can agree on, however, is the importance of picking a productive big fish area and fishing it thoroughly. Staying the course even when bites might be few and far between is part of the game — although it's easier said than done when SCORE-

TRACKER® is ringing. Getting "spun out" is the downfall of many anglers targeting big ones.

"The mentality of big fish hunting is finding a technique that fits your strength and sticking with it," Jones says.


He should know. At just 31 years of age, Jones was one of the fastest anglers ever to hit \$1 million in career earnings, thanks in large part to his \$269,000 Heavy Hitters haul.

The 2024 rendition of Heavy Hitters will present a unique twist, as the 30 qualifying anglers will return to Florida's Kissimmee Chain but do so May 18-23. With bass likely to be done spawning, offshore tactics may prevail. But keep in mind, the Kissimmee Chain is currently chock full of grass, making traditional, heavy-handed tactics a given.

Will a true hydrilla gorilla make an appearance? If so, history suggests Jones, Lucas, Roy and Birge will be the favorites to find it. ■



THE CHATTERBAIT® EVOLVED



Custom 5/0 heavy duty needlepoint black nickel hook

Wire-tied 100% silicone skirting

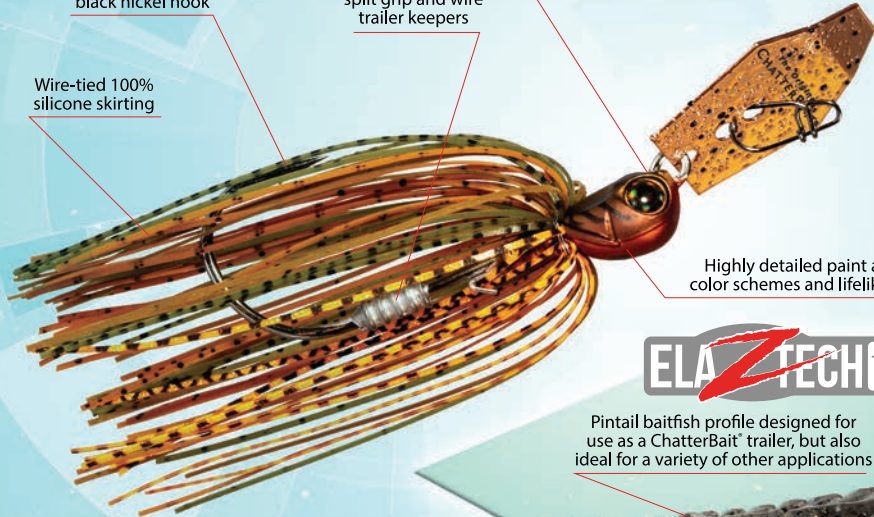
Hybrid molded split grip and wire trailer keepers

Patented direct head-to-blade connection and trademarked hex-shaped ChatterBlade®

CHATTERBAIT® ELITE

EVO™

HIGHLY EVOLVED PERFORMANCE BLADED JIG




Highly detailed paint and skirt color schemes and lifelike 3D eyes

ELAZTECH 10X TOUGH MADE IN USA


Pintail baitfish profile designed for use as a ChatterBait® trailer, but also ideal for a variety of other applications

4.5" CHATTERSPIKE™

Dorsal and ventral hook slots for easy weedless rigging



Segmented body and tapering tail with pyramidal cross section increase energy transmission from ChatterBait® vibration, enhancing bait action



2024



Johnny Morris
Bass Pro Shops
REDCREST
MLF
MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING

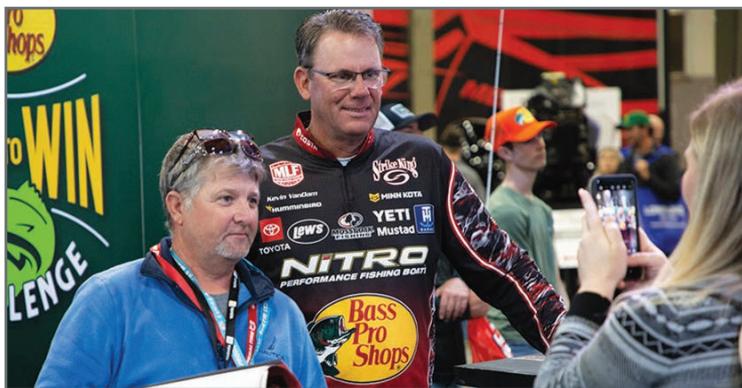
POWERED BY



MARCH 14-17 • LAY LAKE
BIRMINGHAM, AL

OUTDOOR SPORTS EXPO
MARCH 15-17, 2024

Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex



Don't miss the biggest party in bass fishing!
Learn more: **REDCRESTEXPO.COM**





THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN (AND LURES)

Exploring the pros, cons and mythical ethos of Japanese baits



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.

There's always been a certain aura around Japanese lures.

For some of us, it's an appreciation for the remarkably detailed finishes that make them look more like works of art than baits. Others point to their hard-to-get, "secret lure" reputation, which causes anglers to covet them like rare bourbon whiskeys. And still others look at some of the ludicrous shapes and actions and wonder what the heck the designers could be thinking.

Whatever your stance, there's no denying that Japanese lure companies have had a massive impact on the sport of bass fishing. From their scarce origins, these lures are now in almost every angler's tackle boxes, and some of the biggest lure trends in the last couple decades can be traced back to Japanese roots.

Let's look at why Japanese lures got this aura to begin with, and how those designers continue to develop baits that create new trends in the sport.

To do that, we go back to the 1990s.

These days, it's easy to take for granted the prevalence of companies like Megabass, Jackall, Duo Realis, Keitech, Lucky Craft and Deps, and how readily available their products are to purchase. Yet only a couple decades ago (before the internet), few knew about them. For those who did, getting their hands on their products was remarkably difficult.

That alone gave Japanese lures an aura of being secret, "superior" lures, according to Chris Rosell, associate product and marketing manager for Megabass. That reputation only grew when



ART BY BRANDON ROMAN

Japanese rigs like the drop-shot and wacky rig began winning tournaments. If the rigs were so innovative and effective, the lures must be, too.

That mindset persists even as Japanese baits have become more commonplace. Some of that is stereotype, but some of it is truly rooted in the way Japanese companies design lures.

A prime example is Jackall's Aska crankbait. Legendary designer Seiki Kato spent four years working through more than 80 prototypes, adjusting it little by little to get what he wanted. That's not to say U.S. companies don't put in their time when it comes to product development — there are numerous examples of multi-year lure development processes — but having worked with a number of companies in the industry designing lures, I've never experienced anything like Kato's dedication to that one bait.

"The design process is crazy," says Ariel Biley, product manager for Jackall. "The research that goes into it and the focus on the smallest intricacies outdoes everything in U.S."

Then there's all the creativity and innovation.

Lucky Craft pioneered a new wave of jerkbaits and squarebills in the early 2000s. Paddle-tail swimbaits were lost in your great grandpa's tacklebox until Keitech found a way to make them staples. Duo Realis shone a light on the spybait, while Deps did the same with bulky stickbaits (such as the Cover Scat). And then there's Megabass, whose Vision 110 jerkbait has become the go-to for almost everyone, as is their Magdraft among larger swimbaits.

And we haven't even gotten into the truly weird lures like the O.S.P. Saikoro Dice, which Biley says comes from Japan's "crazy style" concept. A cadre of

Japanese anglers intentionally try to catch bass on baits that look nothing like something they should eat, which has resulted in some wild, off-the-wall creations.

While Biley says Jackall tends to steer clear of that "crazy style," there can still be a stigma of Japanese lures being "too weird" for American markets. A prime example is the Riser Bait, which he says Jackall nearly discontinued in the U.S. because of poor sales. Turns out, just like in the 1990s, anglers in the know were keeping the lure secret. But now that the cat is out of the bag, Jackall has barely been able to keep them in stock.

So, yes, there's definitely something special and "different" with Japanese lures. There's also downside to that — cost.

More often than not, Japanese lures cost more than U.S. lures, which is going to steer many anglers away. And Rosell and Biley understand. Why spend \$20 on a crankbait when the \$10 one you've always used seems to catch fish just as well — especially when many top pros also hold up the same \$10 crankbait in Top-10 lure galleries after tournaments?

To that second point, we could spend an entire article shooting the Easter Bunny and talking about pros not holding up the lures they actually used in tournaments. (Anglers lie? No way!) But the first point is incredibly valid, especially when you consider many American companies create their own versions of popular Japanese lures that often work close to or as well as the originals at a fraction of the cost.

Does that make U.S. companies' products better? If cost is your primary concern, then probably. If you feel the added attention to detail (and cost associated with it) is worth it, perhaps not. Ultimately, there's no right or wrong answer.

What history tells us, though, is if you're looking for the next innovative, "secret" lure, it's probably going to come from Japan. That said, once the secret is out, U.S. companies have proven quite talented at recreating them (along with developing plenty of unique products of their own).

Just know that, even as they continue to permeate the American market, the aura around Japanese lures is not going anywhere, and rightfully so. ■

2024 MLF5 SPONSORS



CLASSIC Balsa ACTION BUILT FOR

LONGER CASTS AND BIGGER BLASTS.



BERKLEY® DIME

When it's time to fill the boat, start dropping Dimes. With the fish-catching swagger of FlashDisc® technology and an action scientifically super-tuned to mimic a balsa bait, this new mid-depth polymer phenom also casts like a bullet thanks to our weight transfer system in select sizes. Add scary-sharp Fusion19™ hooks and 21 best-in-class finishes, and it's a true 10/10.

Berkley-Fishing.com



GHOST
MORNING DAWN



©2023 Pure Fishing, Inc.

YOUR FISH. OUR SCIENCE.™

4 SIZES | 21 COLORS



BLAZE



RIVER BREAM



GHOST RED CRAW



KILLER GILL



BLUE SHAD



THE DRIVE FOR #5

THE FIFTH EDITION OF REDCREST ARRIVES ON LAY LAKE **MARCH 14-17**

Coosa River fishery serves up diverse opportunities to REDCREST field

By Tyler Brinks

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. – Alabama’s Lay Lake already enjoys esteemed status in tournament bass fishing lore, having hosted four renditions of the Bassmaster Classic. In March, it will once again take

center stage as the fifth edition of REDCREST heads to the popular fishery southeast of Birmingham.

While a handful of the 50 REDCREST competitors have some experience on the Coosa River impoundment, the championship event – slated for March 14-17 – will mark the Bass Pro Tour’s first visit to Lay Lake. According to local experts, the lake’s

diversity should allow the 50-man field to fish to individual strengths and choose between targeting largemouth and spotted (Alabama) bass. The local tournament wiseguys believe that March is a great time to be on Lay Lake, and that it should serve as an ideal playing field as anglers battle for REDCREST’s \$300,000 first-place payout.



Alabama's Lay Lake, a 12,000-acre reservoir on the Coosa River, has a little bit of everything for anglers.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



Dustin Connell, the REDCREST 2021 champ and lifelong resident of Alabama, can claim home field advantage in 2024.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

"IT WILL BE AN AWESOME LAKE BECAUSE IT'S SO DYNAMIC AND THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS TO CATCH FISH."

tive as well as other riverine portions, but because it doesn't experience a major winter drawdown like Weiss and Logan Martin, it also contains plenty of shallow cover, including aquatic vegetation. As a result, multiple techniques and approaches should be in play.

"Lay does have some of the riverine features like Jordan, Mitchell and Neely Henry, but it also has several large creeks with overbank areas and aquatic vegetation," Holley said. "So Lay has it all, from gravel, rock, clay and sandy-type banks and points to large backwaters with aquatic vegetation. It gives anglers many options, but the caveat is that it's not a big reservoir, and anglers will undoubtedly find the same areas."

A HOME GAME FOR CONNELL

One of three former REDCREST champions in the field, Dustin Connell has an excellent chance to become the first repeat winner. The 2021 champion will look to accomplish the feat on his home lake – Connell's hometown of Clanton, Alabama, is a short drive from Lay Lake, and he's spent his entire life in the area.

GETTING THE LAY OF LAY

The Coosa River chain contains six reservoirs: Weiss, Neely Henry, Logan Martin, Mitchell, Jordan and Lay. Each is a little different in size, habitat and fishing conditions, according to Alabama Department of Conservation and National Resources biologist Michael P. Holley, who monitors the entire chain of lakes.

At about 12,000 acres, Lay Lake falls in the middle of the pack in size. As far as features, it has a little bit of everything. It includes a tailrace below Logan Martin Dam that could prove produc-



TOURNAMENT HISTORY AND WEIGHT PREDICTIONS

WHILE LAY LAKE HAS a decorated tournament history, this event has no direct comparison due to its time of year and format. As a result, it'll be hard to predict what constitutes a good day during REDCREST.

The most recent top-level tournament on the fishery was a Bassmaster Elite Series event last May. Will Davis Jr. won with 62 pounds, 12 ounces across four days. Before that was Bass Pro Tour rookie Keith Carson's victory during a December 2021 Bassmaster Open with 47-1 for three days. Other past triumphs include Bassmaster Classic wins by Kevin VanDam (2010), Boyd Duckett (2007), Jay Yelas (2002) and George Cochran (1996).

None of those events occurred recently enough or at the right time of year to offer a blueprint for what it will take to make the cut or take home the trophy in March. The other wrinkle is that REDCREST will feature every-fish-counts scoring. According to Dustin Connell, weights could be all over the place.

"Most of the events here are five-fish format, and 20 pounds is a good bag," he said. "But 20 pounds is also pretty solid for every fish counts. You catch five for 20, then add 5 or 6 more scoreables, and you're probably getting close to 40 pounds, which I think will be a great one-day total in this one."

Dalton Head shared a similar outlook. He's not expecting a grinder. Given the numbers and quality of bass available, he believes it will take stringing together four strong days to contend on Lay Lake.

"You usually need to be around a lot of fish to win or do well in any format," he said. "In this event, catching 30 pounds a day should be good because that is 10 to 15 solid fish. I'd be happy to start with that. It may not be enough to win, but you'd be above a lot of guys."



Looks good right? Lake Lay's numerous backwaters are full of aquatic vegetation and should see plenty of angling action.



Alabama's Dalton Head is the first collegiate angler to compete at REDCREST.

PHOTO BY COBI HELLENDO

HEAD LOOKING TO MAKE MORE HISTORY

New to REDCREST in 2024 is a collegiate angler competing alongside the top pros. The timing couldn't be better for the University of Montevallo's Dalton Head, as Lay Lake isn't far from his Moody, Alabama, hometown and is a fishery he knows well.

Along with partner Peyton Harris, Head won the 2023 College Fishing National Championship at Lake Toho. The victory qualified both for November's Toyota Series Championship, where they battled for a REDCREST berth. Head overcame mechanical issues to best Harris and punch his ticket to Lay Lake, something he still hasn't had time to process.

"It all happened so fast; we won the National Championship, and then we were at Table Rock Lake for the Toyota Championship, and now I'm in REDCREST," he said. "That event had me down and bummed out because I went through three boats, which included a blown powerhead and broken trolling motor. To still be able to qualify for REDCREST, I couldn't believe it, especially since it's on one of my home lakes."

Head spends a lot of time competing in local events on Lay when he's not on the road. Even though REDCREST will mark a significant step up in class for the 21-year-old, he has to be considered a contender.

"Being the first collegiate angler in REDCREST means a lot; it's almost too good to believe," said Head. "The field is stacked, and the names fishing it are scary, but I'm there to have fun. Plus, I have nothing to lose and can leave everything out there and try to do my best."

HOW'S LAY FISHING?

Given its proximity to the bass fishing stronghold of Birmingham, Lay and the other lakes on the Coosa chain get plenty of fishing pressure. Still, they continue to produce. Connell said Lay, especially, is fishing very well as of late.

"It's been good — the best on the Coosa over the past few years, for sure," he said. "It's a lake that will generally take 20 pounds of large-mouth to win in a five-fish format at local tournaments. Most of the time if you're chasing spotted bass you're fishing for 6th or 7th place, and I've been there and done that. But things will be a little different with the every-fish-counts format, and both species might play."

Head also sang the praises of Lay Lake. He said it's a fishery that has stayed consistent in recent memory, and there's always a chance for a great day on the water. The biggest variables will likely be the weather and, as a result, where the anglers find the bass in their spawning cycle.

"Lay has been good for a while, honestly," he confirmed. "Other lakes

"I've lived 15 minutes or less from the lake my whole life," Connell said. "It's the lake where I caught my first spotted bass. It's a good lake, but it's not my favorite lake on the Coosa because of how it sets up. The fishing is excellent, but Lay doesn't set up fish with the current the same as Jordan and Mitchell, which is how I like to fish on the Coosa."

While it might not be his favorite on the Coosa chain, Connell believes Lay will make for a prime championship venue because of the diverse opportunities offered by the lake.

"It will be an awesome lake because it's so dynamic and there are so many ways to catch fish," he said. "We'll see guys doing everything, and the timing should be perfect. It depends on the weather, but the middle of March is the time to fish around here."

go in cycles, but it hasn't had many up-and-down swings, and you always have a shot at a 20-pound bag for five fish any time of the year. The biggest factor will be the weather, because Alabama's weather in March has been different every year I can remember. It could still be a full-blown winter pattern, or every bass in the lake might be on the bank."

Most likely, the mid-March timing of REDCREST should produce a lot of shallow bass activity with the chance for a spawning slugfest.

"So much of it is dependent on the weather leading up to the tournament, but I've seen bass laid up on beds on Lay the first of March," said Connell. "My guess is we will have a mix of some early spawning bass and a solid amount of fish still in the prespawn stage."

Holley believes it's setting up to be a prespawn event with plenty of bass itching to move shallow.

"In central Alabama, the water temperatures usually reach that magic 62- to 65-degree range from late March to mid-April," he said. "In normal years, the peak of the spawn usually occurs in early April, and we routinely see bass spawn into May. So this tournament will most likely be a prespawn event."



Alabama bass
ILLUSTRATION BY
BRANDON ROWAN

BOTH SPECIES IN PLAY

Look for both largemouth and spotted bass to hit SCORETRACKER® in plentiful numbers during REDCREST. Connell and Holley believe both have a shot at comprising the winning stringer. The fishery features a nice blend of the two species, with neither dominating in terms of numbers or size.

"Both largemouth and Alabama bass are doing well at Lay Reservoir," Holley said. "For largemouth, the number of fish above 15 inches is above

normal, and we are seeing the same trends and even a little better for Alabama bass, with an abundance of them over 17 inches long.

"Because our shoreline electrofishing surveys are more likely to capture largemouth bass over Alabama bass, our overall catch of largemouth is higher in electrofishing surveys. But when we look at our BAIT (Bass Angler Information Team) data, which is angler data from tournaments, we see about 60% Alabama bass and 40% largemouth being weighed in during tournaments."

While he's known as one of the best in the world at catching spotted bass, Connell isn't committing to chasing them during REDCREST. He thinks it'll take a mix of both species to do well.

"I've caught quite a few 3- and 4-pound spotted bass here, but there are some huge largemouth swimming in Lay," he said. "It's very possible to catch a 6- or 7-pound largemouth, and we'll probably see a few of them. There are more spotted bass here, but they are a little harder to catch because they don't set up like on other lakes. My guess is that it will require a little bit of both to have a chance to win it."

"WE SEE ABOUT 60% ALABAMA BASS AND 40% LARGEMOUTH BEING WEIGHED IN DURING TOURNAMENTS."

Head, meanwhile, believes spots will be the way to win, although that could change based on the conditions.

"Lay is very conditional, and there are so many variables that decide which species to target," he said. "Sometimes one species is farther ahead and closer

to spawn, or one is more grouped up. There are other times when one tends to be a little fatter. There's a lot to consider, but both feed big time in March."



Bryan Thrift caught a mix of largemouth and spotted bass to take home the REDCREST trophy in 2023. Might history repeat itself?

WINNING TACTICS

With so many types of cover and two bass species in play, there should be a wide range of techniques on display. Head believes that moving baits will represent the best tools for breaking it all down.

"The fish will be feeding somewhere, and you'll need to cover water to find those groups, then you can slow down with other baits," he said. "Lay fishes like a river more than an impoundment, and the fish are very current-oriented with many flats. It's really its own animal compared to other lakes on the Coosa chain, and moving baits will be a factor."

Connell expects baits and patterns to run the gamut, including the swim jig bite the lake is best known for.

"A swim jig will play for sure," he said. "I also think your vibrating jigs, flipping and typical shallow-water techniques like a wacky rig will be very popular in this one."

He also believes targeting grass will be a common approach. Vegetation, both emergent and submerged, has become more prevalent in the lake in recent years.

"It's coming back, and there is a lot of bank grass, like willow grass, on the shoreline," Connell said. "The coontail has also been showing up, and we even have some hyacinths on the lake now. It's very different from other lakes on the Coosa chain, and the habitat is great for the largemouth." ■

2024 MLF SPONSORS



U.S. AIR FORCE



NEW TOOLS FOR A NEW AGE

(FORWARD FACING SONAR)

LURE DESIGNERS, ANGLERS MOLDING NEW BAITS FOR THE FFS ERA

By Mike Pehanich | PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

EACH ADVANCE in sonar technology has taken fishing a step closer to becoming the “video game” encounter to which some have likened it since the days of flashers.

Through early stages of sonar development, the comparison was mere metaphor. Even as electronics evolved, the meeting between fish and lure remained largely unseen. As a result, the technology meant little to lure manufacturers.

No more.



RAPALA CRUSHCITY FREELOADER
COLOR: GREEN SHAD

SPRO CHAD SHAD
COLOR: THREADFIN SHAD

SPRO MEGALOJOHN
COLOR: BLUE GILL

RAPALA JIGGING RAP MAGNUM
COLOR: SHAD

DUCKETT SUBTLE TAIL
COLOR: ELECTRIC SHAD

SPRO MCSTICK 110 +1
COLOR: DEADLY BLACK SHAD

STRIKE KING BABY Z TOO
COLOR: MORNING DAWN

GAMAKATSU UNDERSPIN

JACKALL RHYTHM WAG
COLOR: GOBY

**BERKLEY POWERBAIT
POWER SWITCH**
COLOR: CLOWN

RAPALA PXR MAVRIK 110
COLOR: HOT BLUE FROST

Z-MAN STREAKZ
COLOR: SHINER

DIRTY JIGS GUPPY HEAD
COLOR: TENNESSEE SHAD

**“OUR (BAIT DESIGN) APPROACH
EMPHASIZES ANGLER CONTROL, ENABLING
THE FISHERMAN TO REACT TO THE FISH.”**

— Kyle Peterson, Berkley

With today's forward-facing sonar units, we can digitally see the three big B's: bass, baitfish and the baits we're throwing. And we view them all in real time with vivid clarity never imagined this side of an underwater camera. Fish images are getting so good that even species identification is possible at times, making angler/fish face-offs more video game-like than ever.

The lures we throw – and how bass react to them – are becoming more discernible as well. Targeting bass that anglers can “see” and figuring out how to trigger them has led to a rapid evolution in the lure market. For the first time, baits are being made specifically for use with sonar.

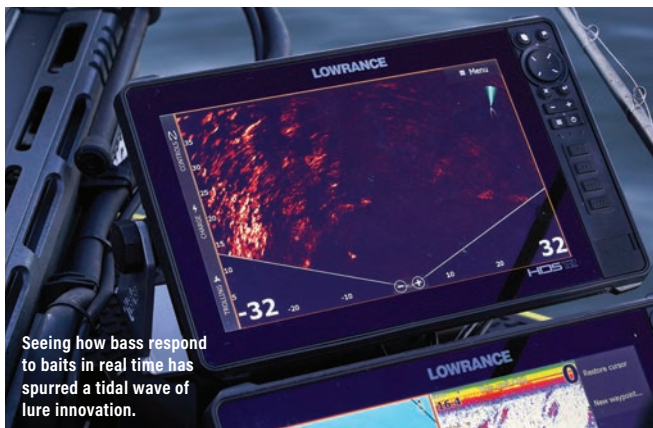
A few trends have emerged:

- Suspending jerkbaits have become 12-month-a-year tools, as they can be kept within the strike zones of inter-

ested fish. Manufacturers are upgrading previous offerings and tweaking jerkbait designs to enable longer casts and deeper reach.

- More buoyant, responsive plastics and jigs/rigs are being developed to deliver a natural fall and offer anglers better control.
- Shape and small features matter. A concave surface creates a better return, and hollow baits return better signals than solid ones.
- Size still matters, too. Large-profile baits create bigger screen signatures and draw the attention of big fish, while smaller, more subtle offerings are proving they can tempt big ones more than many of us thought.

Some of the minds behind the new tools explain why they came about, and how you can use them to improve your forward-facing sonar game.



Seeing how bass respond to baits in real time has spurred a tidal wave of lure innovation.

ANGLER CONTROL

While having a bait that shows up on sonar screens is important, detection capability and image sharpness will almost certainly get better as the technology improves. That presumption has led most lure makers to prioritize what anglers can do with a bait while watching it on screen.

“Our approach emphasizes angler control, enabling the fisherman to react to the fish,” says Kyle Peterson, soft bait manager for Berkley. “We call it ‘video game fishing,’ and certain things are very important when you are fishing like that.”

First comes casting accuracy. Casting to a dot on a screen that represents a fish takes talent and practice. Having a bait that consistently flies far and true is a must.

“Guys are casting while looking at the screen, casting by feel,” says Peterson. “Some can see a fish projected 60 feet away on the screen and cast exactly to where that fish swims.”

Second, the bait must get to a fish swimming in open water as fast as possible — before the angler loses it as a target. If the fish is down in the water column, the bait should arrive quickly, yet allow the angler to control it at a desired depth.

Third, the bait must be endowed with characteristics that allow the angler to do different things with it — imparting movements that capture the attention of bass and elicit strikes.

Peterson and Berkley designed the new PowerBait Power Switch, a baitfish-shaped plastic with an internal weight, to fit all three criteria. The positioning of the weight (toward the head of the bait) and the line tie (slightly rearward) allow anglers to hang it horizontally in front of fish or twitch it erratically.

“With the Power Switch, we wanted a bait that you could get down quickly but stop in the water column and work right in front of the fish’s head,” explains Peterson. “We wanted a bait that you would want on your deck all the time.”

MOPING, STROLLING, HOVERING...

Jighead and swimbait combinations have been favored tools from the early days of forward-facing sonar usage. Whether wielding baits with paddle tails or straight tails, anglers can fish them at controlled levels within the water column. Today, even dyed-in-the-wool power fishermen are



“SMALL, MINNOW-STYLE BAITS TEAMED WITH VARIOUS JIGHEADS HAVE BEEN THE MOST SUCCESSFUL FORWARD-FACING SONAR BAITS.”

— Bass Pro Tour pro Luke Clausen

embracing do-nothing finesse techniques referred to as “hover strolling,” “Damiki rigging,” “mid-strolling,” “moping” and other names with languorous connotations.

“Small, minnow-style baits teamed with various jigheads have been the most successful forward-facing sonar baits,” says Bass Pro Tour angler Luke Clausen. “We impart action by shaking our rod or just reeling the bait through the water.”

While the technique is fairly straightforward, certain baits have proven more effective than others. Clausen notes the increase in buoyant ElaZtech baits like Z-Man’s Jerk ShadZ and StreakZ and Strike King’s Baby Z-Too across the pro ranks.

As for the jigheads, design efforts are focusing on lighter, balanced heads. Carefully determined line-tie angles (90 degrees for most strolling-type applications) and weight distribution keep baits running in a natural, horizontal position. With practice, anglers can even stop them enticingly in the face of a bass with minimal fall or forward movement. Underspinned are being similarly employed with the same soft plastics.

Shank-weighted hooks or combinations of hooks and nail weights have also earned a more prevalent place on anglers’ front decks, especially when bass suspend. The Core Tackle Hover Rig is one example. Featuring a 90-degree hook eye molded into a cascading, segmented lead cone weight positioned to hold soft plastics in place, the new terminal tackle offering straddles the jig and weighted hook categories.

Michael Neal, who designed the Hybrid Swimmer for Big Bite Baits, typically casts said bait toward his prey and counts it down to the depth of the target fish before beginning a slow and steady retrieve. He tries to keep the bait just above the eye level of the fish. After that, he draws from a magician’s array of presentation options to trigger strikes.

“You have to figure out the retrieve they want,” Neal says. “If it doesn’t look like they are going to eat it, I snap my rod tip a few times or turn the reel handle fast. Pop it. Make it do something different.”

Neal predicts an increase in baits and jigheads designed for this rapidly expanding technique, further adding to the list of popular baits that can already be found on tackle-store product pegs.



PowerBait Power Switch, Berkley – “Control” is the watchword for this addition to the popular Berkley PowerBait lineup. Thanks to its unique weight placement, the minnow imitator can be swum horizontally, hopped off the bottom, twitched erratically — you name it. It’s available in 14 colors and six sizes, ranging from 1.75 to 5 inches and 1/16 to 1 ounce.



Hybrid Swimmer, Big Bite Baits – Neal’s cross between a fluke-style plastic and conventional swimbait has a subtle, quivering action that lends itself to a variety of presentation options. The bait features a ribbed body and unique tail design with features of both forked-tail and paddle-tail plastics. Made to pair with Big Bite’s Pendulate Jig Head (see below), it has a concave head that conforms to the jighead’s contour. It’s offered in 3.3- and 3.8-inch lengths and eight colors.

Pendulate Jig Head, Big Bite Baits – Designed to mate with the Hybrid Swimmer, this jig has a swivel built into the line tie to facilitate sudden bait movement and prevent line twist. It also features a custom, large-gap Gamakatsu hook with a bait keeper.



Rhythm Wag, Jackall – This versatile fluke-style plastic is belly-weighted to achieve a balanced, more enticing fall and darting action. Available in 3.5- and 4.5-inch sizes.

DriftFry Mellow and DriftFry Forage, Jackall – This shad-style soft plastic from Japan stakes a unique claim to the category with its webbed fork tail and small plastic lip, which gives it a rolling action. It includes a slot to add a nail weight for hover-strolling applications. The Forage measures 4 inches, while the Mellow is 5.2.

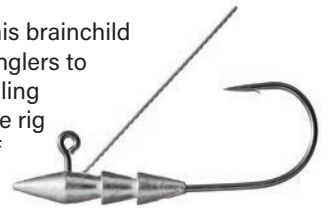
Guppy Head, Dirty Jigs Tackle – Made for small swim-baits, this compact jighead features a 90-degree line tie. A stacked-cone bait keeper spreads jig weight while holding soft plastics in place. It’s available in four weights (from 1/8 to 3/8 ounce), each of which come with 1/0 and 3/0 VMC hook options.

Tour Grade Fluoro Spin, Strike King – Scheduled for spring release, this compact tool is said to be deadly when fished with soft plastics like Strike King’s 3X Baby Z-Too.



Under Spin Head Mini, Gamakatsu – This downsized underspin jig with a No. 3 willowleaf blade is made for FFS presentations. A wide-gap No. 1 hook and premium bait keeper accommodate a range of plastic bait sizes. It’s offered in 1/8-, 3/16-, 1/4- and 3/8-ounce weights.

Hover Rig, Core Tackle – This brainchild of BPT pro Matt Stefan allows anglers to achieve the action of hover-strolling without adding a nail weight. The rig can be paired to a wide range of soft-plastic baits, from flukes to pintail minnows to straight-tail worms. It comes in five weights, ranging from 1/32 to 1/8 ounce, and four hook sizes (No. 4, No. 1, 1/0 and 3/0). A weedless model, which includes a wire weed guard and comes in a few larger sizes, is also available.



DUCKETT BAITS REVEAL FFS
COLOR: CHROME SHAD

DEEP (JERKBAIT) THOUGHTS

No lure has become more synonymous with forward-facing sonar than the jerkbait. Its suspending nature allows it to be worked at and kept in a bass’s strike zone and offers the angler a wide range of presentation options. Strike King brand manager Lucas Murphy notes that the jerkbait has the added advantage of easier screen recognition, its twitches and jerks exposing the bait’s flanks to sonar beams.

As anglers have found new uses for jerkbaits, manufacturers have responded by releasing new lures with upgraded components and extended horizontal and vertical reach.

In 2022, Spro released the McStick 110 Plus One, a 1/2-ounce iteration of the Mike McClelland-designed jerkbait that can dive nine to 12 feet. Bill Lewis also recently unveiled a line of jerkbaits made to be paired with FFS, the Scope Stik. The bait has pronounced sides, a more aggressive darting action and is available in floating, sinking or suspending models.

SPRO MCSTICK 110 +1
COLOR: DEADLY BLACK SHAD

RAPALA PXR MAVRIK 110
COLOR: HOT BLUE FROST

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

Duckett Fishing owner Boyd Duckett has gone even deeper. He's catching bass at 15- to 25-foot depths with the Reveal Jerkbait, a lure he helped design for use with forward-facing sonar. The 3/4-ounce bait is one of several sinking jerkbaits that have gained popularity in recent years, as anglers can let the lures fall to the depth of the fish they're trying to target, then make them twitch and dart like normal.

"We started learning how to catch those suspended bass in open water with FFS — the ones we knew were there but were always the hardest to catch," says Duckett. "Then we discovered fish way down as well."



RAPALA CRUSHCITY FREELOADER
COLOR: GREEN SHAD

NEW LOOKS AT OLD BAITS

In addition to the arms race of new bait development, forward-facing sonar is compelling anglers to look at existing baits in non-traditional ways.

Repurposing trailers for FFS – Last fall, Luke Clausen began to substitute the conventional, minnow-style baits he normally pairs to a Guppy Head with the Z-Man RaZor ShadZ, a soft plastic originally developed as a ChatterBait trailer.

"It's taller. It has a deeper profile and a flat top on it," says Clausen. "It gets better return and is easier to see. It creates a lot of flash, a lot of movement. It is taking the place of the 5-inch Jerk ShadZ for me when fish are eating bigger-size bait."

The same goes for minnow-style soft plastics that taper down to slim pintails. The category isn't new, but most were used primarily as bladed jig and spinnerbait trailers in the past. FFS has given the family a shot of adrenaline.

Perennial BPT star Jacob Wheeler designed the newest such lure — the FFS-inspired Freeloader, one of five baits in his Rapala CrushCity lineup. It proved ideal for fooling pressured, suspended bass during Wheeler's 2023 victory on Lake Guntersville. He fishes the Freeloader on a 3/16- or 1/4-ounce jighead with a "shake-and-bake" style, shaking the rod subtly while slowly reeling.

RAPALA JIGGING
RAP MAGNUM
COLOR: SHAD



DUCKETT BD BLADE
COLOR: CHROME SHAD

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

Blade baits, ice jigs revisited – Expect similar reassessments of blade baits, especially as more anglers take forward-facing sonar to the depths. Duckett's BD Blade represents a new entrant into the category. The 2.75-inch bait features a spread-nose weight in front of a thin body for an aggressive wobble.

Perhaps the most unlikely bait experiencing a revival thanks to modern electronics: the ice jig. Dan Quinn, the field



BERKLEY POWERBAIT NESSIE
SOFT GLIDE BAIT
COLOR: HITCH

promotion manager for Rapala, discovered that a 50-year-old ice fishing lure, the Jigging Rap, had all the makings of FFS stardom — rapid fall rate, erratic action and prominent screen image.

When video research revealed the lure's action diminished at 20 feet and deeper, the stage was set for the development of the Jigging Rap Magnum — a heavier, larger-profile version that swims in circles and darts erratically as it falls, mimicking the action of a dying baitfish with its circular descent. "It glides and darts and does figure eights," says Quinn. "It acts like a puppet."

New in this model is a swiveling VMC belly treble hook to improve landing ratio. With a length of 2.75 inches and weight of 1 1/8 ounce, it can reach depths where fish seldom see a lure (Quinn reports catching bass as deep as 100 feet with it using FFS).

Quinn advises anglers to "know the direction the fish are going" when working them vertically. While the Jigging Rap Magnum falls faster than just about anything else on the market, when you're targeting fish that deep, you need to anticipate where the lure will intercept them.

"You can sharpshoot fish with this bait," he says. "But it is important to lead them as they're swimming."

"SMALLER, FINESSE PRESENTATIONS HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY POPULAR, BUT MAGNUM LURES STILL HAVE THEIR PLACE IN THE VIDEO GAME WORLD."

GOING BIG!

Big baits for big fish? The old axiom is heard less often when talk turns to forward-facing sonar. In fact, with more anglers able to find and target fish than ever before, smaller, finesse presentations have become increasingly popular.

But magnum lures still have their place in the video game world.

"A glide bait is excellent with forward-facing sonar," says Spro marketing head Syd Rives. "You can see it easily on the screen, and it can draw big fish out of brush piles."

Indeed, glide baits and other oversized offerings are carving out a "search bait" niche in FFS fishing. Swim a glide like Berkley's PowerBait Nessie or big swimbait like Spro's new Megalojohn next to a dock or over a fishy-looking offshore spot, and any big fish hiding in the cover will often emerge. It might not actually bite, but having a fluke-style bait, shaky head worm or drop-shot presentation at the ready often finishes the job on reluctant followers.

Live sonar usage will likely only increase in the years to come. For lure manufacturers, the rush is on to design more and better baits for use with the technology, whether it be new twists on old standbys or novel lures altogether. Arm yourself with some of these tools to maximize your effectiveness. ■

One of the most prolific pros with forward-facing sonar, Michael Neal helped develop a jighead/swimbait combination for use with the technology.

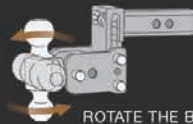


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

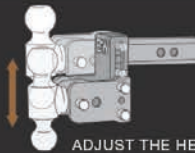


HOW SERIOUS ANGLERS SPOT EACH OTHER AT THE RAMP

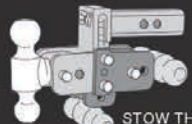
TOW & STOW.
ADJUSTABLE BALL MOUNT



ROTATE THE BALL



ADJUST THE HEIGHT



STOW THE HITCH

TOWING ADVENTURE

- low water
- current
- game plan

Navionics

Cox
DeFoe
Ebare
Jones

6lbs., 13 oz.



HOMEWORK HABITS TO ACE YOUR NEXT TOURNAMENT

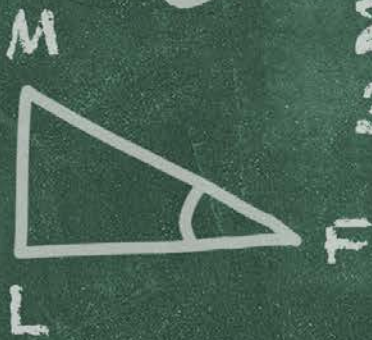
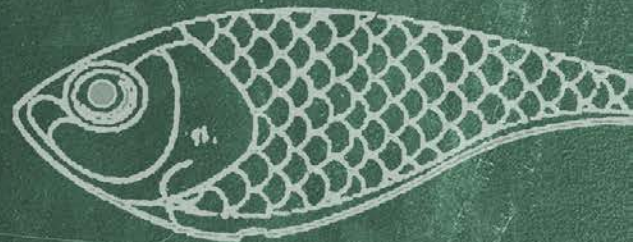
LakeMaster

Weather apps

Google Earth



1. fish
2. catch
3. release



~Plan A, B, C, D

[Tournament Results]

C-Map

Good data > bad data

By Mitchell Forde

Studying fisheries like the pros (and knowing what *not* to study) can give you a leg up before you ever reach the water

It's been nearly two decades since Ott DeFoe sat in a classroom. But the Bass Pro Tour star has never stopped doing homework. During the offseason and breaks in his tournament schedule, DeFoe can often be found poring over maps, satellite images, old articles — studying as if for a final exam that will make or break his GPA. By the time official practice starts for each event, the five-time MLF winner estimates he's usually spent more than 20 hours researching the fishery from afar.

"I probably spend as much time off the water 'practicing' as I do on the water at these events," DeFoe said.

He's far from the only pro with a rigorous study regimen. At a time when secret baits and hidden honey holes are all but extinct, strategy and decision-making separate the top performers from the rest of the pack. And while the process looks a bit different for each angler, most sound game plans are built on a foundation of thorough research, especially with only two days of on-the-water practice permitted before each Bass Pro Tour tournament.

"It's important to have a game plan for the tournament, but it's important to have a game plan for practice before it ever starts," said fellow BPT pro Alton Jones. "And if you can just do that, just learn to make a plan for every single day that you're going to be on the water, whether it's practice or a tournament, and have a well-thought-out strategy, you're way ahead of most of the field."

Studying holds value for the amateur angler, too — arguably more so. Someone who doesn't have time to practice for tournaments or who's simply seeking to catch as many fish as possible during an excursion to an unfamiliar body of water can get a head start by emulating the homework habits of some of the top strategists on tour.

STUDY MATERIALS

Just like in school, not every touring pro has to put in the same amount of studying. While DeFoe and Jones both outlined extensive homework routines, Dakota Ebare and John Cox said they do enough at-home research to get a feel for each fishery but prefer to develop their strategies on the fly (no surprise given the busy schedules maintained by both pros).

Regardless of how deep you want to dive into a given body of water, the good news for modern anglers is that information isn't hard to find. Often, the bigger challenge is knowing what's noteworthy and what to ignore, plus how to put it all into practice (we'll get there).



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Tennessee pro Ott DeFoe's pretournament "homework" includes thorough map study and assessment of previous tournament results on fisheries where he'll compete.

The most ubiquitous study tool is a contour map. These days, paper maps have mostly given way to digital mapping systems such as Lowrance's C-Map or LakeMaster by Humminbird. These interfaces offer detailed relief maps and allow for custom depth shading or water level adjustments, plus they can be accessed from a boat console or personal device. Free options like Navionics ChartViewer might not have as many features but can be accessed online.

Google Earth has become another staple. The satellite imaging software not only offers aerial views of fisheries but features a "historical imagery" function that allows users to travel back in time and view past snapshots. Both DeFoe and Jones said they utilize that tool to look for low-water images, which can reveal things like brush piles, hard spots or off-shore humps that are submerged at full pool. Even for natural lakes or ponds that don't see much fluctuation, images from different times of year can reveal grass lines and deeper holes.

"I'm backing the timeline back and trying to find a time when the lake level was low and features are exposed, where you can really see them in the light of day, and then take waypoints from that," Jones explained. "And I still do that quite a bit; it's just not quite as valuable as it used to be before everybody else figured it out."

Weather, too, is an obvious source to be studied — just about every angler has a trusted weather app. But Jones uses his a bit different than most. While he pays plenty of

Dakota Ebare understands what kind of homework NOT to do in preparation for a tournament.



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

attention to the forecast in the days leading up to and during competition, he's equally concerned with long-range weather trends. He'll start monitoring conditions on a fishery six months or more before a tournament, paying attention to whether it's experienced an unseasonably warm or cold stretch (which could impact the timing of the spawn) and whether it's been especially rainy or dry.

"If it's been a really flooded year, that tells me there's going to be a lot of flow going through that lake," said Jones. "Even if the flood subsides and the waters go down to normal, there's still just going to be a lot of natural runoff producing current, and it's going to predictably position those fish. Low-water years, you're going to have a lot of fish get out and suspend in the middle of nowhere. Automatically, it's going to be a 'Scoping tournament if it's a low-water year. But I want to know that before I get there."

Multiple pros also noted that they examine past tournaments. That could be as simple as looking up past winning weights, but DeFoe likes to dig deeper. He'll read tournament coverage and watch video from events — whether it's archived television coverage or simply an angler's GoPro

footage — to get a sense of things like whether a specific area of the lake dominated and how easy it was to get bites.

"It's still good to read that stuff and to read if a guy is like, 'I had a limit at 8 o'clock and caught 20 or 25 keepers,' or if it's a deal where most of the high finishers say, 'I caught six or seven fish all day,'" DeFoe explained. "So the weights aren't quite as important sometimes as what that information is that you can get of them saying they were catching a lot of fish or not."

HOW NOT TO STUDY

It wasn't too long ago that Ebare would spend days scrutinizing maps and whatever else he could get his hands on prior to each event. But after racking up hundreds of competition days during his 10 years fishing tournaments, he's done a 180. Now, he admitted, he prefers to "wing the heck out of it."

He learned from experience that, while thorough homework can pay dividends (especially for an angler who doesn't have quite so much experience), it far from guarantees success on the water. In fact, if you don't go about it the right way, pre-tournament prep can prove detrimental.

For every good study habit, there can be a damaging downside. Zero in on a few juicy-looking spots you found on a map or Google Earth, and you might be in trouble if they don't produce. Try to hit too many waypoints and you could miss an important nuance. Commit to what you believe the dominant pattern is going to be — whether due to seasonal trends, past tournament results or word of mouth — and you may not find the actual winning formula.

As a result, it's important to view each piece of information gleaned during the research process as a puzzle piece — many of which won't fit into the final design. For instance, while DeFoe uses LakeMaster to break down a fishery, he's not trying to map out all of his practice stops. He just wants to get a general feel for the underwater topography and have options at the ready should he discover a secondary point pattern or decide to check out a few bluff ends.

Past tournament results, too, should be taken with a grain of salt. Jones totally disregards events that were held at a different time of year. Ebare said it can be good to know the handful of baits that typically excel in, say, Florida during the early spring or the Ozarks during fall, but not to get infatuated with a lure because it once accounted for a win. Cox no longer watches old tournament coverage because he found himself avoiding areas once he knew they'd produced big bags.

"I tried to go back and watch some of the past tournaments and stuff, and it always made me feel guilty," Cox said. "You see someone fishing this area and you're like, 'Oh, I kind of have an idea where that is.' And then you're running around in the tournament, and you're like, 'Oh, there's what's-his-face over there, I'm going to stay away from him.' So for me, I feel like it's almost better when I don't really know any of that."

More than any other, the biggest preparation mistake Ebare has observed among inexperienced anglers is relying on a list of individual spots — especially those provided by someone else. While cycling through waypoints that have been productive in the past can pay off from time to time, he doesn't believe it's a recipe for long-term success.

"If it's a tournament where you can get information, somebody tells you, 'Hey, this is where I caught

some, this is where you need to go' — I don't believe in doing that," he said. "That kind of preparation is what's popular, because everyone wants a quick path to success. And that kind of stuff does lead to tournament wins at times, 1,000%, but that doesn't make you a better fisherman. I guess it's all a matter of perspective, but for a guy that's trying to move his way up to become a better fisherman overall and potentially fish for a living one day, I encourage him to do as much as you can on your own."

"IF IT'S BEEN A REALLY FLOODED YEAR, THAT TELLS ME THERE'S GOING TO BE A LOT OF FLOW GOING THROUGH THAT LAKE." — ALTON JONES

Long before he's looking at his graphs on tournament morning, Alton Jones does hours of studying.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

STUDY BUDDIES

That's not to say anglers shouldn't seek help with their homework. In fact, several pros said talking with their peers about a fishery during pre-practice helps them make sense of all the information — sifting through what's important and what isn't, making sure they didn't miss anything.

DeFoe frequently bounces ideas off traveling partners Edwin Evers and Andy Montgomery. If one of the three has more experience on a given body of water (as will be the case for Evers at Oklahoma's Lake Eufaula and Montgomery at Santee-Cooper in 2024), they share their knowledge with the rest of the group. Jones talks strategy with his son, fellow BPT pro Alton Jones Jr.

"He'll have thoughts that I don't have, I'll have thoughts that he won't have," the elder Jones said. "A lot of times it can be very helpful just to ping it off of another pro."

When they find themselves in the same field, Cox confers with longtime fishing buddy and former team tournament partner Keith Carson. Prior to the Tackle Warehouse Invationals event on Lake of the Ozarks last spring, when Cox won and Carson took second, it was Carson who clued Cox in on the sight-fishing bite that developed on the lower end of the reservoir.



John Cox and Keith Carson benefit from years of fishing together and sharing thoughts about conditions.

PHOTO BY KORY SAVAGE

But once again, the pros urge caution when consulting other anglers.

It's important to know tournament rules, for one. If information sharing isn't allowed, anglers can't give or receive way-points. Plus, Cox stressed the importance of doing homework with someone who understands his unique style of fishing and approaches things the same way. Getting a tip from someone who excels at using forward-facing sonar or skipping docks won't do you much good if you can't get those fish to bite.

"We've both fished together in the same boat since high school, so we've learned everything together," he said of Carson. "We're on the same page like making calls and moving and adjusting and stuff, compared to if it's someone who I might be best buddies with but we fish completely different — that's really hard."

TURNING STUDY INTO SUCCESS

There's one critical difference between studying for a test and a bass tournament. Unlike in academia, the goal of researching a fishery isn't to enter an event already knowing all the answers. It's to inform and streamline the decision-making process once you're on the water.

"What separates guys that catch 'em between takeoff and check-in and guys that catch the heck out of 'em with their buddies? It all comes down to being able to make the right decisions at the right time in the right moment," Ebare said. "That is the most difficult thing in all of bass fishing. All my preparation is to prepare myself to be able to make those decisions."

Jones provided perhaps the best illustration of what it looks like to put his homework into practice on the water. As he researches each fishery and scrutinizes weather trends leading up to each event, he uses the Notes app on his phone to outline a plan for practice — but not just one plan.

"I don't want to have to sit out there on the lake and think, 'Boy, that didn't work. I wonder what I ought to try next?'" Jones said. "I want to have a Plan A, B, C, D — a rotation that I'm going to go through."

Once he's on the water, Jones allows for flexibility within his strategy. If something new occurs to him, he'll check it out, and he doesn't pressure himself to explore every option he jotted down prior to arriving at the fishery, especially if he finds a thread that feels promising.

The end goal is for his homework to lead him to the winning pattern early enough that he can fine tune it — adding more spots to his rotation or finding the perfect presentation for a key area. Once he believes he's on the right track, he can commit to that strategy knowing that, if for some reason it fizzles, he has backup options a click away.

"If I look back at tournaments that I've won, almost without exception, it's when I've dialed into the main deal on the first day of practice so that I was able to expand upon that for three days," Jones said. "That's why I'm doing the homework, so if I do figure it out, I'll have

as much time as possible to duplicate what's working in as many different places as I can." ■

Want a firsthand look at how a pro analyzes a body of water? Check out DeFoe's YouTube channel, @OttDeFoeFishing. Prior to each Bass Pro Tour event in 2024, he's releasing a video showing how he uses LakeMaster mapping to break down the fishery.



Scan here to view video.

"NEW"



Ned BLT™



The Mayor™



Freeloader™



Bronco Bug™



Cleanup Craw™

MEET THE MEAT.

— RAPALA BRINGS LEGENDARY LIFELIKE ACTION TO SOFT PLASTICS —

DESIGNED BY
Jacob Wheeler 

CRUSHCITY
Rapala™

 SMART INJECTION TECHNOLOGY™

BASS PRO TOUR 2024 SCHEDULE

14-17
MARCH

BASS PRO SHOPS REDCREST 2024

Lay Lake

Birmingham, AL

9-14
APRIL

Stage Three

Dale Hollow

Byrdstown, TN

30-5
APRIL/MAY

Stage Four

Lake Eufuala

Eufaula, OK

18-23
MAY

Heavy Hitters

Kissimmee

Kissimmee, FL

4-9
JUNE

Stage Five

Chowan River

Edenton, NC

25-30
JUNE

Stage Six

James River

Richmond, VA

6-11
AUGUST

Stage Seven

St. Lawrence River

Massena, NY

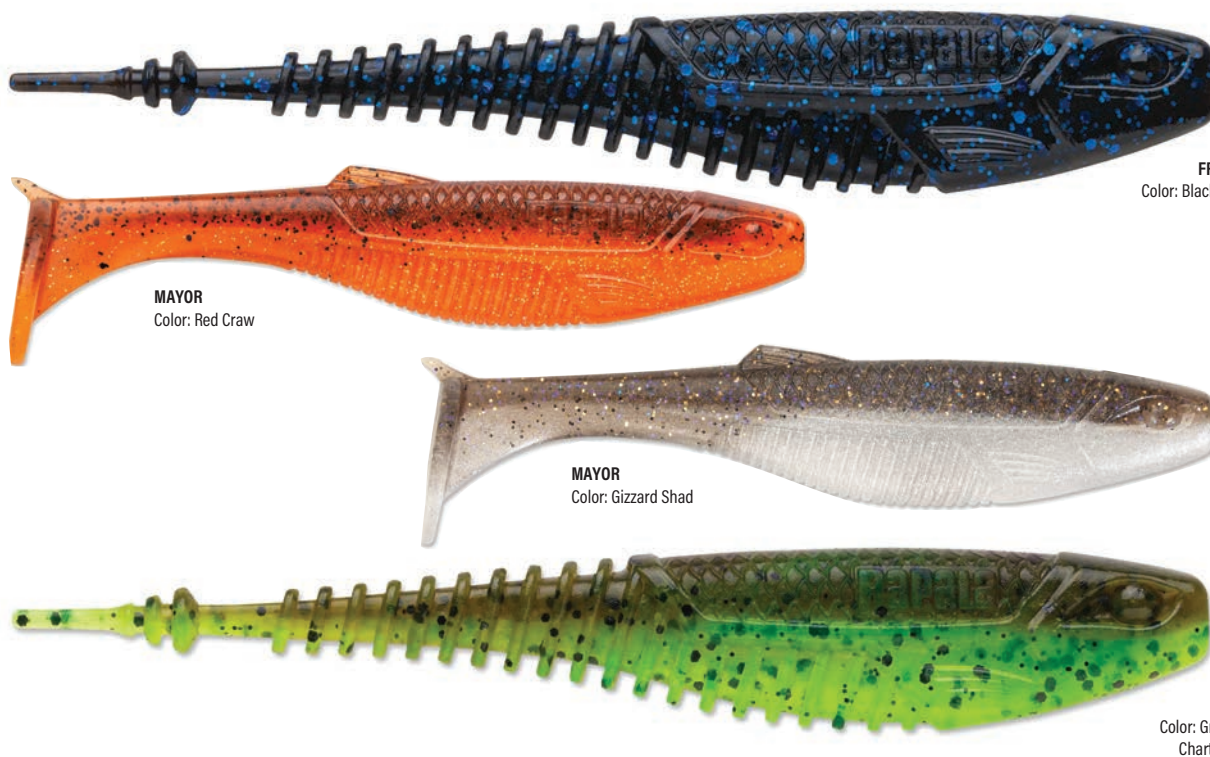
MajorLeagueFishing.com



THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS





FREELoader
Color: Black Blue Flake

MAYOR
Color: Red Craw

MAYOR
Color: Gizzard Shad

FREELoader
Color: Green Pumpkin
Chartreuse Pepper

RAPALA CRUSHCITY SOFT BAITs

By Matt Williams

When the world's top-ranked bass pro helps design a family of baits and slaps his name on them, they should get everyone's attention. Bass Pro Tour big stick Jacob Wheeler is the point man behind Rapala's new line of soft plastics, CrushCity.

Included are paddle-tail swimbaits in two sizes, a pair of craws, a Ned bait and a versatile pintail minnow-style bait that can be used as a trailer on vibrating jigs and spinnerbaits or fished solo with several rigging options.

The baits obviously work pretty well in skilled hands — Wheeler claims he banked \$301,000 on the CrushCity family before the baits even showed up in tackle stores in fall 2023.

First Impressions

It was early winter, with East Texas water temperatures in the mid-50s, when my CrushCity care package rolled in — prime time for slinging an Alabama rig, plying shallow grass beds with a bladed jig or swimbait and teasing suspended fish with a Damiki-style rig or underspin. The Mayor and Freeloader proved ideal for use in those situations and more.

Both have some neat features, but the Freeloader is particularly cool.

FREELoader: It's a 4 1/4-inch pintail minnow with a partially ribbed body, flat back, flat sides, squared-off nose and belly/back slots for lining up the hook and hiding the point. A trio of small tail rings move a little water and produce its unique quiver and hunting action.

Wheeler designed the Freeloader primarily for use as a trailer for bladed jigs, spinnerbaits and scrungers, but it can also be effective when cast on a jighead — as he proved during his win at Stage Four on Lake Guntersville last May. It can also be affixed to an underspin, Texas-rigged weightless, fished solo on a belly-weighted hook or nose hooked on a drop-shot rig. Like the rest of the CrushCity family, it comes in rigid clam shell packaging that is resealable. There are six to a pack in 17 fish-catching colors, including several laminates.

THE MAYOR: The Mayor is a multi-use, boot-tail swimbait that comes in two sizes — 3 and 4 inches. It has a super soft body with a flat nose, back/belly hook

slots and textured, flat sides that make it look and feel like the real deal. Both models can be fished alone on a jighead or weighted belly hook, as a bladed jig/spinnerbait trailer or in combination with an Alabama rig. It comes in packs of six to eight in 16 colors.

In Action

After checking out both baits using multiple techniques, it's clear the plastics are just as versatile as Rapala claims. There's little doubt the entire family will get you bit under the right conditions.

The Freeloader shined brightest for me as a bladed jig trailer and rigged solo on a jighead. The bait behaves entirely different than most fluke-style baits in that there are no fluttering appendages,

RIBBED TAIL RINGS:

The ribbed tail rings on the Freeloader create a subtle wiggle and hunting action that separate it from traditional trailers.



SMART INJECTION TECHNOLOGY:

Rapala uses a process called "Smart Injection Technology" to add custom blends of color, salt and flake at precise locations to optimize action, performance and appeal.

SQUARE NOSE SECTIONS:

The nose section on both baits is squared off, creating a flat surface so the baits will fit snug against jigheads.



boot tails or broken sides to create erratic or overly aggressive action — just a pin-shaped tail tricked out with small rings that delivers a subtle quiver and lets a bladed jig hunt.

Forward facing-sonar junkies will like the subtle kick and slight body roll of the Freeloader for targeting suspended bass in open water on a jighead. That's how Wheeler wielded it during his dominant performance on the Gunter'sville ledges. He fished it "shake-n-bake" style, twitching it while reeling, in combination with a VMC Hybrid Swimbait jighead and 8-pound line.

I fished the 4-inch Mayor solo on a belly-weighted swimbait hook around grass, as a swim jig trailer and on a VMC Hybrid jighead over brush and open water. I ran the 3-inch model in

combination with a Flash Mob Jr. umbrella rig. It performed well across the board, but I found the most success with it on the A-rig.

The 3-inch model is sized perfectly for that application, and like rest of the CrushCity family, it seems to hold up to some abuse and resists tearing fairly well. Something else I noticed is the 3-inch model seems to have a bit harder kick than the 4-inch, along with a really nice body roll.

Final Thoughts

Designers toiled over plenty of prototypes to create what Wheeler says is the lineup of soft baits he needs to win tournaments, and they covered just about all the bases with five different bait styles suited for a variety of applica-

tions. The baits are competitively priced at less than \$7 per pack.

Performance Tips

While the CrushCity baits seemed relatively durable, there are ways to prolong the life of any soft-plastic trailer by reducing slippage and tearing. Many anglers swear by Super Glue. Place a drop on the nose of the bait, a drop on the lead head and compress the two together for a few seconds.

Another alternative for securing trailers is the Hayabusa Trailer Lock. The lock is made with small-diameter wire. The shrink tube head slides over the hook point and rides in the bend, while a pair of pronged arms stab into the back of the plastic and hold it secure.

HITS & MISSES

- + Attractive color selections
- + Good durability
- + Multiple Uses
- + Soft to the touch
- + Lifelike, subtle action
- + Scented
- Size variety

FREELOADER DETAILS

Length: 4 1/4 inch

Colors: 17

Quantity: 6 per pack

MSRP: \$6.49

THE MAYOR DETAILS

Length: 3 and 4 inch

Colors: 16

Quantity: 8 (3 inch); 6 (4 inch)

MSRP: \$6.99

Contact: rapala.com ■

721 ProXP

with the Mercury 250
Pro XS Four Stroke

\$72,995*

INCLUDES all standard features of the 721 Pro XP
along with your **CHOICE** of custom **COLORS**

Plus: MINN KOTA ULTREX 112 / TWO 8' BLACK POWER-POLE® BLADES
CUSTOM COVER / PADDED DECK / TWO HUMMINBIRD G4N HELIX 9'S
4X10 CHARGER / MERCURY PROP / CHANNEL FRAME TRAILER



919 Elite

with the Mercury 225
Pro XS Four Stroke

\$71,495*

INCLUDES all standard features of the 919 Elite
along with your **CHOICE** of custom **COLORS**

Plus: MINN KOTA ULTREX 80 / TWO 8' BLACK POWER-POLE® BLADES
CUSTOM COVER / PADDED DECK / TWO HUMMINBIRD G4N HELIX 10'S
3X10 CHARGER / MERCURY PROP
CUSTOM WHEELS / CHANNEL FRAME TRAILER



** Nationally-advertised price, does not include dealer prep, batteries, freight, taxes, registration and licenses and is for 2024 model year. Phoenix Boats reserves the right to make changes in products and pricing without prior notice. Dealer determines final price. Dual color deck, polyflake hull and gelcoat pinstripe upgrade fees will apply.



PHOENIX

BOATS



920 Elite

with the Mercury 250 Pro XS Four Stroke **\$83,995***



INCLUDES all standard features of the 921 Elite/920 Elite along with your **CHOICE** of custom **COLORS**

Plus: **MINN KOTA ULTREX 112 / TWO 8' BLACK POWER-POLE® BLADES**
CUSTOM COVER / PADDED DECK / TWO HUMMINBIRD G4N HELIX 12'S
4X10 CHARGER / MERCURY PROP
CUSTOM WHEELS / CHANNEL FRAME TRAILER

921 Elite

with the Mercury 250 Pro XS Four Stroke **\$85,495***

Find your local Phoenix Dealer at
phoenixbassboats.com

#builtbyanglersforanglers

MID-STROLLING MINNOWS

By Mitchell Forde

The red-hot technique that has dominated tournament bass fishing lately goes by a few different names — Damiki rigging, tight-lining, mid-strolling, moping. But don't be daunted — this isn't some complex, newfangled contraption that fish, and fishermen, have never seen before.

In 2023 alone, a simple, soft-plastic minnow on a jighead — a slightly upsized version of the rig crappie anglers have employed for decades — won the Bassmaster Classic on Tennessee River small-mouth, keyed Jacob Wheeler's romp at Lake Gunterville on ledge-dwelling, postspawn large-mouth and dominated the Top 10 on Table Rock Lake at the Toyota Series Championship during the fall. As a result, it's earned a spot on just about every pro's front deck and quite a bit of space in this edition of *MLF Bass Fishing* magazine.

Part of the beauty of the technique lies in its simplicity; a few jigheads and a pack of minnow-style plastic are all you need. However, all minnow baits aren't necessarily created equal. Nuance exists within the expanse of seemingly similar plastics on the market, with several top pros opting for different baits under different circumstances. The following soft plastic minnows have either proven their chops by contributing to Top 10 finishes in major tournaments or brought something new to the category.



1

Color:
Blacknose Shiner

BERKLEY POWERBAIT POWER SWITCH

\$7.99-9.99 | berkley-fishing.com

Okay, most minnow baits are nothing anglers haven't seen before. The Power Switch represents the exception. It's no secret that the rise of this technique has been tied to the proliferation of forward-facing sonar, and Berkley designed the Power Switch specifically with 'Scoping in mind. The minnow's PowerBait body comes pre-molded around an internal jighead. That allows anglers to achieve the same action as increasingly popular hover-strolling rigs without having to mess with nail weights or purchase special hooks.

As a result of its design, the Power Switch is heavy for its size, allowing it to be cast accurately and sink quickly to fish. It also darts erratically when twitched or popped. Add in its lifelike profile and unique, subtle tail, and this bait can be fished several different ways — hence its name, as it gives anglers the ability to switch between retrieves to trigger bites. The Power Switch can be hopped along the bottom, jigged vertically, twitched horizontally or hung just above fish. Bolstering its versatility is the fact that it's offered in 14 colors and six different sizes, allowing anglers to target different depths and species.

Size options are 1.75-inch (1/16-ounce), 2.5-inch (1/4-ounce), 3-inch (3/8-ounce), 3.5-inch (5/8-ounce), 4.25-inch (1-ounce) and 5-inch (1 5/8-ounce) models.

2

DAMIKI ARMOR SHAD

Color:
American Shad

\$4.99 | damiki.com

There's a reason many refer to this technique as "Damiki rigging." Some of the first tournament anglers to expose the effectiveness of a jighead minnow did so with the Armor Shad. Key to the bait's success is that it sits horizontally in the water when affixed to a jighead with a 90-degree line tie, its thin tail providing a subtle, quivering action. While the original Damiki rig was typically fished vertically, the Armor Shad has also proven effective when cast and retrieved back to the boat. It's offered in three sizes, with the 2.5- and 3-inch versions being the most popular, as they provide a smaller profile than many other minnow baits, which can be ideal when bass key in on small shad. The Armor Shad is available in 17 colors.

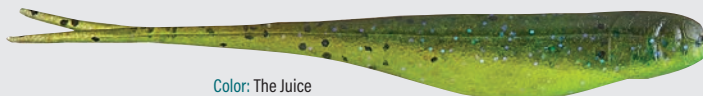


3

STRIKE KING 3X BABY Z-TOO SOFT JERKBAIT

\$4.99 | strikeking.com

The downsized version of Strike King's Z-Too soft jerkbait initially gained popularity as a drop-shot offering, but it's proven equally effective on the back of a jighead. Dakota Ebare proved that when he caught several key fish on a Baby Z-Too during his Invitationals win at Clarks Hill last spring. The bait is made of ElazTech material, which makes it more buoyant than most other plastics and incredibly durable — attach an ElazTech bait to a jighead with a drop of superglue and it's not uncommon to catch dozens of bass on the same rig. The 3.5-inch minnow comes in 10 colors.



Color: The Juice

4

BERKLEY POWERBAIT MAXSCENT FLATNOSE MINNOW

\$8.99 | berkley-fishing.com

Berkley's Maxscent line of plastics has developed a cult following, especially among smallmouth anglers. The Flatnose Minnow features the lineup's trademark scent and matte color schemes and is perfect for rigging on a jighead, as Emil Wagner showed when he rode the bait to a second-place finish at the Toyota Series Championship. The Flatnose Minnow measures 4 inches and is offered in 10 different colors.



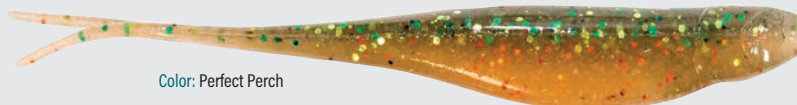
Color: Brown Back

5

Z-MAN SCENTED JERK SHADZ

\$5.49 | zmanfishing.com

The Scented Jerk ShadZ combines the attributes of both of the above two baits. As the name implies, it's infused with Pro-Cure scent and salt to attract fish. It's also made of ElazTech, giving it buoyancy and durability. Add in the fact that it's offered in 3.5-inch, 4-inch and 5-inch sizes, and it's easy to see why this has become one of the best-selling minnow-style baits at Tackle Warehouse. The Scented Jerk ShadZ is available in 17 colors.



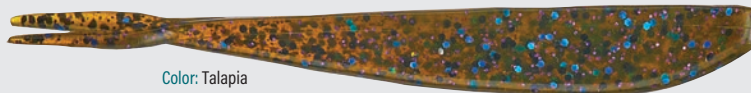
Color: Perfect Perch

PART OF THE BEAUTY OF THE TECHNIQUE LIES IN ITS SIMPLICITY

6 BIG BITE BAITS SCENTSATION SLIM MINNOW

\$6.99 | bigbitebaits.com

One of the first top-level pros to consistently cash checks by targeting suspended fish, Michael Neal utilizes the Scentsation Slim Minnow for his mid-strolling applications. He used it to finish third at Stage Two on Douglas and Cherokee Lakes last March. The 4-inch bait provides an erratic darting action, produced by its flat sides and forked tail. The Scentsation version of the Slim Minnow comes in seven colors, but if you don't see the hue you want, don't worry — it's probably available in the non-scented version, which is offered in 33 different patterns.



Color: Talapia

7 YAMAMOTO SCOPE SHAD

\$5.99 | baits.com

The newest minnow offering from Yamamoto is another bait that was designed to be paired with modern electronics. The Scope Shad features a flat head so that it fits snugly to a jighead and a minnow-style profile that will stand out on screens. Made with the company's Mega Floater formula, it rides through the water horizontally behind a jighead or suspends when fished on a drop-shot. The bite-sized, 3-inch bait comes in 12 colors.

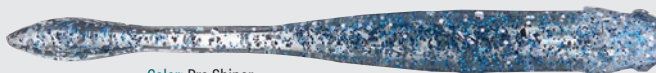


Color: Baby Bass

8 XZONE HOT SHOT MINNOW

\$4.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

With the bass at Table Rock growing wary after being barraged by soft-plastic minnows throughout the Toyota Series Championship, Canadian Evan Kung pivoted from a Scented Jerk ShadZ to a Hot Shot Minnow. The smaller, more subtle offering helped him finish 10th overall and tops among International Division anglers. Like many other minnow baits, the Hot Shot Minnow is designed for buoyancy, and its 3.25-inch length and skinny tail section set it apart by providing a smaller profile and more flowing, natural action. The bait is available in 14 colors. ■



Color: Pro Shiner

HOWEVER, ALL MINNOW BAITS AREN'T NECESSARILY CREATED EQUAL



HERE'S TO GETTING AWAY FOR THE DAY

POLARIS

VISIT [POLARIS.COM](https://www.polaris.com)

Warning: Polaris off-road vehicles can be hazardous to operate and are not intended for on-road use. Driver must be at least 16 years old with a valid driver's license to operate. All riders should always wear helmets, eye protection and protective clothing and footwear. Read, understand and follow your owner's manual. Ride within the limits of your own abilities and never engage in stunt or exhibition driving. Never ride under the influence of drugs or alcohol. All riders should take a safety training course. Call 800-342-3764 for additional information. © 2023 Polaris Industries Inc.

TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS 2024 SCHEDULE

1-3
MARCH

Stop 2

West Point Lake

La Grange, GA

19-21
APRIL

Stop 3

Kentucky/Barkley Lakes

Calvert City, KY

10-12
MAY

Stop 4

Lake Eufaula

Eufaula, AL

15-17
JUNE

Stop 5

Lake Champlain

Plattsburgh, NY

26-28
JULY

Stop 6

Detroit River

Trenton, MI



MajorLeagueFishing.com

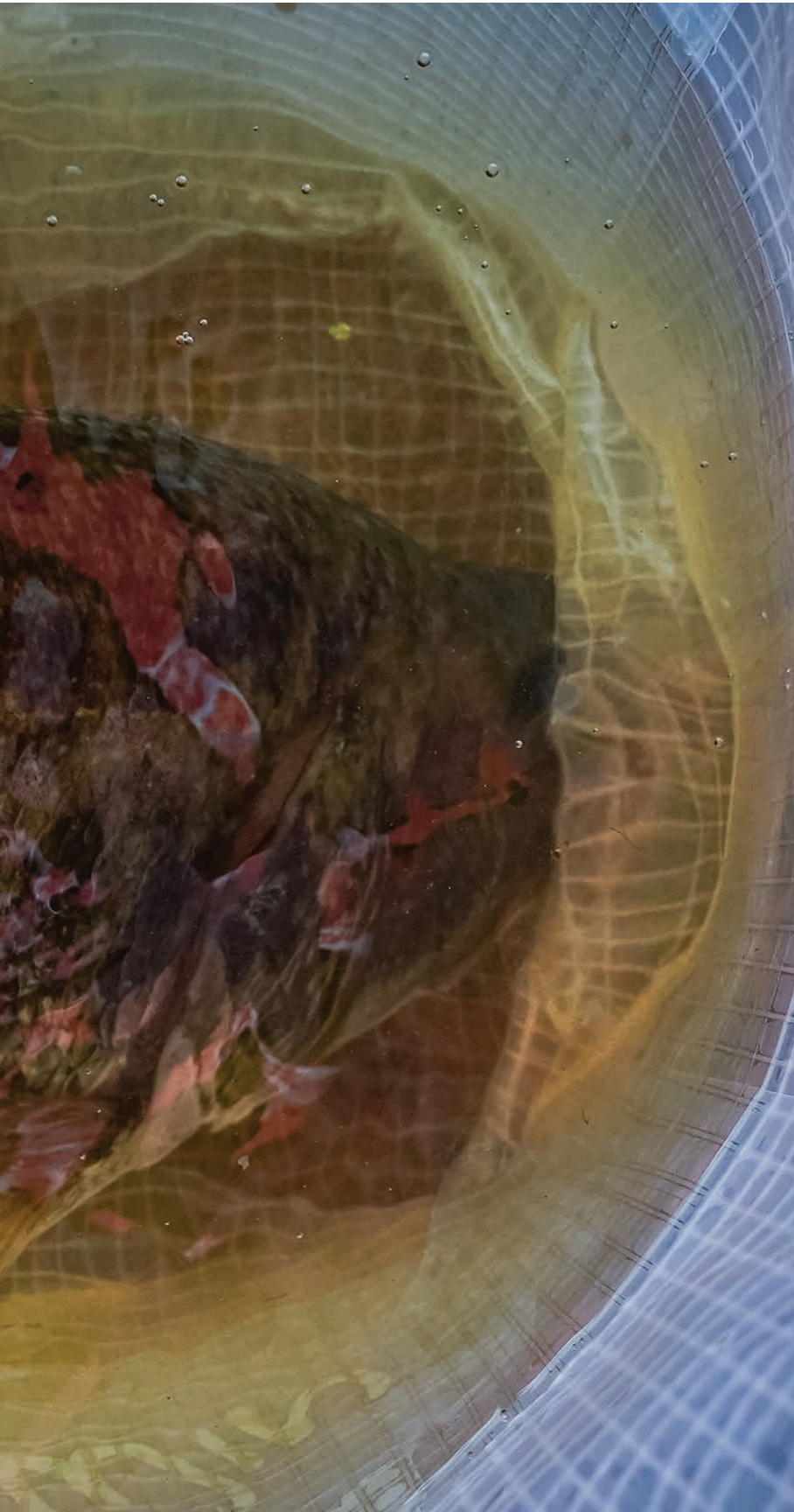


TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY ROSE MATSUURA





THAT'S A SLAB!

It's a simple truth that most of us have never had our hands on an 11-plus-pound largemouth – safe to say that the “11 Pound Club” is a group with a pretty small list of members. And it's even safer to say that the “National Championship 11 Pound Club” is an even more exclusive club. As in, a club of one.

You're looking into the weigh-in bag of Michigan's Adrian College, on the championship day of the Abu Garcia College Fishing Presented by YETI National Championship at Florida's Kissimmee Chain. Adrian sophomores Braylon Eggerding and Lucas Washburn had just finished up a magical day on the Kissimmee Chain, where they had fought tooth and nail to make up for an 8-pound, 9-ounce deficit that hung over their head after Day 1 of the two-day event. The highlight of their day: a bite that, according to Eggerding, felt like his crankbait “ran into some standing timber.”

That “standing timber” turned out to be an 11-pound, 7-ounce gargantuan, a fish that propelled the Bulldogs to 23-9 on the day, and secured them the 2024 National Championship by 1 ounce. Go to page 64 to read the full story.

“We were going crazy when we finally caught it,” Eggerding said. Naturally!

It should come as no surprise to anyone peeking into the weigh-in bag that Eggerding's fish is the biggest ever caught in college National Championship history.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA





THE OL' COLLEGE SPIRIT

Many readers of *Bass Fishing* magazine have experienced a takeoff of some sort out of Kissimmee's Big Toho Marina, and most of you would likely agree that it's hard to beat the sights and sounds of an early winter morning in Florida. There's something even more special about a takeoff that's heavily attended by the competitors' families and friends, which was the case in early January at the 2024 Abu Garcia College Fishing Presented by YETI National Championship.

Long before the Adrian College team of Braylon Eggerding and Lucas Washburn took home the National Championship, the Day 1 takeoff site at Big Toho was flooded with well-wishers from around the country, there to support more than 130 college teams' pursuits of a title. For those who haven't experienced a tournament takeoff at Big Toho, the particular spot in the photo is at the end of a long walkway on the outskirts of the marina. On most tournament days, it's the domain of couple of intrepid photographers. During the Natty, though, it became the embodiment of good ol' college spirit. Go teams!

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

TOURNAMENT REPORT

By Mitchell Forde



Braylon Eggerding and Lucas Washburn completed an 8-plus-pound comeback on the Kissimmee Chain to secure Adrian College's first ever College Fishing National Championship.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

ABU GARCIA COLLEGE FISHING PRESENTED BY YETI NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

Kissimmee Chain of Lakes Jan. 9-11

When the Adrian College team of Braylon Eggerding and Lucas Washburn returned to Big Toho Marina for the final weigh-in of the College Fishing National Championship on Florida's Kissimmee Chain, they thought they'd let victory slip away. The duo put together a strong second day in the weather-shortened event, but after starting 8 pounds, 9 ounces back of the leaders, they didn't think it would be enough. Eggerding kicked himself over a big one that broke off late in the day.

Turns out, their 23-9 limit was just what they needed. Eggerding and Washburn, who started the day tied for 10th place, watched from the hot seat as each of the final 10 teams weighed in. All fell short of their 42-4 total. They ultimately edged the Campbellsville University duo of Carter Doren and Ryan Lachniet by a single ounce to earn Adrian's first national championship.

Eggerding and Washburn pulled off the comeback by bucking the trend set by the other contenders. Most of the top finishers on Day 1 used forward-facing sonar to target bass with jerkbaits, glide baits and other reaction baits — generally doing so in Lake Toho. However, that bite fizzled



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

Eggerding's final-day kicker — an 11-7 monster that bit a lipless crankbait — proved to be the difference maker in one of the closest finals in National Championship history.

under Thursday's chilly, overcast conditions.

The Adrian duo, meanwhile, made the hour-plus run to Lake Kissimmee and employed more traditional Florida methods. They plied lily pads and submerged hydrilla around the mouth of a pocket, targeting fish that were moving up to spawn. Discovering during the tournament that the big fish weren't interested in slow presentations, they triggered bites using moving baits — lipless crankbaits, vibrating jigs, swimming worms.

The lipless crankbait accounted for most of their weight, including a massive, 11-7 kicker. Eggerding said it felt like his bait got hung in a piece of submerged timber — until it started pulling back. After a nerve-racking fight through the

pads, Washburn scooped it into the net. The brute took home Berkley Big Bass honors with ease, weighing 2 ½ pounds more than any other fish caught during the event.

For the win, Adrian received a new Phoenix 518 Pro bass boat with a 115-horsepower outboard plus \$10,000. Eggerding and Washburn, both sophomores, also gained entry into the Toyota Series Championship as pros. Whichever of the two finishes higher at Wheeler Lake will earn a berth to REDCREST 2025 on Lake Gunter'sville.



Boyd Duckett peppered the docks around Muskegon/Bear Lake with a wacky-rigged stickworm, racking up 38-10 of his team's 101-15.

GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES

LUCAS OIL QUALIFIER PRESENTED BY B&W TRAILER HITCHES

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. – The second season of Major League Fishing's team-format series – the General Tire Team Series – launched into its four-event 2024 run in mid-September in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the site of the Lucas Oil Qualifier Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches. Arriving at Muskegon/Bear Lakes, the Grand River and White Lake in early fall, the nine three-man teams picked apart a diverse mix of water conditions, cover and weather in pursuit of three berths in the Bass Pro Shops Team Series final.

See match highlights, photo galleries and full results on the [General Tire Team series page at MajorLeagueFishing.com](#)



Jonathon VanDam put on a show in Match 1, accounting for 19 of his team's 34 fish and more than half of the team's 61-2 total.

ELIMINATION MATCH 1 Muskegon/Bear Lake

Jacob Wheeler and Dylan Hays of Team Kubota opened General Tire Team Series competition with a strong defense of their 2023 title. Along with teammate Boyd Duckett, they racked up 59 bass for 101 pounds, 15 ounces. That bested Team Crockett Creek by more than 50 pounds.

Team Kubota caught all largemouth on Michigan's Bear Lake, which they had never visited prior to competition. Duckett boated 22 of them for 38-10, most falling for a wacky-rigged stickworm. Wheeler chipped in 33-4 on 19 fish, while Hays added 18 keepers for 30-1.

The trio advanced to the semifinals alongside James Elam, Matt Lee and Jonathon VanDam of Team Crockett Creek. Their 34 bass for 60-12 topped Team Smokey Mountain Herbal Snuff & Pouches (Bryan Thrift, Luke Clausen and Josh Butler) by 14 pounds. VanDam, a Michigan native, accounted for more than half the team's weight, catching 19 bass for 34-15. Team Smokey Mountain was eliminated from the competition.



Tommy Biffle connected with the two biggest fish of the day in Match 2 – a pair of 4-pounders – while working along the face of the dam.

ELIMINATION MATCH 2 Muskegon/Bear Lake

Team Knighten Industries and Team Sqwincher both cruised into the semifinals; the real question became which team would pull out the win. Ultimately, Matt Becker, Wesley Strader and Scott Suggs of Team Knighten Industries edged Team Sqwincher's Dustin Connell, Cole Floyd and Roy Hawk by 7 pounds, 7 ounces.

Strader led the way for Knighten Industries, which totaled 94-5 on 58 bass. He found a population of fish that contained both smallmouth and largemouth, primarily using a jerkbait to fool them. He totaled 32 keepers for 48-5. His teammates came through in the clutch, too. Suggs and Becker accounted for 10 of the team's last 11 catches, which propelled them from a 6-pound deficit to a 7-7 lead in the final 45 minutes.

Roy Hawk did most of the heavy lifting for Team Sqwincher. Using a crankbait and a bladed jig, he put 23 bass in the boat for 51-3. Team Sqwincher totaled 86-15 on 40 fish. Team Ferguson (Tommy Biffle, Dakota Ebare and Justin Cooper) was eliminated after mustering just 18 bass for 39-13.

ELIMINATION MATCH 3 Muskegon/Bear Lake

The battle to stave off elimination came down to the wire during the third and final match of the round. Team Builders FirstSource (Zack Birge, Cliff Pace and Mark Rose) secured the victory by catching 48 bass for 77 pounds, 12 ounces. The drama came from a battle between Team B&W Trailer Hitches and Team Star brite for second place.

After the two teams remained neck-and-neck for most of the day, Team Star brite went on a flurry late in the second period to take a lead of more than seven pounds. Team B&W – comprised of Adrian Avena, Ryan Salzman and Spencer Shuffield – closed strong, though, catching 14 scorable bass for more than 28 pounds in the last two hours. They finished the day with 69-11 on 36 fish, just 2-10 clear of Star brite's 67-



Team Builders FirstSource (Zack Birge, Mark Rose and Cliff Pace) worked up a gameplan for Match 3 on Muskegon/Bear Lake. The plan succeeded: Team BFS won the match by 8-2.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

SEMIFINAL MATCH 2 Grand River

James Elam found an epic topwater frog bite and used it to carry Team Crockett Creek to the Team Series Championship. Elam sacked up 75 pounds, 9 ounces on 38 bass, which represented more than half his team's winning total of 132-13 on 74 fish. Most of those catches came on a frog around emergent vegetation, making for some exciting action.

Jonathon VanDam and Matt Lee will join Elam in the Team Series Championship. They topped Team Sqwincher by 11-3. Dustin Connell, Cole Floyd and Roy Hawk stayed alive, though. Their total of 121-1 on 70 scorable bass put them 10-7 clear of Team Builders FirstSource (Zack Birge, Cliff Pace, Mark Rose), which was eliminated.

Floyd nearly kept pace with Elam, catching 38 bass for 67-1, almost all of them eating a swim jig. Connell chipped in 38-5 on 22 fish, while Hawk caught 10 for 15-11. That set up a showdown between Team Sqwincher and Team B&W in the Wild Card round with a trip to Florida for the championship on the line.

WILD CARD White Lake

Team B&W Trailer Hitches jumped out to an early lead on White Lake and never let up, earning a berth to the Team Series Championship in dominant fashion. The trio of Adrian Avena, Ryan Salzman and Spencer Shuffield caught 54 scorable bass for 94 pounds, 11 ounces. That nearly doubled Team Sqwincher's total of 48-13 on 26 fish.

Avena almost could've won the round by himself. He led the way for Team B&W, catching 27 scorable bass that weighed 44-4. Twenty of those came in the first period, nearly all of them falling for a jerkbait. Shuffield added 25-9 on 13 fish, while Salzman caught 14 that weighed 24-14.

Team B&W will join Team Crockett Creek and Team Knighten Industries in the Team Series Championship, which will air on Outdoor Channel this summer. Dustin Connell, Cole Floyd and Roy Hawk, meanwhile, were eliminated. ■

2 total. The team of Chris Lane, Jared Lintner and John Hunter was eliminated as a result.

Shuffield led the way for Team B&W, catching 16 scorable bass for 28-1. Salzman was right behind him with 24-4 on 11 fish. For Team Builders FirstSource, Pace racked up 41-8 on 25 bass. Birge added 16 for 24-11, while Rose chipped in seven for 11-9.

SEMIFINAL MATCH 1 Grand River

The first semifinal match of the year brought red-hot fishing on the Grand River, with all three teams topping the 120-pound mark. Team Knighten Industries ultimately prevailed, with Matt Becker, Wesley Strader and Scott Suggs punching their tickets to Florida for the Team Series Championship by boating 91 scorable bass for 146 pounds, 10 ounces.

Finding a little bit better quality fish proved key, as Team B&W Trailer Hitches actually boated more bass (94) but weighed in 14 less pounds with 132-10. However, the trio of Adrian Avena, Ryan Salzman and Spencer Shuffield did just enough to stave off elimination, topping Team Kubota by 8 pounds. They earned a shot at redemption in the Wild Card round, while Team Kubota — which included defending Team Series champions Jacob Wheeler and Dylan Hays — was eliminated.

Avena led the charge to keep Team B&W alive. He caught a whopping 51 scorable bass for 71-5. Meanwhile, all three members of Team Knighten Industries put forth strong showings. Becker caught 31 fish for 52-4, Suggs also landed 31 for 50-14 and Strader sacked up 43-8 on 29 fish.



Wesley Strader connected with 29 largemouth (almost all on a buzzbait or spinnerbait) to help Team Knighten pile up 146-10 in winning Semifinal Match 1.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



James Elam's red-hot frog bite during Semifinal Match 2 carried Team Crockett Creek to the Team Series Championship.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



Dustin Connell and Adrian Avena do a little pre-game jawing before the Wild Card round on White Lake.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

GENERALTIRE 

DELIVERS

FOR GETTING YOUR FISH STORY STRAIGHT.



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

SCAN HERE



LEARN MORE

GENERALTIRE.COM

#GTDELIVERS

ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROMAN



FISHERY SPOTLIGHT

By Tyler Brinks

DALE HOLLOW RESERVOIR

What to expect when the Bass Pro Tour arrives at the historic Tennessee fishery

The 2024 Bass Pro Tour schedule will throw anglers some curveballs, with a few popular fisheries that haven't hosted tour-level events in recent years plus a couple brand new venues on the docket. Among those is the legendary Dale Hollow Reservoir, the site of Stage Three from April 9-14.

Located along the Tennessee and Kentucky border, this impoundment of the Obey River – a tributary of the Cumberland River – is best known in bass fishing circles as the home of the world record smallmouth bass. Still, the lake's unique slot limit has generally excluded it from the highest level of professional bass fishing – until this year.

FISHERY PROFILE

Dale Hollow is properly synonymous with smallmouth and has been since 1955, when David Hayes caught an 11-pound, 15-ounce behemoth while trolling a Bomber Water Dog. The reservoir has also kicked out several other monster smallies over 10 pounds through the years.

While the smallmouth fishing draws many anglers to the fishery, it's also home to a significant population of healthy largemouth. The 80-man Bass Pro Tour field will have its pick of the two species (plus spotted bass), according to Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency fisheries biologist Mike Jolley, who said the expansive reservoir offers plenty of excellent bass habitat.

"Dale Hollow Reservoir is right at 28,000 acres, and the fish are scattered throughout the fishery," he said. "You have bluff banks, big rock, smaller rock and earthen bottom across the reservoir. The main river section has more current flow and bigger bluff walls. The bottom substrate is the perfect habitat for bass, especially smallmouth."

Dale Hollow's largely clear water also has a bit of vegetation mixed in.

"We don't do specific cataloging of vegetation, but you can find some naiads, coontail and Eurasian milfoil throughout — but the primary areas change with water levels and current," Jolley said. "The entire reservoir has clear water throughout, but clarity decreases some the further up the lake you go and with rain events."

A HEALTHY DALE HOLLOW

By all accounts, Dale Hollow is fishing exceptionally well. Both the smallmouth and largemouth populations are strong, with spotted bass quality on a slight decline.

Jack Daniel Williams' 2022 Toyota Series win on the lake offered a glimpse of the quality of fish that should hit SCORETRACKER®. That tournament occurred just a couple weeks earlier on the calendar, and Williams weighed in more than 21 pounds of largemouth on each of the event's three days to claim the victory.

While Williams lives just a few hours away in Kingsport, Tennessee, he sacked up 64 pounds, 10 ounces during the three-day tournament despite having never previously been to the fishery.

"Everyone assumed that I fished Dale Hollow all the time before that, but it was never on my tournament schedule here in East Tennessee," he said. "I've been back several times since because it's an incredible lake and full of big fish."

Since Williams' win, Jolley said, the largemouth population has only gotten better. The famed smallmouth continue to thrive, as well.

"In my 30-year career, I've never seen the largemouth population doing so well," Jolley said. "The largemouth fishing has always been good, but their size is exceptional right now, likely because the aquatic vegetation has been more consistent, and they've had some strong spawns and good year classes. On the other hand, the smallmouth fishing has always been good, and they are still the dominant species."

LARGEMOUTH, SMALLMOUTH, AND NO SLOT LIMIT HEADACHES

Both species should be well represented on SCORETRACKER® at Stage Three, and there's also a chance for some spotted bass to play in the "every fish counts" format, too. When Williams won his Toyota Series trophy with all largemouth, he was still catching plenty of smallmouth within the slot limit. He believes brown fish will dominate the catch totals in April, although mixed bags will be common. He expects to see plenty of quality fish in the 4-pound range, with the possibility for a few much larger specimens.

"I weighed in all largemouth but was throwing back 4-pound smallmouth because of the slot, but they will be a big part of this event with this format," he said. "There isn't a good way to target one species or another. They are mixed in many of the same places."

Dale Hollow's strict slot limit, which has been in effect since 2000, protects smallmouth between 16 and 21 inches, with anglers allowed to possess one fish under 16 inches and one over 21 each day. While that can be frustrating for those fishing tournaments with weigh-ins — and is a big reason there haven't been more major competitions held on the lake — it's also part of what has made the fishing so strong. Thankfully, the Bass Pro Tour's catch, weigh, immediate-release format will eliminate any concern about the slot limit.

"Those (smallmouth within the slot limit) are great fish up to nearly 5 pounds, and the slot limit allows those adults to spawn and pass on the genetics," Jolley explained. "We evaluate the slot limit every year and took a really hard look at it in 2015, and our creel and electrofishing surveys have shown that it's working well for the smallmouth population. These are the quality fish people come here to catch, and it's why so many enjoy the lake."

TACTICS AND AREAS OF FOCUS

Williams believes the winning area could come from just about anywhere on the reservoir. Generally, where anglers choose to spend their time will come down to individual preference regarding water clarity and species.

"The lake is going to fish big because the smallmouth are up and down the lake, really everywhere," said Williams. "The lake is gin clear but can get a little dirtier up the lake in the rivers. I'd say the middle to upper section of the lake would be the best bet for someone looking for largemouth."

Williams won his Toyota Series trophy with the help of forward-facing sonar and believes it will be a factor for the BPT pros, too. The fishery sets up perfectly for it.

"A lot of the fish stay out super deep and relate only to baitfish, almost like they do on herring lakes," he said. "Most of the banks are bluffs, and there are not a lot of points, so it goes perfectly with LiveScope. Baits like the Berkley Power Switch, small swimbaits and 'Damiki Rigs' will be popular. But, if it gets muddy from rain, you'll see guys flipping and catching fish on the bank."

That said, if you aren't a forward-facing sonar fan, don't despair. The April timing of the Bass Pro Tour event means there's a good chance it will coincide with at least one bass species hitting the banks to spawn. Williams believes the weather will likely be the deciding factor for whether a deep approach or a shallow, spawning-oriented attack takes home the win.

"It depends on the weather, but the largemouth will likely be a few weeks away from spawning and the smallmouth will be a lot further along and moving up shallow to spawn," he said. "Those dates are right about when the smallmouth start to spawn a few hours away, where I live."

Jolley echoed Williams' prediction that there should be fish caught both shallow and deep. Regardless of species and technique, he believes early to mid-April will be prime time for active bass.

"The dates of this event should put it right in the middle of the smallmouth spawn and the early start of the largemouth spawn," he said. "Both species will be up shallow and active. These are spectacular dates to be fishing Dale Hollow." ■



LIVE BASS PRO TOUR ACTION IS JUST A CLICK AWAY!

Watch the 80 top professional bass anglers in the world compete throughout seven regular-season tournaments, fishing for millions of dollars and valuable points to qualify for General Tire Heavy Hitters and REDCREST 2025. The *MLFNOW!* livestream is your connection to all the action!



LIVE STREAMING BROADCAST

See it all at MajorLeagueFishing.com

EPIC

BAITS [®]

25% OFF

FROM NOW UNTIL MAY 1st 2024

Use discount code "bassin24" at checkout to get 25% off your purchase

2024 CONTINGENCY PROGRAM STARTS JAN 1ST

EPIC
TUNGSTEN [®]

HIGHER PAYOUT\$

EPIC
BAITS [®]

PURCHASE CAP
AND 2 STICKERS
TO GET QUALIFIED



AT ALL THE MAJOR
EVENTS BELOW

BE EPIC TODAY [®]



Wesley Strader



Scott Suggs



Matt Becker



Clark Reehm



Colby Miller



Dean Rojas



Kelly Jordon



Justin Cooper

epicbaitsfishing.com

PROFILE: **DALTON
HEAD**
MOODY, ALABAMA



To say that 2023 was a good year for Moody, Alabama, angler Dalton Head would be an understatement. The 21-year-old senior at Alabama's University of Montevallo kicked off the year by winning a College Fishing National Championship title in February with partner Peyton Harris and finished the season with a golden ticket to REDCREST 2024 in hand, thanks to his finish in the 2023 Toyota Series Championship. Shortly after this edition of Bass Fishing magazine arrives in mailboxes, Head will make history as the first ever College Fishing angler to compete in MLF's crown jewel tournament, held in his home state on Lay Lake.

Head's success shouldn't come as a shock to those who know him. He's been fishing since before he could tie his shoes and competing in tournaments since he was 10 years old. With REDCREST on the horizon, Head's demeanor and mindset are remarkably calm for a college senior preparing to compete against the biggest names in the sport. Here's what he had to say when we caught him for a Q&A leading up to REDCREST.

Q&A

By Matt Naber
PHOTO BY COBI PELLERITO

This is probably an obvious question, but I think everybody wants to know: How does it feel to be the first college angler to compete in REDCREST? Has it really sunk in yet that you're getting ready to compete against Kevin VanDam, Jacob Wheeler, Dustin Connell and Jordan Lee for a \$300,000 payday?

A lot of people have asked me that, and it's hard to say how I feel – excited, nervous, or what you'd call it. But I'm ready. That's how I feel; just ready to fish against them. It hasn't sunk in yet, and that's the best thing, because if it had, I'd be nervous and overthinking it. But I get asked by five or six people a day about it, and I just want to go fish. I've fished Lay Lake my whole life, and I'm going to know a lot about the place, especially that time of year. Whatever happens, happens, and I just want to have fun with it.

I'm really proud of myself for not overthinking it. Not that I'm not thinking about it, but God already knows what will happen. If it's His plan for me to win or further my career by doing good, then that's what will happen. But if I can show what I'm capable of, that's what I'm excited about.

I've been fishing my whole life and wanted to be known (as an angler) – that's what I want, to be known. I want people to know Dalton Head, and that's all my dad (Danny Head) ever wanted for me. I want everyone to see the hard work I put in.

The 2023 season was pretty memorable for you. You started the year off by winning the College Fishing National Championship on the Kissimmee Chain in February with your partner, Peyton Harris, and ended the season at the Toyota Series Championship by earning the REDCREST berth. Safe to say that it was the best year (so far) in your fishing life?

Oh 100%. We left Kissimmee high off that win and then went to Cherokee and won a Bassmaster event, then James River for a Top-15 event, and we were just firing off. Everywhere we went, we caught 'em. You get in that rhythm and going good, and it takes away the mental side of fishing. [You start thinking] "I know what to do and I'm going to go do it," and it ends up working out. It was a fantastic year.

The "playing field" for REDCREST – Lay Lake – just happens to be less than an hour from where you grew up in Moody, Alabama, and is maybe 40 minutes from the Montevallo campus. How excited are you to fish for \$300,000 on a lake that you probably know a thing or two about?

I'm very excited about it. I think I've spent more time on that lake (than just about any other). Logan Martin and Lay Lake are my home lakes because I have spent so much time on those two lakes – before high school, during high school, and now I'm (at Montevallo), so Lay Lake is really all I've fished for four years. I'm excited, but March and how it's going to fish – you never know.

Alabama weather is very unpredictable. Every March is different; there's never a March the same as the year before, so I hope my experience plays into my hand and I can do well.

Do you feel any "home lake jinx" pressure? Or do you feel more like Bryan Thrift, who won REDCREST 2023 on his home lake at Lake Norman?

I tend not to worry about it. My main thing is to just go fish. I like to just go fish, and the home lake jinx thing, I don't know. ... It plays, but I feel like it's mostly mental. The curse is all in your head, because if the spot you know is good isn't good or things that should work aren't working, you also know the other things you could be doing instead (on your home lake).

I don't know if I am *that* good on Lay Lake. Thrift is super good on Norman. I hope it ends up that way where I can apply what I learned over the years like Thrift did, and he just dominated. If there was to be a book written about me and Lay Lake, I would hope it would be that.

How much does it blow your mind that you're going to fish against the G.O.A.T., Kevin VanDam, on a lake where he made some history, and that you feel confident about it?

It's how I feel about fishing against all of those guys. Like (Dustin) Connell is 100% an idol, and he's really good, and I've always looked up to him. I also look up to (Jacob) Wheeler and idolize the way he fishes and adjusts on the fly and how KVD power fishes all day and throws a jerkbait all day and figures it out better than anyone else. I look up to all of them, they all impress me.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared and confident are you about Lay Lake heading into REDCREST?

I don't want to go too high and be that kind of guy. I feel like a 6 (laughing). I don't want to say something too high; I try to be humble about it. You can ask everyone; I don't like to brag or boast, I'm a "keep it to myself" kind of guy and not big on the whole talking deal. I like to just perform.

What would be your personal "perfect storm" of conditions that you would love to see on Lay Lake during the week of the tournament?

I'd say decent current, dingy water and warming water. The fish bite better, and it will make for a way better show since everyone would be catching. My perfect conditions would be 57-degree water temperature and rising with dingy water, that would be really nice.

Your University of Montevallo team is a national College Fishing powerhouse. How has your Montevallo experience influenced you as a competitor?

Being on the team, it's very, very competitive here and made me a way better angler after all that fighting and clawing. Your first years here are very important because you have to prove yourself. I can't believe I've changed so much from me as a freshman and where I am now. I definitely wouldn't be where I am now without being on the team – going in the boat with other anglers and learning how they fish and approach things. You get two good anglers in a boat and they'll bounce ideas off each other and figure things out together. That's the beauty of college fishing, you learn so much in a short span that you'd never learn anywhere else.

This is your third year with the team, so graduation isn't too far off. What's your plan after graduating? Will you take the plunge and try to compete professionally fulltime, or will you focus on something else?

I'm going to put everything in the (tournament fishing) basket and go for it. I'm not saying I'm ready right now, but I don't want to work and do something I don't want to do. I'd rather suffer trying to do something I want to do than just roll over and do something I *have* to do. I would feel better chasing my dream now. Even if I fail, I would be happier trying to chase my dream. I want to know I gave it everything that I possibly could. I am an all or nothing guy. When I pick something, I try to be the best at it. ■

2024



POWERED BY



MARCH 14-17 • LAY LAKE
BIRMINGHAM, AL

OUTDOOR SPORTS EXPO
MARCH 15-17, 2024
Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex



Don't miss the biggest party in bass fishing!
Learn more: **REDCRESTEXPO.COM**





EXPECT LOW WATER, BIG BASS AS SAM RAYBURN STAGES 2024 TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP



PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

Sam Rayburn Reservoir

Any list of iconic U.S. bass fisheries is bound to include Texas’ Sam Rayburn Reservoir. While the legendary lake has long been one of the most frequented tournament venues in the country, there remains at least one major event that has never been contested on Sam Rayburn — The Bass Federation’s National Championship.

That will change this spring. TBF’s top grassroots tournament will take place at Sam Rayburn March 27-29. TBF President Robert Cartlidge called the fishery a “bucket-list lake” for the 52 boaters and co-anglers who qualified via the National Semi-Finals and believes it will make for a dramatic championship.

“It’ll be a great fishery for the guys,” Cartlidge said. “A lot of them have never been there. It’s a big-fish factory, and at that time of year, the fishing will be outstanding.”

Sam Rayburn is indeed known for producing lunkers, and Bass Pro Tour angler Todd Faircloth said its bass population remains robust despite the constant tournament pressure. The Jasper, Texas, native predicted most of those fish will be in some phase of the spawn when TBF anglers hit the water, making big females particularly accessible.

Whether the dominant pattern proves to be catching bass off spawning beds or targeting fish that are staging, Faircloth expects a shallow bite to rule. Look for soft plastics — Texas rigs, weightless stick worms, etc. — to be major players.

“WITH THE LOW WATER LEVELS, THE FISH AREN’T GOING TO HAVE A LOT OF PLACES TO HIDE, SO THEY’RE GOING TO BE VULNERABLE.”

“Everything that time of year is kind of going to be around the spawn,” Faircloth confirmed. “There will be some postspawn fish, there will be some prespawn fish, there will be some spawning fish. So everything is going to be pretty much shallow related.”

That all might sound standard for a springtime derby. However, a few key variables could still throw anglers a curveball, most notably the water level.

As of this writing, the lake level is nearly 7.5 feet below full pool. While it would typically fill up by late March, Faircloth expects it to remain low due to construction on the dam. If that’s the case, the bushes, trees and lily pads that would normally serve as prime spawning habitat will be high and dry.

Faircloth expects bass to spawn around submerged hydrilla, stumps and timber instead, with more of them likely relating to main-lake banks than normal. That could negate the homefield advantage of those anglers with springtime experience on the fishery.

“Normally you’re going to be fishing bushes, willow trees, cypress trees, lily pad stems, stuff like that that time of year,” said Faircloth. “But that stuff is just not going to be in the water. So it’s going to be if you can find some shallow grass and stumps and timber — that’s going to be the big deal that time of year. Because that’s basically all they’re going to have cover-wise to get around.”

The other question, of course, is how much forward-facing sonar will factor into the outcome. In years past, electronics likely wouldn’t have mattered much in March. But a few tech-savvy anglers always seem to incorporate the technology into their game plans, no matter the season. Especially given the low lake level, Faircloth could see it being used to find non-traditional spawning areas that aren’t visible to the naked eye — or perhaps even a completely off-the-beaten-path pattern.

“It seems like every time we fish a tournament nowadays it plays a role,” he said of forward-facing sonar. “So if some guys can find some deeper spawning fish

that they can’t actually visibly see, or if they find some underwater stumps, yeah, I could definitely see it playing a role.”

With plenty of big females likely to be shallow, expect to see some lunkers landed. Faircloth anticipates multiple limits will weigh well over 20 pounds. The key, however, will be finding a pattern or area that can continue to produce across all three days of the event.

Ultimately, Faircloth believes any angler able to average more than 20 pounds per day will find himself in contention to earn the Living Your Dream prize package, which includes a fully-rigged Ranger Z250L and paid entry fees into the tournament circuit of the winner’s choice. But given the number of trophy bass swimming in Sam Rayburn, no lead will feel safe until the final weigh in.

“Definitely there will be some quality fish caught that time of year,” Faircloth said. “With the low water levels, the fish aren’t going to have a lot of places to hide, so they’re going to be vulnerable.” ■



PHOTO BY ROB MATSURA

Water will be lower than usual on Sam Rayburn during the National Championship, which will cause anglers to rethink their plans.



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

Q&A

JORDAN
HIRT

2022 TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP PROPELLED IOWA NATIVE TO BURGEONING BASS-FISHING CAREER



As recently as 2021, Jordan Hirt felt far away — literally and figuratively — from his hope of fishing professionally. If the Iowa native wanted to enter anything resembling a major tournament, he had to drive about three hours to Lake Okoboji or six-plus to the Mississippi River. Competing in TBF events required crossing state lines and joining the Nebraska chapter.

Less than three years later, Hirt is preparing to start his second season traveling to some of the top fisheries in the country through the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals. And coming off a 24th-place finish in the points and three top-20s during his rookie season, the 32-year-old figures to be a legitimate contender for Angler of the Year and Bass Pro Tour qualification.

Hirt's big break came when he won the 2022 TBF National Championship on Lake Conroe by sacking up 47 pounds, 1 ounce across three days. The Living Your Dream prize package, which included entry fees for the 2023 Invitationals season, allowed the self-described "bass fishing nerd" to do just that. Prior to the start of the 2024 campaign, Hirt reflected on his rapid rise and explained how he's kept his momentum rolling while fishing much farther from home.

Q. How much tournament fishing were you doing before your National Championship run?

A. "My problem, being from Iowa, was we didn't have an Iowa TBF-affiliated club (prior to 2023). So I spent my time running around lake to lake in Iowa and just fishing basically every weekend when I didn't have to work — all the weekend series tournaments, club tournaments, opens, stuff like that. The year that I won (the National Championship) was the second year that I had entered into the TBF of Nebraska, and that year ended up being a good year setup-wise for me. I went down and fished the Nebraska state tournament on Lake of the Ozarks, and I ended up winning that tournament, which qualified me to fish the (National Semi-Finals District 8 championship). Nebraska hosted the tournament that year, and they put it on an Iowa lake, which was Lake Okoboji. And I ended up winning the regional tournament, which qualified me for the nationals on Lake Conroe. And I went down and practiced my three days, which was just the official practice — I wasn't able to go down prior to the official practice — and found some good fish and wound up winning the national championship."

Q. At that point, was a touring career on your radar at all?

A. "Oh yeah, absolutely. I was the nerd in high school who carried around the FLW magazine and was obsessed with bass fishing since I can remember. But being in Iowa, I basically just cut my teeth fishing local events in south central Iowa and Okoboji and some of the lakes that were a little bit closer to home — which, still, I think our closest lake is like an hour, hour and a half away."

Q. When you won the National Championship and earned paid entry fees into the circuit of your choice, did you feel confident you could hang fishing a national schedule and competing on the Invitationals?

A. "The win at Conroe was a huge boost of confidence. I had jumped out of the Iowa circuit a little bit and went down and fished a couple opens on Grand Lake and the Ozarks, and prior to Conroe, we didn't do so hot when we would leave the state. But once I got to Conroe, I had kind of dialed in a little bit better on my electronics and all the different techniques and whatnot, so I felt more confident going in. But yeah, the win on Conroe was definitely a confidence booster that I felt like I could compete outside of my state."

Q. So Lake of the Ozarks and then Conroe were your first two big wins outside of Iowa. Was there something that clicked that led to that success on lakes you weren't as familiar with?

A. "I think my biggest deal was just really dialing in on fish movements and what they do in different weather conditions, whether they're relating to the bottom or up off the bottom. That year and a couple years prior to the TBF wins that I had, I really honed in on some of that, and instead of fishing spots was fishing for fish, whether I was finding them on side imaging or LiveScope. It was that adjustment versus, oh, this is normally a good spot, we're going to spend the whole day fishing this one piece of cover, live or die by it. Making quicker decisions when things were not working out has helped with my success in the last few years."

Q. I'm sure Okeechobee was a really intimidating place to start on the Invitationals, and

obviously it didn't go great for you, finishing 134th. Is that one you chalk up to nerves and inexperience?

A. "Okeechobee was just a totally different fishery. I mean, just the shallow water and the endless vegetation is something that I hadn't had a whole lot of time with. To me, it was like, where do you even start? But yeah, that was pretty intimidating. Everything I researched was about trying to find the clean water, so I spent a lot of time running around in practice just trying to find areas that looked good, or what did clean water even mean, because clean water in different (parts of the country) means different things to different people. And I did feel like I found an area, and there were fish there. I had some misfortune and lost a couple good ones the first day that really hurt me, and then I came back the second day, and if I would've duplicated that the first day and not lost those fish, I probably would've made a check. But not ever having been there and not knowing exactly what to look for, that definitely didn't help me."

Q. Was it difficult to get your confidence back and gear up for Clarks Hill and the rest of the season after that?

A. "I still felt like going into Clarks Hill, with it being a reservoir, that was going to suit my style a little bit. I could look for deals that I do back home — kind of the same thing I did at Conroe, like brushpile fishing and points and rock piles and stuff like that. And luckily at Clarks Hill, my first hour of practice I caught a decent limit of fish, and that definitely gave me a confidence booster that what I was doing was right, and then I was able to build on that for the next couple days of practice and then even going into the tournament. Once I would catch my limit each day, I would spend like half the day practicing and looking at new stuff that I hadn't looked at yet to try to kind of practice while I was in the tournament. And it really worked there, and then when that happened, that really boosted my confidence for the next several events."

Q. What was the biggest thing you learned throughout last season?

A. "What I really learned last year that I wasn't doing prior to the Invitationals is I wasn't fishing fast enough. I found that I could fish through areas a lot faster, and I didn't have to necessarily catch a lot, but I could cover the amount of water needed to be able to run into areas that had fish. (Before last year) I would spend a lot of time on the really good-looking stuff and trying to figure out how to get those fish to bite versus moving on and finding active fish."

Q. How would you describe yourself as a fisherman? What's your style, your strengths and weaknesses? What sort of fisheries do you feel most confident on?

A. "Natural lakes is probably my number one confidence. Okoboji is a natural lake that has grass and rock piles, stuff like that. I've had a lot of success up there. And then another strength is reservoirs — brushpile fishing or anywhere I can kind of isolate where the fish are going to be. I really like throwing jigs and crankbaits, so I try to kind of mix power with finesse."

Q. You're back in the Invitationals in 2024. Was that an easy decision even though you don't have the financing through TBF this time around?

A. "Yeah, I made just enough money (in 2023) to do it again this year. So that's kind of where I'm leaving it. I'm going to try to make it last and run as long as I can, and hopefully pick up some more sponsors as it goes. I'm really trying to grow my social media and stuff like that to help with all that."

Q. I know your TBF journey was a little different than most having to fish in a different state than you lived, but how did TBF help put you on this path? Is that something more people should be aware of, how quickly you can get from fishing locally to where you are now?

A. "Absolutely. I think for a lot of talent in every state, locally, that advancement is not the easiest decision to make. But with me, the money from winning the 2022 National Championship was enough to get me to be able to not only be qualified but to go and chase the dream, and that was definitely a huge game-changer for me." ■



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

Kevin VanDam
MOSSY OAK FISHING
TEAM LEADER

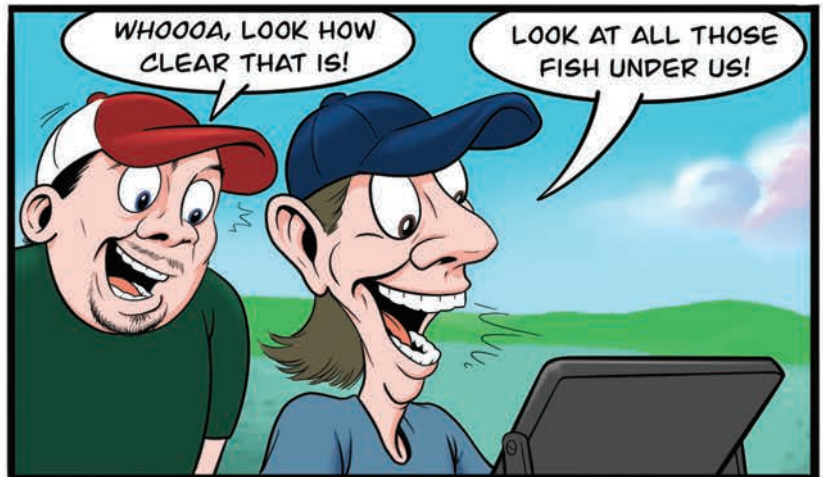
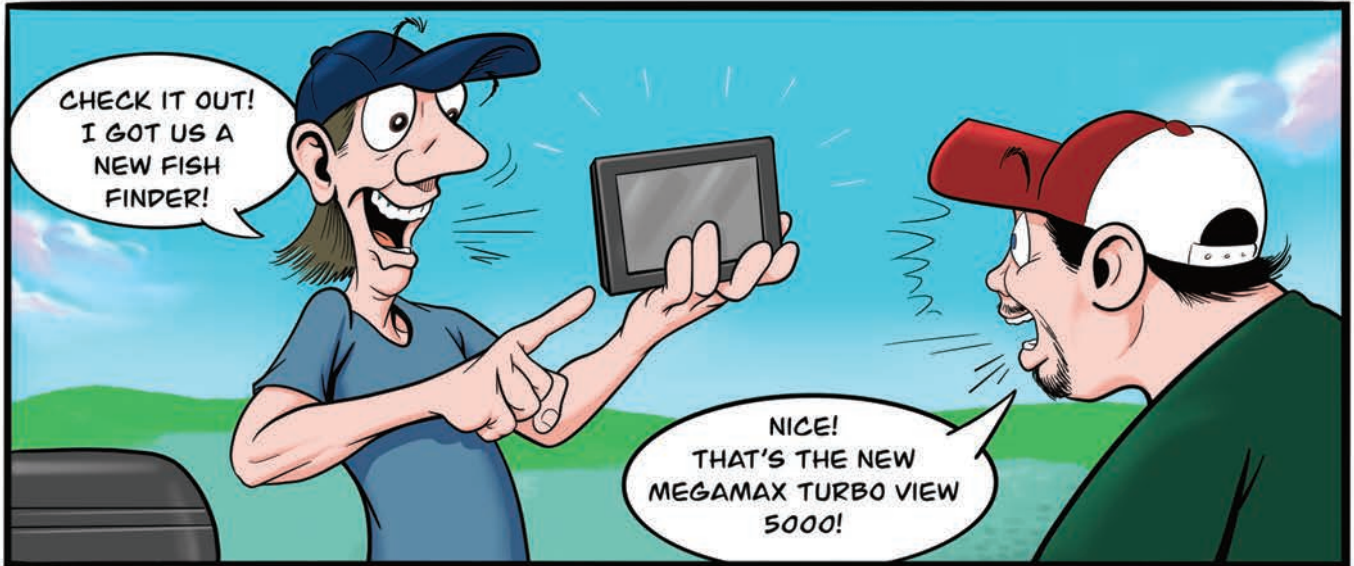


MOSSY OAK FISHING

OBSESSION HAS NO OFF-SEASON.
HUNT. FISH. REPEAT.

HUNTING, FISHING AND OUTDOOR VIDEOS ON YOUR FAVORITE DEVICE. ALWAYS FREE. DOWNLOAD NOW.







MARCH JACKPOT



TOURNAMENT GRADE PERFORMANCE

JUAN CARLOS


ANDREW NORDBYE



PRIVACY.FLOWCODE.COM

SCAN TO LEARN MORE

PASSION FOR THE CHASE



With a new lightweight asymmetric X2-Craftic™ alloy frame design, increased handle size for more torque, and best-in-class Power Stack Carbon Matrix Drag System™, the latest Revo® STX pushes the limits of speed, precision and power for a go-to reel to out-fish the competition on any given day.

**ENGINEERED TO
FURTHER REMOVE
LUCK FROM
THE EQUATION.**

FISH TO WIN

AbuGarcia
REVO

Revo STX Reels