



JUNE-JULY 2024

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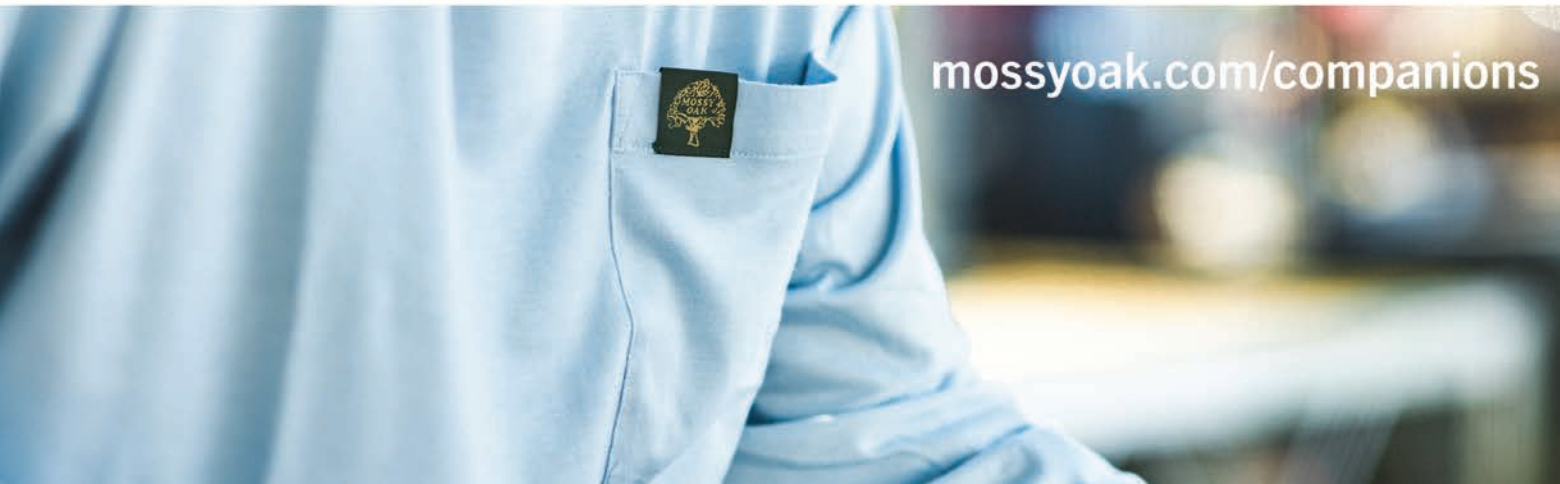
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jenn.sonnek@majorleaguefishing.com
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DEAR ALIENS: WINNING IS HARD



If an alien landed on Earth today and started to pay attention to professional bass fishing, he would likely believe that winning a major-tour-level bass tournament is pretty easy. He would look at the astounding success rates of Jacob Wheeler, Dustin Connell and a handful of pros in various leagues and think to himself, “These Earthlings and their silly fish-catching games, *it’s child’s play* to win!”

He would, of course, be wrong. It would be hard to blame the poor alien, though, because the sheer audacity of Wheeler, Connell, et. al’s success percentages and margins of victory might look to an uneducated intergalactic traveler like they’re just pulling \$100,000 paydays out of the ATM. I assure you (as will Wheeler and Connell) that it’s not that simple. Not by a long, long, long, loooooong shot.

Just ask Oklahoma pro Zack Birge.

Measured by all yardsticks, the 2014 Rayovac Series Championship winner is one of the Top 50 tournament anglers in the world. In 5 1/2 years on the Bass Pro Tour, Birge has fished his way to 12 Top 10s, 32 Knockout Rounds and four Top-25 finishes in Angler of the Year points. He’s shown up big in big games throughout his career: three Top 10s in the FLW Championship/TITLE; three Top 10s in the Toyota Series Championship; two Top 10s in Heavy Hitters and three Top 10s at REDCREST.

A pro’s pro, no debate needed.

However, as the SCORETRACKER® timer ticked down to the final hour on May 5 at MillerTech Stage Four presented by REDCON1, Birge had yet to lay his hands on a championship trophy at the highest level of the game. He’d collected hardware at the Phoenix Bass Fishing League and Toyota Series levels, earned a Rookie of the Year award on the FLW Tour and flirted with wins more than a few times, but he’d never locked up a major-tour victory.

So, as Birge’s boat official counted down the final seconds of the final day at Lake Eufaula and confirmed that the Sooner State native was the winner of the 37th regular-season Bass Pro Tour event ever contested, the gravity of the accomplishment radiated off him like he was on fire. Birge stood with his hands on his head for several long seconds, staring off across the water, absorbing the moment (and admittedly trying hard not to cry).

“Can’t talk,” he said simply when he finally found words.

Ninety minutes later, after Birge had hoisted the silver-and-red Bass Pro Tour trophy and \$100,000 Happy Gilmore check with his wife, Kristina, daughter, Emma, and son, Reed, joining him onstage, the new champion – in his straightforward way – vocalized just how difficult it is to win a tournament at the highest level of the game.

“This means a lot to me,” Birge said. “I’ve been doing this for 11, 12 years, and I’ve been close so many times. It’s darn near impossible to win a tournament against these guys, and it’s hard to explain that to people in a way that they understand.”

Any aliens out there, take note. Zack Birge will set you straight.

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

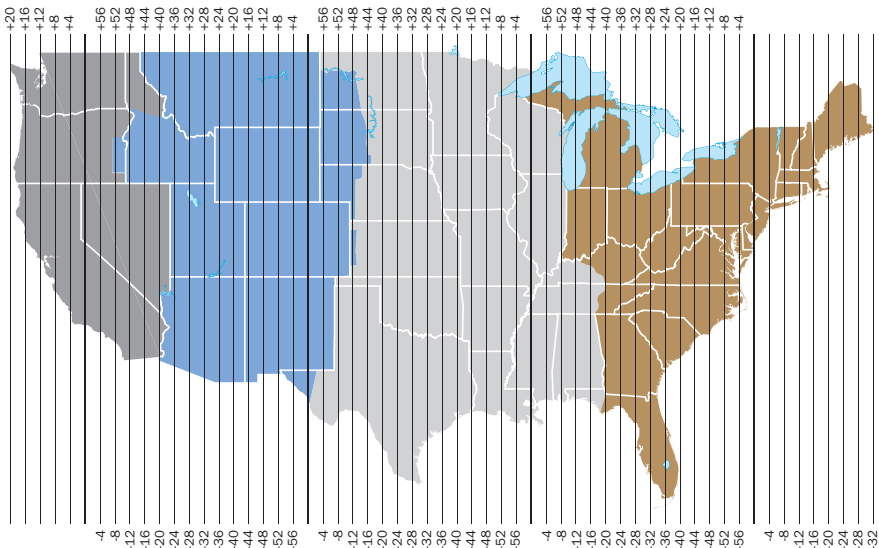


YETI BUILT FOR THE WILD.

SOLUNAR TABLES

JULY-AUGUST 2024

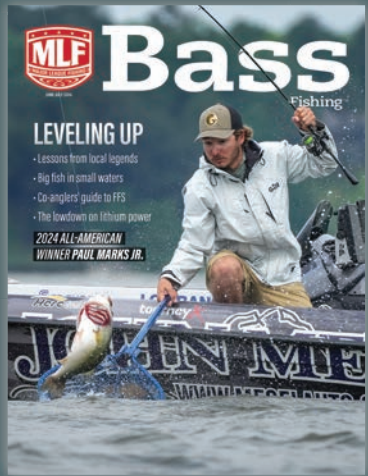
PACIFIC STANDARD TIME
 MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME
 CENTRAL STANDARD TIME
 EASTERN STANDARD TIME



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

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DESIGNING FISHING HABITAT THAT PROVIDES PURPOSE TO A FISHERY

INCORPORATING YOUTH ANGLERS INTO HABITAT PROJECTS LAYS THE FOUNDATION FOR FUTURE FISHERIES IMPROVEMENTS



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

If you grew up in a fishing family, you probably had the experience of making your own brushpile and planting it in a local lake or pond. My family used bamboo, willow trees and old Christmas trees, and I knew dozens of others doing the same thing. We weren't concerned about improving the fishery but solely focused on creating our own fishing spots or honey holes.

Today, as a fisheries biologist and Director of the Major League Fishing Fisheries Management Division (FMD), I view habitat projects very differently. In addition to creating spots for fish to congregate, I also look at how to involve young anglers and educate them on what habitat actually does and why it's needed.

Fish habitat should be something that serves a purpose for a fishery. Maybe it increases the abundance of fish – not to a specific dock, but to an entire creek channel. Perhaps it allows fish to survive when they're most vulnerable as fry, or it may enable them to recover from stressful events like going through a weigh-in. Whatever role the habitat plays, design should be the focus because, if done correctly, it will inevitably attract fish and increase angler success.

The MLF FMD takes this approach when designing our habitat projects. You saw this first at Stage One of the Bass Pro Tour, as we completed the MLF FMD Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Kubota Tractors on Sam Rayburn Reservoir. For this project, we focused on increasing the recovery of fish weighed in during the Tackle Warehouse Invationals event on Sam Rayburn, using MossBack Fish habitat to create four Bass Recovery Zones in the creek channel adjacent to the Umphrey Family Pavilion.

Numerous other tournament organizations have completed weigh-ins since our February project, and undoubtedly, their fish have also used the Bass Recovery Zones following release.

INCLUDING YOUTH AT CENTER HILL

We took this idea and expanded it to include a youth component for two more habitat projects. First, in Tennessee, as half of the Bass Pro Tour anglers competed on Dale Hollow Lake, Alton Jones, Alton Jones Jr., Brent Chapman, Cliff Crochet, Kelly Jordon, Mark Rose and Nick LeBrun volunteered to help the MLF FMD, Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency and the Dekalb County High School bass fishing team complete the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Humminbird on Center Hill Reservoir.

We mirrored the Sam Rayburn plan by selecting a popular boat ramp often used by tournaments for weigh-ins and deployed MossBack Habitat to create Bass Recovery Zones. Possibly the best part of this project was the interaction between the TWRA staff, BPT pros and high school anglers. As with our other projects, we started the morning by explaining to the volunteers what we were building, why the reservoir needed habitat improvements, why we selected MossBack products and why companies like Minn Kota and Humminbird want to help support these efforts. It was a rainy day, so we all worked under small portable awnings and had the opportunity to do an impromptu question-and-answer session with the BPT anglers.



The Oologah-Talala High School fishing team teamed up with several Bass Pro Tour anglers to build and deploy habitat on Oklahoma's Lake Eufaula.

TEAMING UP WITH OOLOGAH-TAHALA HIGH SCHOOL

As we finalized our next project at Lake Eufaula in Oklahoma, we knew that involving the high school fishing team added a lot to the Tennessee project, and the Q&A was a must-schedule part of the process. I called Edwin Evers, who serves as the coach of his son's bass fishing team at Oologah-Talala High School in Oklahoma. Evers helped coordinate a day off for 14 students and a school bus to travel 100 miles from Talala to Peter's Point-Nichols Point in Eufaula, where the habitat would be built.

On the day of the build, the students were met by Bass Pro Tour anglers Britt Myers, Colby Schrupf, Gary Klein, Greg Vinson, John Murray, Josh Bertrand, Micheal Neal, Ott DeFoe, Skeet Reese, Stephen Browning and Evers along with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation to complete the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Humminbird. The students were introduced to the habitat, the importance of Eufaula Cove for tournament-released fish and how the project would improve the fishery.

ODWC biologists explained how this ongoing habitat project includes donations from the City of Eufaula for the next three years and utilizes matching fund opportunities from Sportfish Restoration Funds (in addition to the MLF FMD donation), all to create a large-scale Eufaula Lake habitat plan.

After completing the habitat build, Evers led a round-table discussion covering other career opportunities outside of professional fishing that anglers could pursue.

To comply with BPT rules, since Lake Eufaula was the competition water for Stage Four, we could only allow ODWC staff and the high school anglers to complete the habitat-deployment side of the project. While doing this, some students were interviewed for segments on podcasts, YouTube videos and local news. Following the completion of the project, the students loaded their bus and were treated to lunch by coach Evers at the local Braum's before heading back just in time for school to be let out.

These two Minn Kota Habitat projects provided reservoir habitats that were greatly needed and helped support the fishing community in our quest for better fishing. The Bass Recovery Zone template, focused on significant boat ramps

for tournaments, is highly beneficial and easily replicated nationwide.

Even more important, these projects set up a blueprint for how the MLF FMD can incorporate youth education into our projects. This youth involvement helps us set an example of how anglers can support conservation and stewardship work. It would be extraordinary if their participation in these FMD projects ignites a passion to improve their local resources. It may lead to a future fisheries scientist working to enhance bass fishing as a career, which would benefit all anglers.

The high school anglers helped create a Bass Recovery Zone to benefit tournament-released fish in Eufaula Cove.



LOOKING AHEAD TO FUTURE FMD HABITAT PROJECTS

Our next MLF FMD Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project is planned for later this summer. We're working with Texas Parks and Wildlife and looking forward to planning the project on Brownwood Lake. MossBack Fish Habitat and American Feeder will support the project.

Brownwood is not a reservoir many anglers put on their Texas bucket lists. However, its location near O.H. Ivie, some recent investments into a dedicated tournament weigh-in stage by the Brown County Water Improvement District and the new City of Early Town Center Community Lake opening make it a fishery to watch over the coming years. We're planning a trip to assist TPWD in mapping bottom hardness around the new tournament stage. We'll use the Bass Recovery Zone habitat plan to ensure we have sites available for fish to recover after release. We're already working with local universities and high schools to involve those anglers in the building and deployment of the habitat and will start coordinating with MLF anglers to volunteer and help mentor the youth during the project.

MLF FMD INFORMATION IS ALWAYS AVAILABLE

The best place to look for updates on this and all our projects is always at MajorLeagueFishing.com. Click the blue FMD logo on the home page. ■

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ANGLER OF THE YEAR RACES ENTER FINAL LAPS OF 2024 SEASON

INTRIGUING SCENARIOS ABOUND AS BASS PRO TOUR, INVITATIONALS PROS BATTLE FOR FISHING CLASH HARDWARE *By Joel Shangle*



Halfway through the calendar year and heading into the final laps of the season, each of Major League Fishing's two most visible tournament circuits – the Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Invationals – appear destined to deliver extremely competitive, intriguing finishes in their respective Fishing Clash Angler of the Year races.

WHEELER VS. JONES DOWN THE BACKSTRETCH

Just prior to this issue of *MLF Bass Fishing* magazine going to press, Bassfan.com announced that Tennessee pro Jacob Wheeler had expanded his lead over Texas pro Alton Jones Jr. to 38 points atop the Bassfan.com World Rankings. Wheeler's cushion over "Junior" in the Bass Pro Tour AOY race, however, was significantly tighter heading into the latter half of the 2024 season.

Stop me if you've heard this one before ...

Wheeler's lead over Jones was a slim 12 points (301 to 289) at press time, with BPT tournaments on the Chowan and James Rivers approaching. A quick look at *SCORETRACKER INSIDER™* shows that the Wheeler vs. Jones rivalry has developed into a darn good one, and that the pair's course through the Bass Pro Tour AOY road race has grown to resemble a game of Mario Kart since the midpoint of the 2023 season.

Wheeler and Jones have been within five places of one another in the AOY standings since Stage Five in 2023 and have jockeyed for position within two places of one another in five of the last seven BPT events heading into the Chowan River. In that time, they've combined for 11 Top 10s.

With miniscule shared major-tournament history on the two upcoming river systems (Jones finished 46th on the James in a 2016 BASS Open) but with each having ample experience on the St. Lawrence River to finish the season in early August, Wheeler vs. Jones appears to be headed for what fight fans refer to as the "championship rounds."

We'll cover this rivalry in depth through July at MajorLeagueFishing.com.

LAWRENCE LEADS INVITATIONALS AOY

Amassing an MLF tournament resume that has quickly climbed into the stratosphere, it was only a matter of time before Invationals rookie Jake Lawrence added his first major-tour-level win to his list of accomplishments. The Tennessee pro did just that in May at Invationals Stop 4 on Lake Eufaula, vaulting to the top of the Fishing Clash AOY standings for that circuit in the process.

It seems like a steep task for the rest of the Top 5 (Alec Morrison, Marshall Hughes, Colby Miller and Drew Gill) to knock Lawrence off that perch as the season winds down in June and July based purely on Lawrence's recent performance metrics.

Lawrence's success the past two years has been mind-blowing. He's racked up 10 Top 10s in 12 tournaments across 2023 and 2024 in Phoenix Bass Fishing League, Toyota Series and Invationals competition, putting him at an unheard-of Top-10 clip of 83.3%. It'll be virtually impossible to maintain that pace, of course, but with the final two tournaments of the 2024 season on fisheries where forward-facing sonar will likely dominate – Lake Champlain and the Detroit River – it seems foolhardy to bet against the LiveScope-savvy Lawrence.

That said, Lawrence's lead of 13 points is far from insurmountable (he has 770 to Morrison's 757, and Morrison is a smallmouth expert who lives on Lake Champlain), while the melee among Morrison, Hughes (756), Miller (756) and Gill (752) is as interesting as it gets.

If you're a fan of a good, old-fashioned sprint to the finish, Lake Champlain (June 15-17) and the Detroit River (July 26-28) will be must-watch tournaments.

Follow the Fishing Clash Angler of the Year races for the Bass Pro Tour, Tackle Warehouse Invationals, Toyota Series and Phoenix BFLs at MajorLeagueFishing.com/fishing-clash-angler-of-the-year. ■



Jake Lawrence has been one of the hottest anglers on the planet the past two years.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

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July 13: Bass Pro Shops REDCREST Powered by OPTIMA Lithium Championship Round @ Lay Lake

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July 27: B&W Trailer Hitches Stage One Presented by Power-Pole Championship Round @ Toledo Bend

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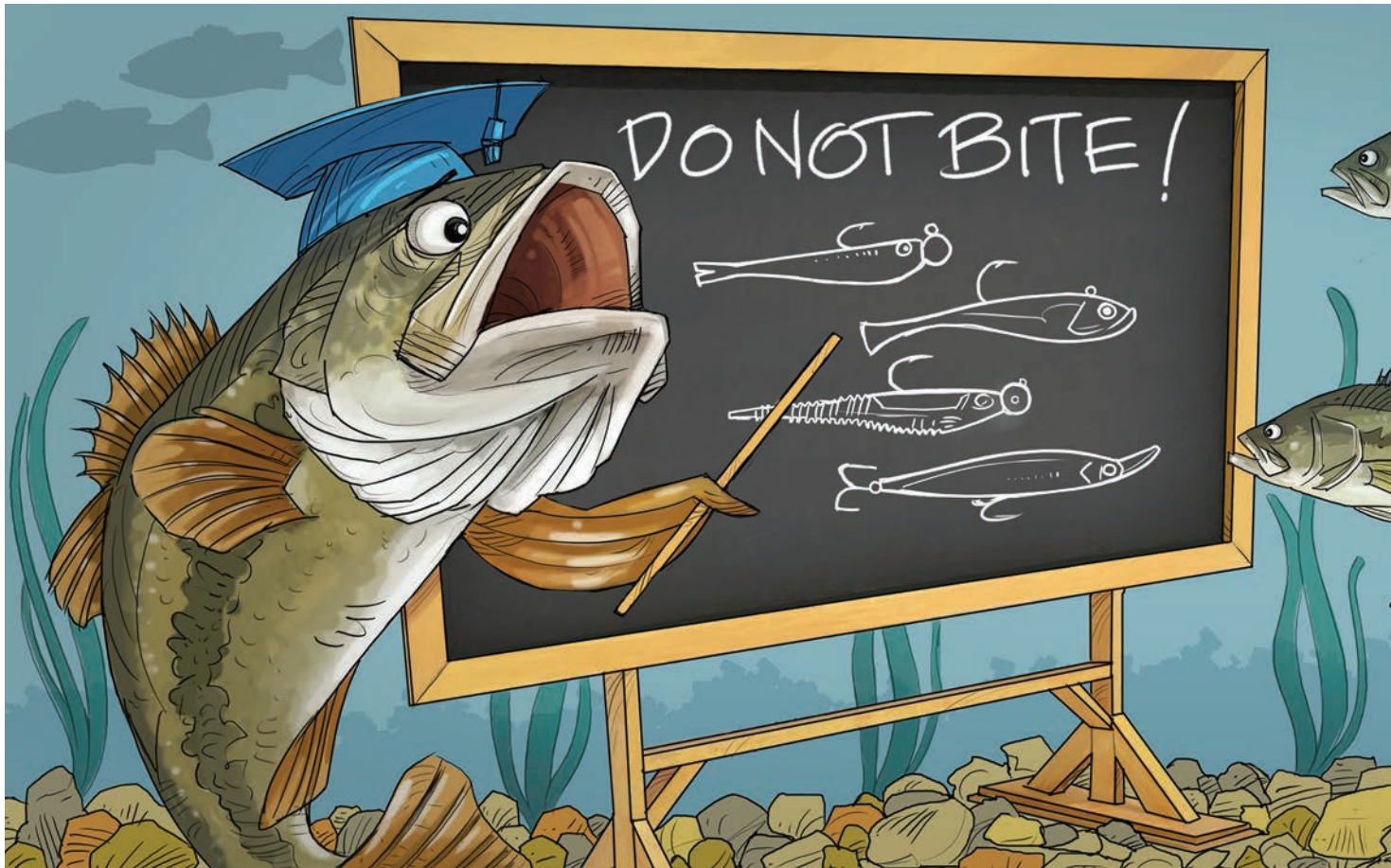
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SHAME ON YOU BASS!

With forward-facing sonar pinging the tournament world, it's time for fish to wise up



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.

Okay. Uncle. Waving the white flag.

I can't take any more of the forward-facing sonar rumbling and grumbling. In just four years, this new technology has divided the sport like a lumberjack splitting wood.

The veteran anglers say it has taken true grit and knowledge out of fishing. The young anglers say it's the evolution of technology — adapt or get left behind. Some claim it's making the sport too expensive. Others argue it's now the most important learning tool on a boat. Some say it should be banned from tourna-

ments. Others say it's here to stay. I've heard people even comment that the electronics companies are building products that are ... *too good*? Sounds like a compliment to me.

Now anglers are haggling over possible limitations of this technology in tournaments, perhaps capping the number of screens or transducers per boat. Meanwhile, dozens of peripheral products have sprung up around forward-facing sonar: waist-high screen mounts, rotating turrets that allow more transducers to peep around the boat, reverse-thruster "brakes" mounted to shallow water

anchors to stop on a dime. And I still contend dedicated forward-facing sonar VR goggles are coming: the Panning Peepers (I'm trademarking that).

The finger pointing over forward pinging is at an all-time high, and I'm here to tell you, I know exactly who is really at fault here.

The bass.

That's right. Mr. *Micropterus salmoides* himself.

The bass is to blame. Bass should be ashamed of themselves. I'm talking about all three brethren, too: small-mouth, spotted and large-mouth bass.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

They should be sorry for leading us all down this road of disruption. They have pitted all of us in this industry against each other by continuing to freely swim through beams and pings out in the middle of nowhere to eat ... minnows?

Really, bass? I thought you were smarter than that.

SLOW TO WISE UP (SO FAR)

After a couple years of this forward-facing technology, I honestly thought it would run its course and be just another black box on the boat. I guess I had a little too much belief that bass would wise up to that constant pinging on their lateral line. I figured they would associate 500 kHz of clicking with a lip piercing. After a few zaps from a sonic laser followed by a couple rounds of dental work, I thought they would get the clue, head to the bank and bury up in grass or under a dock.

I also had more faith in Mother Nature throwing us a couple of rainy

seasons that would turn the lakes into flooded, muddy messes, rendering forward-facing sonar useless in half the tournaments (like we finally saw at Oklahoma's Lake Eufaula).

Yet, here we are, some four years later, and bass are still just freewheeling out in the middle of nowhere, playing amongst the beams like kids in a sprinkler.

Come on bass! Get your act together! You're being lit up daily by more sonar beams than ATL's air traffic control, yet you're still wandering around in the middle of the void like homeless vagrants? Didn't your parents teach you better?

SMALLMOUTH, SPOTS, LARGEMOUTH: YOU'RE ALL GUILTY

Smallmouth, it's actually not your fault. Frankly, you're not the sharpest bass in the lake to begin with. Half the year, you're trapped under ice, freezing to death. I'm convinced it freezes your brain and erases your memory every winter. You also carry a mean streak that would make a cottonmouth proud. When guarding beds, you guys will literally bite a lure five or six times in a row and still come back for more. Given that, I'm pretty sure sonar beams don't faze you at all. You smallies probably chase sonar frequencies in the water the way a cat chases a red laser beam on the floor. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that you actually like getting your brains pinged.

Now, spotted bass, you're savvier than that. Don't you remember how you learned to avoid traditional 2D sonar? Even in 40 feet of water, as soon as you entered the 2D sonar cone under the boat, poof! You were gone. So why do you continue to swim through the beam at 40 feet in *front* of the boat? It's the same thing!

I'm calling you spots out on this, too. You're hanging out with the wrong crowd in the middle of the lake. You run around with those hooligan strippers that teach you bad habits like straight roaming and chasing herring in open water. You think hiding behind your big ruffian buddies is going to protect you? Well, I have news: The anglers are so good with these ping machines, they can tell a striper from a spotted bass. Yes, it's true. They can pick you out of a lineup.

I know, you spots like suspending in the middle of the water column. For some reason, being exactly 17.3 feet down in 50 feet of water is your deal. But at least suspend tight to some kind of vertical structure and get out of plain view! Maybe right up against a pole timber? Or get in the crevice of vertical bluff? Perhaps skulking along a cross brace on a dock? At least try to hide in a shadow.

Finally, of all the bass involved in this forward-facing fray, I'm most disappointed in the largemouth. Come on, guys! Don't you want a nice home? A laydown on the hill? A cozy hydrilla condo? A long, ranch-style property on a stretch of rip rap? These are the places your grandparents and great grandparents lived (or so we thought). They left you magnificent habitat with boat docks and fields of grass to hunt in. So why do you still meander around aimlessly in the abyss?

Didn't you read a single page from the thousands of fishing magazines from the last 30 years? You guys are supposed to live on shallow pieces of cover, like you did for Denny Brauer and Tommy Biffle back in the day! Don't you remember the 80s and 90s? It's time to come back to the bank and eat bream, crawdads and big gizzards instead of those minnows.

If you want to venture out to a river ledge and wolf some shad from time to time, I understand. All-you-can-eat buffets are fun times. Just stay low to the ground. Try the belly crawl.

You largemouths also excel at noise and vibration conditioning. You learn the sonic footprint of things that lead to hooks. Those lipless rattle baits are great for about two weeks in the spring, then you dodge them. Do you even look at a spinnerbait anymore? And you spurned the Alabama rig after just two seasons. Yet now you put up with being blasted by a forward-facing sonar beam all year long, and you're cool with it?

Finally, one last gripe: At least have the sense to get out of the rain. When a super-soaker weather system pushes the lake up five feet with rolling mud, come in from the abyss and get in clearer water near some kind of cover like you're supposed to. Your gills will breathe easier, and so will the rest of the tournament fishing world. ■



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College Fishing angler Dalton Head made an impression at REDCREST on Lay Lake.



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.

REMEMBER THE NAME DALTON HEAD

The University of Montevallo angler's moment in the spotlight at REDCREST seemed more like the start of his fishing journey than the pinnacle

PHOTOS BY GARRICK DIXON

I remember first hearing Dalton Head's name after he and his fishing partner, Peyton Harris, won the 2023 Abu Garcia College Fishing National Championship. Soon after, the two battled for a REDCREST berth at the Toyota Series Championship, where Head prevailed, becoming the first collegiate qualifier in the event's history.

Despite having no professional tournament experience, Head was predicted to be a player at REDCREST. In a you-couldn't-script-this twist of fate, he'd have a home-lake advantage on his side, having

spent much of his bass fishing life on Lay Lake, site of the 2024 championship.

Still, it came as a surprise to me to see Head in a position to win the event, leading for a portion of the second day of qualifying. In a field that included names like DeFoe, Morgan, Evers and VanDam, the young angler looked right at home.

What it must have been like to be that kid: Out of nowhere, just 21 years old, on the brink of changing his life with just a few casts.

"Oh, that was awesome" Head commented. "I want to feel that again."

Ultimately, Head would finish 12th, collecting the biggest payday of his life (\$10,000). But it's the story of how this unassuming young man got to REDCREST 2024, and the lessons he absorbed while fishing on the biggest stage, that's more compelling.

BASSIN' RUNS IN HEAD'S BLOOD

Head was born into an outdoor-focused family in Moody, Alabama. His grandfather, Ralph, is the family's bass fishing patriarch.

"He still belongs to the bass club that I started in," Dalton said of his granddad.

Dalton's father, Danny, is also a member of the club, which takes to Lay Lake or Logan Martin most weekends during the fishing season. The approach of the club is as old as organized bass fishing itself.

Dalton started fishing "ever since I could walk" and joined the club as soon as he was capable. Partnered with his father, he won the first bass tournament he ever entered — an event held on, you guessed it, Lay Lake.

"That's what got me hooked," he recalled.

During his teenage years, Dalton became one of the founding members of Moody High School's bass fishing team, actually competing while still in junior high. Head credits Scott Canterbury and Barry Isbell, two prominent competitive anglers from the region, for mentoring him through this period of heightened competition, which included a developing friendship with his soon-to-be collegiate partner.

Following high school, Head's pursuit of pro fishing took a back seat to reality.

"I was just going to go to work," he remembered. "But Peyton called and said Montevallo would help with tuition and pay our expenses if we fished. That was all I needed to hear."

The two joined the University of Montevallo bass fishing team, a premier group that has accounted for multiple national championship wins and Tackle Warehouse School of the Year titles.

COLLEGE LEARNINGS PAY OFF AT REDCREST

Head credits Montevallo's powerhouse program for his ability to excel in college fishing tournaments. Still, after just two years on the team, REDCREST represented a whole different animal. Preparation was intense.

"Before the off-limits period, I spent every day I could on Lay Lake," Head explained. "I went to Mitchell every day after."

Head's theory was that if he could find and track several groups of bass, regardless of their home reservoir (Lake Mitchell is the body of water directly beneath Lay Lake on the Coosa River), he could "stay in tune" with their movements as the tournament began. That proved dead-on.



"I was preparing for the fish to make a drastic move, and they did," he explained. "The fish were on bait, but it didn't matter where that bait was."

What did matter was current. Following a period of limited flow, the tournament saw reservoir current rates increase dramatically, which grouped up and moved the bass. Utilizing forward-facing sonar, Head simply went looking.

"I was able to see where the current had pushed the bait," he explained. "From there, I found my fish the first day of practice."

Still, the young Alabamian was far from immune to the pressure of competing in a championship-level event with a \$300,000 first-place paycheck.

"My nerves were shot," Head said of his mindset entering the first competition day. "I was so nervous my fish weren't going to be there."

But they were. After starting on a secondary area that resulted in a few quick catches, Head went to the juice. "It was eating me up," he said "I had to play my A-game."

A flurry of a dozen scorable bass put Head near the top of SCORETRACKER®, giving him that taste of glory he can't wait to relive. The second day of competition found him laying off his best area,

finding a productive backup and cruising into the Knockout Round in fourth place, looking like a legitimate contender.

After a quick start on Day 3, however, Head fell victim to the greatest threat to an inexperienced angler in a high-stakes situation.

"I felt like I was going to make it easy (past the Knockout Round)," he said. "But then I got into a rush."

Now dealing with pressured fish, the bites not so easy to come by, Head hurriedly fished through his primary areas, ultimately deciding to leave for greener pastures. A key late-day decision proved futile.

"I had two places I could potentially run to," he said. "One was Spring Creek, but I was afraid those fish were awful close to spawning (and would abandon their holding spots). So, I went to the Narrows."

Head could never get the ball rolling, and when he did, he lost key fish that might have put him in the Championship Round. He admits it was tough getting knocked out.

"It hurt, bad," he said. "But I already said I was going to leave it to God. If I was intended to make it, I would have made it. I left it all out there."

And that's all, really, a competitor can do. Head's family and friends, many of whom took the water to cheer him on, praised him for his strong showing.

"In my mind, though," Head concluded, "I felt I was better than that."

I feel confident Head will get another chance to prove it. Growing up bass fishing, with a fishing family and dominant college program in his corner, it wouldn't be surprising to see him at REDCREST again soon.

When he gets there, Head will know how to deal with the pressure of the big stage, which may prove to be the most valuable lesson of all. ■





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SOFT JERKBAIT

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SOFT STICKBAIT

With a subtle, non-intrusive action, soft stickbaits are great for sneaking up on bass lurking around shallow cover. Skip it under docks, or follow up a missed strike with a soft stickbait - just make sure your drag is set.



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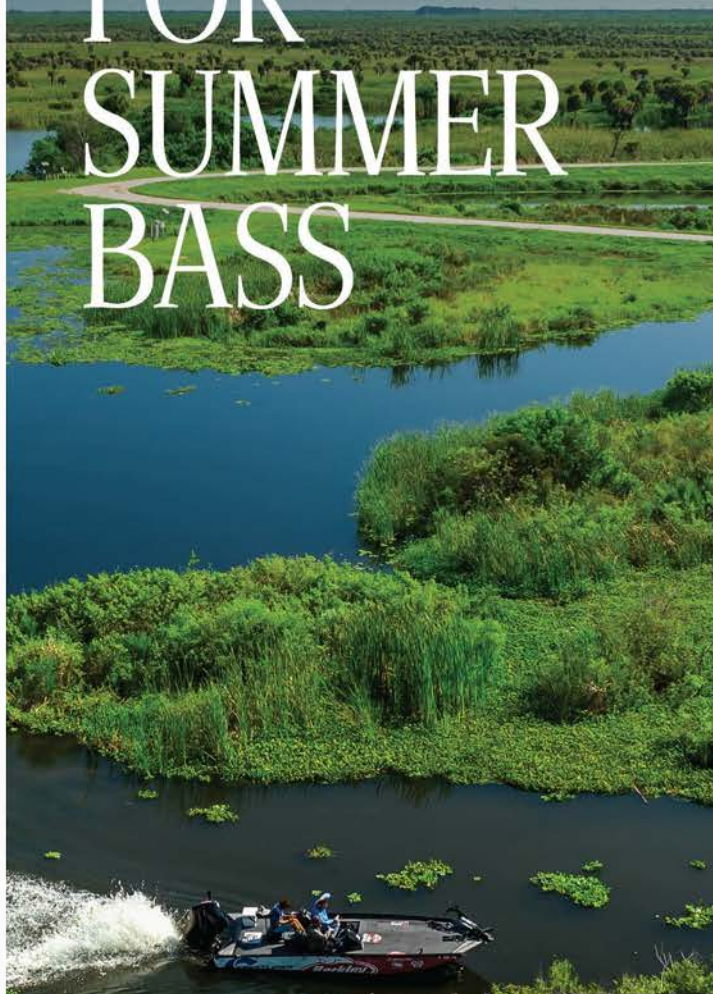


BUZZBAIT

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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.

GLIDING: NEAT, ON THE ROCKS, OR WITH A SPLASH OF WATER?

Like bourbon, glide bait selection is all about the details

Sometimes it's not about the capture; it's about the chase.

Take bourbon.

A decade or so ago, holding a glass of whiskey was like holding a sign that said "I'm old and boring" — a description I actually took pride in despite not being that old (though my friends might agree the boring part was fitting).

Now? Bourbon has made a resurgence, with distilleries popping up all around the country, doing all sorts of unique things (blending, aging in different barrels, exotic mash bills, etc.) to cre-

ate flavors that suit a wider range of people. As a whiskey enthusiast, this has been both a blessing and a curse.

Now, there are so many solid whiskeys out there I can go to most any place and find one worth drinking. Problem is, I have my favorites, and not only have those become FAR more expensive, they've become harder to find. I used to be able to find a bottle of Blanton's almost anywhere. Now, it's "rare," and you have to know someone who keeps it hidden in the back or sell an organ to afford buying one online.



Swimbaits pictured: (front to back)
River2Sea S-Waver 120 — Baby Bass
G-Ratt Pistol Pete — John Pearl Hitch
SPRO KGB Chad Shad — West Gill
Storm Arashi Glide — Rainbow Trout

PHOTO BY BRANDON HOWMAN

Can I drink other whiskeys that still taste quite delicious? Yes. But I like my favorites, and the hunt to try and stock my shelves with rare whiskeys is part of the fun.

Glide bait enthusiasts have found themselves in a similar situation.

THE GLIDE BAIT BOOM IS REAL

A decade ago, tossing a big glide bait around meant you were either from California, a delusional person or both. But with the rise of forward-facing sonar, glide baits are suddenly must-haves. Like the whiskey industry, seemingly every bait manufacturer has responded by creating new, quality options.

The River2Sea S-Waver may be the first “mainstream” glide bait, as it has long been one of the top mass-produced glides on the market, with the Storm Arashi Glide being another. Otherwise, up until recently, you had to try and get your hands on ones from Japanese companies like Roman Made, Gan Craft and Deps.

Now, the SPRO KGB Chad Shad, Scottsboro Tackle Soegecki, G-Ratt Sneaky Pete, Clutch Swimbait Co. OG Glide Baits and many others have all popped up and are widely available. And the thing is, they’re all really good.

Yet, like bourbon, we all have our favorites that we hunt — and when it comes to bass fishing, there can be a tangible advantage to throwing a bait no one else has. There’s still under-the-radar basement glides about which the secret has yet to be let out (nor will I spill it), but in terms of better-known baits, the original resin KGB Chad Shad is like finding a Pappy Van Winkle for you bourbon guys.

Again, so many of these glides are now quality baits, and it’s a matter of finding ones you like for the price you want to pay.

IT’S ALL IN THE DETAILS

There’s a reason people go nuts for a bottle of Pappy or an original Chad Shad, and it’s in the details.

Glide baits are all about balance. The head has to have enough mass to create momentum, the tail enough drag to allow that momentum to swing and turn the head side to side. Different balances can then create different actions. Some glide baits have more of a lazy S movement, while others are more “choppy” (i.e.: can turn quickly and go more side-to-side).

The choppy ones tend to be more coveted, especially when used with forward-facing sonar, as anglers can impart a lot of side-to-side action without actually moving the lure forward much, making it perfect to tempt a bass you’re watching on your screen. That’s why you may have heard of anglers modifying glide baits with lead tape or solder wrapped around the hooks. This is done to add even more weight, which can create a wider glide and even more responsiveness.

However, everything with a glide bait is give and take. Adding more weight means more action, yes, but it also means it’s going to sink a lot faster. A faster sink rate requires you to work the bait faster to keep it at a certain depth, which makes it harder to sit it in front of a bass for as long as possible.

That’s where some of the better glide baits, such as the original Chad Shad or the Clutch models, separate themselves. The resin used to make those baits is more buoyant than others, allowing them to add even more weight to the head without sacrificing buoyancy.

On the outside, you can’t tell the difference between those and any other glide baits, just like you can’t tell the difference looking at two different bottles of whiskey. But inside, there’s a difference.

If you need to see it for yourself, Clutch has a cool YouTube video showing how they produced two versions of their glide bait — one with their resin and another with the resin most companies use — and the difference it made in buoyancy.

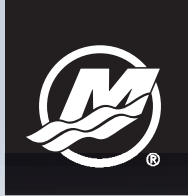
That key detail is going to make a difference in how the lure performs in the water compared to others. Now, is this difference worth \$150 or more for one lure? That’s ultimately for you to decide.

You might be the type who is fine sipping Knob Creek, Angel’s Envy or Four Roses. They’re all very solid options that are easy to get and reasonably priced. Or, you might want to take it up a notch and seek out an Eagle Rare or W. L. Weller. Or, you might covet an Elmer T Lee, Staggy or Pappy Van Winkle and spare no expense to own one.

The beautiful thing about the bourbon and glide bait booms is there’s now options for everyone. ■

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ROGER FITZPATRICK



HOME WATER:
LAKE OF THE OZARKS

SPECIALTY: Flipping/skipping boat docks
WINS: 11
TOP 10s: 62
CAREER WINNINGS: \$392,538
BFL AOYS: 3
ALL-AMERICAN APPEARANCES: 9

LESSONS FROM LOCAL LEGENDS:

HOW TO DOMINATE YOUR HOME WATER

Five of MLF's best offer tips to help you become the king of your home pond

By Mitchell Forde

R

oger Fitzpatrick didn't need to remind Dennis Berhorst of the score. They both know that, as Berhorst said, "he's one up on me."

Entering the 2024 season, Berhorst and Fitzpatrick had both had racked up 12 wins, 61 Top 10s and eight trips to the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American during their illustrious careers. The two Missouri hammers are brothers-in-law, team tournament partners and close friends – but that doesn't mean they aren't competitors, too, especially on their home waters of Lake of the Ozarks.

So, when Fitzpatrick won the lake's first BFL event of the year on March 30, Berhorst knew right away that he'd need to catch up.

DENNIS BERHORST



HOME WATER:
LAKE OF THE OZARKS

SPECIALTY: Shallow power fishing
WINS: 10
TOP 10s: 61
CAREER WINNINGS: \$399,807
BFL AOYS: 2
ALL-AMERICAN APPEARANCES: 8

MIKE BRUEGGEN



HOME WATER:
UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER

SPECIALTY: Shallow backwaters
WINS: 10
TOP 10s: 63
CAREER WINNINGS: \$306,817
BFL AOYS: 6
ALL-AMERICAN APPEARANCES: 9

"We travel together, we stay together, we share our information, and he's helped me through some tournaments, and I've helped him through some tournaments," Berhorst said of Fitzpatrick. "But (when) we've got a BFL here at home, he won't tell me anything then, and I won't tell him anything, because we're on our home lake."

Regardless of who winds up ahead in their amicable battle for Ozark supremacy, both Berhorst and Fitzpatrick clearly rank among the most accomplished anglers in the country at any level. They're part of a small group of MLF pros who have amassed at least five wins and 50 Top 10s at the BFL and Toyota Series levels.

Other such local legends include Mike Brueggen, who has racked up 10 wins and six Angler of the Year titles in the BFL Great Lakes Division (which primarily competes on the Upper Mississippi River); Kip Carter, who's also amassed six BFL AOYs in the waters around his central Georgia home; and Scott Dobson, who has proven himself as one of the

best smallmouth anglers on the Great Lakes and connected waterways. He's compiled eight wins and 68 Top 10s with success at every level, from AOYs in the BFL Michigan Division and the Toyota Series Northern Division to a third-place finish on Lake Saint Clair in his lone Bass Pro Tour event.

While competing on the national stage represents the dream for just about every angler (including most of these five), the harsh truth is that not many will reach those heights,

and even fewer will be able to sustain a touring career. But these five anglers, each of whom has cleared \$300,000 in winnings from MLF competition alone, prove that there's plenty of money and hardware to be won at local levels, especially if you follow their advice for how to become the king of your home pond.

LESSON NO. 1: TIME ON THE WATER TRUMPS ALL

Berhorst grew up fishing, but primarily for food. That changed during his teenage years, when a friend asked him to hop in the boat for a tournament on the Osage River below Lake of the Ozarks. He caught the biggest bass of the event, earning a cash prize that, while modest, piqued his interest.

"I got paid for catching a fish," Berhorst said. "I thought, well, hell, I can do this. So I did."

Each of the other four anglers told similar stories about their introduction to the tournament game. None grew up fishing competitively, learning secret spots or strategies from family members.

So, how did they separate themselves from the competition in their respective bass-crazed regions? There's no mistaking the common denominator to their success: time on the water.

"Yeah, you want to read your magazines, watch YouTube, whatever, gather as much information as you

CARTER



HOME WATER:
LAKE SINCLAIR

SPECIALTY: Covering water with reaction baits
WINS: 6
TOP 10s: 58
CAREER WINNINGS: \$306,958
BFL AOYS: 6
ALL-AMERICAN APPEARANCES: 7

SCOTT DOBSON



HOME WATER:
LAKE SAINT CLAIR/DETROIT RIVER

SPECIALTY: Fishing fast for smallmouth
WINS: 8
TOP 10s: 68
CAREER WINNINGS: \$765,483
BFL/TOYOTA SERIES AOYS: 5



PHOTO BY HUNTER RUD

Fishing skinny water on the Upper Mississippi River is Mike Brueggen's specialty.

can," Carter said. "But nothing beats time on the water. Nothing beats being in it."

Carter estimated that he averages a day or two per week on the water outside of tournament competition. Brueggen and Dobson have shorter fishing seasons, but they take full advantage. Brueggen said he spends about 30 hours per week fishing, while Dobson tries to get out four days per week, and that will increase this summer when he launches his guiding business on Lake Saint Clair.

Spending time on the water allows the anglers to find productive spots and keep up with bass movements. That's particularly key for Dobson as he chases nomadic smallmouth across vast expanses of water and for Brueggen on the constantly changing Mississippi River.

But it's about more than just marking waypoints. Amass enough experience during different weather patterns, water levels and times of year, and knowing how the bass will respond to the conditions becomes second nature — regardless of the fishery. Fitzpatrick and Berhorst both said their experience on Lake of the Ozarks has translated to success on new water. In fact, Berhorst won BFL Regionals on both Beaver Lake and Toledo Bend during his first visit to each.

"(My son) jokes around and says, you and Dennis, you get to a strange lake, put a finger up in the air and say, 'Okay, this is where they ought to be,'" Fitzpatrick said. "That's just the experience that we've had through the years and the amount of time on the water that we've had, and kind of knowing what the fish do in the spring or the fall. Time on the water, you can't put a dollar amount on that. It's one of the most important things."

LESSON NO. 2: TAKE PREPARATION SERIOUSLY

Fitzpatrick recently retired from his full-time job, so finding time to spend on the water isn't an issue anymore. While he spends some of that time fun fishing, particularly when the crappie are biting, most is devoted to practicing for upcoming tournaments. If an event isn't on one of the fisheries near his home, like the 2024 BFL All-American on Tennessee's Cherokee Lake, Fitzpatrick spends hours scouring maps, YouTube videos and any other resource he can find to get a feel for what to expect.

In short, he prepares for tournaments like his livelihood depends on it, even though it doesn't. For multi-day derbies like BFL Regionals and Toyota Series events, he likes to spend at least five days practicing on the tournament venue.

"We'll leave a week before the tournament and get there and practice Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday," Fitzpatrick said. "I've always done that. I do it for the Toyota Series and all the Regionals. If it's just a qualifying tournament, say, in the Ozark BFL, if I'm going to Truman (Lake), I'll take a day or two."

Serious dedication to practice represented another common refrain among the local stars. Brueggen said he's "always fishing where the next tournament is." If Berhorst isn't familiar with a fishery where he knows he'll be competing, he tries to take a few days to visit the lake before it goes off limits so that he can develop a sound strategy for official practice.

"I always like to make a trip or two, depending on how far it is, to kind of break down the lake a little early, just to see what area is working for what I'm doing," he said. "If I'm traveling from out of state, going to a lake I've not been to but maybe two or three times, I'll spend a week of practice there — pre-practice, before I go back for the tournament."

Taking tournament preparation seriously extends beyond on-the-water practice, too. Dobson is maniacal about making sure all his reels are freshly spooled, his leaders newly tied and his hooks sharpened prior to any event, be it one of the national tour events he's fished or a Michigan Division BFL.

"I'm kind of Bryan Thrift-ish in a way," he said.

Dobson is also intentional about making sure his body can perform at its peak for multiple long days on the water in a row amid the often-rough conditions on the Great Lakes. That's something the 51-year-old believes a lot of anglers who don't compete for a living overlook — until it's too late.

"I'm in the best shape I've ever been," Dobson said. "I'm going on 51 next week, and I still exercise. I eat healthy. You can't be out there overweight, unhealthy, no stamina, because these younger kids will eat you up."

LESSON NO. 3: EMBRACE YOUR STRENGTHS ...

Before a competition day begins, Dobson issues his co-angler a warning: Don't get too comfortable.

Dobson has cultivated a unique fishing style based on speed. Not only does he spend "90% of his time" fishing water 12 feet deep and shallower, once he drops the trolling motor on a spot, he uses a combination of forward-facing sonar and a few casts to judge whether or not "the mother lode" might be there. If not, it's back to the big motor and on to the next area, often within minutes.

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"My co-anglers, they almost go insane, because I might make 50 stops in an 8-hour tournament," Dobson said. "Up-down, up-down; run, run, run; boom, boom, boom. My theory is the more area you cover, the more places you go, the better chance you have of running into a population of fish that are a) big, and b) biting."

The theory makes sense, and the results speak for themselves. While his might be the most pronounced, other local stars have also developed distinct styles and strengths. In regions where tournament fishing is popular, where plenty of other anglers know the fisheries, doing something different or better than everyone else has given them an edge.

For Brueggen, it's fishing super shallow, "even compared to river people." Carter is at his best when he can cover water with a moving bait. Fitzpatrick is a master at dissecting boat docks – no surprise for someone who lives on Lake of the Ozarks, with its roughly 70,000 docks.

"No matter where we go, it's always my crutch," Fitzpatrick said. "People will say, on a lake I've never been to, 'you've got to do this, you've got to do this.' Well, if I try all those things and they're just very average or don't seem to be doing it, pull up on a boat dock, I'll get a bite."

Berhorst has honed a similar skillset and applied it beyond flipping docks. Growing up fishing alongside Ozark legends Guido and Dion Hibdon, he noticed their ability to place presentations in the furthest reaches of shallow cover. He's worked to make that part of his own arsenal, and it's won him a lot of money through the years.

"Dion told me one time, 'The reason dad was so good is because he puts the bait in places nobody else throws it,'" Berhorst said. "A lot of people think fishing a boat dock is throwing it down the sides of the boat docks and then go to the next one. I fish behind them, in them, under them, and just put the bait in places where a lot of people don't put it. That's a big key to fishing boat docks for me, and it's basically the same fishing a laydown."

LESSON NO. 4: BUT BE WILLING TO ADAPT WITH THE TIMES

For the first few years he fished tournaments, competing alongside his cousin in team events, Brueggen admitted he didn't fare well.

"I loved it so much I didn't care that I got my teeth kicked in for the first five years," he said.

In hindsight, he's glad he experienced those early struggles. He's adopted that hunger to prove he could hang with the best on the river into part of his identity, listing his refusal to get complacent as the key to his sustained dominance.

"It's probably just not being complacent about what you've done and ways you've fished and areas you've fished," Brueggen said. "Pretend you don't even belong there every time you go out."

Striking a balance between relying on the strategies and skillsets that produced their success in the first place and keeping up with the latest trends can be a challenge, especially as anglers get older. But Carter believes growth is imperative.

"You've got to adjust and learn different things, or you get your head buried," he said. "It forces you to (adapt). Whether you want to or not, if you (compete) enough, you're going to be forced to. And it's a good thing."

These days, as forward-facing sonar continues to dominate tournaments at every level and reveal new ways to catch bass (many of which fly in the face of conventional bass-fishing wisdom), adapting is more important, and more difficult, than ever.

Brueggen admits he's fortunate, calling the Upper Mississippi one of the last major tournament venues in the country where there's a true local advantage to be had — anglers can't just drop their trolling motors and learn the nuances of the fishery in a day or two. Still, he thinks many of those complaining about forward-facing sonar would sing the same tune about any form of change. In his mind, complaining instead of adjusting is a choice — and a death sentence.

"When I was 22, I was beating all the 50-year-olds, too, and I didn't have sonar," Brueggen said. "And then when I was 30, there was some 20-year-olds — one named Cade Laufenberg, who is really, really a good fisherman — and he was kicking everybody's ass. He didn't have forward-facing sonar. So, to some degree it's a young man's game because they stay more positive, not because of the electronics."

Each of the other four anglers agreed, to an extent. They've all seen forward-facing sonar drastically change how tournaments are won on their home waterways and put it on their own boats in an effort to keep up.

But Berhorst, Fitzpatrick and Carter all think the technology has diminished the importance of the years they've spent on the water, and that hasn't been an easy pill to swallow. They're still trying to resolve how much to lean on forward-facing sonar versus the techniques that got them this far.

"It's a great tool," Fitzpatrick said. "I am not even close to as good as the young kids who are coming up and using it. It's how they have grown up fishing, and a lot of the times I'm still using my instincts and stuff like that to try to fish. But what I'm learning a lot is I can use it the way that I like to fish — to power fish, even shallow. You can use that thing in really shallow water and still be effective."

"But, do I wish it never would have been here? Absolutely."

Of the five, Dobson has embraced forward-facing sonar the most. He has two Lowrance ActiveTarget transducers on his boat and is toying with adding a third. It didn't take him long to figure out that, contrary to what some believe, forward-facing mastery takes plenty of skill.

"I went out, and I'm like, oh my gosh, I have to get better at casting to these fish," he said. "You gotta hit 40 feet, 60 feet, 80 feet every single time. So, I spent a lot of time getting dialed into that. ... You still have to have time on the water and know where the bigger population of fish are."

Ultimately, he believes a time is fast approaching where, even at the local level, every angler who wants forward-facing sonar will have access to it and understand how to use it. At that point, it will be back to those who put in the most time on the water, take their preparation seriously and find an edge over the competition that represents the next generation of local legends.

"It's just like any other sport," Carter said. "The more you practice and the harder you work for it, the better you're going to be." ■



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A large bass fish is shown in shallow water, surrounded by reeds and bubbles. The fish is the central focus, with its head and upper body visible. The water is clear, and the reeds are green and yellow. Bubbles are scattered around the fish, particularly near its head. The overall scene is a natural, outdoor setting.

SMALL WATERS,

BIG OPPORTUNITIES

GOOD THINGS COME IN SMALL PACKAGES, AND THAT ESPECIALLY APPLIES TO BASS WATERS

By Mike Pehanich | PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN



RIVER2SEA LANE
CHANGER PROPBAIT
COLOR: CHUBBY

▪ **The thrill of topwater fishing** – “Ponds offer some of the best frog and topwater fishing.”

▪ **Taming lunkers** – Don’t discount the value of encounters with big carp or catfish. “Those fish may not be bass, but they hone skills on how to fight big fish.”

FAVORITE LURES

Chapman continues to fish and test lures on a 3/4-acre backyard pond today. Pond favorites include hollow-body frogs, wacky-rigged plastic worms and spinnerbaits. The Z-Man ChatterBait and Rebel Pop-R also get special mention.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

“SNEAKY, HIDEY SPOTS”

– CHRIS LANE

Small waters framed the childhood and shaped the future of two of the biggest names on the Bass Pro Tour. The Lane brothers, Chris and Bobby, grew up in America’s small-waters Mecca: Polk County, Florida, near the city of Lakeland.

“Growing up in Florida, we didn’t even have to sneak away,” Chris recalls. “We just told our mom we were going fishing – whether it was that small creek with an eddy where we caught bluegill and pound-and-a-half bass or wading where we shouldn’t in those big ponds with alligators. If we

had to put a jon boat in, we did. If we had to walk the banks, we did.”

Small waters dot the Florida map. Natural lakes, creeks, development ponds, park waters, draw pits, quarries – all those and more hold bass in abundance, and the Lanes fished as many of them as often as they could.

The best were waters off the beaten track.

“My son has come up with the best name for them,” says Chris. “He calls them ‘sneaky, hidey spots,’ and he is right. These are the places nobody else fishes. When you find them and have success, it is really rewarding.”

The Lanes had access to some of the most productive and unique small-water fisheries in America in the form of the phosphate pits of central Florida. Mining pits of various types are small-water staples throughout the country. Whether it be coal mining in the heartland, sand extraction in the Carolinas or rock quarries almost anywhere, water from springs, seeps, nearby streams or runoff fills the cavity remaining after earthen excavation and provides a home for bass.

Florida’s phosphate pits, which produce roughly 60 percent of the phosphorous in the U.S., are highly fertile – no surprise considering phosphorous is used principally in fertilizers. The fisheries age – that is, mature – rapidly.

Mining practices leave most phosphate pits deep and structurally unremarkable. Floating hyacinths are often the dominant form of vegetation. Working the edges of the hyacinths with topwater lures is always a “blast,” Chris notes.

“Phosphate bass are very aggressive,” he says. “They will eat anything! Birds, rats, frogs, snakes, mosquitoes... They are not (selective) like Tennessee River bass. The lakes have bluegill, and a lot of them have tilapia, a great source of protein. The fish are so

aggressive, and the lakes have so much food. You can throw everything at the bass.”

Canal waters are also abundant in Florida. Many look appealing, but not all are productive. Finding the best ones is mostly a matter of trial and error. Chris offers one guideline, however: “Those canals connected to bigger lakes tend to be best.”

Small-water experiences flood Chris’s recollections and underscore many of the best times shared by one of America’s best known fishing families. The most memorable?

“The biggest highlight is probably when my brother Bobby caught a 15-pounder.”

Talk about brotherly love!

LESSONS LEARNED

▪ **Access** – Small waters are numerous, diverse and often close to home.

▪ **Finding fish** – The challenge of fish location is limited. Much of the lake can be sized up with visual cues before ever making a cast.

▪ **Time spent fishing** – No need to make long runs in a bass boat. If you only have a few free hours, small lakes allow more time for fishing.



BASS PRO SHOPS XPS
CRAWDIGG CRAW
COLOR: SUMMER CRAW

FAVORITE LURES

“Find lures to fish each level of the water column,” Lane advises.

River2Sea Lane Changer – The Lanes love prop baits. Chris designed this namesake lure with soft plastic propellers.

Bass Pro Shops XPS Crawdigg Craw – Kicking claws act and attract. Says Chris: “It’s one of my favorites because you can fish it on the bottom and punch it in the grass.”

LONE STAR LESSONS — ALTON JONES, JR.

Bass anglers know Texas for its outsized reservoirs. But, for Alton Jones, Jr., it's the small waters that made the best memories.

"From the time I learned to cast, I was fishing small waters in east Texas, any water I could," says Jones, the 2023 Heavy Hitters champion.

He spent his "formative years" fishing stocked ponds on his buddies' farms or private lakes. Chief among the latter was the Westlakes Club, a hunting and fishing club near Mineola to which his grandparents had membership.

"My earliest fishing memories are from there," he says. "It's where my dad (fellow BPT pro Alton Jones) learned to fish as well, so I guess we've come full circle."

He characterizes those cherished waters as "swampy, flat lakes" filled with alligators and visible cover. They served as a chalk board for some of his most important lessons.

"Visible cover provides something you can see and read," he explains. "Docks, rocks, lily pads, cattails, stumps — bass treat those as pathways. You learn what they want to be around on a given day."

Fishing visible cover on compact waters shaped Jones' understanding of bass behavior.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Dissecting cover** — "Learning to pick apart cover methodically is the core of bass fishing."
- **Feel** — "We didn't have electronics on those waters. We had to visualize what was under the surface with just the feel transmitted through your rod."
- **Ambush position** — "You learned to predict where a bass would sit."
- **Triangulation** — Jones learned to locate underwater structure the old-fashioned way, lining up shoreline points to create trian-

YUM RIBBON TAIL COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN PURPLE



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



gular sets of lines to locate a specific object or casting position. "I learned to triangulate at a very young age. I could find a stump in the middle of a 100-acre lake in 10 or 15 minutes and catch a big bass."

"MY MOST RELIABLE BAIT BY FAR WAS A RUBBER WORM."

Jones echoes a familiar theme — that small waters are great places to hone skills, test new baits and gain confidence in new techniques. He recommends seeking out waters that take you out of your comfort zone.

"In Texas, we have a lot of small, deep, rocky lakes, too," he says. "It's important as an angler to use opportunities to fish different types of waters."

Capping volumes of memories was a fish caught on Jones' 14th birthday.

"I caught what seemed the fish of a lifetime," he recalls. "I got it on a Yum Ribbontail worm. I didn't have a livewell, but I found a stringer and tied the fish to the dock. I had this fear that the fish would get away as I ran to get my dad, who was in the shower. It was my first 10-pounder — 10 pounds, 1 ounce. It was a true lunger, and I have a replica of it. I've only caught a few bigger since."

FAVORITE LURES

ChatterBait — "I remember testing a ChatterBait when they first came out, working it around lily pads."

YUM Ribbontail — "I cut my teeth throwing a 7-inch YUM Ribbontail worm in green pumpkin."



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

IRRIGATION LAKE EXPEDITIONS — MARTY ROBINSON

Small waters tend to shine thanks to their simplicity. Among the "simple" reasons for their appeal is a practical one: They get less pressure than big waters — and often hold big fish. Marty Robinson can attest to that: A farm pond produced his biggest bass, a 10-pound, 12-ounce pond king.

"I caught it on a jig-and-pig — the old pork rind trailer," he says with fond recollection.

Small ponds and lakes have had lifelong influence on Robinson, who lives on Lyman Lake in South Carolina.



SMITHWICK DEVIL'S HORSE PROPBAIT
COLOR: BLACK BACK DARK GREEN SCALE

RAPALA ORIGINAL FLOATER 13 JERKBAIT
COLOR: SILVER

REBEL P71 POP-R TOPWATER POPPER
COLOR: BLUE CANDY

ORIGINAL GANGSTERS
Effective then and effective now, this trio of OG plugs has delighted anglers and hooked countless bass over the decades.

"My two boys have grown up fishing the lake," says Robinson, whose son Marshall has joined him on the Bass Pro Tour. "They would go out on it in a small boat every day."

But the 350-acre lake is sprawling water compared to the settings for Marty's own bass upbringing.

"When I was young, growing peaches was the major produce business in the area," recalls Robinson. "I would get a new rod or new bait and go to the 1- to 3-acre irrigation ponds for the orchards and catch bass."

Typically, these intimate waters were triangle-shaped, dug out of the region's red clay. An earthen dam formed a straight bank at the deepest portion of the reservoir. The side banks tapered to the shallow end, where the creek entered. Some ponds had rock in the basin, some had stumps. Most of the cover was shore-related – bank grass or overhanging trees or bushes.

"Most had really big fish!" he adds. A typical mix of pond species was bream, bass and catfish. Some hosted crappie as well. Small bass up to 1.5 pounds were plentiful, but most lakes also had "two or three giants, up to 8 or even 10 pounds."

LESSONS LEARNED

- "Getting a feel for it" - "When I started fishing ponds, I would get a bite and watch my line, see something moving off with it," says Robinson with a chuckle. "When I started fishing lakes, I couldn't watch my line like that because the boat was moving."

FAVORITE LURES

Like many pond prowlers, Robinson didn't carry a ton of tackle. He relied on a one-two punch.

"My most reliable bait by far was a rubber worm, a motor oil rubber

worm," he says. "I could catch them on worms when nothing else would work. Still can today."

Robinson's second choice was some kind of topwater lure – poppers, twitch baits, prop baits, you pick.



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

FARM POND CLASSICS – CASEY ASHLEY

Grandparents are special people ... especially those with farm pond connections.

"When I was young, I stayed with my grandparents while my parents worked," recalls Casey Ashley, the popular MLF pro whose career winnings have topped the \$2 million mark. "They were old timers, and they knew



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PHOTO BY BRANDON ROMAN

Z-Man ChatterBaits, in all their various sizes and styles, are bona fide weapons for small-water bass.

everybody, so I got to fish everybody's pond. I know I aggravated them, because I wanted to go every day."

These ponds were often simple, spring-fed waters with little vegetation.

"The only cover was what was left when they built the ponds," he recalls. "Stumps, trees and the bulrushes that grew along the edges."

The ponds were generous with bass. Good ones yielded 5- to 8-pounders. One of the more memorable ponds was built on a drainage ditch.

"It had contours," he says, recalling its mid-lake structure. "We caught them offshore on that one."

LESSONS LEARNED

▪ **Carryover to big waters** -

"Florida fishing is like farm-pond fishing."

▪ **Recognizing situations** - "When you fish a lot, you get attuned to how fish react when conditions change, like how bass would really bite after a rain or before a big storm. ... And you learn what works best at a given time."

▪ **Feeling the bite** - The quiet and isolation of pond fishing assists concentration and feel. "The best thing of all is getting to feel the bite," says Ashley.

▪ **The basics** - "Ponds are great places to learn the basics, to capture the beginnings of things you need to learn," he says. "When a bait is worked right, feeling the bite, knowing you got that fish to bite, ... that's what intrigued me about bass fishing."

FAVORITE LURES

"Farm ponds are where I fell in love with topwater," says Ashley. Classic baits ruled his childhood.

▪ **Original Rapala Floating Minnow** -

This revolutionary balsa bait has charmed bass and bass anglers since its arrival in the U.S. "I would not leave the house without it," says Casey.

▪ **Smithwick Devil's Horse** -

"The Devil's Horse was really good, especially when you had spawners," Ashley says of the tapered propeller bait.

"When you found a big one spawning shallow in a farm pond, there was no better bait than the Devil's Horse. It's still a big deal for me in Florida."

▪ **Rebel Pop-R** -

It's hard to talk pond fishing without referencing this legendary and versatile popper/chugger.

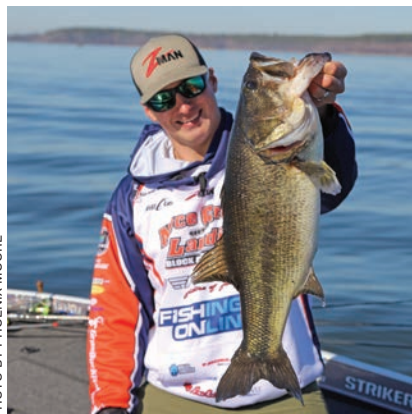


PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

NO WEEPING AT THE WILLOW TREE - GRAE BUCK

Ponds paved the way to Grae Buck's burgeoning pro career.

"Small waters got me hooked on fishing," says the Bass Pro Tour rookie with four Phoenix Bass Fishing League wins.

Buck's family moved into a Pennsylvania farmhouse when he was in fourth grade. The home's most beloved feature was a 1/3-acre pond.

"I tore those poor fish up every day," he says. "But they got my love of bass fishing growing."

Pond hopping with buddies followed. Most of the waters were seepage ponds, 8 feet at the deepest. Some had submerged grass. A few were rimmed with cattails, the edges of which were "sweet spots."

He learned early on the importance of the first cast to a prime, bass-holding spot.

"We had a willow tree growing on a pond," he remembers. "When we fished there, everyone wanted to make the first cast to the tree. You just knew you would catch a good one!"

LESSONS LEARNED

▪ **Importance of that first cast** -

The willow tree lesson was of paramount importance. "It still makes me think about where I will be making my first cast," says Buck.

▪ **Stealth** -

With little fishing pressure or human traffic, pond bass are often hyper-alert to footsteps and disturbance. That lesson has carried over to his tournament tactics. "I make a stealthy approach to an area," says Grae. "I stop the boat, work quietly, quickly."



BILL LEWIS RAT-L-TRAP
COLOR: SKY SHAD

FAVORITE LURES

▪ **ChatterBait** - "When it first came out, we tormented bass with that bait, and it usually got the big one."

▪ **Bill Lewis Rat-L-Trap** - "At ice out, we would work it super slow through the deepest part of the pond, just crawling it. The fish would be pure white." ■

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PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



BERKLEY SWAMP LORD

By Matt Williams
PHOTOS BY BRANDON ROWAN

In my book, nothing in bass fishing tops the thrill of getting hammered on a frog. Berkley's Swamp Lord hollow body is built to traverse the rough stuff, bring out the bully in bass and entice the big ones. Most important, as it proved when it stole the show at General Tire Heavy Hitters, it puts fish in the boat. Designed with heavy input from 2022 REDCREST champ Bobby Lane, the Swamp Lord is also available in a popping model, but I spent my time with the walking version.

First Impressions

I've checked out a small army of toads over the years, and I could tell right away this one had plenty going for it. To wit:

SOFT BODY: The body is made from durable plastic that collapses easily to

expose the business ends of the sticky-sharp double frog hook. The material is soft to the touch (you can actually put a finger on it through the packaging) and is molded with a wide, keel-shaped belly and strategically placed butt weight to promote good balance, easy walking and an aggressive, butt-down stance. The silicone strand legs can be trimmed to an angler's preferred length.

STOUT HOOK: The heavy-wire Berkley Fusion 19 frog hook is built to battle big ones. It's sized perfectly to conform with the frog's wide body, but you may need to tweak the points outward just a tad. If a bare finger catches when slid down the sides of frog, you're good.

WATER SEAL: Water intrusion can be a problem with some frogs because it

can hamper the action or even cause the bait to sink. Berkley addressed the issue with a shrink-tube collar that fits snug around the hook shank where it enters the body cavity.

In Action

It's always a pleasure to fish a brand-new bait that performs as advertised. The Swamp Lord didn't disappoint. I took it to one of my home ponds and caught a few fish around pads, grass and brush. Here's the skinny:

CASTABILITY: Paired with a St. Croix Slop-N-Frog rod and Berkley X5 braid, it cast like a dream. It also landed upright every time.

EASY TO WALK: Some frogs are much easier to walk than others. This is one that even a beginning angler can take to the dance and have some fun with.

Walking the frog is simply a matter of developing the proper cadence, fast or slow. Use short, soft twitches, and the Swamp Lord will almost dance in one spot with limited forward movement. That technique can be deadly around holes in pads and grass mats or adjacent to isolated wood.

Keeping the Water Out

So, how well does the shrink-tube collar resist water intrusion?

It seems to do a really good job on the retrieve but won't completely seal out water when a bass slams the frog and shakes things up beneath the surface.

The good news is the water can be pushed back through the shrink wrap by compressing the frog a few times. I found that squishing

HOOK SHANK:

The hook shank is wrapped with shrink-tubing to help prevent water intrusion where it enters the body cavity.



BODY STYLE:

The bait's wide body provides a large profile, moves a lot of water and is made from durable plastic that is super soft to the touch. The flat belly allows it to skip really well. Weighing 2/3 ounce, it casts a mile, runs true and traverses heavy cover like a 4x4.



DOUBLE FROG HOOK:

The frog is equipped with a heavy-duty Berkley Fusion 19 double frog hook that is sticky to the touch.



the body at the butt and belly simultaneously empties the body cavity pretty quick.

Final Thoughts

The Swamp Lord may not be the last hollow body you will ever need, but it is certainly worthy of a spot in your frog fishing arsenal. The soft body collapses nicely around a high-quality hook that seems to sit just about right straight out of the package, while the shrink-tubing around the shank does a good job of keeping water out of the body cavity. The frog casts well, is simple to walk, keeps fish buttoned, and the color selection is on the money.

Performance Advice

> Try different speeds and cadences. The best retrieve is always the one the fish want on a given day.

> Stay with the basics on color. Maverick (black) is good in low light, bone or honey shad in sunny conditions. When panfish are bedding, turn to chartreuse perch, MF bluegill or green pumpkin.

> A heavy-action rod with a fast tip helps with horsing fish out of heavy cover and maximizes casting distance. Preferred rod lengths vary, with 7-foot to 7-6 representing the most common range. A longer

rod might hamper a short angler from working the bait properly.

> Braided line is heavily preferred in froggin' arenas. Braid cuts vegetation, while fluorocarbon and mono tend to ball up. Line sizes ranging from 50- to 65-pound test work best in thick cover.

Applications

> Walk it over grass mats, through pads, around hay grass or other types of shallow vegetation.

> Skip it beneath docks or around overhanging branches.

> Work it around bream beds or in shad spawn situations.

HITS & MISSES

- + Easy to walk
- + Casts great
- + Durable
- + High quality hook
- + Flat belly helps with skipping
- + Resists water intrusion
- + Good price point
- + Solid color selection
- Hook may need tweaking out of the package

DETAILS

Colors: 12

Weight: 2/3 ounce

Length: 2.6 inches

Hook: Berkley Fusion 19

Action: Walking

MSRP: \$9.99

Contact: berkley-fishing.com ■

>> POPPING FROG STRENGTHS

The 2.4-inch Swamp Lord popping frog weighs in at 2/3 ounce and features a cupped nose that pops, gurgles and spits water when twitched. It's a good choice for open-water situations but also can be deadly when twitched and paused around grass clumps, bream beds, voids in pads and stumps/laydowns or skipped beneath docks and overhanging bushes.

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LEANING into **Li**THIUM

A technology revolution has changed the way we power bass boats

By Tyler Brinks



Lithium power has revolutionized the bass boat battery landscape in recent years, with longtime battery manufacturers like OPTIMA now offering the advantages of lithium to contemporary bass boats.

PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

The past several years in bass fishing have witnessed a literal “power shift,” as the lithium-battery revolution has drastically changed how anglers power their boats. Many brands now produce lithium batteries, and more and more anglers are reaping the benefits of a power option that provides longer battery life, quicker charging and clean energy throughout the day.

Bass Pro Tour anglers Zack Birge, Edwin Evers, Greg Vinson and Luke Clausen have all switched to lithium power for their tournament boats. They’ve each experienced some noticeable benefits of lithium as a power source and weighed in with information on their battery setups and how they keep the lithium-powered systems on their boats running to perfection.

EXTENDED POWER

One significant benefit of lithium power compared to traditional wet cell or flooded batteries – even over absorbed glass-mat (AGM) batteries – is the extended length of time that lithium power lasts on a charge. For a bass angler, that means crisper power to your electronics all day and longer use from your trolling motor. Lithium batteries also charge faster and have a much longer life cycle.

After seeing his power demands increase with more electronics on his boat, MillerTech pro Vinson switched to lithium batteries.

“As we all exponentially ramped up our demands for power for extra graphs, LiveScope systems and more powerful trolling motors, traditional AGM batteries weren’t cutting it anymore,” Vinson said. “That’s what got me to look into lithium, and I’ve been blown away by the power and how well they hold up.”

Vinson runs two 36-volt, 60 amp-hour MillerTech Marine Trolling batteries in parallel and two 12-volt, 135 amp-hour MillerTech Intelligent Lithium Iron Phosphate batteries rigged in parallel. He said it’s nearly impossible to wear them down.

“I spent this offseason fishing for fun around the house without charging them just to test their limits,” he said. “I went multiple days without charging them and never got below 50 percent before I finally hooked them up to a charger.”

Clausen runs a RELiON RB100-HP — a 12-volt, 100 amp-hour battery — for his cranking needs, as well as three RB100 12-volt, 100 amp-hour batteries for his trolling motor. He noticed immediate results in his power when he switched after two events during the 2023 Bass Pro Tour season.

“My batteries weren’t in when the season started and I switched after the first two, but I immediately noticed my trolling motor running stronger all day and didn’t see diminished power late in the day like I used to,” Clausen said. “One unique benefit of the cranking battery I run is the three individual terminals on each side to isolate your power source for your electronics. That makes a huge difference in the clarity on your screen, and the power keeps them from dimming at the end of the day, which will happen with a large draw on traditional batteries.”

This is Evers’ first year running lithium batteries, as his battery sponsor, OPTIMA, just got into the lithium game this year with its OPTIMA ORANGETOP Group 31 Lithium lineup. Evers has been impressed by the performance of his three ORANGETOP Q31-DC150 12-volt, 150 amp-hour batteries.

“The first thing I noticed when I made the switch was that my trolling motor was a lot faster and lasted all day long, and that my electronics became clearer,” he said. “OPTIMA took a long time getting into the field with lithium batteries. I think they were sitting back and learning from the mistakes that others have made, because these batteries are flawless and have a solid design to take the abuse of running a boat in rough water. They took all that into account and are as powerful at the end of the day as when you start in the morning.”

Birge has been running lithium batteries for several years and has what he feels is the perfect setup: a Monster Marine 36-volt, 65 amp-hour battery for his trolling motor and a 12-volt, 170 amp-hour Monster Marine Beast 2.0 for his cranking battery.

“I tried to keep it simple and wanted the most powerful batteries they made,” he said. “Running one trolling motor battery also saves space. The cranking battery’s name says it all: It’s a powerful beast. I run three 16-inch Lowrance units with ActiveTarget on one battery. It’s been super reliable; I’ve never had an issue after running their batteries for five seasons.”

PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS



.....
Bass Pro Tour pros Greg Vinson and Zack Birge swear by the advantages of lithium batteries produced by MillerTech and Monster Marine, which offer extended power over AGM batteries.
.....

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



WEIGHT SAVINGS

A typical marine battery can weigh 80 pounds or more, and a comparably sized lithium-ion battery will weigh about a third of that, with many weighing less than 30 pounds. That's a massive weight savings for your boat when switching to a complete set of lithium batteries.

The one minor drawback is that bass boats are designed with that rear weight in mind. Many anglers add multiple graphs, beefy mounts and transducers to the front, which can also affect a boat's weight balance and performance.

Birge has a noted affinity for fast boats and says that a lighter battery compartment will slightly affect a boat's performance and top speed, but the benefits far outweigh any drawbacks.

"For me and my boat, I've noticed that the weight savings with lithium batteries don't change the top-end performance very much," he said. "My boat always runs a touch better with more weight in the back from full fuel tanks and livewells, so a lighter rear compartment may lose a mile per hour or so. It's well worth a little loss in speed for the added perks you get from lithium batteries."

In addition to liking to go fast, Birge also loves shallow-water fishing, and lithium batteries help there as well.

"Having less weight in the back allows you to draft shallower and get a quicker and shallower hole shot," he said. "You'll also notice a snappier mid-range as you accelerate to your top speed. The switch to lighter lithium batteries will also allow your boat to draft about two inches shallower because you took the weight of a full-grown man from the back."

"If you're like me and like to fish shallow and find yourself getting in a bind and getting stuck sometimes, losing a mile per hour of speed is well worth it to be able to get out of those places easier."

Clausen has also noticed a slight difference in boat performance but noted that there are many variables from boat to boat. Overall, he says the reduced weight helps his boat perform better.

"Everyone's setup is different, and you have to consider fuel tank placement, how much fuel is in the boat, your livewells and any extra gear you may be carrying," he said. "The main thing I noticed when reducing weight in the back

after switching to lithium batteries was a quicker hole shot. I also run my jack plate a bit lower and can use a prop that is one size bigger, which is slightly more fuel efficient and helps in rough water."

RIGGING REDUNDANCIES

Professional anglers' bass boats are their offices, and job requirement No. 1 is a full, dawn-to-dusk day of work. Because of this, all four anglers have their boats rigged specifically for their own needs, including their battery setups. Some also have different redundancies built in, just in case there's ever an issue with a battery going down. Thankfully, they haven't had to use these backup plans, but they're there just in case.

Vinson relies heavily on his Garmin LiveScope system to perform at the highest level. He has a dedicated battery for it, with a backup in place. In his boat's starboard front compartment, he has a MillerTech 12-volt, 55 amp-hour Sport Series battery that runs his LiveScope and nothing else.

"It's a small battery and very light; it weighs a little over 17 pounds. I have it in a little insulated tray in the compartment where I keep my life jackets, throw cushions and extra rain suit," Vinson said. "The whole idea was to run my LiveScope with the cleanest power possible, and I've seen very good results with my screen clarity. It runs my graph and black box and that's it. I also have a supplemental power cord that runs from the main battery as a backup."

Birge is running just two batteries but has a spare of each rigged next to them in case of emergency. He can quickly change over the leads if there's an issue, but he's never had to in thousands of hours of fishing with lithium power. Instead of three 12-volt batteries for his trolling motor, he has one single Monster Marine 36-volt, 65 amp-hour battery plus a spare of the same model.

"That 36-volt battery is the same size as a regular Group 31 AGM battery, and even with two of those in there, you still save the space of one full battery," he said. "I decided to go with a 36-volt system because no matter the battery, when you have three 12-volt batteries, the system is only as good as the weakest battery. If one goes down, you are down to 24 volts, and your trolling motor will barely run or won't run at all. But I can't kill that 36-volt battery in a day."



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

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Evers also has two batteries for his cranking setup, and after using them this year, he believes one would have sufficed.

"I have them hooked in parallel, and it's like one big battery," he said. "Truthfully, I could have gotten away with just one but wanted an extra because this was my first experience running lithium batteries. One is strong enough for a cranking battery to power everything all day."

SMART BATTERIES AND CHARGING SYSTEMS

One unique aspect of lithium marine batteries is their ability to connect to Bluetooth. Several brands offer mobile apps to monitor the batteries. There are also several options for smart chargers that keep batteries nearly full at all times.

Evers always likes to know the charge level of his batteries and how quickly they're charging, and he can monitor them in several ways.

"I can look at the OPTIMA app or my Power-Pole CHARGE app, but all of my batteries are also connected with an NMEA 2000 connection," Evers said. "This allows all of the batteries to communicate so one never goes to sleep. The other cool thing is that I have them connected to my Lowrance units to check the battery status from my electronics."



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

OPTIMA pro Edwin Evers (above) and RELION pro Luke Clausen (left) rely on the "smart charging" aspect of lithium batteries coupled with charging systems.

Vinson also uses his smartphone to monitor his batteries through the MillerTech Lithium Battery monitoring app.

"I have all four batteries in the app labeled so I know which is which, and I can see where they're at any time of the day," he said.

Clausen can also check the status of his batteries with his charger, the Power-Pole CHARGE system. It charges on the go and provides an emergency jump start if needed.

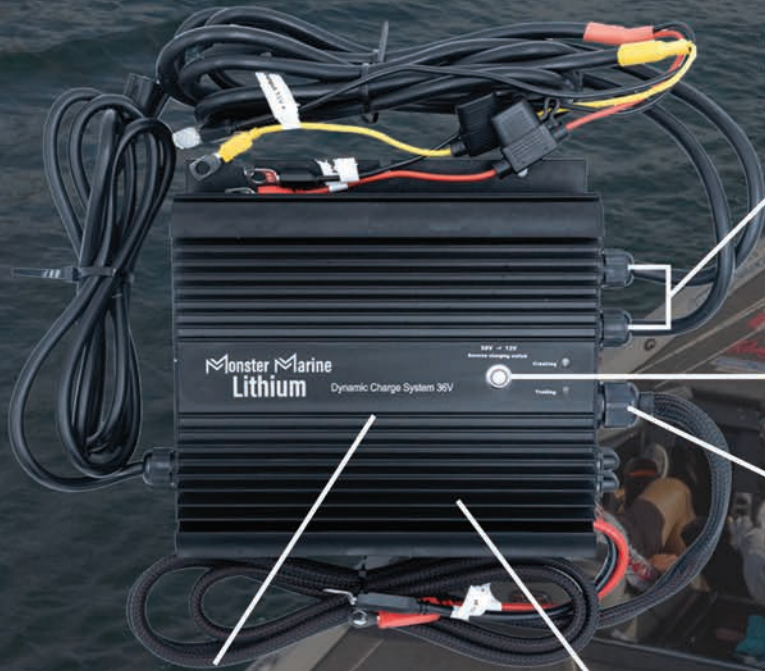
"It's a great system, and it works with any type of battery," Clausen said. "It's simple to set up. You enter the battery type, size and amp hours, and it will charge whatever configuration of batteries you have."

Birge, too, uses an app and relies on the Monster Marine Dynamic Charge System to keep his batteries full.

"It has an app that lets you see the percentage throughout the day and your charge status at night," he said. "It's also cool because it charges while you are running the boat and has an emergency jump start feature."

Legions of bass anglers are switching to lithium batteries. Lithium is a clean source of power that lasts all day, and its ability to withstand thousands of recharge cycles makes lithium batteries last much longer than others. These are just a few reasons why Birge, Clausen, Evers and Vinson are embracing the lithium revolution. ■

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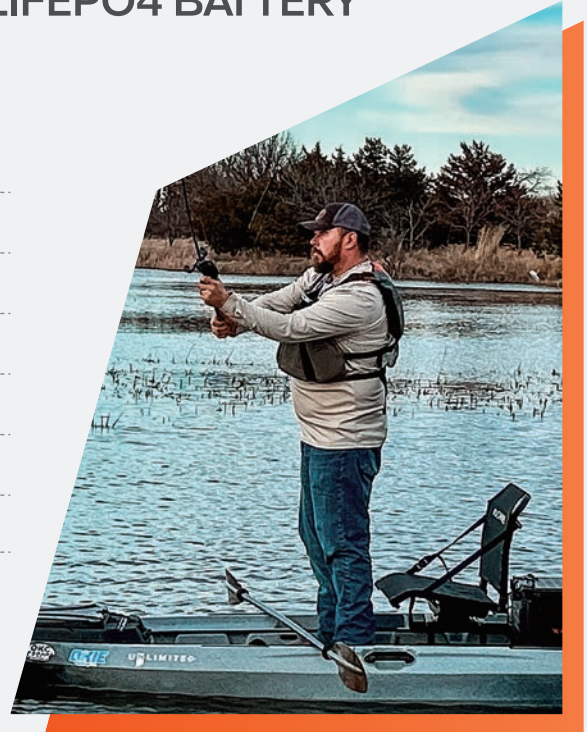
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”


— Tim, a kayak fishing tournament angler



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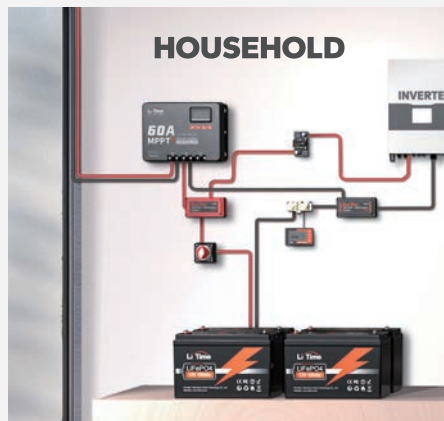
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THE LOWDOWN ON LITHIUM BATTERIES

By Mitchell Forde

If you consume much bass-fishing content (including the 'Leaning into Lithium' feature on page 52 of this issue), you've noticed a recent buzz about batteries. As tournament anglers continue to load their vessels with more screens, transducers, brakes and other gadgets, they need a way to power it all — and to do so without weighing down their boats.

A host of companies have rushed in to fill the power void with lithium iron phosphate batteries. The advantages of lithium over traditional, lead-acid batteries are inarguable. They charge faster, provide longer life and produce clearer electronic imaging. They also weigh about half as much, giving you an edge in those boat races from blast-off to your honey hole.

Less straightforward, however, is sifting through the numerous brands that have introduced lithium options in recent years and the different products they offer to determine which is the best battery to power your boat. Here's a rundown of some of the most popular lithium batteries trusted by top-level MLF pros and the benefits each can offer.

1

OPTIMA ORANGETOP Q31M-DC150 | Q31M-DP120

\$999.99 | \$1,199.99 | optimabatteries.com

Long one of the most well-recognized brands in the battery landscape, OPTIMA entered the marine lithium market in May when it released a pair of new ORANGETOP batteries. Sales director Daryl Brockman said the company's deliberate entry into the fray allowed it to learn from the pitfalls experienced by other lithium batteries and include some unique technological features. So far, the feedback from OPTIMA's stable of pros, including Bass Pro Tour angler Edwin Evers, has been excellent.

"I would say all of them were pretty cautious about it, a little bit concerned about reliability and some of the problems they've seen," Brockman said. "And our sponsored guys have had no issues whatsoever and just love them. It feels like it's been better than they've expected them to be."

The main component that Brockman believes separates OPTIMA Batteries from the competition is their battery management system. Essentially a computer system that monitors the battery and controls its power output, OPTIMA's system allows batteries to communicate with one another, ensuring that they charge and discharge evenly when used in series. Plus, not only are the ORANGETOP Group 31s Bluetooth compatible — allowing anglers to monitor charge from an app, customize alerts for when the charge reaches a certain level and get an estimate of how much run time they have left — their NMEA 2000 capability allows that same information to be displayed on a boat's graphs.

"Our battery management system is much more sophisticated, and because of that, we have a lot of unique features, both to protect the battery and to give it better ability to protect itself," Brockman explained. "It also enables some pretty differentiating communications capabilities."

As handy as those features are, don't mistake these batteries for prioritizing style over substance. With a deep-cycle battery offering 150 amp-hours — ideal for a long day of powering a trolling motor — and a dual-purpose battery that can crank your outboard and power large graphs at 120 amp-hours, both offer more energy storage capacity in a standard, Group 31 size than most batteries on the market. Brockman said the dual-purpose battery in particular offers more amp-hours than other 12V cranking batteries, allowing a single battery to power everything in your boat aside from the trolling motor.

"Your graphs, basically everything other than the trolling motors, is running off that 12V battery," he explained. "So, having that extra energy storage capacity for that 12V starting bank is real important, especially for those guys that are running several graphs and/or the bigger graphs, because they draw a lot of power."



2

MILLERTECH 12V 135AH SPORT SERIES | 36V 60AH MARINE TROLLING BATTERY

\$1,099 | \$1,300 | millertechenergy.com



Lester Miller, the owner and general manager of MillerTech, believes his company has become one of the top power providers among touring pros because of its warranty and commitment to customer support. Miller realizes that many anglers and other boat owners might not possess intimate knowledge of batteries and power systems, so his company has a policy not to let the phone ring more than five times when customers call.

"People pay \$3,000, \$4,000, \$5,000 to set up their boat with lithium batteries, and if there's a problem with the battery, they can't talk to a person immediately – you can imagine how frustrating that is," Miller said. "When you talk about technology or products that use advanced technology, that's all good and great, but when that technology fails

or when there's a glitch or a problem with it, usually the company that gives you the quickest, fastest, most reliable service is the company you're going to trust to buy those products from."

MillerTech also offers customers peace of mind with its 10-year, "no-questions-asked" warranty. Miller said MillerTech has never turned down a warranty claim.

MillerTech's products measure up to their service, too. Miller highlighted two lithium batteries that are most popular with bass anglers. All 24 of the touring pros sponsored by MillerTech use one or multiple 36V, 60 amp-hour batteries – a Size 31, deep-cycle battery – to power their trolling motors. The 12V, 135 amp-hour Sport Series battery is a popular dual-purpose option that can crank outboards up to 250 horsepower. Both have built-in Bluetooth capability so users can monitor battery levels from the MillerTech app.



3

MONSTER MARINE 36V, 73AH DEEP CYCLE MARINE BATTERY

\$1,599 | monstermarinelithium.com



Monster Marine was one of the first companies to go all-in on harnessing lithium to power boats, and it has developed an extensive line of products in the years since. For an angler looking to replace a standard, Group 31 lead acid trolling motor battery with a lithium option, Monster Marine Vice President Gary Green recommends "the Titan," a 36V, 73 amp-hour deep cycle battery.

"This will fit right in without having to maneuver or change out trays or anything of that nature," Green said. "You can just pull the lead acid out, put this one back in and strap it down and go."

Like all Monster Marine products, the Titan is built with marine-grade components and features a battery management system that allows it to withstand a higher amp draw than its rating without tripping – a common issue in lithium trolling motor batteries.

Green recommends pairing Monster Marine's batteries to its dynamic charging system. The system serves as both an at-home charger (that can charge multiple batteries at the same time), an emergency jump-start and a reverse charger, meaning it can charge your trolling motor battery on the water while you're using the outboard or your cranking battery while you're on the trolling motor.



4

LiTIME 12V 100AH TM

\$539.99 | litime.com

Another deep cycle battery ideal for powering a trolling motor for a long day of fishing, LiTime's 12.8V, 100 amp-hour offering stands out for its value, especially if you're planning to purchase multiple batteries either to have a backup or rig them in series, which many pros do.

LiTime's products feature a battery management system that protects the battery from over-charging, over-discharging, overheating and short circuits. It also comes with layers of protection against moisture, dust, salt spray and shock resistance, so there's no concern about it holding up in rough waters. One thing to keep in mind is the battery doesn't allow charging at temperatures below 32 degrees, which protects the battery but might not make it the ideal choice for those living in chillier climates.

5

RELION RB100-HP

\$999.95 | reliionbattery.com

When this cranking battery was introduced in early 2023, it became the first lithium option to meet all the specifications necessary to be approved for use with Mercury outboards. At 12.8V and 100 amp-hours, the RELiON RB100-HP is ideal for starting engines and powering graphs and other accessories throughout the day.

One unique feature is its six terminals. Compared to the two offered on most batteries, that allows users increased flexibility in how they connect it to their electronics and other devices. It also features an atmospheric vent that equalizes pressure while preventing contaminants from entering the battery. Made in the U.S., it comes with a 10-year warranty. ■



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TOURNAMENTS



WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

When Andrew Nordbye's wife, Codi, and twins Andi Mae and Zeal joined him on stage as he hoisted his first trophy as a pro at Tackle Warehouse Invationals Stop 3 on Kentucky Lake, the gravity of the moment might not quite have registered for the two five-month-olds. But for Andrew — who has worked his way through the Abu Garcia College Fishing and Toyota Series ranks to reach the Invationals, moving from Missouri to Alabama to chase his fishing dream — and Codi, their expressions said it all: how much work it took to reach this triumph and what it would mean for their young family. Congrats, Nordbye clan.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA









A CO-ANGLER'S GUIDE TO THRIVING IN THE FORWARD-FACING SONAR ERA

By Tyler Brinks

There's no denying that forward-facing sonar has revolutionized fishing and changed how anglers target bass. The technology has been a hot topic since it became mainstream and has impacted everything about the sport, from tackle used to what anglers know about bass behavior.

It's also changed fishing as a co-angler. While those fishing from the back of the boat rarely have access to a forward-facing transducer, when their boaters are beaming for bass that aren't relating to structure or cover, it can be difficult to know where to throw. However, several savvy backseaters are learning how to adapt and catch fish while their boater partners use forward-facing sonar.

Arkansas' Scott Parsons has five wins with Major League Fishing from the back of the boat, including two Toyota Series triumphs last year, and Illinois co-angler Alan Bernicky has four wins of his own. They've both been successful before the technology hit the scene and have continued their run in recent years with an approach that includes modifying bait selection and staying keenly aware of what's happening around them — two enormous keys to success for co-anglers in all situations.

CHANGING YOUR APPROACH

Forward-facing sonar has shifted how anglers position the boat and how they target bass, be it individual, suspended fish or those relating to cover. Parsons and Bernicky have adapted and honed specific approaches based on whether their boater partner is beaming in shallow or deep water.

"When they are scoping shallow water, it's no big deal, because you can still cast to targets and fish your strengths like normal," Parsons said. "One thing I'll do if my partner goes down the bank looking for fish is cast directly behind the boat. The bass often get spooked, then circle back and go right back to the bank. If you can make a very long cast, you can pick up a few more bites if you are willing to break off a few lures here and there."

Bernicky agrees that shallow fishing opens up more possibilities.

"You can still fish pretty much like you normally would," he said. "The one thing when they are in deeper water is that they are constantly moving. It can be tough sometimes, but that's the case anytime you are fishing from the back of someone's boat."



Alan Bernicky and Scott Parsons, both multi-time MLF winners out of the back of the boat, have continued to succeed amid the rise of forward-facing sonar thanks to a few key strategy shifts.



As for open-water situations, Parsons relies on pre-tournament research and sticks to proven baits for the body of water.

"I always try to do some research on a lake and know what pattern is going on before I get there," he said. "If it's an offshore bite for bass chasing bait, there's a good chance that both you and your partner can catch a limit from those places."

It's always a good idea to watch your boater partner when fishing as a co-angler. For one, it's a great way to learn, but it's also crucial for your own success. One of the cornerstones to Bernicky's approach through the years, it continues to serve him well today.

"When your boater is 'Scoping and chasing individual fish, you have to watch what he's doing so you can make the best casts," he said. "Otherwise, you'll make a long cast, and your boater is moving the opposite way, and you have to reel in quickly. If you pay attention, you can anticipate what he will do next and ensure you don't waste as many casts."

BAIT SELECTION

Generally, when fishing from the back deck, it's a good idea to show bass something different than the angler standing 15 feet away. However, Parsons breaks this rule when his boater partner fishes with forward-facing sonar in open water.

"Typically, I'm always trying to throw something different than my partner," he said. "But, if they are throwing a single swimbait in open water, I'm throwing it because it works so well for suspended fish. The other thing I'll throw, which is really good for these fish, is an Alabama rig. You'll also want a drop-shot rig and jerkbait ready to go."

Bernicky is also a fan of the single swimbait but urges his fellow co-anglers to use heavier jigheads than they usually would.

"Normally, I'd fish a lighter head, maybe something like a 1/4-ounce," he said. "But, when my boater is 'Scoping and moving around more, I want a heavier head to keep that bait down and in the strike zone. I'll use a tungsten head that's a 1/2 or 3/4 ounce on a small, 2.8-inch Keitech Swing Impact FAT swimbait to keep the bait down deeper."

He also likes an Alabama rig, primarily for the added attraction.

"When you are out in deep water in the middle of nowhere, you want something with a lot of flash and drawing power," he said. "I'll also upsize my heads to 1/2 ounce to get the rig down faster and keep it down there."

WORKING TOGETHER

The boater and co-angler pairing is determined via a random draw each day. Both Bernicky and Parsons agree that communication is key to making every day a good one regardless of the boater.

Bernicky takes the approach of doing whatever he can to help, no matter the situation.

"I always tell my boater in the morning to 'do your thing and get your five,' and that I'll be their net man and moral support," he said. "They have spent a lot of time and money on this event. The key is always not to get frustrated even if you are having a bad day, because a lot of times, these guys will do what they can to give you a shot to catch fish."

Parsons also asks if the boater can leave the console graph on for him. It's not required, but just asking can go a long way.

"Some boaters turn off the back graph to save battery or reduce interference on other graphs, but you can ask if they can leave just the mapping on for you," he said. "That's one thing that can help you understand where depths may change based on the contour lines. But if they don't leave it on, just always cast towards the bank and do everything you can to catch fish."

No matter how the day unfolds, Parsons reminds himself why he's there in the first place.

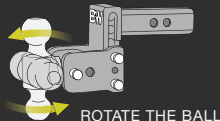
"I'm there to learn, and that's what being a co-angler is all about," he said. "It teaches you what to do and how to catch fish. My time as a co-angler has made me a much better angler overall." ■

BW

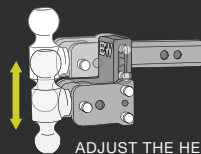
FROM OPEN ROAD TO OPEN WATER



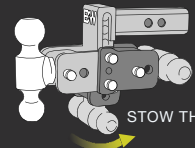
TOW & STOW.
ADJUSTABLE BALL MOUNT



ROTATE THE BALL



ADJUST THE HEIGHT



STOW THE HITCH

TOWING ADVENTURE



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

1. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION Toledo Bend

March 26-28

Long a force to be reckoned with in east Texas, Tater Reynolds put together a dominant, wire-to-wire victory on Toledo Bend. While most of the field fished around spawning areas and struggled to generate bites due to a persistent cold front, Reynolds targeted offshore staging spots for bass he believes were migrating to their summer haunts after spawning.

Relying on a pair of 6th Sense deep-diving crankbaits and a handful of dragging presentations, Reynolds sacked 28 pounds, 15 ounces on Day 1. He followed that up with 24-6, then added an exclamation point with 29-15 on Day 3, topping runner-up Cole Moore by 21-10. The win earned Reynolds \$32,539.

2. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS CENTRAL DIVISION Smith Lake

April 4-6

Rusty Cooper experienced the type of final day anglers dream about to cement his first professional win. Cooper, who spent all three days dissecting a pocket where largemouth were coming and going in waves, blasted 20 pounds, 14 ounces on Day 3. That brought his total to 50-10, more than 6 pounds clear of Jesse Wiggins.

Cooper sat second after Day 1 with 16-7 but failed to catch a limit on Day 2, weighing four largemouth for 13-5. Rather than switching gears and targeting Smith Lake's abundant spotted bass, he stuck with his largemouth game plan, wielding big baits on the final day - with big results. Including a \$35,000 Phoenix Boats bonus, he earned \$95,000 for the win.

3. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS PLAINS DIVISION Grand Lake

April 11-13

Returning to the site of his 2021 win in the College Fishing National Championship, Cole Breeden added his first professional victory to his expanding resume. The Lebanon, Missouri native married old school with new school, targeting largemouth that were staging or spawning around cover in flat pockets but using his forward-facing sonar to do so.

Pitching a Texas-rigged Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Creature Hawg or a Neko-rigged MaxScent Hit Worm, Breeden sacked 22-12 on Day 1. He backed it up with 20-5 on Day 2 to take the lead, then slammed the door shut with 19-14 on a windy Day 3 to top Jake Lawrence by 6-10. Breeden took home \$37,965 for the victory.

4. BASS PRO TOUR POWERSTOP BRAKES STAGE THREE PRESENTED BY MERCURY Dale Hollow Lake

April 9-14

Jacob Wheeler continued his Bass Pro Tour reign of terror on Dale Hollow. He notched his second win of 2024 and eighth consecutive BPT Top 10 in typical Wheeler fashion - by feeling out the fish during the early rounds and running away from the field on the final day.

Wheeler found Dale Hollow's notoriously nomadic smallmouth and largemouth grouped up offshore, chasing bait. Key to keeping up with them was Wheeler's ability to anticipate how the wind would position the shad. On the morning of the Championship Round, he found a mixed-species mega-school in a main-lake drain and used a jighead minnow to boat more than 40 pounds in the first hour and more



5.



6.



7.



8.

than 70 in the first period. His final total of 116-6 on 39 scorable bass bested second-place Michael Neal by 30-12.

5. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS STOP 3 PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS

Kentucky Lake

April 19-21

Kentucky Lake continued its resurgence by playing host to a small-mouth slugfest. Just about all of the contenders used forward-facing sonar to target smallmouth that were staging or spawning around isolated cover on the northern end of the fishery. Andrew Nordbye did it better than anyone else, weighing 63 pounds, 5 ounces, edging Dakota Ebare by 1-3.

Nordbye grabbed the Day 1 lead with 22-12 but slipped to second behind Ebare after Day 2. Using a jig-head minnow and a Ned rig, he

caught most of his keepers around stumps but made the clutch call to visit a barge tie on Day 3. That produced a 5-14 kicker, which boosted his final-day bag to 21-12 and secured the win. The victory earned Nordbye \$80,000 and a spot in REDCREST 2025 on Lake Guntersville, his home lake.

6. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS CENTRAL DIVISION

Lake Chickamauga

May 2-4

Banks Shaw introduced himself to the tournament fishing scene in historic fashion. The 20-year-old blew away the field for his first win as a pro, setting a new Toyota Series record with his 24-pound, 5-ounce margin of victory.

A college angler at Northern Alabama, Shaw leaned on his knowledge of Chickamauga to intercept bass moving from spawning areas to

summer holes along hard spots and shell beds. Finding fish in groups and using his forward-facing sonar to make precise presentations proved key. Using a jighead minnow and a 3/4-ounce jig, he improved each day, bagging 23-11 on Day 1, 26-13 on Day 2 and a 32-4 megabag on Day 3. The emphatic win earned him \$44,000.

7. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS WESTERN DIVISION

Lake Havasu

May 2-4

Lake Havasu City native Roy Hawk put on a masterclass in fishing Havasu during the postspawn and earned his first professional win on the fishery since 2007 as a result.

Hawk leaned on the trove of waypoints he's amassed on Havasu over the years, rotating between deep, offshore spots and an inside grass line. He primarily threw an

assortment of crankbaits, mixing in a Yamamoto Speed Senko as well. Hawk sat second after Day 1 with 18-12, then took the lead with 19-14 and sealed the win with 18-0, earning \$27,859 in the process.

8. GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES BUILDERS FIRSTSOURCE QUALIFIER PRESENTED BY TOYOTA

Lake O' The Pines, Lake Bob Sandlin, Martin Creek

March 30-May 4

Over the course of six days on three Texas lakes, a trio of teams earned spots in the Bass Pro Shops Team Series Championship, rounding out the field for the season-ending event. Team Star brite (Alton Jones, Brent Chapman and Dave Lefebvre) won the first semifinal match in decisive fashion with 43 scorable bass for 63-1. Then, team Ferguson edged team Knighten

9.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



10.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUOKA



11.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



12.

PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS



Industries in a thriller, with the trio of Stephen Browning, Anthony Gagliardi and Keith Poche winning by a 3-1 margin. Team Knighten would redeem itself in the Wild Card match, overwhelming team Builders FirstSource by more than 25 pounds. That assured Michael Neal, Takahiro Omori and Dean Rojas a spot in the championship field as well.

9. BASS PRO TOUR MILLERTECH STAGE FOUR PRESENTED BY REDCONI Lake Eufaula (OK)

April 30–May 5

Oklahoma’s volatile spring weather threw all sorts of curveballs at the BPT field during its first visit to Lake Eufaula: Thunderstorms and tornadoes during practice caused the lake level to spike 4 feet, with the muddy runoff resulting in changing water conditions each day.

That produced an old-school grinder, with most anglers fishing shallow around flooded cover. Oklahoma native Zack Birge ulti-

mately prevailed. After spending most of the tournament fishing down lake for spawning fish, Birge opted to start the Championship Round in a pocket around the corner from takeoff. Using a vibrating jig and a frog, he grabbed the top spot on SCORETRACKER® early and never relinquished it. His final tally of 17 scorable bass for 46 pounds, 10 ounces topped Drew Gill by nearly 16 pounds.

10. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVATIONALS STOP 4 PRESENTED BY E3 SPORTS APPAREL Lake Eufaula (AL)

May 10–12

Jake Lawrence took the ledge fishing skills honed during a lifetime on the Tennessee River south to Eufaula and used them to score his first national win. Lawrence sacked up 21 pounds even on Day 1, then backed it up with 22-6 to take the lead. When the bite got tougher for everyone on Day 3, his 16-4 total

proved just enough to edge Paul Marks Jr. by 11 ounces.

Lawrence rotated between a handful of offshore staples but said his key bait was a 5-inch Castaic Jerky J on a 3/4-ounce, long-bill Tennessee River Tremor Head. The win earned Lawrence \$115,000, a spot in REDCREST 2025 and the lead in the Fishing Clash Angler of the Year standings.

11. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION Lake Eufaula (OK)

May 16–18

With falling, muddy water making for a tough bite, local knowledge proved invaluable. There might not be anyone who knows Lake Eufaula better than Chris M. Jones, as he proved with his second MLP win on the fishery.

Jones ran to the south end of the lake and did what he does best, fishing flooded bushes. He bagged 17 pounds on Day 1 but stumbled with

12-1 on Day 2. On Day 3, he committed to a frog, which had gotten his biggest bites, and the decision paid off in the form of a 6-8 kicker. The brute anchored a 17-6 limit, which gave him the win by 2-11, earning him \$30,031.

12. GENERAL TIRE HEAVY HITTERS 2024 PRESENTED BY BASS PRO SHOPS

Kissimmee Chain
May 18–23

Jordan Lee used his Lake Gunterville frogging expertise to continue his dominance on the Kissimmee Chain, claiming his third BPT win on the fishery and second Heavy Hitters belt.

Taking advantage of a unique bite, Lee spent the entire event fishing matted hydrilla with a Berkley Swamp Lord. While the pattern, which produced 63 pounds, 4 ounces on Day 1, fizzled a bit each day, Lee mustered enough bites to stack 27-14 on SCORETRACKER® during a tough



Championship Round. That topped Keith Poche by 4-4 and earned Lee \$100,000. Meanwhile, Kevin VanDam finished his final event with a flourish, pocketing \$100,000 for catching the biggest bass of the Championship Round, a 7-12 lunker.



13. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE ALL-AMERICAN Cherokee Lake

May 29-31

A budding star at the local level for a few years, 23-year-old Paul Marks Jr. announced his arrival with a decisive victory at the 41st Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American

Presented by T-H Marine. Amid a brutal bite on Tennessee's Lake Cherokee, Marks totaled 38 pounds, 6 ounces across three days, enough to beat runner-up Matthew O'Connell by more than 4 pounds.

Marks grew up fishing local tournaments alongside his father on their home waters of Lake Lanier. He progressed to the Abu Garcia High School Fishing ranks — where he qualified for the national championship as a freshman and won an event on Lake Hartwell in 2019 — then the BFLs, where he won three times from 2021-2023.

At the grassroots championship, Marks used his electronics prowess to find a steady pattern on Cherokee when just about no one else could. During the first day of practice, he caught some sizable smallmouth on points that pointed into the current or wind. He then ran similar areas and used Lowrance SideScan to mark as many rocks as he could find around 15 feet deep.

"It was all sizes; some of them were the size of trucks, some of

them were the size of a basketball, they just had to be in the right spot," Marks told MajorLeagueFishing.com. "Legit spots that I thought I might actually fish, I probably marked 150."

Marks used finesse gear to fool the smallmouth holding around those rocks, leaning on a 3.8-inch Zoom Z-Swim in Tennessee shad on 1/4- or 3/8-ounce Greenfish Tackle Bad Little Shad jigheads. Even though the bite was tough, he didn't need to spot bass on his forward-facing sonar screen or contact the rocks with the swimbait to generate strikes. Instead, he steadily reeled the bait 2 to 3 feet above the rocks.

"The water isn't real clear, but the smallmouth can see or maybe feel it coming — they'll haul ass to get it from a long ways," Marks said. "I'd say 80% of the time, I didn't see them. I'd throw out there, and they'd come eat it."

Marks sat third after sacking 12-11 on Day 1, then vaulted to the lead when he added 13-6 on Day 2. He slammed the door with 12-5 on the

final day, making him the only angler to even eclipse 10 pounds each day.

The All-American has long served as a springboard for professional careers, with the list of past champions including Shaw Grigsby, Stephen Browning and Jacob Wheeler. Marks will now have a chance to follow in their footsteps. For the win, he took home \$120,000, including a \$20,000 Phoenix Boats bonus. He also earned berths to the Toyota Series Championship on Wheeler Lake in November and RED-CREST 2025 on Lake Gunterville.

Strike King co-angler winner Justin Parchman also earned a spot in the Toyota Series Championship in addition to his \$50,000 paycheck. The only angler to top 20 pounds from the back of the boat, Parchman took the lead with a strong Day 2 that saw him catch a limit weighing 10-3. While he landed just two keepers for 3-10 on Day 3, bringing his total to 21-1, it proved enough to edge Caleb Welch by 1-5. The Oklahoma native caught all but two of his fish on a Ned rig. ■

PROFILE: MARTIN VILLA

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA



When Virginia-based Bass Pro Tour rookie Martin Villa first experienced a bass tournament, the then-20-year-old jokingly told the other anglers that he'd be back the following week to beat them. Youthful bravado aside, little did Villa know that first-time exposure to competitive fishing was his first step toward becoming a pro on Major League Fishing's top circuit. Now 41, Villa is in the middle of a highly successful rookie season, making his wife, Jamie, and sons William (9 years old) and Austin (7) proud.

Q&A

By Matt Naber
PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

You had two Top-10 finishes in the first half of the 2024 Bass Pro Tour season, which is a success by almost any measure. How do you feel about the season so far?

I feel blessed to have climbed up and survived the season. It gives you some confidence to know you can compete at the highest level. But you still have to work on every aspect of your game, whether you think you do or not.

You're fishing in a new-to-you format on the Bass Pro Tour this season. How has your learning curve adapted to the "every-fish-counts" format?

I'm trying to evolve with the format. I'm not saying that winning is getting lucky, because it's not, but to hold onto six days of fish and catch the best on the final day is a problem I struggle with. The fine line of catching them just enough is the key to survival in the every-fish-counts format.

If there ever was [a learning experience] for me, it was [Stage Four on Lake Eufaula, Oklahoma]. That tournament lasted one day too long – it was a new thing for me, because I caught the biggest fish of the day (during Day 2 of qualifying) and then proceeded to shake off big fish. It felt hard to wrap my head around. The biggest thing is trying to catch them multiple ways and then finding out what works best on the

final day – the key is to make it to the final day and then close your eyes and swing for the fence.

There are people who compete well at the five-fish format but can't do this [format]. Bass fishing is the art of a female bass, and that's usually not fast and furious. I feel like there's 100% capable sticks out there who thump people on the five-fish format but will never compete in the every-fish format. I feel like the guys who are successful at this format are finding the 'lifeline of the lake'. It's been an eye-opener.

You're also an avid fly fisherman. Which came first, fly fishing or bass fishing?

I was a (fly-fishing) purist; there was a long period in my life when I would hold my nose up to conventional tackle. I started bass fishing when I was 20 years old.

You have a family fishing cabin in New Brunswick. What's the fishing like in New Brunswick?

It's fly fishing only for Atlantic salmon. It's a very visual thing. They swim thousands of miles to get to you. If you talk to anglers who fished all species and asked if they had only one to fish for, it would be the Atlantic salmon.

Does your fly fishing influence your approach to bass fishing?

Yes, 100%. Purism comes in many forms. There are bass anglers who only like to flip, or ones who only use artificial lures. Growing up fly fishing, I frowned on conventional tackle. Then I got into bass fishing, and when I came back to fly fishing, I was twice the fisherman I was [before]. I've learned so many things from one [method] that I incorporate into the other – it's looking at the same fish with a different lens, and you bring your own little spin on it.

Do trout and Atlantic salmon have any similarities to bass when it comes to catching them?

Trout are very predatory; the brown trout could compare to a bass. They will sometimes bite off more than they can chew – I've seen 3-foot snakes hanging out the mouth of a 22-inch brown trout. But the older they get, the wiser they get.

What's the story behind the fly rod in your bass boat?

You never know when there's a giant hatch with smallmouth on them. But I won't use (the fly rod) unless I think it's the most efficient way. One of the most sacrilegious things you can do as a fly fisherman is fishing for spawning fish, and my favorite way to catch a bass off a bed is with a fly rod. I'm not doing it unless it's efficient, so it's going to have to be a hatch.

How would you describe your perfect fly-fishing day? And how would you describe your perfect bass-fishing day?

The perfect fly-fishing day would be beautiful scenery and beautiful weather and a fish dancing on the surface. The perfect bass-fishing day would be to hold up a trophy. I've caught plenty of bass but never held up one of those trophies.

We have the best fishing in the country in Virginia, and the cobia will come to us on a spawn and are very accessible with fly rods. The show Spanish Fly had a huge impact on my life. There was a fly-fishing mentality of (anglers) keeping to themselves, but Spanish Fly brought everyone together. [Jose Wejbe's] favorite thing was to fish topwater for cobia, and that was the first I'd heard of cobia. They're fun to catch and just an awesome fish – very fast-growing, and they're great for sashimi.

You have some video on your YouTube channel of you catching and cooking fish tacos. Do you do this often?

Oh yeah, all the time. The most exciting fish to fish for are the ones you will eat that night. Brook trout are my favorite to eat. We call them Appalachian salmon, but you've got to be careful to not overharvest them and just pick out the males.

What's your go-to recipe for fish tacos?

I don't really have one; it's whatever floats the boat. My favorite would be chili-flavored breading with a grilled pineapple slice and cilantro and onions.

In addition to fishing, you're also a mason. How did you get into that and what do you like about it?

I like a lot less about it than I do fishing. I got into the trade because they said there would never be equipment made to do your job. I got into it because it was a job, and I stayed into it too long to leave it. I work to fish.

Out of all the things you build, what are you most proud of?

I'm more proud of a happy customer. When I build something, it lasts a lifetime. It's disappointing to see what building has come to. The culture of building to build the best just isn't there anymore. But for masons, we haven't changed. A chimney will still last you a lifetime.

How do you balance your masonry with your fishing career?

It's been difficult. Up until now, I leaned more to the fishing while it was going on. And once the season is over, I'll be a fulltime mason again. The ability to compete with the pros only comes with time on the water.

You seem like a really busy guy. When you're not working or fishing, what do you do for fun?

Go fishing with my sons and take the family fishing. Fishing, swimming, camping – that's what we love to do.

How did you go from fishing small, local, jon-boat tournaments to the big leagues?

I first saw a bass-fishing tournament when I was in my teens, and I asked what they were doing. I knew most of them there, and so the younger version of me said, 'I'll be back next week to beat all of you.' From there, it was local trolling-motor-only tournaments, then BFLs and on up the ladder. In 2018, I was on the verge of getting out of competitive bass fishing. The love for saltwater was deep inside of me, and I had to make a choice: either purchase a Ranger or a center console with a tower. That's when MLF came out, and I saw the new style of tournaments there. So, in 2020, I pulled the trigger on a Ranger and told my family I would give it four years, and if I couldn't

achieve the goals in four years, I would wash my hands of competitive bass fishing. Luckily, I made that choice, because here I am at the highest level.

My oldest son has shown interest in fishing tournaments, and as much as I want to start him at a young age and create a monster in the industry, I want him to enjoy his childhood with traditional fishing. Tournaments make you look at it in a different way, and I want him to grow up with how I had it – before tournament angling changes the way you look at traditional fishing. I see the excitement in my kids' eyes when they catch a hand-size bluegill and don't want to take that from them because I know competitive angling will do that. We want our children to be children for as long as possible, and that's true for fishing, too.

Do you feel like there was a turning point in your career? A moment where you realized you had what it takes to go pro?

Yes, on the James River in 2022 – I was below par in the points with two tournaments left, and I really wanted to qualify for the TITLE championship on the St. Lawrence. On Day 1, I had 12 pounds and was sitting in like the 80s. I was questioning my existence there, because the pros were on my home waters and they 'pro'd' me. I didn't sleep that night, and I knew the next day would be a defining day. I caught a 19-pound bag, and it built confidence in me and allowed me to climb in the points. That was the turning point.

Then I made a Top 10 and was inside the cut line for the championship

on Champlain. I finished 12th at that one, then I got a Top 10 on the St. Lawrence. So, three exceptional finishes in a row after a night where you feel you didn't belong changed my view on my abilities and whether or not you belong there.

What are your goals between now and the day you decide it's time to retire?

Hopefully I don't ever retire! Every day we get to cast a rod is a blessing from God, and I hope to walk the fine line of being a successful pro and a successful family man. We don't get to decide the day we retire in this industry. I just hope that I can make my family proud and my friends proud and find a little part of the industry that has my name on it. ■

“EVERY DAY WE GET TO CAST A ROD IS A BLESSING FROM GOD, AND I HOPE TO WALK THE FINE LINE OF BEING A SUCCESSFUL PRO AND A SUCCESSFUL FAMILY MAN.

The advertisement features a photograph of two anglers standing on the back of a boat, fishing on a calm lake. The angler on the left is wearing a black and red hoodie with the MLF logo on the back. The angler on the right is wearing a camouflage jacket with 'FISHING CLASH' written on the back. In the foreground, there is a QR code with the text 'PLAY NOW!' below it. At the bottom left, it says 'OFFICIAL SPONSOR OF' followed by the MLF logo. At the bottom right, it says 'ANGLER'S FAVORITE GAME. DOWNLOAD AND PLAY FOR FREE!'.



LEVESQUE EARNS ULTIMATE REDEMPTION WITH NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

NEW HAMPSHIRE BOATER TOOK HOME \$125,000 “LIVING YOUR DREAM” PRIZE PACKAGE AT SAM RAYBURN

For nearly a year leading up to The Bass Federation National Championship, John Levesque thought to himself, “what if?”

The New Hampshire native had led after each of the first two days of the 2023 National Championship on Lake of the Ozarks but caught just three keepers on the final day and fell to third place. While part of Levesque was proud of his showing in the grassroots championship, he couldn’t help but wonder what it would have been like to receive the “Living Your Dream” prize package offered to the tournament winner.

He doesn’t have to wonder anymore. Levesque not only requalified for the 2024 National Championship on Texas’ Sam Rayburn Reservoir, held March 27-29, he bested the other 51 boaters to claim the trophy that had eluded him a year prior. His three-day total of 45 pounds, 7 ounces edged Arkansas’ Kevin Brown by 1-3, earning Levesque the \$125,000 package he’d dreamed of winning. It included a \$20,000 check; a new Ranger Z520R with a 250-horsepower



John Levesque experienced redemption in winning the 2024 TBF National Championship.

Mercury outboard, Minn Kota trolling motor and other accessories; plus \$5,000 paid entry fees to the tournament circuit of his choice.

“I definitely felt a little empty going to bed every night for a year thinking, ‘Man, what if?’” Levesque said. “I never knew the implications of what really happens when you do win, but I always thought, ‘I could never afford a new boat, what if I won that boat? I wonder how much different things would be?’ So that definitely fueled me to try and make another run at it this year.

“I can’t believe it worked out the way it did. It’s absolutely amazing.”

OVERCOMING EARLY ADVERSITY

While Levesque’s redemption story had a fairy-tale ending, his journey back to the National Championship stage was anything but smooth. Having never fished Sam Rayburn before, he organized a weeklong trip to the famed reservoir with a friend before the lake went off limits.

Three days in, disaster struck when he lost the lower unit on his outboard.

“I had to scramble and actually find a marina down there to leave it with and pray that when I came back I’d have a boat ready to go,” Levesque said.

Once official practice opened, Levesque found the bass surprisingly uncooperative, never identifying a pattern or area where he could duplicate his bites. He caught one “good fish” during practice, so he decided to start Day 1 of competition on that spot. Throwing an Alabama rig, he was pleasantly surprised to boat a limit by 9:30 a.m. He culled his way up to a 16-2 total — not bad considering the tough conditions, but still nearly 4 pounds shy of the Eastern Division leader.

With the top angler from each of the seven divisions making the cut to fish Day 3, he wasn’t overly optimistic about his chances. But, not having found any other productive areas, he returned to the same spot for Day 2. He threw everything he could think of at the fish, from the A-rig and a glide bait to finesse offerings like a drop-shot and Ned rig, grinding out another 16-pound bag.

With the bite getting progressively tougher due to falling lake levels for dam repairs, that proved enough to not only vault Levesque to the top of the Eastern Division

standings but to the tournament lead. He described the area where he did his damage on the first two days as a classic staging point that attracted both prespawn and postspawn fish.

“It was a main-lake island that had a deep drop and then had a nice, long point nearby,” Levesque said. “So, I was able to just kind of cycle around within a less than 100-yard stretch. I was able to just kind of stay right in that area, go back and forth, and let the spot that maybe had a bush or something kind of reload, and then I would come back to it.”

A CLUTCH ADJUSTMENT

Championship Day brought a sense of déjà vu for Levesque. He returned to the spot that had carried him through two days, but a howling wind made it difficult to fish effectively. After about four hours, he only had dinks in his livewell. So, he made the difficult decision to abandon his honey hole and head to an area he’d never fished.

It didn’t take long for the move to pay off.

“I had to do something different,” Levesque said. “I actually went somewhere I had never been, and I started grass fishing, and I managed to catch a 4-pounder on a ChatterBait, which happened to be the fish that won it for me.”

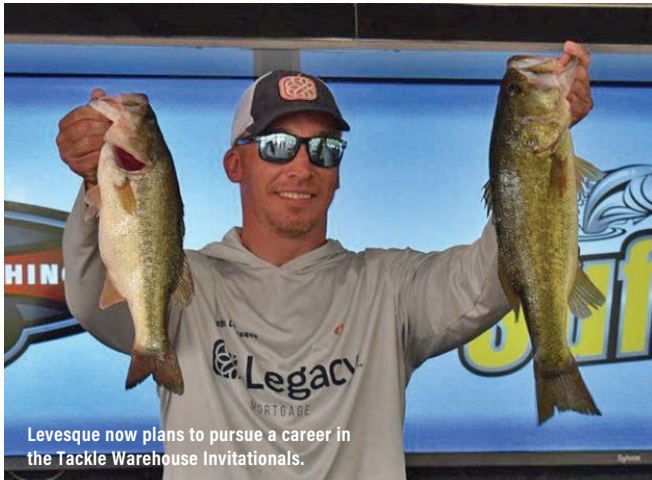
Levesque got an assist from the boater and co-angler from Maine, whom he roomed with during the event, in formulating his Plan B.

“Even though we were competing, we were so far from home, we realized that if we had any chance, we had to try to work together as long as we’re allowed to,” Levesque said. “Every day after practice, we really just shared with each other what’s working. We were both doing different things, but I was told, ‘Hey, this is a great area. This is where my friend was catching most of his fish.’



Levesque's final-day adjustment earned him the trophy and "Living Your Dream" prize package.





"I just kept that in the back of my mind, and on the final day, I was like, well, he's not in it, and I know where he was, so I'm going to go try to do what he was doing and maybe it will work for me. And thank God I had good networking. I'm very lucky to travel down with the Maine guys."

Even after making a few more culls to get his limit over 12 pounds, Levesque felt sure he'd blown the lead. It wasn't until the second-to-last angler weighed in that he allowed himself to believe he'd actually won.

"I was super bummed," he said. "I was like, oh my God, I dropped the ball again. But I figured it was really tough, and there was a chance. I might have been praying a lot. And then when they announced what he had for weight, I knew I had more. Honestly, I didn't know until just moments before I got on stage that this might be real."

Since receiving the "Living Your Dream" package he'd coveted for a year, Levesque's life has been a whirlwind. In addition to the aforementioned prizes, he also earned entry to the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American and Toyota Series Championship, plus an invitation to fish the 2025 Tackle Warehouse Invationals. Recognizing the once-in-a-lifetime chance to take his fishing career national, Levesque is currently working to initiate relationships with sponsors, increase his social media presence and find other means to pay for a year on tour. He's relishing the process.

"This has been an absolutely amazing experience," Levesque said. "I'm a grassroots guy getting a huge opportunity, and now I've got to start doing a little social media, and I've got to get involved with companies. I really fished on a local level mostly, so this is definitely a huge opportunity, and I couldn't be any more grateful."

WIRE TO WIRE CO-ANGLER WIN FOR PREAT

Chase Preat had never visited Sam Rayburn prior to the National Championship, but you'd never know it based on how quickly he figured out the lake. The Kentucky native led after all three days, sacking up 31-10 to win by more than 3 pounds and take home a "Living Your Dream" prize package of his own worth \$35,000.

Preat, who does most of his fishing on Lake Cumberland, said he prepared for the event by rigging up a few techniques that tend to work for him at home and a few others

that he'd heard produced success on Rayburn.

No surprise, one of those was a bladed jig. He discovered a unique method of presenting the springtime staple on Day 1 — by accident.

"We went up there and we found them on some stumps, and I accidentally cast it in, hit the stump, and then I let it fall," Preat explained. "And when I let it fall, that's when they were picking it up. I picked up on that pattern. I just kept following it, and it led me to catch some good fish."

Preat weighed in 15-14 on Day 1. He followed it up with 13-11 on Day 2, mostly using an Alabama rig to target fish suspended offshore.

"Day 2, we were out a little deeper," he said. "We were fishing with some A-rigs, taking them through schools of feeding shad. ... They were hitting it two at a time."

Fishing with Levesque on Day 3, Preat, too, found the bite tough. He managed one keeper on an Alabama rig in the morning, then added two more on a ChatterBait after they moved areas. His three fish weighed just 4-10, and Preat was worried someone would overtake him, but his sizable lead held up.

"I thought if I got at least two to three good fish, keeper fish, that I would be okay, because I had such a lead," Preat said. "But man, I was just nervous as can be."

Preat plans to use his winnings, which included a \$20,000 check and \$2,500 in paid entry fees, to launch his career as a boater by fishing a Toyota Series division. He wasted little time carrying his momentum to the boater side, winning a Kentucky TBF event on Cumberland in early April.

"It was a big step in my fishing career," Preat said of his National Championship triumph. "Just bringing home a win like that to little ol' Kentucky just felt good, because nobody here's ever got to fish anything big like that." ■



SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING STATE CHAMPIONS



Arkansas | Lake Dardanelle

▲ Alex Coyner, Lucas Mars and Lawson Lewis, Jackson Roumbanis (tie)
Youth Fishing Federation and Russellville Cyclones
13 pounds, 15 ounces



Arizona | Lake Roosevelt

▲ Trevor Frederickson, Nolan Smith
Chandler High School Wolves
18.66 pounds

California | California Delta

Brayden Baker, Collin Constantino
Vista Del Lago Fishing Club
27.51 pounds

Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey | Lake Anna

Jerry Hodge III, Luke Pappas
Junior Bass Legends
16 pounds, 3 ounces

Indiana | Patoka Lake

Brady Osborn, Ryan Seitz
Southeastern Bass Anglers
15 pounds, 6 ounces

Illinois | Lake Springfield

Lane Argo, Drake Pheiffer
D/L Bass Fishing
11.52 pounds

Iowa | Lake Okoboji

Cole Carstens, Nolan Ponstein
Panorama Panthers
20.60 pounds



Kansas | Melvern Lake

▲ Laiken Emanuel, Nicholas Herrman
Capital City High School
5 pounds, 10 ounces

Kentucky | Lake Cumberland

Jayce Clemons, Riley Dean
Owen County High School
17 pounds, 7 ounces

Montana | Noxon Reservoir

Aiden Currie, Silas Jones
Stillwater Christian School
11 pounds, 5 ounces

Nebraska | Merritt Reservoir

Jack Hughes, Reece Perry
North Platte High School
9.95 pounds



Nevada | Lake Mead

▲ Ivan Peterson, Landon Bellows
Boulder City Bass Club
13.48 pounds

North Carolina | Jordan Reservoir

Nolan Clark, Kieran Stephenson
Triangle Bass Club
15 pounds, 1 ounce



North Dakota | Nelson Lake

▲ Ryan Bullinger, Colton Dodds
Century High School Patriots
22.46 pounds

Oklahoma | Fort Gibson Lake

Parker Eubanks, Jace Hannon
Eagles Fishing
15 pounds, 8 ounces

Tennessee | Old Hickory Lake

Tristan Henry, Malachi Pearson
West Tennessee Student Bass Trail
14 pounds, 2 ounces



Texas | Sam Rayburn Reservoir

▲ Caden Williamson, Braden Norton
Vidor High School
23 pounds, 1 ounce

West Virginia | Sutton Lake

Micah Osborne, Luke Stewart
Clay County High School
11.19 pounds. ■

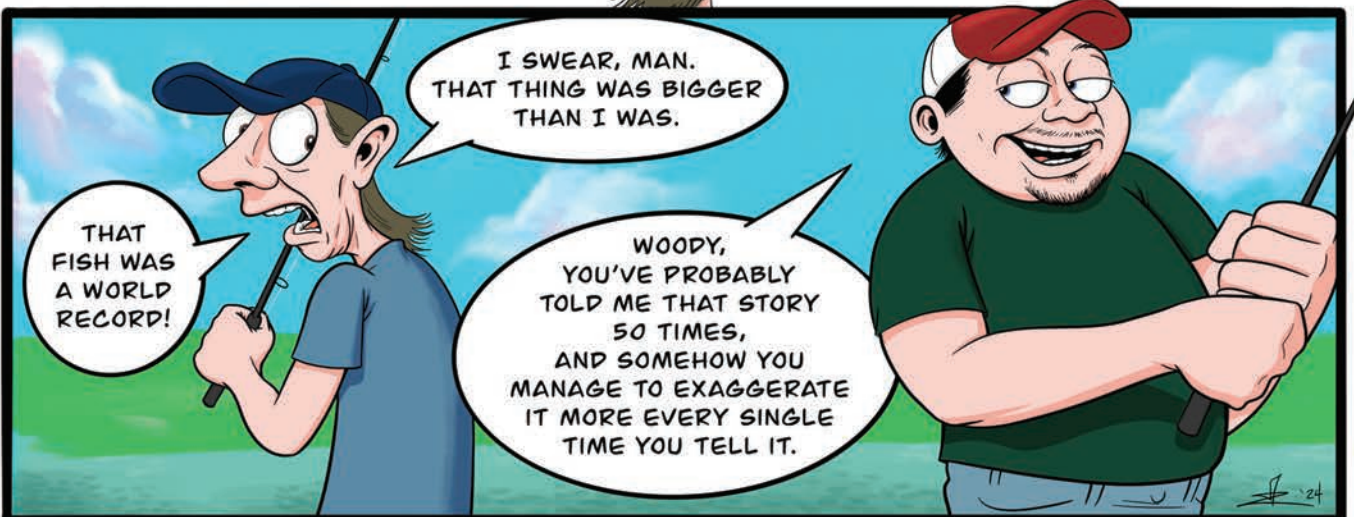
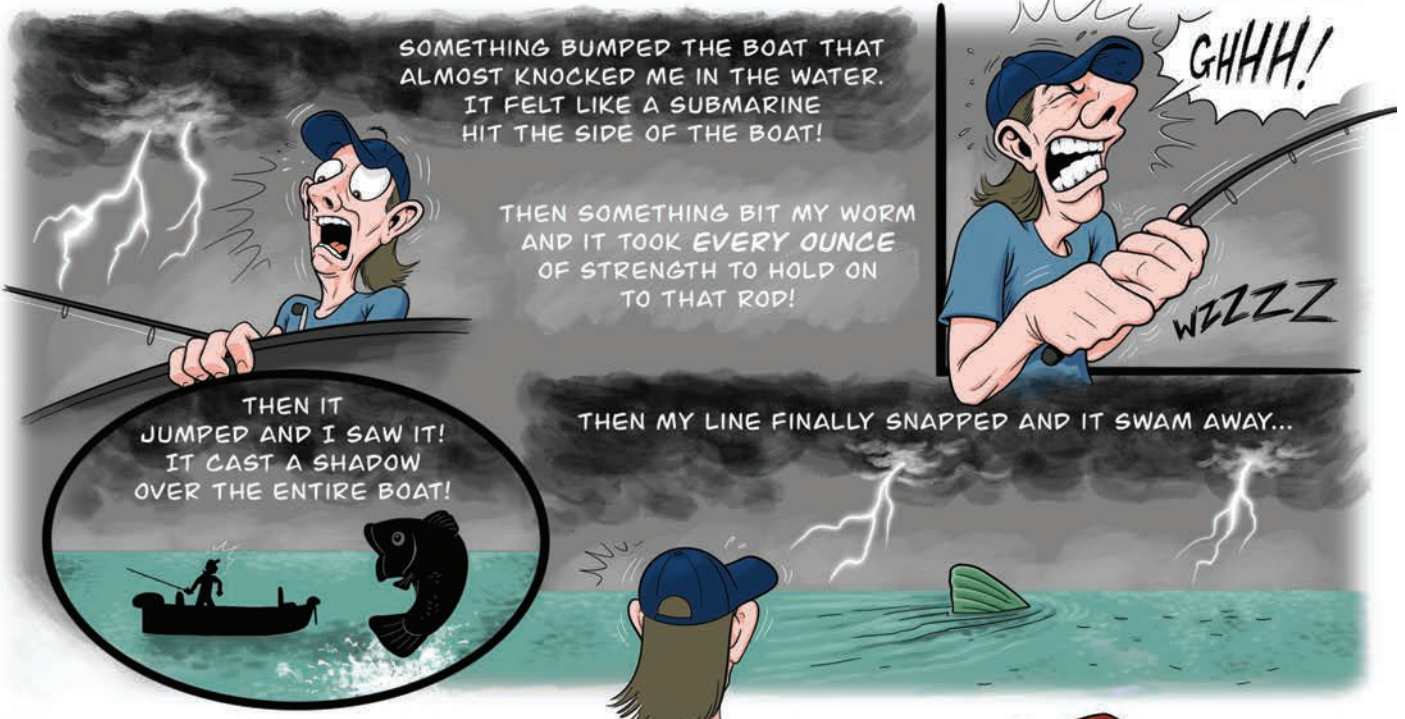
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