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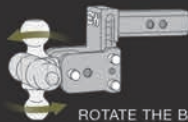
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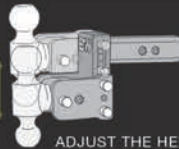
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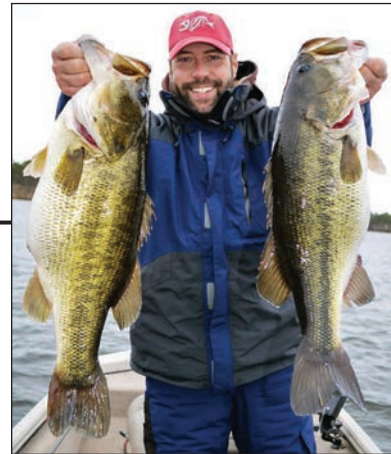
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TOWING ADVENTURE

A BRAVE NEW FORWARD-FACING WORLD AWAITS



I know, I know. ANOTHER pundit talking about forward-facing sonar. In my own defense, I've done a pretty good job of staying out of the verbal mosh pit that has swirled around the subject of live sonar for the past three years.

I'm going to jump into the pit for a while now, but I'll keep this brief. One statement, a few words of color, and then back to your regularly scheduled chit-chat about baits, tournaments and anglers.

First, the statement.

Forward-facing sonar is not the devil. Nor is it the greatest thing since the invention of the automobile. It's somewhere in between.

As much as this technology has triggered social media feeds and turned the bass tournament world upside down and backwards, FFS very simply is what it is: a powerful tool that can dramatically assist an angler in locating, patterning and catching bass. Granted, it's proven to be perhaps the most powerful tool to come along in 40 years (tournament results in the Bass Pro Tour, Tackle Warehouse Invationals, Bassmaster Elite Series, etc. over the past three seasons speak volumes about its efficacy), but in theory, it's still the hammer, wrench, knife and lasso that a carpenter, plumber, chef and cowboy use to do their jobs.

Right?

Well ... kinda, but not really.

The argument to be made here is that carpenters' hammers, cowboys' lassos and chefs' knives haven't changed significantly in centuries. Sure, better materials and craftsmanship have made for better tools, but when push comes to shove, the cowhide and horsehair lariats that my dad used as a buckaroo in the 1940s are pretty similar to the nylon and hemp ropes that Fred Whitfield used to win eight world titles and over \$3 million as a professional roper. The 9-inch chef's knife in your kitchen is virtually the same tool that Wolfgang Puck used to create the smoked-salmon pizza that kicked off his restaurant empire in the early 1980s.

Same tools for eons, but different results based on the skills and imagination of the users.

Live sonar, however, is a tool on a whole different level. If it's a hammer, it's Thor's Mjolnir. If it's a knife, it's Excalibur. If it's a rope, it's Wonder Woman's "lasso of truth."

While FFS is absolutely NOT the automatic fish catcher that anti-'Scopers make it out to be, its development has undeniably altered the course of tournament bass fishing, and at supersonic speed. A percentage of anglers have embraced the technology with gusto as their primary method of competing, and they've made hay with it. However, live sonar's ability to provide a detailed, virtually instantaneous view of the underwater environment – and the surge of minnow-pinging as the primary technique to win bass tournaments – presents a genuine problem on many fronts for tournament organizations.

Fans just don't want to watch it for hours on end, and a high enough percentage of anglers don't want to compete in FFS-dominated contests that it negatively affects tournament entries.

Major League Fishing CEO Boyd Duckett summed it up pretty succinctly when discussing MLF's new rules for forward-facing sonar, which take effect in 2025: "Forward-facing sonar is a powerful tool for catching fish; however, it's proving to make tournament fishing one-dimensional. Tournament fishing as a business becomes unsuccessful when it's one-dimensional."

I'm in favor of the rules under which the Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Invationals will operate next year re: forward-facing sonar (see Mitchell Forde's breakdown on page 14). All FFS is a non-sustainable business model. No live sonar seems like an overcompensation. Next year's Bass Pro Tour and Invationals rules, which allow forward-facing sonar but with some governors, seem like the smart compromise.

But what do you think? Drop me a note at joel.shangle@majorleaguefishing.com if you see it differently.

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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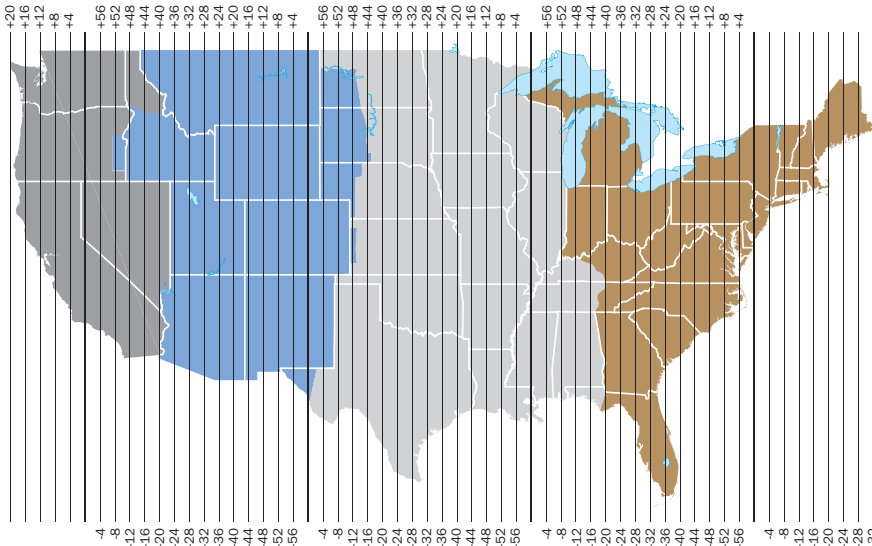
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NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2024

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



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

SOLUNAR TABLES® are designed to forecast the daily active feeding periods of fish. They are formulated from the position of the earth in relation to the sun and moon. The major periods last for approximately 2 to 3 1/2 hours, and the minor periods last for approximately 3/4 to 1 1/2 hours. To determine the start of major and minor times for your area, find the bold time-zone rule on the map. If you are located in the area left of the time-zone rule, add the number (in minutes) at the top to the corresponding time on the chart. If you are located in the area right of the time-zone rule, subtract the number (in minutes) at the bottom from the corresponding time on the chart. Add one hour to all times during daylight saving time.



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WHAT DO FISH CATCHES TELL US?

INFORMATION GATHERED DURING MLF EVENTS HELPS ASSESS AND MANAGE FISHERIES THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY



By Steven Bardin & Gary Klein

With Micheal Neal's August win on the St. Lawrence River, the Bass Pro Tour officially completed its sixth season. During this time, there have been 40 regular-season events visiting 15 states and 43 unique fisheries.

In the decade before the Bass Pro Tour, MLF's televised events had become a staple of the fishing industry. Pre-BPT, 33 events were filmed on more than 70 unique fisheries in 17 states. Additionally, General Tire Heavy Hitters, REDCREST and General Tire Team Series all feature the league's catch, weigh, immediate-release format. By my count, MLF has now hosted a total of 104 such events (not counting the four current General Tire Team Series events happening this fall).

MLF's fish-friendly format attracted many fans, myself included. As a fisheries biologist, I recognized how impactful the format could be for fish care and as a resource for fisheries managers. As I learned more about the format and the data being collected by league officials, I quickly realized MLF had an opportunity to be an industry leader in sharing data to make management more informed.

As we developed the MLF Fisheries Management Division, one of our first tasks was to port all the fish catches into a sharable format and set up a system with the management agencies of all 21 states MLF had visited. This information is shared only with state agencies, strictly as a conservation and management tool. I've written many times about the data collected by MLF officials and our BUBBA Smart Scales, and how the MLF FMD shares it with stage agency biologists. This time, I want to open the virtual filing cabinet and share how some of that data (and some really interesting stats) with you.

THE BASIC NUMBERS

Our data set now includes 117,844 individual fish catches. This data consists of basic information like the species, time, date and weight of each catch, plus habitat and depth range. In total, it includes 77,337 largemouth, 27,278 smallmouth, and 13,229 spotted/other. I say "spotted or other" because MLF has visited places like Lake Travis in Texas, where native Guadalupe bass are found, or Lake Norman in North Carolina, where invasive Alabama bass are caught. These fish comprise that spotted bass category.

Combined, the 117,844 fish weighed an astonishing 278,094 pounds.

SOME STANDOUTS: The bulk of these fish catches come from regular-season Bass Pro Tour events. These 40 events combine for 83,363 fish catches weighing 207,750 pounds.

A few events stand out for producing a tremendous amount of fish or weight.

- ❖ The most weight-all time in a BPT event was the 2021 Stage Five event at the St. Lawrence River in New York, with 11,677.63 pounds coming from 3,743 fish catches.

- ❖ The most fish all-time in a BPT event came during Stage Six of 2019 on Table Rock Lake in Missouri, with a total of 6,082 fish catches weighing a combined 9,822.31 lbs.
- ❖ Fun fact: Second all-time is also Table Rock Lake the following month with 5,982 fish weighing 9,595.31 lbs.

For the 2024 season, the Bass Pro Tour field completed seven events with 12,456 fish catches totaling 34,256.83 lbs. Minn Kota Stage Seven at the St Lawrence River was once again the leader with the most weight and fish catches. This event logged 2,887 fish (518 largemouth and 2,369 smallmouth) and combined for 8754.25 pounds (1,490.75 of largemouth and 7,263.5 of smallmouth).

I understand that the BPT has had different rules, minimum scorable weights and even numbers of anglers each season, so comparing one year to the next to determine the quality of a fishery likely isn't the best approach. Instead, I worked to develop a statistical analysis program that helps look at the data a bit deeper.

The simplest way to compare fisheries would be to look at the average weight of the fish themselves, although we must understand there is a big caveat for the variable scorable minimum used in a specific event. We can calculate the average weight by species, ignoring the minimum, by dividing the total combined weight by the number of fish.

Lake Fork has produced the highest per-fish average for largemouth in MLF Cup and BPT history, a sturdy 3.74 pounds in 2022.



- ❖ This tells us that, for largemouth bass, Stage Two in 2022 at Lake Fork had the highest average weight at 3.74 pounds. That average was 3.49 pounds two years prior at 2020 Stage Two on Fork.

New York's Cayuga Lake has been a big-smallmouth factory, kicking out the highest per-fish weight for smallies among MLF Cup, Bass Pro Tour and specialty events.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

❖ We use the same process for smallmouth to find that Stage Five on Cayuga Lake in 2023 had the highest average smallmouth weight at 4.49 lbs. This was also an improvement from Stage Six at Cayuga the year before, which had an average of 3.72 pounds.

On paper, this data would seem to show that both fisheries are improving, but once again, this doesn't take into account the minimum scorable weight.

To create an actual average considering the minimum scorable weight, we would need to standardize the weights for all events to only include fish above 2 pounds. The large-mouth bass records stay the same when we do this, as they were both 2-pound-minimum events.

The smallmouth bass record does slightly increase for 2023, which had a five-fish limit and used a minimum scorable weight of 1.25 pounds. In the original data, 772 smallmouth bass ranged from 1.25 to 7.31 lbs. We needed to remove the 13 smallmouth bass below 2 pounds. Once this was done, the new average smallmouth bass weight at Cayuga in 2023 was 4.54 pounds, showing a greater improvement than originally found.

THE TRUE MEASURE OF A FISHERY

The gold standard for using the MLF data to help make management decisions is to create a catch-per-unit effort (CPUE) equation. This equation considers the number of fish, the number of anglers and the number of hours of fishing time available. A manager will then know how many fish an angler should expect to catch for every hour on the water. This can be applied to recreational fishing, five-fish tournaments and future catch/weight/release events.

The MLF format allows for three 2 1/2-hour periods for a maximum of 7 1/2 hours of angling time per day. This season

on the BPT, 40 anglers competed on Days 1 through 4, giving us 300 angling hours per day. Day 5 had 20 anglers for 150 fishing hours, and Day 6 had 10 anglers for 75 hours. If we simply divide the number of fish caught during the competition day by these angling hours, we get an average number of fish caught per hour per angler.

For 2024, our highest CPUE number occurred during the Championship Round at Stage Three on Tennessee's legendary Dale Hollow Lake with 2.95 fish per angler per hour. The highest average for an entire event was at the St. Lawrence River, with an event-long average of 2.08 fish per angler per hour.

The 2019 Stage Six tournament on Table Rock Lake has the highest single-day CPUE at 5.09 and the highest event average at 4.00.

The fun part of using the CPUE system to assess the fisheries is I can compare a BPT event to a smaller field event and get a usable comparison. For example, the 2020 General Tire World Championship from Grand Rapids, Michigan, had anglers compete on Pokegama, Wabana, Turtle and Spider Lakes. Day 2 of that event saw eight anglers compete on Pokegama with a total catch of 404 fish. That's a CPUE of 6.73 fish per angler per hour, the highest single-day CPUE in MLF history.

The 117,844 fish catches shared with agencies will continue to grow each season – before the 10th anniversary of the BPT, we will likely cross the 200,000-fish threshold. Tracking population changes will take time and repetitive visits to fisheries, but in the meantime, MLF, our FMD data partners Mossy Oak, Berkely Labs and BUBBA, our anglers and officials should celebrate every event as a meaningful citizen-science effort that will benefit state biologists and fish management for years to come. ■

Tennessee's legendary Dale Hollow Lake lived up to its reputation during Bass Pro Tour Stage Three, producing not only an abundance of chunky fish, but also the highest catch-unit-per-effort day in more than 100 events.

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MLF TO IMPLEMENT NEW FORWARD-FACING SONAR RULES IN 2025

ALL TOURNAMENT CIRCUITS WILL HAVE INDIVIDUALLY TAILORED POLICIES GOVERNING THE USE OF LIVE SONAR

By Mitchell Forde

It's no secret that the proliferation of forward-facing sonar has revolutionized tournament bass fishing. More than any other advancement in recent memory, the technology has accelerated anglers' understanding of bass behavior and unlocked new ways to catch them — to the point that, if competitors aren't staring at sonar screens, they often haven't been able to keep pace.

As a result, forward-facing sonar has become a divisive subject among fishing fans and anglers. Major League Fishing addressed the issue with a series of policies that will take effect starting in 2025. These rules, which are tailored to each of the seven tournament circuits under the MLF umbrella, will continue to allow anglers to showcase the fish-catching power of forward-facing sonar while also highlighting versatility at the highest levels of the sport.

"We're not anti-forward-facing, we're not negative toward the creation of technology," said MLF President and CEO Boyd Duckett. "We are negative toward single-dimensional angling. So, we attempted to find a way to incorporate forward-facing in such a way that it becomes part of our sport but doesn't dominate our sport."

Across all levels of MLF competition, anglers will only be allowed two forward-facing or 360-degree sonar transducers on their boats. In addition, no graph screens may extend more than 25 inches from the seat or more than 18 inches from the floor of the front deck while an angler's boat is on plane. Those restrictions will standardize equipment and address some of the safety concerns that have emerged from anglers cramming more and more technology onto their boats.

As for how anglers are allowed to deploy forward-facing sonar, it will look a bit different at each level.

BASS PRO TOUR'S "ONE PERIOD RULE"

During Bass Pro Tour competition, pros will be allowed to utilize forward-facing/360-degree sonar during one of the three periods in each competition day. An icon on SCORE-TRACKER® will show *MLFNOW!* viewers which anglers are using the technology, who has already used it and who can still access it. Duckett believes that will not only encourage diversity among the competitors but make their strategies more compelling.

"Now you have, so to speak, a 'turbo-boost period' that should be very intriguing to the fans," Duckett said. "So, you take someone like Drew Gill, who is probably the best in the world at this technique, and it's going to be fun for all the fans — we want to see Drew's skillset. We want to see him dominate the field during this period, and then we also want to see how he survives those other two periods. Conversely, we want to see Mark Davis, who is one of the best natural anglers on the planet, continue to compete when technology is limited, and can those techniques that he has honed over the years carry him through a turbo-boost period."

Bass Pro Tour anglers will still be allowed to use forward-facing sonar during practice. Those rules apply to all seven regular-season events plus REDCREST. General Tire Heavy Hitters and the General Tire Team Series represent an exception. With all anglers competing in league-issued boats in those events, forward-facing sonar use will not be limited.

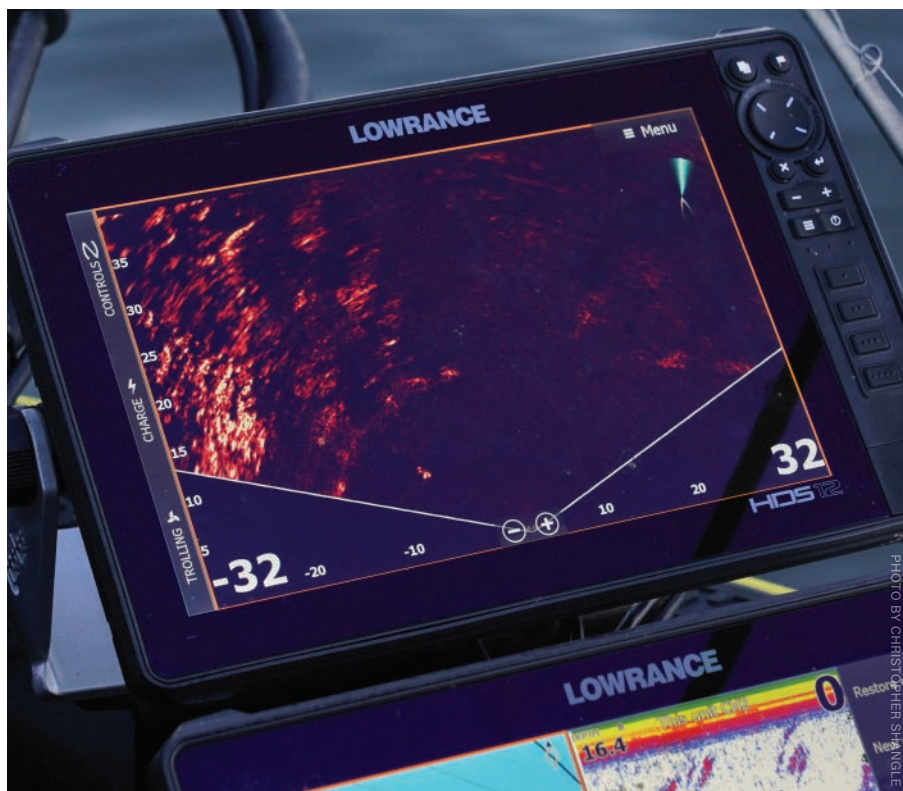
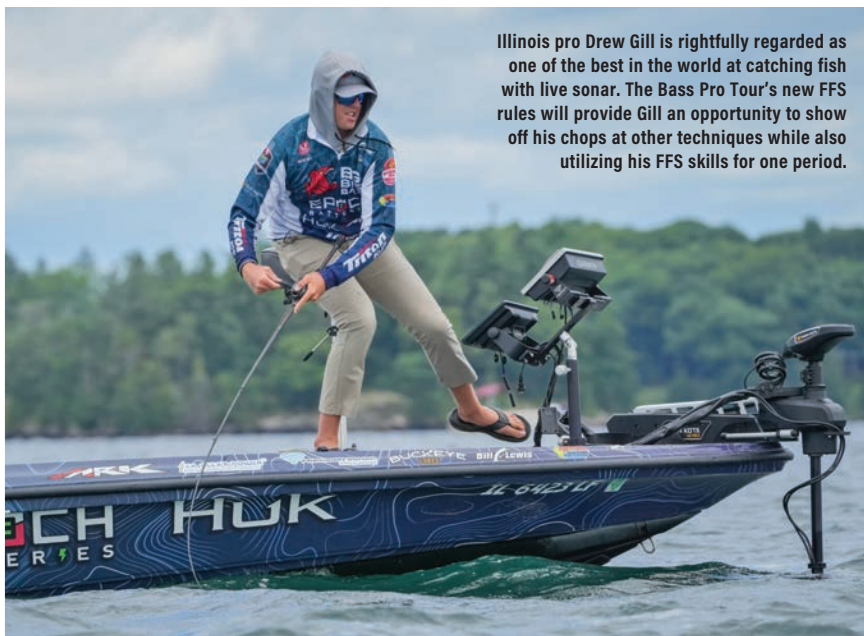


PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SHANKLE

PHOTO BY ROE MATSUJURA



Illinois pro Drew Gill is rightfully regarded as one of the best in the world at catching fish with live sonar. The Bass Pro Tour's new FFS rules will provide Gill an opportunity to show off his chops at other techniques while also utilizing his FFS skills for one period.

don't want to compete against that, and they can't afford it. And the captains don't want to participate; they don't want to be lesser than. And we want all the kids to come.

"In addition to that, we're also trying to tell the world that forward-facing is one of many techniques. If you're going to be a pro angler, it's only one of many techniques that you have to learn."

MLF spent more than a year collecting feedback from anglers, sponsors and viewers at every level before arriving at these forward-facing sonar policies. While Duckett believes the league has found the right solution for each circuit, he also acknowledged that technology never stops advancing, so MLF will continue to monitor the situation.

MLF5 RULES

At the Tackle Warehouse Invationals level, competitors will be allowed to utilize forward-facing sonar on Day 1 of each event, but they will not be able to use the technology on Day 2. That will give the full field one day with the technology and one without before it's cut to 30 anglers on Day 3, during which forward-facing sonar will be permitted.

"Unlike the Bass Pro Tour, we don't have an official on the boat to easily govern the Invationals," Duckett explained. "So, it's clean and easy. There's two days of qualifying: One day is with, one day is without, so it's equal. That way, all techniques compete."

The use of forward-facing sonar will not be restricted for the Toyota Series, Phoenix Bass Fishing League or Abu Garcia College Fishing. However, it will be banned during all Abu Garcia High School Fishing competition. Feedback from high school anglers and boat captains indicated that forward-facing sonar had created a particularly uneven playing field at that level.

"High school participation is limited by captains," Duckett said. "Those kids don't have boats. And so it's parents, it's friends, it's a grandfather, it's a buddy of a buddy. It's anybody that's willing, and it's a big gift for someone to sign up to be a captain and take two kids you don't know fishing to allow them to be introduced to the sport. The few captains that have \$110,000 boats that are fully rigged, the other kids

PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS



Bass Fishing Hall of Famer Mark Davis is one of the most "natural" anglers in history, but has also embraced technology. The Bass Pro Tour's new rules will allow anglers like Davis to lean on both their traditional skills and their knowledge of technology.

"Our decisions are directly data-driven," he said. "We sit in a unique position in being the largest tournament organization in that we have 30,000 individuals that participate in our company. So, when we poll our anglers or poll our fans, we're reaching masses that maybe everyone else is guessing about. When we get to divisions such as BFL, Toyota Series, high school, we're able to see what our participants are doing or are most interested in. Then, when we get to the Tackle Warehouse Invationals and Bass Pro Tour, then we're listening to our fans and what they're voting for. I think we landed at a very good place." ■

"IN ADDITION TO THAT, WE'RE ALSO TRYING TO TELL THE WORLD THAT FORWARD-FACING IS ONE OF MANY TECHNIQUES. IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE A PRO ANGLER, IT'S ONLY ONE OF MANY TECHNIQUES THAT YOU HAVE TO LEARN."

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

MLF NOW!

Live Stream at MajorLeagueFishing.com or MyOutdoorTV.com

Oct. 24-29: General Tire Team Series Patriot Cup — 8:30a.m.-3:30p.m (ET)

Nov. 17-22: General Tire Team Series Summit Cup — 8:30a.m.-3:30p.m (ET)

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TV BROADCASTS

Discovery Channel — Saturdays 7-9 a.m. (ET)

Oct. 19: MillerTech Batteries Stage Four Presented by REDCON1 Championship Round @ Lake Eufaula

Oct. 26: U.S. Air Force Stage Five Presented by WIX Filters Championship Round @ Chowan River

Nov. 2: General Tire Stage Six Presented by O'Reilly Auto Parts Knockout Round @ James River

Nov. 9: General Tire Stage Six Presented by O'Reilly Auto Parts Championship Round @ James River

Nov. 16: Minn Kota Stage Seven Presented by Humminbird Championship Round @ St. Lawrence River

CBS Sports — Saturdays 9 a.m. (ET)

Oct. 19: Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Stop 3 Presented by Phoenix Boats @ Kentucky Lake

Oct. 26: Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Stop 4 Presented by E3 Sports Apparel @ Lake Eufaula

Nov. 2: Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Stop 5 Presented by 7Brew @ Lake Champlain

Nov. 9: Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Stop 6 Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches @ Detroit River

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

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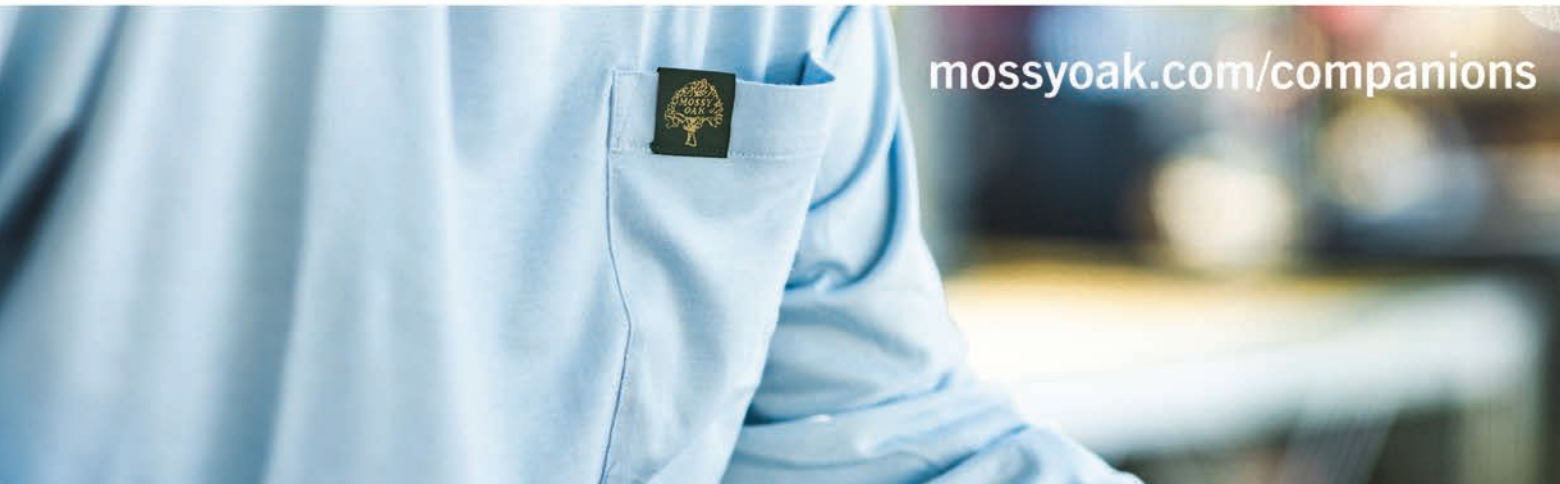
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TEAMWORK AND BEAM WORK

How does the dynamic of forward-facing sonar work in a team setting?



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.

Since the advent of forward-facing sonar, I've had the opportunity to watch anglers zigzag endlessly across lakes, 'Scoping around for the next bass willing to play.

Back and forth ... back and forth.

Sometimes I've wondered how the beam works in a team tournament. What happens when two anglers are on the bow, staring at the same screen, with only one foot pedal with which to zigzag? The General Tire Team Series Presented by Bass Pro Shops will give fishing fans a good

look at this dynamic this fall as two pros are paired per boat sharing a single forward-facing sonar unit in the bow.

Matt Becker and Spencer Shuffield won the inaugural Team Series event in September at Presque Isle Bay near Erie, Pennsylvania. Though they won fishing submerged grass, they did use forward-facing sonar to see how grass lines laid out and where baitfish were congregated.

Becker fishes team events in the offseason to keep his fishing sharp. He's used to sharing forward-facing sonar with a

partner and knows how to best manage the "screen time" when both anglers are 'Scoping.

"Forward-facing sonar can quickly become a hang-up in team events," Becker says. "Both anglers can see the screen, but there's only one trolling motor to control the beam direction. That can lead to both guys getting sucked into just watching the screen, waiting and wondering when to make a cast.

"Don't let that happen. If both guys are looking at the screen, there needs to be a

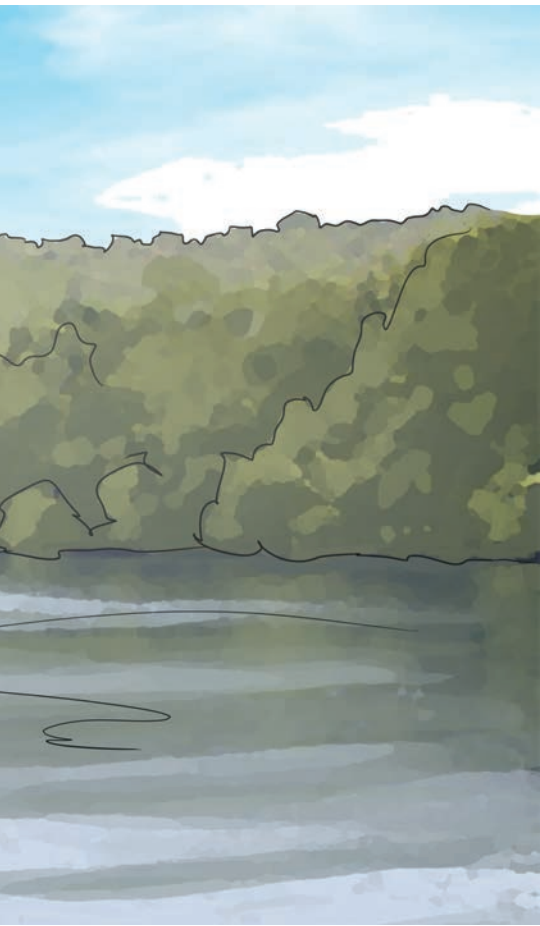


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

plan, an objective and a method to work together.”

With that in mind, Becker offers a few options for maximizing the team’s beam.

FIRE UP, DOUBLE UP

Forward-facing sonar excels when schools of bass are aggressively feeding in open water. When a bass is hooked, the rest of the school becomes competitive and usually follows the fighting fish. This is when most anglers wish they could cast another lure out to the melee. Well, now they can.

“After getting a fish on, if your partner can immediately cast to the frenzy, it’s usually an automatic double,” Becker says. “The guy fighting the initial

fish might want to slow down on horsing it to the boat to give his partner an extra second or two to make the right cast to the following group. The window of opportunity to catch the second fish is usually small, but doubling up is certainly possible if your partner is quick on the trigger.”

CROSS TRIANGULATION

When bass turn neutral or negative, their strike zones shrink considerably. This is when extremely accurate presentations are required. For this situation, Becker and his partner sharpen their presentation accuracy by having one angler make the first cast to establish visual marker points. Since the splash of the lure can be seen on the water’s surface and on the screen, it gives the angler making the second cast a much better idea of the exact distance and depth of the fish.

“We might see a fish, and I’ll take the first cast,” Becker details. “As soon as my lure hits the water, we now have a reference point from the dimples on the surface. Now my partner can better judge his cast, because he sees how the fish moves relative to the reference points. Plus, there is not as much pressure to make the first cast so perfect. The first cast is just a ‘line-up’ for your partner’s second cast, which is the money cast. It works pretty well when you get in a good rhythm with this process.”

SETTING A TRAP

When fish consistently follow lures like jerkbaits and swimbaits to the boat without biting them, it can be extremely frustrating. A pack of fish might “play” with the lure all the way to the boat. When the lure is reeled up and they’ve had their fun playing chase, they sulk back down to the bottom, presumably laughing at the angler’s offerings.

Becker has a cure for this problem called “setting the trap,” which can only be done with two anglers in the boat.

Before engaging the pack of fish, one angler pitches a sinking bait like a Ned

rig, jig or drop-shot just in front of the boat and lets it sit on the bottom. Then, the other angler casts to the fish with a jerkbait or a swimbait and starts teasing them back to the boat. Once the fish following the “teaser” give up and return to the bottom under the boat, the other angler hops the bottom bait to get their attention.

“It works pretty well on smallmouth,” Becker says. “I’m sure it’ll work on largemouth and spotted bass followers, too, especially if groups follow the first lure. It’s all fun and games when they’re chasing the teasing lure. But when something suddenly appears, hopping around on the bottom, they race to eat it. It’s a pretty cool trick.”

BAIT AND SWITCH

Another luxury of team tournaments is the opportunity to try more lures, colors and sizes to see what best triggers the fish on that day.

“Since we can closely monitor a bass’ reaction to a lure on live sonar, we can quickly tell what triggers them and what doesn’t,” Becker says. “When fishing alone in a tournament, I want to constantly change lure size, weight, color, line size or even a rod action to give a lure a different look, but I simply don’t have time to tie different stuff on all day. With a partner, one guy can fish, and the other guy can dig through tackle, constantly feeding the point guy different options and vice versa.”

Becker says on several occasions, this has led to something as subtle as a color change or line size change that turns on the bite. As a result, he encourages team anglers to experiment constantly, especially when fish are uncooperative.

“That’s the fun part about using forward-facing in team tournaments – it’s an opportunity to learn something new,” Becker says. “When fishing alone, you can’t simultaneously introduce other lures into the game to see how the fish react to them, but you can with a partner. This can lead to a lot of one-two lure combinations that fish have not seen.” ■

“AFTER GETTING A FISH ON, IF YOUR PARTNER CAN IMMEDIATELY CAST TO THE FRENZY, IT’S USUALLY AN AUTOMATIC DOUBLE.”

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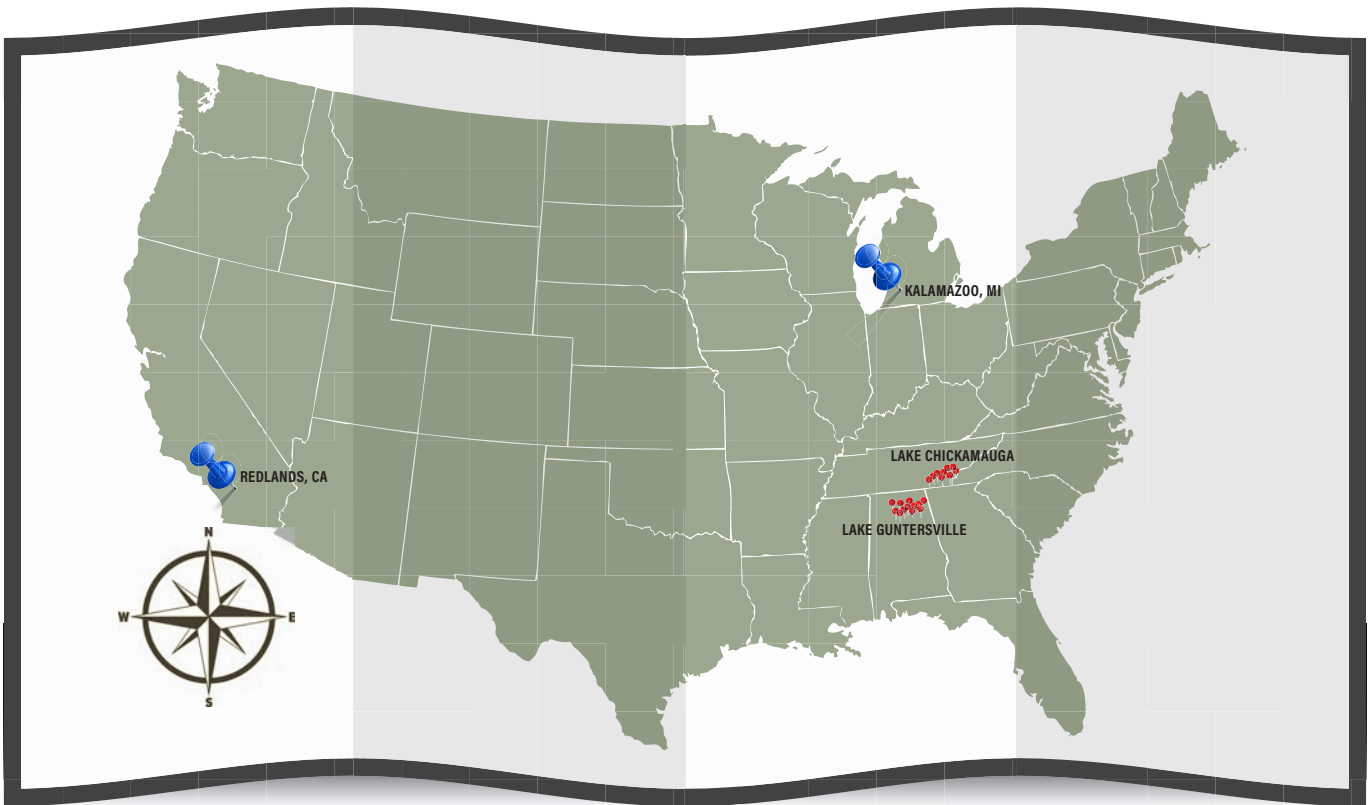
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

THE GEOGRAPHY OF PRO BASS FISHING

Making right decisions is everything for pro anglers. One of the most overlooked? Where to live.

Professional bass anglers get asked – and ask themselves – questions all the time. What’s the best bait for this fishery or these conditions? Where should I start a day on the water? When is it time to leave a spot and try something different?

Here’s a question fewer people might have considered, but it’s one touring pros have to answer before all others: Where is the best place to live?

In the early days, Texas was a hot spot. Many anglers based around Toledo Bend and Sam Rayburn Reservoir went on to make names for themselves casting for cash. Missouri also pumped out several legendary pros, as did the Carolinas, Arkansas and Florida. It seemed that growing up in a warm climate equated to more time on the water and more bass fishing success... Then Kevin VanDam came and rewrote the rulebook.

A native of Kalamazoo, Michigan, VanDam kept his home address in the Wolverine State throughout his entire unparalleled career. It wasn’t until recently that many anglers began to relocate in an effort to chase their pro dreams. Lake Guntersville quickly became a popular destination. Later, areas around Lake Chickamauga romanced a cadre of anglers.

But some pros continue to live outside the box. West Coast natives, northerners and even Canadians are staying put despite travel challenges and/or only having a few months a year to fish. So, is there a right answer?

EHRLER REMAINS TRUE TO SoCAL ROOTS

Brent Ehrler is still a Californian. Despite the high living costs and extensive commutes to most tournament venues, Ehrler has maintained residence in Redlands since day one of his career.



Road warrior
Brent Ehrler.

“It’s a pain, but that’s all I’ve ever known,” Ehrler concluded.

In the early years of his career, Ehrler made the 2,000-plus mile drive out east several times each year. Nowadays, he drives across the continent just twice a season – once there and once back.

After driving to his first tournament stop of the year, Ehrler’s system revolves around flying to and from each location. Often, this requires 10 or more flights a year, which can be quite costly. But it allows Ehrler an important peace of mind.

“It’s all about my support structure,” he said. “My brother and parents, my friends, in-laws — they all live close by. So, when I’m gone, my wife and kids have help.”

Ehrler pointed out that, while travel is tough on bass pros, it’s even tougher on their families. And if the Ehrlers were to relocate to an unfamiliar part of the country, his absence would be harder on the rest of the family. Staying in California relieves much of that burden.

In order to make his residence work, Ehrler must leave his boat and truck in various locations throughout the year. A network of friends helps find secure parking, but tackle prep can be daunting. Organizational challenges are monumental, requiring weeks of preparation each spring.

“Before the first tournament, I have to pack for the entire year,” Ehrler said.

That all might sound seamless enough, but I can’t imagine being away from my rig when trying to prepare. Still, maybe the separation forces Ehrler to truly regroup and approach each new event with a clear mind.

MAKING THE MOVE

Other anglers have made the leap and uprooted their lives to reside closer to popular tournament venues. Chris Lane relocated to Guntersville as a way to spend more time at home. Recognizing that his residence in Florida often required an extra day of travel to get anywhere, Lane wanted to be more centrally located.

“It’s a day on each side of the trip, up to 15 trips a year,” he said. “That’s a whole month I gained at home by moving to Alabama. Plus, the lake is unbelievable. It’s a fishing town; it’s been a great choice.”

Lane did admit that, even though he gets to spend plenty of time with his brother Bobby when they travel together on the Bass Pro Tour, Florida family functions got the short end of the stick due to his move.

“I’ve got a big family in Florida,” he said. “That’s the toughest part, missing the Thanksgiving dinners.”

Lane is just one of several pros who have moved to the Guntersville area in recent years (in fact, he was playing pickleball with California transplant Justin Lucas when I called for an interview). Such relocations can be tough at first, but Lane said his immediate family has settled in, his kids get to attend “a normal school,” and the family enjoys the structure.

International moves, now that’s a different story. Often, we see Canadian pros staying north of the border rather than making a push to the U.S.

I’ve heard the U.S. political climate listed as one reason why Canadians stay put, echoed by a few big-name pros. I’ve also heard credit given to the Canadian fishing.

Wait, what? Can bass fishing four months a year rival the endless summers of a place like Florida? As a former Upper Midwest native who now resides in Florida, I assure you it can.

While living in the north, I caught far more bass each year than I do in Florida. Sure, we get far more opportunities in the Sunshine State to go fishing, but not nearly as many for catching. Bass fishing in many parts of Canada rivals anywhere in the world when conditions are right. Fifty-fish days are commonplace. Largemouth, smallmouth, deep and shallow all are in play, as are finesse applications, power fishing and even frogging and flipping, all of it with catch numbers that most anglers would consider career highs.

So, it’s quite possible for a northern angler to catch as many or more bass per year than just about anyone, helping to perfect the technical aspects of fishing — proper hooksets, selecting the right rod/reel/line and more. This allows for maximum efficiency when it’s go time.

A career as a professional bass angler involves monumental stress. At times, dealing with the logistics of the job can be more nerve-racking than trying to catch fish. In order to excel, anglers must be comfortable with their situation at home before ever making a cast.

As for where that home is, it seems the right answer is up to the individual. ■



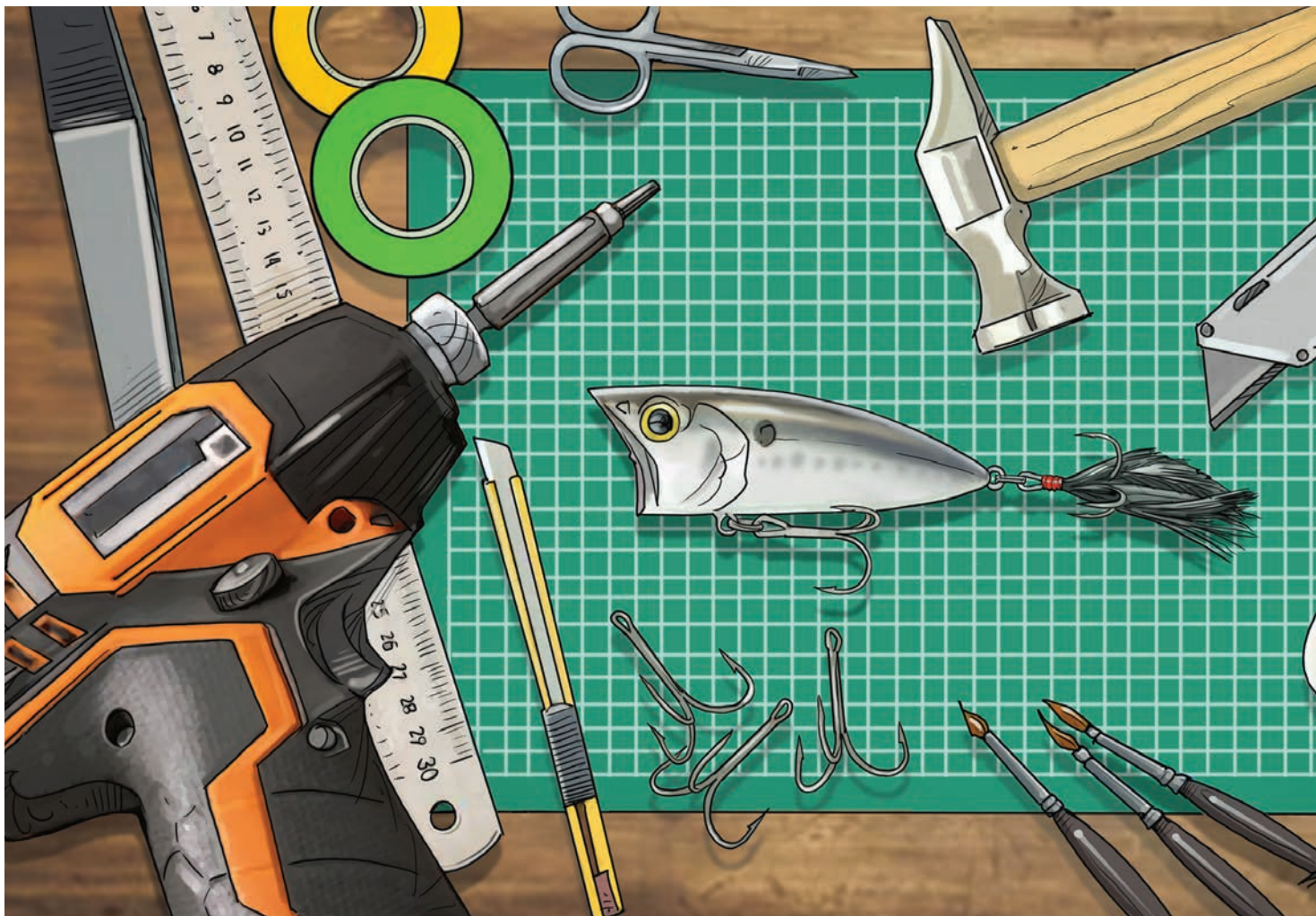
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.

INSIDE THE MIND OF A TINKERER

That annoying kid who never stopped asking questions? That's me.

"Sean, you might ask more questions than anyone I've ever met."

When you're 13 years old, a statement like this coming from an adult could easily be taken as a hint that you're being annoying. For me, it was (and still is) a description I received with pride.

The originator of the statement was a fishing guide who would later become a friend. At the time, though, it was our first day on the water together. And being a curious budding lure builder, I saw it as a prime opportunity to learn.

"What does this lure do?"

"How does it work like that?"

"What would happen if the lip was angled like this?"

One question after another after ANOTHER. Looking back, had the guide opted to leave me on shore and drive away laughing maniacally in frustration and relief, I wouldn't have blamed him. Fortunately, he didn't.

When I was asked to write a column on the mindset of a tinkerer and lure designer, I thought this was a fitting story because it gets to the true heart of it.

To be a tinkerer is to ask questions. To be a tinkerer is to be curious.

Actually, being curious doesn't even do it justice. A tinkerer's mindset is one of insatiable inquisitiveness. We are driven by the desire to know how things work, why they function the way they do and how they can be improved.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

While most people see things as they are, we ask "what if" and "why not" — and then we ask follow-up questions to understand the understanding.

We're exhausting people to be around at times, I'm sure. It probably only gets worse when you realize our curiosity rarely stops with questions. It almost always spurs action.

When a fishing buddy wishes a lure could be more weedless, the tinkerer goes home and spends the whole night (or many nights) drilling, glueing, and/or tweaking the lure until it's more weedless. Or, after learning what makes a particular lure so good, the tinkerer will go home and modify dozens of lures to have that new trait.

Every problem is a challenge to be solved, even if the challenge is against ourselves and whether or not we can create it.

One of my favorite examples of this was the first lure I designed for a company, the 6th Sense Splashback popper. I originally created some homemade balsa versions for myself after learning about the discontinued Rebel P70 Pop-Rs. I'd asked around about what made them so great, learning all the little nuances and idiosyncrasies. Then I pulled out some balsa wood, and I started carving (using a utility blade). I started sanding (covering my living room coffee table in dust). I started

weighting (melting lead with a spoon on my stove). I started testing (learning very quickly balsa wood does NOT do well with water and needs to be sealed really well).

I had some utter failures, but pretty soon, I also had balsa versions that cast better, walked tighter (some could turn 180 degrees in place), could both spit and pop and had one-knockers in them (a secret quirk of the old P70s). And once professional anglers found out, I couldn't make enough of them.

Could I have just coughed up the \$100 to buy an original off eBay? Sure. But that's not what tinkerers do.

There's little enjoyment or pride from going the easy route. To us, the problem and the solving of it are more fun than the finished product. I'm not sure there's a lure or piece of tackle out there I haven't looked at and thought, "I wonder how it can be better?"

Hence why, instead of buying a lure in a color I kind of like, or I'll often buy the ugly version of it (even from the bargain bin), learn how to paint it and then paint it to a color I love. Or I'll look at the hook placement on a lure and wonder if I can increase the hook-up ratio by moving it.

Do I sometimes ruin lures with my cutting, drilling and glueing? Oh yeah! I have whole piles of Frankenstein's monsters I've ruined through the years. But I also have lures more valuable because of their uniqueness than 1,000 lures combined.

I know many of you will think I'm crazy. If I'm being honest, that's one of the disappointments of the industry as a whole: How tinkerers are becoming fewer and fewer. They're being forced out by "experts" — people who just recreate exact replicas of what true tinkerers create or who embrace what pro anglers tell them to do as gospel, no questions asked.

Remember the story at the beginning? Well, it didn't end there. The guide shared something that has stuck with me just as much as his sort-of compliment about my curiosity.

After apologizing for asking so many questions (I was 13 after all and deathly afraid of being perceived as being annoying), the guide said the following:

"Don't apologize for it, Sean. It's a good thing. I spend more than 300 days a year in the boat with 'experts' who brag nonstop about how much they know. They know everything. They know more than me, despite the fact they're paying me for my expert knowledge. And I'm no expert. If I was, I could guarantee fish every time I go out, and I can't. None of us are experts. We should always be asking questions and trying to learn. Few do, though."

After building and designing lures for myself and companies for more than 20 years, I can tell you with full honesty, I'm no expert. And I never will be.

I still design lures that absolutely, flat out suck. But that's part of being a tinkerer — understanding you're going to fail and continuing to do it anyways, because every failure is an opportunity to learn.

And what makes me proud is that even if I'm creating something similar to another lure, it's never the same. I'm always looking to improve it. I didn't want to create a P70 Pop-R. Those already existed. I wanted to create something better.

There is always a better way. It's just a matter of asking the right questions and not being afraid to get your hands on things, testing and learning until you solve the problem.

That is being a tinkerer. ■

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All About The Bass – Breaking Down The Benefits Of RELiON Lithium Batteries



For professional anglers, pursuing the perfect catch involves more than just skill and experience. It's heavily dependent on equipment, too. Marine batteries, in particular, play a significant role in modern fishing. Whether navigating vast lakes, trolling for hours, or relying on sophisticated electronics, anglers need long-lasting, reliable power. Today, that means a lithium-ion battery.

For Jesse Wiggins and Matt Becker, two experienced MLF Bass Pro Tour anglers, there are three key things to consider when selecting a boat battery. And plenty of reasons to choose lithium.

Reliable and consistent all-day power

Reliability is every angler's number one concern. "One of my main concerns out on the water is knowing that my power system will not fail, leaving me stuck in a tough spot," notes Jesse. "With lithium batteries, I enjoy complete peace of mind, knowing my power system is top of the line."

"Beyond the battery simply lasting all day, you also need to be sure it will deliver consistently high power," explains Matt. Whereas lead-acid batteries suffer from voltage sag and deliver less power over time, lithium-ion batteries maintain a constant voltage throughout use. "The biggest reason I switched from lead-acid to lithium is having 100% power for the entire cycle," continues Matt. "I can leave my trolling motor on speed four and get the same performance whether the battery is at 99% or 1%. It's truly incredible."

Space and weight concerns

Pro angling vessels aren't exactly spacious pleasure cruisers. They're stripped-back, highly efficient fishing machines. Space is at a premium, so battery size and weight are a serious consideration for Matt. "The less weight I have in my

boat, the faster it goes. The less space the battery takes up, the more I have for extra equipment."

RELiON lithium batteries provide more power than lead-acid batteries at half the weight and are designed to fit bass boat battery trays. For Jesse, converting to lithium has been a game-changer. "Lithium technology is a lighter and stronger choice and helped me save considerable weight and a lot of time - it charges so much faster than my old lead-acid batteries."

Long-term cost and battery durability

While lead-acid batteries have a lower up-front cost, that doesn't always translate into a lower overall cost. RELiON lithium batteries benefit from up to 10 times the expected lifespan of lead-acid batteries and, unlike lead-acid, are maintenance-free. Less frequent replacement and consistent performance make lithium the cost-effective option in the long run. "Don't think you are saving money by purchasing a lead-acid battery. The initially lower price soon increases as you need to replace them more regularly," Jesse advises.

Pro anglers opt for RELiON batteries

In the world of professional angling, a great fishing battery is more than a power source. It's a strategic investment in success on the water. But RELiON lithium batteries aren't reserved for the pros, they're also tried, tested, and trusted by everyday anglers who want faster charge times, longer-lasting batteries, and total reliability.

Equipped with the right power source, you can focus on what matters most - landing that trophy catch. It's why professional anglers like Matt and Jesse choose RELiON lithium batteries. And it's why you should too.



RELi³ON®

HOT TECHNIQUES!

... AND HOW THEY COME AND GO

What happens to the must-have rigs that light up the fishing industry like brilliant meteors only to settle into disuse? Are they gone forever? Will they rise again?

By Mike Pehanich

Few sports evolve with the rapidity of bass fishing. New lures and gear are the lifeblood of the tackle industry, and new and evolving techniques shape the way we play the game.

Fishermen are inveterate tinkerers, on eternal lookout not only for new lures to fool fish but better ways of presenting them. As hot techniques spread throughout the bass world, anglers find new ways to improve or refine them until they settle into either broad usage or niche application.

The shelf life of any given technique is hard to predict. Some lose their luster quickly. Others endure – in one form or another – for generations. Many enjoy major or minor revivals. When they do come back, they typically do so with some hint of change or a new wrinkle.

Take the Alabama rig, that Rube Goldberg-like contraption borrowed from striper fishermen that took the bass world by storm. It produced eye-popping catches and turned the tackle industry on its ear. But its popularity fizzled as bass grew wise to the sight of a bird cage of baits. Is the A-rig now



MLF founder Boyd Duckett hoists up a nice smallie caught with a simple split shot rig.

PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

making a comeback? Major League Fishing founder Boyd Duckett has noticed a recent revival on Lake Guntersville, his home lake.

"It was dominant 10 years ago, before fish 'bait trained' on it," Duckett says. "You can catch fish on it again, but on a finesse version of the Alabama rig using 4-inch swimbaits like my Duckett Subtle Tail."

Then there's the occasional rig like the drop-shot, which comes and comes and keeps on coming. This technique has evolved with tackle and lures, benefiting from concept refinements and tailored rod, reel and line combinations, serving as a seed concept for other techniques.

It's impossible to separate lures from techniques as anglers and lure manufacturers hunt for new ways to bring fish to boat. Rigs influence lure design. Lures inspire new rigs and manners of presentation. For this discussion, we'll team the concepts and blur the distinctions.

NEW VS. TRIED AND TRUE

Pro ranks divide loosely between specialists with one or more dominant skills and generalists who rely on having an array of techniques at their disposal. Yet even noted specialists keep their eyes open for game-changing baits and techniques.

"For me, it's about 50/50 between go-to and bread-and-butter techniques," says four-decade tournament veteran John Murray. "If guys are all catching them on the same rig and I can use something not as well known, I do it. I still have a lineup of bread-and-butter techniques, but I believe you have to take some chances."

For Murray, giving bass a new look might mean reviving an old staple that has fallen out of fashion. Be it cutting edge or old school, he believes elite pros aren't exposed to as many techniques nowadays since pro tournaments eliminated non-boaters from their events.

"We used to pick up a lot from those guys," Murray says.

Not every technique has broad application. Some are best fitted to a specific context – a location, conditions, depth, cover type, bottom content. Others seem to work everywhere. Some are designed to imitate a crayfish, baitfish or other bass delicacy in the most natural manner, others to provoke an aggressive response.

Bass instincts remain the same. But their survival hinges on adaptation to the threats posed by anglers. And the modern bass angler throws them an abundance of threats in the form of new baits, rigs and presentations.

Revitalize the unwieldy Alabama Rig by using finesse plastics like the Duckett Subtle Tail.





A true blast from the past, the do-nothing rig, such as this grape/glow tip offering from IKE-CON, is still a solid selection for shallow-water bass.

DO-NOTHING RIG

Everything you need to know about fishing this pre-rigged worm can be gleaned from its name. A slow and pretty much unaltered retrieve – almost nothing – is all it takes.

The rig consists of two small hooks on a single piece of monofilament line threaded through the soft-plastic worm. The leader-like line extends several inches from the nose of the worm, ending in a loop. In shallow water, a snap swivel

attached to the loop is all you need to get it down. An additional split shot above the swivel makes the rig more serviceable in windy conditions or to reach deeper.

Decades ago, the do-nothing was a standard trailer on a Carolina rig. In some regions, it remains so today.

Status: Oft forgotten, particularly at advanced angler levels, the do-nothing remains a reliable shallow-water fish catcher as a stand-alone rig.



YAMAMOTO 4" FAT SENKO
COLOR: SMALLMOUTH MAGIC

A still-worthy finesse technique, the split shot rig can be employed with a variety of soft plastics to tempt big bass.

SPLIT SHOT RIG

Most of the weapons in our bass arsenal find common ancestry in the simple split shot rig. Originally paired with a live nightcrawler or forage fish, the split shot rig adapted easily to plastic imitations resembling the same.

Today, it is hard to find a veteran West Coast bass angler unfamiliar with the Reaper, a 3- to 3.5-inch plastic (usually hand poured) bearing faint resemblance to a leech or eel. Deadly effective at the end of a split shot rig for bass in deep, clear California and Washington reservoirs, it was also a staple for smallmouth anglers on Lake Erie and other parts of the Great Lakes for decades.

While the rig may be the poster child for "old school" finesse, it has a venerable big fish heritage as well. Trophy-bass pioneer Bill Murphy employed the split shot rig with giant 15-inch worms and pork rind eels to take monster large-mouth in the early days of California lunker hunting. He coupled the rig with a painfully slow but highly effective hand-retrieve presentation called "stitching."

The reaper/split shot combination has been largely forgotten in the pro ranks. For the most part, so has the split shot rig itself.

But not entirely so. Duckett keeps a split shot rig with a 4-inch senko (Texas-rigged with a 2/0 hook and fished on a spinning rod with 6- to 8-pound line) ever at the ready.

Status: Duckett attributes broad abandonment of this effective technique to the development of other techniques that tend to catch bigger fish. But don't write it off.

"A soft-plastic worm fished behind a light weight or weightless has stood the test of time," he says. "The split shot rig is extremely effective all the time."

TEXAS RIG

The Texas rig became the emblem of modern bass fishing when it traveled from Lake Tyler, Texas, in the late 1950s into the hands of pros like Bill Dance and Larry Nixon, who won groundbreaking Ray Scott tournaments in the early 1960s. Within a handful of years, familiarity with the Texas rig became a rite of passage into the bass fishing fraternity.

Grammatically, "Texas rig" has applications as both a verb and a noun. As a verb, to "Texas rig" a plastic bait means to thread the hook – usually an offset hook – through the head of the worm/bait, pivot the hook, and bury its point into the bait body, thus making it relatively "weedless" or "snagless" when worked through tangled cover.

Used as a noun, it refers to a terminal tackle combination of bullet-nose sinker, hook, and weedless-rigged plastic worm, lizard, beaver, creature, etc. It triggered an unprecedented explosion of tackle innovation, leading to varieties of offset hooks; sliding weights; plastics of varying shapes, softness, buoyancy and durability; and a vast array of rod, reel and line improvements for delivery, presentation and capture that continues to this day.

In addition to its relative snaglessness, the Texas rig offers the option of pegging the sliding sinker to the head of the plastic or letting the weight slide freely. Each option has advantages and disadvantages that have inspired other rigging methods.

Status: Though the Texas rig has yielded much of its popularity to presentations better tailored to particular circumstances, the rig remains a staple among most members of the bass fishing community.



Z-MAN FINESSE WORM 7"
COLOR: JUNEBUG



STRIKE KING BABY Z TOO
COLOR: THE DEAL



6TH SENSE CAROLINA PRE-RIG



Worms, lizards, flukes, creatures and craws all play well on a Carolina rig. Try pairing this well-known rig with buoyant plastics that rise on the pause.

CAROLINA RIG

Ask Bass Fishing Hall of Famer Mark Davis his favorite technique, and he only grins.

"That's like asking me my favorite flavor of ice cream," he says. "I like them all – when they work!"

Still, he's quick to admit a special taste for the Carolina rig – a sliding egg or cylindrical weight above a colored bead on the main line connected to a swivel with leader tied to hook and Texas-rigged plastic. The rig has earned him more of his \$2.7 million in tournament winnings than any other.

Bait options were limited when the veteran Arkansas pro first adopted the Carolina rig.

"We had a pre-molded worm, then a lizard," he reflects. "Later we had all

kinds – creatures, big worms, crawfish baits. But the great thing about it was that even with a big lure and a big weight, you could fish it subtly."

Extremely widespread in the 1980s and '90s, the rig's popularity has tapered off since. While it remains a mainstay in Davis' arsenal, he admits that it seems to attract smaller fish than it did in its early years. Still, it continues to produce, as Davis proved when he fished the rig exclusively at the Bass Pro Tour event on Dale Hollow last April.

Like other rigs and techniques, the Carolina rig has taken a finesse turn.

"Now, small creatures, straight worms or craw imitations get more play," says Davis, who also fishes a lighter and more simplified version, the mojo rig, which leashes the bait to a

rubber core sinker. "I always have a mojo rig tied to a spinning rod ready," he says.

The mojo rig is particularly effective in clear water of 10-foot depths or less.

"On any clear highland reservoir, the mojo comes into play," Davis says. "I can cover water with it."

Status: The Carolina Rig may be experiencing a quiet rebirth with broader usage of buoyant plastics leading the comeback.

"The ElaZtech plastics in the Strike King line float, and that can be really important in short grass," says Davis. Z-Man marketing manager Cory Schmidt echoes the sentiment, noting that Z-Man swimbaits and the Scented Jerk Shad trailing a Carolina Rig are proving deadly. "When you stop your retrieve, the bait rises," he explains.

As good as ever, the drop-shot rig is still a tournament-winning technique.



ROBOWORM 4.5"
STRAIGHT TAIL WORM
COLOR: AARONS MORNING DAWN

DROP-SHOT

Gary Klein regards the drop-shot rig as a landmark bass fishing development, crediting Aaron Martens for its widespread introduction.

"It's one of the most versatile techniques that I've experienced," Klein says of the deceptively simple combination of plastic bait with weighted dropper line. "It's also something more than it seems. It's really a combination of presentations based on rate of fall, length of leader, bait, weight and hook style that allows you to present a lure like you are fishing live bait. It can do so many things!"

Klein calls drop-shotting a "thought process" (a term he applies similarly to Carolina rigging) rather than a technique – a challenge of matching presentation variables to fish and conditions. Its utility has prompted development of many offshoot techniques. The free rig, cherry rig, Tokyo rig and Jika rig can all trace their origin to the drop-shot concept.

Status: "It's a technique that is good for all, and it will never go away," Klein says. "It's a phenomenal technique."



YAMAMOTO 5" SENKO
COLOR: WATERMELON RED AND GREEN

The lesser-known free rig gives baits a different look, and subtle differences often result in bites when the bass are pressured.

FREE RIG

The free rig is a recent innovation with "old school" familiarity. It consists of a free-sliding drop-shot or bell-style sinker with a rounded eye (a must!) ahead of a hooked plastic bait. Whether it was conceived first in Japan, Korea, or by some anonymous old timer who preferred to fish his Texas rig without pegging the sinker to the hook depends on who you ask. It shares traits with the Texas Rig, Carolina Rig and drop-shot.

The use of a round, bell or dropshot sinker with a wide and rounded eye is what puts the "free" in the rig. The

"HALF MY CATCH AT THE BPT EVENT ON THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER CAME ON THE FREE RIG AND A SENKO."

weight drops quickly to the bottom, but the lure itself trails at a slower rate, made variable by weight, bait and presentation. Allowing it to fall on a slack line is a must to present the fish a tantalizing, slow-trailing plastic.

Shin Fukae, a Japanese angler noted for employing a broad array of finesse techniques, is arguably the most accomplished with the technique among MLF pros. But its reputation is spreading.

"Half my catch at the BPT event on the St. Lawrence River came on the

free rig and a Senko," Murray says. "The weight hits bottom first, yet the Senko still has a chance to do its thing. It gives the fish a different look than a Texas-rigged or drop-shot bait."

Murray, who studies the movement and fall rate of different free rig combinations in a swimming pool, has tested the rig with both sinking and buoyant plastic bait options.

"I'd say a third of my fish on the free rig hit on the fall," he says.

Status: The free rig doesn't get a lot of attention, yet it has clearly sparked interest, even among admittedly "old school" pros like Davis.

"I haven't fished it a lot yet, but I can absolutely see how it can be an effective tool," he says. "It's a technique that requires just the right lure – a bait that hovers a bit – but it's coming on. I think tournaments will be won with it."

SWING HEAD JIG

Developed and popularized by Tommy Biffle, the swing head jig enables an angler to present plastic baits to bass in an uncharacteristically aggressive, erratic manner.

Featuring a jighead attached via split ring to a free-swinging hook, the swing head invites baits ranging from cigar-style worms to creature baits to do different dance steps on a lake bottom. It enjoyed a huge rush in popularity after a well-publicized introduction.

"It's very effective," says Klein, who created a swinging jig for Berkley featuring an arrow-shaped, football-style jighead. "It allows an angler to cover a lot of water efficiently and put a lot of different (plastic) bodies into play."

Murray regards it as a rig occupying "that middle ground between a jig and a crankbait." He fishes swimbaits, worms, crawfish imitations and other plastics on heavy 3/4- to 1-ounce swing heads. "You can cover water and create strikes as you bounce it off objects," he says.

Status: Klein calls swing head fishing "one of the most overlooked techniques in fishing today, ... phenomenal for largemouth, smallmouth and spots, too."

Murray agrees. "Everyone has the swing head in his boat today," he says. "When fish are on it, it's tremendous. When they are not, you're hauling water."



**BERKLEY POWERBAIT
 MAXSCENT CHIGGER CRAW**
COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN

**BERKLEY FUSION19
 SWING JIGHEAD**
COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN

A fast-moving technique, the swing head jig covers a lot of water quickly with an erratic action that provokes a reaction bite from bass.

Flipping, pitching and skipping are highly effective techniques for catching big bass in tight spaces, demonstrated here by MLF pro Nick LeBrun.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

PITCHING & FLIPPING

Flipping jigs and rigged plastics to shallow cover revolutionized bass fishing.

Californian Dee Thomas invented the technique, then Klein brought it to the eastern tournament scene. The concept is simple: Use an underhand swing with a stout rod to deliver a crawfish, worm, creature or other types of plastic to precise locations.

"It's nothing more than a presentation to shallow targets, but it's a technique that won't go away," Klein says.

Flipping revolutionized bass fishing by bringing specialized skills to the game, and until recently at least, few anglers entered the pro ranks without at least rudimentary command of the technique. Credit its staying power to deadly effectiveness when bass have assumed ambush positions in tight cover locations such as docks, laydowns, stumps and emergent vegetation.

"It's so effective because you can put the bait wherever you want to," Klein says.

Range was flipping's only limitation, but shallow-water specialists like Denny Brauer and Biffle lengthened its reach with a variation called "pitching,"

in which a well-tuned reel – and practiced skill – enabled anglers to reach more distant targets with a similar underhand maneuver.

"That's the thing about all our techniques: Tackle technology evolves right along with them," says Klein, noting how advances and customization in rod, reel and line can accelerate the popularity of a rig or technique.

"WE AS FISHERMEN ARE EVOLVING WITH THE TECHNIQUES, EVOLVING WITH THE TECHNOLOGIES, TOO."

Status: Flipping and pitching remain the most effective techniques for dropping a bait on a prime bass-holding target, though today's sophisticated bass angler may well add dock skipping to his game. Skipping – scudging the bait across the water in a manner that resembles skipping a stone – enables the angler to reach deep recesses of boat stalls and the undersides of pontoons and overhangs. But flipping and pitching continue to draw the biggest bass from the tightest locations. With effective flipping, a bait spends more time in prime bass

ambush locations. For that reason, even though it's been called a lost art by some, expect flipping and pitching to undergo periodic revival.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

Forward-facing sonar (FFS) has become the primary driver behind lure and technique development recently. The bulk of head-to-head FFS encounters are with suspended fish – which, in theory, should take significant pressure off the structure and cover-oriented bass that most of the techniques of yesteryear were designed to catch.

So, while we're already seeing a new wave of baits and rigs designed for use with FFS, don't expect the classic staples to suddenly become extinct. As Duckett says: "All techniques come back after we've quit throwing them awhile."

Which will remain our mainstays? Which will be rediscovered and reinvented with a new wrinkle? Which will become situational weapons? What new deadly combination of bait and rig has yet to reach us?

"We as fishermen are evolving with the techniques, evolving with the technologies, too," reflects Klein. "And that's what keeps the fires burning." ■



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WHEELER'S WORLD

JACOB WHEELER'S THIRD FISHING CLASH
ANGLER OF THE YEAR TITLE IS HIS SWEETEST



ONE YEAR AFTER NARROWLY MISSING A COMEBACK FOR THE AGES, THE NO. 1 ANGLER IN THE WORLD COMPLETED AN AOV-WINNING SEASON THAT PLACES HIM AMONG THE ALL-TIME GREATS OF THE SPORT

By Joel Shangle

Five-year-old Olivia Wheeler was ready for the celebration. Decked out in pink sneakers, blue bow in her hair and proudly sporting a Jacob Wheeler jersey that matched that of her dad and 2-year-old brother, Hudson, Olivia skipped around the weigh-in stage at the Massena Dam Intake Park in Massena, New York, doing cartwheels, shaking pompons and breaking into impromptu cheer poses.

Warming up for the Very Big Moment.

These are moments that Olivia lives for: When “Lurch” yells her dad’s name, Dad picks up a big trophy, sparks go off (sometimes confetti, too), people cheer, and she, Hudson and mom, Alicia, join Dad onstage to pose with a big check and celebrate Dad’s ability to catch a bass better than anyone else in the world.

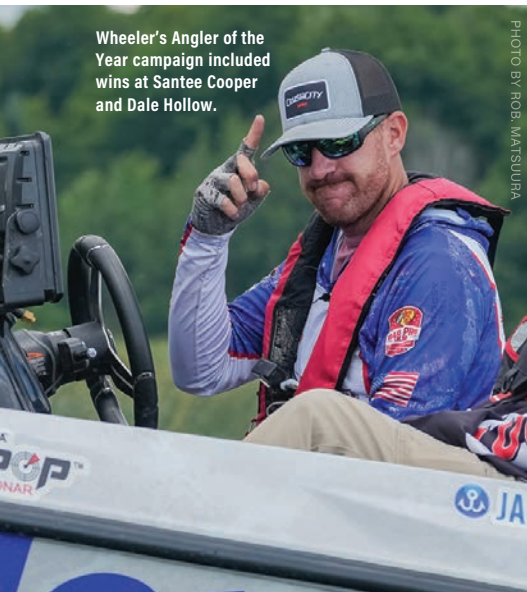
There have been a lot of Very Big Moments for Olivia, Hudson, Alicia and Jacob Wheeler over the past handful of years. Jacob has hoisted eight Bass Pro Tour trophies and three Angler of the Year trophies in six years, which has made for plenty of sparks, big checks and celebrations.

But this one – a year and a half after one of Dad’s most disappointing days as a professional angler – might be the very biggest.



Jacob Wheeler celebrates his third Fishing Clash Angler of the Year title alongside his wife, Alicia, his daughter, Olivia, and his son, Hudson.

PHOTOS BY JOEL SHANGLE



Wheeler's Angler of the Year campaign included wins at Santee Cooper and Dale Hollow.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

SETTING THE STAGE FOR AOY NO. 3

Throughout his 14-year career, Indiana native Jacob Wheeler has made a routine of being the first/youngest/fastest/etc. at virtually every level of tournament bass fishing:

- ❖ He was the youngest-ever winner of the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American at 20 years old on Louisiana's Cross Lake in 2011 and followed that up a year later by becoming the youngest Forrest Wood Cup champion, winning at age 21 on Lake Lanier in Georgia.
- ❖ He won the inaugural BASSfest on Lake Chickamauga, Tennessee, in 2014.
- ❖ He won the first Bassmaster Elite Series event he competed in – on Cherokee Lake, Tennessee – in 2017.
- ❖ He owns the highest round-winning percentage in MLF Cup/Select history and finished first or second in 21 of the rounds he fished.
- ❖ He became the first Bass Pro Tour angler with two, three, four, five, six, seven and eight wins.
- ❖ He was the first angler to win back-to-back BPT tournaments.
- ❖ He became the first two-time BPT AOY when he claimed the trophy in 2022.
- ❖ He's held the No. 1 spot in the Bassfan World Rankings for six years, the longest stint in the top spot since Bassfan's rankings started in 2001.



The 2024 season saw Wheeler notch Top 10s on multiple deep, clear reservoirs, a cover-filled swamp and a tidal river.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

And most recently, on Aug. 10, 2024 – following the Knockout Round at Stage Seven on the St. Lawrence River – Wheeler earned his third major-tour-level Angler of the Year title, a career accomplishment that elevates him to a tier among the all-time greats of the game. Only nine other anglers in the 57-year history of the sport (Roland Martin, Kevin VanDam, David Dudley, Clark Wendlandt, Bill Dance, Mark Davis, Aaron Martens, Andy Morgan and Jay Yelas) can claim three or more AOY titles on their resumes. Six of those are in the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame, and three have been on the Hall of Fame ballot.

Wheeler's four-year Angler of the Year run (wins in 2021, 2022 and 2024; second in 2023), though, puts him in even more rare air.

As *Bass Fishing* magazine assistant editor Mitchell Forde reported in Wheeler's AOY-winning story on MajorLeagueFishing.com, Wheeler has six wins and 26 Top 10s in 36 events

since 2021, a win rate of 16.6% and a whopping Top-10 percentage of 72.2%. He's collected just shy of \$2 million in earnings in that time (counting his MLF5 tournaments).

The only four-year streak in the past 40 years that surpasses Wheeler's current run is VanDam's dominance from 2008 to 2011, a period in which the consensus G.O.A.T. wrapped up four straight Angler of the Year trophies, won two Bassmaster Classics and banked eight wins.

Wheeler's surge isn't far behind, though. He's won at a comparable rate (VanDam won 18.2% of his events over that span) and finished in the Top 10 more often (VanDam was at 54.5%). Plus, when considering that two of VanDam's wins and five Top 10s came in postseason events with 12-boat fields, you could justifiably add Wheeler's 2022 Summit Cup and 2023 Team Series victories to his tallies.

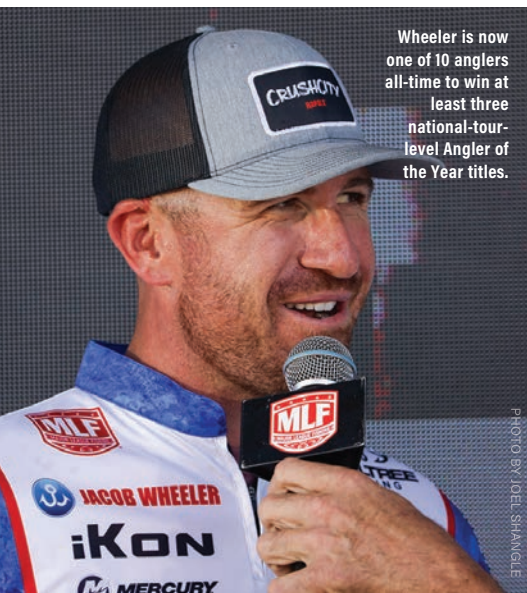
"You have to seize the moment," Wheeler said. "In every single sport, [people] are going to have their time, and right now, I realize that I'm living in that time where everything is clicking."

SETTING THE STAGE FOR 2024

Wheeler made no secret about the fact that he entered the 2024 Bass Pro Tour season with a little bit of a chip on his shoulder. Five months prior, he started the final tournament of the 2023 season on Michigan's Saginaw Bay in a four-man battle royale among himself (384.5 points), Alton Jones Jr. (391.5), Ott DeFoe (382.5) and Matt Becker (381.5) in the Angler of the Year points race, confident that he could close the gap between he and Jones and claim his third straight AOY trophy.

Wheeler had spent the previous four months furiously making up ground following one of the worst tournaments of his career – a 75th-place finish at Lake Murray that dropped him from third to 25th in Angler of the Year points. He won the next Bass Pro Tour event on Lake Gunterville, finished third at both Cayuga Lake and Lake St. Clair, and had made up an astounding 36% of the AOY points deficit in just three tournaments as action got underway on Saginaw Bay.

Wheeler fished Saginaw Bay in classic, strategic Wheeler fashion, quietly finishing 10th in his group in the Qualifying Round as the media spotlight burned brightly on VanDam, who



Wheeler is now one of 10 anglers all-time to win at least three national-tour-level Angler of the Year titles.

PHOTO BY JOEL SHAMBLE



Wheeler's decision to pivot from targeting smallmouth to flipping for largemouth on the St. Lawrence River helped seal his AOY victory.

was competing in his final regular-season professional tournament. Wheeler finished the Knockout Round in third place with 17 pounds, 15 ounces, and left the ramp on the final day trailing VanDam by 3 1/2 pounds in the event's two-day cumulative championship format.

Becker would go on to catch the biggest five-fish bag of the week (22-11) to win the tournament while Wheeler fell to eighth, just 1-1 out of fourth place (which would have been good enough to win AOY). Becker claimed the AOY trophy with 461.5 points, Wheeler finished second with 457.5.

"I just couldn't catch a big one that last day at Saginaw Bay," Wheeler said. "I had the followers that could've made the difference, but I didn't catch them. It was definitely an irritating moment – I had worked really hard to give myself the opportunity to control my own destiny, and it just didn't happen for me.

"I came back home and tried to analyze my mistakes and bad decisions I had made, and Lake Murray was the one that stood out. I tried trick play after trick play there, over-extended myself and didn't stick with the fundamentals of bass fishing. It cost me the AOY. That one killed me. I went into 2024 thinking, 'That right there can't happen again.'"

TOLEDO BEND – STARTING OFF 2024 STRONG

The first event of the 2024 season at Toledo Bend Reservoir in Many, Louisiana, turned out to be the Dustin Connell Show, as Wheeler's "Ding Team" housemate blistered the

Championship Round field by more than 44 pounds to pick up his fourth regular-season Bass Pro Tour win in three years. Wheeler finished third at Toledo Bend, though, winning the Qualifying Rounds with 151-7 and staying within range of Connell on the final day until he fell into a 90-minute lull in the second period. Connell, meanwhile, added over 70 pounds to SCORETRACKER® in the second half of the day.

Nonetheless, Wheeler's fourth-place finish was an improvement over 2023, when he started the season with an 11th-place finish on the Kissimmee Chain.

AOY race: Connell got out of the blocks first in the 2024 Fishing Clash Angler of the Year race with 80 points, followed by Spencer Shuffield (79), Drew Gill (78) and Wheeler (77).

SANTEE COOPER – MAKING THE RIGHT MOVES

Stage Two at South Carolina's heralded Santee Cooper lakes showed off Wheeler's diversity and ability to identify, build (and stick with) a winning pattern that's a little outside the norm. Early in the three-day practice period, Wheeler noticed that a large majority of the field was focused on a handful of well-known, cypress-filled creeks and scrapped that approach. Instead, he moved offshore, got on his graphs and spent the balance of practice and the first three of his four competition days developing a milk run of 40-plus waypoints where he could fish alone.

That approach – which flies in the face of conventional Santee Cooper

wisdom, which points you straight to the bank and cypress trees – paid off handsomely, as Wheeler racked up 53-8 his first day of qualifying, 34-1 in the Knockout Round and 47-4 on the final day to beat Dean Rojas by 5 pounds.

"I didn't pre-practice for Santee Cooper, and I think that actually turned out in my favor," Wheeler said. "Whether you think you do or not, sometimes you can go into a place with preconceived notions of how it's going to fish based on pre-practice. At Santee, I was able to just take it as it came. I could see it for what it was every day I was out there. I think that made a huge difference at that event."

AOY race: Wheeler took over the AOY lead after Stage Two with 157 points, leading Jesse Wiggins by 7.

DALE HOLLOW – GOING BACK TO 'HOME AWAY FROM HOME'

Following a two-month break for REDCREST 2024 (Wheeler finished sixth), Bass Pro Tour competition resumed on a fishery that Wheeler describes as his "home away from home": legendary Dale Hollow Lake in northern Tennessee. Wheeler's fondness for Dale Hollow stems from the innumerable days he's spent on the Obey River impoundment in the winter-time, honing some of the skills that have contributed to his success.

Wheeler finished practice with multiple patterns in mind and continued to develop his game plan through the Qualifying Round, in which he finished fifth. He topped the Knockout Round with 25 fish for 79-13 and then let loose on the final day, blasting 14 fish for 43-3 in the first hour alone. Wheeler ended with 39 scorable bass for 116-6 to outdistance Michael Neal by over 30 pounds.

"I've fished Dale Hollow a ton; it's one of my favorites," Wheeler said. "Things were changing a lot there, though. We had a bunch of rain, it was warmer than usual, some fish were wanting to move up (to spawn). These BPT events, you have such a long duration of time between practice and the championship, and so many things change. You have to adjust every single day, because the fish move so much. It was an honor to hoist the first trophy there in a national-level, professional event."

AOY race: Wheeler extended his AOY lead to 17 points after Dale Hollow (237 to Connell's 220).

LAKE EUFAULA – THE ‘MAKE OR BREAK’ TOURNAMENT

As far as “grinders” go, tournaments don’t come much more grindy than Stage Four at Oklahoma’s Lake Eufaula. Pummeled in the days ahead of the event by heavy rain and tornado activity, water levels spiked and clarity plummeted on the massive, 105,000-acre central Oklahoma reservoir, creating a mega-tough bite all the way around.

Wheeler started the tournament with just one fish for 3-14 on Day 1 of qualifying but rallied into the Knockout Round thanks to 21-11 on his second day, squeezing past Brent Ehrler by 2 ounces for his group’s final knockout berth. He ended the week with three fish for 6-4 in the Knockout Round, finishing 17th. Wheeler left Oklahoma satisfied that he’d survived the event without losing ground in the AOY race.

me. That was one of those tiny decisions that nobody ever sees and don’t realize how much they matter.”

AOY race: Despite Eufaula being his worst finish of the 2024 season, Wheeler stayed atop the AOY leaderboard, albeit with a smaller lead: 301 points to Alton Jones Jr.’s 289.

CHOWAN RIVER – THE RACE IS AT FULL SPEED

As the tournament week progressed on the Chowan River system in coastal North Carolina, it became apparent that the AOY race was going to come down to Wheeler “holding serve” for the final three tournaments of the season. He played the Qualifying Round just as he had multiple times before – leading his group with 47-5 on Day 1 and then laying off on Day 2 to develop more areas,

“At that point in the season and AOY race, you’re in it: AOY is literally all you can think about,” Wheeler said. “You can see the target. You can see the end of the road. After Stage Five, it really becomes the focus of just about every thought. That’s when the family support becomes a big, big deal. It’s always important to have that support, but that end-of-season time when AOY is an obsession, you have to have your family behind you.”

AOY race: Wheeler picked up 2 points on Jones after the Chowan, leaving North Carolina with a 14-pound cushion (378 to 364).

JAMES RIVER – STRETCHING THE LEAD

Wheeler had some familiarity with the James River heading into Stage Six, having collected three Top 25s in BASS Northern Opens on this Virginia tidal fishery from 2012 to 2016. He took right to the task, piling 78-8 on SCORETRACKER® on Day 1 (the heaviest single-day weight of the event) and sailing through the Qualifying Round with a group-best 107-9.

He faltered early in the Knockout Round, though, catching only two scorable fish before noon. While he found a groove on main-river brush piles in the latter half of the day, it was too little too late. Wheeler finished 11th, the first man out of the Championship Round cut. But even though he fell shy of making his fifth Championship Round of the season, Wheeler benefited from similar slight lapses by Jones (16th), Connell (21st) and Gill (25th).

“It turned out that I actually gained a few points at the James – it might not seem like a lot of points, but at that time of the season and that point in an AOY race, 3 to 5 points is a lot,” Wheeler said. “At that point, I went all in on AOY. I knew if I made the cut at the Saint Lawrence, AJ and Dustin couldn’t catch me. That was the best-case scenario: I had control of my own destiny.”

AOY race: Wheeler left Virginia with a 19-point lead over Jones in second (448 to 429), his largest AOY cushion of the year.

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER – BRINGING IT HOME

Wheeler took advantage of the six-week gap between the James River and the season finale, departing from a



An 11th-place finish at the James River put Wheeler in a position where he needed only to make the Knockout Round at the season finale to clinch AOY.

“When it comes down to it, Lake Eufaula was where I won Angler of the Year, in some sense,” Wheeler said. “I was on the brink of another Murray scenario on Eufaula, but I made some adjustments and some little decisions that made a huge difference in that tournament. For example: I made a bad cast with a frog into a willow tree, and instead of going up into the tree to get it – which I knew would mess up that willow tree – I broke it off and made another cast. Boom, a 3-pounder eats it. That 3 pounds was huge for

advancing easily to the Knockout Round and the final day.

Three of Wheeler’s closest pursuers (Jones, Connell and Drew Gill) advanced to the Championship Round (which Gill eventually won), and he finished fourth, smack in the middle of the pack of anglers chasing him. Wheeler left the Chowan in early June already thinking about the final two summer events – the James River in late July and the finale at the St. Lawrence River in early August – and the task ahead to secure the AOY trophy.

“I COMMITTED TO LEARNING AS MUCH AS I POSSIBLY COULD IN THAT FIVE DAYS.”

family vacation in Pennsylvania for five days of pre-practice on the St. Lawrence before the 30-day cutoff.

“I committed to learning as much as I possibly could in that five days,” Wheeler said. “Smallmouth that time of year, you’re mostly projecting where you think fish are going to be when you come back in a month, which is really difficult. One of those days, though, I went looking for places where I could have some backup largemouth. Largemouth are more ‘homebodies’ than smallmouth; they’re more dependable. Finding a zone where largemouth live was really important to me. Having that in my back pocket was huge.”

Thanks largely to that largemouth knowledge, Wheeler hammered the first few nails in the AOY coffin during the first day of qualifying. Trailing leader Spencer Shuffield by 20 pounds in the second period and not feeling the offshore drop-shot bite, Wheeler pulled out a flipping stick and Rapala CrushCity Bronco Bug and went to work in the shallow cover.

That decision virtually sealed the AOY trophy. Wheeler weighed 18 largemouth for 45 pounds to give him 74-5 on the day, a weight good enough for third place in his group. More important, it gave him a 15-pound cushion on the cut line. He maintained the deep/shallow pattern on the second day of qualifying, starting with deeper smallmouth and swapping to shallow largemouth as he had the day before but then returning to the offshore pattern late in the day and adding 22 pounds in the final period to finish with 48-14.

Good enough for 10th place. Good enough to wrap up Fishing Clash Angler of the Year.

AOY AFTERMATH – IT TAKES A VILLAGE

It’s a month after the final event of the Bass Pro Tour season, and the Wheeler home on the banks of Lake Chickamauga in Tennessee is the site of an Angler of the Year party. Alicia Wheeler has organized a 50-person celebration of Jacob’s third AOY win,

welcoming family and friends from West Virginia, Louisiana, Indiana and Alabama to join local, extended “Wheeler family” members to give props to Wheeler’s season.

While Jacob and his new AOY trophy are the focus of the party, in Alicia’s mind, the festivities are just as much to celebrate the extended family members present as her husband.

“This is not a job you can do alone,” Alicia said of the task of raising two young children, running the Jacob Wheeler Fishing business and maintaining a family home while Jacob is traveling and competing for weeks at a time. “We bring in people from all over because we want them to be able to celebrate – they’ve been a big part of all of this that Jacob has accomplished. We’re celebrating Jacob, but it’s also a thank you to everybody. Without every single person at that party, it would be so hard to make (AOY) happen.”

The team effort – and especially that of Alicia – is not lost on Wheeler, whose approach to tournaments and his job is evolving as Olivia and Hudson grow up. He’s staunch about calling and FaceTiming with them every night he’s away for work and dedicates as much time to them as possible when he’s home. He and Alicia are learning where and when to adjust schedules and make concessions between Jacob’s need to pre-practice and maintain his skills and the needs of a young family.

“I go into every year thinking, ‘This isn’t going to last forever for Jacob’, so my only job is to make sure that his only job is to think about fishing,”

Alicia said. “I try to handle every aspect of our family and his business without pulling him into it, and we have a really, really good group of people around us that help me do those things.”

Wheeler acknowledges that his first Angler of the Year award in 2021 was one of the most memorable achievements of his life. The 2024 Fishing Clash AOY trophy, though, is unique and special – it’s more personal to him because it represents a payoff to family and friends who have bolstered him throughout the year. And, because Hudson and Olivia are getting old enough now to appreciate the Very Big Moments.

“Winning AOY would be almost impossible without my family – and especially my wife – being there as a supporter and pushing me to succeed,” Wheeler said. “If you don’t have that support from home and your wife, and they’re not pushing you to be better and in full support of decisions, it just doesn’t work. It definitely helps to know that you’re on the same page and know the goal.

“My kids got to really see it all go down, and there’s really nothing better than that. Hudson gets to see the trophies in our house and gets to see the hard work that goes into winning them. Olivia is older now, and it all makes more sense to her, and she gets to enjoy it all. It’s way more meaningful that they’ve been present – that makes this season special. It’s not even about the trophy now, but the memories and everything that comes along with it.” ■



PHOTOS BY JOEL SHANGLE

Having his family present for all the big moments made Wheeler's 2024 AOY triumph especially rewarding.

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ALEC MORRISON



ALEC'S ARRIVAL

ALEC MORRISON WON A TIGHT FISHING CLASH ANGLER OF THE YEAR RACE IN HIS ROOKIE SEASON ON THE TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVATIONALS

By Mitchell Forde | PHOTO BY JODY WHITE





Alec Morrison hoists a hard-earned \$50,000 check after a tremendous season. His average finish of 8.67 is the best by an angler on the Invitationals/Pro Circuit since Bryan Thrift in 2010.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

When the final bell dismissed students from his high school each afternoon, Alec Morrison didn't go to sports team practice or rehearsal for a band or play. He didn't hang out with friends. Often, he admits, he didn't even do his homework.

Instead, Morrison's mom dumped his boat into Lake Champlain, a few miles from his home in Peru, New York. Just about every day the weather allowed it, Morrison would fish until it got too dark to see, then stow his rods and spend the next several hours idling back and forth, graphing.

"I would just go out there and literally fish until dark," Morrison said. "I spent a lot of nights fishing until dark and then graphing until like 3 a.m."

For Morrison, that was his practice, his rehearsal. He's been obsessed with catching bass for as long as he can remember, and since about age 10, all he's wanted was to fish for a living.

He's off to a heck of a start. During his debut season touring nationally, Morrison won both the Fishing Clash Angler of the Year and Polaris Rookie of the Year titles for the Tackle Warehouse Invationals, earning \$50,000, a new Polaris UTV and a berth in REDCREST 2025. He also qualified to join the Bass Pro Tour next season.

The 25-year-old's rapid rise to the top level of the sport might seem like it came out of nowhere. But those who observed Morrison's work ethic, his electronics mastery and his innate understanding of bass behavior as a teenager have seen this coming for a while.

"Everybody just saw the fire in his eye, the passion, the focus level at a very young age," said Bud Cipoletti, a fellow Champlain local who served as an early mentor to Morrison. "And we all saw it coming, basically, his ascent to success."



Morrison admires his 2024 AOY and ROY trophies.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSURA

CHASING HIS DREAM

Like most anglers, Morrison got his start fishing from the bank. Growing up on the shores of Champlain, one of his favorite spots was Point Au Roche State Park, where he'd occasionally run into FLW Tour or Bassmaster Elite Series pros on practice days and ask them questions. Once he found out it was possible to make a living traveling to the best bass fisheries in the country and competing in tournaments, he knew what he wanted to do for a career.

"They would be ending their day of practice or whatever, and they would take the time to talk to me, which was really cool, because I was kind of showing them that I was actually interested in this," Morrison said. "And it was really from that point where it started, where I kind of realized that this was actually a thing that I could be doing."

As soon as he was able, Morrison started fishing tournaments. It didn't take him long to find success. Less than two months after he turned 16, the minimum age required to enter MLF events, he competed as a co-angler in a Toyota Series event on Champlain ... and finished second. He also finished second in his first event as a boater, a June 2018 Phoenix Bass Fishing League tournament on Champlain.

For the next few years, Morrison only competed locally, fishing tournaments around the Northeast. He notched a few more Top 10s as a boater in BFL events, but his first win eluded him. Following the 2022 season, Morrison's father told his son that if he was serious about chasing a professional fishing career, it was time to branch out. So, Morrison spent the first few months of 2023 living in Florida with Cipoletti and Garrett Rocamora, the idea being that he could explore new fisheries while simultaneously working to earn his captain's license and start a guide business.

"We just kind of had been looking at everything and came to the conclusion that I may have been falling behind a little bit because I could only fish tournaments half of the year up



Bruiser-class smallmouth bass, like this one weighed at Stop 5 on Lake Champlain, were a big part of Morrison's breakout season.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



Morrison battles an airborne smallie during Stop 5 on Lake Champlain, his home water.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



Morrison hooked into some largemouth lunkers at Stop 1 on Sam Rayburn and recorded a Top-10 finish.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



These nice spotted bass helped Morrison finish in 12th place at Stop 2 on West Point Lake.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

north," Morrison said. "I was learning at a good pace, but I could definitely be learning faster and putting some more hours in."

On the surface, the Sunshine State's shallow, grassy, largemouth-filled lakes might seem like the complete inverse of the deep, clear waters of New York, where smallmouth often win tournaments. But Morrison quickly discovered that the skills and strategies he'd honed at home translated to Florida. Cipoletti was blown away.

"I met up with him at the end of a day, and I watched him put together like a 49-pound bag," Cipoletti recalled. "It was the craziest thing I've ever seen. I watched his whole process, and it felt like somebody who had perfected their method. He

had a whole system of scanning forever, for four hours, and finding all of the juice, and then going back through scientifically, methodically — with the wind, against the wind. And I watched him put together that insane bag, and I was like, this is crazy. And the thing is, he did that every day for the next few weeks. He put together like 45-plus-pound bags on a lake that everybody had said was on the downside. And then he won every local tournament in Florida that he entered."

His confidence bolstered, Morrison decided to enter all three Toyota Series Northern Division events in 2023 plus take his first crack at competing on a new southern body of water. He settled on a Toyota Series event at Texas' Sam Rayburn Reservoir in May.



Morrison stacked up 66 pounds, 12 ounces of bass at Stop 6 on the Detroit River to secure his AOY and ROY titles.

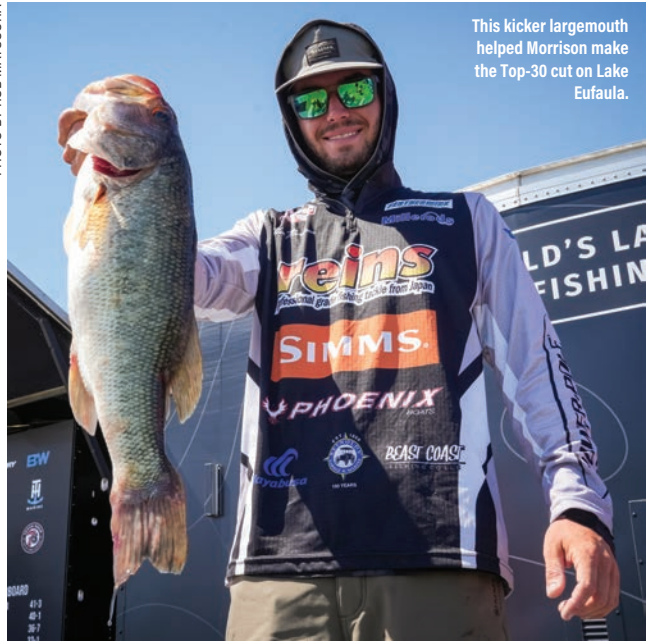
PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



Morrison relied on sonar and smallmouth to take a fourth-place finish at Stop 3 on Kentucky-Barkley Lakes.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



This kicker largemouth helped Morrison make the Top-30 cut on Lake Eufaula.

Morrison not only hung with the field of Texas hammers, he blew them away. Weighing a three-day total of 73-5, Morrison set a Toyota Series record with his 24-pound margin of victory.

The dominant performance put Morrison's name on the national radar and enhanced his belief that his fishing style worked. His confidence further ballooned as he went on to win one Phoenix Bass Fishing League event on Champlain and finish second in another as well as winning the Angler of the Year crown for the Toyota Series Northern Division.

"Rayburn was definitely a huge turning point," Morrison said. "I feel like I fished a specific kind of way, and I had a few good events on my home body of water, Champlain, in years past, but I basically never won anything. Once I was able to get that victory, I was able to kind of look at myself as an angler and realize, I can do this; the way I like to fish works."

TECH SAVVY, HARD WORK SPARKED DOMINANT SEASON

Even as well as Morrison finished 2023, he didn't enter his rookie season on the Invitationals thinking about winning Angler of the Year or qualifying for the Bass Pro Tour. With Rayburn and Champlain both on the schedule, his primary goal was to win one of those two events.

"I was like, I should probably fish (the Invitationals) considering two of them are places I feel really confident at," Morrison said with his typical nonchalance. "So, that was really the main goal going into the season was to win those two events, and it's really crazy how things kind of came together."

While Morrison didn't hoist the trophy at either event, he did finish among the Top 10 in both. Looking back at a season that he initially thought might contain some highs and lows because it included four fisheries where he'd never competed before, it's his consistency that stands out.

Morrison made the cut at all six Invitationals events. He finished among the Top 10 four times, three of those being fourth place or better. His average finish of 8.67 is the best by an angler on the Invitationals/Pro Circuit since Bryan Thrift in 2010.

"He had 17 pretty much great days of fishing in a row," fellow Invitationals pro and New York native Brett Carnright said. "He never slipped up one time, never had an off day, which is extremely impressive, because when you go to new bodies of water and only get three days of practice, usually a couple times throughout the year, you're going to have a bad day."

While his season contained no shortage of memorable moments, Morrison pointed to two that went the furthest toward propelling him to the points crown. The first occurred on Day 2 at Sam Rayburn, when he caught an 11-pound lunker. The second came during his first day of practice on Kentucky Lake. Morrison said he feared that event, the third of the season, more than any other on the schedule. But within his first few hours on the water, he found that he could use SideScan to identify smallmouth beds next to submerged stumps, allowing him to idle offshore bars and efficiently pinpoint fish. After finishing fourth, Morrison seriously started gunning for Angler of the Year.

"HE'S PUT IN THAT WORK THAT EVERYBODY ALWAYS TALKS ABOUT: SLEEPING AT THE BOAT RAMP, IN THE TRUCK, THOUSANDS OF HOURS ON HIS BOAT MOTOR. LEARNED HOW TO CATCH THEM SHALLOW LARGEMOUTH FISHING; BACK HOME, DEEP-WATER STUFF; EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN."

"I was real nervous about that one, and it all pretty much changed on Day 1 of practice," Morrison said. "In three hours, I figured out what I needed to do to basically win. That was really kind of the turning point to kind of take a step back and be like, 'oh, man, (AOY) is a potential, for sure.'"

Morrison credits his ability to succeed on unfamiliar bodies of water in large part to his electronics prowess. Coming from a 20-something in the modern fishing era, that probably isn't a surprise. However, while Morrison is certainly adept with forward-facing sonar, he thinks his willingness and ability to

break down a lake using mapping, SideScan and down imaging are his greatest strengths — skills he honed by graphing nearly all 300,000-plus acres of Champlain.

"I grew up essentially learning that the dude who put the most work in behind the console was typically the guy who did the best," Morrison said. "It's taken thousands and thousands of hours to graph all of Lake Champlain. But I learned so much valuable information about fish and why they get on places that they do."

Cipoletti called Morrison "brilliant," saying he has a natural feel for electronics, fish behavior and tournament strategy that few others possess. Just as important, though, he points to the work ethic he observed during Morrison's stint in Florida as what separates him from other young pros.

"He stayed out until 3 in the morning again, just scanning," Cipoletti said. "It's just his obsession with being the best. It's like Michael Jordan-type stuff for me to witness, like somebody just shooting hoops until 3 in the morning, practicing more than anybody else."

"I've watched him for 14 years, and the kid lives and breathes bass fishing," Carnright echoed. "He's put in that work that everybody always talks about: Sleeping at the boat ramp, in the truck, thousands of hours on his boat motor. Learned how to catch them shallow largemouth fishing; back home, deep-water stuff; everything in between."

NOT DONE YET

Morrison has heard other anglers who have won points titles describe their seasons as if they were destined — no matter what, it felt like they could do no wrong. He can't relate.

While the results might not show it, Morrison felt like he had several "slip-ups" during the Invitationals season. For instance, his 22nd-place finish at Stop 4 on Alabama's Lake Eufaula (his worst showing of the year) left him frustrated for weeks, as he not only felt like he was late to find the winning pattern but hooked and lost several key fish once he did so. Plus, the blistering pace set by the other anglers at the top of the points standings magnified each misstep. Despite making the cut at each of the first four events, Morrison started the northern swing 13 points back of Jake Lawrence. Even after a third-place finish on Champlain, he remained six points behind entering the season finale.

Then, on the first day of Stop 6 on the Detroit River, Morrison made an error that he felt certain would end his AOY quest. He placed a smallmouth in his livewell but forgot to cull, making another cast before realizing he had six fish in the boat. He incurred a 2-pound penalty as a result.

"I was like, man, I don't know how many more mistakes I can make here," Morrison said. "It's probably not going to work out (for AOY)."

The mistake did prove costly, although not in the way Morrison expected. He went on to sack up nearly 25 pounds on Day 1, which would have been the biggest bag of the event had it not been for his penalty. He backed it up with 23-6 on Day 2 and 20-8 on Day 3. That put him 10 ounces shy of Keith Carson for the win — meaning he would have earned the trophy had it not been for the penalty — but his runner-up finish proved more than enough to boost him to the top of the AOY standings.

Still, as excited as Morrison was to claim the points crown, he admitted missing out on his first national win stung.

"I'm pretty bummed I couldn't hold up that Invitationals trophy at the end of the year for the tournament win," he said. "That was something I was pushing for all year, and it really makes me want it even more."

That sums up Morrison's outlook on his budding professional career. Most might look at his 2024 results and see a nearly flawless season; he sees room for improvement. In fact, he's encouraged that he was able to log such strong results despite those growing pains, which he'll work this off-season to correct.

As he prepares to make his Bass Pro Tour debut, Morrison is confident he can take his game to another level. Even in the midst of turning his childhood dream into reality, there's no time for complacency. The closer he's gotten to realizing his goal, the more driven he feels to work for it.

"I feel as if some guys do really well for a year and then they kind of take their foot off the gas a little bit," Morrison said. "They take a breath, and you might not see them do well for a while again. I don't really think that's me, because every time I seem to do pretty good, it just tends to fuel me a little more and push me a little harder."

"I'm really looking forward to having some more success at a higher level, and I'm excited for what's coming." ■

A bright future ahead, 25-year-old Alec Morrison makes his debut on the Bass Pro Tour in 2025.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



ONYX AIR SPAN ANGLER

By Matt Williams
PHOTOS COURTESY ONYX

Life vests (PFDs or Personal Floatation Devices) are probably the most important yet most neglected piece of equipment anglers keep in their boats. Whether you're a fan of inflatables or foam-filled life vests, Onyx has all the goods to keep you covered and safely afloat, including the new Air Span Angler. "Air Span" technology is just one of the key features that sets this product apart from other traditional life vests. It's a great all-around choice for fishing, paddling and general recreational use.

First Impression

The Air Span Angler is the product of innovative minds coming together to build a snug-fitting PFD that is just as functional as it is

comfortable to wear. Among the cool features:

- ❖ Two roomy pockets for carrying sunglasses, spare baits, terminal tackle, snacks or other goodies. The zippered pockets are conveniently located on the front of the vest for easy access.
- ❖ The left pocket also has a tool holder for pliers, scissors, screwdrivers and other items you might need.
- ❖ The shoulder straps feature Airprene comfort pads, which prevent rubbing from the adjustment buckles.
- ❖ A conveniently located lash tab for holding accessories.
- ❖ The large arm holes allow the jacket to be put on or taken off easily without binding, even

when wearing bulky winter clothing.

- ❖ Comes with a rod holder strap so a fishing rod can be secured while tending to other business.
- ❖ The tapered back is lined with perforated mesh that expands to foster breathability when the vest is secured.

In Action

I've owned a passel of PFDs over the years, but none to compare to this one when it comes to overall comfort and functionality. Paddlers and kayak anglers will find plenty to love, although it would be nice to see it in some more fashionable colors.

Not only is easy to get on and off, but the straps are simple to readjust for a cozy fit whether fishing in a T-shirt

or bulky rain gear. Some other things I like about the vest are its secure fit without restricting movement and the pair of roomy pockets for holding extra baits, snacks, sunglasses and other devices. Finally, the Air Span technology lends to breathability to help keep the upper body cool when it's hot outside.

Final Thoughts

While inflatables certainly have their advantages, I've always preferred the wrap-around security of a good-fitting life vest with a strong zipper on it. If you prefer a different style, the Onyx line-up offers dozens of other options to suit everyone from casual boaters to the most hard-core bass anglers. Check them out at onyxoutdoor.com.

INNER MESH:

The Air Span Angler gets its name from the inner mesh that lines the back panel (Onyx calls it Air Span technology). Cinch up the straps and the mesh panel expands to create air flow to help keep your back cool in toasty conditions.



HEAVY-DUTY ZIPPER:

A heavy-duty nylon zipper holds the vest secure.



POCKETS AND POUCH:

Comes with two roomy front pockets and a tool pouch that seals with a buckle and nylon strap.



Performance Tips

❖ All too often, PFDs get put up wet in a sealed storage compartment or left out to bake in the elements between fishing trips,

leading to premature wear, reduced buoyancy, fading and other damage. Always allow life jackets to thoroughly dry before storing them and keep the material clean

using a mild soap and water. Take care of those PFDs and they'll take care of you.

❖ Always make sure the PFD fits comfortably and is sized appropriately to fit the chest circumference. A PFD that is too small may not keep you afloat. It should fit snug, but not too tight. A life jacket that is too big could ride up over your head/face and hinder performance or come off completely.

Applications

❖ Use it for fishing and paddling
❖ Size ranges from X-Small to 2X-Large
❖ Fits three chest sizes — 28-36 inches, 36-44 inches and 44-56 inches

HITS & MISSES

- + Easy on, easy off
- + Roomy front pockets
- + Comfortable enough for all day wear
- + Ideal for paddlers and kayak fishermen
- + Does not restrict movement
- + Easy to adjust for custom fit
- + Air Span technology keeps you cool

- One color



DETAILS

Sizes: 6

Colors: Green/gray

Buckles: 6

Pockets/Tool Pouch: 3

Weight Rating: 90 pounds and up

Safety Approval: U.S. Coast Guard and Canada Transport Approved

MSRP: \$109.99

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LET IT ROLL

This is no game — “fuzzy dice” have become one of the hottest new bass baits

By Tyler Brinks

One of the latest trends in American bass fishing (courtesy of Japan) is the increasing popularity of small, square or spherical soft plastics with protruding skirt material — or, in tackle nerd vernacular, “dice-style” or “fuzzy dice” baits.

American anglers first caught wind of these unique soft plastics from Japanese pros such as Taku Ito and Kyoya Fujita, both of whom have scored top finishes on the Bassmaster Elite Series with this bait style. Initially, it was easy to write them off as a gimmick (and many still do). But thanks to the “you can’t keep it secret for long” nature of social media and the internet, quite a few American pros have learned that these crazy-looking baits can be extremely effective in the right situations.

This past season on the Bass Pro Tour, Michael Neal, Alton Jones Jr. and Nick Hatfield secured top finishes fishing versions of these baits — including Neal’s season-ending win at the St. Lawrence River using a homemade dice contraption that he stitched together at the kitchen table of his Airbnb. Jones and Hatfield closely follow fishing trends from Japan and have been ahead of the curve in using knowledge of new Japanese baits to their advantage. Both were willing to share what they’ve learned from fishing dice/fuzzy dice baits, and both believe that the category is the next big thing in bass fishing.

THE DICE-BAIT PLAYERS

The “dice bait” or “fuzzy dice” category got its name thanks to the most well-known bait in the family, the OSP Saikoro Dice Rubber — a small cube with imprinted numbers like an actual die. However, there are other baits that fit into the category, too, such as the Geecrack Imo Kemushi and Imo Kemushi Cue Bomb as well as the Hide Up Coike Full Cast.



Alton Jones Jr. shows off the Geecrack Imo Kemushi Cue Bomb.

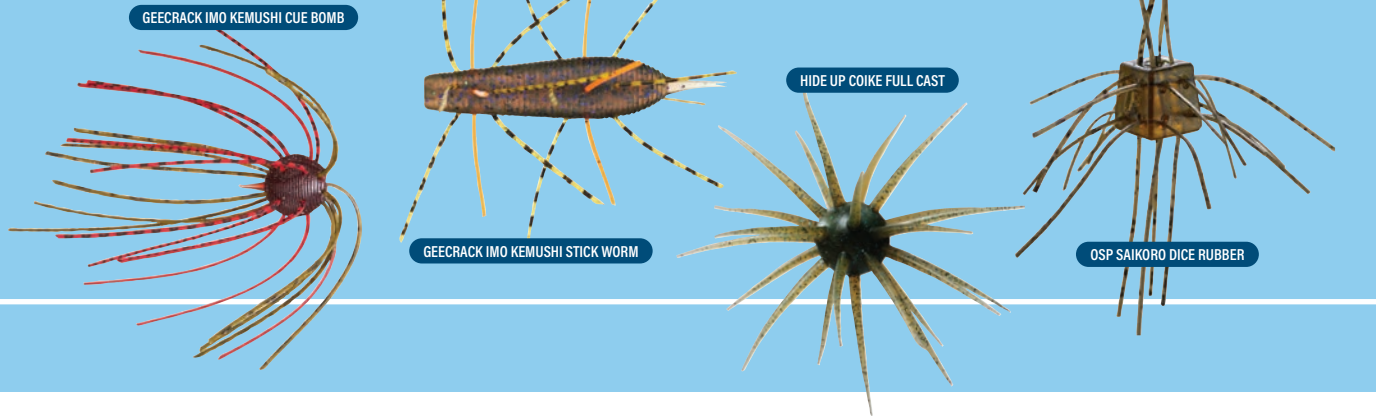
PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLIE

While each of the baits is similar, they offer different sizes, shapes and soft-plastic materials. The Saikoro Dice Rubber is a 1/2-inch cube with multiple strands of silicon skirt through the bait, and it comes in both salted and unsalted versions for different fall rates. The Geecrack Imo Kemushi is available in several sizes and options, from the cylindrical Slim Worm or Stick Worm to the Cue Bomb, a 1 or 1.2-inch sphere.

The commonality among those baits is each has multiple skirt strands protruding from the soft plastic. The Hide Up Coike Full Cast, meanwhile, is similar but larger (weighing approximately 1/2 ounce) and with spikes emerging from its round body that are molded as part of the lure.

UNIQUE DRAWING POWER

Fuzzy dice baits look quite different than traditional soft plastics — and not much like anything in nature, for that matter. But both Hatfield and Jones believe their unique appearance combined with their slow fall is what makes them so effective.



GEOCRACK IMO KEMUSHI CUE BOMB

GEOCRACK IMO KEMUSHI STICK WORM

HIDE UP COIKE FULL CAST

OSP SAIKORO DICE RUBBER

Jones first received some early fuzzy-dice intel in 2022 from his connection to the Japanese lure company Geocrack.

"My relationship with them opened my eyes to what's going on (in Japan), and the Imo Kemushi Stick Worm was the first bait I was introduced to," Jones said. "I used that bait at our last two Bass Pro Tour tournaments in 2022. I caught some big fish with it at both and immediately became a fan because the bait has incredible drawing power. That off-season, I ordered a bunch of different baits and started exploring them more."

A student of the game and an avid follower of tackle trends, Hatfield pays close attention to new techniques coming from Japan, which first piqued his interest in these baits. "I try to stay in the loop with JDM tackle and the techniques they use and love to watch the Japanese anglers because they do things a lot different than we do," Hatfield said. "I've spent time in the boat with some anglers from Japan, and there's so much to learn. That's what got me interested in fishing these baits. I got some OSP Saikoro Dice Rubber and Geocrack Imo Kemushi and started tinkering with all of the different baits early this year and have caught a lot of fish with them since then."

Hatfield is still trying to understand why these baits work but believes it's just something new the bass have yet to see.

"I think the biggest thing is that they're new and that much different," he confirmed. "I don't know if the fish think it's a crawfish, a goby or a little bug, but it's so much different than the plain old worms the fish are used to seeing. It doesn't have a lot of action underwater, but I saw this year for bed fish that you would throw a bunch of different baits and then throw one of these in there and get bit on the first cast."

"I FISH IT EITHER WEIGHTLESS OR ON A NO. 1 HAYABUSA WACKY RIG HOOK WITH NO MORE THAN A 1/32-OUNCE NAIL WEIGHT."

HOW TO FISH THEM

These unusual soft plastics can be rigged several ways, and both Jones and Hatfield have experimented with them on three popular finesse rigs: a drop-shot, a Ned rig and a wacky-rig hook.



Nick Hatfield has found success rigging dice-style baits weightless, on drop-shots and on Ned heads.

PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

"I fish it either weightless or on a No. 1 Hayabusa wacky rig hook with no more than a 1/32-ounce nail weight," Hatfield said. "You want to keep it super light and finessey on the fall. I've also fished them on a drop-shot and have had success with the Stick Worm fished on a Ned rig head as well. They have a version with a buoyant soft plastic that helps to stand it up."

Jones primarily fishes dice baits on a No. 1 VMC Wacky/Neko hook or on a drop-shot rig.

"I prefer to fish them weightless, either the Cue Bomb or the 'dice,' but they have an incredibly slow fall rate — it's maybe a foot every four seconds, so it hardly even sinks," Jones said. "I'll insert a small nail weight into it to be more efficient when using forward-facing sonar or when casting to docks and brush piles."

Using both his eyes and electronics, Jones has observed how fish respond to these baits and used that understanding to dictate his presentations.

"I've noticed that the fish rarely go down to the bottom and get it, so the slower fall is critical," he said. "Anything deeper than 12 feet, I'll rig it on a drop-shot and use a longer leader of around 18 inches to separate the weight from the bait."

Jones will often fish the drop-shot in the middle of the water column, imparting much more action than he does with other soft plastics. He's also careful to hook the bait correctly to increase his hook-up percentage.

"I fish them with fairly violent shakes on a drop-shot to get those tentacles to move more, then let it free fall," said Jones. "That is an efficient way to catch fish in the middle of the water column when they're pressured and not responding well to minnow baits. I'll also use a larger hook and hook right into the meat of that little ball on the Cue Bomb, so even if the bait spins around in a fish's mouth, you can still hook them."

SITUATIONS AND SCENARIOS

As much as Jones likes dice baits, they're not always his first choice. He believes there are much more efficient ways to catch fish in some instances.

"It does seem to be situational, and it's not going to be the first thing that I'm going to try," Jones admitted. "This is



Jones typically turns to dice baits on clear, pressured fisheries.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

a visual thing, so you need some clear water, and it tends to do best on pressured fisheries. If I'm fishing in areas where I know there are fish from seeing them on my electronics, and they won't bite other lures, I'll throw the Cue Bomb to them. It's also good for later-spawning fish, which can be trickier to catch, or when you see cruising fish that won't react to other baits."

Hatfield echoed those statements and said pressured bass is one scenario in which these baits shine. He's also found his best success targeting smallmouth; he secured high finishes at the St. Lawrence River, Lake Champlain, and Kentucky Lake on the Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Invationals this year in part thanks to these baits.

"I've done better with them for smallmouth, like at the St. Lawrence River, where I was casting to fish I saw on my forward-facing sonar or fish that I visually saw cruising," he said. "But they can still play a role in largemouth scenarios. They work where you would fish a jig — docks, laydowns, brushpiles and places like that. But you have a more finesse look and slower fall, which is so different than most lures, and that is why I think these could be the next big thing in bass fishing." ■



Fuzzy dice have proven particularly adept at catching smallmouth, as Hatfield proved throughout the 2024 season.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



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TRICKED-OUT TOPWATERS

By Mitchell Forde

Fall is synonymous with a few things – deer hunting, football season, sweater weather. If you're a hard core bass angler, though, something else probably popped into your mind first: It's topwater time.

Across much of the country, there's no better time of year to experience the thrill of a big bass blowing up on your topwater bait. That unforget-

table adrenaline rush might be the biggest reason why, despite the consternation about hard baits taking a backseat to soft-plastic minnows and other finesse techniques in recent years, we've continued to see a steady stream of new topwater baits hit the market. Here's a rundown of eight innovative topwaters that you need to try this fall, including several that just debuted at ICAST in July.

1 RAPALA PXR JOWLER 127

\$21.99 | rapala.com

Think of Rapala's Jowler as a cupped-face walking bait that's been amplified in every way. This new offering is designed to be bigger, louder and more aggressive than the norm, thus calling bass from farther away and provoking vicious strikes. The most striking feature of the bait is its unique, wide mouth. That allows it to spray water as it's walked or create a loud gurgle when chugged. The 5-inch bait contains a dual-frequency knocker that both attracts bass and helps with casting distance – at nearly 1 ounce, you can launch this thing. Armed with VMC RedLine trebles, the Jowler doesn't require any modification out of the package. It's available in 10 colors.



COLOR: YELLOW PERCH

2 BILL LEWIS ZIG ZAG

\$8.99 | baits.com

This new offering from Bill Lewis provides a fresh twist on an old-school favorite – the frontrunner. The Zig Zag is designed to be fished in tandem with a topwater walking bait. Tie your main line to the front of the Zig Zag, then tie a 1- to 2-foot length of line from its rear line tie to another topwater, and the two baits will walk in opposite directions. Not only does the action mimic one baitfish chasing another, which can trigger a reaction strike, the feathered treble on the Zig Zag provides the opportunity for anglers to hook a second fish after one grabs the walking bait – not uncommon when bass are chasing bait in schools. It's available in six colors.

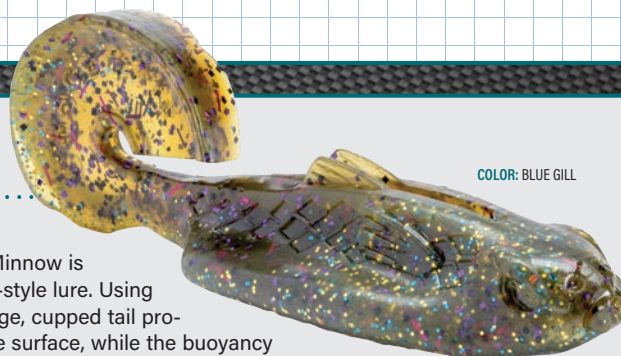


COLOR: SNEAKY SHAD

3 STRIKE KING RAGE BUZZ MINNOW

\$6.99/pack | strikeking.com

Another unique hybrid bait, Strike King's new Rage Buzz Minnow is designed to serve as a soft-plastic alternative to a popper-style lure. Using the company's popular Rage Tail technology, this bait's large, cupped tail produces a consistent plopping sound as it's reeled across the surface, while the buoyancy of the plastic and lack of treble hooks makes it highly weedless. The 4-inch bait fits well on either a single or double hook. Set to hit the market later this fall, it will be available in seven colors.



COLOR: BLUE GILL

4

SNAG PROOF ZOO WAKE

\$9.99 | americanbaitworks.com

Combining the attributes of a hollow-body frog, a swimbait and a wakebait, the new Zoo Wake from Snag Proof becomes an entirely new offering. The bait features a frog-style double hook around a hollow plastic body, much like a traditional frog. However, instead of silicone strand legs, it has a paddle tail that churns the water as it's retrieved. Perhaps its most unique aspect: It floats when motionless or retrieved slowly, allowing it to pass over vegetation without getting fouled, but it swims slightly under the surface when reeled quickly. The 4 1/4-inch, 1/2-ounce bait is available in 10 colors.



COLOR: CRAPPIE

5

Z-MAN HELLRAIZER

\$12.99–14.99 | zmanfishing.com

It only takes a glance to see that the HellraiZer is different than any other topwater on the market. The brainchild of ChatterBait inventor Ron Davis, the bait's uniquely carved face and belly line tie allow it to wobble back and forth and spit water during a straight retrieve. Meanwhile, the weighted ChatterBait-esque blade on the back provides flash and vibration with a feathered rear treble flowing behind it. If you want to cover water and show pressured bass a new look, give this bait a shot. It's offered in two sizes — a 5-inch plus a new 4-inch model — and 10 colors.



COLOR: SCALY SHAD

6

NOMAD DESIGN CHUG NORRIS

\$11.99 | nomadtackle.com

The first thing that stands out about this popping-style bait is its massive, round, cupped mouth. Indeed, the Chug Norris — which was initially designed for saltwater applications, then downsized to fit bass anglers' needs — creates quite the commotion when popped. However, this bait also walks better than you might expect based on its appearance. The key to its side-to-side sway is Nomad's patented autotune line tie, which isn't fixed in place. The 3-inch, 3/8-ounce bait comes stock with super sharp BKK Spear hooks and is available in nine colors.



COLOR: NATURAL SHAD

7

BUCKEYE BUZZERK

\$6.99 | baits.com

Designed according to specifications requested by pros, the tomizable buzzbait. Out of the package, its blade ticks against its sound that entices strikes. For situations that call for more finesse, that the blade doesn't hit the head. Adding to the bait's versatility is its comes in three sizes (1/4, 3/8 and 1/2 ounce) and eight different hues, which include nickel, gold or painted blades.



COLOR: BUBBLE GUM PINK

Buzzerk is a highly cus-lead head, creating a clacking simply bend the wire up a bit so range of size and color offerings. It

8

SHIMANO WORLD POP

\$19.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

The attribute that sets the World Pop apart from the numerous other poppers on the market is Shimano's Flash Boost technology. Inside the translucent body of the bait is a piece of foil suspended on micro springs. It constantly flickers, even when the bait is at rest, producing a subtle yet lifelike flash. The 2 3/4-inch, 3/8-ounce bait also comes with premium hooks, including a feathered rear treble. It's available in 13 colors. ■



COLOR: BLUE SV



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TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



B&W Trailer Hitches:
Spencer Shuffield,
Matt Becker



7Brew Coffee:
Adrian Avena,
Mark Daniels Jr.

GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES

By Mitchell Forde | Photos by Phoenix Moore

Ever wondered how it would look if the world's best bass pros paired up and competed out of the same boats in a format that mirrored local buddy tournaments? Those who tuned in for the first two events of the fall 2024 General Tire Team Series Presented by Bass Pro Shops saw the answer: lots of unfiltered strategy talk; double-ups; goofy celebrations; dramatic, buzzer-beating bites; even an on-the-water extraction of a hook from a hand.

The B&W Trailer Hitches Challenge Cup Presented by Toyota and the Knighten Industries Heritage Cup Presented by Berkley each saw 12 pairs of Bass Pro Tour pros duke it out across six days of competition. While the partner dynamic looked familiar to anyone who has competed in team tournaments, MLF borrowed a wrinkle from its Cup events by not revealing where the teams would fish until the morning of competition, forcing the pros to break down new water in real time.

The Challenge Cup, held in Erie, Pennsylvania, delivered multiple 100-pound days. Matt Becker and Spencer Shuffield of Team B&W Trailer Hitches used Becker's knowledge of his native Pennsylvania and their combined offshore expertise to



Smokey Mountain:
Luke Clausen,
John Hunter



COIGN:
Drew Gill,
Matt Stefan



REDCON 1:
Andy Morgan, Cole Floyd



Star Tron:
Bobby Lane,
Jacob Wall



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



WIX Filters:
Keith Carson, Ron Nelson



Kubota: Jacob Wheeler,
Dustin Connell



B&W Trailer Hitches:
Matt Becker,
Spencer Shuffield



breeze through the Knockout Round on Chautauqua Lake and then lap the Championship Round field on Presque Isle Bay, where they used a bladed jig, flipping tube and walking topwater to pluck schooling largemouth from grass. Their final tally of 64 bass for 113 pounds, 5 ounces earned the victory by more than 35 pounds.

Held in Neenah, Wisconsin, the Heritage Cup provided abundant shallow-water target fishing — not to mention close competition just about every day. The Team REDCON1 duo of Ott DeFoe and Andy Montgomery went a perfect three for three, first rallying to win their Elimination Round match on Lakes Poygan and Winneconne, then cruising to victory in the

Knockout Round on Lake Butte des Morts. During the Championship Round on Green Lake, they put on a dock-skipping clinic. With Montgomery wielding a jig and DeFoe cleaning up with a wacky worm, they totaled 55-8 on 29 bass, which proved just enough to withstand a late charge by the father-son team of Alton Jones and Alton Jones Jr.

Many of the same two-angler pairings will be back in action when the Team Series continues later this fall with the Patriot Cup (Oct. 24-29) and the Summit Cup (Nov. 17-22). Catch all the action live on the *MLF NOW!* livestream at MajorLeagueFishing.com, the MLF and MyOutdoorTV apps and Rumble.com. ■



Knihten Industries:
Keith Poche, Kelly Jordon



B&W Trailer
Hitches:
Nick Hatfield,
Justin Lucas



7Brew Coffee:
Ryan Salzman,
Zack Birge



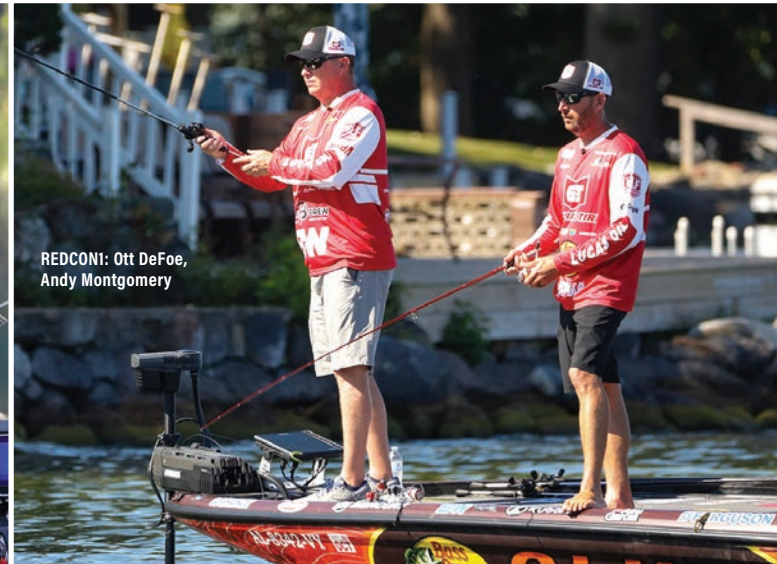
Smokey Mountain: Terry
Scroggins, Casey Ashley



Builders FirstSource:
Alton Jones,
Alton Jones Jr.



Star Tron: Martin Villa, Grae Buck



REDCON1: Ott DeFoe,
Andy Montgomery

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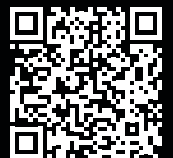
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PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

1. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS STOP 6 PRESENTED BY B&W TRAILER HITCHES Detroit River

July 26-28

Known best for his shallow-water and sight-fishing prowess, Florida native Keith Carson proved he can catch offshore smallmouth with the best in the business during the final event of the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals season. Carson nearly led wire to wire, taking the Day 1 lead with 22-15, then slipping to second with 21-15 on Day 2 before closing strong with 22-8, bringing his total to 67-6. That topped Alec Morrison by 10 ounces.

Like many in the field, Carson ran to Anchor Bay in Lake Saint Clair each day, but he avoided the crowd by targeting more isolated, roaming bass. Carson showed off his improved forward-facing sonar skills

by locating fish with Lowrance ActiveTarget and using a Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Jerk Shad on a jighead to catch them. The victory earned him \$80,000 and a ticket to REDCREST 2025.

2. BASS PRO TOUR MINN KOTA STAGE SEVEN PRESENTED BY HUMMINBIRD St. Lawrence River

August 6-11

Michael Neal joined the short list of multi-time Bass Pro Tour winners after outdueling John Hunter in a smallmouth slugfest on the St. Lawrence River. Making his fourth Championship Round appearance of the 2024 season, Neal overcame a nearly-8-pound deficit to Hunter entering the final period of the Championship Round to win by more than 15 pounds.

Committing to the upper end of the river and fishing deep, Neal used

a drop-shot and a finesse jig to drift for bass in 40 to 60 feet of water. Key to his win were managing his fish — he saved a few key areas for his final-period rally, which saw him boat 12 bass totaling more than 38 pounds — and adjusting based on the wind and current. Neal's weights got better every day: 64-3 on the first day of qualifying, 73-5 on the second, 83-11 to win the Knockout Round then 88-14 in the single-day sprint for the trophy.

3. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS NORTHERN DIVISION St. Lawrence River Presented by FX Custom Rods

August 22-24

Casey Smith put together a massive final day on the St. Lawrence River to climb from sixth place and claim his second Toyota Series win. After making about a 90-

minute run upriver from takeoff on Championship Saturday, it took Smith less than 5 minutes to boat a 5 3/4-pound smallmouth. The New York native kept pouring it on from there, putting more than 25 pounds in the boat during the opening hour and eventually culling his way up to 26-4. The second-biggest bag of the event, it brought his three-day total to 72-1, which topped Kyle Cortiana by 1-2.

While most anglers favored bottom-based presentations, Smith did the bulk of his damage targeting smallmouth that were chasing suspended schools of baitfish with a 5-inch Deps Sakamata Shad on a jighead. He took home \$39,750 for the victory.

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4.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

4. GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES PRESENTED BY BASS PRO SHOPS B&W TRAILER HITCHES CHALLENGE CUP PRESENTED BY TOYOTA

Erie, PA

August 25-30

The Team B&W Trailer Hitches duo of Matt Becker and Spencer Shuffield earned the distinction of winning the first top-level team tournament with pairs of pros fishing out of the same boat. Thanks in part to Becker's knowledge of the area having grown up in Pennsylvania, the pair finished second in their Elimination match on Presque Isle Bay to advance to the Knockout Round. There, they jumped out to a quick start on Lake Chautauqua, easily punching their tickets to the single-day Championship Round.

With the four-team field returning to Presque Isle Bay, Becker and

Shuffield found a group of offshore largemouth during the second period and used the one-two punch of a ChatterBait and a flipping tube to get bit and pull away from their competitors. Their final-day total of 64 bass for 113-5 marked the best day for any team all week and topped Anthony Gagliardi and Stephen Browning by nearly 35 pounds.

5. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHERN DIVISION

Santee Cooper Lakes
Presented by Suzuki Marine

September 12-14

Taking on the Santee Cooper lakes at an unusual time of year, South Carolina native Bennett Lawshe used his knowledge of the system to claim his first MLF win. Recognizing that bass were feeding on hatching mayflies, Lawshe caught most his weight during Days 1 and 2

5.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

6.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

— when he sacked up 19-11 and 25-7, respectively — on a Spro Bronzeye popping frog around cypress trees. He then ran offshore and used a jerk-bait to fill out his limit.

While Lawshe led by about 6 1/2 pounds entering Day 3, high winds made for some stress, as his trolling motor batteries died before noon. Still, he was able to bring 13-8 to the scales, which boosted his total to 58-10. Winning by nearly 7 pounds, he earned \$32,142.

6. GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES PRESENTED BY BASS PRO SHOPS KNIGHTEN INDUSTRIES HERITAGE CUP PRESENTED BY BERKLEY

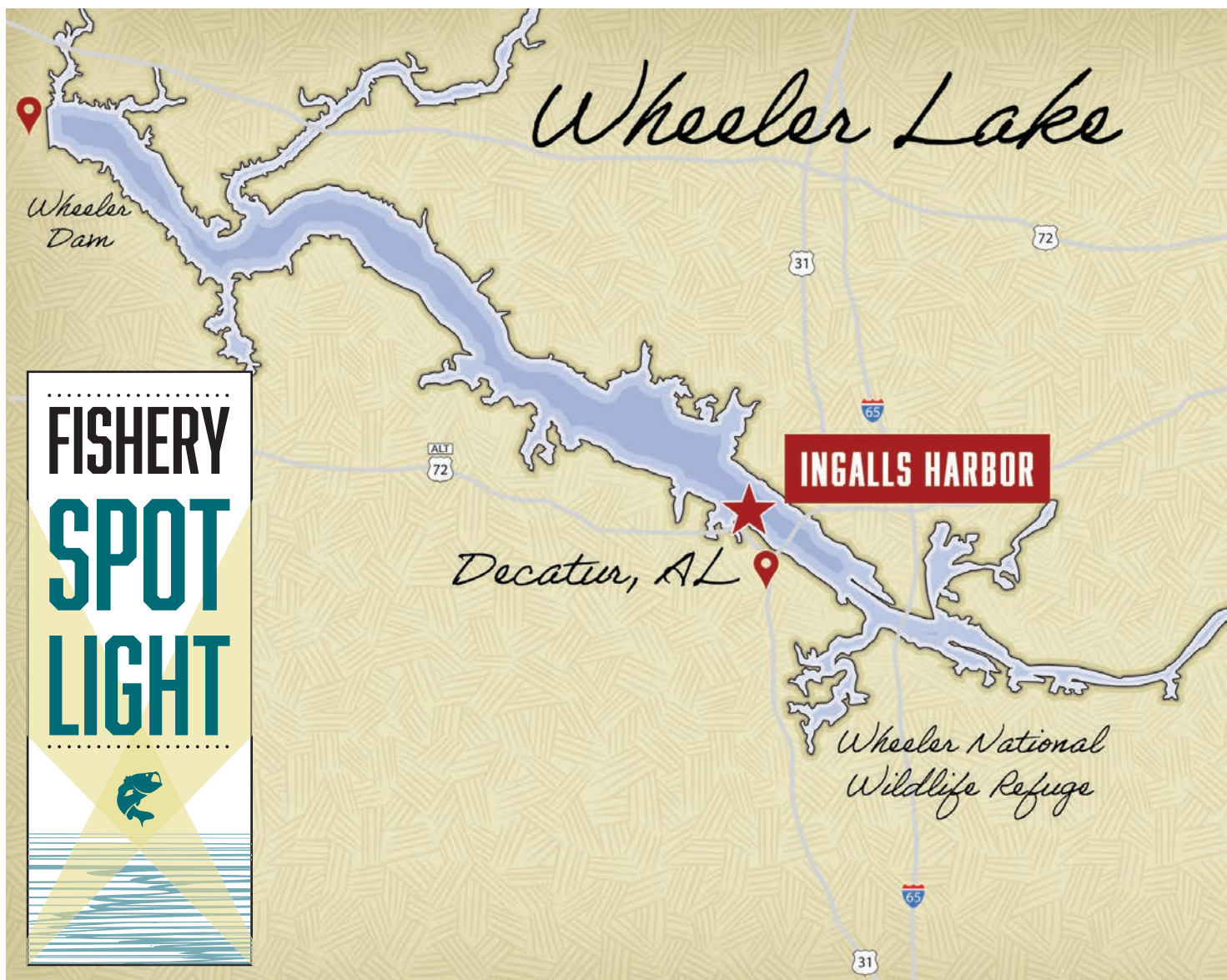
Fox Cities and Neenah, WI

September 15-20

Longtime friends and traveling companions Ott DeFoe and Andy Montgomery used their team chem-

istry and shallow-water prowess to win three rounds on three different fisheries en route to claiming the Heritage Cup trophies.

Representing Team REDCON1, DeFoe and Montgomery had to rally to stay alive during their Elimination Round match, climbing from third place to the top of SCORETRACKER® in the final 45 minutes before lines out. A steady day during the Knockout Round on Lake Butte des Morts then advanced the pair to the Championship Round on Green Lake. While several other teams tried to make the deep smallmouth bite work there, DeFoe and Montgomery committed to skipping docks all day. With Montgomery utilizing a jig and DeFoe throwing a wacky worm behind him, the duo boated 29 bass for 55-8 — just enough to edge the father-son duo of Alton Jones and Alton Jones Jr. by 5-7 and earn \$20,000 apiece. ■



WHEELER LAKE

By Tyler Brinks

It's been four years since the Toyota Series Presented by Phoenix Boats visited Alabama's Wheeler Lake, and now the fishery will be front and center as the host of the Toyota Series Championship Nov. 7-9. In addition, the best college anglers in the country will be back on Wheeler in April 2025 for the Abu Garcia College Fishing National Championship.

While neighboring lakes Guntersville and Pickwick sometimes overshadow this Tennessee River impoundment, Wheeler is a fine fishery in the midst of a rebound. This should result in great fishing for both championship events.

HOW IT SETS UP

At 68,300 acres, Wheeler is Alabama's second-largest lake. It's only slightly smaller than the largest, Guntersville, which is located just above Guntersville Dam.

Wheeler stretches some 60 miles and features tree-lined banks, riverine sections, aquatic vegetation and bridges, each of which attract bass and anglers. It shares some of the same characteristics as its neighboring fisheries but is a unique body of water according to Phil Ekema, the District 1 Fisheries Supervisor at the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Ekema said the lake can be divided into two primary sections, with the area above Decatur being more riverine and everything below it much flatter.

"Below Decatur, it's much more like a lake and more like a river above it," he said. "Some of the best places to target bass in the fall would be in the current breaks, points and creeks that come into the lake. The fish should heavily relate to the current on the main lake, especially in November as they focus on shad. The lake has an excellent population of both threadfin and gizzard shad."

Wheeler is also home to several well-known community holes, including the Decatur Flats, located below the Interstate 65 Bridge and downstream to about the Browns



ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON HOWMAN

THE STATE OF WHEELER LAKE

Ekema, also an avid angler, oversees all of the Tennessee River lakes and offered a state of the union on the fisheries.

"Guntersville is doing well and most well known, of course, and Wilson is probably the best right now when it comes down to it," said Ekema. "Pickwick may be down a little bit compared to previous years, and Wheeler may be slightly down, but it's still fishing well. But comparing each lake is hard since they are so different."

According to Crow, one of the primary reasons Wheeler is fishing better than years past is because of the re-emergence of vegetation.

"The lake went a long time without grass, and it was awful, and then about four years ago, we started to get some eelgrass, milfoil and hydrilla, and the fishing started getting good again," said Crow. "This year, we have less grass, but there's still some coontail left and a star grass that doesn't mat but is better than nothing. Overall, the grass is not near as good as it was a couple of years ago, but it will still be a player."

Water star grass is a unique vegetation, and Ekema believes it will be a factor, but other options could be more productive — if anglers can find them.

"It's almost like a little tree with a center stalk and little leaves that come off of it," he said. "It's a very tough weed, and you feel it when your lure hits it, but if you find a dense band of it, the bass will use it. If you can find some milfoil or hydrilla, you might find a hot spot, and there's still some of it out there. The TVA does not treat weeds; the grass fluctuates from year to year on Wheeler primarily due to Mother Nature from things like current, water levels and wind action."

LARGEMOUTH VS. SMALLMOUTH

Wheeler is home to all three major bass species, but both Ekema and Crow believe largemouth and smallmouth bass are likely to represent the bulk of the weight at the Toyota Series Championship. Smallmouth have the potential to dominate, as they typically run bigger and the population is currently in good shape.

"Proportionally, the smallmouth are doing better than the largemouth right now," said Ekema. "They've always been there, but it used to only be right below Guntersville Dam and down by Wheeler Dam on the lower end; now they are from one end to the other. The minimum size for smallmouth is 15 inches, and there's not much difficulty catching one that big. Fifteen to 20 inches should be a popular size, whereas most largemouth will likely be between 14 and 16 inches long."

Those numbers stem from electrofishing conducted by Ekema and his team during the spring months. They've also noted a resurgence in the largemouth population, although the top-end size might not be there yet.

"We primarily survey largemouth because our gear is only good to about 8 feet deep, and the smallmouth and spotted bass, due to their behaviors, are not as well represented, but both are doing well," he shared. "There was an excellent year class from 2020 and 2022 for largemouth from good spawns, and those fish are now mainly 15 inches for the fish two years ago and 16 and 17 inches for the 2020 class. The spotted bass population is also pretty strong, but

Ferry Nuclear Power Plant. This area, known as "the Flats," will surely attract many anglers in November, according to Alabama guide Brent Crow, who won the Toyota Series Championship on Pickwick Lake in 2021.

"In November, you can win from one dam to the other," said Crow. "Even without massive grass flats like we had in the old days, the Flats still has a stronger population than anywhere else on the lake."

Other popular areas will likely be down the lake around First Creek and Second Creek, the Elk River and directly below Guntersville Dam, which isn't far from the tournament takeoff at Ditto Landing in Huntsville.

"You can run up the river and catch fish — mainly spotted bass with a few largemouth and a few smallmouth mixed in," Crow said. "Down the lake around First and Second Creek could be good, but they don't tend to be as much of a factor as the Flats are for tournaments. But, below Guntersville Dam, you can definitely win there. If we see a 25-pound bag during this event, it will likely be from below the dam, but it's hard to do that three days in a row."

they typically don't play in tournaments because they run so much smaller. Unless someone needs to fill out their limit, they shouldn't be a factor."

Crow agreed, saying that smallmouth run bigger and are much easier to pattern this time of year with the cooling water. He also expects them to be a major factor.

"The fishing got good again for smallmouth before largemouth, and there are some monsters in the lake," Crow said. "It's not a St. Lawrence River population-wise, but it has some really good ones. On the Tennessee River, you don't catch smallmouth very often in the summer, and then they group up and get more aggressive in the fall. I could see this event won with all smallmouth, all largemouth or a mixed bag."

TACTICS AND PREDICTIONS

As the water cools each fall, the fishing heats up throughout the southeast, and Crow says November should offer excellent fishing on not only Wheeler but the entire chain.

"Early November is usually a really good time to be fishing Wheeler, and it's a great month for topwaters," shared Crow. "You can fish walking baits like pencil poppers, plopping topwaters and a buzzbait, which should all be good. If you can get around any grass, you can still catch some on a frog, too."

The caveat to the topwater bite could be the weather, which can be unpredictable during the fall.

"It's hard to get three days in a row on Wheeler in the fall without some wind," Crow said. "If you get any wind from the

east or the west, it gets awful with the current flowing against it. Three-footers will kill any topwater bite and muddy the Flats."

Aside from topwaters, Crow said a host of moving baits could be effective.

"ChatterBaits, spinnerbaits, maybe even a little cranking should do pretty well," he said. "You shouldn't have to drag something to catch fish, even though you can always catch some there on a shaky head. It shouldn't be a finesse deal unless someone strictly uses it with LiveScope."

Speaking of forward-facing sonar, Crow considers it the wildcard that could change everything he mentioned above. The technology was a major factor in the two most recent editions of the Toyota Series Championship, and he believes it could be the difference-maker once again.

"There hasn't been a big fall tournament here with that technology around, and I think it's going to be a player," Crow said. "I'm going to practice and try to find out a way to catch them that way in case it's the way to win. This event could be won with LiveScope or someone throwing a topwater on the Flats if they can find the right school."

Regardless of the winning pattern, Crow expects plenty of fish to cross the stage and said there is potential for many limits with some quality bags mixed in.

"This is a time of year when almost everyone catches a limit, and there's potential for some big bags," he said. "You'll see some 20-pound bags, for sure. With good weather, somewhere in the high 50s should win over three days." ■

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PROFILE: **ALTON JONES JR.**
LORENA, TEXAS



To say that Texas pro Alton Jones Jr. has been on a hot streak is a bit of an understatement. Arriving on the major tournament circuits in 2017 as an Elite Series rookie and joining the Bass Pro Tour in its inaugural year in 2019, Jones took to the highest level of tournament competition like a duck to water.

He earned his first BPT AOY Top 20 in 2020 (13th) and hasn't finished outside the Top 20 since, finishing third in 2023 and fourth in the most recent AOY race after hotly pursuing Jacob Wheeler throughout the 2024 season. Along the way, Jones won his first major tour event in 2022 (Bass Pro Tour Stage Two on Lake Fork), racked up \$150,000 in big-fish bonuses at Heavy Hitters just a few months later and then won Heavy Hitters by a whopping 59-pound margin in 2023.

Tournament success is in Jones' blood – his dad, Alton Sr., is a former Bassmaster Classic champion and has racked up nearly \$3.5 million in winnings in his 33-year career. But "Junior" (or "AJ" to many) can attribute his success to more than just good genes. We caught up with him as he prepared for a Team Series event for a quick round of Q&A. Here's what Junior had to say.

Q&A

By Matt Naber
PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

You've been on a hot streak of major accomplishments for the last few years: Heavy Hitters paydays, consistent AOY Top 5s, etc. Can you attribute that hot streak to anything in particular, or is it a mix of things?

I think there's a handful of things, definitely. Confidence and momentum are a massive part of it and can't be understated. This career is a roller coaster, and just being able to have confidence every time you go out to find the fish you need is a big part of it. Everyone starts out trying to survive, whether that's financially or sponsor-wise, but then you go through that and become a check-casher. Then when you get comfortable there, you try to ramp it up to the Top 10 level and work your way into the mindset of winning and getting into the position to win.

You finished third in the 2024 Fishing Clash Angler of the Year standings. Are you satisfied with the season, and what might you do differently in 2025 to seal the deal on your first AOY?

I'm satisfied with the season – the only thing you can ask for is a chance to win a major title, and during the last event of the year I had a chance and put myself into position. I would consider the year a success, no doubt; but to say I'm not disappointed after two years in a row of being right there and not getting it done is frustrating.

Thanks to your Heavy Hitters success, you have a reputation for big fish – or “chungus” as you like to call them. What's the story behind that word and what's the biggest chungus you've ever caught?

Funny enough, Big Chungus is a meme from I don't know how long ago – it was a fat Bugs Bunny. One of my buddies, his wife was like “man, that's a Chungus!” So, she started saying it, and I adopted it and thought it was funny and rolled with it.

My biggest bass was 11 pounds even in Sugar Lake in Mexico, then I had a 160-pound yellowfin tuna in Hawaii.

The General Tire Teams Series is underway, and as we go to press, you're set to compete alongside your dad, Alton Sr., as a team in the Heritage Cup. When was the last time you two were in a boat together as a team? And what are your expectations for that Team Series event?

This will surprise a lot of people, but since I went pro, Dad and I haven't fished together a lot. Being in the boat and competing together, that has been at least 10 years. So, a day on the water at the competitive level with him will be really fun. I'm excited and interested to see how it will go. Before, he was the captain; but now it's more a split role in sharing in the decision-making process, and I'm just looking forward to a day on the water with Dad and hope it's three days.

You share the same name and profession with one of the most successful tournament anglers in history. I'm sure you've been compared to him frequently. Did you ever feel any

added pressure because of that? And how did you set yourself apart?

Not really – I grew up around it with front row seats to the sport. I've seen a lot of successes and failures from all the anglers. Everyone has to be their own angler, and I learned fast that you have to go through the process yourself and trust your gut. It's not added pressure, it's added support.

I think what benefitted me was a lot of people just go fishing on their home lakes, but I was fishing with my dad all across the country. We didn't have a local lake that I was “the guy” on. My experience growing up was finding fish, and that's one of the things that really helped me.

You've fully embraced the social media/content side of the tournament game, working with Tyler Anderson on projects like the “Trimmed Up” YouTube series and hilarious things like the “Out of Context” series. You seem to enjoy the content process, but do you ever think to yourself ‘Man, it would be awesome to just fish with no cameras around’?

You've gotta find some humor in it. We're all humans and say goofy-dumb things and let your personality come out of it. You know, we get so used to fishing with cameras or a GoPro or a live camera – and the reason “Out of Context” exists is because we get so comfortable on camera. Anything can happen when you're out on the water, so it's nice to have video running since that's the ability to share it with friends and family and fans.

You have an affinity for baits and lures that are far outside the same ol' same ol' 6-inch green pumpkin worm. When did you really start getting into JDM baits? And what about those “outside the box” baits appeal to you?

The way it came about, I had a good buddy share with me a Bellows and I fell in love with it. It was a Geecrack bait, and my knowledge was a Megabass Jerkbait. Then during COVID, I got on board with Geecrack, and when working with them I fell head over heels with the JDM (Japanese Domestic Market). Back in

2019 and the spring of 2020, my guys at Geecrack told me about a mid-strolling technique with a jighead minnow – then fast forward four years, and that's what we're all catching them on.

It helps me think outside the box to generate more bites. I learned to never call something silly or stupid because someone will win \$100,000 on it. There's a lot of tackle innovations coming out of Japan, and in October I'm taking my first trip over there to dive into the JDM culture and spend a week fishing.

What has been your greatest JDM discovery? And, are you currently holding onto something that you're excited to fish, but not ready to tell the world about yet?

It would have to be the innovations of the dice bait. The Cue Bomb has been a cool tactic, and when we designed it, I didn't realize the power of it. It's something I'm still learning and trying to perfect. I'm wanting to learn it and I obsess over it since it's very situational. It takes a lot of skill to master on where and when you throw it. It's something I'm working on for next season with that technique and style of bait.

You've won more than \$1.2 million and are still on the young side of the roster. What's the coolest thing you've used some of your prize money for?

You know, in this sport you need a big safety net since you don't know when you will have a tough year. We just broke ground on a new home, so I've begun spending on that – it's where most of those winnings have gone. I'm looking forward to having my own man cave and boat storage area.

If you weren't competing professionally in bass fishing, what would you be doing?

I always just wanted to compete. I would say my true love – but I'd never be good enough to do it professionally, but if I could – I'd be a backcountry skier. I've been going to Colorado every year since I could walk, but that's the only thing that's driven me like fishing does. I'm a solid skier, but being in the mountains is something that's my favorite experience. ■



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Gabe Golubosky



GOLUBOSKY CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR IOWA ANGLERS

Iowa Federation became 48th member to join TBF in 2023

The bass fishing bug bit Gabe Golubosky early. He started competing in tournaments at age 12, and over the past 20 or so years, he estimates he's fished with just about every bass club in his home state of Iowa.

As a result, it takes a true stand-out to catch Golubosky's attention. But when fellow Iowa native Jordan Hirt took home the Living Your Dream Prize Package after winning The Bass Federation's 2022 National Championship on Lake Conroe, Golubosky took notice. Then, the following year, Des Moines native Chad Garton followed suit by topping the

co-angler standings at the 2023 National Championship on Lake of the Ozarks.

Prior to Hirt's win, Golubosky had never heard of TBF — not a shock considering Iowa didn't have a state chapter (Hirt and Garton had both qualified for the National Championship through Nebraska). But after seeing the lucrative prize packages dished out at the National Championship, he needed to find out more.

So, in March of 2023, he traveled to Missouri to compete in a qualifier event for the National Semi-Finals. Upon experiencing the event and learning more about the straightforward path to

the National Championship, he knew he wanted to bring the Federation to Iowa.

"My first question coming back to Iowa was, why don't we have this?" Golubosky said.

He wasted little time in making it happen. In April of 2023, Golubosky joined forces with a few other Iowa anglers to establish a TBF chapter in their home state. By mid-June, they held their first qualifying tournaments, two separate events on the same weekend on Lake Rathbun.

"I reached out to TBF national office, and ironically there had been a couple other guys in the state that, the stars just kind of aligned," Golubosky

said. “We were all asking the same questions at the same time, and basically off to the races we went.”

A TEAM EFFORT

After spearheading the effort to start an Iowa Federation, Golubosky took on the title of president. But he’s quick to note that he was only able to get the chapter off the ground so quickly because he’s had plenty of help.

Matt Lindholm, a lawyer, helped establish the organization as a non-profit. Dan Williamson started a fast-growing club, the Iowa Bass Busters, and brought it under the TBF umbrella, ensuring the Federation would clear the minimum 50 required members. Bob Harris, who had already been running a TBF youth program in Iowa, took on the role of tournament director. He provided sponsor connections and a tournament-ready trailer complete with a stage and a water tank for fish.

Golubosky was effusive in his praise for Harris, whom he called the “glue” of the organization. Recent tournament results have illustrated the health of the youth program he oversees, with an Iowa duo placing fifth in the recent Junior World Championship and high schooler Evan Powell, who got his start fishing TBF youth tournaments, sacking up more than 26 pounds to win a state qualifier on Lake Okoboji in April. Golubosky also believes Harris’ weigh-in setup helps set TBF events apart from other local derbies.

“We’re definitely bringing one of the more professional outfits,” Golubosky said. “We’ll have dunk tanks for the fish and things of that nature.



The top three finishers at Iowa’s state qualifier on Lake Rathbun in June — Aron Jacquart (middle), Peter Pattschull (left) and Nick Siepker (right) — each qualified for the District 8 National Semi-Final this fall.

Our qualifiers are trying to set the stage of being a premier event. We’re not just a weigh basket on a truck bed. We are trying to bring that to guys, that this is a prestigious event.”

LESS EXPENSIVE AND MORE INCLUSIVE

With less of a time crunch this year, Golubosky has sought to bring the TBF experience to more Iowa anglers in 2024. Instead of staging both state qualifier events on the same weekend, the Federation held one on Okoboji in April and the other on Rathbun in June.

That aligns with Golubosky’s primary goal: To expand access to the National Championship along both geographic and financial lines. Before he started the Iowa Federation, the only tournament circuit in the state that offered a pathway to a national event competed solely on the Mississippi River, on the state’s north-west border. By offering National Semi-Final qualifiers at both Okoboji

(on the northern border of the state) and Rathbun (south of Des Moines), Golubosky hopes to appeal to anglers who don’t have the time, money or desire to travel across the state and compete on a fishery where they can’t prac-

tice. He’s hoping to eventually add events on the Mississippi River, too.

“Before this, the only way to get to any national-level event would have been through B.A.S.S. on the Mississippi River,” Golubosky explained. “They only fish the Mississippi River, period. There’s no other body of water they fish besides the river. So, that’s where we were trying to fill in that gap for the central and eastern side of the state, help people get to these national-level events.”

Golubosky also wants to make sure anglers can afford to chase the dream of competing in the National Championship. One measure he’s taking to lower costs is establishing Iowa as a test state to hold its own National Semi-Final rather than competing in a joint event with Nebraska and South Dakota. That means in future years the event through which Iowa anglers can qualify for the National Championship will be held within the state every year, thus saving competitors money on travel.

While Golubosky is excited about his plans for the future of the Federation, he knows the most important thing he can do to make them a reality is spread the word to Iowa anglers about everything TBF can offer.

“Financial hurdles are the biggest problem in fishing,” Golubosky said. “The biggest hurdle initially is just the financial cost, and that’s the thing with TBF is just getting the word out that this is an affordable path. It’s a very affordable path, it’s close to home, and really just more guys need to know about it.” ■



The Iowa Federation hit the ground running with a top-notch weigh-in setup.

BAILEY, MOODY CLAIM JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP CROWN

When the top youth teams from across the country arrived at Lake Hartwell for the annual Junior World Championship in late July, anglers found the bite tough. Katie Bailey and Jacob Moody of the West Tennessee Junior Bass Trail made the right adjustments, increasing their weight each day and taking home trophies as a result.

With the anglers – all of whom had to be in eighth grade or younger – competing in a three-fish-limit format, Bailey and Moody weighed in 5 pounds, 6 ounces on Day 1. Day 2 saw them rally with 7-5, which was enough to boost them to 10th place in the 72-boat field. That earned them a spot in the 15-boat Championship Friday field, where weights were zeroed.

Bailey and Moody once again bested their bag from the day prior, bringing 8-2 to the scales. Anchoring their sack was a 4-15 brute, the biggest bass of the day. That proved to be just enough to top Indiana's Sam Elliott and Myles Motsinger by 1 ounce. For the win, Bailey and Moody earned \$3,000 apiece in scholarship money, with TBF awarding a total of \$15,000 in scholarships at the event.



NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS UNDERWAY

As mentioned above, the National Championship represents the goal destination for all TBF anglers. The field for the 2025 iteration is starting to take shape.

Qualification for the National Championship is determined by the annual National Semi-Finals. As of this writing, six of the 23 districts have held their two-day Semi-Final events.

The highest-finishing boater and co-angler from each state are guaranteed spots in the championship field. Additionally, states that enter at least 40 boats in their NSF events can send a second boater and co-angler, while those with at least 80 boats can send a third, and so on.

The winner of the National Championship will take home the Living Your Dream Prize Package, which includes a fully outfitted Ranger Z250 and paid entry fees for whatever tournament circuit the angler chooses. The location and dates for the National Championship will be unveiled in November after all National Semi-Finals have been contested.

STATE WINNERS

District 4: Lake Wheeler

Alabama

Boater: Chad Sykes (24.14 lbs.)

Co-angler: Matthew King (20.13 lbs.)

Mississippi

Boater: Blake Duncan (24.07 lbs.)

Co-angler: Chris Marshall (14.08 lbs.)

District 9: Le Homme Dieu Chain

Minnesota

Boater: Martin Terveer (31.56 lbs.)

Co-angler: Robert Beaman (23.63 lbs.)

Wisconsin

Boater: Mike Puterbaugh (29.14 lbs.)

Co-angler: Brant Stahulak (25.62 lbs.)

District 16: Lake Champlain

Massachusetts

Boater: Jacob Swanson (39.33 lbs.)

Co-angler: Mark Consolini (21.82 lbs.)

Vermont

Boater: Scott Green (32.02 lbs.)

Co-angler: Charlie Ferrell (21.23 lbs.)

District 21: Elephant Butte Lake

Colorado

Boater: Jerod Rosten (23.08 lbs.)

Co-angler: Richard Riddler (18.61 lbs.)

New Mexico

Boater: Joshua Baker (25.7 lbs.)

Co-angler: Rolando Barrueta (22.87 lbs.)

District 22: Lake Mead

Nevada

Boater: Antonio Herring (25.38 lbs.)

Co-angler: Andrew Hays (21.01 lbs.)

Utah

Boater: Jade Larson (25.41 lbs.)

Co-angler: Cassandra Jenkins (20.83 lbs.)

ABOUT THE BASS FEDERATION

THE BASS FEDERATION INC., (TBF) is a member of the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame. TBF is owned by those we serve, and dedicated to the sport of fishing. The Federation is the largest and oldest organized grassroots fishing, youth and conservation organization. TBF, our affiliated state federations and their member clubs conduct more than 20,000 events each year and have provided a foundation for the entire bass fishing industry for more than 50 years. TBF founded the Student Angler Federation and the National High School Fishing program in 2007 to promote clean family fun and education through fishing, and are proud partners in fishing with MLF. Visit bassfederation.com or highschoolfishing.org and "LIKE US" on Facebook.

SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING STATE CHAMPIONS

▼ **Maine: Cobbosseecontee Lake**

Brody Gould, Brayden Luciano
Student Angler Federation of Maine
19 pounds, 6 ounces



▲ **Ontario: Bay of Quinte**

Evan Wagner, Sidney Marshall
Highlands Secondary School
12.98 pounds

▼ **Michigan: Detroit River**

Luke Hendrick, Rylan Hamlin
Jackson High School Bass Fishing
21.65 pounds



▲ **Vermont: Lake Champlain**

Alex McFaul, Ethan Wagner
Essex High School Hornets
16.95 pounds

▼ **New York: Great Sacandaga Lake**

Caleb Hildenbrand, Parker Terrell
Legacy Jr Bass Club
11.91 pounds



▲ **Washington: Riffe Lake**

Emmett Hamrick, Miles U'Ren
Tahoma High School
8.33 pounds

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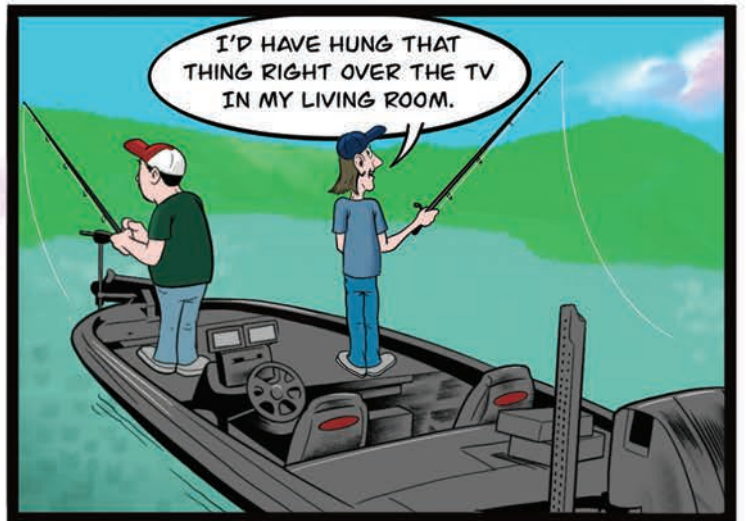
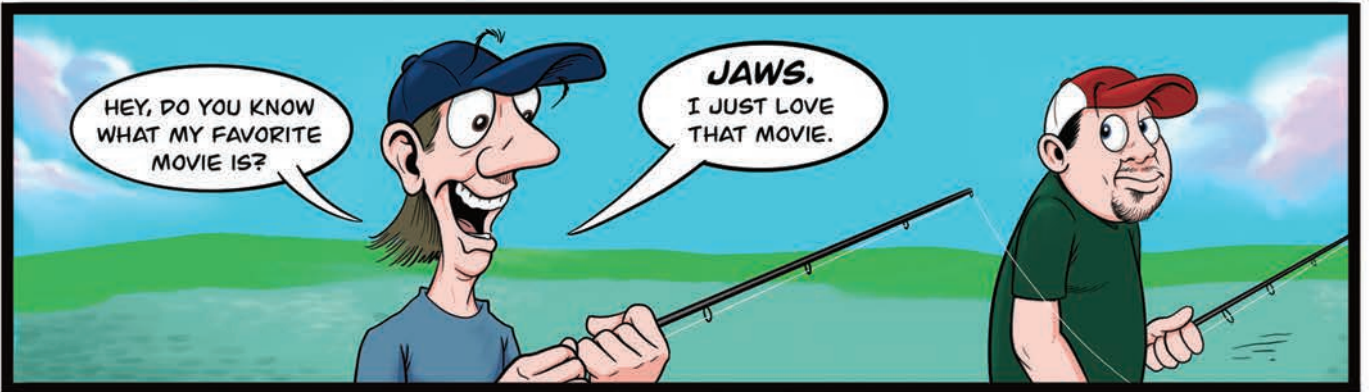
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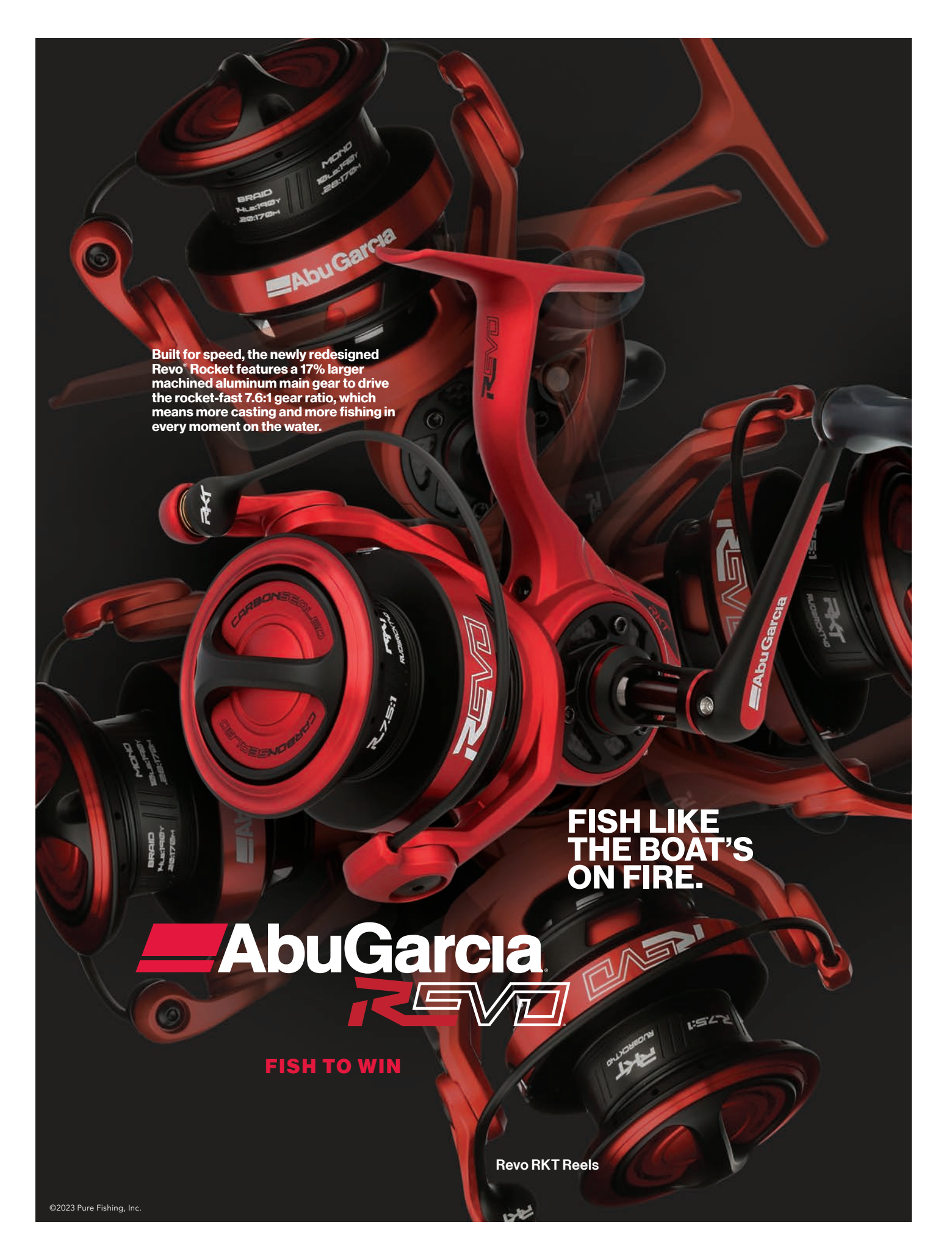


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