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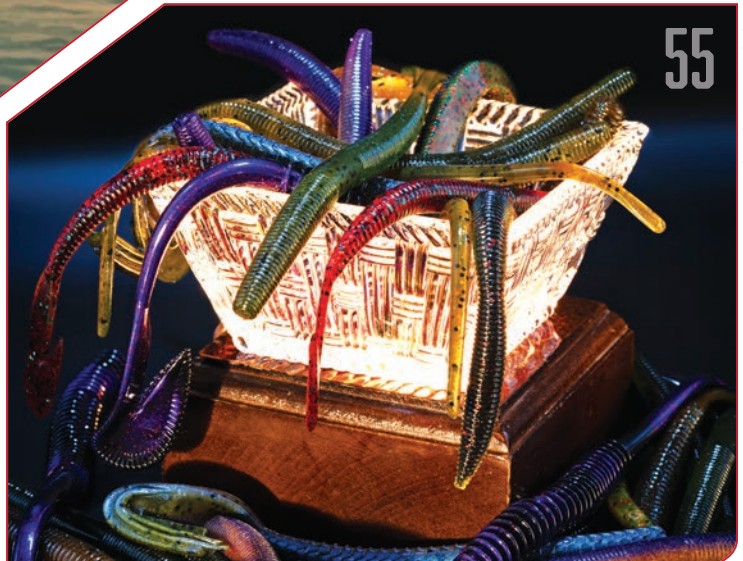
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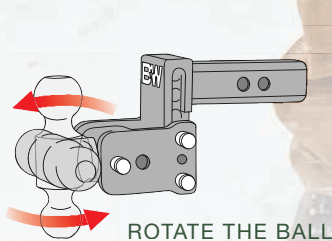
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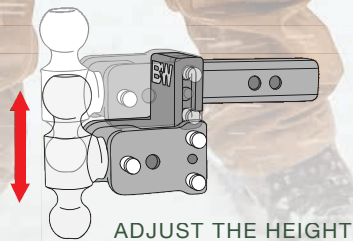
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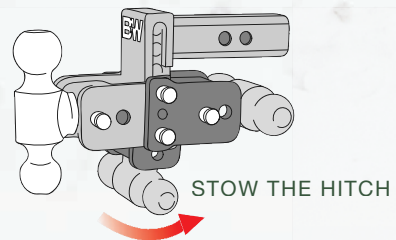
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THE LIFE OF GAMBLERS

My first couple years in college were largely spent in the common lounge area of my dorm playing No Limit Texas Hold ‘em with a handful of people I still call friends to this day. I fell in love with poker during those couple years, not just playing but also watching it on TV (this was during the poker renaissance perpetuated by ESPN’s constant coverage of the World Series of Poker) and consuming every poker book I could get my hands on, from Doyle Brunson’s “Super System” to “Hold ‘Em Wisdom for All Players” by Daniel Negreanu. In another life, I may have pursued a career that led me down a similar path as those players I idolized.

I still play on occasion – and there are some absolutely fantastic poker vloggers on YouTube carrying the torch for the game whose videos I rarely miss – though I’m admittedly more of a casual fan these days now that I’m no longer an unfettered undergrad playing for peanuts in a dormitory for 10 hours a night.

Recently, I got to thinking about the lifestyle of a professional poker player – the long days and long nights, the incredible self-confidence and work ethic required to make money playing the game, the gambler mentality of it all. And it hit me: Many of those personality traits are requisites for making a career of bass fishing. Truly, those who pursue bass fishing as a career are the rounders of the modern sporting world.

Consider: Every man or woman who enters a fishing tournament puts money on the line (and in many cases, a lot of money) with the belief that he or she is capable of winning more than the stake, knowing it’s possible to walk away with nothing. Even those with sponsor help know how quickly that can dry up. Belief in oneself is the supreme difference maker between winning and losing, big paydays and big zeros.

The gambler mentality is touted often in bass fishing (for proof, read Joe Balog’s column on page 24 in which Dakota Ebare explains going all-in on winning instead of playing bubble boy to earn a check). Those who can afford to miss a cut often take the biggest swings. Those who are willing to risk their whole stack are the ones who make history. As Mike McDermott (played by Matt Damon) explains in the poker movie “Rounders,” “You can’t lose what you don’t put in the middle. But you can’t win much either.”

The more I thought about it, the more the similarities became strikingly obvious. Just as poker theory has evolved, turning studious players into statisticians extraordinaire, bass fishing theory has taken off with the advent of space-age electronics and the spread of information across the internet (from Google Earth to YouTube). Gone are the days of simply reading the player across the table and pushing your whole stack across the betting line because you spotted a twitching eyelid or a pulsing vein. And in bass fishing, rarely is a tournament won these days without ample preparation and the aid of the newest and best information, gear and electronics.

Ultimately, though, the best poker players and the best bass anglers on the planet all have one fundamental trait in common: They trust their instincts. They’ve seen it all and they know all the odds and angles. And when it comes time to play those angles, there’s no second-guessing. Greatness leaves no room for self-doubt, and you’ll find none among the likes of Jacob Wheeler and Michael Neal and Kevin VanDam and so many other superstars of our sport.

A “fish” in poker is a player who is considered an easy target – a weak player whose money is fair game. I’ve yet to meet a bass that was a “fish” in that sense of the word, but I guess that’s why I’m not a pro.



JUSTIN ONSLOW, MANAGING EDITOR

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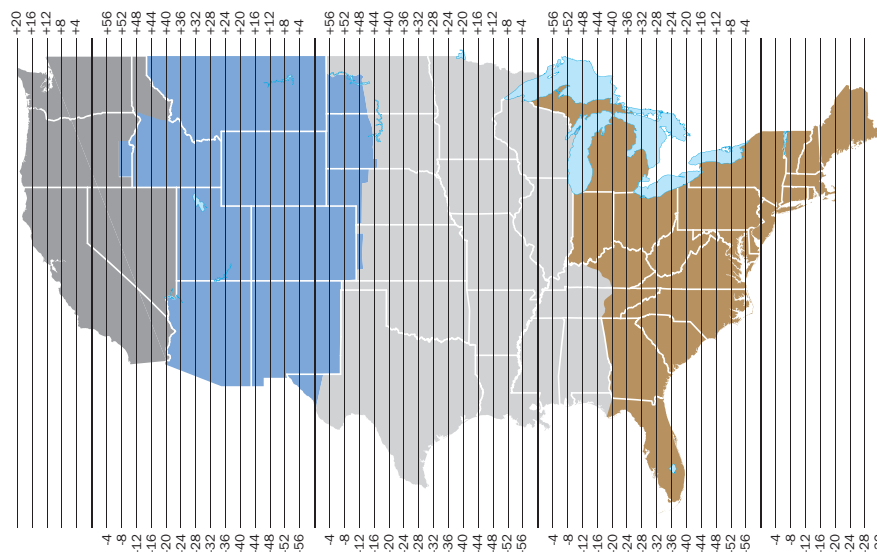
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SOLUNAR TABLES
JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2023

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



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|-----------|-----|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|-----------|-----|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|
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| 2 | Mon | 1:05 | 7:10 | 1:20 | 7:30 | | 2 | Thu | 2:10 | 8:20 | 2:30 | 8:45 | |
| 3 | Tue | 1:45 | 7:55 | 2:05 | 8:15 | | 3 | Fri | 3:00 | 9:05 | 3:15 | 9:30 | |
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| 6 | Fri | 4:05 | 10:10 | 4:20 | 10:40 | ☉ | 6 | Mon | 5:15 | 11:25 | 5:35 | 11:50 | |
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| 29 | Sun | 11:25 | 5:15 | 11:55 | 5:40 | | | | | | | | |
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| 31 | Tue | 12:40 | 6:45 | 12:55 | 7:10 | | | | | | | | |

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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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Bass Fishing HALL OF FAME Reflections

By Dave Washburn, MLF Vice President of Operations

Most people endure history. They survive the ups and downs of life. A few are lucky enough to witness history in the making. They have a front row seat to pivotal moments in time. Fewer still, make history. They leave an indelible mark that changes the trajectory of life for millions of people. Kathy Fennel is one of these few. The history makers. The Hall of Famers.

It's not hyperbole to say that Kathy's contributions to sportfishing have influenced millions of people for the better. She has been a steady hand and guiding light for tournament anglers since 1982, when she joined a tiny upstart in Gilbertsville, Kentucky, named Operation Bass. She grew with the company, helping revolutionize the sport with professionally run, close-to-home tournaments for weekend anglers. She

worked alongside other visionaries to introduce sponsor-wrapped boats and trucks, LIVE on-the-water television coverage, Fantasy Fishing and million-dollar payouts. She ushered in the modern era of bass fishing where top professionals thrive and high school students earn varsity letters alongside their classmates who play traditional stick-and-ball sports.

Kathy has led the charge in crafting a sport that is accessible to everyone. A sport that is enjoyed by millions of dedicated anglers who support conservation through participation and who influence millions more to do the same.

Kathy is a 2015 inductee into the Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame and a 2022 inductee into the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame, where she is one of only four women to have earned such honors.

As Executive Vice President and General Manager of Major League Fishing, Kathy continues to work alongside visionaries to provide life-changing opportunities for anglers and to diversify the sport, which just this year crowned its first female high school national champion, Fallon Clepper – on the 50th anniversary of Title IX – only to see its first female junior world champion Madison Robertshaw, crowned a month later. In November, our sport also saw its first female collegiate champion, when Marlee Churchman of Louisiana State University-Shreveport won an Abu Garcia College Fishing presented by YETI tournament on Lake of the Pines. All three young ladies were members of co-ed teams, working alongside their male counterparts to achieve shared success. This is an example for us all.

Kathy also works tirelessly to bring the thrill of bass fishing to MLF partners in Canada, China, Italy, Mexico, Namibia, Portugal, South Africa, South Korea, Spain and Zimbabwe. These partnerships are helping to shape the future of our sport by appealing to new, diverse audiences both in the United States and abroad.

She didn't set out to help change the bass-fishing world, but she did, and I have been blessed to be among the few with a front row seat. I am honored to call Kathy a friend and mentor. What I've learned, and what we should all learn, from Kathy is that you can lead with compassion and conviction, simultaneously, and in doing so, you can help change the world. ■



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WHEELER'S PURSUIT OF BACK-TO-BACK BALLY BET AOYS STARTED EARLY

Two-time AOY went from nontraditional bass-fishing upbringing to the top of the sport

Most professional athletes begin to dream about playing a game for a living when they're children. Back-to-back Bally Bet Angler of the Year Jacob Wheeler is no exception: As a second-grader, Wheeler informed his parents that he had a slightly non-traditional career plan in mind.

"At 6 years old, I told my parents that I wanted to be a professional bass angler," Wheeler said. "I remember even earlier, there was a Jacobs Cup on Wheeler Lake and [I thought] 'Jacobs Cup on Wheeler Lake, yeah, I'm going to win that!' At career day, I'd tell people all the time 'I'm a professional bass angler.'"

What made the youngster's bassy focus so exceptional was his hometown: Indianapolis, Indiana. At the time, the Indiana Pacers were in heated competition with the Orlando Magic and Atlanta Hawks for NBA Eastern Conference supremacy, and the Indianapolis Colts were in a run to the AFC Championship game. But instead of admiring Reggie Miller or Marshall Faulk, Wheeler looked up to Ohio-based bass pro (and eventual Redman All-American champion) Joe Thomas.

"That's not normal," Wheeler joked. "You're not in Texas or Alabama – where you're in the heart of bass-fishing country – you're in *Indiana*. Downtown Indianapolis. If there's anybody who's *not* going to make it, you would pick me. You would say 'That kid, more than likely, is not going to make it.'"

Wheeler, of course, made it. And made it big.

He became the youngest-ever winner of the BFL All-American in 2011, followed that up a year later with a Forrest Wood Cup title and then raced to the \$1 Million Club faster than any angler in history. He dominated in 2021 and 2022, picking up bookend Bally Bet AOY trophies and becoming one of only five anglers to win major tour-level back-to-back AOY awards.



PHOTO BY DAVID A. BROWN

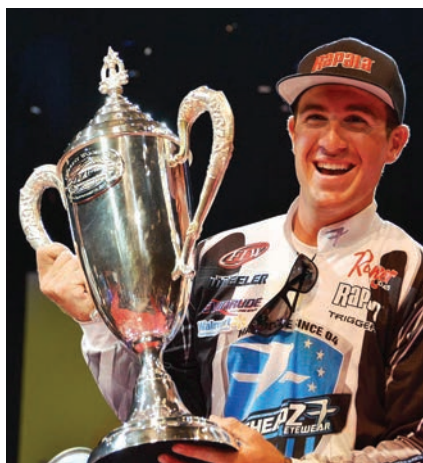


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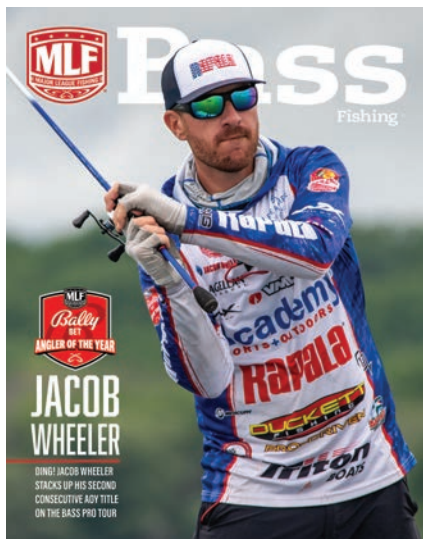


PHOTO BY GARNICK DIXON

MINDSET MATTERS

As longtime bass scribe Rob Newell stated in the October/November issue of Bass Fishing magazine, Wheeler's success has come thanks to a hearty mixture of perseverance, hustle, work ethic, skill and intelligence (and a little serendipity). Now eleven years into his professional career, Wheeler has added "savvy" and "experience" to the mix of a winning mindset.

"LOOKING BACK, I COULD NEVER FATHOM IN A MILLION YEARS WHAT'S TRANSPIRED IN MY CAREER."

"There's a learning curve of [understanding] how to win a tournament, and then there's a learning curve of how you win Angler of the Year, and how you prep for that," Wheeler said. "It's different. Your goals change and your mindset changes. There's the mental side of it that takes time and years to get to where you need to be. If you start (fishing) early, eight to 10 years in you're getting enough knowledge, you're mentally all there – you've had both bad and good tournaments, so you know how to deal with that emotion. It comes to that point where it's a perfect sweet spot."

As the 2023 Bass Pro Tour season approaches and Wheeler prepares for a run at an AOY three-peat, the gravity of his stellar success isn't lost on him. Six-year-old Jacob would be proud.

"I appreciate (it) because I think it shows people that everything doesn't have to be perfect to accomplish your goals," Wheeler said. "It wasn't all me, by any means. I had a lot of people help me along the way and a lot of things went the right way. You have to have a break in this sport to get to the next level and to the next and the next. Looking back, I could never fathom in a million years what's transpired in my career." ■

JACOB WHEELER
MLF ANGLER OF THE YEAR
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TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS PROVIDE PATHWAY TO BASS PRO TOUR, \$3.9 MILLION PRIZE POOL

Six-tournament circuit kicks off at Lake Okeechobee in February

Professional tournament anglers make their preparations for the 2023 season, Major League Fishing is similarly finalizing rosters and prepping tournament staff for a new tour-level circuit that will serve as the pathway to both the Bass Pro Tour and REDCREST.

In September, MLF announced the formulation of the Tackle Warehouse Invationals, a six-tournament circuit with a prize pool of \$3.9 million. The Invationals will replace the former Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit as the official qualifying circuit for the Bass Pro Tour: The top eight pros in the Invationals Angler of the Year standings will receive an invitation to fish the BPT in 2024.

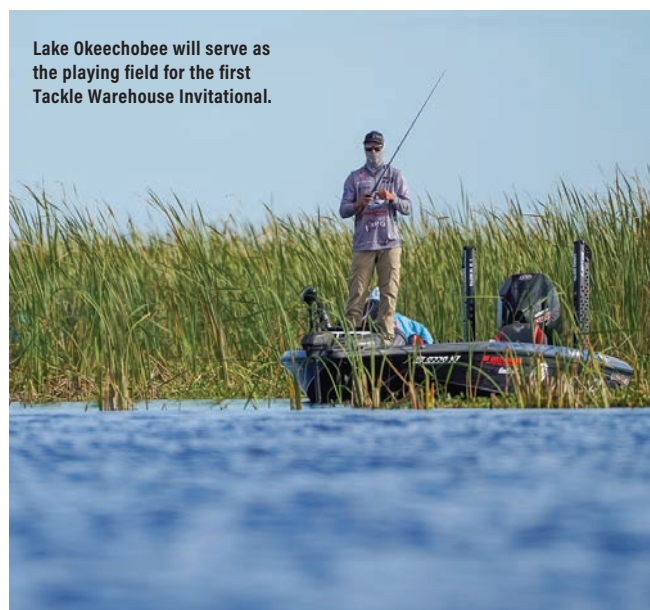
In addition, the individual winners of each Invational will qualify to fish REDCREST V in 2024.

INVATIONALS NEED-TO-KNOW

Here's a rundown of need-to-know information about the 2023 Tackle Warehouse Invationals:

- > Each Invational will feature a field of 150 anglers. Those 150-angler rosters will be filled by invitations to a combination of qualifiers from the 2022 Pro Circuit; top anglers from the 2022 Toyota Series; winners of the All-American and TBF boater division; the top finisher in the International Division of the 2022 Toyota Series Championship and anglers who didn't requalify for the Bass Pro Tour. In addition, 2023 Bass Pro Tour anglers will have the opportunity to fill out the fields on a first-come, first-served basis.
- > Invationals will be contested on a three-day schedule in a five-fish-limit, weigh-in format. The full field of 150 will fish Day 1 and Day 2; the top 50 anglers in cumulative two-day weight will fish the final day. The winner will be the angler with the heaviest cumulative weight over the three-day competition.

- > A top prize of up to \$115,000 will be awarded to each Invational winner (\$100,000 plus potential \$15,000 Phoenix contingency bonus).
- > The 2023 Tackle Warehouse Invationals schedule kicks off in February at Lake Okeechobee in Florida and finishes in late July on the Mississippi River in Wisconsin (see full schedule below).



Lake Okeechobee will serve as the playing field for the first Tackle Warehouse Invational.



"The MLF/Tackle Warehouse Invationals schedule offers a diverse group of fisheries – some old favorites with a lot of history, and some new locations that we haven't been to for quite some time," said MLF Senior Director of Tournament Operations Daniel Fennel. ■

2023 MLF TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVATIONALS SCHEDULE

Feb. 8-10 | **LAKE OKEECHOBEE** | Clewiston, Fla.
Hosted by the Hendry County Tourism Development Council

Feb. 28-March 2 | **CLARKS HILL LAKE** | Appling, Ga.
Hosted by Columbia County, Georgia, & Thomson-McDuffie County CVB

April 14-16 | **LAKE EUFAULA** | Eufaula, Okla.
Hosted by the Eufaula Conservation & Fishing Association

May 4-6 | **LAKE OF THE OZARKS** | Osage Beach, Mo.
Hosted by the Tri-County Lodging Association

June 17-19 | **POTOMAC RIVER** | Marbury, Md.
Hosted by the Charles County Board of Commissioners

July 25-27 | **MISSISSIPPI RIVER** | La Crosse, Wis.
Hosted by Explore La Crosse



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Team Toyota Angler



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MLF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIVISION'S 2022 SUCCESS STORY

Habitat projects, cleanup efforts, research and education programs set tone for 2023



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

With the conclusion of our fourth Minn Kota Habitat Restoration project in November, the MLF Fisheries Management Division in partnership with Berkley Labs completed all our planned 2022 projects. It's amazing to look at all that has been accomplished since we officially announced the FMD in March at REDCREST.

We unveiled our partnership with Berkley Labs, Costa, Mercury Marine, Ferguson, MossBack Fish Habitat and SeaArk at REDCREST in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and also announced the Costa Clean Water Matters Campaign and our plan to use the revolutionary Correct Craft Lake Clean Up boat to collect trash by land and water throughout the year.

We had aggressive goals for 2022, and we're pleased to report that we exceeded our expectations.

BUILDING FISH HABITAT TO BUILD A BETTER FISHING FUTURE



REDCREST 2022 was also the site of the industry's first live habitat build in an expo. At the Ferguson Habitat Build booth, members of the Union Sportsmen's Alliance joined the FMD in

constructing 100 Georgia Cube homemade structures and MossBack Fish Habitat products donated by MossBack, the Kevin VanDam Foundation and REDCREST attendees. The habitats were given to the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and deployed into Lake Bixhoma in March and Grand Lake O' the Cherokees and Lake Eufaula in July.

A month later, we announced the addition of our partnership with Minn Kota and the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Projects. This partnership allowed us the ability to complete three additional habitat projects in 2022. The first was at the Duck River Reservoir in Cullman, Alabama, supported by Mercury Marine and Mossback Fish Habitat. It took place during the off day of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit event on Guntersville.

FMD directors were joined by Pro Circuit anglers Evan Barns, Greg Bohannan, Bill McDonald, James Niggemeyer and Gary Klein.

In June, the second Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Berkley Labs was completed on Lake Chickamauga and focused on the Richland Creek area. This project also included a donation to the Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency for an additional habitat deployment in Grasshopper Creek that took place in July.

Bass Pro Tour anglers were competing on Watts Bar during the project, so pros Casey Ashley, Josh Bertrand, Tommy Biffle, Roy Hawk, Kelly Jordon and Skeet Reese joined the FMD and TWRA to construct and deploy the habitat.

In November, while the General Tire Team Series was filming on lakes

around College Station, Texas, the FMD completed its final restoration project of the season, this time supported by Humminbird. The project took place at Lake Bryan in Bryan, Texas. Volunteers from Texas A&M University, the Union Sportsmen's Alliance and MLF anglers collaborated with Texas Parks and Wildlife to complete this two-day project.

In total, between the REDCREST habitat build and the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Projects, the FMD provided 383 individual habitats covering 29,910.97 square feet with a value of \$93,599.26. These habitats went into six fisheries in four states.

DOING OUR PART TO CLEAN OUR NATION'S PREMIER FISHERIES



The four Costa Clean Water Matters shoreline trash cleanups supported by SeaArk were completed at Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri, the James River in Virginia, Lake Champlain in New York and Lake Cayuga in New York. In total, our volunteers covered 12 miles of shoreline and the Correct Craft Lake Clean Up boat covered an additional 6 miles by water. These teams combined to collect over 1,300 pounds of trash from the four reservoirs.



Bass Pro Tour anglers Casey Ashley, Kevin VanDam and Gary Klein were joined by University of Missouri

COMBINED EFFORTS BETWEEN REDCREST AND MINN KOTA PROJECTS

383

Total number of individual habitats provided by FMD.

29,910.97

Total square feet covered by habitats.

\$93,599.26

Total value for habitats that went into six fisheries in four states.

college anglers during their group off day to help clean up the Lake of the Ozarks.

The James River cleanup saw a large volunteer crew including Miles Burghoff, Randy Despino, Takayuki Koike, Terry Luedtke, Jimmy Reese, Skeet Reese and Gary Klein.

The Lake Champlain cleanup had a volunteer crew consisting of Dakota Ebare, Cole Hewett, Robby Lefere, Terry Luedtke, Jeff McClain, Jimmy Reese, Skeet Reese, Scott Towry and Gary Klein.

The final cleanup took place at Lake Cayuga with Bass Pro Tour anglers Dakota Ebare, Alton Jones, Michael Neal, Kevin VanDam and Gary Klein.

We want to thank all our angler volunteers this year for their commitment to our conservation efforts.

DIVING THROUGH DATA TO IMPROVE BASS POPULATIONS

Outside our projects at events, the FMD continued to lead research efforts to track, log and provide data for every fish caught on the Bass Pro Tour to state agencies. This season, we were able to log 11,054 fish into the MLF DataTracker, which includes the weights, GPS location and habitat type for 7,236 largemouth bass, 2,320 smallmouth bass and 1,498 spotted bass. Our research into largemouth bass genetics continued with our Bass Pro Tour officials and the Tackle

Warehouse Pro Circuit release boat crews collecting DNA samples from 102 largemouth bass over 7 pounds.

We are anxiously awaiting those results from Auburn University's Fisheries DNA lab.

The FMD continued its collaboration with universities to study Largemouth Bass Virus by donating 17 largemouth bass and 13 Alabama bass to Auburn University Graduate Research. We were able to announce the results of our 2021 collaboration with Michigan State University to assess the prevalence of LMBV in smallmouth bass at Lake St. Clair. They found more than 75 percent of the smallmouth sampled were positive for LMBV.

If you haven't seen the article, visit the FMD page and click the "Research" tab to learn more on that project and the results.

CONTINUING EDUCATION ON THE FMD WEBSITE

While you're visiting the FMD site, there are recurring articles under the "Education" tab that you might be interested in. The first to launch this year is the "Major League Fishing Anglers Guide to Aquatic Plants." In this series, we showcase a specific plant, how to identify it and advice from our anglers on their favorite ways to fish it. The second series is our "Meet Your Biologist" interviews.

In these articles, you'll meet local biologists who manage legendary fisheries, conduct fisheries research and design better products to maximize catch rates.

MLF Anglers Guide to Aquatic Plants: Coontail



MLF FMD biologist Steven Bardin and MLF pros take you through a guide of everything you need to know about Coontail and how to catch fish around it.

APRIL 18, 2023 - STEVEN BARDIN - FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIVISION

In the second edition of the MLF Anglers Guide to Aquatic Plants, we're covering one of the most widely distributed submerged aquatic plants - Coontail or *Ceratophyllum demersum*. To help guide us on this plant, we have Bass Pro Tour anglers Cliff Crochet, Gary Klein, Ott Defoe, and Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit anglers Alex Davis, Blake Smith, Grae Buck, James Niggemeyer, Jim Moynagh, Jim Tutt, Jimmy Washam and Trevor Fitzgerald.

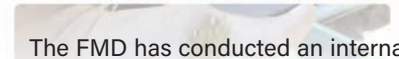
Common Names

This plant goes by many names, including: Coontail, Coons-tail, or, in the aquarium world, Hornwort. All of our pros identified the plant and called it Coontail, although Crochet did say, "It's certainly that green grass that's not Hydrilla."

Distribution

Coontail is one of the most common aquatic plants in the US and has worldwide distribution. There are three other lesser-known plants related to common Coontail. They are Spiny Hornwort *Ceratophyllum echinatum* (Eastern US), Prickly Hornwort *Ceratophyllum muricatum* (Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina) and Soft or Tropical Hornwort *Ceratophyllum submersum* (Florida).

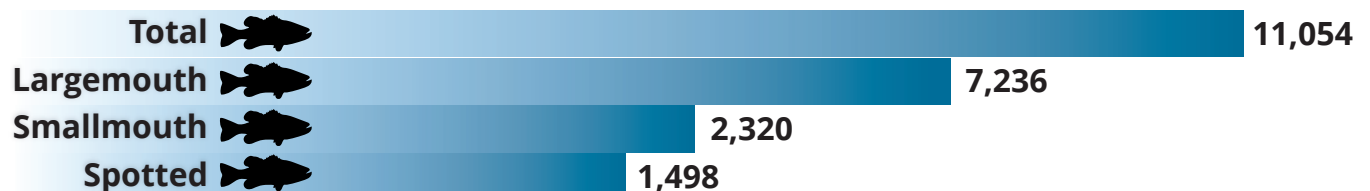
Identification



The FMD has conducted an internal angler survey to ensure that we continue to focus on conservation efforts that our anglers feel are most important to them. This data was shared with state agencies as well during the first FMD, Berkley Labs and state agency virtual summit.

The 2023 schedules for the Bass Pro Tour and MLF Invitational events offer us the opportunity to continue building on the progress from 2022 while exploring new projects. ■

FISH LOGGED INTO THE MLF DATATRACKER





HABITAT SUCCESS

Lake Bryan, Texas will benefit from FMD restoration project

By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

During the third qualifying event of the 2023 General Tire Team Series in College Station, Texas, the MLF Fisheries Management Division in partnership with Berkley Labs completed our fourth Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Humminbird. This project was on Lake Bryan in collaboration with Texas Parks and Wildlife College Station office and the Bryan, Texas Utilities Department.

Lake Bryan was impounded in 1974 and was used as cooling reservoir for power generation. The reservoir is 829 surface acres with a maximum depth of 45 feet and a constant water level. It's maintained by well water and has a slightly high salinity. The reservoir is almost divided perfectly in half down the center by a peninsula, with each side connected by a small channel on the southern end.

The lake traditionally has low spawning success, low survival and low angler catch rates due to a lack of habitat. Stocking redfish has been

attempted several times but has yet to result in a significant adult population.

Bryan Texas Utilities has put more emphasis on the recreational value of the reservoir since renovating the public park in 2018. These improvements have focused primarily on improving access for both boats and shoreline anglers. TPWD began restocking Florida largemouth bass fingerlings in 2019 and again in 2020. This spring, TPWD stocked 18,000 Lone Star Bass into the reservoir. Lone Star Bass are largemouth bass spawned at the Texas Freshwater Fisheries Center from two ShareLunker offspring. These improvements have resulted in more angling attention on the lake.

The Lake Bryan record largemouth bass of 8.7 pounds was caught in 2021.

FMD'S HABITAT GOALS FOR LAKE BRYAN

The FMD chose this project because of the recent recreational improvements, as well as the size and shape of the lake. The reservoir's shape allowed us to directly compare the suc-

cess of adding artificial habitat to a reservoir. We focused all our habitat on the west side of the reservoir, leaving the east to still be habitat limited.

The TPWD team will be able to use their electrofishing and creel sampling data to assess the direct impact of our project over the next several years.

To select the specific sites for our habitat deployment, we asked Gary Klein – MLF co-founder and co-director of the FMD – to examine topographic maps of the reservoir and select sites. Gary selected what he considered obvious transition sites where largemouth bass and crappie would most likely move as seasons change. Once Gary outlined the sites, we got the MossBack Fish Habitat team involved and went through their product catalog selecting four products: Trophy Tree XL, Safe Haven XL, the 40-inch Conservation Cube and the Spawning Bed.

Each product was selected to fill a niche in the reservoir and promote both forage survival and predator ambush points. Additionally, BTU provided 33 concrete trash receptacles to be used as catfish spawning habitat.

The final steps to prepare for the project were to get the build site secured from Bryan Utility on Lake Bryan, get cinder blocks and pea gravel from Lowe's Bryan Texas store #0103, and finally get our volunteer crews together to help build and deploy the structures.

For volunteers for this project, we put a call in to Texas A&M Fisheries Society to provide student volunteers and sent out email invites to local Major League Fishing Bass Fishing Membership. Through those requests and local word of mouth (as well as some unplanned help from MLF staffers who were working the Team Series event in College Station), we were able to gather a dozen volunteers for the project.





Volunteer participation is critical to our success and we're always grateful for the help we receive.

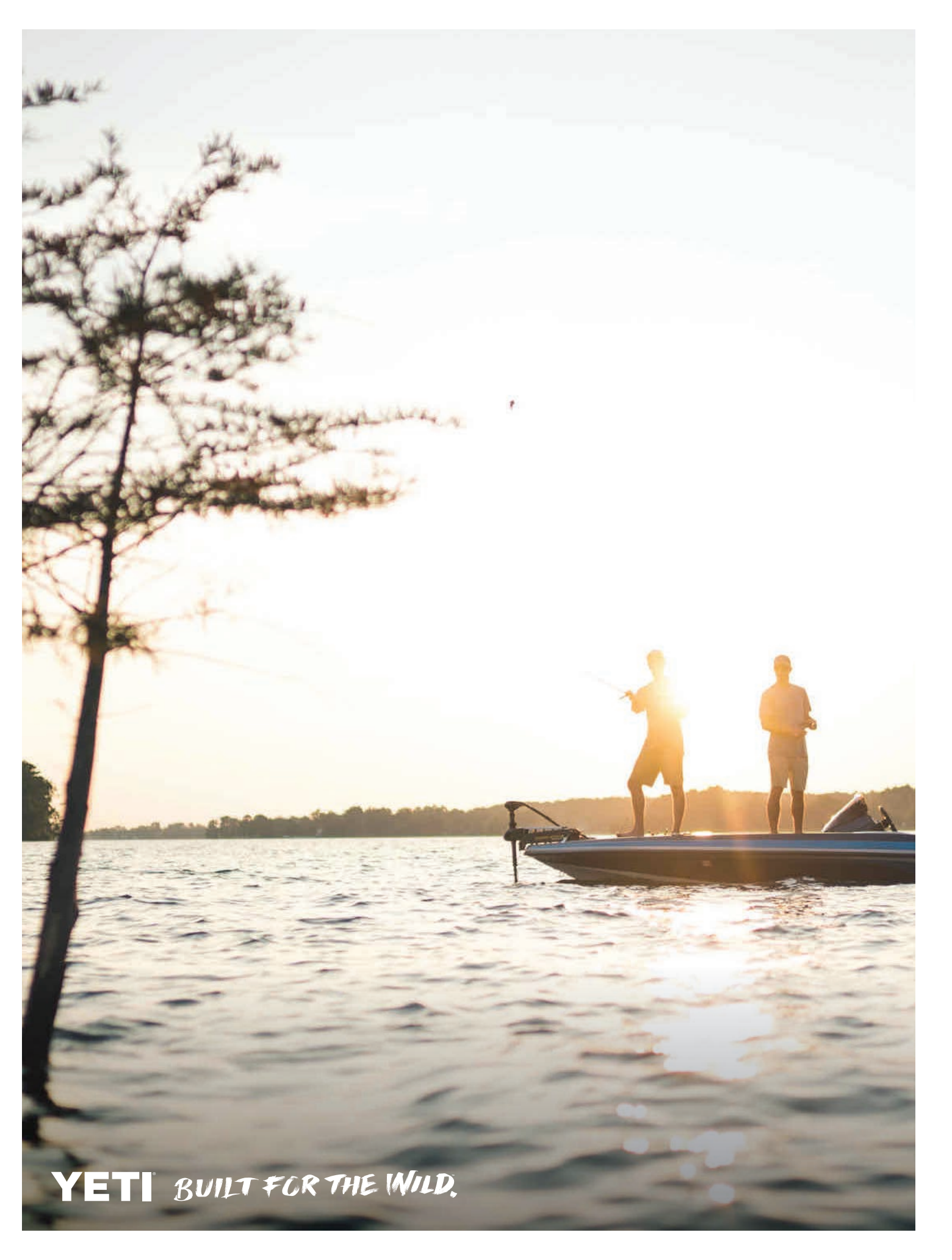
With a full team of volunteers, we quickly constructed the 74 MossBack habitats. We spent time with the students explaining how the products are made, how various fish species use them and where we would be deploy-

ing the habitat. Deployment of the habitat was made possible with TPWD providing their work boats. The exact GPS locations for each habitat drop were collected by TPWD staff and will be available in the future on the TPWD website as well as on the FMD page.

This project was a shining example of collaboration involving fisheries

managers, anglers, students and the fishing industry. It's an example of exactly what the Fisheries Management Division was built to do, and we look forward to continuing in 2023 with several more Minn Kota Habitat Restorations projects. We can't wait to see the results of our projects when TPWD does their next survey. ■





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ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

THE MYSTERIES OF THE BITE WINDOW

Your magic honey hole might just be a carriage-turned-pumpkin if you don't hit it at the right time.

Sometimes people ask what separates top bass fishing pros from the “average Joes.” Why is it that pros tend to catch more fish no matter where they go?

There are a lot of reasons pros are consistent fish catchers, and one of the most important is that their best “spots” on a given fishery aren't necessarily spots at all. They're “bite windows,” and top pros know how to identify and utilize their bite windows effectively.

Bite windows as a concept is tricky to explain because it's more about timing than it is fishing an actual area. In fact, what makes bite windows so elusive is that they're created by a perfect combination of conditions to trigger bass to feed – or

at least make them more aggressive. They're also temporary (hence the “window” part) due to their opening-and-closing, finite nature.

Much like seeing a rainbow, bite windows have little to do with the exact spot you're seeing the rainbow from and more about the perfect combination of moisture, clouds and light direction that forms the colorful phenomenon. You can see a rainbow from a particular spot one day and then return 100 more times to that same spot when there's no precipitation and not see one again.

Fishing specific spots certainly has merit, but over the last 15 years, the incredible technology of GPS, digital mapping and GPS-lock trolling motors have made many anglers spot-oriented.

Thanks to electronics, we can drive right to a waypoint or specific contour, “anchor” on it with the trolling motor and fish it for hours. That has put a lot more pressure on specific spots that used to be secret honey holes. In the meantime, full daily coverage of the Bass Pro Tour has revealed more true secrets reside in how bite windows work.

The advent of real-time scoring across each day of BPT tournaments has shed light on these conditional windows that open for periods of time throughout the day. Today’s top pros are much more attuned to bite windows and what’s creating that feeding opportunity.

TIDE CYCLES

Tides are a fundamental example of a force that creates bite windows. Bass that are subjected to ubiquitous tide cycles learn to use the ebbs and flows to feed.

In tidal fisheries, bass tend to be more predictable on falling tides. As water and bait are pulled off the flats down onto cover or edges like laydowns, pilings, hard spots or vegetation in deeper water, they set up in more predictable places. If you hear of pros talk of “riding the tide,” it often means running with a particular tidal window as it moves up or down a river or bay system so they can stay in the premium bite window for a longer period of time.

CATCHING THE CURRENT

Moving water is a big player in the bite window phenomenon. If you fish Tennessee Valley Authority fisheries regularly, you know just how critical current generation is to bite generation.

Variation in dam generation changes the water velocity, which in turn changes the bite windows. If a couple more generators open at the dam, the velocity increases, causing some bite windows along ledges to close and others to open.

Chains of lakes that are controlled by a series of dams create a constant game of variable velocity moving the bite windows around. Beyond that, reading current seams and eddies in moving water is still a true art in fishing. Some pros are just naturally great current readers: They can look at moving water and see the perfect bite windows in the moving water.

WATCH THE WIND

Wind is another huge bite window creator. Much like current velocity, changes in wind speed or direction create new opportunities. The great Aaron Martens taught me some special things about wind that make it such a potent force in creating bite windows.

Specifically, Martens revealed that it’s not so much just wind itself that opens windows, but rather changes in wind speed or direction that creates them. If it’s been slick-calm all morning and then a healthy breeze begins to ruffle the surface, a bite window is opening as bass sense the sudden change and respond accordingly. On the other hand, if the wind has been thrashing one side of the lake for three days and suddenly shifts or calms, a bite window is opening as that side of the lake settles back down.

IT’S ALL ABOUT COLOR

Water color is another everchanging condition that pros have a keen eye for when identifying bite windows. The general rule of thumb for bite windows with water color is finding water colored slightly differently from the norm at that time. This is particularly true of highland impoundments that are historically very clear.

Heavy rainfall will send slugs of colored water down the system that create feeding windows for a couple days before it clears back up. The opposite is true for big natural lakes or lowland impoundments that get roiled up with wind or a huge influx of muddy water that turns the lake into “chocolate milk.” In this case, bite windows generally occur where clearer water leaches into the lake from inflows of cleaner water like marshes or small seeps.

Pros are good at reading the right water color relative to where they’re fishing. “Good” water color is different for every region of the country, and having an eye for the right water color is a like having a crow bar to open up the window or a brick to smash it open.

FORAGE SPAWNS

Bass have an innate sense for finding food; their primary job is to observe their environment to locate easy prey. With that, they’re good at sniffing out

forage that’s in the process of reproduction. Bass know that typically spawning forage must gather in large masses and is focused on reproduction, making the prey abundant and vulnerable.

Whether it’s a shad spawn, sunfish bedding, crawfish mating or mayflies hatching, bass know where and when it happens. This process creates a tremendous bite window in areas that otherwise might not be productive. Over the years, pros have discovered a lot about bite windows with shad and bream, but there’s still a lot of mystery surrounding the spawning habits of blueback herring, gobies and crawfish.

MANUFACTURED CONDITIONING

Man-made functions are the fastest growing forms of bite windows emerging due to development around lakes. To a large degree, bass are conditional creatures: When something in their environment creates a feeding opportunity on a regular basis, they’re going to take advantage of it.

Some of the more obvious forms of this man-made conditioning come from drainage pipes that flow into a lake when it rains or locks that open and close with the passage of boats going through a dam. Some people have lights on their dock or auto-feeders that sling out fish food; both attract smaller fish, which in turn bring bass.

Examples of other such conditionings are numerous: trestle bridges that rumble with each passing train, barges that push “barge tides” up rivers or the end of idle zones where boats get up on plane during heavy boat traffic weekends – all are functions bass can get conditioned to get an easy meal.

One of the coolest man-made bite windows I ever witnessed happened while fishing a tough tournament on Lake Texoma with bass pro Jay Yelas years ago. Yelas had discovered that when the striper guides returned to a particular marina dock every day at lunchtime and released their excess live bait back into the lake, a 30-minute bass feeding frenzy resulted. Over the course of three days, Yelas nearly won that event, mostly from bass he caught during that magical manmade bite window. ■



WHAT ARE WE DOING WRONG?

Household names figured out the game. It's up to the rest of us to do the same.



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.

Reality can be a tough pill to swallow. The truth is this: Most aspiring pro bass anglers will never attain superstar status. Just making a living is tough enough. Yet some seasoned vets and solid up-and-comers have figured out the game. Where do the rest of us go wrong?

To get the answers, I talked to five MLF standouts: two household names and three rising stars who have proved their worth in the bass fishing game. I asked these heavyweights to pick one reason why so many hopeful pros don't make the grade. In their answers, I found a consistent pattern.

MARK ROSE: 23-YEAR PRO, \$3,000,382 IN CAREER EARNINGS

"What stands out – and I see it most in the younger guys – is they get caught up on what they see on the internet," Mark Rose says.

In other words, he reasons that unproven tournament anglers often decide on valuable fishing patterns before ever going fishing.

"They come to a tournament and they say, 'Okay, this is going to be a spinnerbait bite, or a brush pile affair,' for example," Rose continues. "And all they know is what they saw on YouTube. What you learn in practice is the most vital information you can get. Fisheries change; my experience has taught me that."

Rose insists that competitors must look at each body of water with an open mind on every trip. Such a gameplan allows for the discovery of current patterns.

"You find something happening right then and there, and that's how you unlock winning scenarios," he adds.

DAKOTA EBARE: 4-YEAR PRO, 21 MLF TOP 10S.

Dakota Ebare is a pro who defines the mental approach to tournament fishing with ease.

"It's all about having a winning, aggressive attitude," he says. "Guys that struggle make poor decisions under pressure and with a lot on the line."



Ebare cites the common scenario of tournament anglers doing well in practice, then doing equally poorly come tournament day.

“It’s easy to make good decisions in practice,” he says. “In practice, when the fish aren’t biting, you pick up and move.”

He contrasts that scenario to anglers feeling locked in during competition days and not fishing in the flow. Those same anglers, then, are just trying to get by.

“I hear about check weights and what it’s going to take to get a check,” Ebare continues. “I don’t even think about that, because if I fish for 50th, I’ll never find the fish to win.”

Ebare also acknowledges that his method isn’t for everyone.

“Sometimes it takes making risky decisions,” he says. “But guys that are consistently good are very versatile and fish on the fly.”

SPENCER SHUFFIELD: 7-YEAR PRO, \$904,301 IN CAREER EARNINGS

Spencer Shuffield comes from a professional angler lineage. Exposure early on to the game certainly helped carve his meteoric rise to the top of the standings. By the time he was 18, Shuffield had spent years in a bass boat all over the South.

He contrasts his upbringing with less successful anglers who really haven’t fished that much.

“Nowadays, lots of guys jump in (to high-level tournament fishing) because they have a lot of money, or they have someone who will fund them,” Shuffield says. “And everybody wants info before they even hit the lake. You can’t fish somebody else’s spot. That’s their big downfall.”

Shuffield reasons that only through self-discovery can bass fishing secrets be unlocked.

“Everybody wants to know the answers before they even (visit) a fishery, but we all approach a body of water differently,” he concludes. “Unless you figure it out for yourself, you’ll never be successful.”

TODD FAIRCLOTH: 23-YEAR PRO, \$2,734, 374 IN CAREER EARNINGS.

Like Rose, Todd Faircloth sees less successful tournament anglers putting too much emphasis on what they learn online, without utilizing personal experience.

“When I started, if you wanted to learn something, you went to the lake and figured it out on your own,” he says. “But there’s a lot more knowledge now. Today, if you want to learn something, you Google it.”

“To be successful and consistent, you’ve got to gain inner confidence. It’s a momentum-building thing, and you can only do that by learning on your own.”

Faircloth believes many new anglers will head to a lake noted for a certain pattern or hot lure and, despite having little or no experience in that arena, try to make it work in a tournament. Not Faircloth.

“Until I get my hands on it and learn it, I’m not going to try anything new in a tournament,” he says.

Confidence is a trait Faircloth has seen in all the best pros.

“It was so evident in Aaron (Martens),” he says. “He always believed he was in the best area and using the best lure. KVD is the same way. It’s like a notch above confidence.”

NICK LEBRUN: 4-YEAR PRO, ALL-AMERICAN CHAMPION AND BACK-TO-BACK PRO CIRCUIT WINNER

Nick LeBrun is known for his laid-back style. His critique of less successful pros matches his core values.

“A lot of what I see holding back other anglers is their situation at home,” LeBrun says. “Maybe their wife isn’t fully on board (with a pro fishing career). It’s not going to be good. Or maybe they have a small business back home, and they have one foot in and one foot out of fishing; that’s tough.”

LeBrun contrasts that to what he sees as the opposite end of the spectrum in a close cohort.

“A guy I see that’s doing great – like Dakota Ebare – all he’s doing is fishing,” LeBrun adds. “He’s fully committed and fishing as many events as possible.”

LeBrun pointed out that, for tournament professionals, “the only thing you should be worried about is getting the next bite. If you’re not in it 100 percent, you might have a good event here and there, but you won’t be around in five years.”

So what have we learned? Is tournament bass fishing a mental game? For years, I’ve argued yes.

Confidence – however it’s achieved – is the primary factor in making good decisions on the water. In today’s game, anglers are better at an earlier age, and more committed than ever. Winning professionals make consistent decisions based on confidence that can only be attained through experience. They avoid dock talk, fish their strengths and keep an open mind and a positive attitude. The winning recipe is right there on paper.

All we have to do is believe. ■



THE FOX IN THE HEN HOUSE

An unhealthy mix between largemouth bass and the “poc” led to extinction of a species



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Duke has been writing about all aspects of bass fishing for 40 years. When he's not reading about, writing about, thinking about or talking about bass fishing, he's usually bass fishing.

If you've never heard of the giant pied-billed grebe (i.e., *Podilymbus gigas* to all you Latin speakers out there), don't beat yourself up. Very few people have heard of the bird. Fewer have seen one, and their numbers will not rise because the giant pied-billed grebe – or “poc” – is extinct. The last of them shuffled off this mortal coil more than 30 years ago, and the largemouth bass played a role in their demise.

By way of background, you may be interested to know that the poc is a water bird that was native to Lago de Atitlán in Guatemala. The lake covers about 32,000 acres and sits a mile high in the Sierra Madres. Atitlán was formed by a volcanic eruption some 80,000 years ago. It's the deepest lake in Central America, plummeting to nearly 1,200 feet in places.

Amazingly, only Atitlán offered the unique set of ecological, geological, and other conditions that allowed pocs to survive.

And although the poc had certainly been at Atitlán for many millennia, no one really took notice of it until a naturalist identified it in the 1920s. And despite the designation “giant,” it was only large in comparison to other grebes. An adult poc measured less than 20 inches long as it paddled across the surface. It had white plumage in spring but was dark brown the rest of the year. The underside or belly of the bird was dark gray.

Few birds are truly flightless, but the poc was one. Their small wings were incapable of flight but did a good job of propelling them through the water as they dived for food. Grebes ate small fish, crabs, snails, aquatic insects, tadpoles and frogs. They could stay submerged for more than a minute and cover the length of a football field in that time.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE WAHLER

ODES TO THE PIE-BILLED GREBE

The poc was so interesting that it captured the attention of a prominent American naturalist named Anne LaBastille. She came to Atitlán in the mid 1960s to figure out why the grebe population was in decline.

Shortly after she arrived, she was scanning the lake, looking for the birds, when two scuba-diving snorkelers came out of the water. Each had a big largemouth tied to his belt. She estimated their weights at about 15 pounds.

LaBastille learned that largemouth and smallmouth bass had been introduced to the lake in 1958 and 1960 by a U.S. airline and a local hotel. To say that bass thrived there would be an understatement.

They were packing on the pounds at a rate of two per year or more. Local crabbers and commercial anglers targeting other species reported a precipitous decline in their harvests that began about the time bass were introduced. Most blamed the new fish for devastating the population of baby pocs – gobbling them up faster than the adults could hatch them.

When LaBastille asked about the largest “lobina negra” (black bass) any of the locals had seen, she was told 25 pounds. The fish had grown from fingerlings to world record size in seven years...maybe less, and LaBastille theorized that young grebes were part of that winning diet.

I had never heard of the giant pied-billed grebe until about a decade ago while working on a book (“Bass Forever”) with the great underwater cinematographer Glenn Lau. We were finalizing a chapter about giant bass, and he told me of a trip he made to Atitlán in the ‘60s.

Birds and bass made it into two of Anne LaBastille’s books, “Assignment: Wildlife” (1980) and “Mama Poc: An Ecologist’s Account of the Extinction of a Species” (1990). In them she tells a fascinating story of her research and concludes that bass were a major factor in eradicating the species.

One of her most amusing stories concerns a confrontation with the local Minister of Agriculture. In broken Spanish, LaBastille tried to tell him, “The black bass has (messed) up the lake!”

But was the predation all one-way? After all, grebes ate fish. Surely, they ate bass, right? Well, maybe not...or at least not enough to save themselves. LaBastille observed several adult grebes attempting to feed small bass to their young, all to no avail. The baby grebes couldn’t handle the spiny-rayed fish.

Eventually, LaBastille convinced local authorities to amend some fishing regulations and change agriculture practices as measures to save the poc’s forage base and habitat. They screened off a sanctuary for the grebes and poisoned the bass inside. There were even Guatemalan postage stamps dedicated to creating awareness and support for the giant pied-billed grebe.

For a while, it seemed that LaBastille and Guatemalan authorities were making real progress toward saving the poc. A 1965 population count reported just 80 grebes. By 1968, there were 125, and by 1973 there were 210. Things were going in the right direction...for a while.

MOTHER NATURE TAKES HER FINAL TOLL

In 1976, disaster struck Guatemala in the form of a major earthquake – 7.5 on the Richter scale. It killed more than 10,000 people. At Atitlán, the lakebed fractured and much of the water drained out, destroying most of the grebe’s habitat, including the sanctuary. Four years later, only 32 of the birds were left.

Authorities tried relocating some grebes to another lake, including a pair of mating adults. Two eggs were laid. One hatched. For a few days, the parents were seen leading the little chick out onto the lake, but then the chick disappeared. Authorities believe a largemouth bass ate it.

In 1985, only 56 adult pocs were counted. The writing was on the wall. Four years later, there were two.

“Endlings” are what biologists call the last of a species. To see them must be a profound event. Ultimately, the giant pied-billed grebe could not withstand loss of habitat, an earthquake, and the largemouth bass.

And the bass of Lago de Atitlán – what happened to them and why is the lake not a favored destination of every record chaser? Well, the bass suffered loss of habitat, too, and commercial fishing took a serious toll, but as of the 1990s, there were still bass in Lago de Atitlán, including some big ones.

Likely, there always will be. ■



PHOTOS COURTESY TACTICAL BASSIN

HOW TO FISH FAST FOR LETHARGIC WINTER BASS

Slow and steady doesn't always win the race



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Matt Allen and **Tim Little** are well-known big-bass experts who own Tactical Bassin, a website and social media channels dedicated to educating the public about bass fishing.



With overnight temperatures flirting with the freezing mark in many parts of the country, now's the time to throw on a couple of extra layers of clothing, grab your fishing rods and head to the lake. When you get to the launch ramp, don't be surprised if you're the only bass angler there - and don't let this discourage you. The bass are biting. Now is your chance to have the entire lake to yourself and target some of the biggest bass you'll come across the entire year.

If you're one of the guys or gals that live in a part of the country where your lakes ice over, hopefully you're catching

fish in an icehouse or reading this article next to a warm fire. For everyone else fishing in parts of the country where the lakes don't turn solid, winter-time bass fishing can be very rewarding.

When anglers think about cold-weather bassin', they usually think about cold, lethargic bass that are thought to be best targeted with smaller, more finesse-oriented presentations. If you're one of those anglers, you're not wrong. There are absolutely times when using smaller finesse techniques produce bites when nothing else will. However, through many years of fishing the coldest water

and in the nastiest conditions, we've discovered that bass will chase down and eat fast-moving reaction baits as if it were in the heat of summer. Believe it or not, these reaction techniques often outproduce slower finesse techniques in wintertime scenarios.

GETTING UP TO SPEED (CRANKING)

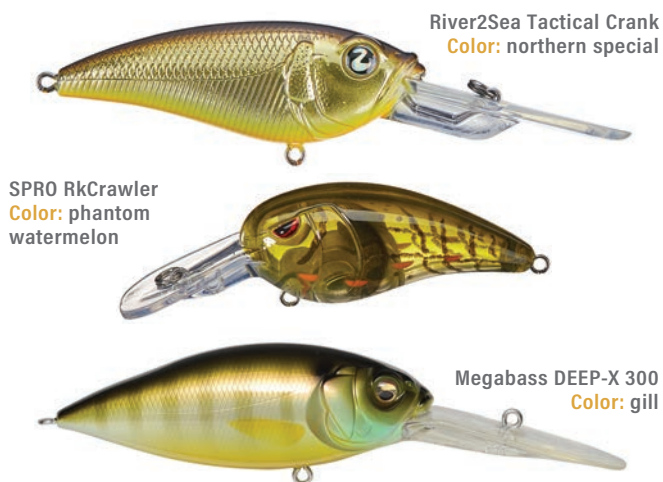
The first technique we lean on time and time again is a technique that has produced several double-digit bass and bass up to 13 pounds for us. We call it "speed cranking" - fishing a crankbait as fast as you can physically turn your reel handle and implementing quick pauses in your cadence.

This results in a bass (or several bass) chasing down your crankbait at full speed and devouring it on the pause.

What always comes to mind when describing or teaching this technique is quickly moving a toy past a lazy cat. Even though the cat might not want to chase or be expecting to chase the toy, the cat is a predator and mentally hardwired to chase and pounce. A bass is a predator and is hardwired the same way. Even when conditions or water temperatures aren't ideal, you can take advantage of a bass' predatory instincts. We've successfully speed cranked bass with water temperatures in the low 30s.

That said, this technique requires very specific crankbaits and gear. To take full advantage of speed cranking this winter, you'll need to be throwing a crankbait that has a tight wobble. I can't emphasize that enough. There are a lot of great crankbaits on the market, but most possess a wide wobble better suited for warmer water.

The best cold-water crankbaits that we've found are the River2Sea Tactical Crank, Megabass DEEP-X 300 and the SPRO RkCrawler. All three of these crankbaits are mid- to deep-diving plugs and possess the tight wobble needed to optimize this technique. Pair any of these baits with a 7:1 or 8:1 gear ratio reel and crank them as quickly as you can turn the handle.



The key with speed cranking is similar to how you might ordinarily fish a squarebill around shallow cover: Any time your crankbait hits or deflects off a piece of cover or structure, pause your bait for a split second. This is when most of your bites will occur.

UNDER THE WINTER UMBRELLA (RIG)

With the quick movement, ability to deflect off cover and the occasional directional change, the crankbait has proven to be the best bait for the job for us, however, understanding the concept of speed cranking might get you thinking about other types of baits that might work well when fished fast in the winter (after all, a crankbait isn't the only reaction bait that can trigger a bass' feeding instincts). Here's another favorite of ours: the umbrella (or Alabama) rig.

The umbrella rig is a lure with several wire arms coming out of the head of the bait. Usually, these rigs have five or six wires in total. Depending on each state's regulations, an A-rig can be

rigged with two to five swimbaits with hooks. If you're fishing in a state that requires limited hooks, use "teaser" or "dummy" baits as your baits without hooks.

The baits without hooks help make up the illusion of a school of the baitfish. When rigging your A-rig, make sure that your swimbaits with hooks are the largest and the furthest to the rear of the wire arms. Even with several dummy baits on your rig, the proper size and placement of your swimbaits with hooks almost guarantees the bass will eat the right swimbaits.

A properly rigged A-rig works all year long, but it works especially well in the winter. The A-rig is best used for mimicking small schools of bait fish. Just like speed cranking, we like to fish an A-rig very fast. Every five or six turns of the reel handle, we add in a pause or twitch to make the A-rig collapse and expand to imitate a small ball of fleeing baitfish.

When fishing the A-rig around hard structure, make sure to add your pauses and twitches as the baits pass the ambush point. More often than not, this is when you'll get bit. In open water, bass will often follow the A-rig just a couple feet behind the bait. If you see evidence of this (either on forward-facing sonar or as your bait reaches the surface), add more movement to your rig. As soon as you add extra movement, it sometimes makes those bass feel like they've been spotted by the bait ball. Those bass now need to commit and eat or miss out on the easy meal.

Just like with speed cranking, there are a couple very specific A-rigs that we like to fish in the winter. There are several options on the market that work well enough, but we like A-rigs that have lighter, thinner wires that will allow the rig to compress and expand with the reel turns and twitches explained above.

Two A-rigs that we've had a lot of success with are the Hog Farmer BFL Flex Rig and the G Funk Baits Bama Rig. Both of these rigs come with top-notch components, so you won't have to worry about any swivels, snaps or split rings failing, and both have enough flex in the wires to allow for expanding and collapsing as you work your bait.

The next time you're bundled up and dragging around Ned rigs and drop-shots, remember: There are other options available to you that will catch bass. Slow and steady isn't always the best option. Fast and erratic - though maybe a little counterintuitive - may just be your ticket to more and bigger bass this winter. ■





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TRI-UMPHANT!

THREE-TIME BASS PRO TOUR WINNER
DUSTIN CONNELL'S 2022 SEASON WAS
A STUDY IN WINNING PSYCHOLOGY



PHOTO BY SHANGHAI

By Rob Newell



he field of play for professional bass fishing is far more dynamic than most other sports. Given the tremendous number of variables a

pro angler deals with in a day of competition, the only constant in fishing is that it's constantly changing. With that, professional fishing is a very challenging sport to win in.

Many bass pros will go their entire career without winning more than three national events total. So, when one pro wins three tour-level events in a single season, it turns heads.

Enter Dustin Connell's 2022 Bass Pro Tour season. In a span of seven months, Connell won three Bass Pro Tour events. His hat trick started with a win on Lewis Smith Lake in March and then he closed the season with back-to-back victories at Cayuga and Mille Lacs.

"WHAT MATTERS IS WINNING. NOBODY REMEMBERS ANY OF THE REST OF IT. WINNING IS THE PUREST FORM OF COLLATERAL IN THIS SPORT."

Three victories in one season against the best field of competition assembled – it's an achievement that makes you stop and scratch your head. So many lakes, so many variables, so many other talented fishermen, and Connell wins 42 percent of the events in a single season? How is that even possible? How did he make it look so easy?

Connell, however, is not the first to win three Bass Pro Tour events in a single season. In 2021, Jacob Wheeler pulled off a triplet of BPT victories that stunned the fishing world as well. Both pros are good friends and room together at most events. Connell is quick to give Wheeler credit for helping him dial up a winning mindset on Tour.

"When I saw what Jacob did winning three times last year, it totally opened my eyes to the possibilities of winning a lot more than I have been," Connell says.



2022 THREE-PEAT

With wins on the Bass Pro Tour at Lewis Smith Lake, Cayuga Lake and Mille Lacs Lake in 2022, MLF pro Dustin Connell solidified his status as a "beast closer."

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

"WE ALL HAVE THESE PIECES TO THE WINNING PUZZLE IN OUR BOX, BUT THEY'RE JUST PIECES. TO ME, THE MENTAL SIDE IS PUTTING THESE PIECES TOGETHER IN THE RIGHT ORDER AT THE RIGHT TIME TO SOLVE THE WINNING PUZZLE."



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Whenever pros win multiple events in a short period of time, statements like "tournament fishing is all mental," "the best bass fishing is found between the ears," and "the mind is the best tackle-box" become cliché. When asked about his trio of trophies, even Connell plays the mental card, saying "At this level, 80 percent of this game is mental."

But what does all that mental mind talk mean? Where is that nitrous switch located in the brain?

Well, that's where it gets a little more complex. Fortunately, Connell is extremely well-versed in breaking down the mental side of the game and is willing to share what he's learned about winning at the top level of bass fishing from his amazing three-fer season.

"At the Bass Pro Tour level, we all have great equipment," Connell begins. "We have tremendous mechanical skills, we have volumes of knowledge and experience, we have confidence in our abilities, we have a desire to be the best. We all have these pieces to the winning puzzle in our box, but they're just pieces. To me, the mental side is putting these pieces together in the right order at the right time to solve the winning puzzle."

MENTAL CONDITIONING

For Connell, one of the big steps in learning to win has been identifying old fishing habits and conditioning he adopted early on. Along the journey to becoming a pro angler, Connell says he picked up puzzle pieces that served him well at the beginning of his career, but they're not universal; they don't always fit together to form a winning picture for changing fisheries, changing technology and, especially, changing tournament formats. The longer these old pieces – or habits – hang around in the box, the more they clutter the winning mindset. At times, some of these habits need to be identified and culled.

"I'm not going to say they're bad habits, because they're not," Connell explains. "They're habits we form while maturing as anglers. When I started fishing tournaments, I fished numerous evening derbies – sometimes four to five a week. I found success in those events with a high-speed pace, fishing as fast as I could to land on the juice before the clock ran out. The more I fished like that, the more it wired my brain to fish that way."

With that, Connell's list of fishing habits continued to form. He found success in fishing fast and swinging hard with his strength techniques and fell into, "being hard-headed and forcing the issue," to make heroic catches.

When he stepped up to two-day local tournaments, that approach still produced, but with it came frustration when it worked one day and not the next.

"As a competitor, getting mad and frustrated when things don't work is natural," Connell says. "But how you handle that frustration is huge. Early on, I let frustration fly all over me."

When Connell moved up to the BASS Opens and then the Elite Series, he started with the "get checks and qualify for the Classic," mentality.

"Nearly every pro starts their career this way," Connell says. "That's why I can't say it's a bad habit. When you work up through the regional to the national levels of multiple-day competition with no money or notoriety, your first goals are earning checks and points to establish a foundation. You don't make on-the-water decisions based on winning; you make decisions based on needing to eat, paying entry fees, paying gas bills and getting to the next tournament. That conditions the brain to think in that way."

With a berth into the Elite Series in 2017 came the next habit: the mindset of "I'm just happy to be here."

"Again, I can't call it a bad habit," he says. "It's all part of becoming seasoned as a pro. At my age, I was just happy to be out there competing in national tournaments instead of working construction. That leads to fishing in your comfort zone; running a lot of history, falling back on techniques that have worked in the past. It becomes redundant."

Connell experienced victory twice at Bassmaster: He won an Open on the Alabama River in 2015, near his home of Clanton, and also won an Elite Series event at Ross Barnett in 2017. But Connell says those wins didn't come because he learned how to win. Those wins came from local knowledge, sheer will and fishing by the seat of his pants.

Connell's next career victory came at REDCREST at Lake Eufaula in February of 2021. That event helped him realize he had all the pieces he

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

Connell won his three Bass Pro Tour titles in 2022 by catching the most fish, but this 7-pounder he caught at Lake Fork proves he can catch big 'uns too.



needed to win tournaments; he just wanted to do it more frequently.

"I wanted to be what I call a 'beast closer,'" he says. "Jacob Wheeler, Ott Defoe, Edwin Evers, Jo Lee – all those guys are beast closers. When it's all on the line on the final day, they step up and close. I wanted to be in that category."

IDENTIFYING THE NEGATIVE LOOP

The REDCREST victory made Connell realize he had the winning components, but he needed to clean out some clutter of his old conditioning. The Bass Pro Tour was a different puzzle altogether: six days, every fish counts, multiple rounds, zeroing weight after cut days. He felt he was being held back by too many old pieces that weren't relevant anymore. He needed a mental house cleaning of certain notions and emotions that had become old habits, clouding his view of victory lane for that format.

Through the rest of 2021 and into the offseason, Connell went to work purging his old habits. Over the course of several events, he began to precisely identify a redundant cycle in his fishing that was hampering him. Several old

habits and subconscious notions were joining together to start this spin, which was fueled into a swift swirl by frustration. Essentially, it was a negative feedback loop that needed to be broken and dissolved.

"This cycle starts by chasing that Knockout Round for a \$10,000 check and REDCREST points," he explains. "I would run my best stuff and burn it up to make the Knockout – great, I make another Knockout Round."

But once in the Knockout – five days into the tournament – things have changed substantially. Productive areas or patterns have fizzled. Fishing pressure takes a toll. Bites get hard to come by. The slide down SCORE-TRACKER® begins. Frustration sets in. And old habits began to haunt him.

"Then I start running history and old places trying to get a bite," Connell explains. "I get torn between fishing new water to expand or clinging to what got me there. I start trying to force the issue, which only makes me madder."

Then Connell takes a moment to humorously reflect on where he is mentally at this point by referencing the golf movie "Tin Cup."



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

SMALLIE SMACKDOWN

While the majority of the field was chasing largemouth at Cayuga Lake, Connell was targeting smallmouth with pinpoint accuracy.

"Then I go all Roy (McAvoy) in my head, where he keeps taking penalty strokes for new drops instead of laying up, just to prove he can hit it over the water hazard. Yeah, that was me in a Knockout Round three years ago.

"By the end of the day, I was doing the very thing I hate the most during a tournament: furiously fishing down the bank, going through the motions, casting aimlessly. And why? Because I'm chasing a few extra points in the standings."

CLEANING OUT THE MENTAL CLUTTER

To clean house mentally, Connell started by stripping away the checks-and-points and just-happy-to-be-here yarns that were binding his winning potential. Such ideals are great when starting a career but are impediments to winning.

"Here's the deal: The only thing anyone cares about in this sport is who wins, period," he says candidly. "I've made umpteen Knockout Rounds, I've made Championship Rounds, I've made REDCRESTS - no one cares where you are in the points unless

you're leading the points. What matters is winning. Nobody remembers any of the rest of it. Winning is the purest form of collateral in this sport."

With that realization, Connell began to wonder: What good is making yet another Knockout Round if you don't have enough in the tank to make the Championship Round and go for the win?

"My old strategies were fine for making Knockout Rounds, but they left me stranded there," he says. "I had to find better strategies to play the long game."

SLOWING DOWN AND CHANNELING FRUSTRATION

One of the first goals Connell set was to learn to slow down and, in his words, "just chill out."

"I was always frantically ripping up and down the lake, chasing some pattern or running history places as fast as I could," he says. "It was one of those old defaults."

The tool that helped Connell pump the brakes was forward-facing sonar.

He used Lowrance ActiveTarget to win REDCREST and since then has gone to school hard on the beaming game.

"Once I really started panning around on different lakes, I realized there are freaking fish everywhere," he says. "If I would just slow down and learn how to make them bite, I could be so much more efficient. I know everyone may not be a fan of it, but that technology has changed my mindset to working smarter, not harder. As long as I can see fish, why run around like a mad man chasing ghosts?"

Next on Connell's mental must-do list was to snuff out frustration and anger when things weren't going his way. Pro anglers are often their own harshest critics, so frustration comes with the territory of wanting to be better.

"Frustration can push you to another level if channeled correctly," Connell says. "But if it gets out of hand, becomes negative and turns to anger, it just becomes super fuel for the downward spiral."

Connell has found a way to feather his frustration to push him yet keep it from boiling over to fueling his old fast-and-furious feedback loop.

"When I hit my rev limiter, I simply say, 'that's it; we're done, I'm out,' and I pull up my trolling motor," he explains. "I may have no idea where I'm headed or what I'm going to do, but here is what I do know: I'm not wasting my time anymore casting at memories, fuming mad, while I chase the ghosts of a few extra points."

WHEN THE PIECES ALL FIT TOGETHER

Once Connell drives far away from the habitual vortex that tried to suck him in, he says it's like hitting a reset button and starting the tournament over.

"Basically, I clear my mind and go practice and it renews my spirit," he says. "By the Knockout, the whole lake has changed, and everything is different. It's time to idle and find a new school or pan around in other areas to see if a new bite window is opening up."

Connell sees it as an investment in the potential to win instead of spinning out in the same used water. It doesn't always work, but when it does, the pieces come together to set up a win.

Smith Lake was a perfect example of this strategy. In the Knockout Round,

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Connell scrapped his old water and went looking for winning opportunities. As the clock ticked down and he slid down to the bottom of the SCORETRACKER®, he stayed calm and kept idling and beaming, working smarter, not harder. In the third period, he made a pass down the dam and struck pay-dirt. For five days, the dam produced very little for those who fished it. At this point, all the other competitors had written it off.

"That was a magical moment," Connell says. "When my ActiveTarget lit up with huge schools of bait and bass on the face of the dam and no one else was there fishing it, my confidence went through the roof."

In the last hour of the day, Connell caught 21 pounds to go from the bottom of the SCORETRACKER® to the top in the Knockout Round. He knew, for the first time in his career, he had just set himself up to win in the Championship Round.

"At that moment I learned something very special," he says. "When you finally let go of points, when you forget about the SCORETRACKER®, when you drive away from all your history for the week into the unknown and have the faith and belief in yourself that you can find something better – you have just found the place, mentally, where the beast closers make their magic. When they find a new vibe just starting to jam while everyone else is listening to reruns, confidence soars to new levels."

Connell's win at Cayuga was of the same nature. From the beginning, he decided to gamble on smallmouth when 80 percent of the field was fishing for largemouth.

"I knew smallmouth would be the least pressured fish, so I committed to looking for them on ActiveTarget," he says. "I practiced during the tournament to figure out how they were set up and exactly how to present my bait to trigger a bite. I figured out when to leave them alone and for how long to let them set back up. Every day I was getting better at dialing those smallmouth in while fishing pressure was eating away at those guys targeting largemouth."

At Mille Lacs, Connell was totally focused on winning from the beginning. During the Qualifying Round, he would constantly check the wind forecasts five



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

LOOKING AHEAD

Connell's focus on changing conditions paid dividends at Bass Pro Tour Stage Seven on Mille Lacs Lake in Minnesota.

days out to the Championship Round to see where he needed to focus his practice efforts for the tournament. With a threat for big south winds during the Championship Round, he used the calmer tournament days to practice in the south end to set up the win."

"Three years ago, I would have never won Cayuga or Mille Lacs," Connell admits. "Because I would have been running flats with a winding bait, focused on just making the Knockout Round, with no plan after that."

WHEELER WITH THE ASSIST

Connell admits that Jacob Wheeler's existence and performance in pro bass fishing has been a profound inspiration to him. The two have roomed together since the inception of the Bass Pro Tour, so Connell has studied Wheeler's winning ways carefully.

"He's opened my eyes to what's possible in this sport," Connell says. "He's the guy who pushes me to be

better every day. He's helped me become a more positive person. He helped in pointing out some of my old habits and encouraged me to embrace new technology. And, ultimately, he helped me define the power of letting go of tournament constraints like time, the SCORETRACKER®, the cut lines, the points, and to trust in your own abilities to go into the unknown and discover something better than the same old ruts that everyone else has been in."

Wheeler himself expresses a great deal of satisfaction in seeing the season Connell has conjured up.

"I'm super proud to see what DC has accomplished this year," he says. "Since the beginning of the Bass Pro Tour, it's been awesome to watch how DC and I have both evolved as anglers to excel in this format. My hat's off to him on his amazing season. I think it's fair to say, he has become a beast closer." ■

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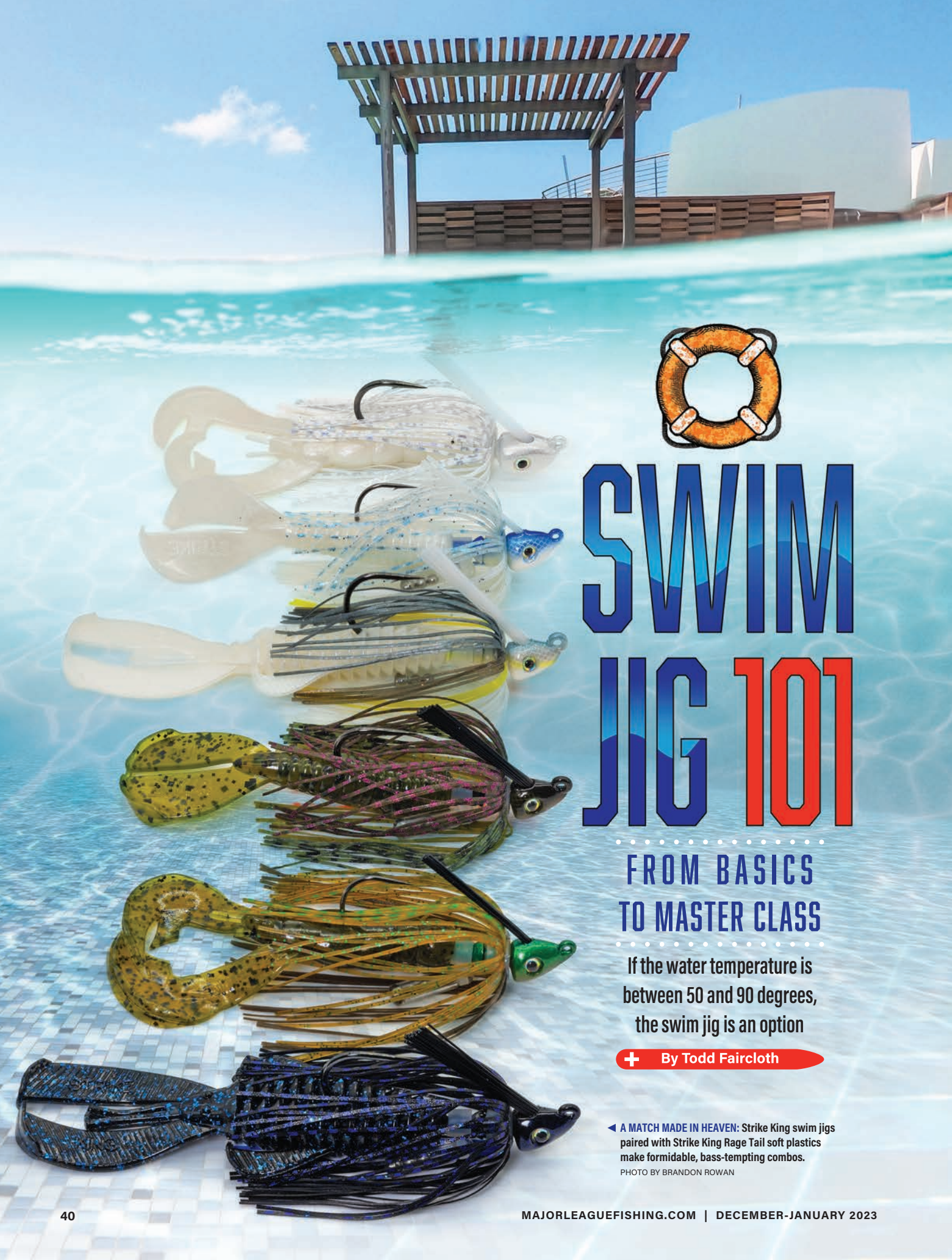


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SWIM JIG 101

FROM BASICS
TO MASTER CLASS

If the water temperature is
between 50 and 90 degrees,
the swim jig is an option

+ By Todd Faircloth

◀ **A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN:** Strike King swim jigs paired with Strike King Rage Tail soft plastics make formidable, bass-tempting combos.

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN



remember hearing about swimming a jig around 2000, and that's when I started experimenting with it. I grew up flipping and pitching heavy jigs in grass, so I always thought of jig fishing as being a slow, bottom-bumping or dragging technique.

When I began experimenting with swimming a jig, I was just using lighter versions of the jigs I flipped and pitched with. I learned pretty quickly that the hooks on those jigs were too heavy for the line I was using - monofilament and some fluorocarbon - and that the line tie on a swim jig needed to be parallel to the hook rather than perpendicular to it, like on my favorite flipping and pitching jigs.

One of the first things I really liked about swimming a jig was that I could practice for tournaments with it. I could cover a lot of shallow water with a swim jig and have a more finesse look than if I was using a spinnerbait, like a lot of other anglers would use. In 2004, I had a top-five finish at a tournament on Smith Lake in Alabama, and I caught most of my bass swimming a jig around boat docks. That really



Todd Faircloth shows off a 6-pound bucketmouth.

“A SWIM JIG CATCHES BASS JUST ABOUT YEAR-ROUND AND ALL ACROSS THE COUNTRY. IT’S ONE OF THE MOST VERSATILE LURES IN MY BOAT.”

boosted my confidence. Then, in 2012, I won a big tournament on the Mississippi River out of Wisconsin, and I found most of those fish while practicing with a swim jig.

Since those events, the swim jig has been a staple for me. I always have one rigged up and ready to go, and I keep a swim jig combo on the deck of my boat about 75 percent of the time I'm on the water.

WHEN AND WHERE SWIM JIGS ARE MOST EFFECTIVE

If the water temperature is between 50 and 90 degrees, the swim jig is a serious option. My preferred temperature range is about 55 to 80 degrees. To make it work, you may need to speed it up or slow it down, figure out the best places to throw it and get dialed in on the right size and color, but a swim jig catches bass just about year-round and all across the country. It's one of the most versatile lures in my boat.

I don't think a swim jig is at its best in the dog days of July and August, but from pre-spawn to early summer, it's hard to beat - and during a shad spawn, it's absolutely great.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

MLF pro Todd Faircloth gets it done with only three colors for his swim jig trailers: black/blue, green pumpkin and pearl.



STRIKE KING RAGE TAIL CRAW

STRIKE KING RAGE BUG

STRIKE KING RAGE TWIN TAIL MENACE GRUB

MY SWIM JIG TACKLE

MOST OF MY SWIM JIG FISHING is done on 30-pound-test Sunline FX2 braid. It's strong enough to handle the roughest cover but light enough that I can make long casts and get my bait out away from the boat so the bass don't realize I'm there.

If the water's very clear or if I'm skipping boat docks with a swim jig, I'll switch to Sunline Super FC Sniper fluorocarbon. It's easier to skip with fluorocarbon than with braid, I can be more accurate with fluorocarbon, and I get fewer overruns. If the water's clear and the sun's out, skipping docks with a swim jig can be the best pattern on the lake.

My swim jig rod is a Mark Rose signature series heavy action 7-foot-2 Lew's Team Casting Rod, and my reel is a Team Lew's HyperMag

Speed Spool SLP with an 8.3:1 gear ratio. The rod has a moderate-fast tip that helps me make long casts, but's got just enough flex that it helps to "feed" the jig to the bass when one hits. If a rod is too light, you'll struggle to get the jig through cover or to get a good hookset. If it's too heavy, you'll pull the jig away from bass and won't have a very good feel for the bait.

I like a fast reel when swimming a jig for a couple of reasons. First, I'm usually fishing the lure high in the water column, and a fast reel makes that a lot easier. Second, since it's common for a bass to hit the jig from behind and swim straight at the boat with it, a fast reel lets you catch up to those fish so you can get a good hookset.



▲ Lew's Team Casting Rod 7'2" Heavy Mark Rose



▲ Sunline FX2 Braid



◀ Sunline Super FC Sniper Fluorocarbon



▶ Team Lew's HyperMag Speed Spool SLP 8.3:1

ON THE BUSINESS END

MY GO-TO SWIM JIG is a Strike King KVD Heavy Cover Swim Jig (a Bass Pro Shops exclusive). It's got a beefy hook, but it's not too heavy for 30-pound-test braid or 18- to 20-pound-test fluorocarbon.

I probably use the 1/4-ounce model for about 70 percent of my swim jig fishing. The 3/8-ounce version gets about 20 percent and the 1/2-ounce gets the rest. Because I'm usually swimming a jig pretty high in the water column, I like to use a light jig as often as possible. If I need to go a little deeper (or fish shallow but fast), I use the 3/8-ounce model, and if I need to go a lot deeper, I'll use the 1/2-ounce jig.

When it comes to colors, I keep things simple. Almost all my swim jig fishing is done with just four colors: green pumpkin, black/blue, white, and blue shad.

Trailers are just as simple. I use the Strike King Menace Grub, Strike King Rage Craw and Strike King Rage Bug in colors that match the jig I'm using. The Menace Grub is what I use about 80 percent of the time, and I rig it perpendicular to the hook (i.e. it runs parallel to the water's surface). Rigged that way, the bait tracks well and is less likely to roll.



▲ STRIKE KING RAGE TAIL CRAW
COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN

▶ STRIKE KING KVD HEAVY COVER SWIM JIG
COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

NOT JUST FOR GRASS

MLF pro Todd Faircloth fishes a swim jig around wood, as well as vegetation.

I generally don't throw a swim jig in really dirty water (less than a foot of visibility) but when I do, I like to use a bulky trailer that moves a lot of water so the fish can find it more easily. Sometimes, when the water's extremely dirty, you can catch fish on a bulky swim jig that just won't bite a spinnerbait.

One of the best things about a swim jig is that it's not habitat- or cover-specific: You can throw it anywhere and get bites. It's a good open-water lure, and it comes through thick vegetation and wood very well.

I love throwing a swim jig around shoreline vegetation like pencil grass and water willows. If you have that kind of cover and the water temperature is in the upper 50s to the mid 60s, it just screams for a swim jig.

MASTERING THE BASICS OF SWIMMING A JIG

Before I ever make a cast with a freshly rigged swim jig, I like to run it through the water next to the boat. I want to be sure it's tracking straight and not rolling. If your swim jig is running off

to one side or rolling, you can usually fix it by adjusting the weedguard or straightening out the trailer. I fan out the weedguards on my swim jigs. I think it helps the bait to swim better and I get a better hookset. A swim jig that's not running properly isn't going to get very many bites.

Once I know the bait is working properly, I'll generally make a long cast past my target. I want to cover water with a swim jig, and a long cast helps to ensure that a lot of fish will see the bait. It also gets the bait away from the boat where the fish are less likely to be aware of me.

After the swim jig hits the water, I keep my rod at the 10 o'clock position during the retrieve – not any higher. It's a good angle to keep the jig up in the water column, and it's a good position for setting the hook. I'll start the retrieve as soon as the jig hits the water. The high gear ratio reel means I can crank at a comfortable speed and still keep the bait up.

I generally shake my rod tip pretty vigorously during the retrieve – just 3 or 4 inches up and down – all the way back to the boat. It gives the bait an

erratic look and makes the skirt flare, which I think helps trigger strikes. But there are days when the bass want a steady retrieve – no shaking.

Usually, I'll swim the jig within sight – often just inches under the surface – but you have to experiment with depths and retrieve speeds until you find out where the fish are and what they want. Don't do the same thing for hours without a bite. Mix it up until you figure things out.

A big key to having success with a swim jig is remembering that it's still a jig and can do the things that other jigs can do. Just because we call it a "swim" jig doesn't mean you never stop cranking it.

One of my favorite methods is to "kill" the jig when it reaches a high percentage spot, like a stump, the end of a laydown log or an outside weedline. These are places where bass hold to ambush prey, and killing your bait there will get you strikes that a lot of other anglers miss because they get in a rut, forget that their jig can do something besides just swim and they just never stop reeling. ■

IT'S ALL CHEMISTRY AND FREQUENCY UNTIL SOMEONE

GETS SMASHED IN THE MOUTH.



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SHAD



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HOT CRAW



WHITE



WHITE CHARTREUSE

CATCHING UP WITH

BILL TAYLOR

Nearly a year into retirement, the legendary tournament director is still finding ways to make fishing his life

By Jody White

For the past few seasons, MLF Senior Director of Operations Bill Taylor laid the groundwork for his departure from the duties he's undertaken since 2001. Taylor made it official in January of 2022 and stepped away from his career as a full-time tournament director.

Having first started work in tournaments with Operation Bass many decades ago, Taylor has seen it all in tournament fishing. He's truly a legend in the sport of bass fishing – perhaps more famous to more people than the countless pros he's weighed in over the years. Now a year into his retirement, we had a chance to catch up with Bill and pick his brain about life away from the weigh-in stage and dig into his incredible run as one of the key figures behind the most successful tournaments in the sport.

You've fished for most of your life. How did you get drawn into tournaments?

I've always worked so I could fish. When I got started at it, it was just a desire to get on the water, and I've continued that to this day. I love the outdoors. I love competition. And I love being out there, whether it's alone or with one of my good friends. It's been a part

of what I am since I was a little guy.

My involvement in the tournament management positions all evolved through my connection with Operation Bass. I fished the very first tournament they put together. In about 1984, we were at an event at Dale Hollow, and Mike Whittaker – the owner of the company at the time – was looking to

expand. He wanted to know if I'd be interested in becoming involved, and at that point in time I had about 14 or 15 years in with United Parcel Service. My mind was pretty set. I knew they had a good retirement package and I knew it was a good company, so I politely declined and told him my old buddy Charlie Evans might be interested.

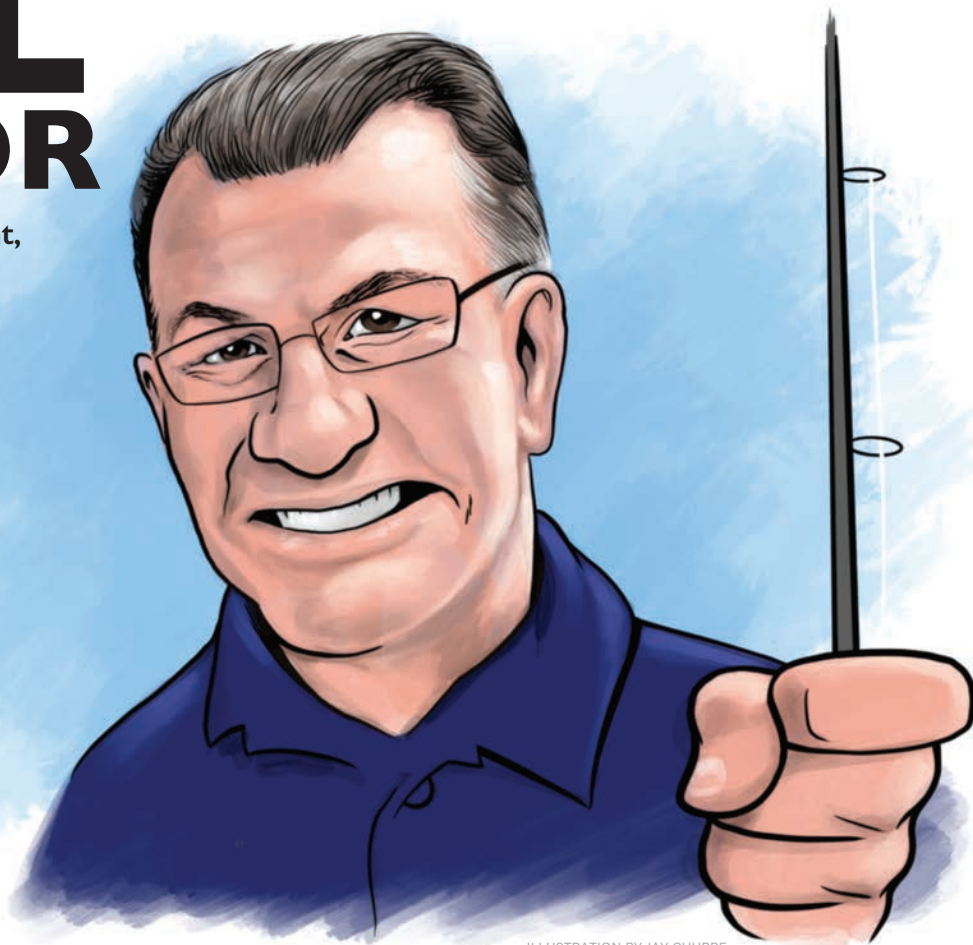


ILLUSTRATION BY JAY CHUPPE

But you eventually started working for Operation Bass.

Charlie and I had been fishing a tournament on the weekend, and I asked him what he had to do when he got back to Benton (Kentucky, home of the original Operation Bass/FLW office) to work. He said he had to hire a couple tournament assistants and I asked him what that meant. I said I might be interested in that.

To make a long story short, my daughter was just graduating high school and going to college, and I figured that would help pay for that.

So you worked part-time and then went all-in?

I did it almost six years. I took all my [UPS] vacation in that time frame to attend the events, and eventually I retired from UPS. Six months or so after I had retired, it wasn't long until I was offered a full-time position as a tournament director. I went from working full-time back to working full-time again and the rest is history.

How did you start tournament fishing initially?

Right out of college I got drafted – I was one of the very first to get drafted under the lottery system. I went into the U.S. Army in 1970. I spent two years there,



and once I got out of the Army, I started back with UPS and started fishing.

While I was in the Army, I became a member of B.A.S.S. My wife sent me the magazine, and I read the stories of the tournaments, and I couldn't wait to get back home. I joined a bass club in 1973, and it evolved from there.

I had grown up fishing farm ponds around my community, but I really fell in love with Lake Cumberland. I was really intrigued by the big water over there. I lived about 30 minutes from Lake Cumberland at the time, and one of my close high school friends, his dad had a small boat with a 10-horsepower outboard. He and I began to go to the headwaters of Lake Cumberland, and we grew from that when we were in college.

Ever since I met you, you've been into night fishing, which is mostly a summertime thing. When did you branch out from that?

I'll never forget the first time I caught a bass on a jig was in late February. The weather got pretty, and I had bought an 18-horsepower Johnson outboard and I rented a boat in Beaver Creek on Lake Cumberland.

In those days, you could rent a boat for not much money, and I had an old "doll fly." It was a hair jig and I put a trailer on it and I caught a 6-pound largemouth for my first fish ever on the jig. I got hooked on jig fishing in 1973 and that's how I got started in winter-time fishing.

I found out pretty quick after that if I wanted to really catch some big ones I went in the wintertime. I was one of the very first people in my area that really fished in the wintertime. I read all these articles about guys in Arkansas and how good they bit in the winter. It became my favorite time to fish.

What was your tackle situation like back then?

The very first Abu Garcia reel I bought, I paid \$38.95 for it, and I thought I'd died and went to heaven. My

tackle consisted mostly of Bomber crankbaits, and I bought every jig and every spinnerbait I could buy.

I guess the biggest turnaround in my career was the "alphabet baits": the Rebel Super R, and the Big Os. The first one I saw was a brown-colored Super R. It had black stripes, and I'll never forget it. I paid \$1.98 when most tackle was 75 cents to \$1. I thought it looked like a chub minnow. The first cast I made with it in Lake Cumberland, I caught a smallmouth that was 4 pounds.

You were fishing pretty steady in central Kentucky by the time Operation Bass started in 1979. I think you finished second in the first tournament they ever ran, and it just went up from there.

I got lucky in 1981. I won their end-of-the-year championship and went on to win 14 events and held the record for a while before I had to back off when I started working part-time. I won my last one on those circuits in 1997 on Cherokee Lake. The last 20 years I haven't fished hardly any BFLs or things like that. I didn't get to fish as many tournaments as I wanted to, but I'm going to fish a lot more next year.

I bet you have some great memories from all that time around tournaments.

I've met so many great people – not just professional anglers, but great people. I'd watched Jerry McKinnis on TV and I got to meet him. I really understood where he was coming from, how he got to where he was, and he was one of the great people I got to know.

Another one was Roland Martin. Bless his heart, Roland had so much energy. When he came through boat check, he was like a lost cat,



like a stray dog trying to find a home. But I gained so much respect for Roland, and he and I talk pretty regularly on the phone today.

And I met guys like Larry Nixon, one of the best damn fishermen in the sport ever.

It seems like as a tournament director you've had the chance to impact a lot of folks over the years.

I hope with anything I accomplished in the sport that people respected me for how I handled them and talked to them in different situations. Whether it was family issues or financial issues, it's amazing how many people talked to me about those situations. It gave me a great feeling to know that maybe I helped somebody in that category. It's been a great ride.



Are there any changes through the years that you had a hand in you're particularly proud of?

I remember when we discussed running two tournaments in one. Why don't we let the co-anglers fish against the co-anglers and the boaters fish against the boaters? From that discussion came our format of boater and non-boater. I was still fishing the events part-time at that point. As a matter of fact, my co-angler

won the first tournament in the Mountain Division when we started that.

Working for Operation Bass and FLW, you saw a lot of future pro anglers come through in front of you. You're pretty proud of that, right?

I watched Bassmasters, and I watched the growth of Major League Fishing from their startup. The Forrest Wood Cup, I looked at those rosters and every one of those rosters said the same thing: that 85 percent of those anglers had started at Operation Bass or FLW, and it continues today. Our company, we groomed these guys, and it was quite the honor just to have a small part in it, that all these anglers started with us.

One of the hot topics on the internet these days is forward-facing sonar. What do you think about it?

Let's back up a little bit. I can remember when flipping was first introduced by Dee Thomas. It was too good, too easy to catch fish. It penalized the angler in the back who wasn't running the boat. It was too hard on [the fish] when you jerked on them. Some organizations limited the rod length you could use, and like

everything else, some things stay and some go.

I'm for anything that grows the sport. What I mean by that is, our ability to catch fish, if it's legal within regulations, I'm for that. Whether it's the [umbrella rig] or forward-facing sonar, I'm for that.

With the guys out offshore fishing with forward-facing sonar, for the guys that don't do that, it opens up tons of water for them. The bank beaters, there's no difference in the way they fish, and they're getting more areas to fish.

For anybody that's against it, it's more than likely that they want to make excuses because they can't compete. The guys that compete at the highest level are going to learn to compete with whatever techniques. The same guys that won before are still winning if you look at it. Those guys are just good at every technique out there.

A lot of the argument against forward-facing sonar is that it's boring to watch on TV or live. How much do you think we should prioritize entertainment at the top level compared to letting the anglers compete with everything they can?

As a tournament fisherman that watches about every minute of online coverage, it can become just a little bit boring. There's nothing like a Spook bite, or a surface lure strike with a great videographer.

I watch these guys that are really good offshore, and then they go to a lake and beat the bank and they're still good. I think there's room for both – forward-facing sonar is not an easy task to learn. And I would say of all the pros out there, there are a lot that still are beating the bank.

Plus, you're never going to get a schedule that is entirely offshore. Some folks might not like sight-fishing events, or not like Florida events. Looking at next year for the Tackle Warehouse Invitational schedule, I think you could hand the Angler of the Year trophy to Andy Morgan after the first event.

I saw that. I agree 100 percent. They have a great schedule, not only the Bass Pro Tour but the Invitationals. There's going to be a lot of shallow-water fishing in all of those events.

I know Michael Mulone and Chris Hoover, who set most of those up, and those guys understand fishing. They try to do the best they can to make sure there are diverse fisheries in that schedule, and that creates interest in the schedule. For Lake Champlain, they know when to go there, and they also know when to go to the Arkansas River.

There are a lot of cool things about working in tournament fishing, but it's still work. What was your least favorite part of the job?

I didn't have a least favorite part of the job. I really enjoyed the scheduling part when I was involved; that was one of my most favorite things that I did.

I really loved the scheduling. I really loved setting up for a lakeside weigh-in, getting the flow for parking. I loved making sure I knew the water well enough to know where the off-limits [areas] should be, or what the regulations should be. And I loved being at the tubs and seeing the anglers come in.

The hardest part of my job was having to disqualify or penalize an angler for a rule violation. I'm not talking about someone violating an off-limits or information rule



– that’s easy. What I’m talking about is a guy that breaks down on the water and can’t get back in, or a guy that makes a cast too close to the off-limits, makes one cast and calls me [to self-report].

It seems like information and off-limits rules get a lot of attention now. Are there any current rule changes you’d like to see?

I’ve had a lot of success bass fishing, and I’ve never gotten information from anyone that truly helped me win an event. There are some people that can make use of information, and there are some like myself that can’t. There are fishermen that will fish their way regardless; they’ll go to places that they know suits them.

With that being said, I think the information rule is the most highly talked about rule out there, and it’s the hardest rule to enforce. I think it’s so easy for people to voluntarily give anglers information, and they don’t understand it could be a violation of the rule.

I was never one for off-limits [periods], to be honest with you. I think if a guy wants to fish the week before the event, they should be able to. But nowadays, the anglers prefer those rules. Due to the

fact that we try to listen to what our anglers want to make the sport more fair, you have to have certain rules like that, because you do want to listen to the anglers.

I think letting the anglers have a lot of input is great. When you think about the money they have on the line, it makes a lot of sense to let the players decide as much as possible.

I agree with that 100 percent. It’s good for all tournament organizations to have their own agenda, but if they refuse to listen to the anglers, that’s on them.

Our company has always had an open-door policy. If a guy on the release boat has a suggestion, or an angler does, they should listen. Just because Bill Taylor doesn’t like off-limits, it works good for the Bass Pro Tour. If you don’t listen to your anglers, you’re missing the boat.

Are there any rules or aspects like that you were skeptical about initially and then came around to?

I’m sure there are some rules that I didn’t like to begin with that turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I don’t like any tournament rule that takes a penalty to the ungodly max, but there’s not one that comes to mind.

Like the A-rig – I was adamantly for the A-rig. We came up with a good working plan between Kathy Fennel, Dave Washburn and all the tournament directors, and that helped everybody, except the ones that didn’t want it, which was the pros. So we said no A-rig at that level. We made adjustments and it worked beautifully.

I love an umbrella rig. What do you think about bringing it back at the top level?

One of the best shows I watch on TV is [Mark] Zona’s show. He uses the A-rig. I’ve watched Ott DeFoe use it to catch monster bass. It’s one of my favorite lures, but it isn’t a surefire way to catch them all the time. You’ve got to know the pattern, how to rig it, how deep to fish it, how to get unhung with it, everything.

I’ll tell you one that I am against is these guys that have the 6-inch flutter spoons with a big 5/0 stinger hook and they’re out looking at them on [forward-facing sonar]. They jerk and they jerk and they snag those fish. I’m not a big proponent of that lure – that’s one lure adjustment I’m adamantly against. To me, that’s snagging fish intentionally.

Is there a recent rule you really like?

There’s one rule I got in that I was very proud of. The creel limit is five, but how many times have you heard of someone catching their sixth fish and continuing fishing? They do it not thinking; they’re just so caught up (in the moment).

It used to be a disqualification. Well, we found a way around that, and now it’s a 2-pound penalty and you go back to fishing. A 2-pound penalty is a pretty good penalty, and I’m proud to have been able to get that rule changed.

I would almost make that a lighter penalty. It seems like some really good and upright anglers are really bad at counting.

I don’t disagree with that. The objective with any rule is to make the rule fair. So, the objection to that is that if it carried such a low penalty, you could keep an extra fish and gain an advantage if one dies, so it has to be higher than a dead fish penalty.

Is there anything else that really sticks with you from your time in the tournament directing game?

One thing is, I really appreciate the opportunity I’ve had, first given to me by Charlie Evans and Kathy Fennel, and then from MLF by Boyd Duckett and Jim Wilburn and all the staff. They’ve been a big help to me in my retirement. I’ll continue to support tournament fishing. The sport has been good to me, and I really appreciate the opportunity I’ve had. ■



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TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS





ARK FISHING

GRAVITY 7 BAITCASTING REEL

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY BRANDON ROWAN

Three years in the making, Ark Fishing's Gravity Series baitcasters (G3, G5 and G7) are loaded with a wide range of innovative features and components. The Gravity 7 is tricked out with all sorts of goodies aimed at achieving the top-end performance that pros demand. It's the Cadillac of the bunch and the one we put to the test.

First Impression

Low in profile and comfortable in the palm, the Gravity 7 is built around a rigid aluminum alloy frame with a bright silver finish and classy gun metal trim. It sports a cone-shaped line guide, carbon fiber handle tipped with tapered rubber grips, a removable carbon fiber side plate, recessed

brake dial with 20 settings and a 14-pound C3 Force star drag. Like the drag, the tension knob adjusts with subtle clicks.

Crack open the side plate and it's evident this is truly a custom-tier reel. Inside, Ark's patented "Gravity Control" braking system and a short-shaft duralumin spool work in unison to provide pleasant casting experiences with small and big baits alike. The magnetic braking system has three modes of operation (marked I, II, III) that are easily adjustable by pushing down on the red rotor and turning it to the desired setting. The rotor locks on two silver pins at each setting. The "III" setting provides maximum braking; "I" is minimum braking. Braking in each of the three internal

modes can be fine-tuned using the external 20-digit brake dial for 60 (yes, 60!) different settings.

In Action

I learned enough about the G7 in a few testing trips to feel confident saying it's the "reel deal." I found plenty to like about the reel once I got comfortable with how the brake settings work, and, more importantly, how to get them dialed in when throwing baits of different sizes and weights in varied conditions with fluorocarbon and braided lines.

Don't expect to be able to launch baits out of sight with this reel, but you will experience smooth, long casts and skips with minimal effort. The G7 can handle everything from big glide baits

and magnum crankbaits to wacky worms and light-weight crankbaits with the proper combination of settings, beginning with the internal setting.

While everyone's casting ability is different, a good general rule is to go with the No. 3 setting when casting big, heavy baits, No. 2 with medium-weight baits and No. 1 for finesse baits and flipping, where you will rely heavily on your thumb to slow down the spool. The 0-20 external brake dial allows for fine-tuning depending on wind and other conditions; the higher the number, the more braking control you get.

Final Thoughts

It's an ambitious task for a young company to step into the reel game and go



BRAKING SYSTEM:

Ark's Gravity Control magnetic braking system provides three braking modes with 20 exterior adjustments each that allow for effortless casting and precision tuning.

ALLOY FRAME:

A sturdy aluminum alloy frame houses reinforced brass gears and a Hyper Smooth transmission system.



SHAFT & SPOOL:

Also exclusive to the G7 model are a floating cast shaft and featherlight duralumin line spool that combine to provide reduced vibration and greater casting distance.

DRAG:

The 7-ounce G7 is equipped with Ark's C3 (Carbon, Compact, Competition) Force Drag, that utilizes new brake washer materials and brake grease that lend to smooth braking under a variety of



toe-to-toe with the big boys, especially in baitcasting arenas where budgets are huge and product loyalty runs deep. Ark has assembled a pro staff comprised of some of the nation's top anglers and leaned heavily on Bass Pro Tour pro Randall Tharp to create what is arguably one of the most cutting-edge reels introduced in recent times.

Performance Advice

- **Performance Tip #1:** Ark owner Louie Zhang says the duralumin line spool holds about 100 yards of 12-pound-test premium Seguar fluorocarbon. It would be wise to limit the line backing when spooling with braid to squelch concerns of casting to the knot.
- **Performance Tip #2:** The No. 3 internal braking mode provides maximum braking. No. 1 is the minimum and No. 2 is in the middle. Use the 20-position dial on the carbon side plate to fine-tune braking to suit the conditions, tactic and size of the bait.
- **Performance Tip #3:** There isn't much to grip when removing the side plate to access the internal brake setting. Use your thumb to push the spool against side plate for easier removal.

Applications

- Finesse and power fishing tactics
- Four gear ratios available

>> ALL ABOUT GRAVITY

The Gravity Series also includes the entry-level Gravity 3 model and a mid-level Gravity 5 that retail for \$129.99 and \$179.99, respectively. Both are fashioned with aluminum alloy frames, reinforced brass gears, cone-shaped line guides, four retrieve ratios (5.4:1, 6.4:1, 7.1:1 and 8.1:1) in right/left hand retrieve and a line size indicator on the side plate. The G3 has a standard magnetic braking system, EVA foam knobs, an aluminum handle and six stainless ball bearings. The G5 comes with the Gravity Control braking system and nine stainless ball bearings.

HITS & MISSES

- + 60-position braking system
- + Stout gears
- + Free-floating, featherlight spool
- + Smooth, long casting
- + Versatile
- + Premium drag
- + Carbon fiber handle
- + Non-slip rubber grips
- + Cone-shaped line guide for reduced friction
- No line size indicator

DETAILS

Gear Ratios: 4 (5.4:1, 6.4:1, 7.1:1 & 8.1:1)
Weight: 7.0 ounces
Capacity: 100 yards, 12-pound-test fluorocarbon
Bearings: 11 Stainless
Frame: Aluminum Alloy
Drag: 14-pound C3 Force, Star
Handle: Carbon Fiber
Grips: Rubber
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Elevating

THE LOWLY WORM

THE OLD AND VENERABLE plastic worm seems ever the same, yet ever-changing. Here's a look at recent turns of the worm – and what you need to know to turn today's worms into tomorrow's success.

BY MIKE PEHANICH | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON ROWAN





ZOOM ULTRA
VIBE SPEED
WORM
COLOR:
RED BUG

Z-MAN
TURBO FATTY
COLOR:
WATERMELON RED

ZOOM MAGNUM
ULTRA VIBE
SPEED WORM
COLOR:
GREEN
PUMPKIN
BLUE

Most lures have short histories. Some enjoy fleeting fame before settling into niche roles or drifting into obscurity.

But a very select few not only survive the test of time but live on in a lovefest of imitation.

One such lure is the worm.

"I love the lowly worm," admits MLF pro Miles Burghoff. "The lowly worm has saved my day a time or two. It never gets old."

MLF vet Mark Rose echoes his praise.

"I make a living trying to get a bite," Rose says. "And a worm just does it. We have so many varieties – the ribbontail, straight tail, do-nothing worms. The Ned rig has shown us that even little morsels of a worm are good. You just need to know when and where to use each technique. The old rubber worm is as effective today as it's always been."

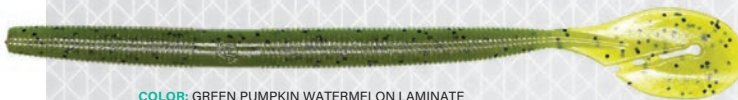
Subtleties in worm design and formulation are easy to overlook, but they're helping to make the latest generation of worms deadlier and more versatile than their predecessors.

SWIMMING WORMS

Ribbontail worms have been around forever, and they remain favorites for bass folk at every level. But action worms have taken an aggressive turn.

JUST KEEP SWIMMING | Cover grassy flats quickly with a swimming worm and a fast retrieve.

NOTABLE SWIM WORMS



COLOR: GREEN PUMPKIN WATERMELON LAMINATE

Speed Senko (7-inch), Yamamoto Baits – Adding to the Yamamoto tradition, the Speed Senko adds a thumping tail to the ever-popular Senko to rally bass attention in a hurry.

Blazin' Worm, Googan Squad – MLF pro Matt Becker boasts that this bait delivers "action throughout the worm, not like a curlytail." A patented double-flange tail adds plenty of "wiggle and dance" on a slow steady retrieve. Becker speculates that swimming worms caught on first in Florida due to their resemblance to needlefish or small gar.

Tour Swim Worm 5.5- and 7.5-inch, Big Bite Baits – This hybrid borrows features of sister plastics – a buzz tail from the surface riding Tour Toad and a rib-ringed front section that slows the fall.

Hyperlastics Wormspin (7.25-inch), A Band of Anglers – This tough, durable worm with a spinner tail has tantalizing action worked over or through grass beds and on the fall.



COLOR: BLUE BABY



COLOR: PURPLETOMA



COLOR: BLACK N' BLUE/SILVER



BERKLEY POWERBAIT
MAXSCENT LIL' GENERAL

BERKLEY POWERBAIT
MAXSCENT HIT WORM

BIG BITE BAITS SCENTATION
CLIFF HANGER WORM

BERKLEY POWERBAIT
MAXSCENT THE GENERAL



*“SCENT AND FLAVOR
ADDITIVES ENHANCE A
BAIT’S ABILITY TO
ATTRACT AND THE FISH’S
DESIRE TO HOLD ON.”*

“In recent years, worms have evolved,” Burghoff explains. “Traditionally, we fished worms slowly, on or near the bottom, with a Texas rig or a shaky head setup. But nowadays I use worms to cover a tremendous amount of water.”

He’s not alone. Today’s anglers are counting on these quivering creatures to do more than shake and crawl. For a growing number, they have become search tools. A worm that swims with thumping or pulsating action can find fish much faster than one that sneaks through an isolated patch of cover.

One such tool is the **Turbo FattyZ**, a worm that Burghoff recently designed for **Z-Man**. It’s a thick-bodied bait, made with a heavy concentration of salt to enable long casts and modest depth reach with a 1/4- or 3/8-ounce bullet weight and steady retrieve. Its curved, paddle-like tail delivers a thumping swimming motion at a range of retrieve speeds from slow to surprisingly rapid. The worm’s bulk and density extend its versatility.

“I use it as a tool to break down water quickly,” he says.

He alternates between fishing it with conspicuous surface commotion and with a more subtle sub-surface swim, depending on conditions.

“On big, grassy flats, I like to keep the trolling motor on high, make long casts and reel it in,” Burghoff adds. “Even if I just get fish to wake on it, that clues me in to the fact that there are fish in the area. It’s such a productive technique when I’m trying to break down large grass flats from Lake Okeechobee to the Mississippi River.”

Burghoff calls it “an all-year bait” but finds it particularly effective early and late in the season.

“The speed-type buzzing worm was an eye-opener for me,” echoes Rose, trumpeting the anticipated arrival this season of the **Strike King Rage Twin Tail Menace Worm**, which has flanges on the tails that enhance its vibration. “I first saw its effectiveness in Florida, especially around vegetation.”

As with most developments in the category, the roots of swimming worms were sunk well before they blossomed into trend. **Zoom’s 6-inch Ultra Vibe Speed Worm** put a tail engine to

wormin’. A 7-inch **Magnum UV Speed Worm** followed.

Presentation tip: Swim worm technique focuses on speed and depth.

“On lakes with emergent vegetation such as reeds, lily pads, Kissimmee grass and the like, I fish close to the surface, or with submerged vegetation, right above the grass,” Burghoff says. “You can drop it into a hole, but mainly you’re just reeling it in.”

STRAIGHT TAIL: SCENTED, SALTY AND SUPPLE

A straight tail worm may be the most reliable bass-catching tool ever fashioned. Mastering its use is often a budding angler’s first proud accomplishment and a pro’s last prayer in time of need.

“My ‘go-to’ is a straight tail worm,” professes Justin Lucas, who got his bass fishing education on tough California waters before moving to Alabama. “I feel very comfortable picking up a drop-shot or a wacky rig with a soft plastic worm. I have confidence that I can get bit on that no matter what.”



SHAKE IT WITH B L A T

MLF pro Brian Latimer teamed up with Z-Man to design the SMH Wormz and SMH Jighead. This winning shaky head combo utilizes Z-Man's tough but supple ElaZtech material and a rounded underside on the jighead for reduced hookset resistance.

Z-MAN SMH SHAKING MY HEAD JIGHEAD
 COLOR: BLACK - 1/4 OZ.



Z-MAN SMH SHAKING MY HEAD WORMZ
 COLOR: PLUM

"Simple is better," says two-time MLF winner Brian Latimer. "A 4- to 6-inch straight tail has been by far the most productive bait I've used day in and day out for the past 30 years. A worm will always be a top-10 producer. It will always be a winner."

Yet even the simplest of worm designs continues to evolve.

"Two things are driving worm development today: scent and the blend of plastics," says Michael Neal, who garnered back-to-back Angler of the Year titles the past two seasons on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit.

Finesse and slow-drop techniques favor soft, supple plastic formulations. Neal notes that buoyant plastics have become go-to tools used in conjunction with Forward-Facing Sonar (FFS).

"A lot of shaky head jigs were designed for baits that stand upright, yet a lot of the plastics used just lay flat," he adds.

The blend of a plastic factors into worm action and mouth feel, as well. Anglers have long been as mesmerized as the bass by the writhing, living action of soft hand-poured worms that California garage shop operations made famous. Mainstream manufacturers have come closer to mimicking those same qualities in their production facilities.

But supple plastics tend to tear easily, leading some manufacturers to fashion worms with thicker front bodies that add durability to sections where bait keeper, Neko weight or hook tears can shred baits before a fish can do damage.

Scent and flavor additives enhance a bait's ability to attract and the fish's desire to hold on.

WORTHY WORMS

COLOR: MORNING DAWN

Filler Worm, Strike King - More than meets the eye, this versatile finesse worm with wide-set nose features a super-soft plastic for supple action over a salt-heavy bottom layer. Open Pour Technology (OPT) makes for a balanced worm that falls horizontally through the water column and quivers with the slightest movement. Available in 16 colors.

COLOR: SCUPPERNONG

Scentsation Skinny Stick (5-inch), Big Bite Baits - Neal's slender "do-all worm" leaves a scent trail, too. Serve it on a shaky head, Neko Rig or drop-shot. Made to rival hand-pours in suppleness.

COLOR: CALIFORNIA CRAW

Mag FattyZ (7.25-inch), Z-Man - A pumped-up version of the 5-inch FattyZ, the "Mag" has proven extremely popular with kayak pros, factoring into recent wins and high placements. Effective on a Texas Rig or Carolina Rig or magnum shaky head.

COLOR: PB & J

Zero, Strike King - Rose's choice for wacky worming and any other stick-style worm applications, this salt-infused worm offers a winning combination of softness and durability.

Factor salt into the discussion as well. This tried-and-true ingredient serves not only as a flavor additive but also adds density, which plays into worm action and casting distance.

Pure Fishing has fueled the "scent" trend with its Berkley PowerBait MaxScent products, which add the drawing power of proven scents to the taste benefits of its PowerBait plastics. A gentle rib texture aids with scent release. **The General** (along with a **Lil' General Ned Rig** version) and the Flat Worm from the Berkley PowerBait line have been particularly popular products. Subtle design elements - a thick upper body tapering to a paddle tail - add action to the **Hit Worm** and **Hit Worm Magnum**.

Two finesse techniques are front of mind in straight tail worm development: the shaky head and the Neko Rig.

Rose calls a straight tail worm on a shaky head jig "a survival kit for the bass fisherman." A shaky head couples stealth with snag-resistance.

Latimer recently designed the **SMH ("Shaking My Head") WormZ** for Z-Man along with a freshly fashioned **SMH Jighead**. The worm, made with Z-Man's patented ElaZtech material, is supple yet highly elastic and durable (many swear that it becomes more attractive to bass the more they beat it up). Latimer opted for a rounded underside and shank-positioned bait keeper on the SMH Jighead to eliminate hookset resistance met with other jig designs.

The Neko Rig has blossomed in recent years. This wacky rig variant is enjoying widespread usage among pro and amateur angler alike. Its 'weight-ahead' configuration with hook point



GOOGAN BAITS SLIM SHAKE WORM
 COLOR: ALABAMA CRAW

GOOGAN BAITS DRAGON DROP WORM
 COLOR: BROWN GILL

BERKLEY POWERBAIT MAXSCENT FLAT WORM
 COLOR: GOBYASHI

facing backward reduces snags. The addition of a nose weight makes it far more effective under windy conditions and gives it greater depth reach than an unweighted wacky worm.

WORMY HYBRIDS

Few bass see a lot of live night-crawlers during their lifetimes, yet the worm silhouette has immense appeal from a bass-eye perspective. Why so? Fish may well think of it as a leech, young snake, eel, overgrown insect, young gar and who knows what else when presented with this underwater Rorschach Test.

Soft plastics makers have reasoned that coupling the worm shape with other creature features compounds the appeal. Ribbontail worms continue to propagate. Eel, leech, sculpin and salamander hybrids have decades-long histories, too. Extending the hybrid trend today are worm/crawfish combos.

GETTING THE DROP

If you need proof of the broad reach of “finesse” among pro anglers today, just look at the number of drop-shot rigs on bass boat decks today.

HYBRID WORMS

COLOR: SUMMER CRAW

Zeus Worm, Strike King – Rose helped develop this 9.5-inch bait, which he calls “the most versatile lure in the Perfect Plastic lineup.” Zeus offers both a ribbontail and a straight tail in a single worm. “Pinch off the curly plastic and you have the perfect Neko, shaky head, or wacky worm. It’s the most unique design ever in a casting worm.”



COLOR: BLACK BLUE FLAKE

Big Bite Scentsation Quarantine Craw – From Big Bite’s new line of scent-impregnated baits comes this 4.5-inch blend of slender stick worm and flapping craw claws.

“Drop-shot worms play a huge factor in all my tournaments,” Becker says.

The Pennsylvania pro cites a 4-inch **Googan Drag n’ Drop** worm and a

“BASS WILL EAT A STRAIGHT TAIL WORM ON A DROP-SHOT ANYWHERE IN THE COUNTRY.”



6.5-inch **Googan Slim Shake** worm as his top drop-shot options.

“Bass will eat a straight tail worm on a drop-shot anywhere in the country.”

Berkley’s PowerBait MaxScent Flat Worm has set the bar for a new generation of scent-rich worm/baitfish imitators. It has played a starring role in smallmouth beatdowns in particular, all over the country.

“Less is best” is the common theme of drop-shot practitioners, who generally rely on a tantalizing “in-your-face” presentation to trigger bass bites. Drop-shot worms of recent vintage ride that theme. Most feature soft plastic bodies that quiver at the slightest movement. Some ooze bass-tempting odors.

DROP-SHOT ‘EM



COLOR: PERCH DINNER

Scentsation Cliff Hanger, Big Bite Baits – Slender 5-inch worm has the look and feel of a fine hand-pour.



COLOR: SCUPPER PURPLE

Scentsation Smasher (3.5-inch and 4.5-inch), Big Bite Baits – Slender double-taper body shapeshifts between worm and bottom-dwelling baitfish like sculpin and goby. Action aplenty.

Presentation tip: Neal is among the many who make the drop-shot first pick in FFS face-offs.

“If I find bass suspended, I try to get the bait a few feet past them and let it sink to the bottom,” he says.



With the enhanced properties lure makers have added to today’s soft plastics, it’s hard to think of the lowly worm as lowly anymore.

Upgrade your worm arsenal with some of these next-generation worms before you hit the water this season. ■

NEW YEAR NEW GEAR



**DAIWA TATULA
70SV CASTING REEL**

Designed to be the smallest, lightest and most comfortable casting reel Daiwa has ever produced, the Tatula SV 70 might just be the next great thing for BFS applications. At 6.5 ounces, the SV 70 packs some heavyweight features into a featherweight package including its "Hyper Drive Design" that includes four brand-new design elements to the Daiwa lineup (Hyper Armed Housing, Hyper Drive Digigear, Hyper Double Support and Hyper Tough Clutch). The SV 70 also features a newly redesigned T-Wing line guide system meant to alleviate some issues prior models had with allowing connecting knots to freely flow through the line guide.

Technical specs aside, here's what you need to know about the Tatula SV 70: It's really light, super palmable and insanely well equipped for light-line, small-lure baitcasting applications previously relegated to spinning reels. Reasonably priced and packed with new tech, it's worth checking out this winter for your cold-water finesse techniques.

\$229.99 | daiwa.us

**LEW'S CUSTOM LITE
SPINNING REEL**

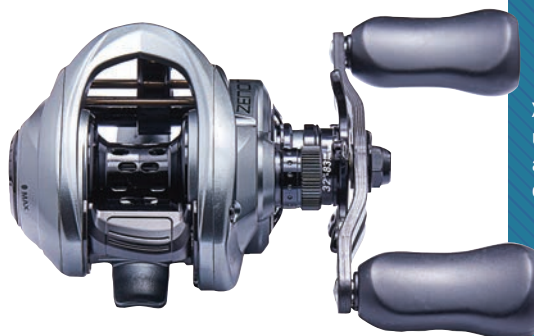


At \$159.99 MSRP, the new Lew's Custom Lite spinning reel is in the conversation for best bang-for-your-buck reel on the market. It's light (6.6 ounces for the 200 size and 6.9 ounces for the 300) and comfortable, boasts 10+1 bearings, a carbon fiber frame and rotor and buttery smooth 16- or 18-pound drag (depending on reel size) you don't often find in reels at this price point.

The 200-size option adds 31 inches of line to the spool for every turn (32 inches for the 300) with a 6.2:1 gear ratio and 160 yards of capacity for 30- to 40-pound braided line. It's a true do-it-all reel for nearly all spinning technique needs, and for the money (and with the Lew's one-year warranty guarantee), it's a quality option for both the casual bass angler and tournament professional alike.

\$159.99 | lews.com

ABU GARCIA ZENON MG-X CASTING REEL

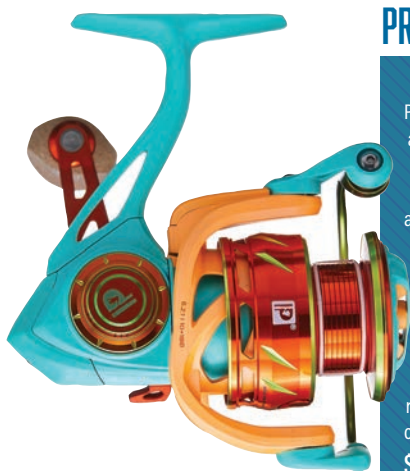


Truly a casting reel built for comfort and strength, the 5.1-ounce Zenon MG-X from Abu Garcia punches well above its weight class. While small and light, the MG-X version of the high-end Zenon lineup still features 15 pounds of drag and a spool that'll handle 135 yards of 10-pound mono, so it's not just relegated to light-line applications.

Abu Garcia touts a handful of proprietary design elements that make the Zenon MG-X worth the lofty price tag (\$449.95 MSRP) including the IVCB-4 braking system for ultimate adjustability and a Carbon Matrix drag system, aircraft-grade aluminum main gear and 10 stainless HPCR bearings (plus a roller bearing). If you need a do-it-all reel that can handle everything from BFS to flipping, punching and frogging, this is it. Available in left- and right-hand retrieve in 6.8:1 and 8.3:1 gear ratios.

\$449.95 | abugarcia.com

PROFISHIENCY KRAZY SPINNING REEL



As flashy as they are unique, the aptly named Krazy spinning reels from Profishency (A12 and A13 models) certainly stand out from the crowd – and that's not a bad thing. In a market flooded with reels that fit a certain mold, these offerings from Profishency open new doors for what a quality reel can look like.

Available at many big-box retailers as well as Tackle Warehouse, Profishency aims to make quality gear at a great price point and make it appealing to anglers of all ages and skill levels. The A13 meets many entry-level specs (graphite body, stainless steel main shaft) while the A12 will check a lot of boxes for the seasoned angler looking for a little more in the way of durability and smoothness (magnesium frame, aluminum pinion).

Profishency's Krazy reels (they also make casting reels) aren't a gimmick, and you shouldn't be fooled by the loud, in-your-face colors. These are serious reels that should appeal to anyone who doesn't mind bucking tradition in favor of style.

\$89.99-149.99 | profishency.com

LEW'S LITE SERIES SPINNING ROD

Spinning rods are getting lighter, stronger and less expensive every year. This year, Lew's is offering a new model that's all the above in the Lite Series spinning rods in nine models ranging from 5'4" ultra-light to 7' light.

Built on an HM50 graphite blank that offers lightweight performance without sacrificing power and durability, the Lite Series is built for light-line techniques for everything from panfish to big bass. It's also built for comfort with a CT-1 ComfortTouch reel seat and a Winn Dri-Tac handle for exceptional handling.

What's more, Lew's newest and lightest lineup comes in at \$109.99-\$119.99 MSRP, meaning sensitivity and comfort will no longer cost you an arm and a leg.

\$109.99-119.99

lews.com



You can't go wrong with G. Loomis when it comes to high-end sensitivity. The new GCX Lite lineup continues to carry that torch in a series that features 17 new spinning models including one- and two-piece sticks from 4'8" to 7'6" in ultra-light, medium-light and light powers.

There's no one design element that really makes the GCX Lite lineup the belle of the ball – it's simply good at everything in the finesse technique arena. Multi-Taper Design technology creates nimble and ultra-durable blanks with sensitive tips that allow for both precision and distance when casting. And for quality rods as light and sensitive as these, \$249.99-\$319.99 (depending on model) is an easy pill to swallow.

\$249.99-319.99

gloomis.com



G. LOOMIS GCX LITE SPINNING ROD

FAVORITE ZACK BIRGE RUSH SIGNATURE SERIES CASTING ROD

Premium components headline a list of impressive features in the Zack Birge Signature Series sticks from Favorite Fishing, which should come as no surprise considering Birge himself trusts his professional success to them. From 36-ton Toray graphite blanks to Fuji Alconite KR guides and EVA foam handles, it's truly surprising to see Birge's signature sticks clock in at a penny under \$250.

Birge's signature lineup consists of two casting rods: 7'3" medium-heavy/fast and 7'7" heavy/fast – ideal for covering a multitude of different techniques. If you're looking for a do-it-all spinning rod, there's also a Birge model available that's a 7'1" medium-heavy/fast multi-technique juggernaut.

\$249.99

favoriteusa.com



Not everyone loves fiberglass for techniques that require a lot of bend to keep fish pinned. Although the market continues to trend toward more fiberglass rods for cranking and vibrating jigs, 6th Sense zigged opposite the zag with a new line of graphite casting rods designed to improve hookup ratios and help get fish to the boat or bank. Specifically for reaction baits (or "moving" baits, as the series name alludes to), these parabolically bending rods give you extra cushion for playing fish and working finicky baits, especially those with trebles.

The Movement lineup consists of six models from 6'9" medium to 7'11" heavy, all with moderate-fast actions and all coming in at \$139.99 MSRP. Product highlights include supple 24-ton Japanese carbon graphite blanks, American Tackle semi-micro guides and full EVA foam grips for all-day comfort.

\$139.99

6thsensefishing.com



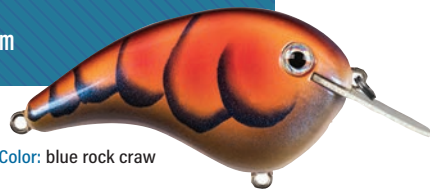
6TH SENSE MOVEMENT CASTING ROD

STRIKE KING CHICK MAGNET JR.

When the Chick Magnet hit the scene in 2021 (earning acclaim at ICAST for its impressive design), it set the standard for mass-produced flat-sided crankbaits thanks to input from Andy Morgan and his decades of experience throwing (and winning with) flat-sided plugs in east Tennessee. This year, Morgan and Strike King upped the ante with a smaller version of that bait in the Chick Magnet Jr., a flat-sided crank of similar dimensions but at nearly half the weight that swims a little shallower than its big sibling.

Flat-sided plugs shine in cold and stained water and on pressured fisheries, and in those situations, smaller is often better. That's where the Chick Magnet Jr. comes in. And as is the case with the original Chick Magnet, the Jr. provides balsa performance in a more durable package that also casts better thanks to Strike King engineering and Morgan's keen eye for detail.

\$9.99 | strikeking.com



Color: blue rock craw

DUO REALIS ROZANTE PERJ 95F WAKEBAIT

Somewhere between a glide bait and a true wakebait, the Rozante Perj 95F from Duo Realis is an innovative and attractive option for targeting big bass in all kinds of scenarios, from probing shallow-water cover to calling up aggressive bass from the depths. It features proprietary ball bearing joints connecting the three sections to allow the bait to move in ways most bass haven't seen before.

In addition to natural wobble and roll that make the Rozante Perj 95F a unique offering, it's also equipped with three sticky sharp trebles to improve hookup ratio and comes in five brilliant colors from subtle (ghost chartreuse) to in-your-face flash (Inakko). And at \$27.99, it also finds the sweet spot in a large topwater/shallow subsurface category filled with high-price offerings.

\$27.99 | duo-international.com



Color: inakko

SPRO MIKE McCLELLAND McSTICK 110 +1

MLF standout Michael Neal has made a lot of money with the SPRO McStick 110, thanks in big part to how well it pairs with forward-facing sonar. Now, there's a deeper-diving version available that adds a significant amount of diving depth to the original 3-to-5-foot suspending jerkbait and adds a little versatility to the lineup.

The McStick 110 +1 dives 9 to 12 feet depending on line size and gives anglers another great option for targeting suspended or bottom-dwelling bass in deeper water. It has a tight wiggle and nose-down posture on the pause, seven realistic fin-ishes and enough flair to draw in even the wariest of bass. It also suspends well in ultra-cold water to give lethargic bass a little more time to make their move.

\$14.93 | spro.com



Color: ghost magic purple

BERKLEY MONEY BADGER CRANKBAIT

The new Money Badger from Berkley is a jack of all trades in the crankbait arena. It's made to share elements between baitfish and crawfish imitators, and while its action is akin to hard-thumping balsa plugs, it's also equipped with Berkley's tungsten weight transfer system and FlashDisc technology for ultimate casting distance, tuning, tracking and stability.

What's more, the Money Badger lineup consists of five different size offerings (1 1/2 inches to 2 3/4 inches) in weights from 1/5 ounce to 3/5 ounce and diving depths from 4 to 13 feet. Combine that with 22 color options and you have a lineup of terrific crankbaits with all the versatility you could possibly need.

\$7.99-8.99 | berkley-fishing.com



Color: black gold

DAIWA YAMAMOTO NEKO CRAWLER



Color: brown purple laminate

Color:
watermelon
moondust



YAMAMOTO SLINKO

A collaboration between Daiwa and Yamamoto, the new Neko Crawler worm is the most refined and highly specialized tool for catching big bass on a Neko rig. Everything about the Neko Crawler is designed for the task, from the flat front end (to easily accept and hold on to nail weights) to the bulbous tail end that dances around and moves water as you work the bait. A thin, ribbed body adds to the presentation and completes the look of a Killer Neko worm that can replace the others in your arsenal.

The Neko Crawler, at 5 inches long, is in the Goldilocks zone of size for many other soft plastics applications, too. It's available in 10 great colors and will only set you back about a dollar per bait (\$8.99 for a pack of eight).

\$8.99 | daiwa.us

The folks at Yamamoto were genuinely excited to roll out the new 5.5-inch Slinko at ICAST 2022 – and seemingly for good reason. Any time you can take a bait as iconic and ubiquitous as the Senko, make some subtle and not-so-subtle changes and have a result as good as this, there's a lot to be enthusiastic about.

The Slinko takes the Senko and adds the appearance of extra bulk, though the aggressive ribbing along the entire body of the bait doesn't add a ton of actual mass – just the illusion of mass thanks to those ribs. As a result, the Slinko is super buoyant (perfect for weighted applications like Neko rigs, Carolina rigs and shaky heads) and allows for optimum hook penetration. It's available in all the Yamamoto colors you love for \$7.99 (packs of seven).

\$7.99 | baits.com

BERKLEY POWERBAIT MAXSCENT LIL' SUPER TROOPER CRAW

The Lil' Super Trooper Craw from Berkley is exactly what you'd expect from the big brother of the Lil' Trooper: flashier and better for applications that require moving more water. The biggest difference between the original and the Lil' Super Trooper is the size of the craw claws, which add some heft and movement despite the overall length (2 1/2 inches) remaining the same.

A Ned rig bait by design, the Lil' Super Trooper takes "subtle" and drops it on its head. If you're having a hard time getting bit on a small stick worm, adding some extra flair with big pinchers and more action might be the way to go. Like the Lil' Trooper, the Lil' Super Trooper is available in 10 realistic colors in packs of eight for \$7.99

\$7.99 | berkley-fishing.com



Color: watermelon copper

GOOGAN SQUAD HAPPY TRAILER

A soft plastic unlike any other, the Happy Trailer from Googan Squad is an amalgam of a lot of different baits - though it's hard to say it looks like any one thing. And that's the appeal of this particular bait, marketed as a trailer primarily for swim jigs, bladed jigs and spinnerbaits because of the unique shape and cut directions of the different sections of the body that displace a ton of water and give the Happy Trailer some wild thumping action.

The Happy Trailer is available in almost all the colors you'd need to match the skirt on your favorite jig or spinnerbait and is a reasonable \$6.99 for a pack of six.

\$6.99 | googansquad.com



Color: summer craw

GAMAKATSU G-SHIELD TUNGSTEN FLIPPING WEIGHT

A flipping weight is just a hunk of metal that sinks your bait, right? If you want to get existential about it, sure, but if you prefer to see the forest for the trees, you understand how subtleties in your metal weights can go a long way in catching more and bigger fish. Gamakatsu understands those subtleties as well, and it's abundantly clear with the new G-Shield lineup of tungsten weights.

The flipping weight in particular is especially innovative for its use of a large composite insert that's meant to be big enough to shield entire knots and even the eye of your favorite flipping hook for supreme abrasion and snag resistance. Tack on a chip-resistant matte finish and the size of the weight stamped on the outside for easy identification and you have the last line of flipping weights you ever need to try. Available from 3/8 (pack of three) to 1 1/4 ounces (pack of one) for \$9.59 to \$12.99 at tacklewarehouse.com.

\$9.59-12.99 | gamakatsu.com



GAMAKATSU G-SHIELD TUNGSTEN HYBRID SWING HEAD

If you've never tried a swing head for soft plastic presentations, this is the one to check out. Like the rest of the G-Shield lineup, the matte finish is chip-resistant with the weight stamped right on it, and every design element of the weight was carefully considered, right down to the quality wire harness and recessed line tie.

Perfect for slow-rolling creatures and worms around snaggy cover or worked through grass and around brush and rock, the Gamakatsu G-Shield Tungsten Swing Head is a versatile must-have, especially for anglers who like to target offshore bass.

\$6.99-11.99 | gamakatsu.com



PICASSO SHAKEY VIBE AND MAGNUM SHAKEY VIBE BLADED SHAKY HEAD

The Shakey Vibe and Magnum Shakey Vibe bladed shaky heads from Picasso are the best of both worlds in many ways. Building on the traditional shaky head (designed around stout 5/0 and 8/0 hooks and quality coil bait keeper), the addition of a clear blade simply provides anglers with more options for presentations. Want to still crawl and hop a worm over rocks and around ledges? No problem. Need to cover water with a craw or creature bait? It can do that, too, and certainly gives fish a new-ish look - like a smaller-profile vibrating jig sans skirt.

The regular Shakey Vibe features a 5/0 Gamakatsu jig hook and comes in black and green pumpkin finishes in 3/16, 1/4 and 3/8 ounces. The Magnum version features a Gamakatsu Magnum jig hook and is available in the same two colors in 1/2, 3/4 and 5/8 ounces.

\$6.99-7.89 | picassooutdoors.com



Z-MAN MICRO FINESSE SHROOMZ

As finesse as finesse gets, the Micro Finesse ShroomZ heads from Z-Man are best for use when the fishing is ultra-tough and bass simply need a compact, unintrusive offering to entice them to bite. Built on the same platform as Z-Man's other high-quality Ned rig heads, the Micro Finesse ShroomZ head is simply scaled down to feature size 4 (1/10- and 1/15-ounce models) and size 6 (1/20 and 1/30) hooks and welded wire bait keepers to keep your Z-Man ElaZtech or similar soft plastic baits in place. While ideal as a quiet offering for pressured fish, the Micro Finesse ShroomZ heads also have their place in panfish and crappie tackleboxes as well as for small creeks, streams and ultra-clear water environments.

\$4.99 | zmanfishing.com



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NEW GEAR**



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Designed to be the flagships of the Grundéns brand – and with bass anglers in mind – the Gambler line is as rugged as it is comfortable, as waterproof as it is stylish. Top-notch features include 80D nylon exterior fabric with GORE-TEX C-Knit backer and TOPO stretch panels, zippered pockets, submersible nylon cuffs and overlapping Velcro cuffs and a stowaway hood that zips into the jacket collar.

\$529.99-549.99 | grundens.com

**GRUNDÉNS GAMBLER GORE-TEX BIBS AND
GAMBLER GORE-TEX JACKET**



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JACOB WHEELER
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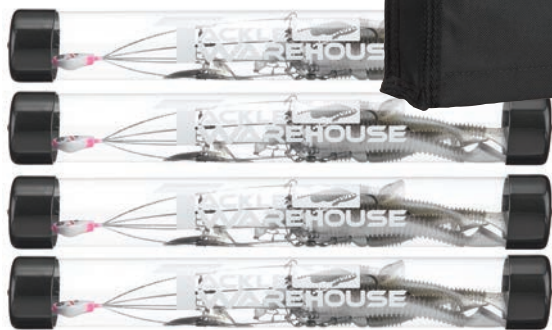
How about Ansi Z87.1+ high-velocity and high-mass impact protection? Lightweight? One hundred percent UV and UVB light blocking? The Wiley X Omega Jacob Wheeler Edition sunglasses have all those features and more. They're stylish, lightweight and prescription ready as well, and at \$190, you can feel good putting them to the test on the water, in the truck or anywhere else you need to protect your eyes.

\$190.00 | wileyx.com

**TACKLE WAREHOUSE
UMBRELLA RIG BAG**

'Tis the season for getting umbrella rig hooks snagged in clothes and truck seat covers. Winter is the ideal time to be throwing A-rigs, but if you're like most anglers, organizing and storing those wired bringers of mayhem can be a real pain. Tackle Warehouse has you covered with their new umbrella rig bag, a canvas satchel with four rigid compartments for storing individual A-rigs (rigged or otherwise) in clear plastic tubes – four included with each bag. This bag probably won't be the fanciest or most expensive (\$24.99) fishing item you purchase this season, but it'll definitely be among the most practical.

\$24.99 | tacklewarehouse.com



**BUBBA PRO SERIES
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Top of its class in the digital fish scale category, the Bubba Pro Series Smart Scale is packed with all the features you need and want in a tournament-ready fish-weighing tool. The sleek and attractive red-and-black scale features a 60-pound weight limit and accuracy to within .03 pounds with a number of modern features to make weighing, recording and culling easier than it's ever been.

Equipped with three modes (Tournament, Rally and Competition), the Pro Series Smart Scale has everything covered. Tournament Mode stores up to eight catches while Rally Mode keeps up to 99 recent catches and Competition Mode tracks catches for up to four teams. In addition, the scale offers Bluetooth capability and its own mobile app with an included five-year membership.

Comes with a premium IPX7 waterproof carry case and a lip clip and gill hook included.

bubba.com



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TOURNAMENTS







FINDING FORTUNE WITH THE BIRDS

Before high-powered electronics, precise GPS charts and screens the size of 1950s-era television sets, bass anglers often relied on their avian friends to identify areas full of baitfish. Find the birds, find the bait, find the bass.

Birds, on the other hand, have to use their keen sense of sight to find big schools of baitfish balling up beneath the surface. The process is simple: Circle high, peer far and wide and scope out the lake until you spot a pro from Brookeland, Texas, with a Phoenix boat and a white Tiger Creek Lodge wrap. That's where the baitfish will be – along with plenty of big bass.

Bass Pro Tour rookie and rising star Dakota Ebare is among the best anglers on the planet when it comes to finding big fish. He's an electronics wizard and a consummate student of the bass fishing game, which is a big reason why he's enjoyed such success in his relatively short career (beginning with his Abu Garcia College Fishing days in 2015 and culminating in a fourth-place finish in the Bally Bet Angler of the Year standings on the BPT in 2022).

Ebare has amassed 21 Top-10 finishes and nearly \$680,000 in tournament winnings with Major League Fishing to date, and he's attracted a large squad of fans who have enjoyed his rapid ascent in the professional bass fishing ranks – none more avid than the birds that use him as a dinner bell.

Find Ebare, find the bait, find the bass.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



GENERAL TIRE

GO TEAM!

The Crockett Creek team of Jacob Wheeler, Dylan Hays and Jason Lambert were among the first MLF pros to compete in the General Tire Team Series, taking on two other teams in the first-ever Team Series qualifying match in Alexandria, Minnesota.

Photo by Phoenix Moore

By its very nature, tournament bass fishing is a solitary game. Sure, there are thousands of two-man team tournaments throughout the country every year, but at its highest level, major tour-level bass competition is a “team of one.”

Until the General Tire Team Series, that is. Starting in early January, bass fans around the world will watch the superstars of the sport compete in a totally new format, with no limitations on communication: three-man teams working together, with unlimited, open-mic communication among them provided by cellular headsets. MLF photographers have been on hand throughout the fall and winter, capturing the action as 27 teams battled for spots in the nine-team GT Team Series Championship.

General Tire Team Series episodes will air every Saturday from 2 to 4 p.m. ET on Outdoor Channel, starting Dec. 31. More information, results and coverage can be found at majorleaguefishing.com



Although they had never fished together previously, Alton Jones Jr.'s teammates Britt Myers and Roy Hawk were all-in on the concept of working as a three-man squad.

Photo by Phoenix Moore



Unlike regular Bass Pro Tour competition, where it's every man for himself, Team B & W Trailer Hitches teammates Mark Davis and Gary Klein traded information throughout their Match 1 competition.

Photo by Garrick Dixon



Myers and Hawk made some last-minute adjustments during a period break, bringing a new, live teamwork dynamic to bass fishing.

Photo by Garrick Dixon



Team Knighten teammates Wesley Strader, Mike McClelland and Scott Suggs have fished and traveled together for years as tour-level pros, making their team chemistry an obvious strength.

Photo by Phoenix Moore



The communications system among Team Series competitors is the big difference maker. Marty Robinson tested out his headset prior to his first day of competition.

Photo by Joel Shangle



Kevin VanDam chose his Team Series teammates – Todd Faircloth and David Walker – based on their skills and experience, and his expectations of the early fall fishery.

Photo by Garrick Dixon



Mark Rose and Jordan Lee – the first-ever first-round pick in the GT Team Series Draft – sorted out their team strategy before the third Team Series qualifier (this one in Texas).

Photo by Brandon Rowan



Team Fox Rent a Car captain James Elam pulled teammates Brent Chapman and Jonathon VanDam over for some quick map study before the start of their match in Minnesota.

Photo by Garrick Dixon



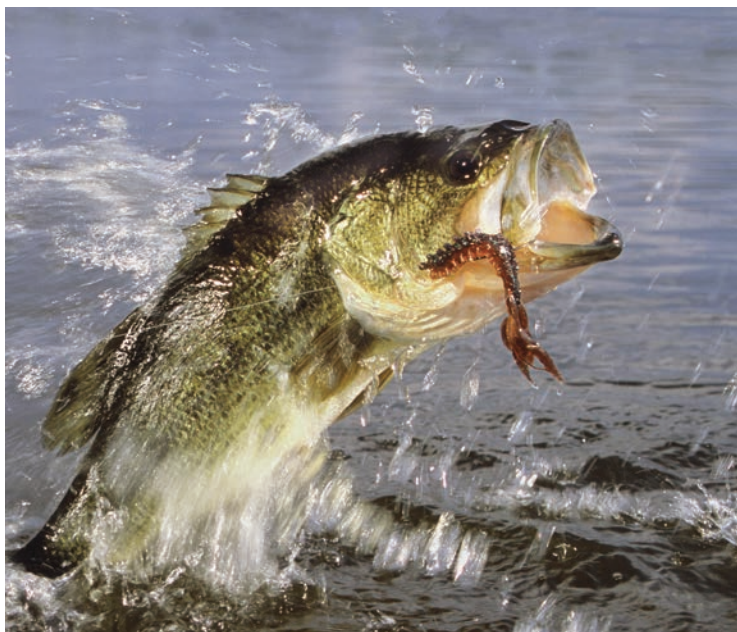
Smoky Mountain Herbal Snuff team captain Josh Bertrand started to build a Day 1 game plan with Andy Morgan and Brandon Coulter.

Photo by Garrick Dixon



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1.



3.



2.



4.

1. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. NORTHERN DIVISION St. Lawrence River

Sept. 22-24

As a Northern Division rookie and native Texan, Spike Stoker wasn't exactly one of the favorites to chase down the trophy in the division finale on the St. Lawrence. Between having only fished one other tournament there and having trolling motor issues for half of Day 2, the odds weren't in his favor.

Fortunately, Stoker found the winning fish that he picked off all three days of the event by spending extensive practice time on the northern waters. He hit the jackpot with one key stretch — an area with lots of chunk rock and bigger-than-average bass. His area held up over three days as his Berkley PowerBait MaxScent drop-shot and Carolina-rigged Zoom Ultra Vibe Speed Craw tallied 64-12 for the \$40,555 payday.

2. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE REGION 1 Lake Murray

Oct. 6-8

Despite having never been to Lake Murray prior to the BFL Region 1 Regional tournament, Tyler Trent was confident in two things: his ability to be consistent over three days of competition and his aptitude with catching fish offshore. Both things held true for Trent, who weighed in 16-5, 16-7 and 16-7, respectively, to win the cash-and-boat winner's package worth \$67,604 by 1 pound, 2 ounces over Matthew O'Connell.

Trent expected to be able to catch a lot of fish on topwater offerings throughout the event but instead relied almost exclusively on a drop-shot in 20 to 30 feet of water, mostly keying on brush, cane and stumps to get the job done.

3. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE REGION 2 Pickwick Lake

Oct. 13-15

For most anglers in most tournaments, weighing in just two keepers on Day 1 of a multi-day tournament would mean certain defeat. That wasn't the case for Timothy Kelley, however. The Irmo, South Carolina, boater roared back from an 8-pound Day 1 performance with back-to-back stellar days (16-5 and 17-14, respectively) to edge out Drew Boggs by 15 ounces for the \$60,868 payday and an automatic qualification into the 2023 All-American championship.

To catch his winning fish, Kelley relied on an Ima Little Stik topwater to target big bass along a bluff ledge. He spent three days positioned along a shallow flat next to the ledge, periodically picking off quality keepers to add to his winning stringer.

4. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE REGION 3 Mississippi River

Oct. 13-15

One of the most prolific northern BFL anglers of the last couple decades, Mike Brueggen added his 10th BFL win (and first Regional victory) in the Region 3 tournament on the Mississippi River out of his home town of La Crosse, Wisconsin. Brueggen, along with upping his total of Top 10s in MLF competition to 60, added \$60,794 to his career earnings and secured a spot in the 2023 Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American.

Leaning on years of experience on the upper Mississippi, Brueggen spent his time in Pool 2 targeting sandy bottom in 4 to 5 feet of water with a crankbait and swim jig. While many of the spots he probed were barren, Brueggen often caught multi-



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ples when he did find productive water en route to 56-7 for the tournament and a 4-pound, 9-ounce margin of victory.

5. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE REGION 4 Grand Lake

Oct. 20-22

“Fishing history” can often be problematic for bass anglers, simply because conditions on a given fishery can change so drastically from year to year, week to week or even day to day. Phillip Lunceford has been fishing Grand Lake for more than 20 years, so his history with the Ozark foothills impoundment is such that he knows how temperamental the lake can be in the fall. He also knows that when all else fails, historically productive spots are better than nothing.

After a cold front moved through the area and spoiled much of what

Lunceford found in practice, the now two-time MLF winner decided his best option was to scrap the top-water bite he was planning for and just run familiar water with familiar baits. His confidence in those areas and techniques panned out to the tune of 39-7 over three days to eek past Ozark hammer Jeremy Lawyer by just 12 ounces. For the win, Lunceford took home \$61,000 (including a Phoenix 819 bass boat with a Mercury outboard).

6. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE REGION 5 James River

Oct. 20-22

It took Chester, Virginia’s Cody Casey just eight tournaments with MLF to notch his first win – and it was a big one. With his 39-10 over three days at the James River, Casey locked up a berth in the 2023

Phoenix BFL All-American and a \$60,000 check thanks to a couple key culls in the final 30 minutes of the tournament.

After catching about 30 keepers on Day 1 and 10 on Day 2 (mostly with drop-shots and crankbaits), Day 3 proved to be more of a grind. Casey knew he needed more than he had in his livewell as the clock ticked down on the final day, and a 5-pounder with a half hour to go eased those concerns slightly. Finally, he tacked on another cull at his last stop of the day, which proved to be more than enough to secure the win by 3 pounds.

7. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE REGION 6 Lewis Smith Lake

Oct. 20-22

Bass Pro Tour star Jesse Wiggins chose to fish the Mountain

Division in 2022 knowing the Regional was to be hosted on his home lake for a chance at qualifying for the 2023 All-American. Wiggins did more than just qualify for the BFL championship event with 42-5 over three days to take home \$60,000 (including a new Phoenix 819 Pro with a Mercury outboard).

Wiggins had to overtake his brother and Day 1 leader Jordan (who went on to finish 11th) for the victory, aided by the second-largest bag of the event on Day 2. With 12-14 on the final day, Wiggins eked out the victory by just 2 ounces over Emil Wagner.

While Wiggins called the event a “grindfest,” he managed to secure plenty of quality, despite the quantity not quite being there. One key area and a squarebill, swimbait and vibrating jig did almost all the damage for him. Wiggins’ swimbaits of choice included Jackall Rhythm Waves and small Keitechs.

8.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

8. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. CHAMPIONSHIP
Lake Guntersville

Nov. 3-5

Kyle Hall ran away with the Toyota Series Championship victory on Lake Guntersville by a wide margin, topping second-place finisher Marshall Robinson by nearly 6 pounds to secure the \$237,500 payday (including a \$35,000 Phoenix bonus). With the win, Hall upped his 2022 earnings to \$425,000 thanks to a Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit victory back in early August and a second-place finish in the Toyota Series (also on Lake Champlain) a week later.

Weighing in two bags of 20 pounds or more (the only angler in the tournament to do so), Hall's consistency was his calling card

throughout the three-day event. The Granbury, Texas, pro tallied 20-8 on the final day, and while it turns out he didn't need it, he did manage a stroke of luck with less than 10 minutes remaining when he boated a 5-pounder to seal the deal.

While many anglers were focused on fishing grass or finding schools of bass, Hall relied on his Garmin LiveScope forward-facing sonar to pick off suspended fish in about 20 feet of water with a Shane's Bait umbrella rig and Damiki blade bait, "roaming around" areas with ample bait until he found big bass feasting on those bait balls.

"My Garmin electronics were huge for me in these wins this year," Hall said of his winning tactic. "When I can see them, I have a lot of fun doing it. It hurts my back a little bit doing it, but I'll gladly deal with that if it means I can win."

9.



9. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE WILD CARD
Wheeler Lake

Nov. 11-12

Two pounds separated Powell, Tennessee's Jake Lee and runner-up finisher Darren Ashley in the Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine Wild Card on Wheeler Lake. The two-day event is the last chance to qualify for the BFL All-American for anglers who didn't qualify for a Regional tournament. In addition to securing a berth in the 2023 All-American, Lee was awarded \$5,921 for the win.

Lee couldn't manage to get much of anything going in practice - at least until the final hour of the final day of the practice period. As he idled in front of a river bar, Lee

began seeing fish breaking the surface, only to find it was a school of white bass. As he proceeded to the back side of the bar, the largemouth began to show themselves.

"I got to the back side of the river bar, and there were the largemouth," he said. "I spent the entire tournament on the back side of that bar and just continued to go up and down that 1/2-mile to 3/4-mile stretch. That's all I had. I had nowhere else to go."

That particular stretch proved to be enough as Lee tallied 10 keepers for 29-13 over two days. He initially planned on utilizing a Heddon Super Spook on those fish, but conditions forced him to turn to a River2Sea Whopper Plopper for all his Day 1 keepers instead. On Day 2, Lee switched to a Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer for all his keeper bites. ■

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Strike King Co-Angler Program Hit New Heights in 2022

The Strike King co-angler program in both the Toyota Series Presented by A.R.E. and the Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine continues to grow in popularity and participation every year, with yet another impressive turnout in 2022.

"We set participation records in each of the last two seasons, and the Strike King co-angler program is an integral part of that success," said Dave Washburn, MLF Vice President of Operations. "We are proud to recognize all the quality anglers who fish from the back of the boat. In fact, we created the term 'co-angler' years ago to do exactly that."

In all, there are seven co-angler divisions in the Toyota Series and 24 divisions in the BFLs. Strike King co-anglers earned points all year long toward winning their division's respective Co-Angler of the Year award. Co-Angler of the Year winners in the Toyota Series took home \$2,000 apiece while BFL winners enjoyed a \$500 bonus each for their successful seasons.

Since 2018, the Toyota Series has seen nearly a 34-percent increase in co-anglers while the BFLs have increased more than 14 percent. As the program continues to grow and provide more anglers the opportunities to succeed, it's MLF's hope that even more anglers are able to participate in the experience of being a co-angler.

"Fishing as a co-angler with Major League Fishing offers amazing opportunities," said Daniel Fennel, Senior Director of Tournament Operations. "Whether learning new techniques on your home water or experiencing a new lake for the first time, there are multiple reasons to get involved. We want to give a big thanks to Strike King for supporting our co-anglers in our BFL and Toyota Series."

STRIKE KING CO-ANGLER HIGHLIGHTS Sandidge claims convincing co-angler win at Toyota Series Championship

The memory of 2021's third-place finish is now eclipsed by a 2022 victory for Jason Sandidge, the Strike King co-angler champion at the Toyota Series Championship Presented by A.R.E. on Lake Guntersville. The Arkansas co-angler caught five bass for 16 pounds, 2 ounces on Day 3, giving him 40-6 for the tournament, which was good enough for a 7-pound edge over Jason Swanson in second.

After finishing third at the Toyota Series Championship in 2021, Sandidge was elated to hoist the 2022 trophy just a short year later.

"I've been so close so many times," Sandidge said with a sigh. "When it's your time, it's your time. I understand that now. I knew I needed to fish the conditions and fish my strengths and I would get a win someday."

In a three-day tournament, Sandidge caught them just about every way he could on Guntersville in the fall. Sandidge was paired with Andy Wicker on Day 1, Brent Anderson on Day 2 and (pro winner) Kyle Hall on Day 3. All three boaters had different ideas on how to catch 'em, and Sandidge rolled with the punches each day.

"Day 1 for me was all about punching grass so hard that my arms cramped up," Sandidge said. "Day 2, we ran 50 miles up the river and I caught my limit of spotted bass in like 20 minutes on an Alabama rig. Day 3, it was about grinding with an A-rig and a topwater. It was just meant to be."

Sandidge filled his limit early on Day 3. But even before he filled his livewell, he began to feel more at ease with his cushion.

"I caught my third keeper at 9:30 the final morning that weighed 5 pounds, so I felt like I had a pretty good shot to win at that point," Sandidge said. "But I knew we were on Gunterville and a co-angler caught an 18-pound bag on Day 1, so anything was possible. I felt confident, but not really comfortable."

Sandidge weighed in last on stage and only needed 9 pounds to jump into first. He cleared Swanson by more than 7 pounds to earn the win and a Phoenix 518 Pro powered by a 115-horsepower Mercury outboard. It was Sandidge's third win of his MLF career and first since 2017.

Horton takes co-angler title at All-American on Lake Hamilton

There was high drama on Lake Hamilton in early June for the Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine All-American for the Strike King co-angler title. Separated by just 10 ounces, Mississippi co-angler Clint Horton beat second-place finisher Cory Guinn with a three-day total of 15 bass for 21 pounds, 15 ounces. Horton walked away with a check worth \$50,000 and memories that will last him a lifetime.

"This is unbelievable," Horton said while holding his new trophy. "I would have never expected this in a million years. I've been fishing tournaments for 10-plus years, and to win one of this size and importance is amazing."

Horton came into the final day of the All-American in second place with 14-15 – only 2-8 behind leader Guinn. Once Horton found out he was paired with second-place boater Hunter Eubanks, the two began to talk about strategy for the final day. Luckily for Horton, Eubanks was more than willing to do what Horton felt comfortable with.

"I got lucky and drew a great boater who let me fish how I wanted to," Horton said. "I made some lucky skips under docks and caught fish. I flipped up by a laydown and caught a 2 1/2-pounder. Hunter could have caught that one but somehow I did, and that fish was probably the difference for me."



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

Horton returned home to Mississippi to celebrate with his friends and family and went back to work as a supervisor for a construction company, a job he enjoys. Horton doesn't fish BFL events for a chance at turning pro or gaining big sponsorships. He fishes for the love of the sport and the enjoyment it brings him. To make it his livelihood is not in the cards.

"Fishing is just fun to me," Horton said. "I don't want to turn it into a job. I feel like I wouldn't love it like I love it now. I'm happy with what I'm doing now and I'm happy that an event like the All-American exists so I can fish it." ■

2022 STRIKE KING CO-ANGLER OF THE YEAR WINNERS



TOYOTA SERIES

Central
Randy Wiggins

Northern
Carter Wijangco

Plains
Jeff Moss

Southern
Mason Chapman

Southwestern
Robert Chavers

Western
Tyson Christman

Wild Card
Alan Hults

PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE

Arkie
Andrew Wooley

Bama
Mike Langdale

Buckeye
Matt Fisher

Bulldog
Benjie Winkler

Choo Choo
Randy Wilson

Cowboy
Greg Dennis

Gator
Davis Dimauro

Great Lakes
Mark Folsom

Hoosier
Ryan Sykes

Illini
Chuck Davis

LBL
Pat Rapp

Michigan
Dennis Sepeck

Mississippi
Sank Payton

Mountain
Todd Stopher

Music City
John Lawson

North Carolina
Trevor Wright

Northeast
Matt Hummel

Okie
David Blankinship

Ozark
Jeff Moss

Piedmont
David Deciuics

Savannah River
Johnny Hancox

Shenandoah
Lenny Baird

South Carolina
Thomas Pennell III

Volunteer
Brad Barton

PROFILE: **KYLE HALL**
GRANBURY, TEXAS

2022 TOYOTA SERIES
LAKE GUNTERSVILLE
CHAMPIONSHIP

\$235,000

PHOENIX BOATS Bonus



In 2020, then-23-year-old Kyle Hall finished 10th in points on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit to earn Polaris Rookie of the Year honors, besting a crop of tremendous young rookies who have made names for themselves in the two seasons that have followed. Hall, now 25, continues to build on his rookie success, first winning a Pro Circuit event at Lake Champlain to close out the 2022 regular season in early August and following up that victory with a second-place showing in the Toyota Series (on the same fishery) a week later.

Fast-forward a few months to Hall hoisting the Toyota Series Championship trophy at Lake Guntersville, \$235,000 check at his side, and you'll quickly realize the former Rookie of the Year no longer fishes like a rookie. In fact, he fishes like he might be next in a long line of young guns poised for future glory.

Q&A

By Justin Onslow
PHOTO BY ALLY PERKINS

It's been a hell of a year for you. You won on the Pro Circuit. You won the Toyota Series Championship, and you came close to winning a couple other Toyota Series events, not to mention all the prize money you added to your resume this year. Can you put into words what 2022 has meant to you?

I don't really know. It's a huge step going forward, and I hope it continues.

It's not like this success has come out of nowhere. You won Polaris Rookie of the Year on the Pro Circuit at just 23 years old. You're building quite the reputation as one of the top young guns in the sport.

It's been unbelievable. I'm just trying to keep the momentum going forward.

Your professional career started on an inauspicious note with a 142nd-place finish at Rayburn to open the 2020 Pro Circuit season. Looking back on that first pro derby now, how much did that event galvanize what your career is becoming?

I started that way the last three years, and I just think it's something coming out of the winter that I'm not really thinking about fishing when I'm not fishing tournaments. This year, I'm hoping to fish a little bit more this winter, that way the first tournament isn't a great big bust for me.

| CO-ANGLER | FISH | WEIGHT |
|--|------|-------------|
| 6 JONATHAN G... SAN PABLO, CA | 10 | 20 lb-12 oz |
| 7 SHAWN CLAR... AFTON, OK | 8 | 19 lb-5 oz |
| 8 JACOB SMITH... FRISCO, TX | 8 | 19 lb-3 oz |
| 9 DAVID WILLIAM... FREDERICKSBURG, VA | 8 | 22 lb-12 oz |
| 10 FRANK LAURIA... WESLEY CHAPEL, FL | 8 | 20 lb-11 oz |

I don't think some people realize how hard it is to win the Toyota Series Championship. The regular season fields are generally pretty big. You either need to win a tournament or fish so well throughout the year just to make the Championship, and then you're fishing against some of the best in the country at that level of fishing.

Toyota Series (events) are the hardest to win by far, just because you have all the [local] anglers and everything. There's several guys that qualified for the championship knowing it was going to be on Guntersville.

You've spent some time on Guntersville, but you're not a local or a seasoned vet on that fishery like some of the people you just beat. How much does it mean to you, coming from Texas, to win on fisheries that aren't necessarily places you've spent a massive amount of time?

It was my second time there. I spent a lot of time in Texas in the winter, last winter mainly, on some of the lakes around here just learning LiveScope. I actually did a little bit of research about Guntersville before I went this time, and figured I'd be able to LiveScope.

After the third day of practice, I was ready to go home. I couldn't LiveScope anything over 2 pounds, and I was pretty frustrated. The last day, I figured it out, and LiveScope was my No. 1 key to the success there.

Forward-facing sonar has really leveled the playing field in a way. You get into those situations where you go to a fishery that's primarily a grass fishery or ledges and you get guys who are so good with those techniques, but LiveScope opens up a lot more patterns for people who are good with the technology.

It really does. Even when I was there earlier this year (for Pro Circuit Stop 4), there was a ton of fish on the ledges, and that's what most of the guys were doing.

Normally, a couple years ago, I'd be out there with the ledge guys. I think I was one of very few that was LiveScoping there earlier this year. I was able to see those fish on LiveScope and people were driving right over the top of them graph-

ing because it wasn't like you had a whole school there. It opens up so many more different ways of fishing that have never been done before.

You and [Bass Pro Tour pro] Dakota Ebare, who you beat by 5 ounces at Champlain, are really close friends and longtime roommates. He has 21 Top 10s in MLF competition and is still hunting his first win. Was it tough for you to see him come so close again and come up just short, even though you were the beneficiary of that close call?

It was very hard, especially with us being the last two on stage. It was something I don't really ever want to go through again, but at the same time, I wouldn't have traded it for anything.

I'm closer to him than anyone else on tour, and going into the week, we both knew we were going or have a shot at it. At the very end of the week, it was me and him standing on the stage. You don't get to do that too many times.

Dakota's a great dude. I'm sure he was as happy for you as you were about winning.

I've never wanted Dakota to win as bad as I have this year just because of how many times I've seen him so close.

I own a tackle store here in Granbury, and I sat there on the final day while he was at Lake Fork (for Bass Pro Tour Stage Two), and I thought about driving over there but I decided to stay at the tackle store. We were doing a giveaway for every fish he caught over 5 pounds. We'd give away a \$100 gift card every time he caught a 5-pounder.

I sat there and pulled my hair out all day; couldn't even enjoy him catching 5-pounders, giving away hats and merchandise and shirts and all kinds of stuff. We had about 30 people in the store that day pulling for him. As many times as he's been so close, I wanted him to win just as bad as he wants to win.

So what does Kyle Hall do when he's not fishing? Because it seems like you do an awful lot of that.

When I'm not fishing, my No. 1 thing is the tackle store. During hunting season, I like to hunt – duck hunt, deer hunt, pig hunt. I like to golf quite a bit. I got into that recently.

Last year I spent a lot of time at O.H. Ivie here in Texas chasing ShareLunkers. I plan to do a lot more of that this year from December 1 to February.

I don't blame you at all. That place has been so insane lately.

I caught a 16-pounder there this year. March 1, 16-10. Pretty crazy.

My goal this year is to catch more than one 13-plus-pounder for the ShareLunker program. It only goes from January 1 to March 31, so my goal is to catch two 13-pliers there.

Are you going to put in some time in Florida in preparation for the start of the Tackle Warehouse Invationals?

I don't know just yet. I get the idea every year and I never end up doing it.

I've been to Okeechobee before, and I kind of have an idea of what they're going to be doing. I think as long as I stay fishing from the first of the year until the middle of February, and have my head wrapped around the fishing world, I think I'll be fine.

Being as young as you are, you really have a steep learning curve when it comes to the national trails because of lack of experience on some fisheries. What's your process for breaking down a new lake and putting yourself in position to compete?

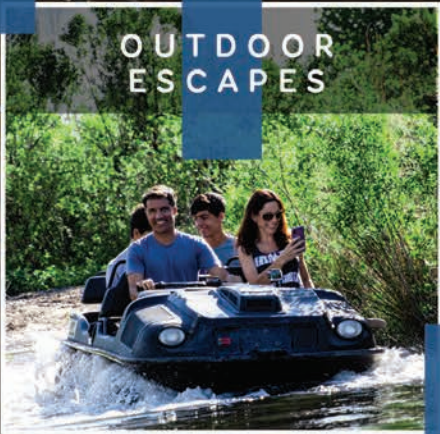
When I get to the lake and break it down, I do a little bit of research and I figure out what's going to fit me best. I like to figure out my types of fishing, which is LiveScope, and if I get on a river system or something where I can't LiveScope, I'm flipping wood and stuff.

I just try to keep away from my weaknesses is my No. 1 thing. I do plenty of research to know what areas of the lake have my types of fishing, so when I launch my boat for practice the first morning, I'm not at the wrong end of the lake for what I like to fish.

Any big goals for next year?

My No. 1 goal next year is to qualify for the Bass Pro Tour. I want to be on the biggest stage with the biggest names. I've leaned toward the FLW/MLF side of the industry much more in my whole career. It's just who I got started with and who I believe has the most potential for the sport. ■

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OREGON TBF THRIVING UNDER NEW LEADERSHIP



Oregon Federation president Tom Hartshorn and secretary/treasurer Gary Harral.

The Bass Federation is a nationwide organization with federations in 47 of the 50 states. One state that has gained some serious ground in the last couple years is the Oregon federation, which is headed up by president Tom Hartshorn and secretary/treasurer Gary Harral.

Before Hartshorn and Harral took over in 2020, grass-roots fishing in the state of Oregon was on the decline. There were only six total TBF events throughout the state and only 85 members in 2019. When Hartshorn assumed the task of guiding Oregon’s TBF program, he knew some changes needed to be made to see the Oregon federation recover its membership and grow.

“Membership was really dwindling when we took over,” Hartshorn said. “The first thing we did was bring in some local sponsors and split the state up into two divisions.

Those were the two most important things for us to accomplish in the beginning.”

Prior to 2020, TBF tournaments were held on the Columbia River. The mighty Columbia – while being a world-class smallmouth fishery and an excellent largemouth fishery – can be a daunting fishery for anglers who aren’t entirely familiar with it. The largest North American river flowing into the Pacific Ocean, it’s prone to heavy winds, rough weather and choppy water in the stretch of the Columbia flowing through eastern Oregon. That’s why Hartshorn and Harral agreed that a departure from the Columbia would encourage more Beaver State bass anglers to participate on the Oregon TBF trail.

“I think fishing the Columbia River can intimidate some [anglers],” Hartshorn reiterated. “To accommodate that and

to get more participation, we decided to split our federation into two divisions: the Coastal and River divisions. Because anglers now had the option to fish in a division outside of the river, that really started to drive up our participation and membership numbers.”

In just one year, the Oregon federation saw membership increase by 30 percent with 11 total events: four Coastal Circuit National Semi-Final Qualifiers (held on inland lakes like Siltcoos and Tenmile), four River Circuit National Semi-Final Qualifiers (held on the Columbia) and three Open events.

Fast-forward to the end of 2021: Membership increased to 151 members with the same number of events.

Thanks to sponsorship dollars from companies like Minn Kota, Humminbird, Lowrance and Ranger Boats, the Oregon federation was also able to pay entry fees for 56 of its adult members, as well as the entry fees for all their Oregon Student Angler Federation teams in 2021 alone. The number of anglers and students that the Oregon federation can support continues to grow under Hartshorn’s and Harral’s leadership.

As another fishing season ends and Hartshorn reflects on his third year as president, he can’t help but appreciate the opportunity that is afforded to him and other local anglers who get to enjoy the bass-rich waters of Oregon while also striving for even higher goals down the road.



Douglas Derrick and Patrick Johnson with a haul of smallmouth from the River Circuit of the Oregon federation, which has enjoyed tremendous growth the past two years.

“I really think that TBF is a great avenue for grassroots anglers,” Hartshorn said. “It gives your weekend anglers the opportunity and the chance to fish in a big-league tournament. Knowing you can earn a spot in the National Championship by winning your state, perhaps win that tournament, get to fish in the BFL All-American and maybe one day become a pro is such an enormous opportunity, all from just being a TBF member.”

If you would like more information on how you could join the Oregon state federation, visit TBFOregon.org. To find out how to join a federation in your respective state, visit BassFederation.com.

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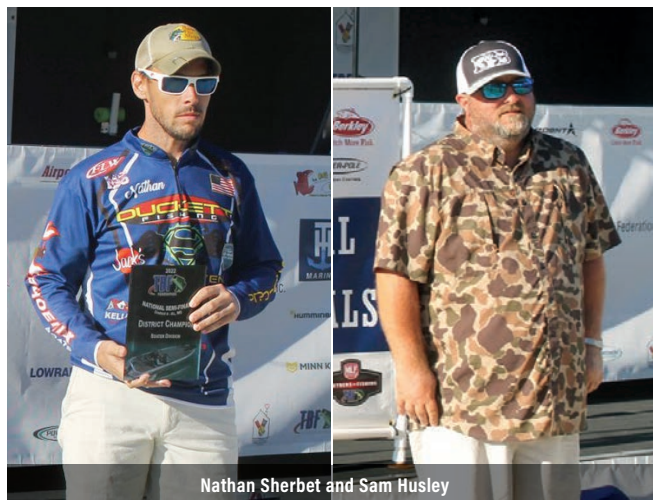


BOATERS, CO-ANGLERS FINISH UP NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS; ANGLERS ADVANCE TO 2023 TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

DISTRICT 1 – FL/GA was held at the Harris Chain in Florida on Oct. 9. Jon Gagnon (GA) and Raymond Trudeau (FL) will be advancing to the National Championship as boaters while Jeffrey Hickman (GA) and Jon Christian (FL) will head there as co-anglers.

DISTRICT 3 – KY/TN anglers fished on Oct. 16 at Lake Cumberland. John Elliott (TN) and Wesley Bailey (TN) will represent the Volunteer State as angler/co-angler while David Sowers (KY) and Dylan Southwood (KY) will represent Kentucky.

DISTRICT 4 – AL/MS was fished on Logan Martin Lake on Oct. 9 with Nathan Sherbet (AL) and Sam Husley (MS) advancing as boaters, and Ethan Tyler Moody (MS) and Luke Coleman (AL) joining them as co-anglers.



Nathan Sherbet and Sam Husley

DISTRICT 5 – LA/TX was held on Lake o' the Pines on Oct. 2. James Biggs (TX) and Ryan Latch (LA) will be the boaters for the district, with Nick Teel (LA) and John Walker (TX) advancing as the top co-anglers.

DISTRICT 6 – AR/OK was held on Lake Eufaula (Oklahoma) on June 12. Jaret Rushing (AR) and Bradley Sullivan (OK) will be moving on as boaters with Ray Dotson (AR) and Jered Grooms (OK) moving on as co-anglers.

DISTRICT 7 – KS/MO anglers took on Stockton Lake for their Semi-Final. Hunter Baird (KS) and Brian Maloney (MO) were the top boaters while Billy Ray (MO) and Don Glick (KS) will represent the co-anglers.



Hunter Baird and Billy Ray

DISTRICT 8 – ND/NE/SD was fished on Lake Francis Case. Zane Ridpath (NE) and Tyler Darling (SD) were the winning anglers with Chad Garton (NE) and Jefferson Lehman (SD) representing the co-anglers for their respective states.

DISTRICT 9 – IA/MN/WI fished their Semi-Final on Lake Vermilion in Minnesota. Tony Hatton (MN) and Kevin Fassbind (WI) will represent their states as boaters, with Jake Hoevel (WI) and George Poetz (MN) as co-anglers.



DISTRICT 10 – IL/IN competed on Patoka Lake in Indiana. Dustin Taylor (IL) and Scott Bateman (IN) were the top boaters for their states while Ryan Cannon (IN) and Jason Stomberg (IL) were the top co-anglers.

DISTRICT 11 – MI/OH competed on Sandusky Bay of Lake Erie. Pat Uphagrove (MI) and David Slonaker (OH) will fish in the National Championship as boaters. Dylan Phillips (OH) and Ryan Hamlin (MI) will be the co-anglers for the two states.

DISTRICT 12 – VA/WV held their Semi-Final on the Chickahominy River in Virginia. Alan White (WV) and Thomas Wooten (VA) were the winning boaters. Robby Fleshman, Jr. (WV) and Mike Coleman (VA) were the winning co-anglers.

DISTRICT 13 – DC/DE/MD fished on the Nanticoke River on Sept. 25. Jonathan Lang (MD), Roger Shirkey Sr. (DE) and Peter Yanni (DC) are the three advancing boaters. Larry Taylor (DE), Chad Boggs (DC) and Mike Tserkis (MD) are the three advancing co-anglers from the district.

DISTRICT 14 – NY/ON/PA held their Semi-Final on Lake Erie. Boater Mike Loughlin (ON) and co-angler Sean McLaughlin (ON) will move on to represent Canada in the National Championship. Stateside, boaters Brad Brodnicki (NY) and Bob Brody (PA) will be joined by co-anglers Joe Pacholec Jr. (PA) and John Claeys (NY).



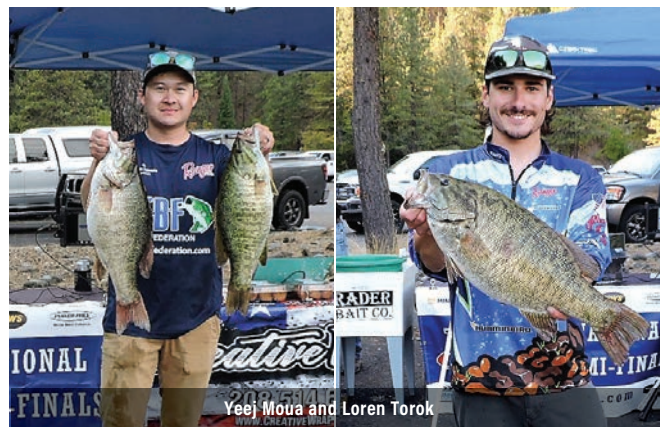
DISTRICT 15 – CT/NJ/RI fished on the St. Lawrence River. Gradie Beaulieu (RI), Jeff Misaiko (CT), and Rob Laufenberg (NJ) are the three boaters advancing while Joe Venuto (NJ), Eric Baba (CT) and Jordan Bettencourt (RI) are the three co-anglers.

DISTRICT 16 – MA/VT fished Ticonderoga. Thomas Waltz (VT) and Peter Bradley (MA) advance as boaters with Chye Khoo (MA) and Will Doud-Martin (VT) moving on as co-anglers.

DISTRICT 17 – ME/NH John Levesque (NH) and George Cooper (ME) will represent the district as boaters and John Sherman (NH) and Toby Cross (ME) will be the co-anglers. The event was fished on Androscoggin Lake.

DISTRICT 18 – OR/WA took place on the Columbia River in early October. Tyler Nale (OR) and Wes Wezenberg (WA) will represent the district as boaters. Wes Williams (WA) and Gary Cross (OR) will be the representing co-anglers for the two states.

DISTRICT 19 – MT/ID fished on Dworshak Reservoir on October 2. Boaters Yeej Moua (MT) and Loren Torok (ID) will advance with Tony Jennings (ID) and Jason Anderson (MT) moving on as the co-anglers.



DISTRICT 21 – CO/NM/WY competed on Pueblo Reservoir in Colorado. Stephen Way (CO) and Dillon Robertshaw (CO) will be moving on as the boater/co-angler combination.



DISTRICT 22 – NV/UT anglers fished on Lake Mohave. Steven Heck (NV) and Rick Taylor (UT) will advance as boaters with Mandy Myers (UT) and Robert Schoessler (NV) as the co-anglers.

DISTRICT 23 – AZ/CA anglers fished on the California Delta in early October. Michael Nemecek (CA) and Austin Melville (AZ) are the advancing boaters with Peter Jacobson (CA) and Brandon Kahoun (AZ) joining them as co-anglers. ■



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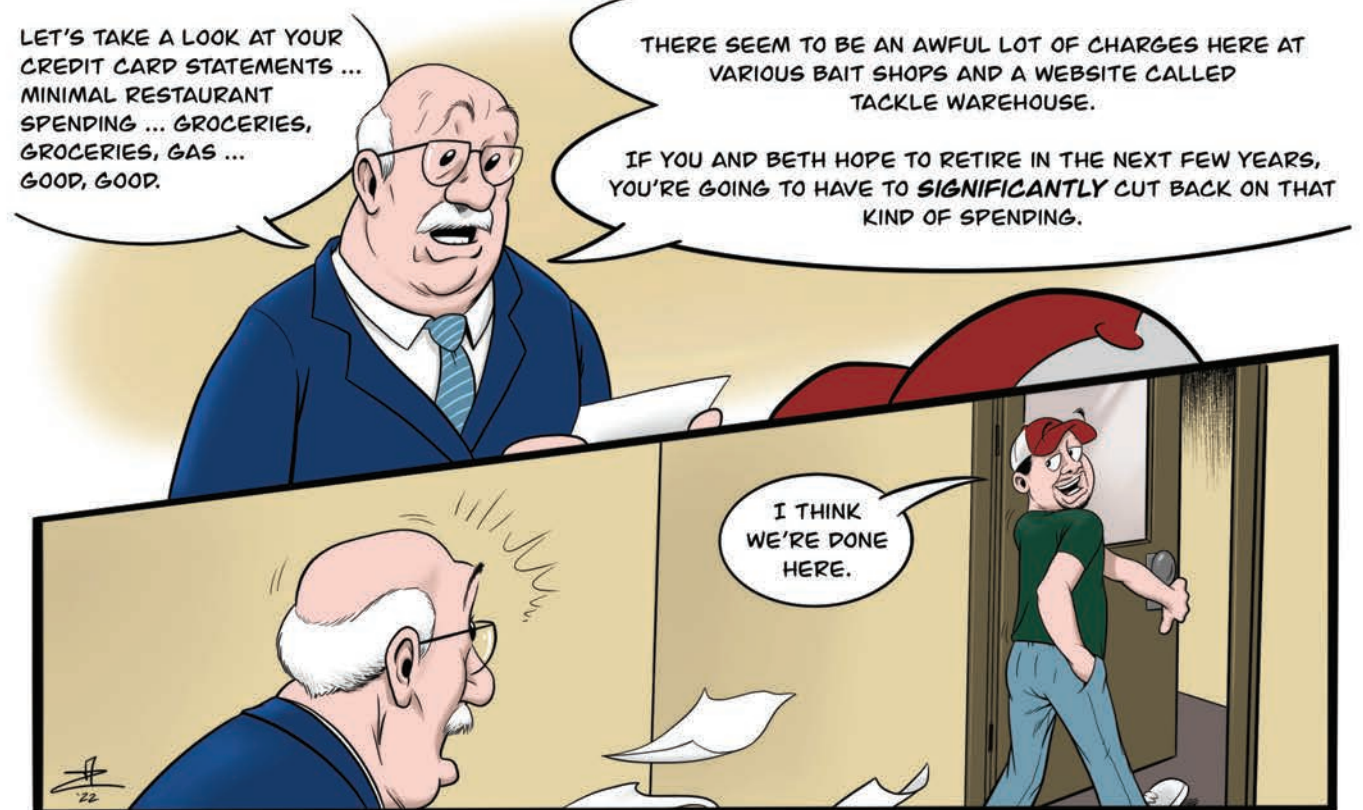
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