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## THRIFT'S WIN CLOSED THE CIRCLE ON REDCREST

Longtime readers of *Bass Fishing* magazine – and fans of the sport of tournament bass fishing – are very familiar with the content of the image gracing the cover of this April/May 2023 issue: North Carolina pro Bryan Thrift hoisting a championship trophy.

Thrift, who claimed the title of REDCREST Champion in mid-March on Lake Norman, made his most recent cover appearance in the Fall 2019 edition, cradling the Forrest Wood Cup. Two years prior (the Summer 2017 edition), it was Thrift showing off the 2017 FLW Tour Angler of the Year trophy on the cover. This issue's REDCREST trophy photo (snapped by MLF photographer Garrick Dixon) represents a trifecta of trophies that only Thrift can claim: REDCREST, Forrest Wood Cup, FLW Tour AOY.

But Thrift's REDCREST win on Lake Norman and the accompanying confetti and hullabaloo represented something a little more private and personal to him: a second chance.

Rewind to Lake Eufaula, Alabama, in late February of 2021, the site of REDCREST 2021. Due to a once-in-a-generation weather event in Texas that forced an emergency venue change from Lake Palestine to Eufaula, Thrift entered REDCREST that year as a noticeable favorite. Eufaula was a fishery upon which Thrift had enjoyed a lengthy (and extremely successful) history, and he took little time proving that the "favorite" label suited him just fine. Fishing his first-ever championship event in the MLF every-scorable-bass format, Thrift dominated both the Qualifying and Knockout rounds by wide margins, and entered the final day on Eufaula with all the momentum in the world. It didn't seem to matter that weights zeroed for the Championship Round, so great was Thrift's momentum.

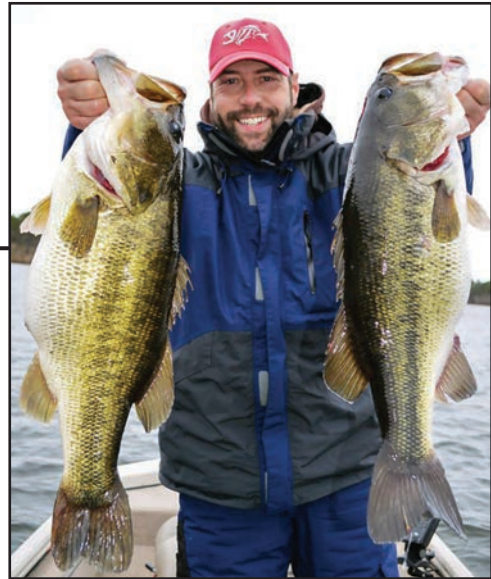
That momentum evaporated almost immediately. One day after catching 14 fish for 40 pounds in the Knockout Round, Thrift mustered only two fish for 6-15 on the final day, finishing ninth out of 10.

That REDCREST loss naturally irked Thrift. He didn't speak about it much publicly, shrugging his shoulders and downplaying the outcome when asked, but as an angler notorious for being a closer, I'm guessing that REDCREST 2021 irked him more than he let on. Coming into the week on Lake Norman, Thrift knew that he'd never have a more tailor-made opportunity to make up for the Eufaula final-day dud.

Not 10 seconds after confirming that he had indeed won REDCREST 2023, Thrift finally came clean as fans watched on the *MLFNOW!* live stream.

"Two years ago at Lake Eufaula, I was leading going into the last day and thought for sure I had a really good chance to win and ended up barely catching a fish the last day," Thrift admitted. "I have a little tear in my eye."

On a fishery where he started his career as a pro, Thrift closed the circle on his biggest win as a pro, and on REDCREST. You can read all about Thrift's path to the REDCREST trophy starting on page 34.



JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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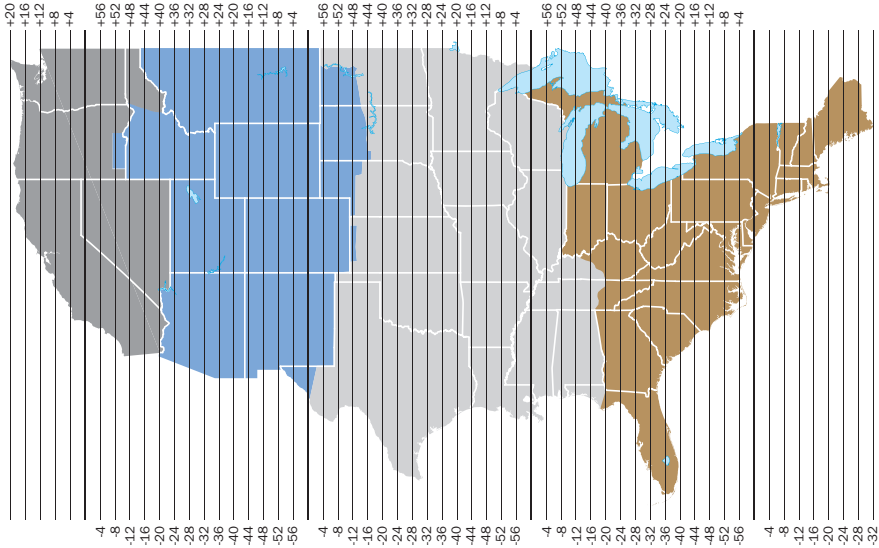


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# SOLUNAR TABLES

MAY-JUNE 2023

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



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

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

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# KISSIMMEE CHAIN BY THE NUMBERS

Three Bass Pro Tour events have provided a wealth of information



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

When the MLF Bass Pro Tour diverted from an “every-fish-counts” scoring structure to a format that counts the anglers’ heaviest five fish, there was a lot of speculation about the impact it would have on competition and strategy.

We had similar questions in the MLF Fisheries Management Division (FMD), the biggest of which being if and how a change to the scoring rules would affect the amount of data we were able to collect and provide to state fisheries biologists. Those of us who work in FMD have taken pride in the fact that each Bass Pro Tour competition has resulted in thousands of fish catches recorded (down to the GPS location, which is time-stamped and confirmed by the angler and the official). This data was scientifically significant – and, more importantly, the data set was large enough to make population level assumptions for the fisheries.

We theorized that changing the scoring rules could impact the number of fish caught, and we were anxious to see how the data from 2023 would stack up to past seasons.

Luckily for us, the first event of the 2023 season took place on a group of fisheries where the Bass Pro Tour has quite a bit of history. The **Kissimmee Chain of Lakes** in Florida is defined by lakes **Tohopekaliga, Russell, Cypress, Hatchineha, Kissimmee, Tiger** and their attached canals. It was the home of the inaugural Bass Pro Tour event in 2019, has hosted a summertime General Tire Heavy Hitters event and now is the home for the first BPT event using a five-fish cumulative weight. Immediately after the last event, FMD got to work analyzing the data and trying to understand exactly what impact (if any) the scoring rule had on data collection.

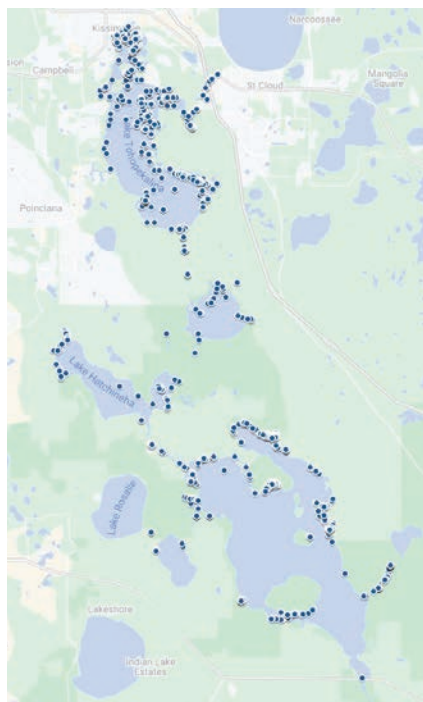
## SCORING RULES FOR EACH EVENT

Before we compare results, we must recognize that each of the three events mentioned above had slightly different rules, numbers of anglers and minimum weights. For this story, I’ll break down the events based on the number of angler days and angler hours, so we’re able to make direct comparisons.

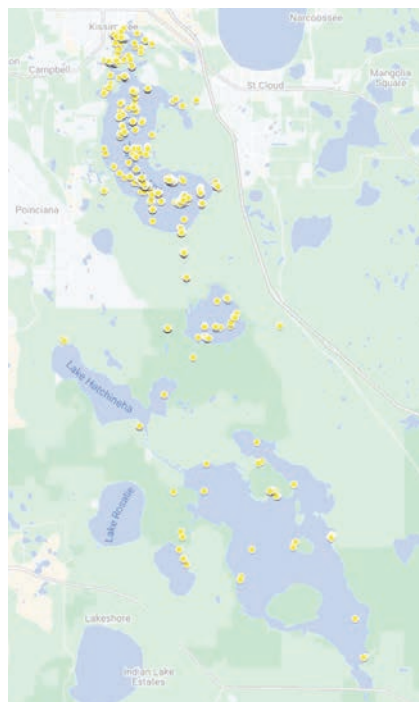
We’ll assume that each Bass Pro Tour angler has the potential to fish for a maximum of 7 1/2 hours – three 2 1/2-hour periods – with no running time from morning launch or returning to weigh-in to shorten their fishing time.

## 2019 BASS PRO TOUR STAGE ONE (JAN. 29-FEB. 2)

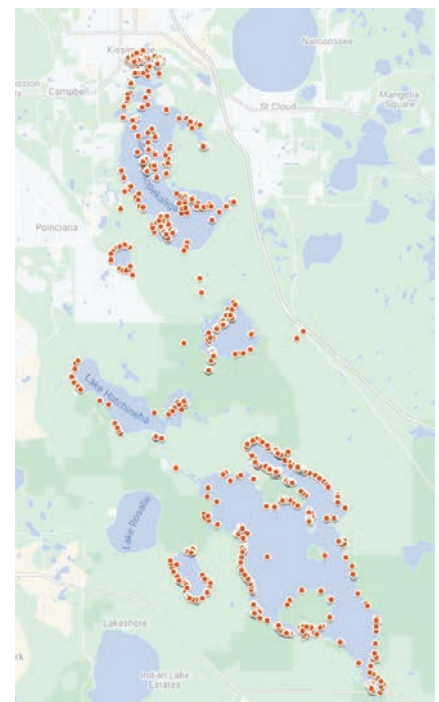
- The 80 anglers were divided into two 40-angler groups, and each group had two days of competition for their Qualifying Rounds.



2019 – Bass Pro Tour Stage One



2020 – General Tire Heavy Hitters



2023 – Bass Pro Tour Stage One

- The event used the minimum scorable weight of 1 pound, counting a cumulative weight where every fish counts. After two days of fishing for both Group A and Group B, the field was cut to 20 anglers each.
  - The 40 combined group A and B anglers' weights were zeroed for the Knockout Round, and the competition continued on the Kissimmee Chain by the same rules.
  - At the end of the Knockout Round, the field was cut down to the Top 10.
- The final day of the event was off the Kissimmee Chain on Lake Garcia. In total, this event included 200 angler days on the Kissimmee Chain, which equals 1,500 cumulative angler hours on the Kissimmee Chain.

## 2020 GENERAL TIRE HEAVY HITTERS (JUNE 7-12)

- Group A had 40 anglers, while the late Aaron Martens was unable to compete in Group B, giving that group 39.
- The minimum scorable bass for the qualifying round was 2 pounds.
- After two days of competition, each group was cut down to 19 anglers, with the angler for each group with the highest cumulative weight receiving an automatic bid into the Championship Round. This resulted in the Knockout Round having 38 anglers using a 2-pound minimum scorable weight.
- The championship day included each group winner plus the eight anglers with the highest weight from the Knockout Round. Those 10 anglers would compete using a 3-pound minimum for the Heavy Hitters championship.

This event included 206 angler days on the Kissimmee Chain, resulting in 1,545 angling hours.

## 2023 BASS PRO TOUR STAGE ONE (FEB. 13-18)

- The 2023 season kickoff was also the first Bass Pro Tour tournament in the best-five scoring system on the Kissimmee Chain.
- This event used a minimum scorable weight of 1 pound, 4 ounces throughout the entire competition.

Ott DeFoe at 2023 Bass Pro Tour Stage One.

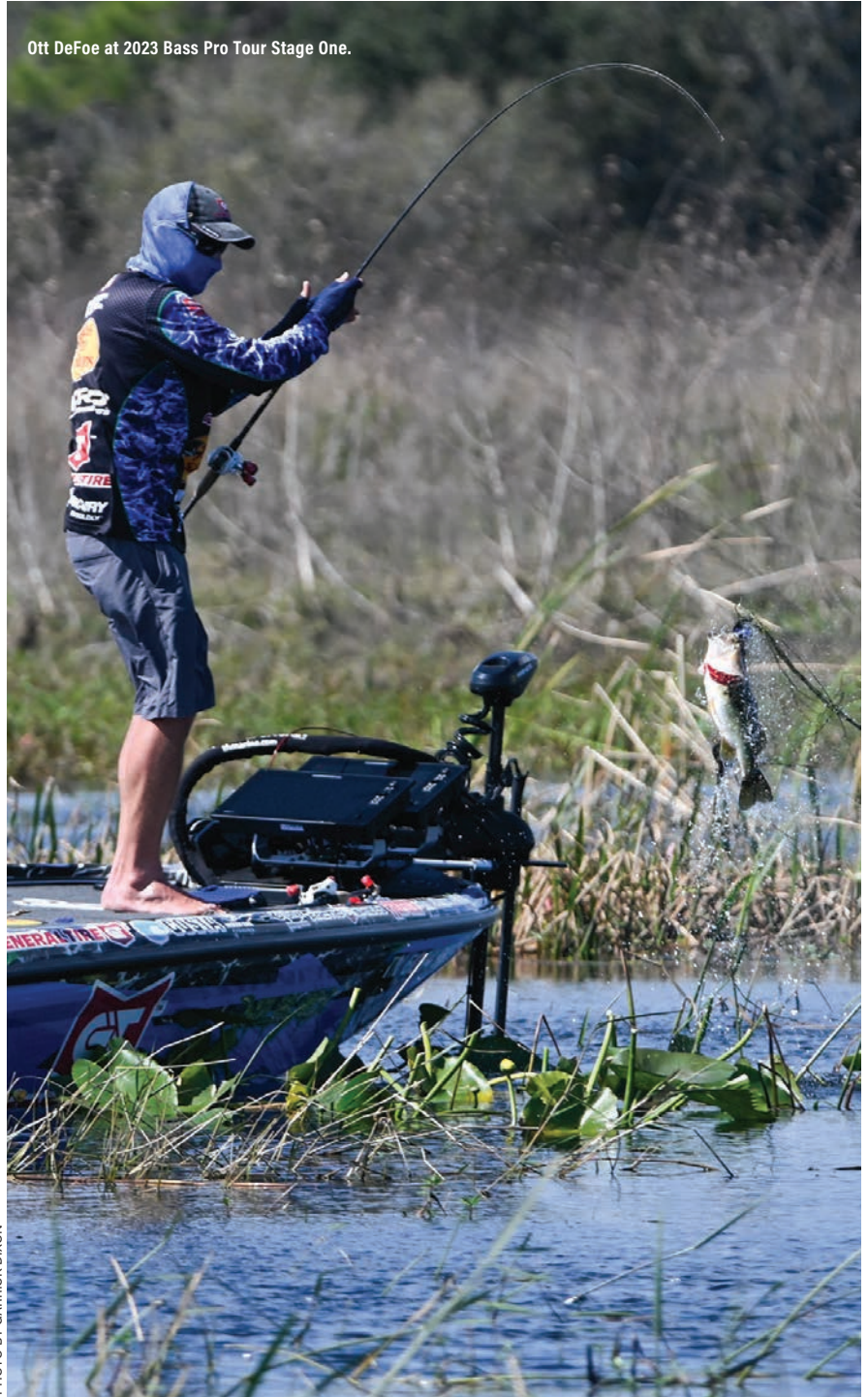


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

- Groups A and B both included 40 anglers competing for two days. After four days, each group's top 20 anglers with the highest two-day totals advanced to the Knockout Round. For the Knockout Round, the weights were zeroed, and after one day, the field was cut to 10

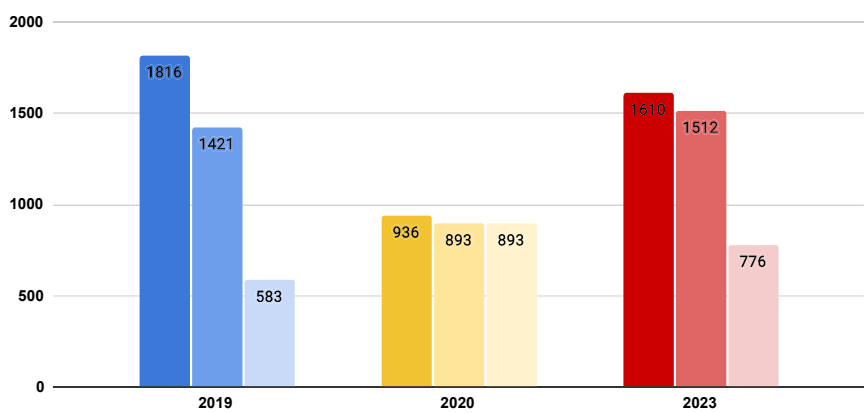
anglers with their Knockout Round weights carrying over to the Championship Round.

The anglers competed the entire duration of the event on the Kissimmee Chain. This resulted in 210 angler days which is 1,575 cumulative hours on the Kissimmee Chain.

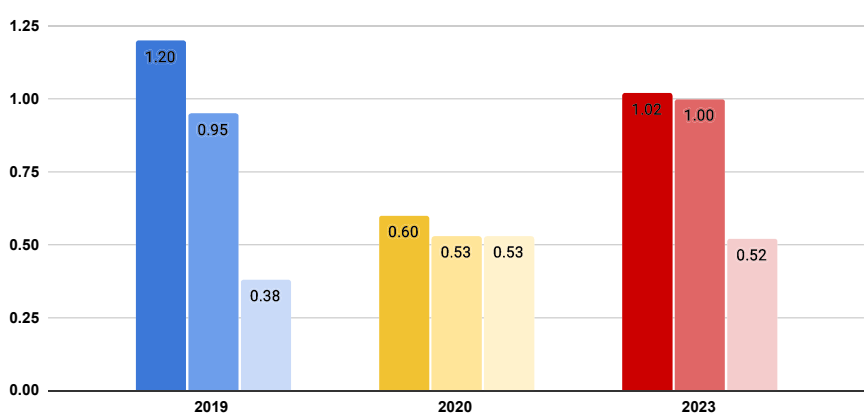
## TOTAL NUMBER OF FISH CAUGHT DURING KISSIMMEE CHAIN EVENTS

1st Bars = Original Scoring Rules  
 2nd Bars = Adjusted to 1-pound, 4-ounce minimum + Drop Day 6  
 3rd Bars = Adjusted to 2 pound minimum + Drop Day 6

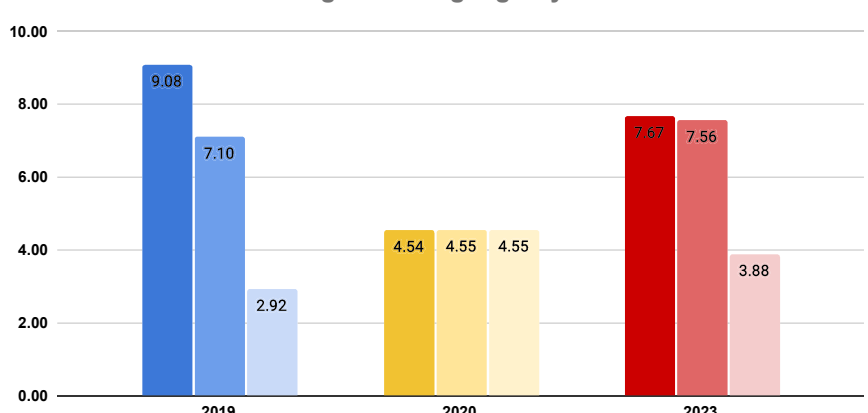
Total Number of Fish Caught During Competition on Kissimmee Chain



Total Number of Fish Caught Per Angling Hour on Kissimmee Chain



Total Number of Fish Caught Per Angling Day on Kissimmee Chain



## STATS BREAKDOWN

- In 2019, there were 1,816 total fish caught and recorded into SCORE-TRACKER® from Kissimmee over five days. This was an average of 363.2 fish per day of competition, and a per-angler average of 9.08 fish per day. When we look at the average number of fish per hour, we get a total of 1.2 fish per angling hour and 48.42 fish per competition hour.
- The average fish weighed 1-14, with the largest fish of the event weighing 9-12, and three fish over 7 pounds being caught. The cumulative weight of the five days on the Kissimmee Chain was 3,445.31 pounds.
- In 2020, there were 936 fish caught and recorded into SCORETRACKER®. This was an average of 156 fish per day of competition and a per-angler average of 4.54 fish per day. The hourly breakdown of fish was .60 fish per angling hour and 20.8 fish per competition hour. The average fish weighed 3-5, with the largest fish weighing 9-2, and 18 fish over 7 pounds. The cumulative weight of the six days of Heavy Hitters was 2,991.19 pounds.
- In 2023, there were 1,610 fish recorded into SCORETRACKER® in six days of competition. The average number of fish per day was 268.3, with a per-angler average of 7.67 fish per day. The number of fish per hour of angling averaged 1.02, and the average number of fish per competition hour was 35.7 fish. The average weight was 2-7, the largest fish was 9-8 and there were 17 fish over 7 pounds caught. The cumulative weight was 3,892.19 pounds for six days on the Kissimmee Chain.

## COMPARING 2019 TO 2023 USING 1-POUND, 4-OUNCE MINIMUM

Comparing 2019 to 2023 using 1-pound, 4-ounce minimum  
 On the surface, the 2019 data and the 2023 data are similar, but it becomes unbelievably close when we adjust the 2019 result by removing all fish under a 1-4 minimum scorable weight. With that adjustment, the number of qualified fish

catches for 2019 would drop to 1,421. If you remove the Championship Round from 2023 – since the 2019 Championship Round was on Garcia – there would be 1,512 fish caught in 2023. That means the 2019 and 2023 events were within 100 fish catches of being identical if they had the same minimum scorable weight.

Using those same adjustments, we see that the average number of fish per day would have been 284.2 in 2019 and 302.4 in 2023. This equals a per-angling-day catch rate of 7.10 in 2019 and 7.56 in 2023 and a fish per angling hour of .95 in 2019 and 1.0 in 2023. Statistically, these numbers are within a margin of error that make them remarkably similar.

## COMPARING 2019 AND 2023 TO 2020 USING 2-POUND MINIMUM

The 2020 Heavy Hitters event looks very low compared to the other two events in terms of fish catches per day, but that's because a higher minimum scorable weight was being used. The unique rules of Heavy Hitters make comparing it directly to the other two events somewhat difficult. The easiest way to look at it would be to drop the Day 6 results from 2020 and 2023. The 2020 event (using a 3-pound minimum scorable weight) resulted in just 43 scorable bass, which drove the stats way down for that event. If we look at the 2020 event minus Day 6, we have a total of 893 fish catches using a 2-pound minimum scorable weight Days 1 through 5. This averages out to 178.6 fish per day. When we adjust 2019 and 2023 to use a 2-pound minimum, we get a total of 583 and 776, respectively. In 2019, that would be an average of 116.6 fish per day and in 2023 it would be 155.2 fish per day.

Using our original data and looking specifically at the number of fish caught per angler hour is the most effective way to compare the data sets. Unadjusted, the fish per angling hour in 2019 was 1.2, 0.6 in 2020, and 1.02 in 2023. When we adjust these numbers for a 2-pound minimum and drop Day 6, we get a fish per angling hour of 0.38 in 2019, 0.53 in 2020, and 0.52 in 2023. Once again, a remarkably similar comparison.



Adrian Avena at 2020 General Tire Heavy Hitters event.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

The other stat that's likely intriguing is the largest fish and number of fish over 7 pounds. For largest fish in 2019, it was 9-12, 9-2 in 2020, and 9-8 in 2023. The number of fish caught over 7 pounds was three in 2019, 18 in 2020 and 17 in 2023. On the angling side, you could argue that the 2019 season started earlier (when smaller male bass were more likely to be caught, driving down the opportunity for a big fish), but the reality is, in Florida, sometimes the big fish show up and sometimes they don't.

## TAKEAWAYS

When we look through the data and try to answer the question of how the scoring rule change will impact the amount of data we're able to collect and provide to state fisheries biologists, I think the answer from this event is that there's no impact. It seems that as long as Bass Pro Tour anglers continue to weigh the majority of their fish, even if they already have five in their daily limit, then the FMD should be able to provide the states data that's equivalent to the standard we set in the past. The greater impact on fish catches appears to come from the minimum scorable weight. It's an easy trend to spot when we compare all the

data sets. The higher the minimum scorable weight, the lower the number of recordable fish catches. That's an obvious trend and one we predicted years ago.

Another interesting anomaly seen in the 2020 and 2023 data is that the average weight of fish caught is close to 1 pound above the minimum scorable weight. That's not a trend we've been tracking, but it will be on the radar in future analysis.

One more fun takeaway for Kissimmee Chain anglers comes from the GIS maps we created to assess fish catches. The maps tell a story of the anglers being evenly distributed throughout the Chain in 2023, but in 2020 and 2019, they were certainly more concentrated within Toho and in other smaller areas of the chain. This is hopefully a sign that these fisheries are improving and that the entire chain is healthier today than ever before.

In the 2023 season, we'll have two additional opportunities to assess data from other events and will look forward to seeing if the trends from Kissimmee continue. Both events will be on northern fisheries – Cayuga and St. Clair – where anglers may be competing for ounces at the cut line, making every fish truly continue to count. ■

# WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

## MLF NOW!

Live Stream at [MajorLeagueFishing.com](http://MajorLeagueFishing.com) or [MyOutdoorTV.com](http://MyOutdoorTV.com)

April 14-16: Tackle Warehouse Invitational Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches @ Lake Eufaula

April 24-29: General Tire Heavy Hitters @ Caney Creek Reservoir and Bussey Brake

May 4-6: Tackle Warehouse Invitational Presented by Phoenix Boats @ Lake of the Ozarks

May 16-21: Bass Pro Tour Toro Stage Four Presented by Bass Cat @ Lake Guntersville

June 6-11: Bass Pro Tour Stage Five Presented by ATG + Wrangler @ Cayuga Lake

June 17-19: Tackle Warehouse Invitational @ Potomac River

## TV BROADCASTS

Outdoor Channel — Saturdays 12-2 p.m. (ET)

April 15: Bass Pro Tour Bass Boat Technologies Stage Four Presented by Bass Cat - Championship Round @ Lake of the Ozarks

April 22: Bass Pro Tour General Tire Stage Five Presented by Covercraft - Knockout Round @ Watts Bar Lake

April 29: Bass Pro Tour General Tire Stage Five Presented by Covercraft - Championship Round @ Watts Bar Lake

May 6: Bass Pro Tour Fox Rent A Car Stage Six Presented by GOOGAN Baits - Championship Round @ Cayuga Lake

May 13: Bass Pro Tour Bally Bet Stage Seven Presented by Minn Kota - Championship Round @ Mille Lacks Lake

May 20: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops - Qualifying Group A Round 1 @ Lake Palestine

May 27: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops - Qualifying Group B Round 1 @ Lake Palestine

June 3: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops - Qualifying Group A Round 2 @ Lake Palestine

June 10: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops - Qualifying Group B Round 2 @ Lake Palestine

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

April 15: Builders FirstSource Qualifier Presented by Berkley: Match 2 - Day 2 @ Gibbons Creek Reservoir, TX

April 22: Builders FirstSource Qualifier Presented by Berkley: Match 3 - Day 1 @ Somerville Lake, TX

April 29: Builders FirstSource Qualifier Presented by Berkley: Match 3 - Day 2 @ Gibbons Creek Reservoir, TX

May 6: Bass Pro Shops Championship Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches: Match 1 - Day 1 @ Clermont Chain, FL

May 13: Bass Pro Shops Championship Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches: Match 1 - Day 2 @ Clermont Chain, FL

May 20: Bass Pro Shops Championship Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches: Match 2 - Day 1 @ Clermont Chain, FL

May 27: Bass Pro Shops Championship Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches: Match 2 - Day 2 @ Clermont Chain, FL

June 3: Bass Pro Shops Championship Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches: Match 3 - Day 1 @ Clermont Chain, FL

June 10: Bass Pro Shops Championship Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches: Match 3 - Day 2 @ Clermont Chain, FL

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

April 15: All Angles - Builders First Source Qualifier: Match 2 - Day 2 @ Gibbons Creek Reservoir, TX

April 22: All Angles - Builders First Source Qualifier: Match 3 - Day 1 @ Somerville Lake, TX

April 29: All Angles - Builders First Source Qualifier: Match 3 - Day 2 @ Gibbons Creek Reservoir, TX

May 6: All Angles - Bass Pro Shops Championship: Match 1 - Day 1 @ Clermont Chain, FL

May 13: All Angles - Bass Pro Shops Championship: Match 1 - Day 2 @ Clermont Chain, FL

May 20: All Angles - Bass Pro Shops Championship: Match 2 - Day 1 @ Clermont Chain, FL

May 27: All Angles - Bass Pro Shops Championship: Match 2 - Day 2 @ Clermont Chain, FL

June 3: All Angles - Bass Pro Shops Championship: Match 3 - Day 1 @ Clermont Chain, FL

June 10: All Angles - Bass Pro Shops Championship: Match 3 - Day 2 @ Clermont Chain, FL

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

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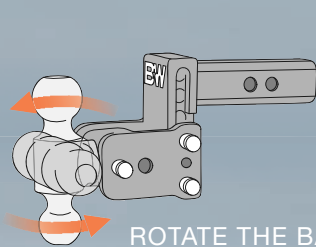
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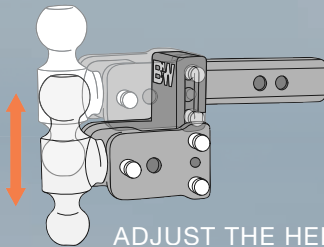
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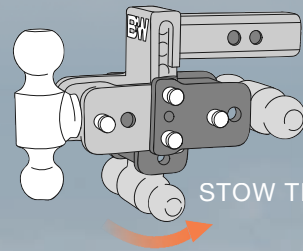
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## FORWARD-FACING SONAR IS RUINING MY LIFE

... or at least turning my world upside down



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

**D**oes that title sound best suited for a YouTube video? Now I just need a thumbnail of me kneeling in the bow of a bass boat with my head in my hands, with a big red arrow pointing to four graphs. Throw in few thought bubbles that read: *It's too expensive! It's unfair! High fence fishing!*

You ready to click on it?

Well, don't bother. The truth is, forward-facing sonar is not ruining my life. What live beaming technology is doing to my life, though, is overturning, debunking and contradicting so much of bass fishing's traditional body of knowledge that I've studied and written about for years. Yes, it's uncomfortable because I now question

everything I've learned about fishing over the last 25 years, but at the same time, it's an extraordinary discovery process. Every time I have an in-depth talk with some of the top beamers in our game, my mind is blown in terms of what they tell me about true bass behavior. In many cases, it's not what we think. It's quite amazing just how much we still don't know about bass, and a lot of what we thought we knew about them is simply not true.

Pretty bold statements, I know, but as they say in the courtroom, nothing beats live testimony. And that's where live beaming comes in. Pro anglers who spend eight to 10 hours a day, for days on end, watching fish movements on a

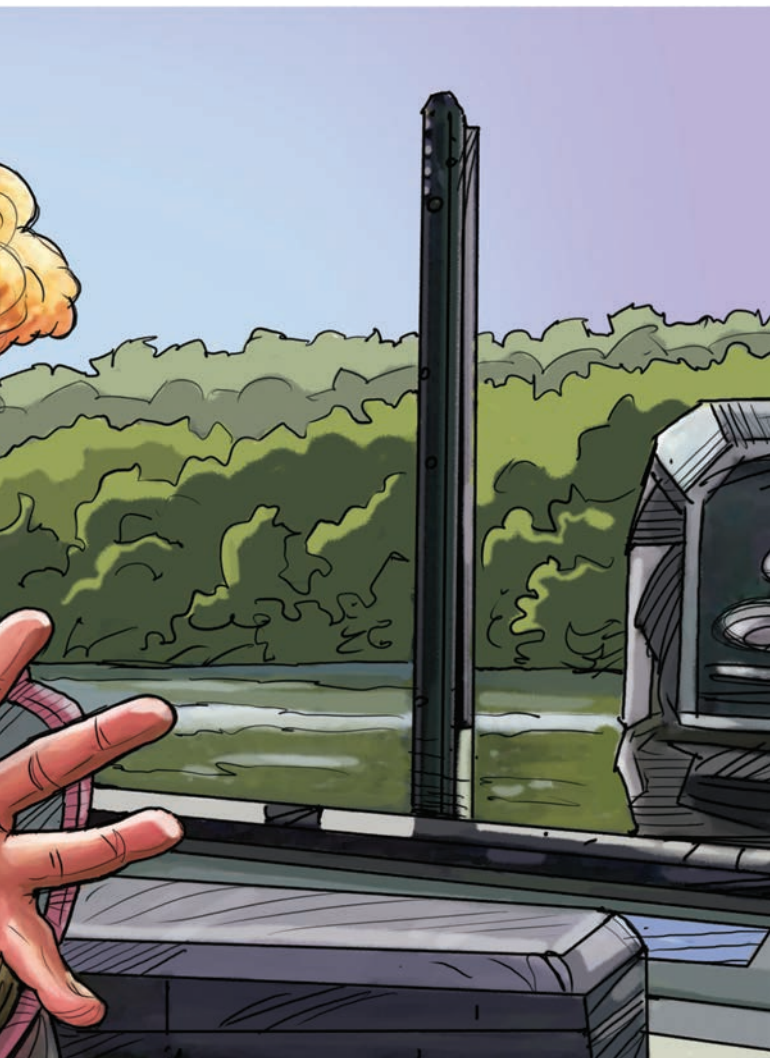


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE WAHLER

screen in real time are replacing the speculation about bass behavior with facts on their real actions. Right now, this new technology is rewriting the knowledge base of our sport. How could learning so many new things about the way fish behave ruin the life of anyone who likes to fish?

## WHAT FFS IS TEACHING ME

For me, the biggest surprise FFS has revealed is just how comfortable bass are roaming around in open water without any cover. Free-swimming smallmouth and spotted bass are understandable, but it's the pelagic nature of largemouth that has stunned me.

One of the very first "rules" we learn as anglers is that bass always relate to some kind of cover. I grew up reporting on bass pros who made their entire livings catching bass from shallow cover. These days, I find myself covering successful pros who are fishing out over 30 to 50 feet of water in areas where there's not much cover or contour on the mapping. When I ask, "What are they relating to?" they laugh and say, "Nothing!"

Even more amazing is to watch a pro literally follow a group of largemouth around in the middle of nowhere on a lake in Florida or Texas with the trolling motor. It blows my mind, especially when there's such enticing cover on the bank in 3 to 10 feet of water.

Perhaps the fallacy here is on my part for believing that "relating to structure or cover," means having their nose stuck in it. If live beaming returns are any indication, maybe a bass' definition of "relating to something" is far looser than I assumed. I know saltwater pelagics will "relate" to reefs that are 200 yards away. I guess there's no reason bass couldn't be this way, too. But who knew?

Also, it appears bass are not near as stationary as we once believed. Except for the spawn, another common beam theme is that bass swim around a lot, nearly in constant motion – and not just bass, either. Fish of all species mill around out in the middle of lakes, just as they often do in the ocean. "I never knew there were so many fish in lakes," was a common refrain after anglers began utilizing FFS in the middle of nowhere.

Incidentally, bass seem to have symbiotic relationships with other species of fish in lakes, such as big stripers, white bass, carp and even drum. This, too, is a page out of the saltwater playbook: Certain species will follow or use other species for cover. I've never really considered the same possibilities in freshwater until pros began to tell me about seeing other species in conjunction with bass. These other species provoke feeding opportunities for bass. Forward-facing sonar now allows anglers (for the first time) to watch these symbiotic relationships play out in front of their eyes.

## WHAT I'M LEARNING ABOUT PRESSURE

Another undeniable advantage to this technology is watching the realities of fishing pressure on bass – seeing how close the boat can get to fish before they sense its presence and get "pushed" away. Or watching a school take cover in the shadow of the boat, "hiding in plain sight," so to speak. There are times when bass are actually spooked by the very presence of a particular lure entering their realm. Many anglers are amazed by how often bass follow their lures and don't bite, as if they are studying them, leaving us to wonder how they get so smart in terms of knowing what's fake and what's food.

Along those same lines, anglers are now getting a much better idea of exactly how big a strike zone is, depending on the water clarity, clouds, wind, etc. Present a lure too close and too fast and it spooks them. Present a lure too far away and they never see it. But present a lure in just the right zone – just barely detectable by feel or by sight – and suddenly a bass demonstrates a strong trait of curiosity and the willingness to investigate. Who knew?

These are all things we had no idea about until the ability to see them in their mysterious underwater haunts became a reality. It's an overall observation of how bass relate to everything in their environment: structure, cover, bait, other species, fishing pressure, water color, current and wind. Are these not the very things we have wondered about for years? I've seen some things that can truly ruin my life, and a screen that provides a real-time look at how fish behave in their underwater world is simply not one of them. ■



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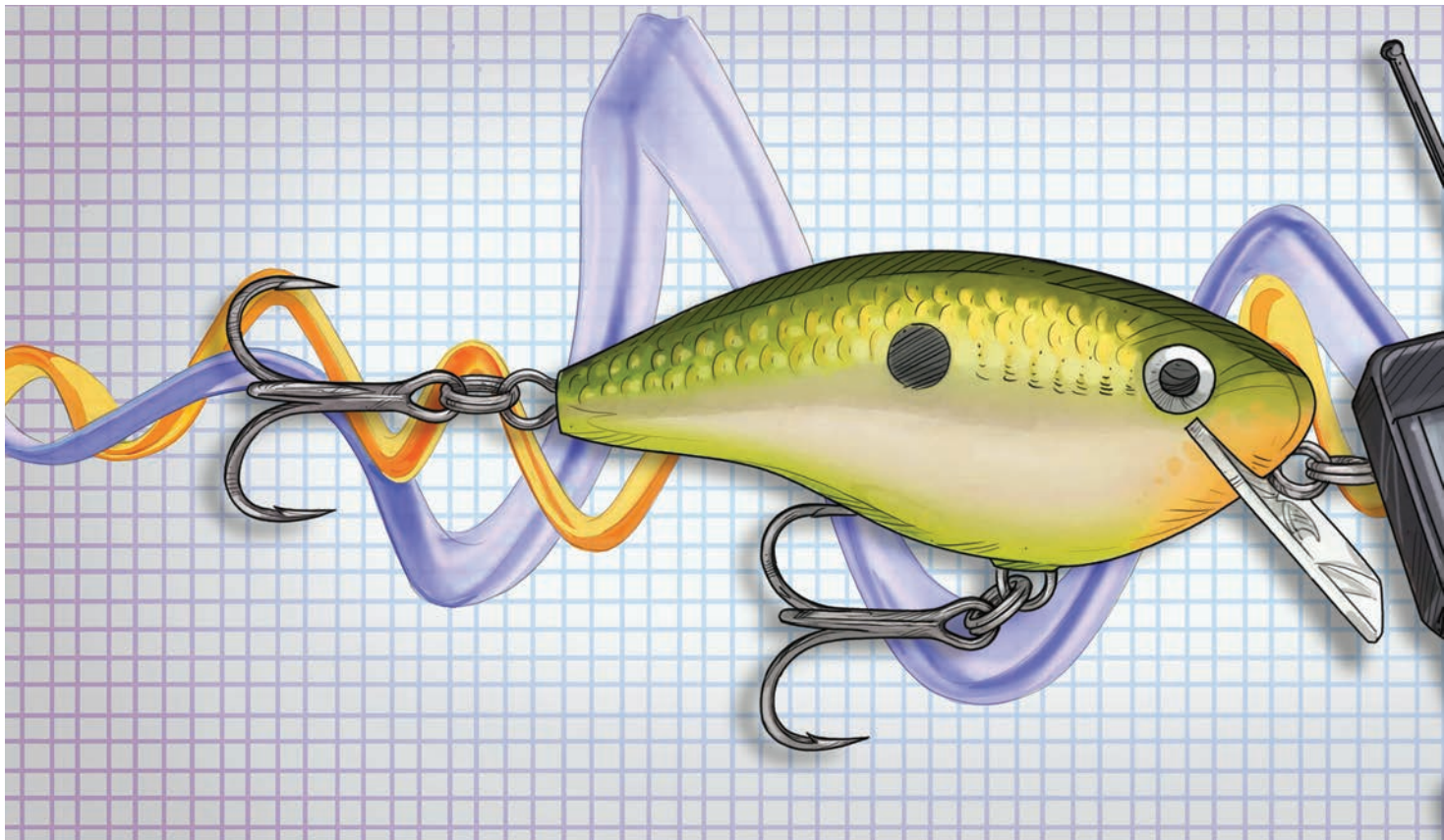




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## THE X-FACTOR

Is vibration really the key to unlocking bass fishing mastery?



### 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.

**H**ow many times have you struggled to explain why a certain technique or lure works so well? I mean, beyond the obvious – color, size, retrieve speed, depth; those variables come into play most of the time when determining the effectiveness of our favorite bass fishing baits. But then there's the X-factor: the variable that obviously exists, as evidenced by our catch rates, yet remains invisible to our detection.

For years, I've searched to define the X-factor. I've played with lure scents, pulled dozens of baits through tanks and briefed scientific journals to learn the ways bass see and hear. I've obsessed to the point of diving beneath the surface to view the underwater world; to see for myself how bass fishing lures really work.

The bulk of my questions remain unanswered. However, after nearly 40 years of hardcore fishing (and learning), I feel I can safely say that the biggest X-factor in bass fishing – the subtle variable that determines whether or not a bass

strikes a lure – is somehow linked to what we term “vibration.”

Wave patterns within the water. Fish footprints, as I've heard them called. You see, energy expended as movement within the water – by real fish or fake (lures) – results in a wave pattern that can be felt by bass. Somehow, it's that wave pattern that accounts for most of the unknowns. I think.

My intention was to interview a few notable pro anglers and get their take on this mystery, record their accounts and slowly begin to link them all to the subtleties of vibration and feel. Then I called Gary Klein and threw everything out the window.

Klein's approach to fishing defies the X-factor. As one of the sport's most seasoned veterans, Klein's entire career – nearly his entire life – has revolved around rationalizing, discovering and quantifying the unknown variables of our sport. To Klein, no fishing riddle is unsolvable.

He admits the concept consumes him.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

“I could talk about this stuff for eight hours,” he says. “It’s the tip of the iceberg and the greatest path to go down in bass fishing.”

Sounds daunting. Yet Klein begins his instruction practically.

“There’s two things that we as (avid anglers possess,” he continues. “Time on the water, which leads to practical experiences, and from there, we can build recognition.”

In essence, what Klein is referring to is creating a set of rules based on success or failure. For instance, if I routinely catch bass in 50-degree water on a Wiggle Wart, I can recognize that something is going on there, and perhaps I can search for a reason.

“Vibration – I refer to it as water displacement,” Klein says. “Everything underwater has a presence. Bass are conditioned by the environment they live in on how they utilize that.”

Through over four decades of fishing all across the country, Klein has found that bass living in generally clear water seem to key most on their sense of sight

for feeding purposes, whereas those living in murky water key on water displacement and noise. He utilizes these rules by fishing flashy, aggressive baits in crystalline waters, but always throws in a triggering mechanism, such as a directional change.

Not surprisingly, Klein then subs in noisy, hard-wobbling baits in stained water, but his approach goes far beyond these bass fishing basics. Since the beginning, Klein wanted to learn more.

“Often, in fishing, nothing or everything matters,” he quips. “It’s the tough times where we learn the most.”

Here, Klein concludes that the down times bring out the particulars of bass behavior. His aim is always to learn the answer behind the occurrences.

“We start understanding lures and recognizing the feel and vibration of different line sizes – even different rod types,” he says. “An angler develops a feel. That’s the subtle feel of the bait displacing water.”

Therein lies the most basic building block of today’s lesson. Klein insists that it’s that subtle feel that constantly changes with the slightest modifications to our approach.

Throughout his career, a number of repeat occurrences peaked Klein’s curiosity.

“For instance, I recognized how many times I’d lift a crankbait out of the water and have a fish following it, or get a strike right at the boat,” he explains. “It’s a very common occurrence, and one I wanted to define.”

Through repetition, recognition and reason, Klein began to solve this primary bass fishing mystery.

“In the beginning of a retrieve, most of the line is off our reel,” he says. “Our inches-per-turn, then, is less (than normal), as we’re winding line onto a small diameter reel spool. At the end of the retrieve, our spool is much larger, our inches-per-turn more, and therefore the lure is traveling faster.”

Using this logic, nearly every lure we cast and retrieve gets faster as it approaches the boat. This, Klein believes, causes following fish to rush the bait at the last minute. As we then begin to pull the lure from the water, a directional change (and vibrational

change) is made, often triggering a quick strike, the result of subtle variations that can be systematically defined.

Today, Klein performs a deliberate directional change with every cast-and-retrieve bait, on every cast.

“It always adds multiple fish to my stringers throughout the year,” he says.

Klein insisted that nothing should be taken for granted in terms of triggering a hit from bass.

“Without a doubt, there are no coincidences, and there’s a reason everything happens in bass fishing,” he asserts.

After 44 years on Tour, it’s logical to think he’s on to something.

“As professional anglers with so much time on the water, we’re always seeking ways to become more efficient,” Klein acknowledges. “We’re more conditioned and catch a higher percentage of our bites, and we recognize these things more often.”

By simple mathematical sample size, Klein’s overwhelming amount of experience allows him to perceive these subtle clues more readily.

Everything makes a difference in bass fishing, but we need to learn to realize it in order to duplicate it. For instance, the same lure on the same line, winding on the same reel might fish different on a rod six inches longer than the norm. And that might be all it takes.

“I could be in the boat with you, and make these subtle changes, and you’d be blown away,” he says.

Klein again emphasizes that everything comes down to feel – really the changes in feel associated with direct changes below the surface – and that it’s all being constantly modified by our choices and actions.

So, it’s out there. The answer to bass fishing’s biggest mystery. According to one of the true pioneers of competitive angling, our fishing results can always be quantified. This comes from an angler who has made more casts and retrieves, through a greater portion of his life, than maybe any other. There’s a reason behind every strike and rejection that the bass throw at us, which do, in fact, boil down to vibration, or something like it.

It’s just up to us to harness the power of the X-factor. ■



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## FRITZ FRIEBEL AND THE FIRST RECORD LARGEMOUTH



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

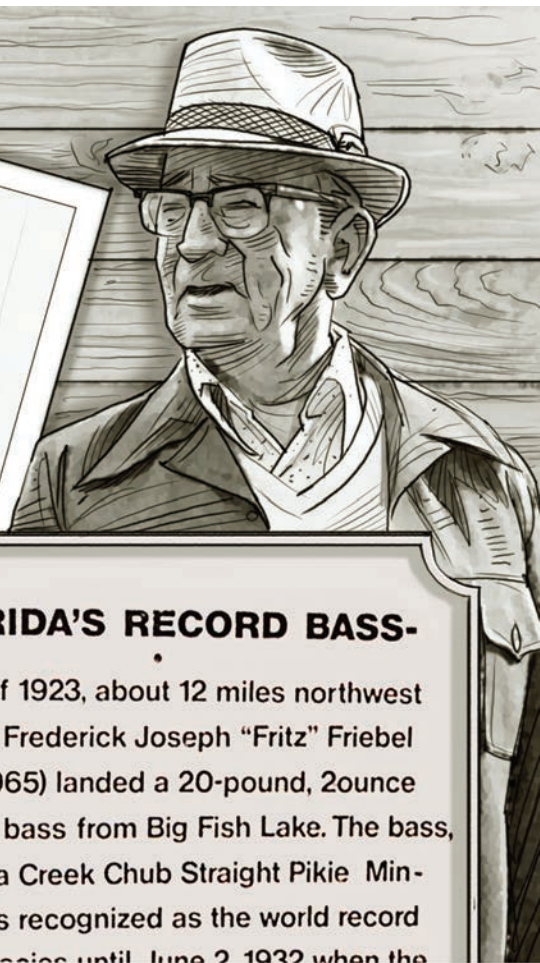
**Ken Duke** has been writing about all aspects of bass fishing for 40 years. When he's not reading about, writing about, thinking about or talking about bass fishing, he's usually bass fishing.

**G**eorge W. Perry and his 22-pound, 4-ounce largemouth bass from Georgia have held at least a share of the world record for so long that few realize he was not the first record-holder. That distinction belongs to a Florida angler named Fritz Friebel who caught a 20-pound, 2-ounce largemouth in 1923 — a hundred years ago and nine years before Perry's catch.

To say that Friebel's accomplishment has been underappreciated (and even disrespected) through the years would be an understatement, especially when you consider that his was just one of two certified largemouths weighing better than 20 pounds until the 1970s, when the California lunker boom began. There's even an argument that Friebel deserved to hold onto the world record until the 1980s.

### MEET FRITZ FRIEBEL

Not surprising for a man named "Fritz," Friebel's parents were from Germany and immigrated to the United States in the 1890s when they settled in Brooklyn. Fritz was born there three years later. When he was 9 years old, his father — a knitter by trade — stopped in at the neighborhood bar and met a man who told the elder Friebel he was moving to Florida. There was great opportunity in the Sunshine State, he claimed, so the Friebels began saving for the move and eventually settled in San Antonio, Florida, northwest of Tampa.



**FLORIDA'S RECORD BASS-**  
In 1923, about 12 miles northwest  
Frederick Joseph "Fritz" Friebel  
(1865) landed a 20-pound, 2ounce  
bass from Big Fish Lake. The bass,  
a Creek Chub Straight Pikie Min-  
now recognized as the world record  
species until June 2, 1932 when the

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

## THE CATCH

June 17, 1923 was a Sunday, and Fritz said he should have been in church. Instead, he was bass fishing with his brother-in-law and a new acquaintance. According to Friebel, they were on Moody Lake in Pasco County, which is now split in two by I-75, but then covered about 200 acres. According to family and friends years later, Fritz and company were almost certainly on another lake and only referenced Moody to throw other anglers off the trail.

Friebel brought his own rowboat, and the trio found another boat at the lake. They split up – Friebel and the new friend in Fritz's boat, and his brother-in-law in the other. The friend drew the short straw and started the day by paddling while Fritz got to fish. He was casting his favorite lure – a Number 700 Creek Chub Pikie – on a 4 1/2-foot casting rod. He fished for some time with limited success before reaching "a kind of enclosed space surrounded by lily-pads. Just the place for the haunt of a big bass."

Those words are allegedly Friebel's and come from the 1925 Creek Chub catalog. The article, "Smashing a World Record," has Fritz's byline, but the purple prose makes it unlikely that he actually wrote it.

"I made a cast to one of the boundaries of the pads," it reads. "Without the slightest warning, and of a sudden, the water churned into an immense circle of suds, which led me to believe that an alligator had actually taken the bait."

Of course, it was no alligator.

Fortunately, Friebel's new friend had a cool head. He dropped the paddle and grabbed a handful of pads – the go-to shallow-water anchor of the 1920s – while the brother-in-law shouted encouragement: "Hold him, boy! Hold him!"

That was easier said than done. Reels of the day had no internal drag system, so Friebel jammed one thumb against the spool and the other pinned the line against the rod blank. It slowed the giant – a little – but it also cut his thumb in three places "as though it had been a razor."

Eventually, Friebel wore the fish down and got it near the boat. Once

again, the new friend proved his worth. He put both hands on the fish's jaw and pulled it into the boat, proving "that he was equal to anything that might need a cool head in fish warfare."

With the prize flopping in the bottom of the boat, they stopped fishing. After all, this was the biggest bass they had ever seen, and possibly the biggest bass anyone had ever seen. It measured 31 inches long and 26 5/8 inches around. On the spring-loaded scales that Friebel kept in his vehicle, the lunker weighed 20 pounds, 2 ounces just minutes after the catch.

"At once we broke camp and drove the 12 miles to San Antonio" to a general store run by Fritz's brother. There, a few hours later – roads were rough back then – the bass weighed 19-10 on certified scales. It had lost half a pound.

A witness to the weighing accused Friebel of putting lead sinkers in the fish. So Fritz took out his pocketknife, cut the fish's belly open, and told the man to put his hand inside. There was no controversy about the weight after that, and the record-keeping authorities were willing to accept the heavier weight recorded on the hand scales at the lake as the official mark.

## A VERIFIED WORLD RECORD

Rightfully proud of his giant bass, Friebel had it frozen in a block of ice and kept on exhibition for several days in a shop window across the street from the Knight & Wall offices. After that, his family thawed the fish and ate it, the standard fate of any lunker in those days.

Even at the time of his catch, Friebel's bass was generally regarded as the largest ever. Some newspapers reported that the fish surpassed an 18-12 from Lake County, Florida, but no one came forward with a claim of a larger largemouth, and no bass had ever been termed a world record until Fritz's.

He entered the catch in the annual Field & Stream Fishing Contest and, of course, won for the heaviest largemouth in the Southern Division in 1923. That year and a year later, the magazine acknowledged it as a record for the species.

A few years later, Friebel's position atop the record book was taken away. In 1926, George Nicholls of Alabama claimed a 24-pound bass from the Tombigbee River. It won the annual Field & Stream contest and replaced Friebel's catch as the "world record" ... for a while.

Upon further investigation, though, Nicholls' fish was identified as a striped bass, and his claim thrown out as a fraud on multiple levels. But by then, George Perry's 22-4 had stepped between Nicholls and Friebel and quickly put atop the record book. Friebel was out, never to claim world record status again.

### WHAT ABOUT FLORIDA?

But, Friebel had the Florida record, right? Well, not exactly.

You see, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (now the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) didn't start keeping official state records until 1976 - 11 years after Fritz's death at age 72 - and the

people assembling those first records were not aware of the Friebel bass.

That's right. They didn't know about it. Oops!

Instead, they established a 19-pound largemouth caught by W.A. Witt in 1961 as the state record. Though more than a pound heavier, Fritz's catch was nowhere to be seen.

When the error was finally corrected in 1984 and Friebel was officially declared the state record-holder, the glory was short-lived. By 1986, the state changed its record-keeping requirements, demanding that someone from FWC personally inspect the fish. Fritz was out ... again.

Today, the Florida record largemouth bass is a 17.27-pounder taken in 1986. The Friebel bass - nearly 3 pounds heavier - is listed as the "uncertified" state record.

### A FINAL INDIGNITY

For many years, a wooden sign commemorating Friebel's catch stood in a city park in San Antonio. Time and

weather took their toll until city officials had it taken down. Then, in 2002, Friebel's family - led by three nephews in Ohio - asked that the sign be replaced. They were even willing to pay for it. The nephews remembered Uncle Fritz for his generosity during the Great Depression. When toys and other amusements were hard to come by, he always brought them fishing and sports equipment.

The family designed the sign and constructed the 50-pound monument out of plastic and other weather-resistant materials. It was built to last. Along with a brief tale of the catch, it includes a carved likeness of an angler holding a yardstick and a giant bass.

The problem is it's not Fritz Friebel. Really.

The family made an error. They found a photo of W.A. Witt holding his 19-pounder and assumed it was Fritz. The mistake went unnoticed.

"It looks a lot like him," one nephew said. But it's not him. Fritz's spotlight had been stolen again. ■



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Color: ghost trout

Deps Slide Swimmer 250  
Color: butch brown kokanee

Megabass Magdraft  
Color: rainbow



**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.



# CHOOSING A SWIMBAIT FOR SPRING BASS SUCCESS

Right now is the time to "go big" for the biggest bass of your life

**M**ore and more anglers are adding big swimbaits to their everyday fishing arsenal. A bait category that was laughed at or thought to be a "California thing" is spreading, and we're seeing a proliferation of swimbaits tied on rods nationwide. We've even seen large swimbaits utilized in major tournament wins east of the Rockies.

A large swimbait is an enticing meal that large bass love to eat. If you want to catch the biggest bass in your lake, a swimbait is the number one bait to target prespawn giants in the spring.

## WHICH SWIMBAIT DOES WHAT?

There are several different styles and types of swimbaits on the market: soft swimbaits, hard swimbaits, glide baits, etc. Just like different types of crankbaits or finesse baits, different types of swimbaits shine in different situations. In this article, we'll focus primarily on soft swimbaits and glide baits for the spring months.

Choosing the correct swimbait for the conditions can seem like a tall task, but using the right swimmer could mean the difference between blanking or catching your new personal best. Understanding

where to fish these baits – as well as which baits to throw in different situations – will make it even easier to catch a giant!

Identifying the correct swimbait starts with knowing the main forage fish in your fishery. Do you have trout or kokanee in your lake, or are bass primarily feeding on threadfin or gizzard shad? Do you have golden shiners or a lot of bluegills? Maybe you're fishing a lake that has herring?

A quick trip to your local tackle shop can really shorten your learning curve about your lake's forage base, and if you don't have a local tackle shop,

jump online and do a little research to figure out what your bass are feeding on.

## DRAWING POWER

The reason why a swimbait works so well is its drawing power. A bass will travel farther to eat a larger meal than it will a smaller meal – that means that you’re simply fishing a larger area of the lake with each cast of a swimbait. As bass transition from their winter haunts and move to their spawning areas, they’re looking for easy meals to feed on before they start the actual spawning process. This is why so many giant bass are caught on swimbaits this time of year.

There are two main categories of soft swim baits, categorized by the shape of their tails and the style of tail kicks they produce: wedge-tail swimbaits and boot-tail swimbaits.

## WEDGE-STYLE BAITS

Wedge-tail swimbaits have a subtle and realistic type of tail kick. These baits are best utilized in clearer water, where/when a natural-looking swim is key. Wedge-tail swimbaits work best when your primary forage is rainbow trout and kokanee. If you’re fishing a reservoir with good water clarity, this style of soft swimbait will work best.

To target the biggest bass in the lake, we look for long, tapering main-lake points and secondary points leading to spawning flats or bays. We frequently like to fish the baits “uphill,” so we position our boat or kayak near the shoreline and make long casts out over the point in deep water. We fish the swimbait back to the boat slowly, trying to imitate a slow-moving, lazy trout. This is a perfect spot for a large bass to pick off an easy meal.

If we’re fishing on a warm afternoon, we get up near the shoreline and chuck and wind just like we would if we were fishing a spinner-bait. This time of the year, the bigger bass often move shallow to sun themselves and feed.

Some of our favorite swimbaits in this category are the **Huddleston Deluxe 8-inch Trout**, the **Hawg Hunter Magnum Trout** and the **Savage Gear Pulsetail RTF Trout**. All three of these swimbaits have a very subtle and realistic swim and have produced multiple teen-size bass for us (the largest over 17 pounds!).

## BOOT-TAIL BAITS

Boot-tail swimbaits have a more aggressive kick and give the swimbait body rolling action. We like to fish these in lakes where the primary forage are shiners or shad.

Boot-tail swimbaits put off a lot more vibration and really work well in

dingy or stained water. As we transition from prespawn to postspawn and the weather and water warms, we often head shallow with boot-tail baits. If your lake has a lot of docks or laydowns, boot tail baits are the best choice in the soft-bait category.

Some of our favorite swimbaits in this category are the **Megabass Magdraft**, **Bull Shad Bacca Buritto**, and some of the **Scottsboro Tackle swimbaits**.

## GLIDE BAITS

Glide baits have caused quite a buzz in recent years, and both larger tackle companies and custom bait makers have brought a lot of really good baits to the market. There are two different styles of glide baits: cover glides and open-water glides.

Open-water glides have a really wide, slow “S” glide. When you hold one of these baits in your hand, you’ll notice that it has more range of motion at the joint than a cover glide. Open-water glides are meant to be fished in areas where more drawing power is needed.

Similar to wedge-tail swimbaits, open-water glides are meant to look like a slow, lazy meal waiting to be eaten. They’re meant to cover water, and you fish them in the same places you’d fish your wedge-tail soft swimbaits: we like to launch them over long, tapering main lake points, secondary points and offshore humps.

Some of our favorite open-water glide baits are the **Baitsanity Trout Explorer** and the **Depts Slide Swimmer 250**.

Cover glides have a narrower range of motion at the joint, a tighter “S” glide and are meant to be fished around cover (hence why we call it a “cover glide”). When you cast past a piece of cover like a dock piling or laydown, you implement two rod twitches or quick turns of the reel handle to make the bait dart side to side. This is when you’ll get 90% of your bites.

Cover glides with a narrower range of motion can get a lot more “twitchy” or “choppy” and that generates big bites around cover.

Some of our favorite cover glide baits are the **RiverS2ea S-Waver 168**, **Baitsanity Antidote** and the **KGB Chad Shad**.

Now that you have a better understanding of the different swimbait types and tail styles, we encourage you to try some of these baits at your local lake. The whole category of big swimmers might see a little overwhelming at first, but the results can be extremely rewarding and can give you the best shot at catching the biggest bass of your life! ■





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**2023 REDCREST**

**BRYAN  
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LAKE NORMAN-CHARLOTTE, N.C.



# Bryan Thrift lives up to “favorite” label with convincing REDCREST win on Lake Norman

## North Carolina pro claims winning hardware, \$300,000 payday on home fishery

By Joel Shangle

**CHARLOTTE, N.C.** – In sports betting, the term “chalk” describes an obvious, prohibitive favorite. A can’t-miss pick. A guaranteed, “take it to the bank!” five-star lock.

Even though North Carolina pro Bryan Thrift nimbly sidestepped the label of “favorite” in the months leading up to Bass Pro Shops REDCREST 2023 Presented by Shore Lunch – a move that’s very typical of Thrift’s unassuming “aw shucks” attitude – virtually everyone within 1,000 miles of Mecklenburg and Catawba counties pegged the 2019 Forrest Wood Cup winner as the angler to beat on Lake Norman. The logic was simple: Norman is a fishery upon which Thrift has spent thousands of tournament hours and has claimed multiple trophies and checks. It’s the lake that Thrift credits for developing the wide-open, run-and-gun fishing style that has earned him \$3.6 million in tournament winnings.

After five grueling days of jousting with the 40-angler REDCREST field, a late-winter storm system, and Lake Norman’s wide-roaming spotted bass and largemouth, Thrift proved that he was indeed worthy of the favorite label.

“Smoke,” it turns out, was as chalk as it gets at REDCREST 2023.

### THRIFT’S NORMAN RÉSUMÉ

Thrift first fished Lake Norman in seventh grade, on a day trip with his baseball coach. He started to legitimately explore the lake shortly after high school, when he joined a local bass club, and then began to build his encyclopedia of Norman knowledge in 2003-2004 when he got his first bass boat.

Thrift cashed his first MLF (then-FLW) tournament check on Lake Norman in late April of 2007, a \$25,000 boost to his bank account courtesy of a 10th-place finish in the third FLW Tour event of the 2007 season. Thrift followed up with a \$127,500 Norman payday in

late March of 2010 as he hoisted the champion’s trophy at the second event of the 2010 FLW Tour season – a prespawn event where Thrift estimated he fished over 100 docks a day – for his first-ever tour-level win.

Thrift added another \$71,000 to his Lake Norman ledger at the 2016 FLW Tour Invitational after a milk-run assault on the lake’s offshore brush and rock piles with a 4-inch swimbait. Add his \$300,000 REDCREST payday to his Lake Norman tally (and a handful of Top 10s in miscellaneous MLF/FLW events) and Thrift’s \$530,000-plus MLF total on the 32,000-acre impoundment of the Catawba River accounts for nearly 15% of his \$3.6 million career earnings.

In the days leading up to the March 8-12 tournament, the 39 other anglers in the REDCREST field were plain-spoken about the problem they faced keeping pace with “Smoke” for five days on Norman.


“We’re all probably going to be trying to keep up with Bryan Thrift, he probably has all those bass out there named,” Alton Jones Jr. said.

“Thrift is going to win REDCREST, that’s all you have to say,” Michael Neal said, semi-jokingly.

Even Thrift’s former tournament partner – and other REDCREST favorite – Andy Montgomery was matter-of-fact about the prospect of duking it out on Norman with the Damiki pro: “Me and Bryan have won a lot of tournaments on that lake together. We’ve spent a lot of time in the boat together, but he knows that offshore game way, way, way, way better than I do. He’s going to be hard to handle, man.”

Thrift breezed through pre-tournament media and two days of practice with a devil-may-care attitude that belied how deeply invested he was in winning the tournament. He professed his affection for the fishery and said all the things a hometown favorite should say leading up to a game on his home field.

“I’m very happy to qualify for the championship event on a lake I know so well,” Thrift said. “(Lake Norman) has been a very good lake to me. It pretty much got my career started, because



Thrift’s REDCREST victory on Lake Norman was just the latest in the North Carolina pro’s string of success on his home lake.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

Thrift steadily worked his way from Day 1 through Day 5 on Lake Norman with a gameplan based on his knowledge of the lake.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

after getting that first (FLW Tour) win at the top level, it seemed like it opened a door, and I started winning a lot after that. It got the ball rolling for me. I learned to bass fish on that lake."

## MAN ON A MISSION

Rewind two years to REDCREST 2021. Thrift went into that event on Lake Eufaula, Alabama, as a popular pre-tournament favorite thanks to a glowing résumé on that fishery. He wasn't "chalk" on Eufaula ... but he was darn sure close.

By all measure, Thrift dominated on Eufaula through the Qualifying and Knockout rounds, winning both by wide margins and establishing himself firmly as the man to beat heading into the Championship Round.

Unfortunately, his title hopes evaporated on the final day as Thrift managed only two keeper fish and Dustin Connell claimed the REDCREST trophy.

"It was just frustrating to have three or four really good days, and the last day just go out and fall on my face," Thrift admitted.

REDCREST 2023, though, set up perfectly for Thrift to earn the trophy that eluded him in 2021. A late-winter weather system rolling through the Carolinas dropped the temperature from a daytime high of 70 degrees in

practice to a nighttime low of 39 the night before Championship Sunday (with a steady rain thrown into the middle of the tournament week).

Also playing to Thrift's advantage was an overhaul of the REDCREST tournament format. Instead of the "every scorable fish" scoring structure and zeroing of weights on the final day, REDCREST 2023 featured a best-five-fish daily limit and a cumulative weight for the two Knockout Rounds and the Championship Round to determine the winner. Thrift could work his way through the first two days with enough weight to advance to the Knockout Round, manage his encyclopedia of waypoints and fish, and adjust on the fly as conditions changed on Norman.

Things went according to plan in qualifying competition. Fishing what he called a mid-lake "ditch" each morning with a 3/8-ounce Fitzgerald Fishing Bryan Thrift Tungsten Micro Jig and 3-inch Damiki Air Craw and a Damiki Underspin with a 3-inch Damiki Armor Shad, Thrift posted 13 pounds, 12 ounces on Day 1 and 11-7 on Day 2 to advance to the first Knockout day. He eschewed the process of picking out individual fish on forward-facing sonar; instead leaning on his Humminbird electronics to tell him he was in an area with an abundance of bait and

bass, and then fishing his way around the area until he was satisfied he had worked it thoroughly before moving on.

"(The ditch) was a little drain in 25 to 30 feet of water, and full of baitfish and bass," Thrift said of his morning go-to spot. "(Forward-facing sonar) lets you know how much activity is in an area. Humminbird MEGA 360 and MEGA Live are great tools that work together very well. I can see everything around me with the 360 without having to turn the trolling motor to it, but I have the MEGA Live that lets me scan around and find vertical structure better. If there's a small stump or tree that doesn't really stand out on the 360, I can see it on MEGA Live.

"I don't like chasing individual fish, it doesn't really fit me. It frustrates me a lot. I use it (FFS) more to see what's in an area. It gives me the confidence to change up. I'm still fishing a small target versus chasing an individual bass. I wasn't tracking fish and throwing at individual fish; but when I would get in an area I would also pan around and see if there was baitfish in the area, see if I could see fish swimming around. To me, it's just something to see if there was life and activity in the areas. That would make me calm down and slow down to fish the areas thoroughly because I knew fish were occupying the area."

## FROM KNOCKOUT TO CHAMPIONSHIP

Thrift aired it out a little in the first of REDCREST's two Knockout Rounds. Just as he had done the two previous qualifying days, he hit up his morning ditch/offshore pattern for 11 quick pounds in the first hour before moving to docks with a 5-inch swimbait in pursuit of higher quality fish. That move paid off in spades: Thrift upgraded in the afternoon with his three biggest fish of the day (3-6 and 4-9 largemouth and a 3-9 spot) to end the day with 17-12.

The ditch, however, wasn't quite as fruitful in the second Knockout Round, producing only 7 pounds in the first hour. A move to the docks with the swimbait fizzled as well, producing only one 2-pound spotted bass to bring Thrift to 9-10 midway through the second period. Thrift pulled the plug on his previous three days' standouts and headed 15 miles upriver to an area he had discovered a year prior and that had produced a couple of good bites in practice.

Fishing a 1/2-ounce Z-Man Evergreen Jack Hammer ChatterBait paired with a 5-inch Armor Shad, Thrift was quickly rewarded with several fish between 2-6 and 2-11 that upgraded his day's five-fish total to over 13 pounds and gave him the security to run his shallow pattern with a swimbait to end

the day. He finished with a flourish, connecting with a 4-10 spot that pushed his five-fish limit to 15-6 and gave him a 1-9 lead over Jones.

Thrift wasted very little time on his morning ditch pattern on a frosty Championship Sunday, catching just one scorable fish (a 1-12) in 30 minutes before moving out to explore a series of shallow brushpiles and offshore spots to the tune of four more fish to fill his limit at 10-11. Eventually, though, Thrift pulled up his trolling motor and headed back upriver to the stretch where he had finished the previous day. Just after 1 p.m., Thrift picked up a 3-0; eight minutes later, he added a 3-2.

Thrift would eventually cull four times on his upriver stretch to climb over the 13-pound mark again, finishing with 13-10 on the final day – more than enough to outdistance Jones by more than 4 pounds.

"I ended up saving two really good spots for the last two days," Thrift said of his upriver juice. "I went to them in the Knockout Round because I was struggling and picked up a quick 13-pound bag. Fortunately, there was enough there when I went back (on the final day) for another 13-pound bag. I checked it in practice and got two bites and thought, 'That's a place I can go if I'm struggling and fill out a limit.' I had

no idea it was going to give me two 13-pound limits."

Later that afternoon – after Thrift had hoisted the REDCREST trophy onstage in Charlotte and made a joyous victory lap through the crowd at The Park Expo and Conference Center – he tried to summarize his Lake Norman journey and what the win meant to him.

"This being my home lake, I felt a lot of added pressure," Thrift said. "Working shows (in the winter), everybody comes up and says, 'You're going to win REDCREST!' The very first (major) tournament I ever went to was actually right here in Charlotte. In 2004, I went to the weigh-in at the Classic that Takahiro (Omori) won. I got teared up watching that. At that moment I knew this was what I wanted to do for a living, and to have the success I've had since I started my (pro) career in 2007 is amazing.

"This is the hardest event in the world to win. You can't get lucky on one big day and win, and you can't win off of one spot. You have to make a ton of decisions over the course of five days to win REDCREST. I think that makes a true champion; somebody who can figure it out and get it locked in and dialed in for five days straight. It's what every kid dreams about."



Thrift's Day 5 and 6 winning stretch was a spot on the upper end of Norman that he had located a year earlier and kept in his back pocket until he needed it most.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Alton Jones Jr. caught this trophy 5-pound spotted bass during REDCREST 2023.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

# THE BEST OF THE REST REDCREST

By Tyler Brinks

**AS PREDICTED**, spotted bass dominated the catches at Bass Pro Shops REDCREST 2023 Presented by Shore Lunch and there proved to be many ways to catch them. Plenty of good-sized largemouth showed up, though, and they proved willing to eat a variety of lures.

Overall, the patterns and baits used by the Top 10 were an interesting mix, with some baits not yet on the market and big glide baits appearing for the first time in Bass Pro Tour competition. Here's a rundown of how the rest of the Top 10 caught their fish on Norman.

## 2ND - ALTON JONES JR. - 42-6 (15)

Jones relied on three primary baits. He located two bedding fish in practice and went to them to kick off the event, eventually catching a whopping 5-7 spotted bass in the first day of Knockout Round competition.

"I caught those bedding fish on a Geecrack Bellows Shad in AJ's juice rigged on a 4/0 straight-shank hook with a 3/8-ounce tungsten weight," Jones said.

For the rest of the event, Jones focused on specific types of pockets to be more efficient when fishing long stretches of docks. When fishing the docks, he skipped a 6-inch harness swimbait in pearl white or a 5-inch green pumpkin soft plastic stick worm on a wacky or Neko rig.

## 3RD - EDWIN EVERS - 41-14 (15)

Aside from the Berkley Big Bass of the event on a top-water, a 6-0 on the first day of fishing, Evers' primarily fished swimbaits. Both the new 6-inch Berkley Cull Shad in electric shad and a prototype 6-inch glide bait from Mike Bucca, called the Trick Shad.

Evers stuck to the mid-lake section and mainly caught spotted bass, except for the 6-0 largemouth and one more that he weighed during the week. A final bait that contributed was a 1/2-ounce Berkley finesse jig in green pumpkin with a brown and orange Berkley Chigger Craw trailer.

## 4TH - JACOB WHEELER - 40-11 (15)

Wheeler's REDCREST came down to a trio of primary patterns: sight fishing, fishing a Neko rig, and throwing a glide bait. He mixed it up and alternated the three approaches throughout the event.

"I was using a 1/16- or 3/32-ounce VMC Neko Weight most of the time (on the Neko rig) but would go up to a 3/32 to get it down quicker on deeper docks," Wheeler said. "I rigged the bait on a #2 VMC RedLine Series Neko Hook."

He also caught two largemouth that he weighed while sight fishing; a 6-inch shad pattern glide bait served to land other key fish throughout the event.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

## 5TH - MATT LEE - 40-10 (15)

Lee scored a Top-five finish by mixing it up with sight fishing and the big bait, starting close to the ramp to begin the event and moving up the lake as the event went on.

"We had perfect conditions during practice to sight fish, and I had the trolling motor on high and fished a Deps Slide Swimmer 175 glide bait in the Butch Brown crappie color to cover water and locate bedding fish that would show themselves," Lee said.

Once he had fish located, he would pick them off with a drop-shot or Neko Rig. He used a hand-poured finesse worm on a 2/0 Owner Cover Shot hook with a 3/16-ounce Titan Tungsten weight for the drop shot and a 5-inch green pumpkin purple soft stick bait on a 1/0 Owner Jungle wacky rig hook with a 5/64-ounce Titan Tungsten nail weight for his Neko.

## 6TH - CASEY ASHLEY - 40-4 (15)

Ashley went with just a shaky head and jig for the event.

"I just fished those two baits. It was pretty simple," Ashley said. "I was focusing on those shallow docks on flats. I stayed in the middle section; fishing those docks for spotted bass, but caught a few largemouth, which seemed to be way back in the pockets."

He fished a 1/8- and 3/16-ounce Greenfish Tackle Casey Ashley Clean Up jighead with a green pumpkin Zoom Trick Worm and then switched to a Greenfish Tackle HD Skipping jig in 1/2-ounce with a Zoom Big Salty Chunk, rotating through different colors depending on water clarity.

## 7TH - DUSTIN CONNELL - 37-3 (15)

Connell kicked off the tournament with a Day 1 best bag of 16-7. He caught those on a crystal shad-colored jerkbait while using his Lowrance ActiveTarget forward-facing sonar on deeper spawning flats. That bite went away for Connell, and he switched gears to finesse with a wacky-rig and shaky head and power fishing a swimbait around docks located further up the lake than many in the field.

"Finding dingier water was key for me," Connell said. "I was up the river a decent ways."

He fished a Googan Baits Slim Shake in blue baby on a shaky head and a Googan Baits Lunker Log in baby bass on a wacky rig. His swimbait of choice was an albino Bass Mafia Daingerous swimbait.

## 8TH - ADRIAN AVENA - 36-13 (15)

Avena determined early on that sight fishing would be a factor and that's what he did to start the tournament around the takeoff at Blythe Landing.

No one bait was the top producer and Avena said he rotated through a "Plano box full" of his favorite sight fishing plastics. He rigged them all on 3/0 Berkley Fusion straight shank hooks with 1/4- and 3/8-ounce tungsten weights.

"It was just a matter of switching baits on the fish until I found one they couldn't stand and bite," he said. "Later in the event, I kept the Berkley Cull Shad swimbait in my hands unless I saw one on a bed. That bait is cool because it has slots to insert nail weights, and I would add them to get the perfect weighting and caught most of my fish skipping it around the catwalks on docks and on isolated shallow laydowns and stumps."



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

## 9TH - RANDY HOWELL - 35-5 (15)

During practice, Howell committed to fishing dirty water areas and was determined to catch them with a shallow crankbait. It worked for getting bites, but not for the quality he needed; so, he called an audible near the end of practice and found what he fished the rest of the week.

"I switched to the area near takeoff and by the dam in the last couple hours of practice and discovered that the fish were spawning near the warm-water discharge in the last couple hours of practice," he said.

Howell primarily caught spawning fish with a wacky-rigged 5-inch Yamamoto Senko in green pumpkin with purple green flake on a No. 1 Pro X Finesse Wacky Hook. He also caught some cruisers with a Livingston JerkMaster 121 in pro green. When he saw one sitting on a bed, he would pitch a Yamamoto Flappin' Hog in green pumpkin hues. He rigged it on a 4/0 Pro X worm hook with a red 3/8-ounce XPS tungsten worm weight.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

## 10TH - OTT DEFOE - 34-14 (15)

DeFoe relied on two primary patterns, spending a good amount of time targeting spawning bass and mixing in a wake bait.

"The sight-fishing deal was much better the first few days and helped me catch some key fish to advance," he said. "That bite got weaker as the event went on and finally went away for good. It was primarily largemouth, but I also caught some spotted bass on beds."

He fished a wacky-rigged Bass Pro Shops Fin-Eke Worm in bubble gum rigged on a #1 VMC RedLine Series Neko Hook to catch his bedding bass. His other primary pattern was fishing a 4 1/2-inch chrome wake bait fished in the backs of pockets and on secondary points. ■



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# THE FISH FIVE

SECRETS OF THE BASS PRO  
TOUR'S BEST, BY THE NUMBERS

By Joe Balog

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRANDON ROWAN





**T**he Bass Pro Tour features the largest collection of the best bass anglers in the world. At no time in the last three decades has the competitive field been more stacked with world champions, Angler of the Year title holders and pros near or at the top of the career earnings leaderboard.

It's reasonable to assume that such an array of talent would produce diverse results. For the most part, nearly any competitor is capable of winning at any time. We've seen that in individual tournaments – newcomers and veterans alike taking down titles. But in terms of overall consistency, we see a discrepancy in that diversity. Ultimately, the best of the best (literally) always end up near the top of the food chain in season-long points standings.

Looking back to 2020, only five anglers on the Bass Pro Tour have placed in the AOY Top 20 each year. Five out of the 95 who have competed on MLF's highest-level circuit.

Jacob Wheeler, Michael Neal, Bryan Thrift, Alton Jones Jr. and Dustin



Connell. Statistically proven as fact: No other anglers have been as consistent as these five.

How have they done it? Competing against a star-studded field, at fisheries across the country in all seasons of the year. How have these five pros kept the pace and never slipped up? Surely there's a secret. Interviews with each member of this elite group reveal their winning gameplans.

## MICHAEL NEAL DOES WHAT HE DOES BEST

Neal has had an incredible career in fishing, accomplishing more in his 10 years on tour than most do in a lifetime. He's a threat to win anywhere at any time and a perennial championship qualifier (and reigning back-to-back AOY on the now Tackle Warehouse Invitationals circuit). Over the last decade, Neal has refined his approach to consistently catch fish, anywhere he goes.

"I develop my gameplan based on my (fishing) strengths," Neal says.

Online study of a new lake gives Neal an initial idea of what to look for, but once he arrives, Neal only concentrates on what he's good at.

"There's two ways I always plan to fish," he continues. "Finesse fishing or winding."

Regardless of locale, Neal searches out water best suited for these practices. Bladed jigs come into play, as do swim jigs. Spinning rods featuring Damiki rigs and drop-shots get equal attention, too. Throughout his practice



period, Neal is always searching for water to match these techniques, regardless of the fishery. At times, that requires putting on the blinders.

"In Florida, there may be a bunch of mats in certain places, but I'm going to troll right by them," he explains.

That type of fishing environment doesn't suit Neal, so he spends no time there. None. Admittedly, that leaves the window open to other competitors, but Neal makes up for it by endlessly seeking out a comfortable fishing spot that's suitable to his confidence techniques.

That starts by settling in right from the get-go. Neal avoids running all over the lake. Often, he spends an entire tournament – practice and competition – in one major creek arm. Idling is just part of the job.

"I put 300 hours a year on my Mercury," Neal says. "I want to learn everything about my area before competition begins."

From there, he's able to keep his line wet in high-potential spots – a line that holds a lure he has supreme confidence in.



### ALTON JONES JR. KEEPS AN EYE ON THE FIELD

"I practice every day – including the tournament days," Jones says of his typical strategy. "I'll have a starting spot, maybe one or two ideas after that, but then I go with the flow."

For a young angler, Jones' approach is surprisingly mature.

## “IS THERE A **SECRET RECIPE** TO THE METHODS EMPLOYED BY THE SPORT'S BEST?”

"You're never going to find the winning fish for six days of competition in two days of practice," he continues. "The fish are going to move. And there's never stable weather for a period that long, so I'm not going to be too attached to any one idea."

Jones stresses the importance of expanding his fishing approach each day of a tournament. He finds it vital to never hit the panic button, while also using SCORETRACKER® to his advantage.

"That helps determine if what I'm doing is working," he says. "If not, I scrap that idea."

And he scraps it quickly, without remorse. Jones is constantly rethinking his gameplan, largely due to the catch rate being posted in this new-age tournament format.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

last thing Connell wants is to be on the water and feel out of place.

"If you try to force it, you'll flop," he says of avoiding weaknesses and fishing in his comfort zone.

Connell also shares one additional gem: "I get away from areas that routinely get pounded," he says. "If it's a known community hole, I'm out of there. I just don't see the endgame in that type of fishing."

With an eye always locked on first, Connell's goal, in his mind, would be unattainable if forced to share fish.



- that way, if he underperforms, Connell finds himself happily in 20th place with a paycheck in his pocket. He readily admits he's his own worst critic, bemoaning any event where he places near the bottom and further forcing high expectations. But his strategy goes deeper than that.

"When you set really high expectations, everything falls into place," he continues. "It never turns off; map study, research, working on tackle - those all are done to the best of your ability. Your work ethic follows that mindset."

Connell goes all-in on everything he does. If he recognizes a weakness, he works immediately to correct it. The



**BRYAN THRIFT ... IS BRYAN THRIFT**

*"I don't think I do anything unique."*

Typical Thrift. Known for his "lucky break" reasoning, Thrift rarely admits just what makes him so good.

**DUSTIN CONNELL HAS SIGHTS SET ON THE TOP**

In 2022, Connell joined Wheeler as the only pros to win three tournaments in a single season, but it's Connell's overall consistency across all events that places him in our elite group. How does he do it?

"It's all mental," Connell explains. "At this point, we've progressed so much that it's not mechanical. We all have the same baits and the same equipment. The only thing to separate yourself from other competitors is your mental game."

Connell always expects to do well in tournaments. He never fishes to simply make a cut and always shoots for first



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



But we can't ignore the numbers. For 16 years, Thrift has terrorized organized bass fishing. He's done so through intense refinement of technique, often cycling through 20 rods in order to catch a few more bass.

Thrift's strength lies in his relentless on-the-water assessment of the moods of the fish.

"I want to find out what they'll bite and what they won't," he says.

Thrift carries "a ton of tackle," and often experiments with dozens of lures at each practice spot. He does so in order to save time during competition. In addition, Thrift finds himself continuing to refine his approach as competition goes on.

"I laid up a bunch (in the previous BPT format, once he was well above the Toro Cut Line)," he explains. "During qualifying rounds, I practiced quite a bit."

Again, spending time experimenting with lure options, Thrift can often keep up with a changing bite as tournaments progress.

Recently, Thrift has found himself looking for water to support his strengths, just as Neal does.

"I kind of turned into a clear-water guy," Thrift says, noting that a 4-inch Damiki Stinger routinely finds its way into his hand and into the mouths of bass.

Versatility combined with finesse continues to pay the bills for one of the sport's best.



### JACOB WHEELER'S PURSUIT OF MULTI-TECHNIQUE MASTERY

Saving the highest finisher for last, Wheeler continues to astonish us all. He's currently the undisputed best in the world, on track to break many of the sport's records, and has won more money than anyone in the last decade.

All this by the age of 30.

Wheeler reflects on his past to explain his present – particularly the way he fishes now.

"I grew up a generalist, and there weren't many generalists in bass fishing at the time," he says, referring to the popularity of technique specialists in the early 2000s.

Few pros at that time carried a flipping stick and a spinning rod on the same deck.

***"TO GET CONFIDENCE IN ALL THE BAITS AND ALL THE TECHNIQUES, TIME ON THE WATER IS ESSENTIAL. IT'S THE ONLY REAL WAY TO DO IT."***

"I've worked to perfect the (generalist) approach," Wheeler continues. "The year that I won three tournaments, I won all of them doing something different."

Wheeler admits that while the core techniques continue to dominate bass fishing competitions, newer approaches often add a few more fish to the scale. But in order to be capable with all techniques and baits, practice is crucial.

"To get confidence in all the baits and all the techniques, time on the water is essential," he says. "It's the only real way to do it."

All year long, including in the off-season, Wheeler is on the water perfecting his trade. Few anglers continue to put in as much time learning new waters or new fishing systems as him – an approach that doesn't seem to be fading. For Wheeler, the secret lies in being incredibly capable at everything, and willing to try anything.

"That's the toughest thing, letting go of preconceived notions," he says. "But it's the most important."

With supreme confidence in every lure he's got rigged up, Wheeler gladly lets the fish dictate his approach.

So what have we learned? Is there a secret recipe to the methods employed by the sport's best? Maybe it's the culmination of a well-scripted plan; defining what makes you successful and never wavering. Or maybe it's all in their heads; the mental game pushing good anglers to greatness.

Maybe it's both, or maybe they're all just built different. Find out for sure and you're well on your way to becoming the best angler you can be. ■






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T H E R E C I P E F O R

# GIANT BASS



## Hall, Reese, Cox share the ingredients for finding and catching your biggest bass ever

By Tyler Brinks

**E**verybody who enjoys cooking and grilling knows how important it is to follow the recipe for the best results. Sure, mixing things up on the fly can work like magic sometimes – that’s how Caesar salad was created, after all – but following some time-tested guidelines and adhering to a plan frequently eliminates errors in the kitchen.

The same can be said for bass fishing, specifically when it comes to targeting bigger bass. Following the recipe outlined here will increase your chances of catching a fish of a lifetime.

Let’s all just admit that we’re all fishing for the biggest bass we can find. Largemouth, smallmouth, spotted bass – whatever swims in your local lake, you’re out there every day looking for the biggest fish you can find. And, some anglers find the biggest fish consistently, whether in a tournament situation or when strictly trophy hunting. Three anglers who have blended this approach (whether competing in professional tournaments or at home in three of the biggest big bass meccas in the country) are Californian Skeet Reese, Floridian John Cox and Texan Kyle Hall.

Each has preferred methods for targeting giants, but there are common themes among all of them.

### RECIPE FOR BIG BASS

#### Measure and mix:

- A hunter’s mindset
- The right conditions
- A trophy bass lure

#### Stir in:

- Stealthy boat positioning
- One body of water capable of trophy fish

#### Directions:

- Combine all ingredients. Do not overmix and continue baking until a big bass has been landed.

### INGREDIENT #1 – A HUNTER’S MINDSET

Trophy bass anglers are often compared to hunters as they stalk their prey, a comparison that has become even more prevalent with the popularity of forward-facing sonar and the greatly enhanced ability to target individual fish. This is how Hall approaches targeting big fish when he’s guiding or fun fishing, but also applies to targeting better-than-average fish in a tournament situation.

Hall has scored three big wins with Major League Fishing thanks to his mastery of the technology and leans on it heavily when fishing in Texas during the off-season. His January 2023 catch of a 13.58-pound Toyota ShareLunker from O.H. Ivie Reservoir – an honor that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department bestows on bass over 13 pounds – is a prime example of this hunter’s mindset.

In 2022, Hall also landed a 16.10-pound fish from the same lake that was





MLF pro and trophy bass hunter Skeet Reese happily lands a big largemouth, one of many he has caught during his legendary career.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SHANGLE



Kyle Hall caught these absolute giants from O.H. Ivie Reservoir in Texas by making selective casts to big fish spotted on LiveScope. He caught a 13.58-pound bass in 2023, pictured left, and a monster 16.10-pound fish in 2022.

accepted into the state's program that uses these fish for a selective breeding program to enhance genetics in their stocking efforts.

Hall's goal every time he visits this big-bass factory is to catch a large-mouth over 13 pounds and he does it by being selective about where he casts. Hall often spends his days constantly scanning (rod by his side) until he finds what he's looking for, waiting for the perfect moment to make a cast.

"The day I caught that 13, I made five casts in three hours of fishing and would only make a cast when I saw a big one on LiveScope," Hall said. "I just scanned around until I found a fish worth casting to. There were only two fish I saw in that whole time and a few of those casts were bad casts. Once I saw that fish and made the perfect cast, it bit. After that, I came in to weigh it and call Texas Parks and Wildlife for them to come pick up the fish."

Cox also does most of his best work for giant bass while he's looking at

them, but instead of his electronics, it's usually just his eyes and a pair of polarized sunglasses. Fishing for spawning bass is right in his wheelhouse and what he's always the most excited about during the spring months.

"If I look back at all of my big bass over the years, the biggest ones always seem to come by sight fishing, where I was searching for the biggest bass I can find," he said. "Besides sight fishing, flipping, punching mats, or occasionally throwing a vibrating jig have caught some of them for me, but it's hard to beat bedding fish when you're searching for a giant. That's when they're most accessible and you can keep looking until you find 'the one.'"

Reese, on the other hand, has always been a swimbait specialist (some would say "fanatic"), but frequently finds himself torn because his job as a professional angler is to catch keeper-sized bass. But, when tournament checks and points are not on the line, you'll find him fishing big swimbaits.

"As a tournament angler, it's hard to lock into the big bait deal because you're fishing for keeper bass," Reese said. "There's truth to the whole 'the bigger the bait, the bigger the bass' thing, but for a tournament angler, swimbait fishing can be the kiss of death and you might not catch anything. But if I'm fishing for fun, I'll throw a swimbait because it's undoubtedly the best way to catch a giant."

## INGREDIENT #2 - THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

We all enjoy those pleasant days on the water when the sun is shining, but the more adverse the weather, the better for catching giant bass, according to Hall. Some of his best trips to O.H. Ivie have been in extremely cold conditions.

"I think the more miserable the weather, the better chances you have for catching a big one," he said. "I've been out there when it was 10 degrees, with a wind chill below zero and caught big ones. For one, there will be fewer people fishing, but it can also change the behavior of fish."

Hall has a theory that the colder it is, the slower a bass will move – not just in how frequently/inrequently they move around in an area, but also in how they process and react to what’s happening in the water around them.

“I think it gets so cold that they won’t chase anything and will only feed if something comes right in their face,” Hall said. “If you can line up and make the perfect cast, they aren’t going to move, but if it’s right in their face, you have a great chance at getting them to react and bite.”

Cox and his sight-fishing approach differ greatly: his obvious preference is for sunshine and calm weather. For him, it’s more about the timing on the calendar.

“The biggest bass of the year always seem to be the ones that come up first to spawn,” Cox said. “They come up and do their thing and get out of there. I’ve also noticed the best places to find a big one will be one of two things; somewhere very far away from everyone else in the thickest cover or hidden backwater, or right

near deep water. You aren’t typically going to find a giant spawning around a bunch of other beds.”

Reese fits in the middle when describing the perfect situation to catch big bass.

“Historically, my best days for big fish, most of them were overcast with a little wind,” he said. “Water temperatures in the mid-50s during the prespawn with those conditions get my juices flowing because I know my odds are much better for catching a giant on a swimbait. It’s pretty straightforward, but the warmer the water temperature, the worse the conditions are for catching big ones.”

### INGREDIENT #3 – TROPHY BASS LURES

It’s a fact that the biggest bass in a lake can be caught on just about everything, and stories of monster bass caught by crappie anglers fishing small jigs pop up all the time. In general though, larger lures produce bigger fish.

For Hall, especially during the winter months, that means an Alabama rig. The reason for using this is partly because of

how well it shows up on his Garmin LiveScope, but also because the bigger profile appeals to larger bass.

Reese prefers swimbaits and has a long history with them – everything from 5- to 14-inch baits (yes, 14).

“I probably have more swimbaits than anyone on tour,” Reese said. “I’m addicted to them and have something for every situation. In my eyes, they’re the best way to imitate the big forage that the big fish eat, and you have to have a swimbait for every situation. No one bait will work every time.”

Reese bases his bait selection for trophy bass on the fishery and what the bass are eating, but water temperature is another component of his decision on which bait to throw.

“The top-hooked, jighead-style baits in the 7- to 9-inch range that imitate trout are going to be the best for slow rolling when the water is still cold in the prespawn,” Reese said. “I like a swimbait with more action and harder tail kick when the bass are closer to spawning, and then after they spawn. The single-jointed glide baits work well



Sight-fishing guru John Cox finds that the biggest bass in the lake usually spawn first, and tucked far away from smaller fish.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



Follow the right recipe and you'll be catching trophy bass in no time.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SHANGLE

in cold water for prespawn bass, but you can catch them with it in warmer months, too. No matter the bait, a larger profile will appeal to the biggest bass in the lake."

#### **INGREDIENT #4 - STEALTHY BOAT POSITIONING**

Big bass get big for a reason: they've likely seen every bait in the catalog. They're especially wary of sound, and Hall, Cox and Reese all strive to minimize noise and work efficiently with each cast. For sight fishing, especially for larger bass, Cox is painfully certain that he stays stealthy and efficient. He's meticulous about boat positioning, which he asserts gives him the best chance of landing the fish he spots.

"The first thing I'll do when I see a big one on a bed is to look around me, all 360 degrees around the boat," Cox said. "I'm looking for a place to position so I have the best view of the fish with the glare from the sun. This is the most critical thing and can make all the difference in catching a fish or not. Big bass on beds don't give you much time before they swim away and are gone for good, so you have to set yourself up to have the best chance to get them to bite, which means seeing them the best."

Hall also carefully positions his boat to decrease noise when using his forward-facing sonar, especially as the water warms.

***"AND, WHILE THE RECIPE TO CATCH A BIG BASS CAN BE MASTERED IN SEVERAL WAYS, THE INGREDIENTS ARE THE SAME NO MATTER WHERE YOU FISH."***

"I think as the water gets warmer, the fish become a little smarter," he said. "You have to be more careful about easing up on them and if you see one, stop your trolling motor immediately because if not, they'll be gone. It's a little easier in the winter when they're more lethargic, but you generally need to stay way off the fish and bomb a cast to avoid being detected."

Reese also tries to stay as stealthy as possible but adjusts his boat positioning when fishing swimbaits. He casts from shallow to deep by positioning himself closer to the bank and casting out to deeper water.

"This is speculation, but I believe the fish are conditioned to seeing lures coming at them a certain way and you can fool more fish by working your bait from deep to shallow water," Reese said. "Besides that, the bait stays in the prime zone longer when you do that.

With the way that the bait pendulums down, you also get a better feel for what your bait is doing because your line is tight. Those reasons make it the better way to catch bigger bass."

#### **INGREDIENT #5 - FISHING THE RIGHT LAKE**

Catching a fish of a lifetime is only possible if they live in the waters you're fishing. That's what makes this trio of anglers fortunate; they live in areas teeming with double-digit fish.

For Reese, Clear Lake, California, is where he'll go if he wants a chance at a monster bass, and Hall will be on O.H. Ivie in Texas. Cox is blessed to have many great fisheries, both large and small, near his home in DeBary, Florida.

Even if you don't live near one of these regions, the tips garnered from fishing them will up your odds of catching your next big bass.

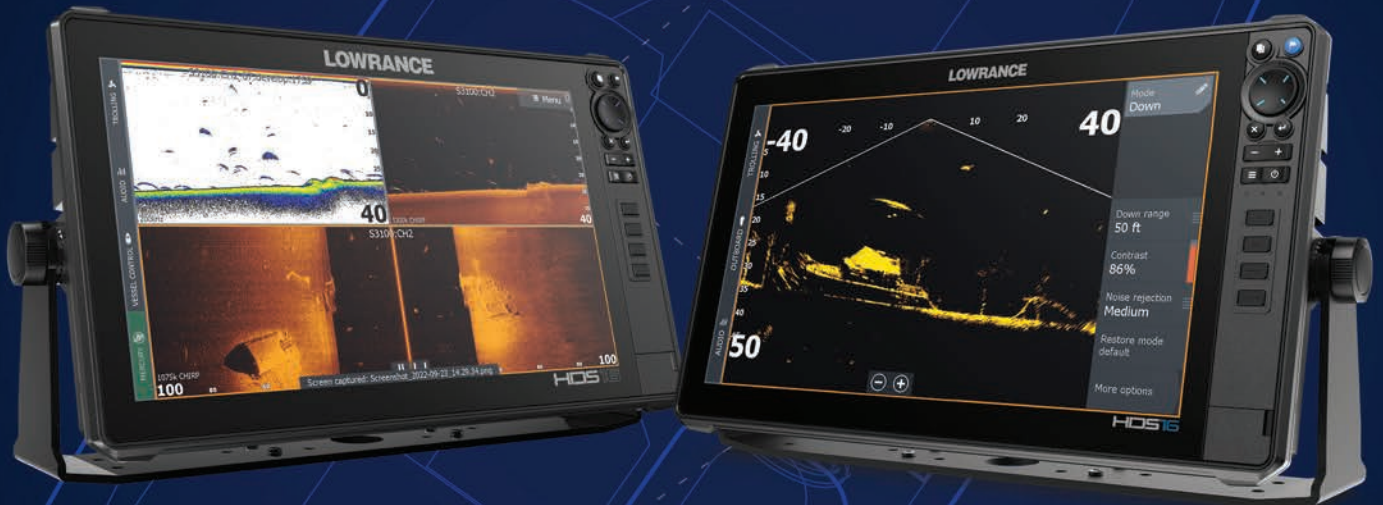
Catching big bass is what we all strive for. We vividly remember critical details about our biggest fish, no matter the species. Everything from the lure used, the exact weight, the time of day, our fishing companions that day, etc. And, while the recipe to catch a big bass can be mastered in several ways, the ingredients are the same no matter where you fish (at least, according to three of the most accomplished big-bass hunters in the world).

Happy cooking ... er, hunting! ■

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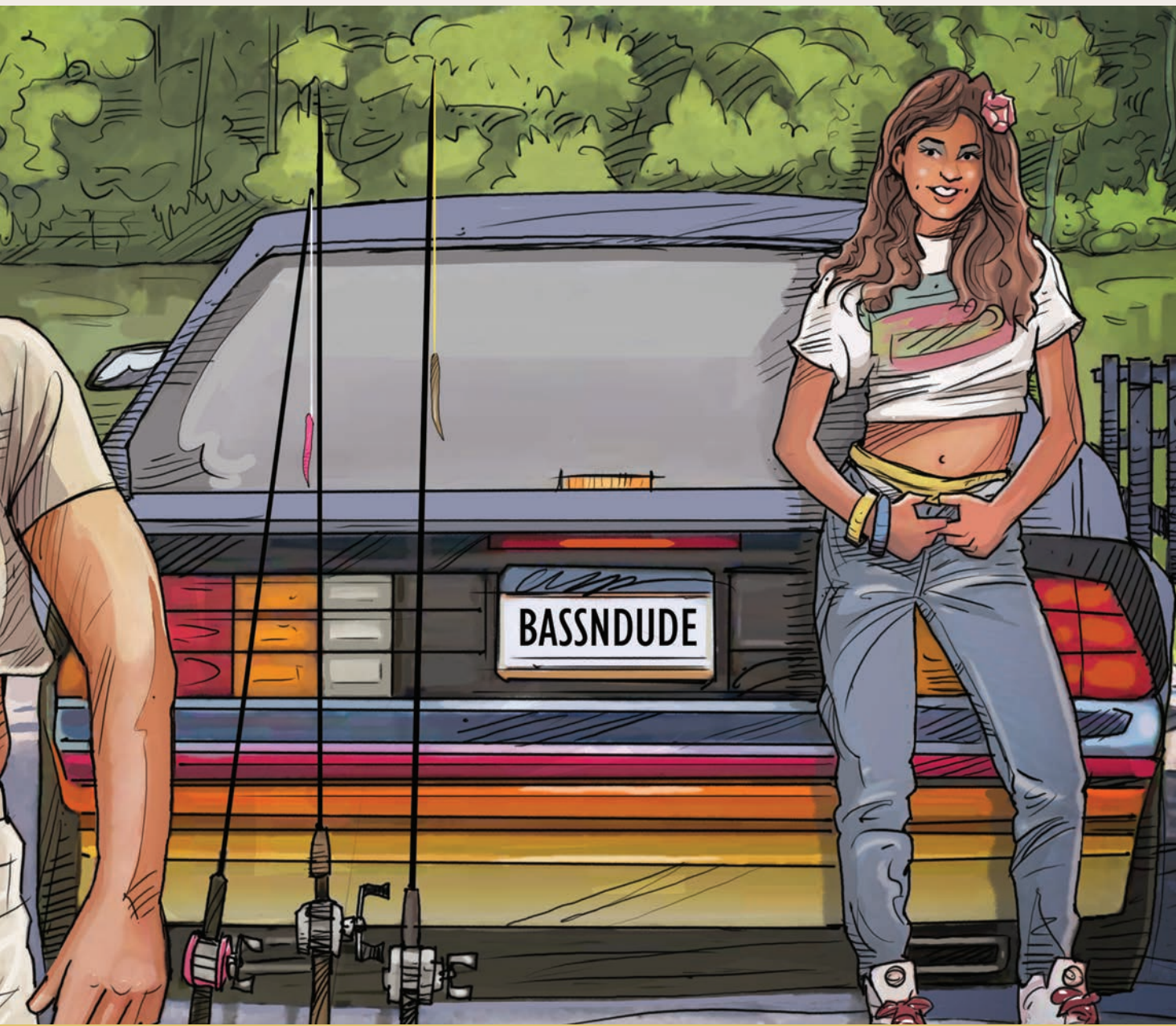
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## AN ALLURING TRIP DOWN MUST-HAVE BASS-BAIT MEMORY LANE (PART 1)

MLF reporter Rob Newell wonders: "What's it going to be this year?"

*By Rob Newell*

**T**his season marks my 25th year covering bass fishing tournaments as a writer, photographer and obsessed investigator of why fish do what they do. Each year as we enter the season, I have the same question on my mind as I did 25 years ago: What's it going to be this year? What's going to be the next red-hot, must-have, purchase-at-any-cost, get-it-in-every-color, catch-every-fish-in-the-lake lure?

If you've fished tournaments for any length of time, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Every few years a lure comes along, and for whatever reason, bass in lakes all over the country attack it like they've never seen a lure before. No matter how awkward, nonreal, unreal or surreal the lure looks, bass will eat them for reasons beyond our comprehension.

Whether it's a new action, vibration, speed, sound, or a new way to present a lure into age-old cover, bass respond so strongly to it that it's truly unexplainable. If you're the first on the bandwagon with the new mousetrap, you can pad your bank account with prize money faster than a Brinks truck could fill it. However, if you're late to the party, you can get left behind even faster.

For some early season fun, I've reached deep into the fog of my memory bank to recount some of these special must-have lures that have come along over the last 30 years. If you were part of any of these lure rages that swept through the competitive fishing world back then, you can certainly relate. This list is in no particular order, other than somewhat chronological.

## I LOVE THE '80S (AND EARLY '90S)

In this first edition I'll start with a few industry shakers from the late 80s into the early 90s.

Before I start this trip down Must-Have Avenue, though, here's an interesting consideration: We likely would have never known these lures existed if it were not for tournament trails, tournament anglers and the intensive sport of competitive angling. Each year, there are hundreds of tournaments fished by thousands of anglers who make millions of casts. Without so many data points creating tournament results, we would never know exactly how potent one lure can be in comparison to the others. And over the last 30 years, I could have never guessed some of these lures would have been top producers.

So let's take a ride...

## LUNKER CITY SLUG-GO

I'll start with the Lunker City Slug-Go because they were the first lures I ever hoarded – as in, lurked in the tackle store, stalked the delivery man and bought almost every bag he had on the truck. If you wonder what drives someone to do such despicable things as to buy up all the lures of a particular brand from a tackle store, this is how it begins.

I'm not sure of the year, but it had to be the late 80s because I was still in high school and couldn't drive yet. I had a friend who loved to fish as much as I did, and he could drive us to nearby lakes and ponds. We would walk pond banks or scull around in our co-owned Tupperware pond-hopper pontoon boat that someone gave us because it leaked so bad. We both had tackleboxes full of standard-issue Florida lures.

And we never caught jack. Nothing to speak of anyway.

We called one of the ponds we frequented "Lake Barren" because we never caught bass there.

One day, a kid at school whose dad was in the local bass club told us we needed to buy some Slug-Gos. We didn't even know what Slug-Gos were, so we went to the local

tackle shop to find out. They were sold out (imagine that) except for two bags in an ugly red shad color. The shop owner also offered us some kind of special "offset" hooks to make them work. To be honest, once I got my first Slug-Go rigged up, it looked terrible: a red plastic stick on a hook – no freaking way this was going to work.

You know how this story ends, so I won't bore you with the fish-by-fish details. But after just one hour, the bottom of the Tupperware boat was littered with 20 broken, shredded, red shad plastic sticks. We had just caught the most bass we had ever caught in our life from Lake Barren. And when all the life was chewed out of the ugly red shad sticks, the pond went dead again. We went back to our standard lures and never got another bite.

---

WE CALLED ONE OF THE PONDS WE  
FREQUENTED "LAKE BARREN" BECAUSE  
WE NEVER CAUGHT BASS THERE.

---

The Slug-Go taught me early on the sobering fact that bass were put on the earth for the sole purpose of monkey-wrenching humans' brains. How could we make three previous trips to a pond full of bass, throw every lure we had in at them, never get a bite, then cast featureless plastic sticks and every bass in the lake would fight over it?

For the next two weeks we stalked the tackle shop every day and finally caught the delivery man in the act restocking Slug-Gos. We bought most of his entire delivery in every color he had. Once the Slug-Gos were hoarded, we skipped a lot of school and caught a lot of bass in places we thought fish never even lived.





## NEON MADNESS

From there, my lizard-dragging dreams came crashing down with the advent of floating worms. These bright, neon-colored worms were yet another stark introduction to a fundamental bass fishing law: Never question how dumb a lure looks. The floating worm was purposely made in the gaudiest of colors: white, bubble gum (pink), school bus (bright yellow), sherbet (pink and yellow swirl) and a real winner, Merthiolate (orange). A package of these things looked like a bag of Skittles.

The first time I fished with a guy who pulled “pink” from the rod locker and began casting it around – during a tournament – it was so surreal I thought it was a joke. When he culled to 17 pounds by 10 a.m. and I had not had a bite dragging my lizard, my head became wobblier than a wheel on a Walmart shopping cart.

That afternoon I would come to find out that, unbeknownst to me, the entire top 10 guys in the club event were all throwing the colors of the rainbow for impressive catches. Floating worms were hot, and I’m not going to lie: that whole freaky color deal kept me awake for hours at night in the following weeks. I should have been studying something important like calculus, but instead I so was obsessed as to why a bass would clobber a worm dressed like a clown with such reckless abandon? There is nothing in their natural environment that even looks like that!

Honestly, it was at this point that I should have quit bass fishing altogether. If a bass eating a Skittle-colored worm with no rational explanation bothered me so much, I should have just stuck with something that made a little more sense – like calculus.

Next time we’ll work into the mid-90s with some more throwbacks that took the fishing lure market by surprise. ■

## LIZZARD DRAGGING

When I finally jumped on the tournament fishing bandwagon in my early 20s, the Carolina-rigged Lizard was the jam. You guys who have been around a while know the one I’m talking about: the Zoom 6-inch pumpkin lizard with a chartreuse tail, trailed behind a 2-foot leader, a swivel, a glass bead and a 1-ounce lead weight – pure bass-catching magic.

By this time, I was in college and fished as a non-boater in the Auburn Bass Club, long before there was College Fishing. No matter what lake we went to, what time of year, what depth we fished or what the weather was, all I had to do was wing that lizard-drowning rig out of the back of the boat, drag it along the bottom and wait for something to peck it. Points, pockets, sand, gravel, mud, vegetation – it didn’t matter; it caught all species of bass in any lake in the Southeast.

I owned two Carolina rig rods, a small box of terminal tackle, a duffel bag full of Zoom bags, and I was on top of the fishing world. And I wasn’t alone. In every lake we fished, every point had a bass boat on it with two guys whipping Carolina lassos far out into the air. They were usually the same guys who hung around the weigh-ins the longest waiting for their checks to get printed.

To this day, when I open a package of Zoom baits, I stick my snout in the bag, take a whiff of that salty goodness and it floods my brain with great memories of dragging lizards.



# 2023 MLF SPONSORS



# THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE



# BERKLEY POWERBAIT JIGS

By Matt Williams  
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON ROWAN

The folks at Berkley have been blending their exclusive PowerBait scent/taste formula into soft plastics and manufactured panfish baits for years. In 2021, they took the old trick and gave it another new twist with the introduction of a jig lineup designed for seven technique-specific applications: flipping, skipping, heavy cover, swim, finesse swim, football and finesse. The jigs are fitted with high-quality silicone skirts juiced up with the company's signature PowerBait brew, which is intended to entice more strikes and make fish hold on longer.

## First Impression

It's obvious plenty of forethought went into designing the lineup, as each of the jig styles features a unique head

shape, line tie, weed guard and a high-quality, sticky sharp, Fusion19 hook chosen for specific applications. But what truly sets the jigs apart from others are the PowerBait-infused skirts. Made from silicone, the banded skirts maintain an attractive flare and displace Berkley's trademarked aroma right out of the package. Though not as overpowering as cracking open a pack of Power Worms for the first time, the scent is still unmistakable.

## In Action

There's a jig for every occasion in the PowerBait line, and we chose to put the football model to the test during the dead of a Texas winter. One thing I noticed right away is that the head

doesn't look like a football at all. Designed by MLF pro Gary Klein, the lead head is thinner in profile and has broad, rounded shoulders that curve backwards. Also unique to the head is a 40-degree recessed line tie, medium weed guard and a concave bottom side.

The head's peculiar shape makes it a Berkley original while evening out the weight distribution and creating a wide contact area that helps the bait sit upright and cause plenty of commotion as it scoots across the bottom like the prey it's intended to mimic – crawfish. As performance goes, the bait isn't snag-proof by any means, but it does navigate rock, gravel and other hard bottom structure really well when slow-reeled, hopped or stroked.

The football jig is designed to be paired with a PowerBait Crash Craw or PowerBait MaxScent Chigger Craw, but you can certainly get by with other styles and brands of compact trailers sized in the 3- to 4-inch range. It comes in five sizes ranging 1/4 to 1 ounce to cover all the bases from shallow to deep.

## Final Thoughts

Berkley has a rich history of mass-producing a wide range of innovative fishing goodies that are affordably priced, and the company's PowerBait jig lineup follows the blueprint to a T. Available in multiple colors, sizes and more than half a dozen technique-specific styles, there's a solid jig for every occasion and water depth at a very competitive price.

## SILICONE SKIRTS:

The jigs come with silicone skirts infused with PowerBait formula to appeal to a bass' senses of taste and smell. The company claims bass are prone to hold on to the bait 18 times longer than other jigs, providing more time to set the hook.



## NEEDLE POINT HOOKS:

The jigs are equipped with Berkley's proprietary Fusion19 needle point hooks.



## TECHNIQUE-SPECIFIC APPLICATIONS:

Designed with heavy input from pro staffers Gary Klein and Bobby Lane, each style of jig features head shapes, line tie angles, weed guards and hook sizes that are best suited for the technique-specific applications.



## Descriptions & Applications

### Football Jig:

Designed with a 40-degree recessed/horizontal line tie, a heavy wire hook and a wide, flattened head to create a stand-up posture. Ideal for bumping around rock and hard bottom structure. Available in 10 colors and five sizes.

**Swim Jig:** Built with a tapered head, 0-degree vertical line tie and heavy wire hook. Good choice for fishing around heavy or sparse cover with braided line when the fish want something moving. Available in 10 colors and five sizes.

**Finesse Swim Jig:** Designed with a smaller, lighter hook than the swim jig. Klein recommends using it in clear

water or in heavy pressure conditions when making long casts with lighter fluorocarbon lines around deeper grass beds, rock, scattered stumps or open, clear water. Available in 10 different colors and two sizes.

### Skipping Jig:

Features a wide, flat head, bulky skirt, 40-degree recessed horizontal line tie and stout hook. For penetrating hard-to-reach places beneath overhanging limbs or under docks. Available in 10 colors and two sizes.

### Heavy Cover Jig:

Designed with a heavy, pointed head, horizontal 0-degree line tie and stout hook to hold up to violent hooksets with braided lines. Ideal for short-range flipping and punching in dense grass

mat. Available in eight colors and three sizes.

**Flipping Jig:** Features a wide, Arkie-style head, 40-degree horizontal line tie and a heavy wire hook. Ideal for probing around flooded willows, buck brush and other wood cover. Available in 10 colors and four sizes.

### Finesse Jig:

Designed with a downsized head, skirt and a light wire hook for clear water and other situations calling for a subtle approach. Available in 10 colors and three sizes.

## Performance Tip

Adding a trailer to a jig is a good way to enhance the action, create a larger profile and add a little bulk that can slow the bait's fall rate. There's a wealth of great trailers out there.

## ADVANTAGES

- + Silicone skirts infused with PowerBait scent/taste formula
- + 7 technique-specific choices
- + Competitively priced
- + Wide range of fish-catching colors
- + Good size selection
- + Quality hooks and finishes

## DETAILS

**Jig Styles:** 7 (Football, Finesse Swim, Swim, Flipping, Finesse, Skipping and Heavy Cover)

**Sizes:** 2-5, depending on style

**Colors:** 8-10, depending on style

**Hook:** Fusion19 Needle Point

**MSRP:** \$4.99

**Contact:** [berkley-fishing.com](http://berkley-fishing.com)



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# RE-IMAGINING YOUR ROD AND REEL ARSENAL

Trends in tackle, technology and technique are compelling anglers to rethink their rod and reel arsenals. Here's what you need to know before you refurbish your rod locker.

By Mike Pehanich

MLF pro Casey Ashley shows that there's a new rod and reel for every condition.

PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

## WHO NEEDS ANOTHER ROD AND REEL? YOU DO!

**GEARING UP FOR A NEW FISHING SEASON** is more than a matter of maintenance and inventory. Broken rods and worn-out reels call for replacement, to be sure, but there's a whole lot more to address. That new technique you dabbled in last season showed promise, but you won't master it until you assemble the right tools.

You need faster reels, to be sure, because, well, let's

count the reasons. And who doesn't need a worm or jig rod that's even *more* sensitive than the last?

Behind every tackle musing is the knowledge that a new rod and reel makes any day feel like Christmas. But this season, you're going to do something different. This time, you'll rethink your tackle, top to bottom, and add a few game-changers to your deck.



PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

**“A HAPPY MEDIUM BETWEEN TOO FAST AND TOO SLOW IS ESSENTIAL.”**

## THE DRIVERS

What trends and developments are driving tackle developments? Well, there are many, and they're always changing:

- **“Technique-specific” tools:** Every major rod maker today offers one or more technique-specific rod lines to match tackle to purpose.
- **FFS:** A powerful influence on current tackle trends is forward-facing sonar (FFS), which places an even greater premium on long casts, particularly with light lures – and very often over open water.
- **Longer casts:** Always a trademark of accomplishment, long casts are functional necessities now, too – to get deep-diving crankbaits to desired depth and keeping them there; to cover deep structure with jigs, rigs and worms; to reach distant fish with lighter lures and more. Hence the clamor for longer rods.
 

“Seven-three is the new 7-0,” says Bob Brown, head of product development for Lew’s. Reels make a difference, too.
- **Sensitivity with strength:** You’ve bought rods for sensitivity, but you still want backbone and durability. No worries! New materials, resins and design technologies have made rods designed for sensitivity stronger, and rods built for power fishing increasingly more sensitive.
- **Need for speed:** Reel makers continue to raise the ceiling on “fast.”
 

“Speed in a reel is a game-changer,” says Justin Poe, who heads rod development at Pure



PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

Brent Chapman prefers a 7'6" Swimbait rod when fishing with bladed jigs.

Fishing. “Whether you’re reacting to a ‘tick’ on slack line or covering water with your trolling motor on high, you need a fast reel.”

The new benchmark for “high speed” is 10:1. The Daiwa Zillion 10.0 TW (T-wing) boasts a 10:1 gear ratio (42 inches per turn). Abu Garcia has the Revo Rocket 10.1:1 (41 inches per turn). KastKing markets its 10.5:1 Speed Demon Elite as the “world’s fastest.” Spinning reels, too, are trending toward higher gear ratios and greater inch-per-turn line retrieves.

- **The new “light”:** Long days and countless casts take a toll on wrists, arms, shoulders, backs and more. But today, “light” makes tactical sense as well.

“You’re seeing more lighter-action rods on boat decks than you did in the past,” Brown says. “Guys are fishing open water, using lighter-action rods to work

light lures, and fighting fish differently. You can’t put too much pressure on fish with light line.”

- **A new “spin”:** You can fish spinning rods without embarrassment or apology. Drop-shots alone call for more rods at the ready – same for rods rigged for Ned and Neko rigs, spybaits, shaky heads and more. Tackle makers are providing more options.

“It used to be that we rolled out a new rod line with 15 to 20 baitcast actions and four spinning rods,” Brown explains. “The latest rod line from Lew’s has nine new spinning actions due to the techniques guys are fishing.”

## TAILORED TO TECHNIQUE

Replacements and upgrades are only part of rethinking your arsenal. The main thrust is matching tools to the task. Rarely in today’s game do you find pros using the same rod for more than a few different techniques.



Daiwa Tatula Bladed Jig & Spinnerbait rod

## BLADED JIGS

Everyone is throwing bladed jigs, and everyone seems to be making them now, too.

"A bladed jig rod is an important one – probably the No. 2 or 3 most inquired-about rod at fishing shows and public events," Poe says.

His favorite combination is a 7-foot, 3-inch medium-heavy, moderate-fast-action rod that's now available in every Abu Garcia series from Vendetta to Fantasista and in the Fenwick Elite series.

"It's an interesting and challenging action because it's a blend of two worlds – something between a jig/worm and a crankbait rod," Poe says.

St. Croix's Dan Johnston acknowledges the same challenge.

"You want to feel the bait, but if you feel it too much, you can pull it away before the fish has it, which can happen with a carbon rod," he says. "The blank should allow the lure to hunt, but you need deflection once the fish takes it."

Bass Pro Tour pro Jesse Wiggins wields his bladed jig with a St. Croix Legend Glass Rip-N-Chatter, a 7-foot, 2-inch heavy-power rod with moderate action (a moderately priced version is available in the Mojo Bass Glass series.)

"It's a glass rod with a parabolic bend that allows the fish to eat the bait entirely," Wiggins says. "But it has the backbone to drive a hook home."

Jared Lintner, the California transplant now living in Georgia, alternates between the 7-foot, 4-inch Daiwa Tatula Bladed Jig & Spinnerbait rod and the 7-foot, 4-inch Daiwa DV Vibrating Jig Rod (Brent Ehrler Signature, Tackle Warehouse exclusive).

"A happy medium between too fast and too slow is essential," Lintner says. "Too little backbone and you don't get a good hookset; too stiff a rod and too many fish get off. I lose a lot fewer fish throwing (bladed jigs) with a compos-

ite rod. Also, its softer tip enables the bait to hunt more. With a graphite rod, the rod tip is more rigid. The same bait on a composite rod has a totally different feel."

**But consider ...** Find a rod that works for you.

"Rods are like golf clubs," says Brent Chapman, who switched from the 7-foot, 3-inch KastKing Speed Demon Bladed Jig to the 7-foot, 6-inch Swimbait rod in the same series for bladed jig duty. "Just because Tiger Woods hits a 5 iron at a given distance doesn't mean that same club is going to work for you. That KastKing 7-foot-6 rod has proven phenomenal for bladed jig fishing for me."

His namesake Josh Bertrand Drop Shot Rod is a 6-foot, 10-inch medium-light spinning rod in the Abu Garcia Pro Series.

"I've gone to medium-light over medium," Bertrand says. "Why? First, because it weighs less, and the lighter weight allows the transfer of energy with less interference, so it's more sensitive. Secondly, you can see the bite in the tip easier with medium light."

Manufacturers are always employing lighter materials. Bertrand's drop-shot rod, for instance, has a 36-ton graphite blank, a lightweight carbon reinforced with Powerlux resin.

"Powerlux is like putting rebar in concrete," Poe says. "It makes brittle

Josh Bertrand teamed up with Abu Garcia to create his ideal drop-shot rod, a 6'10" medium-light finesse machine.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

## DROP-SHOTS

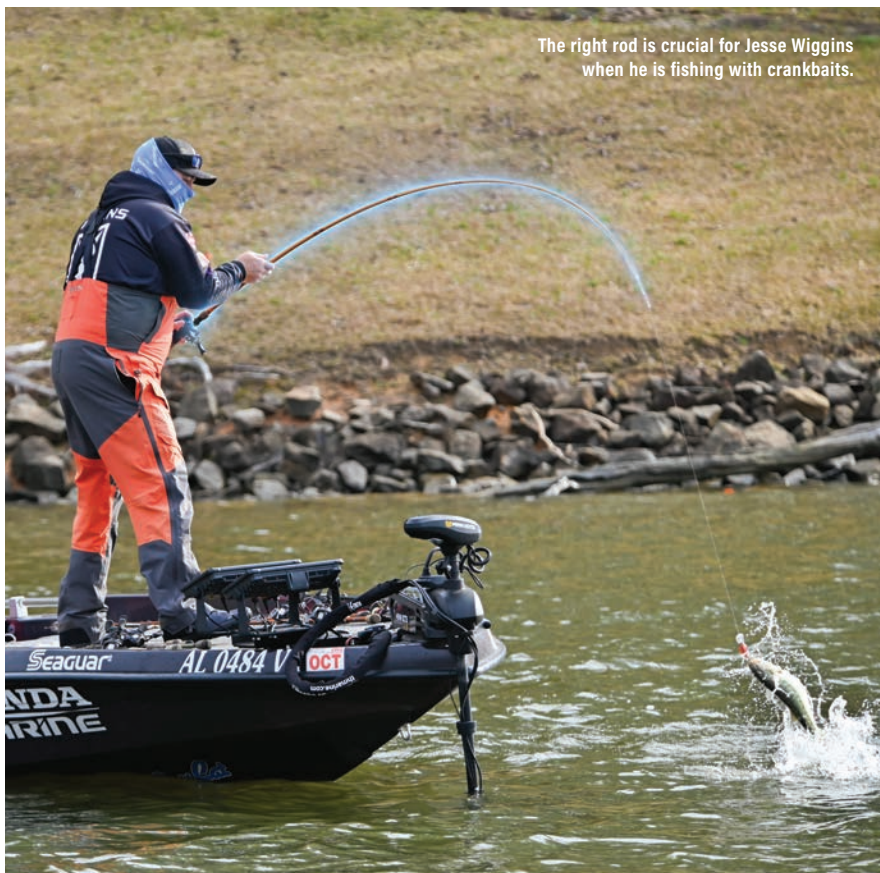
Drop-shotting heads the list of fashionable (and deadly) finesse techniques.

"The biggest fish bite softest," Josh Bertrand says. "With a drop-shot, sensitivity is most important. You're not fishing for aggressive fish but the ones that are toughest to catch."

materials stronger. We found the magic, and it's constantly getting better."

"Extra fast (XF) is the next key word in spinning rods," says Brown, pointing to models in the Lew's Elite series. "Guys like Kevin VanDam want that light tip, but they also want a quick reaction."

XF is indeed a familiar theme.



The right rod is crucial for Jesse Wiggins when he is fishing with crankbaits.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

"The drop-shot rods our guys are using are 7-foot, 1-inch to 7-foot, 3-inch medium-light (ML) to medium (M) spinning rods, extra-fast (XF) action," says Marc Mills, senior marketing manager for Daiwa.

Choices in spinning reels differ. Do you go light with the 2000 and 2500 sizes for sensitivity or opt for a larger spool for control?

Poe still sees pros preferring 2500 and 3000 reels.

"A lot of that choice has to do with the rod," he says. "Most finesse with a spinning rod involves 'tip up' techniques with the rod at the 10 or 11 o'clock position. With a shaky head or drop-shot, the tip is up during the presentation. If you're fishing a 7-foot rod, you may want a bigger reel for 'fishing balance.'"

A 3000-size reel gets the most nods. The larger diameter spool enables longer casts with fewer bird nests.

**But consider ...** Lightweight construction allows even larger spinning reels into the game.

"I've used a [4000-size] spinning reel since 2005," says California ace

Brent Ehrler, whose current choice is the Daiwa Tatula LT 4000, a fast 6.2:1 gear ratio reel that ranks among the lightest reels on the market. "Guys are slowly catching on. It's more efficient, and it gives you lot more control over the fish."



Berkley Stunna Jerkbait 112+1

## JERKBAITS

Forward-facing sonar has sparked a jerkbait revival. No longer reserved for cold-water fishing, the jerkbait today is a four-season workhorse.

"The jerkbait is the No. 1 bait guys are using with FFS," says Poe, noting that all Pure Fishing's major rod families offer jerkbait rods. "Jerkbait rods are just getting finer – so light, so crisp, so nice. You want a rod that can punch a light bait into the wind and gives life to the bait down when you jerk it. But when you throw slack back at it, it dies. The rod has to be sensitive enough to feel that 'tick' on a slack line."

While some prefer the added casting distance of a rod around 7-foot, shorter rods have broader appeal.

"Generally, 6-8 is the longest that most on the Lew's pro staff are using," Brown says. "Most guys are jerking down with the rod tip. With all the electronics most of them have at their feet in the front of the boat, they don't want a longer rod."

Faster reels come into play, too.

"You need a really fast reel to pick up slack line," adds Poe, noting the popularity of the Abu Garcia Revo Rocket and other fast reels of its ilk. "That's another thing that has changed with FFS. Guys have less patience fishing dead water."

**But consider ...** Sometimes, working jerkbaits (particularly light ones) with spinning tackle is a good option, too.

"A lot of guys up north throw a jerkbait on a spinning rod – Kevin VanDam included," Brown says.

## CRANKBAITS

Glass or carbon? Bass anglers have had that choice in crankbait rod selection in recent years, and they've taken sides.

But rod makers have become better at bridging both worlds – enhancing certain key properties while minimizing the loss of others. A new generation of composite and multi-layered crankbait rods, strengthened with advanced resins deliver more of the feel of graphite without yielding the slow responsiveness, load capability and "forgiveness" of glass.

Crankbait fishermen have become more discriminating, too. One rod for squarebills, lipless crankbaits, deep-divers, mid-depth-runners, flat-sides and lightweight balsa baits won't do the job.

"We've come a long way toward giving anglers the tools to fish baits the way they want to fish them," Johnston says. "St. Croix offers linear S-Glass in



Abu Garcia Winch Casting Rod



Jared Lintner favors Daiwa rods for his moving-bait needs.

two rod series, but we also have a slowed down carbon fiber hybrid with linear S-Glass (iACT glass) with incredible sensitivity."

The biggest "difference-maker" for Wiggins over the past season has been the 7-foot, 2-inch Carbon Cranker rod in the St. Croix Tournament Bass Casting series. It's a medium-heavy, moderate-action rod.

"(iACT glass) consists of a layer of fiberglass and a layer of carbon, but it's not a composite," says Wiggins. "It's more sensitive than straight glass."

Johnston singles out a sister rod for deep cranking.

"The rock star of our rods for deep cranking is the 7-foot, 4-inch St. Croix Legend Tournament Bass Power Glass Cranker," Johnston says. "It's a medium-heavy, moderate-action rod that you can throw all day. What's unique is how the (iACT) glass pins them."

Lipless crankbaits make their own demands.

"I want glass (performance), but I want it light - I don't want a heavy rod," says Lintner, who favors the 7-foot, 4-inch medium-heavy, moderate-action Daiwa BLX JDM Limber Casting Rod, which employs X45 Bias Carbon

technology for a limber glass feel in a graphite blank. "It's tremendous, whether I'm fishing a lift-and-drop presentation or chunking and winding."

For squarebill fishing, Poe suggests a rod with a "softer, slower action - slower than moderate" to avoid burying hooks into hard cover such as logs and stumps.

"You want a faster-action rod for soft cover," says Poe, singling out the Abu Garcia Jordan Lee Winch. "A rod that will rip your bait free from grass."



River2Sea S-Waver 168s

## SWIMBAITS

Like crankbaits, swimbaits cover a wide set of sizes and styles from monster glide baits to 3-inch soft plastics on 3/16-ounce jig heads. No one rod handles them all.

"Big swimbait rods haven't changed a lot," Bertrand says. "More common today is using smaller jigs and swimbaits on spinning tackle."

Bertrand uses the Adrian Avena Swimbait rod, a long-handled 7-foot, 4-inch medium-power spinning rod in the Abu Garcia Pro Series. "It's a perfect setup for long casts with LiveScope (FFS)."

**But consider ...** For heavy glide baits (umbrella rigs, too), St. Croix has added to its Legend Tournament series rods with an underside "Grasp" handle for leverage and comfort. It's totally unique, and totally worth checking out as an ICAST best-of-category winner.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

## SPYBAITS

Medium and medium-light baitcasting rods may be viable tools, but spybaiting provides a good excuse to add to your spinning rod and reel arsenal.

"Casting distance is most important in spybaiting - you're not imparting action to the lure at all," says Johnston, referencing the 7-foot, 10-inch medium-power, moderate-fast-action spybait rods in St. Croix's Victory line and the Legend Tournament series.

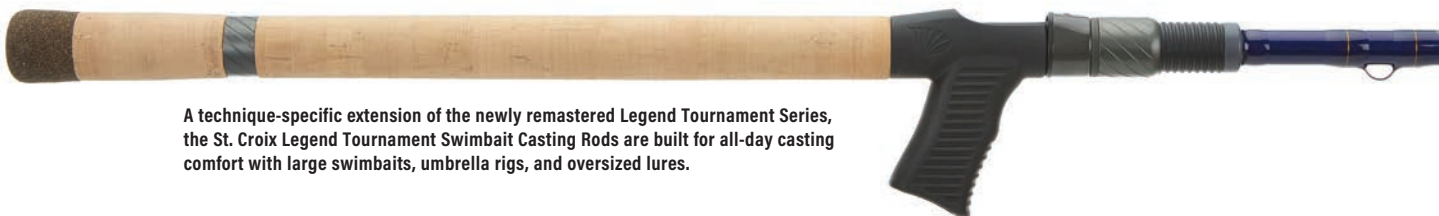
A 3000- or 4000-size spinning reel coupled with a long rod will pick up a lot of line quickly. Keep in mind, however, the need for a slow retrieve.

## FLIPPING AND PITCHING

Flippin' and pitchin' is to bass fishing what huggin' and kissin' is to, well, you know.

Gathering new gear for these sister techniques may not be high on your list, but there's a good chance you're ready to make adjustments.

Time to retire that telescoping pool cue you call your "flipping stick." You can get backbone and strength in lighter rods today.



A technique-specific extension of the newly remastered Legend Tournament Series, the St. Croix Legend Tournament Swimbait Casting Rods are built for all-day casting comfort with large swimbaits, umbrella rigs, and oversized lures.

## “LIGHTER MAKES A DIFFERENCE DURING A LONG DAY OF FLIPPING AND PITCHING.”

“Lighter makes a difference during a long day of flipping and pitching,” notes Chapman, mentioning the 7-foot, 5-inch Flippin’ rod in the KastKing Speed Demon Pro Tournament series. “When you’re making a thousand flips in a tournament, that weight in your hand is a huge deal.”

“I flip and pitch with a 7-3 medium-heavy,” says Ehrler. “I’m more accurate with that 7-3, and it’s lighter in the hand. I can use it to finesse flip with lighter jigs and heavy line. It’s a multi-purpose rod that I can fish spinner-baits and buzzbaits with, too. It’s very versatile.”



Team Lew's Pro SP Casting Reel

## SKIPPING JIGS

MLF’s Andy Montgomery is an acknowledged master of skipping jigs into dock stalls and under tight cover. He designed two rods in the Lew’s Signature Series rods for skipping – a 6-foot, 9-inch and a 7-foot, 1-inch model – acknowledging the importance of selecting a rod suitable to the angler’s stature for best accuracy.

Montgomery’s Lew’s Pro SP Skipping and Pitching baitcasting reel features an extremely shallow spool to minimize backlash trauma. (Capacity is a mere 40 yards of 20-pound-test fluo-



California pro Brent Ehrler flips and pitches with a multi-purpose 7’3” medium-heavy rod.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



Jig-skipping guru Andy Montgomery looks to Lew’s rods and reels when he’s prowling around docks.

PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

rocarbon; a grooved spool prevents knot interference.) Its 8.3:1 gear ratio helps catch up to a charging fish fast. Lew’s will introduce a comparable shallow spool baitcasting reel in its Custom Lite series this season.

## RE-THINKING “SMALL”

For every trend, there’s a counter-trend. While FFS is forcing angler attention further from the boat, Wiggins is thinking small, or “short,” at least.

“I’m going to try one of the St. Croix ice rods this season – one of the heav-

ier ice rods that can handle bigger fish,” he says.

Wiggins got the idea while using a bathyscope, the Flogger (a plastic cone with a viewing device on the narrow end), to view spawning smallmouth.

“We were trying to drop our baits straight down, but our rods were too long,” he says.

Unconventional? Sure. But necessity is the mother of invention, and sometimes you have to re-think things. After all, that’s what keeps the rod and reel manufacturers in business and you on the water. ■

**SKEET REESE  
PRO ANGLER**

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"I find that the copper-brown lens actually allows me to see stumps better in dirtier water." - Skeet Reese

# WHY LENS COLOR MATTERS



## WX PEAK

Selecting the correct lens color based on weather and lighting conditions can be beneficial when identifying important details like stumps, textures and vegetation in the water. Pro angler, Skeet Reese, relies on his Wiley X sunglasses with copper lenses on overcast days, and his grey lenses on sunny days.

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Photo: MLF

# MDJ's LOVING SISTER HELPED PUT HIM ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

**T**eam Toyota's newest member, Mark Daniels Jr., seemed destined to succeed as a pro angler from a young age, but his older sister Layana wasn't about to let him flounder around their native California without a college education – in case his dreams of fishing professionally didn't work out.

So she played a loving “trick” on him, and told him to apply to Tuskegee University in Alabama – where she earned her degree in occupational therapy – but downplayed it to make him think he may not get accepted.


Not only did he get accepted (just as she secretly knew he would), he quit a warehouse job in California, moved to Tuskegee, Alabama, and flourished as an environmental science major.

“My big sister definitely knew what was best for me, and I'll forever be grateful that she kind of tricked me into applying to Tuskegee,” says an appreciative Daniels. “It put me on the path to a great life, and that certainly includes being the newest member of Team Toyota.”

Two kids and three national tournament wins later, Daniels clearly knows how to steer his Tundra toward meeting goals and cashing tournament checks. Beyond his tournament wins and achievements so far as an MLF Bass Pro Tour pro, he's also had great success as a Toyota truck owner with the Toyota Bonus Bucks Contingency Program for tournament anglers. In fact, he's been cashing Bonus Bucks checks since 2017.

Success in the Toyota Bonus Bucks program isn't just for pro anglers like MDJ. A multitude of amateur tournament trails, such as the MLF Phoenix Bass Fishing League and The Bass Federation, are also eligible for anglers who currently own/tow with a 2019 or newer Toyota Tundra, Tacoma, 4Runner or the all-new redesigned Sequoia.

But you can't cash in if you don't sign up, so please visit our website at [toyotafishing.com](http://toyotafishing.com) to make sure you're eligible and registered for the 2023 tournament season.

Even MDJ's sister would tell you it's the wise thing to do. 



Mark Daniels Jr.  
Newest Member of Team Toyota/  
Long-time Bonus Bucks Participant



The All-New 2023 Toyota Sequoia – Bonus Bucks eligible and ready for any fishing trip or outdoor adventure. Never tow beyond a vehicle's published towing capacities.



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**NEW POWERBAIT® AGENT E**  
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**POWERBAIT® POWER SWIMMER**  
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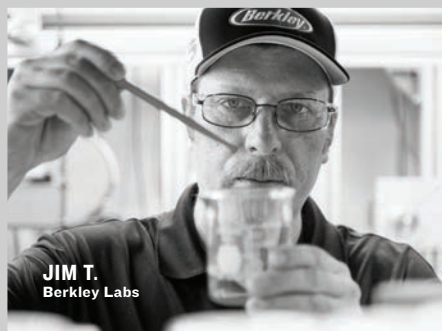


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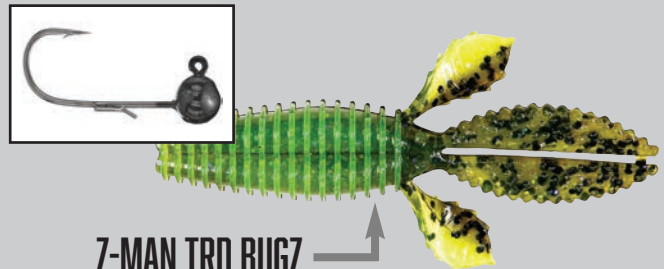
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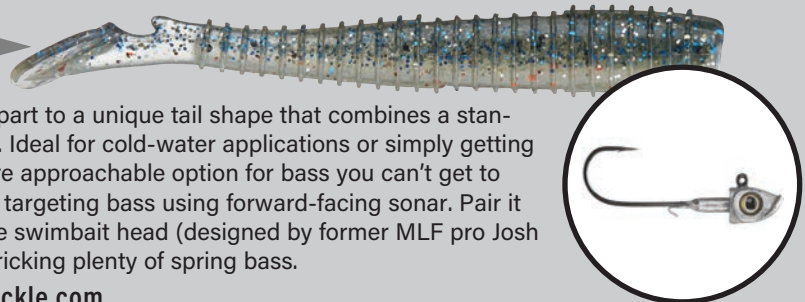
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\$7.69 | [bigbitebaits.com](http://bigbitebaits.com) — \$5.99 | [outkasttackle.com](http://outkasttackle.com)

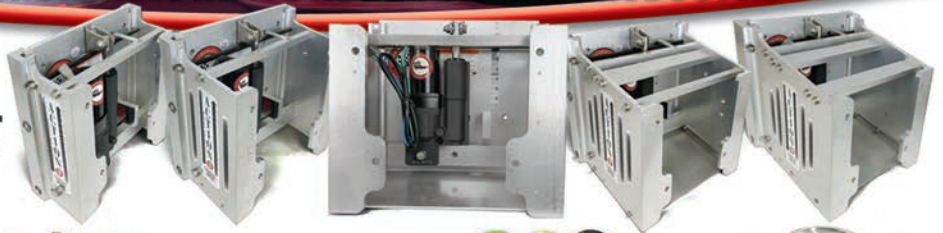


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# TOURNAMENTS







## THAT BIG FISH FEELING

**I**f you followed the coverage of the first stop of the 2023 Tackle Warehouse Invationals season on Lake Okeechobee in early February, you may have seen Brian Latimer's epic Day 1 battle with a Florida giant - on a spinning rod, no less. The skirmish lasted minutes as B. Lat worked the brute around his boat, at first believing it to be a catfish, then realizing after it went airborne - and repeating over and over again - "it's a giant."

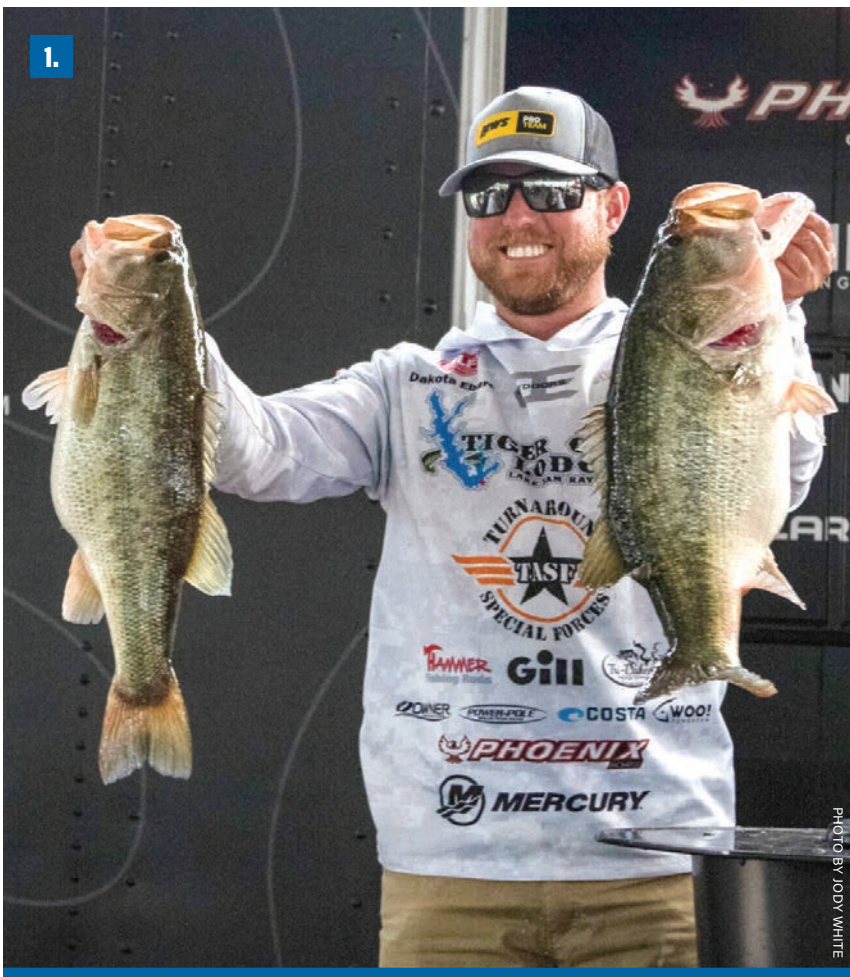
After nearly losing the fish when his line got hung in his Mercury outboard, Latimer managed to get it free, work the beast back around the boat and into his landing net for a feeling you can only get from boating a behemoth bass that did everything in its power to remind you how fleeting and fragile moments like that can be. If you want to feel every emotion known to man in two minutes or less, just hook a Florida giant on light line in a tournament with thousands of dollars at stake.

Apparently, Latimer hadn't gotten quite enough of the spinning rod-fueled adrenaline rush on Day 2, either, starting his morning with another massive bass (7-13) that gave him fits. "One for the studio, one for the show," he quipped to the camera operator as he breathed his second enormous sigh of relief in as many days.

Tipping the scales at 7-11, Latimer's Day 1 tank anchored a bag of 23-14 that ultimately paved the way for a 17th-place finish, an \$11,000 check and a strong start to the season. More than that, it jumpstarted B. Lat's season with enough voltage to power an electric vehicle for a couple hundred miles.

There's just nothing quite like that big fish feeling.

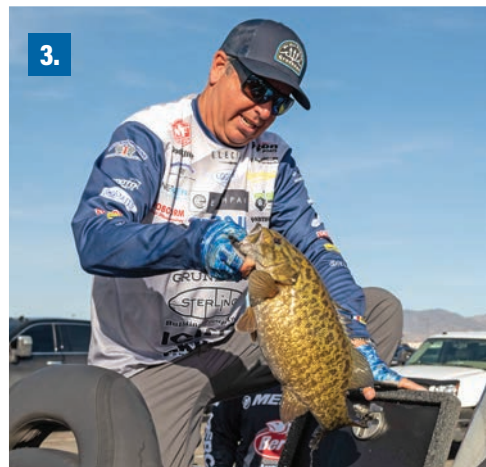
PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



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**1. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION Sam Rayburn Reservoir**

Jan. 25-27

Finally notching his first major win in MLF competition, Bass Pro Tour pro Dakota Ebare – who fishes just about everything, everywhere, and has 22 Top 10s on his long (but young) résumé – busted through the first barrier of becoming one of the top names in the sport. At Sam Rayburn to open the 2023 Toyota Series season, the Brookeland, Texas, pro weighed in a massive 32-pound, 4-ounce bag on the final day of competition to edge out Wyatt Frankens by 1 pound, 5 ounces.

A Rayburn local since 2017, Ebare didn't deviate much from the Big Sam staples to earn his first win: a Strike King 6XD, an Alabama rig, a Strike King Elite 300 jerkbait and a football jig. He primarily targeted fish in about 15 feet of water.

**2. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHERN DIVISION Harris Chain of Lakes**

Feb. 1-3

With 71-13 over three days, Umatilla, Florida's Kenny Steverson put on a clinic in fishing slowly and methodically, spending only about nine of the possible 24 hours of fishing time for the week actually fishing. He locked through to Lake Apopka all three days – which took hours between the run and time in the lock – and, when there, Power-Poled down and fished a 100-yard stretch 30 or 40 yards per day as slowly as possible – with a 6-inch Yamamoto Senko on a 1/2-ounce weight.

It was clearly the right program in the right area, as Steverson ended up winning the event by 7 pounds, 6 ounces, earning a \$102,000 check (including a \$35,000 Phoenix bonus) in the process.

**3. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS WESTERN DIVISION Lake Havasu Presented by Psycho Tuna**

Feb. 2-4

San Clemente, California, pro Todd Kline went wire-to-wire at Lake Havasu in early February by virtue of a change of pace for the seasoned West Coast veteran. Instead of targeting smallmouth (as he is often wanting to do in February), Kline got on a good largemouth bite in practice and leaned into it over three days in the desert to tally 60-14 for the tournament – though smallmouth did end up playing a big part in his win.

On Day 3, Kline found himself with an empty livewell midmorning, knowing a big adjustment was going to be necessary to hold on to the lead he'd built the previous two days. New rod in hand, Kline put a 1/4-ounce underspin to work and the

smallmouth obliged. He tallied 15-13 on Day 3 – 3 pounds, 7 ounces more than he needed to edge out Mike Williams for the \$28,892 payday.

**4. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS POWER-POLE STOP 1 PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS Lake Okeechobee**

Feb. 8-10

Joshua Weaver turned on the jets on Days 2 and 3 of the inaugural Tackle Warehouse Invitationals season at Okeechobee, easing the sting of a 14-12 Day 1 with limits of 31-9 and 26-4, respectively, to close out the event for a \$117,500 payday (which included a \$35,000 Phoenix bonus).

To get the job done, Weaver spent his time at the north end of the lake targeting fresh waves of big Florida bass moving up to spawn following the recent cold snap. Instead of soaking a Senko, Weaver opted for the fast approach and

PHOTO BY COBI PELLEGRINO

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDOFF

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

4.



PHOTO BY ERIK GAFFRON

5.



PHOTO BY GAFFRON DIXON

6.



PHOTO BY COBI PELLERITO

winded vibrating jigs and swim jigs near Tin House and Horse Island, bagging enough to blow out the rest of the field and finish ahead of second-place finisher Colby Schrumpp by nearly 9 pounds.

### 5. BASS PRO TOUR B & W TRAILER HITCHES STAGE ONE PRESENTED BY GRUNDÉNS Kissimmee Chain of Lakes

Feb. 13-18

If there's ever been a more dramatic end to a tour-level professional bass tournament than the "Powwww!" moment of Alabama pro Chris Lane landing a 5-pound, 5-ounce largemouth in the final minute of the 2023 Bass Pro Tour season opener, we have yet to see it. That fish, caught on a black/blue Bass Pro Shops Stik-0 Worm Lane was pitching in a wind-blown stretch of reeds on the south end of Lake Kissimmee, nudged the long-time former Florida resident past

Bass Fishing Hall of Famer Mark Davis by 9 ounces (49-3 to Davis' 48-10).

Lane's opportunity for a buzzer beat was a longshot in itself. Davis had put on a master class on catching big Florida prespawners in the previous day's Knockout Round, piling up 34-10 on his best five fish to build a 10-pound lead over Ott DeFoe in second place and 11-8 over Lane heading into the Championship Round. But the final day brought with it a typical mid-February Florida cold snap, which dropped the daytime temperatures by 20 degrees and kicked up a 15mph wind out of the north, muddying up Davis' isolated buggy whips and temporarily halting the wave of egg-laden females that he had connected with just 18 hours earlier.

Lane, meanwhile, chipped away at the lead with a 6-15, 5-5, 5-4, 4-5 and the final 5-5 to claim his first tour-level win since a 2015 Elite Series event on the Sabine River.

### 6. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS CENTRAL DIVISION Lake Guntersville

Feb. 16-18

Storms packing high winds rolled through Scottsboro, Alabama, on what was supposed to be Day 1 of the Toyota Series Central Division opener, cancelling the first session and shortening the event to just two days. Two days is all Griffin Heffington needed to drop 52 pounds, 5 ounces on the scales for a blowout victory of almost 10 pounds for a \$66,500 payday.

Heffington, who lives a few hours away in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, couldn't buy a bite in practice. He also dealt with electronics issues all week and blown trolling motor batteries the morning of the final day. And even still, Heffington managed to find an area full of baitfish and what he estimated to be about 200 bass that "were all

freaks" – clearly the case considering he weighed in the largest bag of the tournament on Day 1 (27-9) and another 24-12 on the final day to seal the deal, primarily leaning on an umbrella rig and a Rapala DT6 along the way.

### 7. ABU GARCIA COLLEGE FISHING PRESENTED BY YETI NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP PRESENTED BY LOWRANCE Lake Toho

Feb. 21-23

An absolute slugfest on the final day of competition, the Abu Garcia College Fishing Nationals Championship delivered action and excitement aplenty, culminating in a win for the University of Montevallo's Peyton Harris and Dalton Head. The duo dropped 27-11 on the scales on Day 3 – a bag that on most days in most events would be nearly unbeatable – to overtake Vincent Maffei and Andrew Ready of Webber



International by just 8 ounces, despite being one of four bags over 25 pounds weighed in that day. Spending their time in Kissimmee, Harris and Head had to navigate the perils of shortened fishing days due to locking time and a fog delay on Day 2. Still, their area was special and produced steadily increasing quality throughout the week. They leaned on a Florida staple – a Texas-rigged stick bait – to probe the pads, reeds and haygrass Kissimmee is known for to notch the win.

**8. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVATIONALS**  
 TOYOTA STOP 2 PRESENTED BY LOWRANCE  
 Clarks Hill Lake

Feb. 28–March 2

There's a lot to be said about momentum in any competitive sport, and if there's one tour-level pro whose photo should appear beside the word "momentum" in the dictionary, it's Dakota Ebare. Barely a month after his first-ever tour-level win at Sam Rayburn (see above), the Strike King pro again hoisted the

championship hardware after a final-day scare on Clarks Hill Lake from Tackle Warehouse Invitational rookie Travis Harriman. Ebare led the first two days of the event on the strength of a shallow/deep pattern with a vibrating jig, Texas-rigged Strike King Rage Bug and Strike King Ocho, whacking 23-13 on Day 1 and 18-6 on Day 2. He wasn't quite as productive on the final day, though, while Harriman had a day to remember – Harriman came to the scales with 23-14, causing Ebare to sweat until it was confirmed that his 16-6 was enough for a 10-ounce win (and \$118,500 pay-day, thanks to his Phoenix Boats contingency payoff).

**9. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX**  
 WESTERN DIVISION PRESENTED BY TACKLE WAREHOUSE  
 California Delta presented by Psycho Tuna

March 15–17

Expectations were low in the days leading up to the Toyota Series Presented by Phoenix Boats tourna-

ment on the California Delta, thanks to a series of weather and water events that flushed an excess of cold, muddy water into the system and severely dulled the largemouth bite. California pro Nick Salvucci made the most of every bit of clean water he could find, connecting with a tournament-best 22-5 on Day 1 and holding serve for the next two days to collect his first Toyota Series win. Salvucci ran around the southern Delta in search of clean water, focusing on hydrilla clumps next to riprap and tules, catching all 15 of his weigh-in fish on a spinnerbait with double Colorado blades and a 4.3-inch Keitech swimbait trailer. Salvucci took over the Western Division AOY lead with one more event (back on the Delta in late April).

**10. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX**  
 PLAINS DIVISION  
 Grand Lake


March 16–18

Oklahoma pro Blake Capps saved the best for last on Grand Lake, sealing the deal on a win at

the Toyota Series Plains Division opener with his biggest bag of the three-day competition on the final day. Capps entered Day 3 trailing fellow Oklahoman (and Grand Lake sharpie) Chad Warren by nearly 4 pounds, but brought 22-8 to the scales for 59-6 while Warren could only muster two fish for 5-1, giving Capps the win by more than 7 pounds over Michael Harlin, who finished in second place for the tournament.

As was the case with most of the Top 10, the meat of Capps' 15-fish total came on an Alabama rig. According to Capps, the difference-maker was the depth he was fishing – 10 feet or less. Capps threw the A-rig around brush piles he located on points adjacent to spawning flats, eventually bagging the win and \$85,000 reward with Phoenix Boats contingency money. ■

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By Sean Ostruszka

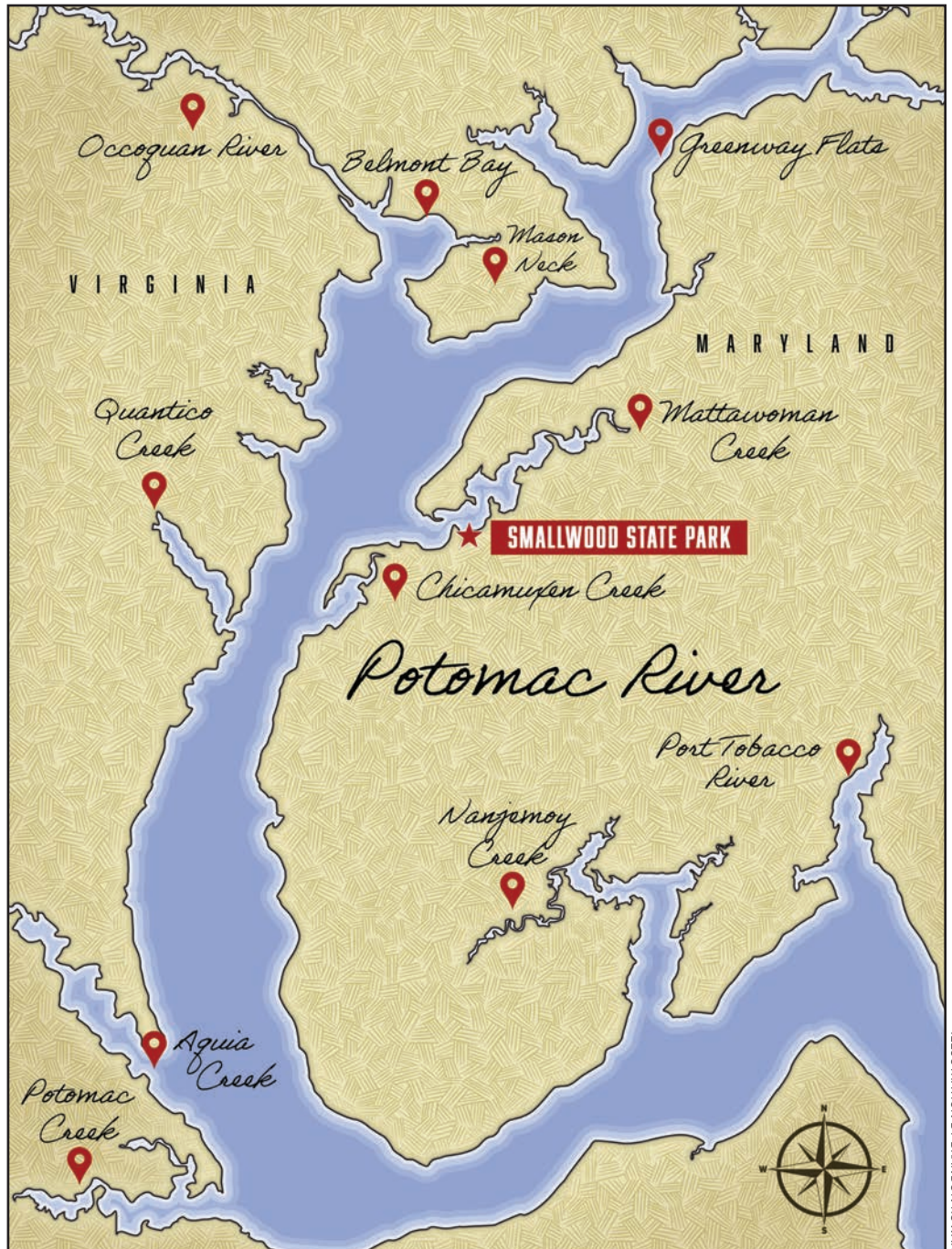


ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROWAN

## POTOMAC RIVER

**T**he more things change, the more they stay the same. You may recognize this line from a Bon Jovi song, but really, it was French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr who coined it back in 1849. Is that notion relevant to an article about the Potomac River? Absolutely not, but the phrase sure is.

The Potomac River has been a staple tournament destination for decades at all levels of competition – and for

good reason. Anglers know what to expect: power fishing, dense vegetation and fishing in crowded community holes.

But as much as everyone “knows” the Potomac, if you take a look at past results, you’ll see a whole lot of things you wouldn’t expect: tournaments being won from unknown creeks, Top-10 finishes from sneaky secret spots on a fishery where there aren’t supposedly any secrets left, and locals excelling one day only to bomb the next.

When Major League Fishing heads to the Potomac this June for the fifth stop of the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals circuit, even the pros that feel they're experts on the fishery may come to find that knowledge and confidence can change just as quickly as the fishery's tides.

## KIND OF A RIVER ... KIND OF NOT?

Yes, the Potomac River is an actual river, but in reality, it's a fishery all to its own.

The body of water is shared between Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C., and runs roughly north to south into the Chesapeake Bay. However, being that it's connected to the Atlantic Ocean, it's a tidal river that usually fluctuates a couple feet per day, not based on whether or not a dam is pulling water, but on the moon.

That's something few anglers are familiar with, which is a bigger factor than most think.

With water that's constantly rising or falling, it means the fish are always on the move. Thus, anglers need to not only understand when the water will be rising or falling, but also how it will move the fish – and where. If they don't, a spot that was loaded with fish one moment might be barren in an hour when all the water gets sucked out of it (or flooding into it).

Bass fishing at the Potomac is almost always shallow, either in the grass and pads or around hard cover like rock and wood. While there are some sections of the main river that can play, the bulk of the damage tends to be done in the creeks (or the mouths of them), with some hot creek arms attracting a ton of fishing pressure.

"Most guys are going to be in those communal grass beds and be staring at 15 to 20 other boats," says Martin Villa, an up-and-coming local pro who has been fishing tournaments on the Potomac for more than a decade. "More than likely, the guy who's going to win that tournament is going to have a bunch of other pros watching him do it."

On the northern end of the fishery, creeks like Belmont and areas like Mason Neck and the Greenway Flats could definitely be players, as they're predominantly milfoil areas (versus having hydrilla, eel grass or "star" grass). And according to Villa, milfoil fish tend to stay put more than fish using the other types of grass because it's denser and can better absorb fishing pressure. Plus, with the timing of the June Invitational event, the spawn may just be hitting those northern creeks compared to being done in the southern ones, meaning slightly heavier fish. Then again, if the spawn is completely done, the northern fish will actually be lighter (having just spawned), making those areas less of a factor.

In the midsection of the river, you have the three biggest players year in and year out –Mattawoman, Chicamuxen, and Quantico creeks. The latter two are a short run from

takeoff, and the tournament is launched from Mattawoman, and all three holds lush fields of various vegetation.

If Villa had to put money on where the ultimate winner comes from, it's from one of these three, and especially Chickamuxen. Regardless, most of the Top 10 anglers will likely fish those three creeks.

Finally, you can run south to Aquia, Potomac and, if you really want to get away, Nanjemoy. Less heralded than the others, many major tournament winners have come from those creeks as of late, particularly Potomac Creek.

## DON'T FISH HISTORY

With so much already known about the Potomac River, many pros get caught up in just doing what they've done in the past and thinking it will work. Sometimes it does, but sometimes it doesn't, all because of the grass.

"The grass grows different every year," Villa says. "The grass that was there last year may or may not be there this year, or may not be as thick or may even be thicker. It's always changing."

Finding the best, lushest grass holding the better-quality groups of fish tends to be the biggest factor for success on the Potomac. Just look at Harry Linsinbigler IV's Toyota Series victory last year from Chickamuxen. There were dozens of boats in there pounding the back of the creek, yet he found a smaller patch of deep, lush weeds more toward the mouth of the creek that allowed him to set himself apart from the crowd.

## SNEAKY GETAWAYS

Speaking of getting away from the crowds, while the best bet to a strong finish is to hunker down amongst the masses, the Potomac has time and again shown to have sneaky little places that can produce Top 10s and even wins.

In the 2022 Toyota Series event referenced previously, Rod Mackinnon III had a spot that he could've won from had he landed all his fish the final day. Jacopo Gallelli won the 2021 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit event from a weed bed he had all to himself. Brandon McMillan stumbled upon one at a Pro Circuit event in 2017 and rode it to a Top 10, and Justin Lucas won an Elite Series event in 2016 from one lone dock.

"It certainly happens," Villa says. "Usually, though, the bent-rod pattern is the one that's more effective."

In terms of weights, Villa figures anyone who can consistently bring in 16 pounds a day will have a shot at making the Top 10, and pros should expect to have sore hands from catching so many fish. As for tactics, power fishing usually wins out – squarebills, vibrating jigs and topwaters – with guys slowing down to drag soft-plastic stickbaits when the bite gets tough.

Those are the things we "know" about such a known fishery. Then again, a lot can change between now and takeoff on a fishery that always seems to be changing. ■

**"MORE THAN LIKELY, THE GUY WHO'S GOING TO WIN THAT TOURNAMENT IS GOING TO HAVE A BUNCH OF OTHER PROS WATCHING HIM DO IT."**

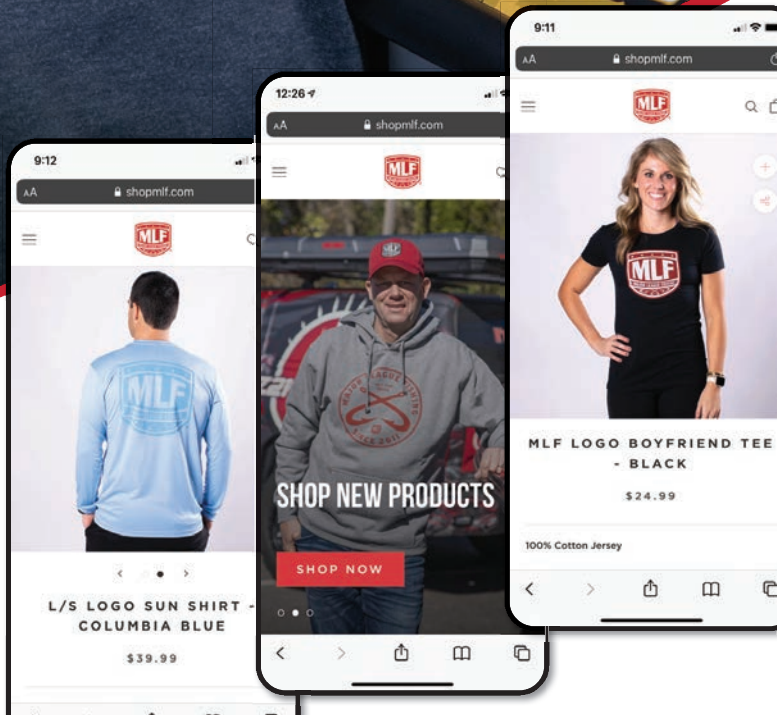
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PROFILE: **FALLON**  
**CLEPPER**  
 MONTGOMERY, TEXAS



Texas native Fallon Clepper made fishing history last summer as the first female angler to win the High School Fishing National Championship when she and her team partner, Wyatt Ford, claimed the No. 1 spot at the 2022 championship on Pickwick Lake in Florence, Alabama. Fishing with Julian Clepper (Fallon's dad) as their boat captain, Clepper and Ford located a honey hole on the first day of the tournament, jumped out to an early Day 1 lead with 18 pounds, 8 ounces, and then hung tough through two more days of competition to catch 39-9 and claim a wire-to-wire win over the 415 other teams who fished the event.

Now a senior at Lake Creek High School in Montgomery, Texas, fishing Texas High School Bass Association tournaments with Ford and considering her options for college, Clepper can look back on a memorable year and is eagerly anticipating the opportunity for her team to defend the National Championship title this coming June. We chatted with Clepper after school let out for the day in mid-winter – she was fresh off a break that reignited her fire to fish. She told us about her plans for college, life and how she hopes to elevate the presence of other female anglers in the game of tournament bass fishing.

**Q&A**

By Matt Naber  
 PHOTOS BY JOE SILLS

**Now that things have settled down and you've had time to think on it – what impact did winning the High School Fishing National Championship last summer have on you?**

I learned not to be afraid. Going into the tournament, I was worried I was going to be looked at, like 'Oh she can't do it,' but this proved that a girl can do it. Winning the National Championship's impact was that a girl can do it, and that it's hard but it's definitely possible (to win). Now I have other girls looking up to me and it feels amazing to prove to the boys that girls can do it themselves, or with a partner – just that girls can do it.

**What's it like to be the first female angler to accomplish this? Have you become a mentor/role model for other girls looking to compete?**

I think I have, because the next day after the tournament I fished (the TBF World Championship) and got 20th, and a 10-year-old girl walked up to me and wanted to take a picture with me. Her dad said, 'She looks up to you so much,' and now I talk to her pretty regularly.

**You've been very candid about how much your dad Julian encouraged you to fish, and how important that opportunity and support have been to you since you were a child. If you could give parents advice about fostering their kids' desire to fish, what would you tell them?**

To not push too hard, because once they push too hard, they get burned out on it. I got burned out on it after last year and I told Dad not to push hard, and pretty soon I got that fire back. I got burned out on it at the end of October after my local tournament. We had a break until Dec. 3, and for all of November, Dad was pushing me, and I felt like the fire wasn't there anymore. So, I had a conversation with him and he said, 'Sorry, I'll step back.' Then there was a break from Dec. 3 through Feb. 18, and during that time I got my fire back just by taking a little break. I just fished a tournament recently and my fire was back and I was ready.

**Looking at results from Texas High School Bass Association events, it seems that Montgomery High School is a powerhouse. How is your 2023 season looking, and what are your major goals for your last year of high school competition?**

This year, my partner and I have been in the top 20 percent at every tournament and are in second place for AOY. Our goal is to win AOY again since we won it our freshman year, and we want to end on a good note. So, that's our big goal: get to first place. We just have one more tournament for our conference, then it's regionals and then state. I'd love to win state since it's on Sam Rayburn.

**How much are you looking forward to this year's High School National Championship on the Mississippi River? And do you have a gameplan for that event?**

It's a little nerve-racking because I'm so far south, and in Texas, we don't have many smallmouths. But I heard smallies will be on beds and that's my favorite thing – to go bed fish. I really have no clue on my gameplan just yet.

**How has your fishing influenced your college selection process? Will you compete in college and what do you want to major in?**

I've gotten offers from quite a few schools, but I'm undecided because all the places are so far from my hometown and family. That would be super hard to deal with. I don't really know what I'm going to do yet, but there's a slight chance I'll go fishing in college. I want to major in finance.

**What are your ultimate goals as an angler? Do you plan on trying to pursue a career as a pro?**

My biggest goal is to make it to nationals and try to go back-to-back Natty champs, but it'll be super hard since I'm from South Texas. Going [to Wisconsin] will be crazy for me. Also, trying to win state on Sam Rayburn this year. I don't have any plans to go pro, but everyone tells me I should.

**What do you consider to be your biggest strength as an angler?**

My biggest strength is to not worry about what anyone else says because once they're in your head, you fall apart on the water. For instance, if they told me I couldn't do it, then I don't let them get in my head. Haters are gonna hate, so they're just fueling my fire to want to go beat you.

**What are you currently working on improving as an angler?**

Right now, it's flipping docks because I'm not very good at that yet and we had to get better at that. It was hard and stressful, but it makes you mad because you want to be able to do it right.

**What's the most important thing you've learned so far in your years as a tournament angler?**

To never give up because you can never know what will happen. You could be in 66th place and then jump to 30th and then first – so, just keep your head down and never give up.

**What would be your ideal fishing setup? (Boat, gear, etc.)**

Probably a brand new 2023 BassCat, probably a Cougar, with a Mercury on the back and Power-Poles. And I only want one graph and two of them up front with Garmin LiveScope. I'm sponsored by St. Croix rods, so any rods from them, and definitely Shimano reels.

**Where's your favorite place to fish and what makes it special?**

Oh, definitely Lake Conroe. My dad fished it his whole life and I have, too, so I know the lake. It can turn on you in one hour. You could be (catching fish) and then five minutes later they're gone, and you have to find something new.

**Where's somewhere you'd like to fish, but haven't been to yet?**

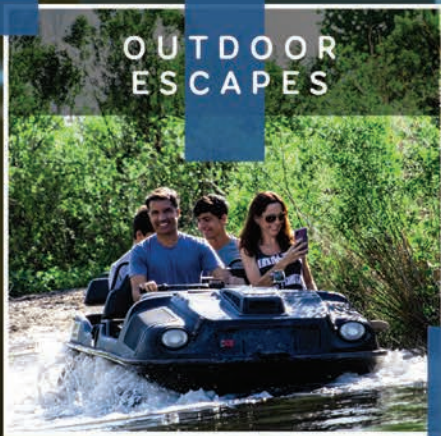
Definitely Lake Erie – I heard it's really good fishing and there's not a lot of smallies here, so that would be a lot of fun. I've only caught two smallies ever in my life, so a limit of smallies would be super fun. ■



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# TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP SNAPSHOTS

## 2023 CHAMPIONSHIP WILL AWARD LATEST "LIVING YOUR DREAM" PACKAGE

**A**s you read this edition of *Bass Fishing* magazine, some fortunate grassroots angler's fishing dream has just come true.

As the BFM presses were rolling on this April-May issue, The Bass Federation's National Championship took place March 29-31 on Lake of the Ozarks in the mountains of southwest Missouri. Fifty-one boaters and 51 co-anglers from around the country and Canada worked their way through the 2022 TBF schedule, battling through their respective state competitions and National Semi-Finals to qualify to fish Lake of the Ozarks. At stake for these anglers: an opportunity to claim part of a prize purse totaling over \$400,000.

The winning boater this year took home a "Living Your Dream" prize package which totals \$125,000 in cash and prizes, including a brand-new Ranger Z520 with a Mercury 250hp motor, Lowrance electronics and a Minn Kota trolling motor. Along with those prizes, the winning boater earned a berth in the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American on Lake Hartwell later this spring.

The winning co-angler took home a \$30,000 prize package, as well as paid entry fee stipends to whatever circuit they choose to fish.

We'll have full coverage of the 2023 TBF National Championship in the May/June issue. Here's a snapshot of recent champions – who will be next?



Jordan Hirt

## 2022 LAKE CONROE, TEXAS

**Jordan Hirt** had a memorable week in southeast Texas at Lake Conroe in 2022. The Nebraska angler not only claimed the title of TBF National Champion but caught his personal best largemouth two times during tournament week.

During practice, it was an 8-4 largemouth that set the mark for Hirt. But that was just the beginning of his once-in-a-lifetime weekend: On his first day of competition, Hirt brought in a monstrous 10-12 to shatter his PB once again and jump out to a stout Day 1 lead.

Hirt led the tournament after the first two days, but faltered on the final day, catching only three fish. As he came to the scales, Hirt knew that he needed 8-6 or more to clinch the National Championship. His three fish tipped the scales at 11-1, securing Hirt the title, trophy and prize package.

**Marc Proctor** also had to sweat out his win as a co-angler. While Hirt only managed three fish on his final day, Proctor did the unthinkable and zeroed. The South Carolina co-angler entered the final day with a 5-pound lead, but when the weigh-in began, all Proctor could do was hope.



The final man to weigh was Riley Nielsen from New Mexico. Nielsen needed 5-7 to win, but could only manage two bass for 4-6. Proctor's solid first two days were enough to keep him margin of victory wide enough to celebrate the biggest win of his fishing career.

## 2021 RED RIVER, LOUISIANA

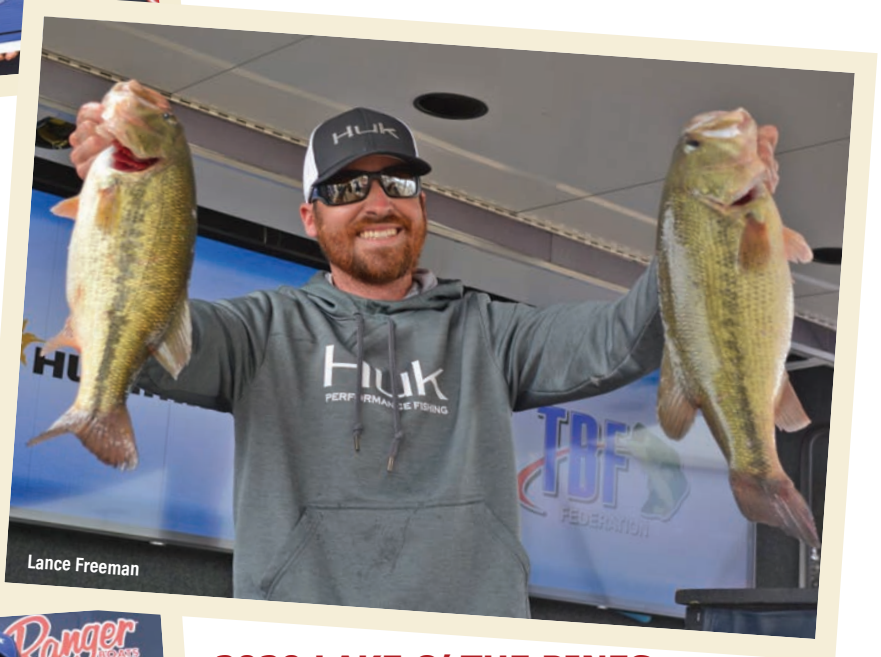
The 2021 National Championship brought the big TBF party to Louisiana for the first time in nearly 20 years. **Mike Morris** showed up to the Red River for the first time in his life and came away with the biggest win of his life.



Morris worked through the "do not dredge" area of the Red River – an area loaded with hyacinth and shade – with a spinnerbait, Senko and buzzbait. After ending Day 2 in third place, the Delaware angler earned the championship on Day 3, catching a limit worth 13-14, pushing him to a narrow 8-ounce win.

"I appreciate TBF and MLF so much for this amazing opportunity and giving me a chance to continue doing what I love, and that's bass fishing," Morris said after his win.

Louisiana angler **Joshua Moore** came away with the co-angler win in his home state, catching a limit each day and finishing with a three-day total 36-7, good enough for a 10-ounce win. Moore collected \$20,000 in cash and more in prizes. Moore had previously sold his boat, which is why he was fishing as a co-angler. With his win, the Louisiana native was able to buy a new boat and continue his fishing career, this time as a boater.



## 2020 LAKE O' THE PINES, OKLAHOMA

**Lance Freeman** became the 2020 National Champion by absolutely smoking the competition on Grand Lake o' the Cherokees. Freeman piled up a three-day total of 5-5, more than 15 pounds ahead of the second-place finisher.

After starting his tournament with a 14-14 limit, Freeman followed it up with two days of 19-pound-plus bags to pull away from the rest of the field. The Kentucky angler fished in the 2020 Toyota Series Championship and a the 2020 BFL All-American after his National Championship title.

On the co-angler side, Derick Pendleton of Indiana overcame a stumble on Day 2 (where he only managed two bass) to win the National Championship. Pendleton finished with a three-day total of 36-6, nearly 13 pounds more than the second-place finisher.

# FEDERATION PROFILE

## VIRGINIA TBF PASSING THE LOVE OF BASS FISHING ON TO THE NEXT GENERATION

**Scott Whitmore** has been president of the Virginia TBF organization for three years. During Whitmore's presidency, the Virginia federation has seen steady growth in membership as well as growing interest from kids in Old Dominion. The 61-year-old loves his commonwealth and bass fishing, but he knows how important it is to pass both of those passions on to the next generation of anglers and outdoorsmen.

"The future of competitive bass fishing depends on the next generation," Whitmore admitted. "A lot of the people heavily involved in bass fishing are beginning to age out, including myself. It's important to get the next generation as involved in fishing and competitive fishing as we can."

TBF program has been crafted to foster a love of competitive fishing while also preparing them for whatever is next in life. For some, that leads right back to fishing and giving back to the TBF program.

"We have kids who come through our program who work their way through and come back to us once they're adults," Whitmore said. "My son is one of those, as well as Cody Pike who fishes on the Tackle Warehouse Invationals. I have another graduate who runs my youth program in the western part of the state. Getting these kids through our youth

program and then into leadership roles is important to our growth as an organization."

Whitmore and Virginia TBF have multiple ways they give back to the youth in their community. They hosted a three-day kid's event called "Reel Kids" at the Richmond Fishing Expo. There, they introduced kids to fishing and gave away free rods and reels.

"We recondition and hand out anywhere from 250 to 400 rods a year thanks to our partners at Bass Pro Shops," Whitmore said. "We spent two weeks doing a rod and reel trade in at our local Bass Pro Shops where we volunteered our federation to take in the used rods and reels so Bass Pro Shops doesn't have to pay anyone to work out there. That booth gives us the opportunity to sell off raffle tickets and other fundraising items, which we give directly back to our youth program."

As Whitmore begins another year with Virginia TBF, the mission remains the same: support their anglers, grow the sport of bass fishing, and continue to foster the relationship between fishing and the next generation of anglers.



To boost youth participation, Whitmore and Virginia TBF have invested time and energy into building one of the best youth fishing programs in the country. They boast the reigning High School Fishing World Finals champions – Wes Newman and Kendall Hatch, who beat 400 other teams last summer on Pickwick and Wilson lakes.

But it's not just about creating success stories while kids are fishing their way through high school. The Virginia



## SAF STATE CHAMPIONS

### FLORIDA | LAKE TOHO

Tripp Berlinsky Jr. & Jacob Sharpe  
Osceola Anglers | 14 pounds, 13 ounces

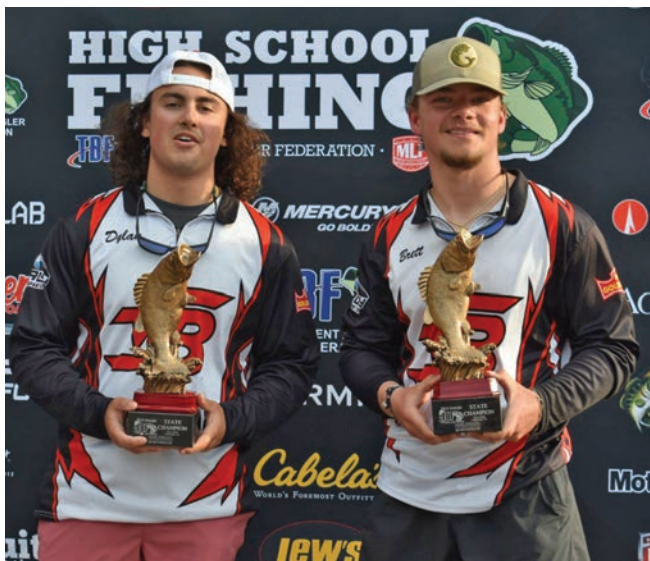


### MISSISSIPPI | PASCAGOULA RIVER SYSTEM

Cooper Rouse & Ryker Reed  
D'Iberville High School | 10 pounds, 6 ounces

### GEORGIA | WEST POINT LAKE

Dylan Thayer & Brett Boswell  
Winder-Barrow High School Bulldogs | 14 pounds, 10 ounces



### SOUTH CAROLINA | LAKE HARTWELL

Jacob Greenwood & Austin Short  
Devildog Anglers | 17 pounds, 7 ounces

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

## ABOUT THE BASS FEDERATION

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

Kevin VanDam  
MOSSY OAK FISHING  
TEAM LEADER

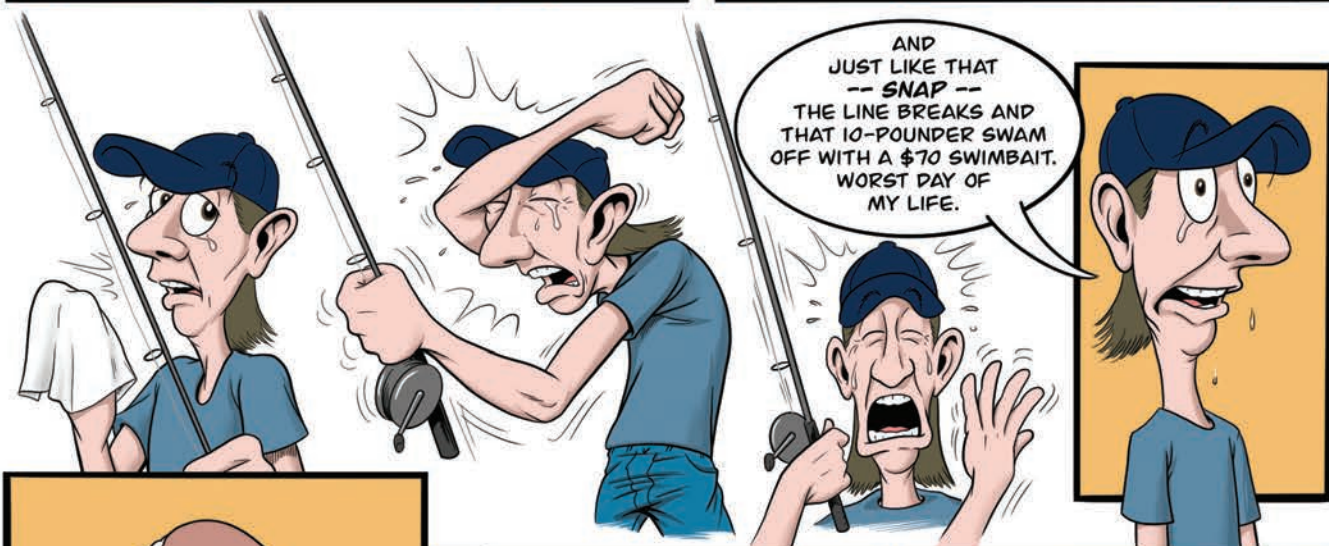


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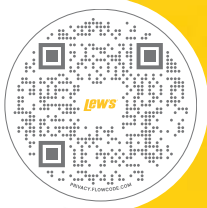


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