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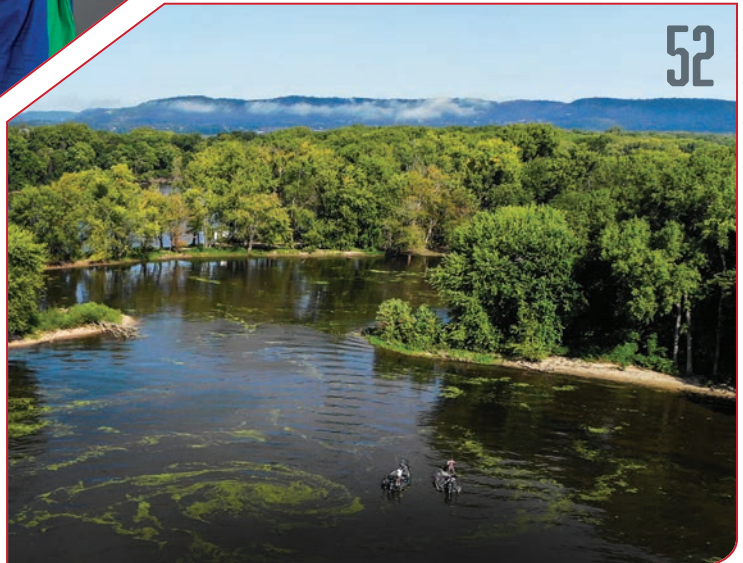
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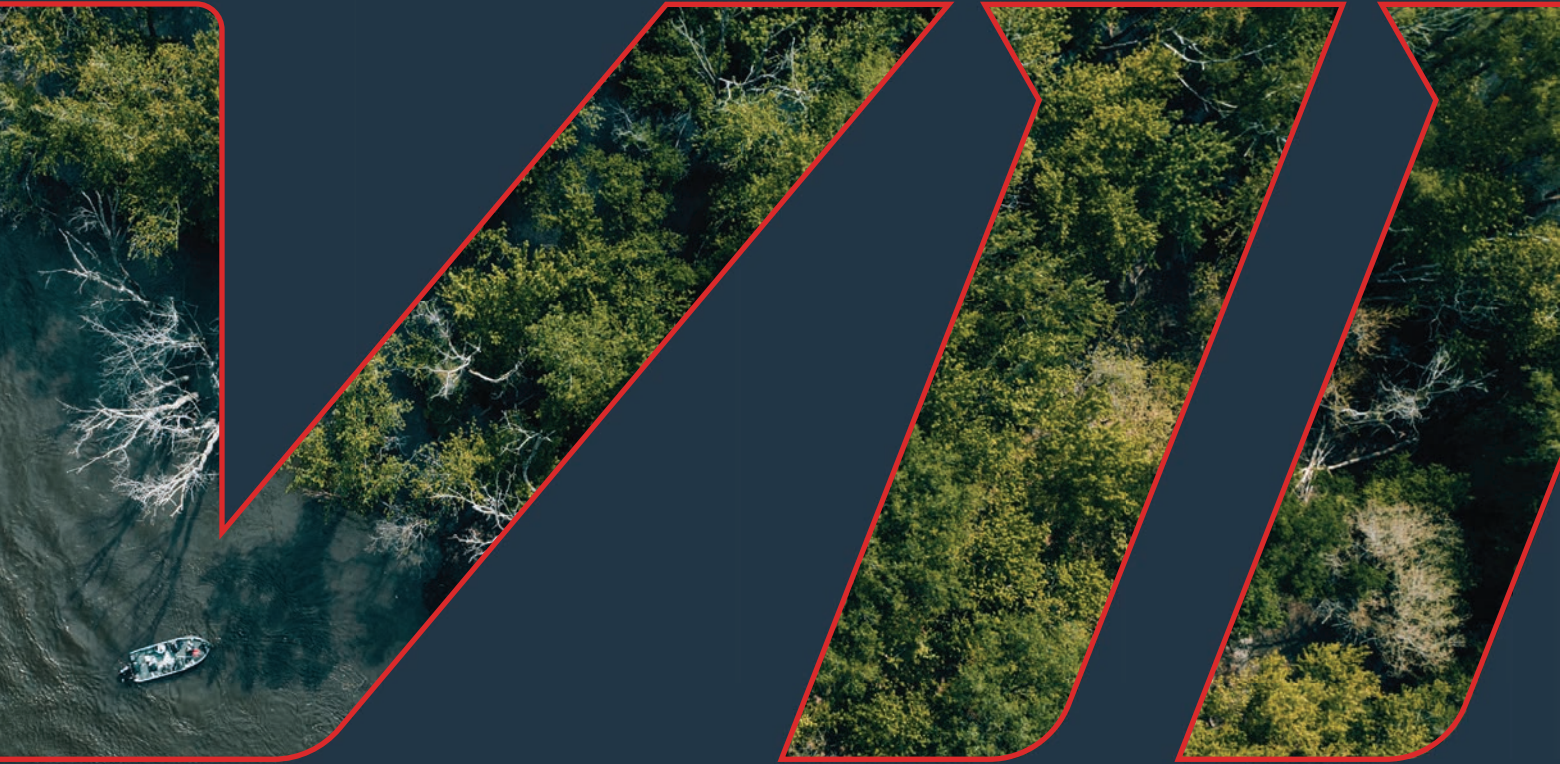
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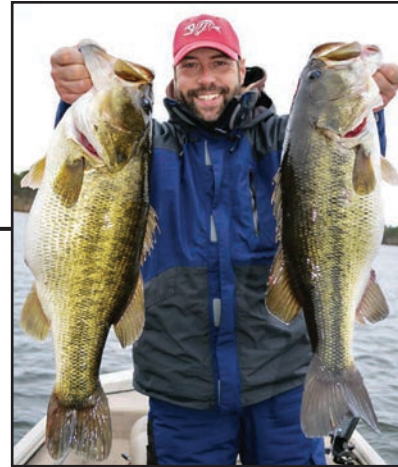
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WHY THE GOAT IS THE GOAT IN MY BOOK



As you read this issue of *Bass Fishing* magazine, the internet is buzzing with salutes and celebrations of the GOAT (greatest of all time), the Kalamazoo Kid, Kevin VanDam. This issue arrived in readers' mailboxes shortly after VanDam's final regular-season, tour-level bass tournament, Bass Pro Tour Stage Seven in Saginaw Bay, Michigan, in early August. Many of you likely watched MLF's salute to VanDam during the *MLFNOW!* live stream or read the stories about Kevin that we published on MajorLeagueFishing.com.

Kevin has been rightfully hailed for more than 30 years as a once-in-a-lifetime fishing talent. Ever since he posted his first tour-level win at the 1991 Georgia Invitational on Lake Lanier and followed that up with back-to-back third-place finishes at the 1992 Texas and Alabama Invitationals on Sam Rayburn and Gunterville, it seemed obvious that the lanky Michigander would be a handful for years to come.

Over \$7 million in winnings and eight Angler of the Year titles later, "a handful" is putting it mildly.

Kevin has spent more time in front of a TV camera, on the internet and interacting with crowds of fans than most NFL superstars. The intimate nature of professional bass fishing, where the competitors shake hands daily with their fan base, has provided the world with a pretty thorough snapshot of Kevin VanDam. However, the things that 99.9% of you *haven't* seen from Kevin are what truly make him a unique person and good friend:

- I'm standing at the island of a kitchen in a large house in Massena, New York, chopping mushrooms. The house is part of a complex that multiple anglers rent for tournaments on the St. Lawrence River and the place where communal dinners are cooked. Standing adjacent to me at the same island is Kevin VanDam. He's chopping onions as we discuss the merits of Pink Floyd.

One of the other anglers (I forget who) passes through the kitchen and jokingly says "Ooooh, look at this. KVD is in the kitchen chopping onions, I never thought I'd see that." To which Kevin responds (with a wink): "I do it all the time. Gotta be a good husband. Here, c'mere, I'll teach you how to chop." This is Kevin.

- It's 6:55 a.m. on a Saturday and I'm about to start the second hour of my radio show on Sports Radio KJR in Seattle. Unfortunately, the two guests who I'd lined up for the 7:00 and 7:20 time slots are both in poor wireless service, and I'm suddenly faced with 40 minutes of air time to fill on my own. I text Kevin: "I need some help, are you busy?" He texts back *immediately*: "Have your guy call me." Within two minutes, we have Kevin live on the air, and he stays with me for the entire 7 o'clock hour, cheerfully answering callers' questions.

Of the nearly 5,000 live radio/TV interviews I've done, it's one of my favorites, and it happened only because Kevin surrendered part of his Saturday to answer a call. Here's another thing you probably don't know about Kevin VanDam: He always answers your call or responds straightaway to your text. This is also Kevin.

We'll still see plenty of Kevin VanDam as he embraces his post-tournament life as an educator and a champion of conservation. He'll still be a KVD-sized presence in the fishing world. I won't lie, though; I'll miss seeing him on the tournament trail, and we'll all darn sure miss watching him compete.

There can be only one GOAT. And this, more than anything, is also Kevin.

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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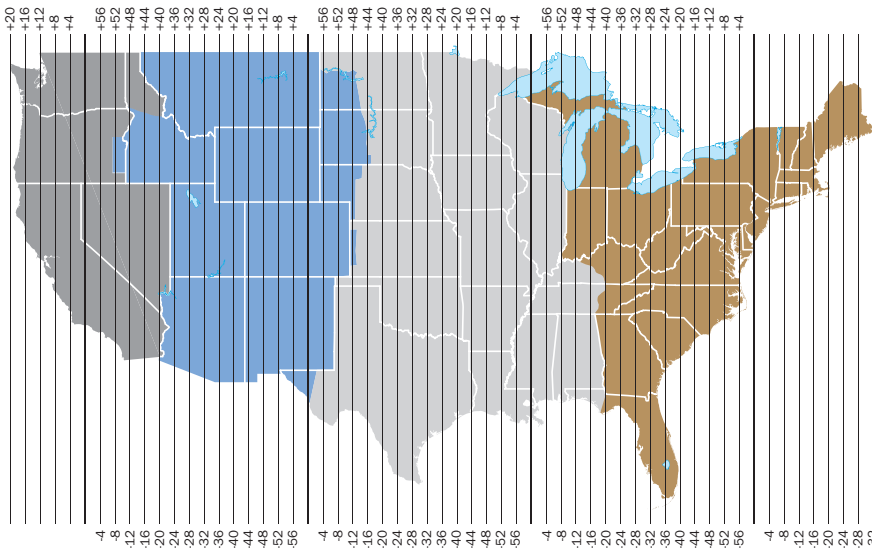
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SOLUNAR TABLES
SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2023

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



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

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

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HABITAT RESTORATION SUCCESS STORIES

2023 Fisheries Management Division/Minn Kota projects benefit 11 fisheries in seven states



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

PLANNING

CONVERSATIONS

OPPORTUNITIES

DESIGNS

GOALS

IMPROVEMENTS

Bass need habitat to thrive. Any angler who has caught them from grass mats, brushpiles or boulders knows that. Over the past two years, Minn Kota and the MLF Fisheries Management Division (FMD) in partnership with Berkley Labs have teamed up to complete habitat restoration projects on 11 reservoirs in seven states, adding a total of 597 individual pieces of artificial structure for bass in those waterways.

Restoring bass habitat is not as simple as dumping Christmas trees into lakes. Long before these projects take place, there's a planning phase that involves months of meetings, permitting and design and includes state agencies, water authorities and MLF anglers.

SETTING UP FOR HABITAT RESTORATION

- FMD's habitat-restoration process begins with exploratory conversations with state biologists about local fisheries near upcoming events. During these conversations, we look for waterbodies that offer opportunities to make impactful habitat improvements. Most of the time, the fisheries we identify are experiencing habitat loss or were initially impounded without habitat. Habitat loss is widespread across the U.S. and is typically driven by increasing siltation, degradation of timber, erosion or vegetation changes.

- Once we identify fisheries in need of habitat, we pinpoint areas that provide an opportunity to answer questions or accomplish a specific goal. The simplest of goals would be to increase anglers' success, but others include improving fry stocking, increasing electrofishing harvest of brood stock and providing recovery sites for fish released from tournaments. These goals will eventually determine the habitat type, density and placement.

- After identifying a waterbody and our goals, it's time to involve the lake authority. Many do not realize there are individual groups that own or control almost every reservoir and the water impounded within them. These could be local water companies, lake management groups, river authorities or the Army Corps of Engineers. The lake authority has the power to approve or veto habitat-restoration projects and also controls what permits may be needed, what types of materials can be used and where habitat can be placed. No two states or lake authorities use the exact same process, which leads to unique requirements for each project.



PHOTO BY RACHEL DUBROVIN

Habitat being transported for deployment on Lake Greenwood, South Carolina.

- Once we have a permit or approval from the lake authority, we then involve our artificial habitat supplier, MossBack Fish Habitat, and start selecting products that are in line with the goals we plan to accomplish. MossBack products are made from recycled PVC and have no known degradation time or breakdown mechanism in water. After selecting the products, we create a design plan that groups the habitat into small deployment areas. During this phase of planning, we consider water fluctuation to determine where habitat can be placed without interfering with boaters or being exposed during drawdowns.

- MLF anglers may be involved at any point during this process. Often, local anglers are consulted in the exploratory phase, or at least by the time we select products and design their deployment. On the day of the habitat restoration project, MLF anglers join local volunteers, the state agency and the water authority. The structures are built, weighted with concrete blocks and loaded onto barges or boats provided by the state. GPS locations for each deployment are recorded for the states to put on their websites.

- Within minutes, we have observed anglers catching fish on the recently deployed habitat, and we often observe fish relating to the structure on side imaging before it even hits the bottom. The success of each individual project is determined by the goals we planned to accomplish. For most, we can use sampling data in the years before the project and compare it to the sampling data afterward.

Following is a look at three projects the FMD has overseen so far in 2023, as well as a 2022 project that is already paying dividends.

REDCREST 2023: LAKE NORMAN IN NORTH CAROLINA

At the Bass Pro Tour's annual championship event, REDCREST 2023 on Lake Norman, we completed the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by the KVD Foundation and MossBack Fish Habitat. The project started with a \$5,000 donation from BPT pro Kevin VanDam's KVD Foundation, which was matched by MossBack to provide \$10,000 in artificial habitat products.

This marked the second year in a row that VanDam and the KVD Foundation purchased habitat for the REDCREST host reservoir. The legendary angler has become a leader in conservation efforts, and his continued support for habitat restoration is an inspiration.

During the REDCREST expo, the habitat was used as a teaching tool for local Boy Scouts, who earned a Fish and Wildlife Merit Badge. The habitat was then presented to the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission and deployed into Lake Norman after the event. Lake Norman needs new habitat due to years of vegetation loss, and the added ambush structure should benefit largemouth bass desperate to compete with invasive Alabama bass.



PHOTO COURTESY MAJOR BASS

MLF pro Micheal Neal and FMD fisheries biologist Steven Bardin construct MossBack habitat.

STAGE THREE: LAKE GREENWOOD IN SOUTH CAROLINA

A few weeks after REDCREST, the Bass Pro Tour visited South Carolina for Stage Three. While the anglers were competing on Lake Murray, the FMD and Minn Kota completed our second project of the year on nearby Lake Greenwood. For the second season in a row, Mercury Marine and MossBack Fish Habitat joined us to complete the Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project.

Lake Greenwood made for an ideal candidate since the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources already had a standing permit with Greenwood County Lake Management and is amid a four-year restoration phase for the reservoir. The state had previously deployed over 300 MossBack structures in 19 sites and purchased 225 additional structures that were given to registered dock owners on the lake.

LAKE GREENWOOD MADE FOR AN IDEAL CANDIDATE SINCE THE SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES ALREADY HAD A STANDING PERMIT WITH GREENWOOD COUNTY LAKE MANAGEMENT.

Our project featured a two-part deployment. First, BPT anglers Greg Vinson, Kelly Jordon and Michael Neal, as well as MLF emcee Steven "Lurch" Scott, joined the SCDNR and GCLM teams to deploy habitat at the Lake Greenwood State Park. Placing habitat around fishing piers that lacked structure served as a way to improve shoreline angler access and fish-catch success. The second part of our deployment was performed by SCDNR once the GCLM approved new deployment areas within the reservoir. In total, 99 new MossBack structures were added to Lake Greenwood in 2023.



PHOTO BY RACHEL DUBROVIN

REDCREST 2023 was highlighted by habitat construction projects with local Boy Scouts.

HEAVY HITTERS: LAKE CLAIBORNE IN LOUISIANA

During General Tire Heavy Hitters in April, the FMD completed our largest — and most star-studded — one-day project of the year on Lake Claiborne. The Minn Kota Habitat Restoration Project supported by Humminbird saw Duck Dynasty star John Godwin team up with Heavy Hitters anglers Dakota Ebare, Gary Klein and Kevin VanDam as well as District 1 and 2 staff from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fish and the Claiborne Parish Water District Commission (CPWDC).

Since 2018, the CPWDC has been working on improving the fishery by annually stocking 80,000 Florida-strain largemouth bass fingerlings and 20,000 bluegills, plus deploying 200 Christmas trees. Our habitat restoration project added 95 pieces of artificial habitat to the lake, ranging from small, dense structures to tall towers. They were deployed in 6 to 12 feet of water.

MINN KOTA HABITAT REWIND: DUCK RIVER RESERVOIR IN ALABAMA

During BPT Stage Four at Lake Guntersville, we dispatched VanDam to nearby Cullman, Alabama, to visit the site of the 2022 Minn Kota Habitat



MLF pro Dakota Ebare helps deploy MossBack habitat into Lake Claiborne, Louisiana.

Restoration Project. VanDam launched his Nitro on Duck River Reservoir and interviewed local sunfish anglers who were anchored near one of our deployment areas. He then used his Humminbird electronics to locate other habitat deployed last year. VanDam proceeded to enjoy what he described as an unbelievable afternoon fishing a crankbait over the tops of the habitat — proof that our efforts help anglers catch

more fish. The video of his day and fish catches can be found on the FMD webpage and the MLF YouTube channel.

We have already begun the planning phase for our 2024 projects. They will be conducted in reservoirs we haven't visited in the past and might incorporate aquatic vegetation and shoreline improvements. Stay tuned for announcements on where the next habitat projects will take place. ■

PHOTOS BY KANYAN KLEIN



Minn Kota pro Kevin VanDam returned to Duck River Reservoir in Alabama to check on the progress of an FMD habitat project. The report: success!

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER SHANGLE



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2023 BALLY BET ANGLER OF THE YEAR STORYLINES HIGHLIGHT DYNAMIC BASS PRO TOUR RACE

Jones, Wheeler, DeFoe, Becker finishing nip-and-tuck battle at Saginaw Bay



Alton Jones Jr.



Jacob Wheeler



Ott DeFoe



Matt Becker

As this issue of *Bass Fishing* magazine goes to press, the most exciting **Bally Bet Angler of the Year** race in Bass Pro Tour history remains in the stretch run. When the BPT field heads to Saginaw Bay and the Saginaw River for the seventh and final stop of the 2023 season from Aug. 1-6, the mysterious Michigan fishery will decide which contender takes home the coveted trophy, as well as \$100,000.

Four anglers enter Stage Seven within 10 points of one another at the top of the standings. After notching consecutive top-five finishes at Cayuga Lake and Lake St. Clair, Alton Jones Jr. sits in first place, but his cushion is only 7 points ahead of two-time defending AOY winner Jacob Wheeler. Ott DeFoe and Matt Becker also lurk closely behind Wheeler.

The tight race virtually guarantees that whoever wins the AOY trophy will have to finish the season strong. We're also assured of a compelling storyline regardless of who prevails. Here are a few facts and figures that illustrate why a win would be noteworthy for each of the four top contenders.



Wheeler is looking to pull off a miraculous three-peat.

PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

WHEELER TRYING TO CAP DRAMATIC COMEBACK

Regardless of how he pulled it off, winning a third consecutive AOY title would put Wheeler into elite company and further bolster his growing candidacy to be included among the greatest tournament anglers of all time. Only Kevin VanDam and Roland Martin have won AOY three years in a row on national-level tours.

However, if Wheeler can stay hot and take home the trophy for the third straight season, this year's win might go down as his most memorable considering the hill he's had to climb just to get back into contention.

Wheeler's quest for a three-peat looked to be sunk by his 75th-place finish at Lake Murray in Stage Three. The rare dud dropped him to 25th in the AOY standings, more than 80 points behind first place. Wheeler himself has admitted that, at least at the time, he gave up on his AOY aspirations. That might just turn out to be the best thing that could have happened to him.

Whether because he has been fishing for wins or because he was simply mad about his struggles at Lake Murray, Wheeler has been scorching hot of late, even by his standards. His dominant victory on Lake Guntersville vaulted him up to 11th in the standings. A third-place finish at Lake Cayuga moved him to sixth. Now, after finishing third at Lake St. Clair, he's knocking on the door of yet another title.

Given his dominance on northern waters and his history of closing the AOY race strong, it would be hard to bet against Wheeler completing the comeback. During the second half of each of the past three seasons (from Stage Four on), Wheeler has never finished worse than 11th. That stretch includes three wins and a jaw-dropping 10 top-five finishes in 11 events.

DeFoe would really like to earn his first career AOY.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

FINALLY DEFOE'S YEAR?

Just about the only box DeFoe — winner of the 2022 General Tire Heavy Hitters, 2019 Bassmaster Classic, three BPT stages and two Bassmaster Elite Series events — hasn't already checked during his decorated career is an AOY win. He's come close several times. DeFoe finished as the runner-up in both 2020 and 2021, as well as 2012 on the Bassmaster Elite Series. Throw in a couple fourth-place finishes on the Elite Series, and DeFoe feels overdue to break through.

It looked for much of the season like this would be his year to do so. DeFoe made the Championship Round in each of the first four stages of the season, amassing a lead as large as 42 points over his nearest pursuer in the AOY race with three events left. However, two straight finishes outside the top 20 have caused him to slip to third, nine points back of Jones.

A high finish at Saginaw Bay could exorcise a lot of demons for DeFoe and finally deliver the one trophy that has eluded him. If he's unable to come through, this year might go down as the most painful of all his close calls considering how large his lead had been.

BECKER EYES RARE ROOKIE FEAT

It's no surprise to see Wheeler, DeFoe and Jones duking it out for the season-long crown. But the other angler in the mix might come as a surprise to some.

Becker, a BPT rookie, didn't exactly explode onto the scene, finishing 47th at the Kissimmee Chain to start his debut season. But since then, he's been rock solid, notching finishes of sixth, 23rd, fifth, sixth and 17th.

Becker's rookie season has been AOY-worthy.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

Should Becker pull off the AOY victory, it would be historic. The definition of "rookie" in tournament fishing can admittedly get hazy due to anglers switching tours or tours themselves evolving, but Becker would become the first angler to win AOY while fishing his first season on a top-level tour since Shin Fukae claimed the title on the FLW Tour in 2004.

Becker's aptitude at catching smallmouth should give him a legitimate shot. In addition to his solid finishes on Cayuga and St. Clair this year, he logged Top 10s at the St. Lawrence River and Lake Champlain on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit last season. He'll need some help, though; even if he wins Stage Seven, Jones would have to finish outside the Top 10 and Wheeler outside the top three for Becker to ascend to first place.

Jones' 2023 season has been one of his best ever.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

JONES LOOKING TO END DOMINANT SEASON IN STYLE

The fact that we made it this far down the list without bringing up the current leader is a testament to the number of storylines at play this season. That's especially true considering that, with another strong showing in Stage Seven, Jones has a chance to lay claim to not only the AOY award but the best season in BPT history.

Jones' regular-season campaign, which has seen him finish 11th or better in four straight events, is nothing to sneeze at. But his season becomes exponentially more impressive when one considers that his two best tournaments, a win at General Tire Heavy Hitters and a runner-up finish at REDCREST 2023, aren't reflected in his point total.

Should Jones win AOY and notch another top-11 finish at Saginaw Bay in the process (which will likely be necessary for him to do so), he would end the year with seven top-11 finishes in 10 events — including top-two finishes in arguably the two most prestigious — and more than \$350,000 in prize money. And oh by the way, his win, which saw him lap the field on the final day of Heavy Hitters, represented the second-largest margin of victory (59-0) in BPT history.

There have already been some impressive individual seasons in the young lifespan of the BPT. Edwin Evers won both the inaugural REDCREST and AOY trophies in 2019. Jordan Lee took home the Heavy Hitters belt in addition to AOY in 2020. Wheeler won three events in 2021, and Dustin Connell did the same last year. But adding an AOY victory to his Heavy Hitters and REDCREST performances would have to at least put Jones' 2023 campaign in the conversation as the best year we've seen yet. ■

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

TV BROADCASTS

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

Aug. 12: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops Qualifying Group B Round 1 @ Caney Creek Reservoir and Bussey Brake

Aug. 19: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops Qualifying Group A Round 2 @ Caney Creek Reservoir and Bussey Brake

Aug. 26: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops Qualifying Group B Round 2 @ Caney Creek Reservoir and Bussey Brake

Sept. 2: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops Knockout Round @ Caney Creek Reservoir and Bussey Brake

Sept. 9: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops Championship Round @ Caney Creek Reservoir and Bussey Brake

Sept. 16: Bass Pro Tour U.S. Air Force Stage Two Presented by Power-Pole Knockout Round @ Lake Cherokee and Douglas Lakes

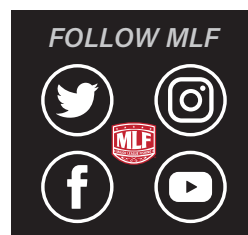
Sept. 23: Bass Pro Tour U.S. Air Force Stage Two Presented by Power-Pole Championship Round @ Lake Cherokee and Douglas Lakes

Sept. 30: Bass Pro Tour Fox Rent A Car Stage Three Presented by Mercury Knockout Round @ Lake Murray

Oct. 1: Bass Pro Tour Fox Rent A Car Stage Three Presented by Mercury Championship Round @ Lake Murray

Oct. 7: Bass Pro Tour Toro Stage Four Presented by Bass Cat Knockout Round @ Lake Gunterville

Oct. 14: Bass Pro Tour Toro Stage Four Presented by Bass Cat Championship Round @ Lake Gunterville



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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



Photo: MLF



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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ARTIFISHAL INTELLIGENCE

If you think we're using high technology to catch fish now, just wait for AI to take hold in bass fishing



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.

When I was a kid, I watched all the Star Wars and Star Trek movies thinking devices like handheld computers, flip-top communicators, robots, tractor beams and lasers were things of future fantasy. Since then, I've seen all the aforementioned "Space Age" items become reality. The speed at which the Space Age is approaching is getting faster, and the next technological revolution looks to be artificial intelligence.

Artificial intelligence, or AI, is poised to enter into every aspect of our lives for the foreseeable future. Much like the internet and social media, big tech is going to toss AI into the laps of humanity like a hot potato and let us sort out the good from the bad from the ugly.

Even at its most basic level, AI's ability to worm its way through massive fields of data to find specific patterns or data points in a matter of seconds is stunning. While this new technology could have hundreds of

more altruistic applications, I'm focusing on some of the places AI will show up first in the sport of competitive fishing. With that, I must provide this disclaimer: These possible AI uses in bass fishing are purely speculative on my part and were not generated by AI itself.

HISTORY IN A FLASH

Tournament anglers of all levels often spend hours researching historical tournament coverage on the internet to prepare for events. This is



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

likely the first place AI is going to provide some fast help to anglers in uncovering key information when visiting popular tournament lakes for the first time. AI, when programmed correctly, will be able to do specific searches on tournament fisheries in a matter of seconds, mining such information as productive areas, lures, cover and techniques from a mountain of tournament coverage from the last 20 years.

The interface will likely come in the form of an app that can pair with modern-day electronics. Data input could be submitted to the app either manually or automatically from an angler's depth finder and GPS. Key variables such as the lake's name, the date, water depth, temperature and clarity would be critical. Other helpful variables, like the weather, dam generation schedules and moon phase could be automatically

taken from online sources. All those data points would then be fed into an AI-optimized search.

AI will work its magic by instantly worming through thousands of hours of bass tournament coverage found across the internet in the form of results, photo galleries, YouTube videos, podcasts, archived tournament shows and archived live streams to highlight the most productive areas, lures, presentations and past results for that lake from previous events. The AI-produced reports would also include key descriptors like shell bars, shad spawn, bream beds, standing timber, clear water, clumps of vegetation, or any other commonly cited themes in the tournament coverage for that lake at that time. The app could be refreshed at any time if inputs change.

Obviously, popular tournament lakes would have far more available information than lakes with very little traffic.

VIRTUAL UNDERWATER CAMERA VIEW

The next place AI will find a home in fishing is in forward-facing sonar viewing. I believe future versions of forward-facing sonar over the next decade will become freakishly realistic by mixing immersive technologies such as augmented reality with AI to produce enhanced visual representations of real elements in the underwater environment. Put another way, AI will help turn high-definition sonar returns from the underwater world into real-time imaging that looks more like it came from an underwater camera.

AI can do this by taking the sonar returns from common underwater composition such as sand, mud, rock, gravel, shell, brush, vegetation and timber and rendering them to look much more realistic. Instead of the anglers interpreting what they're seeing from blipping and pulsing sonar returns, artificial intelligence software will recognize these bottom compositions and objects from sonar signatures and fill in the blanks with digital depictions of sand, brush, timber, rock, grass, etc. This "virtual underwater view" will also add a true three-dimensional perspective to the submerged lakescape.

Sound hokey? We're not finished. How about if AI could also provide a fish ID for each species?

Some pros are already proficient at identifying certain species of fish on forward-facing sonar. If humans can tell bass from crappie from drum from white bass based on sonar blips, imagine what AI can do once it learns each species' unique hydrodynamic signature based on size, shape, muscle density, air bladder size, speed of movement and actual "gait" of a fish as it moves through the water.

Hold on, the possibilities get even freakier: Once a species is identified, a more animated depiction of that species of fish can be rendered, swimming in real time on the screen, revealing its size, direction and speed of travel. In addition, the lure being used by the angler can also be recognized and represented to scale as well.

Talk about mixed reality fishing! Imagine a 10- to 20-foot ditch or "drain" running out of an 8-foot flat in a Texas lake. Picture how this drain would look if the water was crystal clear and you could use an underwater camera to see everything in front of and around your boat for 80 feet: the scattered hydrilla lining the edges of the drain, the standing timber in the middle of the ditch and the bass or crappie suspended in that timber. Now twitch a jerkbait (which looks just like a real jerkbait) right down to the bass (which looks just like a real bass) and see exactly how the bass responds to the lure.

I believe that very sort of virtual aquarium view will be available in the future by combining high-definition sonar with artificial intelligence and augmented reality.

So how many more screens will it take to render this kind of view?

None. It will all be accomplished through immersive technology goggles or glasses, where the underwater world and the fish swimming in it are superimposed right before your eyes. Such goggles are already becoming available to the public, with Apple Vision Pro set to hit the market in early 2024.

Yes! Tournament anglers using virtual reality glasses to catch real bass!

Beam me up, Scotty ■






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From our President, to our sales force, to our boat builders, we all live to fish. Whether it is a pro circuit event, a weekend tournament or spending time fishing with our family and friends, we truly love the sport. This passion has shaped our lives and it has likewise brought about many of the fishing features that you see on the Phoenix today. Our goal is to make every boat that goes out our door the best fishing platform it can be—in design, construction and performance. We love to fish as much as anyone and we believe it shows in every boat we build.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

KEVIN VANDAM SHIFTING GEARS

What he means to the sport, what's next and are we ready for it?

Looking out over Lake Kissimmee, Kevin VanDam was ticked off. *"I gave that one up,"* he thought.

VanDam had just mustered a 20-pound, 8-ounce bag on the second day of qualifying at B&W Trailer Hitches Stage One Presented By Grundéns, the fifth-biggest of the day. But a poor opening round proved too much to overcome. The sting of missing the Knockout Round by a mere 10 ounces overshadowed any fuzzy feelings about what will likely be remembered as his final tournament in Florida.

"That was the last chance I'll ever get on this lake," his thoughts whispered to him.

It's true. VanDam, the greatest performer tournament bass fishing has ever known, is scheduled to retire from tournament competition at the conclusion of the 2023 Bass Pro Tour season in

August. Well, mostly retire. In typical VanDam fashion, his intense competitiveness won't quite allow him to walk away from the sport entirely.

"My goal is to qualify for REDCREST and Heavy Hitters next year so I don't have to quit cold turkey," he said.

THE REALITY OF KVD'S RETIREMENT

Most fans, myself included, despise the idea of VanDam retiring. That's not to say he still needs to accomplish anything; his record of 26 national tour-level wins may never be broken.

"I don't have to win another tournament to prove anything to myself," VanDam said.

He's right. But it will feel strange to no longer watch him stalk world championship and Angler of the Year titles, especially since he has shown that he can still contend.

The fact that KVD continues to be relevant 33 years after his first full season on tour is unheard of, especially as younger players dominate the game. VanDam reps for the old guard.

“In our sport, nobody retires” VanDam said, adding that it’s simply unthinkable to most. “It’s the competitive nature of the game. What else do you do? What else do you know?”

It’s true. But then again, nobody else is VanDam. His unprecedented \$7 million-plus in career earnings, three MLF Cup wins and eight Angler of the Year titles afford him the luxury of going out on his own terms.

VANDAM LEAVES AN INDELIBLE MARK

In many ways, VanDam laid the blueprint for the young guns against whom he now competes. At a time when professional bass fishing had no college-level or introductory leagues, VanDam was one of the first to go all in on touring nationally in his early 20s.

During his legendary career, VanDam has witnessed the constant evolution of the sport and a monumental shift in the capabilities of those involved.

“The biggest change has been the dedication and work ethic (of the top anglers),” he said. “It’s like what you see in high-school sports. The athletes are more committed and better.”

Ultimately, 30-plus years on the road hasn’t diminished VanDam’s drive. But it’s taken a toll.

“It’s a grueling schedule. You just have no flexibility,” VanDam confirmed. “I’ve gotten to the point where there are other things I’d like to do.”

KVD THE TEACHER

So what’s next for KVD? In many ways, his post-retirement life will look similar to how he’s spent recent years. Rivaling only his competitiveness is his passion for teaching others about bass fishing, and VanDam plans to continue to find avenues to do so.

“I’m not funny. I don’t cut up like some of the other personalities,” he said. “My strength is education.”

Touring for over three decades enabled VanDam to visit some of the best bass fishing waters in the world, a treat not offered to many anglers. As a full-time educator, he looks forward to that continuing.

“I still want to visit these fisheries (for filming instructional videos),” he said. “I’ll still need to figure the fish out — my favorite part. But I can have a choice as to when I go.”

VanDam will not only seek to educate anglers on how to catch more bass, but he’ll help shed more light on the steps those anglers can take to

make sure there are plenty to be caught by future generations. He credits Bass Pro Shops founder and CEO Johnny Morris for impressing upon him the importance of conservation, calling him “the greatest conservationist of the modern era.”

“We’re growing as a sport, but the lakes are not,” VanDam said. “To sustain and have quality fishing, we must consider conservation and how we’re managing the resource.”

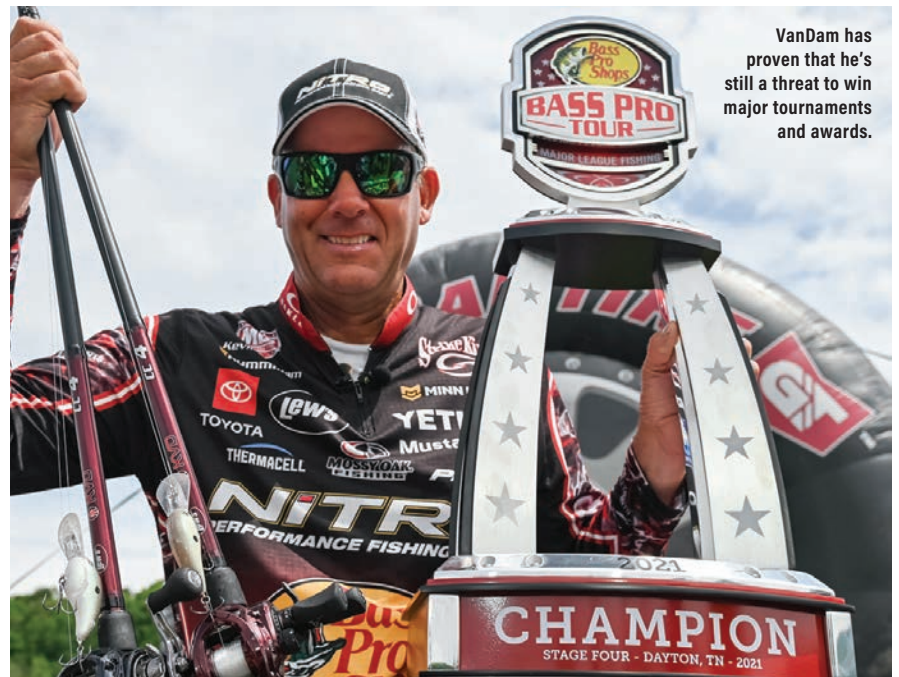
VanDam will also continue to give back in more direct ways. He’s been able to leverage his notoriety into several successful youth outreach programs through the years, most of which are run by his family’s Kevin VanDam Foundation.

“As a connected person in the outdoor industry, I can make a \$100 donation go a lot further,” VanDam explained. In addition to activities aimed at introducing and engaging young people in the outdoors, the Kevin VanDam Foundation works with groups like the March of Dimes and St. Jude’s to better fund research and care for childhood illness.

Not surprisingly, VanDam will also continue to work on product development, something he’s embraced throughout his career. His sponsors and partners, many of which have been there since the beginning, find



PHOTOS BY GARRICK DIXON



VanDam has proven that he’s still a threat to win major tournaments and awards.

VanDam's gifts to be invaluable in their efforts to devise ways to catch more fish and his credibility vital to catching the eyes of anglers. If you fish, chances are at some point you've bought a product with VanDam's name or initials on it.

IS IT TOO EARLY?

VanDam will have plenty to keep him busy. Still, one can't help but think he's stepping away too early. Last season found him again in AOY contention, finishing fifth. In 2021, the fishing world watched in awe as he took to the ledges of the Tennessee River en route to an astounding victory on Lake Chickamauga. In June, he led his group through the Qualifying Rounds on Cayuga Lake, ultimately qualifying for the Championship Round and finishing ninth.

The secret to his sustained success?

"It's a mental toughness and fortitude combined with decision making," he said. "I understand when there's a window to win."

VanDam has always been the epitome of a closer. As he approached his final two regular-season tournaments – both in his home state of Michigan – he had some thoughts about those windows closing on their own.

"You know, I've never won at St. Clair," he confirmed.

I was as surprised as anyone, sure I'd seen him hoist a trophy sometime during the lake's long competitive history.

"I've got a star on the schedule every time we go there," VanDam said. "It's my favorite place on the planet."

How about Saginaw Bay?

"I haven't been there in 30 years, even though it's only three hours from my house," VanDam said.

That sums up why VanDam is ready to retire. The greatest our game has ever known wants time to just go fishing. Whether that's at Saginaw Bay or an exotic locale in Alaska, VanDam will soon come full circle, enjoying the outdoors the way he did before all of this started — before creating the feared KVD persona, filling rooms with trophies and achieving immortality in the sport that he, arguably more than any other figure, helped elevate to its current level.

Still, I think it's too early. He'll continue to be relevant in the sport for

decades, no doubt, but the absence of KVD from the competitive arena will be noticeable. "Where's Kevin?" they'll ask at each BPT event. "How'd KVD do?"

With the upcoming retirement of Kevin VanDam, a chapter in the book on bass fishing will be completed and never

re-written. It seemed like just yesterday that we all got our first taste of the lanky kid from Kalamazoo, dorky hat and baggy shirt, poised to pound the pro tour into oblivion.

"It's scary how fast it goes by," VanDam admitted. ■



VanDam added to his more than 120 career Top 10s at Cayuga Lake in June.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



The author isn't so sure that it's time for VanDam to wave goodbye to tournament fishing.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

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LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Alton Jones, Alton Jones Jr. cementing Jones' claim as "First Family" of professional bass fishing

How the Texas father/son duo has created a powerful legacy of success in tournaments (and life), and helped each other become better anglers along the way

By Joe Balog PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



SINCE THE INCEPTION of the Bass Pro Tour in 2019, Texas pros Alton Jones and Alton Jones Jr. have been the most dominant father/son duo in professional bass fishing. And, some could argue, the most successful in tournament fishing history.

In the four years since that first BPT event on Florida's Kissimmee Chain in early February of 2019, the tandem has reeled off an astounding run of success that includes nearly \$1 million in combined tournament winnings, two Heavy Hitters belts and frequent residence in the Top 10 of the league's Angler of the Year standings.

To borrow a phrase, it's been difficult keeping up with the Joneses.

The father/son relationship between 60-year-old Wendell Alton Jones and 31-year-old Wendell Alton Jones Jr. is multi-sided: It's grounded in strong family values – respect for a parent, love for a child, etc. – but it also represents a high-level working rapport where each is both partner and competitor.

Alton and Alton Jr. have been competing with and against each other at the highest levels of tournament bass fishing since early February 2017, when "Junior" (as he's commonly called by friends and family) fished his first Bassmaster Elite Series tournament, on Cherokee Lake in Tennessee. Alton Sr. finished 19th at that event; Junior finished 25th, just 2 pounds behind his dad.

In the 50-plus tour-level events they've fished together since, each of the Joneses has learned from the other, elevating their game to a higher level. Within the Jones family blood runs a deep understanding of the intricacies of successful tournament fishing, an understanding made even more profound by the give-and-take between a veteran teacher and a gifted student.

GROWING UP IN BASS TOURNAMENT LIFE

A quick look at simple statistics shows that Alton Jones Jr. is one of the top competitors on the Bass Pro Tour. He blew away the final-day competition to claim the General Tire Heavy Hitters title belt on Bussey Brake, Louisiana, this past April; he won Stage Two at Lake Fork in 2022; and he racked up \$150,000 in big-bass bonuses at Heavy Hitters on Lake Palestine in 2022.

"I COULDN'T BE MORE PROUD."

As of this writing, Junior is the leader in the Bally Bet Angler of the Year standings with one event remaining and a strong bet to claim his first career AOY.

Junior was deeply embedded in the world of professional bass fishing through an upbringing in the sport. "Senior" competed in the Bassmaster Top 100s the year Junior was born (1992) and fished the Top 150s, FLW Tour, Bassmaster Tour and Elite Series throughout his childhood.

PHOTOS BY PHOENIX MOORE



Jones Sr. has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, thanks partly to Jones Jr.'s energy.



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

once not experiencing organized bass fishing through the lens of his dad's career. For the first time, destiny was in Alton Jr.'s hand, and it suited him well.

"That's when the lightbulb went off. It was like a flip of a switch," Junior says.

Liberated by the ability to captain the ship, so to speak, Junior quickly took command of his own tournament fishing experience. From that point on, there was no turning back from a career in the game that he had grown up around.

"I knew immediately after that (tournament) that I was going to do all I could to be a professional fisherman," Jones says. "It's funny I never realized it until that day."

BECOMING HIS OWN ANGLER

Jones Jr. would eventually qualify for the Elite Series after two grueling seasons fishing the Bass Opens in 2015 and 2016. Early in his Elite career, he found himself mirroring his father, with mixed results. While Senior was pulling down \$10,000 to \$25,000 checks virtually every tournament, Alton Jr. struggled.

Perhaps Alton Jr. was destined to become a career angler himself, since most of his youth was spent on a boat with his father, tagging along as a practice partner in lakes, river and bays around the country.

"I got to see more fisheries than anyone in the world at that time," Jones Jr. says.

Along with the highlights of travel and the success of Senior's career came Junior's exposure to the downside of professional fishing: "It's dirty truck stops, grueling drives, sleeping in your vehicle for a couple hours so you can get back on the road," Junior says. "People only see the small snippets and perks. It's not a glamorous life."

By his early teens, Alton Jr. wasn't entirely sure of his career path. Home schooling – a necessity to allow the family to live full-time on the road – found Junior missing friends and sports. Balancing the hours was a challenge for everybody, and other interests began to appeal as much as fishing.

But around age 15, Alton Jr. jumped into a tournament with a friend, for



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

Alton Jr. is enjoying a prolific year in 2023, thanks partly to knowledge gained from his dad.

"Year 1 on the Elites, I was the new kid on the block fishing against the big-time, trying to figure out what it takes to even get a check, and my dad was at the top of his game," Junior remembers. "Of course he was trying to help me along, but we fished identical. I was trying to be too much like him. When I was struggling, I'd be out there on the water asking myself 'What would dad do right now?' You just can't fish that way."

Jones Jr. again needed to be his own man, and he began to take thoughtful steps to establish a more diverse skill set and broader base of knowledge.

"I took what dad taught me and sped things up a little bit," Junior says. "I moved more. And I became better with finesse."

Jones Jr.'s headfirst dive into finesse fishing came at a different career stage than his father's, and at a seemingly opportune time. Unproven and mostly unsponsored during the first handful of years of his career, the younger Jones was most worried about putting food on the table and less concerned with catching the winning bag.

"I was chasing checks, Dad was chasing wins," Junior says.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Alton Sr. claimed the Heavy Hitters title in 2021; Alton Jr. followed up with a belt of his own in 2021.



Alton Jr. claimed the 2023 Heavy Hitters belt in impressive fashion in Louisiana.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

One tenet of Senior that remained central to Junior's approach was the belief that he could get a jump on his competitors simply through good, old-fashioned hard work. A decade of practice outings with his father, regardless of time of year or weather conditions, taught Junior that practice is the most important variable in tournament fishing, and hard work pays off.

"I fell in love with the work side of tournament fishing" he recalls, admitting to an uncommon enthusiasm for the grind of practice. "The hardest thing to do is to learn how to practice. Those are the work days, but I look forward to the longest days in the worst weather. That gives me the ability and opportunity to outwork my competitors."

SENIOR'S CAREER RESURGENCE

A 33-year veteran of tour-level bass fishing and one of the most prolific pros of all time with career winnings north of \$3.4 million, Jones quickly admits that Junior's enthusiasm and energy have rubbed off on him in ways that have energized his own fishing.



Alton Jr. grew up around bass fishing and spent his youth fishing diverse fisheries with Alton Jr.

PHOTOS COURTESY ALTON & JIMMIE SUE JONES.



"(His energy) drives me," Senior admits. "I might have retired by now if it wasn't for him."

Senior has enjoyed some of the best years of his career during Junior's rapid ascent, winning the Heavy Hitters belt in 2021 – his first major win since 2012 – and finishing third in the 2022 Bally Bet Angler of the Year race while reeling off five Top 10s that season.

While he continues to rely on many of the same lures and power-fishing techniques that made him a top-level pro for three decades, Jones has supplemented his arsenal thanks to Junior's youthful versatility and his exposure to baits and techniques that he might not have even tried in years past.

"Alton Jr. has pushed me to become more versatile, and I get a shortcut (on learning new techniques) because Little Alton has already mastered them," Jones says. "When he was a teenager, he'd already mastered fishing a frog before I'd ever fished one. There's stuff in his tackle box now that I haven't even heard of. It's easier for me, because now I can get interested (in a new bait or technique) once I know something works."

Both Joneses agree that the shortcuts now offered by Junior are a payback for early Cliff's Notes provided by Senior: Principles proven through years

of tournament experience were adopted by Junior without the learning curve. Give and take.

THE GIVE AND TAKE

Senior and Junior serve as sounding boards for each other in the process of developing strategy long before tournaments begin. They're mindful of Bass Pro Tour rules regarding information, but the pair share unfiltered opinions and observations about fisheries before tournament week commences. For Alton Sr., the confidence that comes from the opinions of immediate, trusted family is unparalleled.

"In fishing, half the story can be worse than none of the story at all," he says. "Naturally, we want each other to do well. Little Alton is a master strategist. He has game plans that blow my mind."

Senior admits that details have become less important as he's aged, and he's honest about the physical slowdown, reduced energy level and time needed to process information at the age of 60 versus his 30s and 40s. ("It's a matter of physiology," he says simply.) Alton Jr., however, quickly hones in on details and is able to plug himself and Senior into information that frequently makes a difference.

Junior's hard-driving attitude about practice – "Practice hard every day,

even during tournament hours," he says – allows him to stay ahead of the fish, and his competitors. But he frequently leans on his father's insight to initially get off the ground whenever he starts game planning for a new Bass Pro Tour tournament location.

"He's seen it all," Junior says of his dad's 33-year well of tournament knowledge. "We'll have a weather pattern or it will be a certain time of year, and he'll key me in to look for something that I'd otherwise never think of. He'll mention a shad spawn or something that happened years ago under the same conditions, and it will be there."

"Hopefully my wisdom rubs off on him," Jones jokes in response.

Now fishing in his fourth decade as a full-time pro, Jones Sr. finds himself in what he describes as "the most fun part of my career."

"I don't have to fish, I get to fish," Senior says. "And let's face it: At 31 years old, most kids don't have time for their parents. They're starting families, busy with their jobs. But our traveling together puts us together a lot. I'm trying to enjoy this time and not take it for granted."

When they're not on the road, the duo can often be found working on boats and equipment side-by-side,

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each keeping their rigs at the elder Jones' property in Waco. They test lures together in the swimming pool.

Nonetheless, competition is fierce.

"I want to be on top of him on SCORETRACKER®," Senior admits.

"I'm usually listening for his name to judge how I'm doing" Junior adds.

The 2022 season saw the duo compete against each other in a Bass Pro Tour Championship Round for the first time, at Stage Two on Lake Fork. Alton Jr. claimed the first-place trophy and check that day with 46 pounds, 2 ounces while Senior finished fifth with 29-6. Junior hoisted the trophy in front of fans, friends and family in the Jones' home state.

His father just stood to the side of the stage, smiling and soaking it all in.

"I couldn't be more proud," Senior said at the time. "To be on the same lake with 'Little Alton' for a championship was pretty great, but there's no better feeling as a father than to watch him lift that trophy."

THE GLUE THAT HOLDS THE JONESES TOGETHER

As is almost always the case with any father/son duo, there's a third party who deserves much of the credit for their success. That's true for the Joneses: Alton's wife and Junior's mother, Jimmye Sue, is the lynchpin of this tournament-fishing family and the biggest common denominator between both Senior and Junior's successes.

Alton and Jimmye Sue met while attending Baylor University and married in 1985. Alton owned a computer store at the time, Jimmye Sue was a registered nurse, and bass fishing already occupied a hearty percentage of Alton's time and energy. So much so that by 1989, Jimmye Sue offered Alton a suggestion that would set the family's course for the next three-plus decades.

"She told me 'You're not being successful at fishing because of the computer store, and you're not being successful at the computer store because of fishing,'" Alton says. "'You have to choose one or the other, and if you don't choose fishing, you'll drive me crazy. Let's try it and see if we can make it work.'"

PHOTO COURTESY ALTON JONES



ALTON, JIMMYE SUE ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY AFTER CRASH

IT WAS A NIGHTMARE come true for Alton and Jimmye Sue Jones.

As they drove Alton's Bass Pro Tour competition rig south from Saginaw Bay, Michigan, in mid-June – headed to Detroit for Bass Pro Tour Stage Six – a car heading the opposite direction suddenly turned into their lane. With no warning and no time to react going 55 miles per hour, the Joneses' truck and boat collided with the vehicle broadside, sending them careening into a field, turning their truck on its side and ejecting the boat from the trailer.

The truck and boat were totaled and a large percentage of Alton's tackle was either damaged or lost. But despite the severity of the crash, the pair escaped with only a broken sternum (Jimmye Sue) and bumps and bruises to show for it.

"God was looking out for us," Alton said. "Everybody who has seen pictures of the truck and boat say the same thing: 'You're lucky to be alive!', and they're right. We're very fortunate to still have our lives, and we can thank God for that."

Although the crash happened just four days before the start of Stage Six, Alton competed in the tournament, finishing 47th while fishing out of Junior's boat (the two were in separate competition groups).

"Jimmye Sue insisted," Alton said. "She told me 'What are you going to do except sit around with me, worry and think about fishing?' We had gotten her home and she was with family and friends, so I felt confident enough in her condition that I agreed to fish. But I have to admit, my head wasn't really in it. It felt good to get out there and fish, but my thoughts were with Jimmye Sue and how close we came to losing our lives."

Jimmye Sue's recovery from the injury has gone well, and she's expected to be back to full strength by the time this issue arrives in subscribers' mailboxes.

So Jones went all in on the tournament game, fishing the 1990 New York and Maryland Invitationals and a full schedule of seven Bass Invitationals, a Bassmaster MegaBucks, a Bassmaster Top 100 and a Bassmaster Top 150 in 1991. His total winnings in those events were \$4,566.67.

"Jimmye Sue was paying the bills," Senior admits. "A lot of wives put their husbands through law school or medical school, but Jimmye Sue put me through 'fishing school'. I was also working as a guide at the time, but she was the one keeping us afloat."

Alton Jr. came along in the spring of 1992, somewhere in between the Florida Top 100 and South Carolina Top 100. Alton continued to fish the Top 100s through the mid-1990s, eventually winning \$24,000 cash and a \$21,000 boat at the Alabama Top 100 on Neely Henry in May of 1997 and finishing 18th in the Bassmaster Classic three months later. Before Junior's

first-grade year in 1998, Jimmye Sue quit her job and the Jones family embarked on a seasonal road trip that continues (in some fashion) to this day.

Years later, with Senior secure in his career and an up-and-coming Little Alton and younger sisters Kristen and Jamie traveling the country with them, Jimmye Sue worked virtually around the clock to bring the next in line up to speed.

"My mom is the glue that holds the family together" Alton Jr. says. "Home schooling takes a special set of parents. I'd be out practicing with my dad all day, and my mom would school my siblings. Then she'd have to work with me half the night when I'd come in after practice. What my mom did was pretty incredible – she was busy taking care of kids, taking care of my dad and doing all the things to allow him to succeed while also allowing me to get my feet under me in my career as well." ■

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BESTING DAD
Marshall Robinson celebrates his 14th-place finish at his first Tackle Warehouse Invationals event on Lake Okeechobee. He bested his father's weight by 8 ounces.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

FISHING GENES ARE STRONG IN LANE, HOWELL, ROBINSON FAMILIES

Marshall Robinson, Cal Lane and Laker Howell follow in their fathers' footsteps in 2023 Tackle Warehouse Invationals

By Mason Prince

While Bass Pro Tour pros Alton Jones and Alton Jones Jr. are the most prolific father/son duo in the sport of professional bass fishing today, it doesn't take a leap in one's imagination to foresee a time when multiple father/son tandems are wearing the BPT shields on their jerseys.

A glance at the 2023 Tackle Warehouse Invationals roster supports that statement: Bass Pro Tour pros Randy Howell, Marty Robinson and Chris Lane shared roster space with sons Laker Howell, Marshall Robinson and Cal Lane, the first time in the history of professional bass fishing that three major-tour-level pros competed on the same tour circuit with their sons.

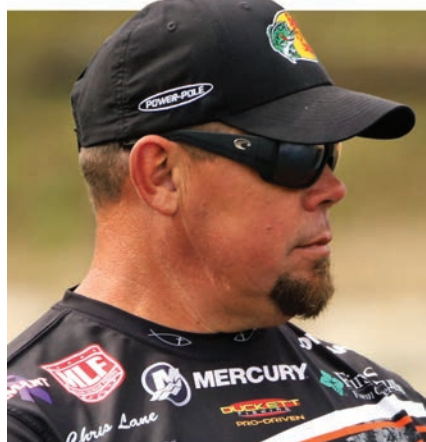
"We joke a lot about it when all the dads and sons are together that we knew this day was coming, it just got here way too soon," Randy Howell said. "I don't know where the time goes that these young men who were just kids not too long ago are here with all of us now."



RANDY HOWELL | PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



LAKER HOWELL | PHOTO BY ALLY PERKINS



CHRIS LANE | PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



CAL LANE | PHOTO BY ROB MATSURA

Cal Lane led the way in 2021, qualifying into the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit through the Southeastern Division of the Toyota Series and fishing two full seasons alongside Chris in 2021 and 2022. Laker Howell followed in 2023 through the Central Division. Marshall Robinson claimed his spot on the roster via the 2022 Toyota Series Championship.

According to all three dads, they've seen their sons' success coming for years.

WHEN THEY KNEW

Randy and Laker Howell have shared a boat for 17 years: Randy served as captain as Laker competed in junior high and high school events. As Laker got older and gained more experience in the tournament game, Randy took note of Laker's passion and attention to perfecting his fishing craft.

"I knew he had what it took to be a pro when he was in high school," Howell recalled. "It really has come naturally to him growing up in and around professional bass fishing. He

would walk around all these professional tournament weigh-ins and talk to all these pros while he was on the road with me. To see him where he is now is just full circle."

Marty noticed Marshall's fishing acumen from a young age as well. When a young Marshall wasn't catching frogs or exploring the outdoors, he was learning about the environments and bodies of water he and Marty would fish.

"When he was a kid, he would catch bream and explain to me why they were in the area that he caught them," Robinson said. "He knew where they were, why they were eating what he was catching them with and how the whole food chain worked. He was teaching me stuff. I knew then he could be really good at this if he wanted to stick with it."

Chris Lane, meanwhile, always knew that Cal had oodles of natural fishing talent but didn't fully grasp his son's potential to be a full-time pro until he watched him qualify for the major tour.

"He fished a Toyota Series event in 2020 on Neely Henry and needed to catch 'em in the final event of the season to get the points to qualify for the Invitationals," Lane recalled. "He ended up finishing eighth out of like 250 boats and earned his spot. That's when I knew he had what it took. That was a 'Wow' moment for me."

MEETING PRO-LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

A 17-year veteran of major-tour-level competition and winner of the 2021 Summit Cup, Marty Robinson rooms with Casey Ashley, Jonathon VanDam and Kevin VanDam on the Bass Pro Tour and understands what it takes to compete at the highest level. He's convinced that Marshall has whatever "it" is.

"I see a lot of similarities in Marshall that I see in pros that I've fished with for 17 years," Robinson explained. "He has the 'it' factor. It all comes naturally to him, something that I never had but a lot of professionals do have. Marshall was born with certain instincts for fishing that others just don't have. That's what makes him special."



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



Laker Howell's tournament education started at a young age while traveling the national-level bass circuits with dad Randy.

Marshall's performance in 2023 supports those observations: As this issue of *Bass Fishing* magazine goes to press, the younger Robinson is in ninth place in the Invitationals Angler of the Year race, needing to move up just one spot in the standings at the season's final event to earn an invitation to fish the Bass Pro Tour in 2024.

The Lanes are no strangers to success. Chris is an eight-time winner, including a win at Bass Pro Tour Stage One in 2023 and a Bassmaster Classic victory in 2012. His brother Bobby claimed the REDCREST 2022 trophy and has five other tour-level wins on his resume. Older brother Arnie owns 10 Top 10s and a reputation as one of the most respected anglers in Florida. But Chris believes that Cal will succeed due to more than his strong fishing genes.

"Watching him learn how to fish and improve every day from such a young age has been amazing to watch," Lane said. "You can tell how bad he wants to make it to the Bass Pro Tour. To know he wants to be like his dad, uncles and grandfather is

pretty cool. He's such a patient angler, and he didn't get that trait from me. He has the patience when he's fishing that he's able to control what he can't really control outside of fishing. I've actually learned how to be more patient by watching him fish."

In addition to fishing the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals, Laker Howell finished in the top 15 in two divisions of the Toyota Series in 2023 and is well on track to reach the high bar that Randy – a Bassmaster Classic champion and 30-year veteran of tour-level competition – has set. Randy is, of course, impressed with Laker's fishing, but is even more proud of his son's life off the water.

"It's not just that he's a good angler, which he is," Howell explained. "It's the fact that he's a good man with a good head on his shoulders. He's kind, generous, compassionate and loves people. He's the total package as a person, and I think that's what I'm most proud of. Those characteristics will help him do really well in the sport and in life."

While there may be benefits to having a familiar last name and an upbringing in the sport, there can also be downfalls, according to Randy.

"It's a double-edged sword because everyone expects you to do well, but if you don't, the criticism can be harsh," Howell warned. "If you can't live up to what other people think you should live up to, people are ready to pounce on you and criticize you. It's a tough thing to manage, but Laker and all the kids have done a great job at it."

Marty, Randy and Chris' respective careers appear to be far from over. But as the sun begins to rise on their sons' careers, Marty can't help but reminisce on how far he and his son have both come together.

"He reminds me of myself when I was young," Robinson reflected. "It feels like I succeeded in living my dream of becoming a professional angler again seeing him live his out. I know how hard he works, and to see his passion and love for the sport develop over these years has been amazing to see." ■



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YETI BUILT FOR THE WILD.



Bass Pro Tour angler Cliff Pace hand-paints a group of Black Label baits, a balsa-bait producer that the Mississippi pro owns and operates.



MASTER CRAFTERS

PACE, SCROGGINS, BECKER HAVE TURNED LURE-MAKING PASSIONS INTO USEFUL TOOLS OF THE BASS-CATCHING TRADE

By Sean Ostruszka

Everyone has a “thing.”

Some like to mess with engines. Others tend gardens and plants. For Cliff Pace, he always grew up fishing. So, being a “tinkerer at heart,” it wasn’t hard to figure out his thing.

“I’ve always been mesmerized by anything that can be used in the process of catching a fish,” Pace said. “That primarily revolves around lures. I’ve just always been intrigued by [building lures], because you can always be trying to make something better.”

Pace is hardly alone.

“Basement” (or homemade) lure making has long been central to the sport. It’s spawned everything from secret lures to high-end custom baits to ones that grew so popular they’re now staples in everyone’s tackle arsenal. And the craft has only continued to grow and grow, with a myriad of websites now dedicated to teaching and exchanging ideas about lure building, and others offering a place for bait-makers to buy all the components you could ever imagine. Plus, let’s not forget the thousands of YouTube video tutorials on how to build or paint a lure.

According to Pace, it’s never been easier to get into the hobby and turn it into whatever you want. Thus, we decided to pick the brains of him and a few other top Bass Pro Tour anglers about what got them into the lure-tinkering craft and why they do it.



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

PHOTO BY TIFFANY PAGE

A lineup of Black Label baits await the next step in Pace's shop.

HOBBY TURNED CAREER

Pro: Cliff Pace

Craft: Designing and building balsa hard baits

Necessity is often the mother of invention. It certainly was for Pace.

"Back when I started fishing, you didn't have the huge array of products you have available now," Pace said. "So, we had to make our own. I can remember the first modifying I did was when I was a teenager. I'd take nail polish remover and take the paint off plastic crankbaits to make them more transparent. Now, those crankbaits are everywhere, but they weren't available back then."

Growing up fishing shallow rivers in Mississippi, Pace also quickly realized the crankbait void went well beyond just colors, but also applications. The plastic versions on the market simply didn't do what he needed. So, he started building his own crankbaits out of balsa to make sure he had specific baits to match specific applications.

Were they pretty at first? Pace laughs and says no, they were "pretty crude." However, to say he got better is an understatement. After all, he now

"MAKE SOMETHING YOU CAN PERSONALLY BENEFIT (FROM) AND ENJOY USING."

owns Black Label Tackle, which specializes in selling handmade balsa crankbaits.

Yet, even though his hobby has turned into a job, he still loves it just as much. Pace continues to find ways to keep tinkering.

"I have my big shop for my business, but I have another shop at home that's my hobby shop," said Pace, who doesn't have any of his original crankbaits, but says he has one of his hand-carved baits hanging in his house that he used to weigh a bass in his first Bassmaster Classic. "That's where I'll do small modifications on lures and tinker. I may work all day building crankbaits, but then I'll go home and may work on skirted baits all night."

"It's my job and business, but still my hobby, one I've always gotten an immense sense of satisfaction."

WHAT'S IN THE SAUCE?

Ever wondered how a lure gets designed and created? Well, every company has a different process, but the one Cliff Pace uses for his **Black Label Tackle** is similar to most, with some tweaks because of how he goes about building his lures.

It all starts with a target idea. Maybe it's a crankbait that runs a certain depth, has a certain wiggle, has a particular profile, works well in a certain type of cover or situation, or some combination of each.

From there, he draws out the shape on a piece of paper, transfers it to a piece of balsa wood and then cuts out the profile and lip slot. Next comes sanding the lure to the shape he wants, followed by adding the ballast.

"Every crankbait needs a ballast," Pace said. "So, you can drill a hole in the belly and pour lead into it, or glue specific-sized weights in. This is one of the biggest guessing games at first. Moving the weight a little forward or further back or increasing or decreasing the weight all changes the action. It's a lot of trial and error."

Because of that, Pace often builds the same lure in batches of a dozen or even 20, all with different weights, weight placements, lip angles and pull points. He'll then seal the wood with multiple coats of sealant until there's a smooth, paintable surface and then paint and assemble them, which is a process that can take up to two weeks.

Then comes the most fun (or most frustrating) part: taking the baits out and seeing how they run.

"Sometimes I'll nail the process first try," Pace said. "But sometimes it may take 40 or 50 tries, constantly going back and tweaking this or sanding down that in order to get the desired action. It can be frustrating when it's not doing what you want, but when you figure it out, you know it, and you know exactly what it's going to do."



PHOTO BY TIFFANY PAGE

Florida pro Terry Scroggins utilizes the skills he learned as a custom car painter in creating custom colors for his crankbaits.

COLOR OF CONFIDENCE

Pro: Terry Scroggins

Craft: Custom painting hard baits and pouring custom soft plastics

There are few things as eye-catching as a car with a custom paint job. Maybe it has a special shade, or extra sparkles or stripes. Whatever it is, even among the thousands of cars you pass every day, a custom-painted ride is hard to miss driving down the road.

That's something Florida pro Terry Scroggins knows all too well.

You see, he painted cars for 15 years before he started fishing professionally. Ever since, he's simply taken that passion for producing something alluring and transitioned from catching human eyes to those of bass.

"Way back when I was fishing locally, there were lures in certain colors that were either hard to find or you couldn't get anymore that worked really well," Scroggins said. "So, I'd buy some and paint them up. Then I'd realize they'd work even better, and it just grew from there."

Many of the vast array of custom-painted lures that are available online today are simply incredible in terms of realism and creativity. Most are produced with an airbrush and water-based paints. Not Scroggins' baits, though. He still harks back to his auto-painting days, using auto paint and a "jam gun."

Part of the reason is his familiarity with the setup. Another is the fact that automotive paints are so durable he doesn't need to seal his lures once he paints them. But what he likes most is the fact that automotive paints come in colors water-based ones don't, such as iridescent hues that change colors, and he feels that gives him an edge.

"Automotive paint is a lot more expensive, but it looks a whole lot better," said Scroggins, who dips his plastic lures in MEK solvent to soften the plastic and ensure a better hold for the paint. "Some of the best automotive colors cost \$400 a pint, but painting baits, that may last 25 years, and again, it looks so different.

"There are absolutely certain situations when they'll only bite one particular color. So, the fact I can make whatever I want is more a confidence thing

than anything else. No one else has it. With how extreme fishing pressure has gotten, these fish get used to seeing the same baits and same colors over and over. A different bait or color can often be enough to generate a lot more bites."

That love of colors doesn't just stop for Scroggins at painting. He also has

gotten big into pouring his own soft plastics, especially custom flipping baits in custom colors that he likes to use back home in Florida.

"If I can go to the store and buy a bait, it's what I do, but sometimes those custom colors make all the difference," Scroggins said.

PHOTO BY RICKY BODSFORD



Matt Becker customizes his hair jigs with upsized jigheads and hooks.



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

POURING SOMETHING SPECIAL

Pro: Matt Becker

Craft: Pouring weights and custom jigs

Most of us had that moment as a kid: when you walked into a tackle store, saw the cool stuff on the shelves, wanted *all* of it, and then realized you could barely afford a single pack of sinkers. Matt Becker sure did, and that's why he started pouring his own weights and jigs.

"It was just a lot cheaper, and I didn't have the money to keep going and buying more," Becker says. "When I was in my early teen years I really got into it, pouring jigs, buzzbaits, drop-shot weights, tube jigs. I even got into soft plastics for little bit. I just always had ideas in my head on how to make a bait better, and I'd try to make it myself."

Case in point: hair jigs.

While admittedly only getting into the pattern in the last several years, Becker immediately realized the effectiveness of hair jigs ... and their limitations.

"All the ones on the market, the hooks were so small," Becker said. "I just didn't feel very safe catching 5- to 6-pound smallmouth on them. Plus,

Becker's handmade hair jigs helped him to a top five finish at Lake Guntersville.



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

you needed such light equipment to cast them."

So, Becker decided to start making his own to fit his needs. That meant bulking up everything, from the size of the jighead to the size of the hook, as well as how much marabou he tied on it.

"The first couple weren't how I wanted, and it was a lot of trial and error," Becker said. "You still wanted it to just float around, but have a bigger profile with more weight so you could cast it further, which is huge on those slick, sunny days when it really shines."

Well, he finally figured out the right combination, and now it's a staple on his deck just about any time he's fishing smallies. Plus, tying his own means he gets to try different colors than just the typical black, or he'll add flashabou and tinsel into his jigs, all to present a different look to wary, shallow smallmouth.

"It's hard to say it makes a big difference to the fish, but it does to me," Becker said. "It gives me more confidence, which is sometimes actually all you really need." ■



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Josh Bertrand, Edwin Evers and Marty Robinson: the first official Team Series squad for 2024.



DRAFT DAY

2023 General Tire Team Series Draft sets the stage for Season 2 of MLF's unique made-for-TV competition

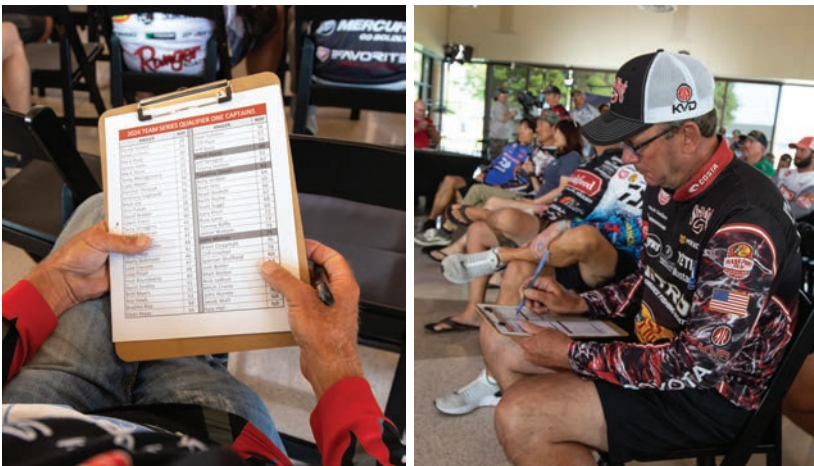
Story and photography by Joel Shangle

"With the first pick of the 2023 General Tire Team Series Draft, I choose Edwin Evers."

And with that statement, Arizona pro Josh Bertrand kicked off the second team draft in professional tournament bass-fishing history, laying the foundation for the second run of Major League Fishing's wildly successful, shot-for-TV competition series, the General Tire Team Series on Outdoor Channel.

MLF fans and viewers had just watched the mid-June TV premiere of the final round of the 2022 General Tire Team Series Championship Presented by B & W Trailer Hitches when the 80-man Bass Pro Tour field assembled at St. Clair Metropark in Harrison Township, Michigan, for the 2023 draft. Bertrand's selection of Evers — the 2019 BPT Angler of the Year and one of the top five tournament money-winners of all time — marked the first chess move among the 27 team captains gathered in the "war room" to build their three-man squads, and certainly was one with which Bertrand was extremely pleased.

"I got a future Hall of Famer and one of the best fishermen in the history of the sport. I can't think of a better way to start a team," Bertrand said.



Team captains track available players as the draft goes on.



Scott Suggs, Wesley Strader and Casey Ashley discuss draft strategy.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



Jacob Wheeler and Dylan Hays return in 2024 for a shot at a Team Series repeat.

MOMENTUM GOING INTO SEASON 2

The 2023 Team Series draft was the first step in a process that will continue in September and October with three nine-team qualifier competitions on yet-to-be-announced fisheries. Those qualifiers will send nine squads to the Team Series Championship in November, where they'll compete for their share of \$700,000 in cash payouts. All the action will be filmed and produced for weekly shows that will premiere every Saturday on Outdoor Channel throughout the first two quarters of 2024.

The first run of the General Tire Team Series continued the outstanding ratings success of its predecessor, the MLF Cup and MLF Select series, thanks largely to the unique three-man team dynamic and wireless technology that allows teammates to communicate, strategize and adjust to conditions in real time as they compete.

Hence the fist bump when Jacob Wheeler chose Arkansas pro Dylan Hays with the final pick of the first round, a repeat of Wheeler's first pick in the 2022 draft. Wheeler and Hays (along with former BPT pro Jason Lambert) dominated throughout the inaugural Team Series, winning their qualifier in Minnesota by an astounding 85 pounds and running away with the \$300,000 Championship in Florida by almost 73 pounds.

"Ultimately, if you're going to compete against this crew, you have to be able to work together well," Wheeler said, gesturing to the BPT anglers in the room. "Last year worked out pretty

darn well. When my guy Dylan was available to be picked when I was up, I thought, 'If it's not broke, don't fix it.' Let's run it back."

Full coverage of the General Tire Team Series can be found on the web at MajorLeagueFishing.com. ■



Dakota Ebare explains his Team Series draft wish list.



Pre-draft discussion among captains is hot and heavy.

2024 GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES TEAMS

CAPTAIN: Josh Bertrand
Edwin Evers, Marty Robinson

CAPTAIN: Greg Vinson
Bradley Roy, David Dudley

CAPTAIN: Chris Lane
Jared Lintner, John Hunter

CAPTAIN: Wesley Strader
Scott Suggs, Matt Becker

CAPTAIN: Todd Faircloth
Jeff Sprague, Jeff Kriet

CAPTAIN: Ott DeFoe
Andy Montgomery, Brandon Coulter

CAPTAIN: Stephen Browning
Anthony Gagliardi, Keith Poche

CAPTAIN: Casey Ashley
Terry Scroggins, Jacob Wall

CAPTAIN: Jonathon VanDam
James Elam, Matt Lee

CAPTAIN: Bryan Thrift
Luke Clausen, Josh Butler

CAPTAIN: Brent Ehrler
Brett Hite, John Murray

CAPTAIN: Alton Jones Jr.
Nick LeBrun, Britt Myers

CAPTAIN: Randall Tharp
Gerald Spohrer, Russ Lane

CAPTAIN: Jeremy Lawyer
Cody Meyer, Shin Fukae

CAPTAIN: Dustin Connell
Cole Floyd, Roy Hawk

CAPTAIN: Adrian Avena
Spencer Shuffield, Ryan Salzman

CAPTAIN: Andy Morgan
Fletcher Shryock, James Watson

CAPTAIN: Michael Neal
Takahiro Omori, Dean Rojas

CAPTAIN: Mark Daniels Jr.
Randy Howell, Cliff Crochet

CAPTAIN: Justin Lucas
Skeet Reese, Fred Roumbanis

CAPTAIN: Zack Birge
Mark Rose, Cliff Pace

CAPTAIN: Jesse Wiggins
Kyle Hall, Gary Klein

CAPTAIN: Kevin VanDam
David Walker, Kelly Jordon

CAPTAIN: Dakota Ebare
Mitch Crane, Tommy Biffle

CAPTAIN: Alton Jones Sr.
Brent Chapman, Dave Lefebre

CAPTAIN: Jordan Lee
Mark Davis, Timmy Horton

CAPTAIN: Jacob Wheeler
Dylan Hays, Boyd Duckett



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20 PLACES YOU SHOULD BE FISHING RIGHT NOW

CAUGHT BETWEEN SUMMER DOLDRUMS AND FALL TRANSITION? PUT THESE FISHERIES ON YOUR "MUST-FISH" LIST FOR SEPTEMBER AND BEYOND.

By Tyler Brinks

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Of all the months in the yearly fishing calendar, September is rightfully regarded as one of the most challenging for catching bass across the United States. "Harvest month" is awkwardly positioned between the summer doldrums and the cooling weather of fall, and as a result, bass fishing can be brutal.

However, September provides some stellar fishing in certain regions of the country. In unique fisheries where the water has already begun to cool, the schooling bite can lead to nearly nonstop action.

The following fisheries are proven September producers (and they'll fish well into the fall, too). Some are traditional tournament venues that don't get much attention outside of spring/early summer. A handful of them have flown under the radar for years, either because of their remoteness or because they're hiding in plain sight. But all of them are worth a look if you're seeking a good September bite.



The upper Mississippi River is one of those magical places that provides good fishing through the summer/fall transition.

LAKE LANIER, Georgia

Georgia's Lake Lanier has blossomed into one of the best spotted bass fisheries in the country. There's never a bad time to visit this Chattahoochee River system impoundment, as the magnum spotted bass will bite year-round. Early fall can be especially good if you're a fan of topwater fishing, according to Lanier guide and 2023 Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American champion Emil Wagner.

"It's a lot of schooling fish and throwing topwaters over humps, points and reef markers," Wagner said. "Those schools will have anywhere from 10 bass to hundreds of them, and you can throw pencil poppers, walking baits, swimbaits and flukes to catch them, or slow down and get them to eat a drop-shot or jig."

As the water cools and the baitfish begin to move around, expect nearly non-stop action on the surface when you find active fish. As a bonus, the striped bass are plentiful and mean, and you'll likely tangle with several in a day of fishing. Wagner advises visiting the popular lake just north of Atlanta during the week, and not just because of the decreased boat traffic.

"They draw more current through the dam during the week, and while it's not as noticeable as other lakes, it makes a big difference," he said. "The bass pull up and set up better on those spots when the current is running."



2023 All-American champ Emil Wagner shows off some of Lanier's hefty spotted bass.

PHOTO COURTESY EMIL WAGNER



Minnesota's Mille Lacs Lake proved during the 2022 Bass Pro Tour that it's a prolific producer in September.

MILLE LACS LAKE, Minnesota

Minnesota is the Land of 10,000 Lakes (or 11,842, to be exact). Of all those lakes, Mille Lacs is one of the most well-known in bass fishing circles and continues to pump out big smallmouth every year.

And September is a perfect month to visit, as proven when Dustin Connell caught 20 smallmouth for 82 pounds, 9 ounces – a tad over 4 pounds per fish – on the final day of Bass Pro Tour Stage Seven in early September of 2022. Jonathon VanDam finished 14th in that event and eighth in a 2017 Bassmaster tournament (also held in September), so it's no surprise that he's a fan of Mille Lacs in the early fall.

"Mille Lacs is fairly unique for a northern smallmouth fishery because there are so many more rocks, shoals and boulders in shallow water that hold fish," he said. "It also has a good bit of grass, and September is a great time to catch big smallmouth on topwaters around it. It's also a perfect time to throw crankbaits, spinnerbaits and swimbaits."

Even though September weather can still be pleasant during the day, VanDam says that the bass can feel that winter is approaching, which kicks the bite up a notch.

"The days are getting shorter, and they know it's time to feed up," he said. "The nights will also get a little chilly, but the nice thing is that it can still be pretty warm when you are out fishing during the day. You start seeing that mid-September, and the bite will only get better once you get into October."

LAKE CHATUGE, North Carolina/Georgia

Nestled in the Appalachian Mountains on the border between North Carolina and Georgia, Lake Chatuge is a beautiful fishery that's full of bass. It's good all year long but offers a great summer and early fall getaway because of its cooler temperatures. Caz Anderson operates a guide service, Fish Chatuge, that caters to those looking for a unique fishing opportunity in the mountains.

"It's a highland reservoir that stays cooler than other fisheries in the state," he said. "The lake has a great topwater bite that starts in June and goes until October for bass chasing blueback herring. September is great because you have a lot less pleasure boaters out there. One highlight of the lake is the hundreds of brushpiles placed by anglers that are perfect for topwater fishing with shiny pencil poppers, walking baits and swimbaits."

While spotted bass are the dominant species, largemouth live here, too, and start showing up offshore in more significant numbers in September.

"When we get the first cold snap of the year and the lake starts to draw down, the largemouth will show up in the same places as the spots," Anderson said. "The tournament-winning weights start to go up then because someone will find a 6- or 7-pound largemouth."

LAKE ROOSEVELT, Washington

This 150-mile impoundment of Washington's Columbia River is full of big walleye and trout, but it's also a spectacular smallmouth fishery in the summer and fall. If you find yourself competing in a tournament this time of year, expect to see plenty of bags in the high teens and a winning weight over 20 pounds – all smallmouth. Fish will be caught on finesse rigs but will also chase topwaters, swimbaits, and jerkbaits.

Massive Lake Erie also provides September opportunity on a grand scale as bass start to push shallow.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

LAKE ERIE, Pennsylvania/New York/Ohio

Even though it's the smallest of the Great Lakes, Lake Erie is still a massive fishery. Jonathon VanDam says September is one of the better months to fish it, as the entire lake can produce big bass.

"The Western Basin, the Eastern Basin by Buffalo, really the whole lake starts to turn on in September when the bass start to push shallower," he said.

"It'd be pretty tough to pick the best section, but the Pelee Island out from Sandusky, Ohio, and the stretch from Buffalo to Dunkirk in New York are some of the historically great places to fish Erie."

With bass moving to shallower water this time of year, VanDam says anglers fishing Erie in September can catch them several ways.

"Fish get on the rock piles and shoals in shallow water, 10 feet or less, and you can catch them with tubes or drop-shot rigs. The crankbait bite is very strong, and the spinnerbait bite can also be really good."

"Lake CDA" as it's called by locals is one of the most interesting multi-species fisheries in the country in early fall.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SHANGLE



LAKE COUER D'ALENE, Idaho

One of the most scenic lakes in the country, Coeur d'Alene – or "CDA," as it's called locally – is a bass fisherman's paradise with surprising diversity. Whether you're after big largemouth in grass or smallmouth in stereotypical Pacific Northwest clear water and rock, you can find plenty of both on CDA. The early fall fishing can be great here, according to Washington's Luke Clausen, who spends plenty of time on the fishery each year after the Bass Pro Tour season wraps up.

"September is a time when you can catch them shallow or deep, largemouth or smallmouth; it's pretty much whatever you feel like that day," he said. "The frog bite for largemouth is great, especially in the Chain Lakes, but you can catch them just as well targeting smallmouth by throwing a small swimbait in deep water on the main lake."

As fall starts to set in, the fishing will continue to get better with each passing day.

UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER POOLS 4-9, Wisconsin and Minnesota

The Upper Mississippi River is no stranger to the spotlight, having hosted national tournaments at all levels for years. Most of its attention has come during the summer, with July and August events being the norm, but the fishing continues to get better as the days get shorter. September is a great time to fish any of the pools, and you can catch bass with just about any technique you choose, according to Tackle Warehouse Invitationals angler Matt Stefan.

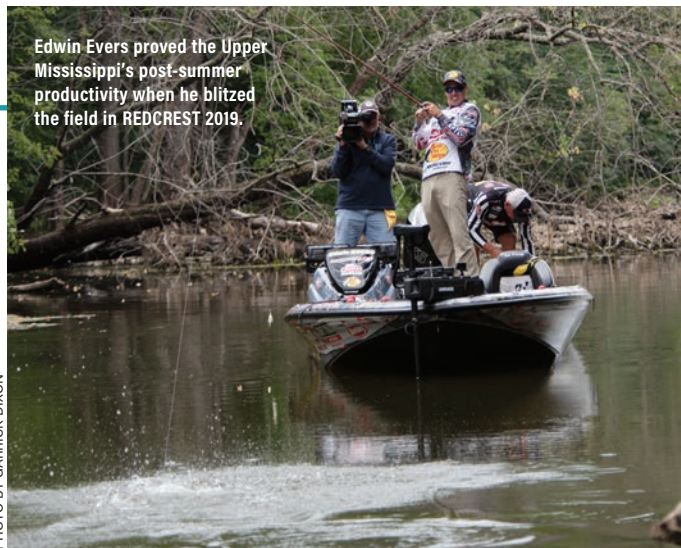
"All those pools are great, and the bass start to follow the shad migration and you can catch them with a lot of different baits," he said. "During the transition in September, you have current-related fish and some in the deeper backwaters as they follow the shad at the mouths of backwaters on wing dams and sand drops. It's a numbers deal, and you see a lot of fish grouped up. You can catch them on Alabama rigs, swimbaits and walking topwater baits."

As a bonus, the fishing pressure decreases significantly in this hunting-crazed region.

"The amount of bass anglers continually drops (in September)," Stefan said. "It's nice to have the best stuff to yourself."

Edwin Evers proved the Upper Mississippi's post-summer productivity when he blitzed the field in REDCREST 2019.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



NEW MELONES LAKE, California

The Mother Lode region is home to some great under-the-national-radar fisheries, but New Melones shines brightest in the late summer and early fall. It has a healthy mix of bass species, with plenty of plump spotted bass to keep you busy plus the chance for a double-digit largemouth at any time.



LAKE SHASTA, California

Bass begin to transition from summer to fall patterns everywhere in the country in September, but the annual change of seasons really kicks things into gear on California's Lake Shasta. This 30,000-acre impoundment of the Sacramento River is full of baitfish, whose movement helps congregate bass in small areas in September. Anglers can sit in one area and sample the prolific spotted bass population all day long using topwaters, crankbaits and soft plastics.

LAKE ST. CLAIR, Michigan

One of the most popular fisheries in the Great Lakes, St. Clair gets plenty of attention from bass anglers and pleasure boaters alike. It's become one of the premier smallmouth fisheries in the country and continues to kick out good numbers with quality bass mixed in all summer and well into the fall months.

The fish get more concentrated in September, and when you find them, you'll find plenty. Bigger bass start to show up

more frequently, as well, according to Jonathon VanDam.

"It's generally still a late summer pattern, but the fish are starting to group up more and relate to baitfish," he said. "It's a time of year when you'll catch better numbers and the fish will be more aggressive as they start putting the feed on. You can catch them a bunch of ways, but a 15-foot diving crankbait gets it right into the strike zone and is one of the best ways to catch them and cover water to find them."

MLF pro Michael Neal proved that catching big numbers of fish is no stretch in winning an event on Lake St. Clair in 2022.

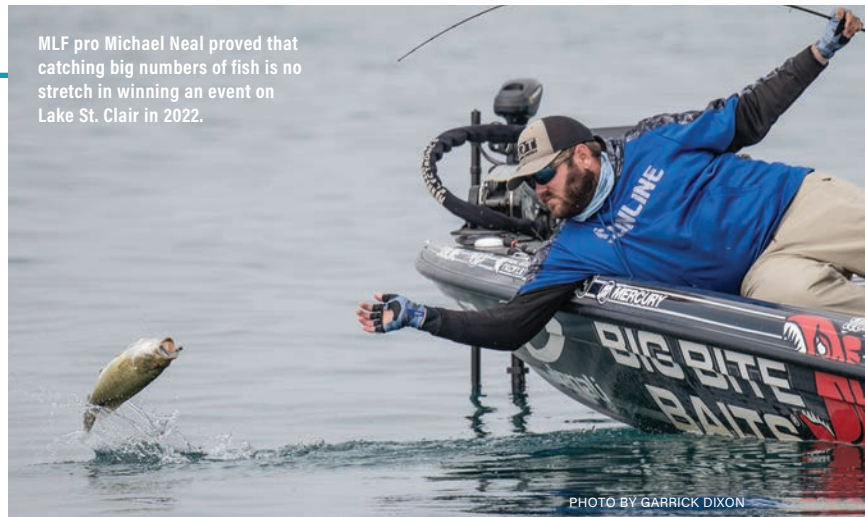
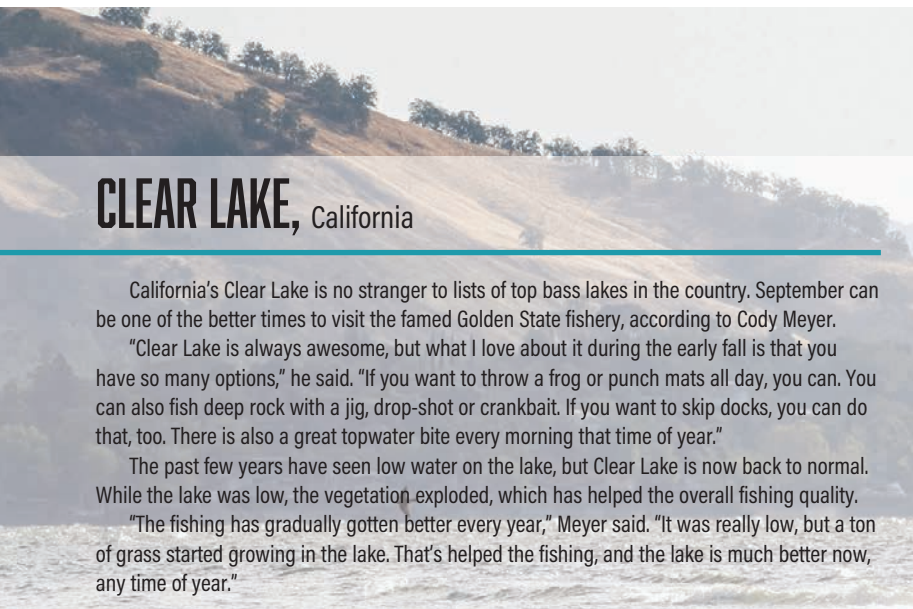


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



CLEAR LAKE, California

California's Clear Lake is no stranger to lists of top bass lakes in the country. September can be one of the better times to visit the famed Golden State fishery, according to Cody Meyer.

"Clear Lake is always awesome, but what I love about it during the early fall is that you have so many options," he said. "If you want to throw a frog or punch mats all day, you can. You can also fish deep rock with a jig, drop-shot or crankbait. If you want to skip docks, you can do that, too. There is also a great topwater bite every morning that time of year."

The past few years have seen low water on the lake, but Clear Lake is now back to normal. While the lake was low, the vegetation exploded, which has helped the overall fishing quality.

"The fishing has gradually gotten better every year," Meyer said. "It was really low, but a ton of grass started growing in the lake. That's helped the fishing, and the lake is much better now, any time of year."

California's Clear Lake has recovered from a long bout with low water and will be a prolific producer in late summer and early fall.



PHOTO BY COBI PELENTO

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September is prime time to fish Lake Roosevelt in Arizona (despite the heat), according to Bass Pro Tour pro Josh Bertrand.



PHOTO COURTESY JOSH BERTRAND

LAKE ROOSEVELT, Arizona

It would be easy to assume that a reservoir located in the hottest state in America would be a dicey bet in September, but 20,000-acre Lake Roosevelt in central Arizona is an interesting exception to the rule. Like many lakes in the West, Roosevelt escapes the hardcore early-fall turnover that stymies the bite in other regions of the country, and September represents the start of a three-month-long topwater bite that goes almost around the clock.

"As soon as the water temperature starts to go down even just a degree or two, you can catch fish on topwater all day long," says MLF pro Josh Bertrand, who grew up fishing Roosevelt and guides there in the off-season. "You can stay out on the main lake, which has steeper drop-offs and clearer water, and throw walking baits to try to call fish up from the deeper cover. Or if you want to get gnarly and aren't afraid of scratching your boat, you can get as far up the creeks and rivers as possible to find less pressured fish – that's more of a buzzbait and frog deal."

Roosevelt is also on the short list of lakes where anglers can find a dragonfly bite in the fall, starting in September: "Any day it's not super windy and fish can see well, you'll see bass coming up and doing a somersault to eat a dragonfly buzzing along a foot above the surface. You can almost always catch those fish on a buzzbait. It's a pretty cool deal."

STURGEON BAY, Wisconsin

Tucked into the southeast corner of Green Bay, Sturgeon Bay has been one of the best smallmouth fisheries in the country for years. While made popular by springtime tournaments like the Sturgeon Bay Open, which kicks out massive bags of smallmouth every year, this fishery is excellent any time it's not covered in winter ice.

During the 2020 Bass Pro Tour season finale on Sturgeon Bay, Justin Lucas caught fire on the final day with 38 smallmouth for 110-05. That event was a summertime affair, but the bass bite even better when the weather starts to cool in September. Expect standard smallmouth techniques like drop-shots and Ned rigs to be top producers here.



Sturgeon Bay's prolific smallmouth fishery doesn't dwindle at all in late summer.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

LAKE OROVILLE, California

After a long literal dry spell caused by a multi-year drought, Lake Oroville is back to full pool. The fishing has improved tremendously since rains renewed the water levels at this Northern California lake. Often overshadowed by Lake Shasta, Lake Oroville is teeming with spotted bass. The early fall can produce some great topwater fishing for spots feeding on a baitfish population that has gotten bigger over the years. Largemouth stocking efforts from a decade ago are also paying dividends, with more big Florida-strain largemouth showing up, often mixed in with the spotted bass.

THE FINGER LAKES, New York

It's hard to pick just one of the 11 Finger Lakes in western New York. They all have similarities but can fish differently based on the conditions and current fishing quality. The region is beautiful, and picking any of these lakes in September will likely lead to a great day on the water in excellent weather. Cayuga gets the most attention and tournament pressure, but other well-known producers include Seneca, Keuka, Skaneateles, Owasco and Otisco.

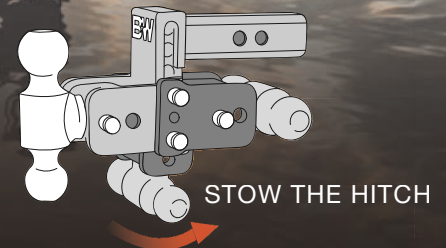
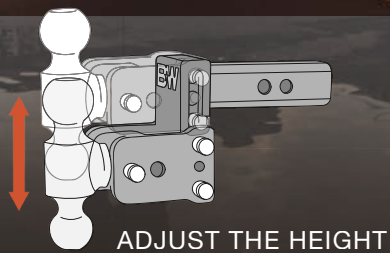
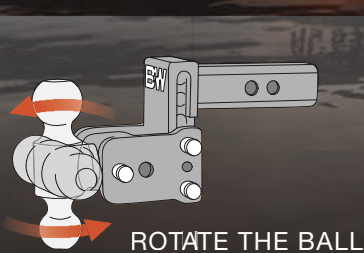
SMITH MOUNTAIN LAKE, Virginia

Late summer and early fall in Virginia can be brutally hot and humid, but Smith Mountain still manages to produce. Fish school up, and topwater fishing will be your best bet to stay on the action. While the fishing can be hit-or-miss across the field in some local events, Smith Mountain kicks out solid fish in late summer/early fall, as evidenced by the 2022 Bass Pro Shops/Cabela's Big Bass Tour September event that saw two bass over 8 pounds weighed in and most of the hourly prizes claimed by fish over 6 pounds.



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LAKE CHAMPLAIN, New York/Vermont/Quebec

The fishing in the north is pretty good everywhere from ice out to ice in, and Lake Champlain is no exception. Spanning more than 100 miles south to north, Champlain has everything an angler could ask for, from milfoil beds and largemouth to smallmouth and boulders.

On the largemouth side of things, Champlain is especially good later in the year; the fish are fat and frequently set up on hard cover. Plus, the grass beds have had time to mature all over the lake, and when you find a good one, you're in business.

For smallmouth, the fall brings plenty of forward-facing sonar opportunities to target fish chasing alewives, and you can usually find a good deep bite on reefs and boulders. Plus, given the right conditions, an umbrella rig or topwater pattern can be a lot of fun. September and October are generally the heaviest weight times of the year for tournaments, with a 23-pound limit of smallmouth not far-fetched.

September weather in the north is delightful, and if you're willing to risk some iffy weather in October, you can also get some top-notch foliage viewing and good cider donuts while you're smashing smallmouth.

While fisheries further south are suffering it out in late summer and early fall, scenic Lake Champlain is ramping up for some of the best fishing of the year.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

BIG STONE LAKE, South Dakota/Minnesota

Big Stone Lake is full of big fish and mostly unknown outside of South Dakota and Minnesota. One look at the results of a September 2021 USA Bassin' event on Big Stone gives you a hint about what to expect: Only 12 boats fished the event, but eight had over 20 pounds. This lake is full of healthy largemouth, and September is a great time to catch them.

FORT PECK, Montana

This impoundment of the Missouri River is far from just about anywhere, but it's full of giant smallmouth bass. The Montana state record, a 7.84-pounder, came from this reservoir, which sees extraordinarily little fishing pressure compared to most places on this list. It's a remote lake known for strong winds, but the big brown fish and untouched surroundings keep anglers returning for more. September weather brings daily highs in the mid-70s with chilly nights for a taste of some great early fall bass fishing.

POTHOLES RESERVOIR, Washington

This is a favorite fishery for Pacific Northwest bassers and is a flipper's paradise for much of the year, with plenty of brush, grass and countless beaver dams. Located in Washington farmland, Potholes is drawn down for irrigation purposes in the late summer, causing the overall size of the lake to shrink and the bass to condense around offshore humps. This is the perfect time to catch them with deep crankbaits, big worms and finesse tactics. Anglers can expect to catch some quality bass and lots of them. ■

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DEPS SLITHERK HOLLOW BODY

By Matt Williams

Here's a stealthy little Japanese frog with a befitting title. Deps' SlitherK is designed to do just what the name suggests: slide through the thickest slop like a well-heeled 4x4. At 3/8 ounce, the 2 1/4-inch bait doesn't stir up much commotion when it goes on the prowl, yet it triggers explosive strikes and produces stellar hook-up ratios.

First Impressions

The SlitherK is hardly new. It made its way to the American market in 2012 but has flown under the radar with many anglers, possibly due to its \$20.99 price tag. I've been throwing it for the better part of a decade and have found plenty to love.

Super Soft: I'm not sure what type of plastic its body is made from, but Optimum

Baits' Matt Paino claims it's way softer than most on the market. The result is a bait that collapses quickly and easily when a bass eats it, resulting in an excellent hook-up ratio.

A Different Mold: Plenty of forethought went into the body design, which features cupped sides, a flat belly and a strategically placed belly weight built around a 3/0 frog hook with a nasty bite and a horizontal line tie. All of that adds up to a deep, horizontal floating position that intentionally suppresses the side-to-side movement of the bait and also creates more water push and vibration. It comes complete with a pair of tiny air/water escape holes in the rear.

Size: Big isn't always better. The physical profile of the body is noticeably small-

er in length and weighs less than most competitors, yet it casts like something larger. Deps finishes the bait off with a single, genuine rabbit-fur tail that is centered on the butt.

No Legs: The bait doesn't have two legs made from silicone strands like most hollow bodies. Instead, its bushy, rabbit-fur tail shows bass a different action and prevents the need for trimming to make it walk correctly.

Color Choices: It's offered in 13 different colors, including several white/bone and black hues that seem to be popular with frog junkies. I'm also a big fan of the shooting star and visible shiner patterns.

In Action

A few casts were all it took to realize the SlitherK is

a hot rod tricked out for high performance.

Long Reach: The first thing I noticed was how well the bait cuts the wind. Casts of 30 yards or more were the norm in combination with 65-pound Suffix 832. Deps claims the rabbit fur tail adds a little casting weight once wet.

Easy to Walk: The sealed belly weight sits close to center, causing the frog to always land belly down, sit flat in the water and partially submerged on the surface. These features, coupled with the concave sides and flat pad of the rump section, help facilitate a fluid walking action that is simple to accomplish using light, downward twitches of the rod tip.

Light on its Toes: The bait isn't designed to cause a

commotion, but its subtle action is enough to attract bass' attention. Its cupped sides push water as it darts back and forth, and the rabbit fur tail pulsates whether the bait is idle or in motion. It slithers through pads, tules and reeds with limited snagging.

High Percentage

Hook-ups: One of the inherent pitfalls of fishing a frog is that many blowups end in a slack line rather than a taut one. Deps seems to have engineered a solution with the SlitherK. I've found the hook-up rate with this bait to be significantly better than a lot of other hollow bodies I've thrown — with no modification to the hook.

Final Thoughts

I've tossed plenty of frogs over the years, and the SlitherK is one of the most deadly hollow-body walkers I've come across. Smaller in size, the bait still casts like a bullet and is simple to walk right out of the package. Thanks to its squishy body that collapses easily around a premium hook, not every bass that eats it gets caught, but a high percentage of them do.

Applications

➤ Fish it around heavy or sparse cover by using a walking retrieve, a stop-and-go or by stroking it forward a few feet at a time, sort of like a topwater football jig.

➤ It casts well for such a small profile bait and is exceptionally weedless, making it a good choice for covering expanses of water on pad or grass flats or skipping tight to targets like overhanging bushes, lay-downs or emergent vegetation.

Performance Tip

Like other types of lures, it's always a good idea to experiment with different retrieves with hollow body frogs until you find one the bass prefer. The fish may react better to a slow, stop-and-go retrieve one day and a steady walking retrieve the very next.

HITS & MISSES

- + Comes through cover easily
- + Great hook-up ratio
- + Casts well
- + High quality hook
- + Simple to walk
- + Subtle action
- + Fur tail eliminates need for trimming and adds casting weight
- Pricy
- Soft plastic can tear

DETAILS

Length: 2 1/4 inches

Weight: 3/8 ounces

Colors: 13

Hook Size/Make: 3/0 Ryugi, Teflon-coated

MSRP: \$20.99

Contact: optimumbaits.com ■



The super soft body is smaller (only 2 1/4 inches) in profile than a lot of other walking frogs, giving it a subtle action and allowing it to slide over and through thick cover amazingly well. But don't be fooled by its size. The bait will tempt some giants along the way.

Cool Design Elements



The bait features a rabbit fur tail that undulates naturally when in motion and that adds a little casting weight once wet.

It's equipped with a Teflon-coated, 3/0 Ryugi double hook that rides snugly against the rump.

Designed with cupped sides, a flat belly and strategically placed weight centered on the belly, the SlitherK is very well balanced and simple to walk.



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COLOR: FREAK

SPRO BRONZEYE BABY POPPIN' FROG
COLOR: NASTY SHAD

Frog fishing is profound fun — if you're up to the challenge and frustrations that come with it. Here's how you can take your frog game to the next level this season.

By Mike Pehanich

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON ROWAN

You feel it coming. Anticipation. Excitement. You sense it in the air, hear it in the mats, feel it stirring in the pads. The stretch of matted grass or duckweed that pleasure boaters find unsightly is your playground, and you know it's just a matter of moments before a hungry bass comes charging through it.

It's froggin' fever! Time to pull out a hollow-bodied frog and get in on the most exciting action of the season.

Frog fishing is filled with suspense and action, punctuated by washtub boils and explosive strikes, packed with the emotional highs and lows of fish caught and blow ups missed, producing memories of giant bass clothed in grass as they are hoisted over the gunwale.

Frogging's appeal goes beyond the excitement of the visual strikes. There's artistry on display when an accomplished frogger is at work.

"The frog is a bait that you can give life to," says frog maestro Dean Rojas. "You control what that bait is doing on the surface. That's the cool factor!"

We mined the experience of four MLF pros for tips on how to improve one's frogging game.

FROGGIN' TIME

Frogs tend to work their best magic around cover — mats, pads, laydowns, stumps, docks and the like.

"Key in on shady areas," says Mitch Crane, a Bass Pro Tour pro from Columbus, Mississippi. "Froggers don't mind sunny days because it isolates fish in those shady areas or isolated floating patches of grass. Those are the things we key on."

Although frog fishing is linked with summer heat, frogging experts find it a far more versatile bait with three- or even four-season appeal.

Fred "Boom Boom" Roumbanis has taken bass on a frog in the California Delta in 52-degree water in January. He finds 54 degrees a more typical starting point, but he will tell you that prime froggin' time is easier to sense than to define.

"A lot of it is muscle memory," says the BPT pro from Russellville, Arkansas, who has rods rigged with his name-sake Boom Boom Frog and Boom Boom Poppin' Frog on his deck most of the year. "It's instinctive. I try hard to be the first guy on that bite, paying attention to water temperature and



COLOR: KRYPTONITE
WEIGHT: 5/8 OZ.

THE OG FROG PRINCE

The frog that started the craze, the Spro Bronzeye Frog 65 is one of the most celebrated baits of all time.

everything going on around me. It doesn't take long if the sun heats the water and the weather gets right."

Frogs are year-round tools for Florida pro John Cox, too, but "prime time" for him is a no-brainer.

"The frog bite is really happening in the thinner stuff, around trees and undercut banks, when you see bluegills coming after it," says Cox. "That seems to be the trigger point, much like shad hitting your spinner blades during the shad spawn. You just know they're going to eat that frog."

A LITTLE ABOUT LEGS

Hollow-body frogs are typically fitted with rubber strand "legs." Few anglers, however, find those legs ready for action right out of the package. Trimming them to preference is a common ritual.

Rojas designed the Spro Bronzeye Frog with a leg length he found ideal for his "walk-the-dog" presentation, but not everyone agrees.

"A lot of guys like to chug a frog, so we don't cut the legs too short," says Rojas. "Guys use frogs differently. We don't want to alienate anybody. They can always trim."

And trim most pros do, to their own "leg" logic. Crane typically takes about an inch off his frog legs, often thinning them as well.

"Legs really weigh a frog down, and I want my frog to lay as flat as it can when I'm walking it in open water," he says. "I probably cut four or five strands. That



BOOM BOOM FROG
COLOR: FRED'S FROG
WEIGHT: 3/8 OZ.

BOOM BOOM!

Fire back at the bass and increase hook up ratio with the Stanford Baits Boom Boom Frog, featuring Frogfur.™

BOOM BOOM POPPIN' FROG
COLOR: GILLY
WEIGHT: 1/2 OZ.

allows me to walk it almost in place without moving it forward in holes or around isolated cover. But if I'm chugging a frog (over a mat), that butt-down frog may be better. It depends."

He pays attention to leg color, too.

"I don't like bright legs," Crane says. "If a frog has bright strands, I will generally pluck those out because I want a bass totally focused on the body of the frog, not the legs."

Cox will trim legs to shrink the overall profile of his frog in a pressured stretch of water. If that isn't enough to elicit strikes or get bass to commit, he'll downsize to a smaller frog.

WALK THIS WAY

When fishing mats, lily pads or other heavy cover, a chugging presentation — getting the frog to surge in a sporadic, life-like manner — is the preferred (if not only) option.

But open-water areas at the edges of cover give the angler a chance to demonstrate his "walking" artistry by imparting to the frog a side-to-side sway reminiscent of a stunned, confused or injured baitfish, frog, or mouse.

A walking frog is most seductive when it sashays annoyingly in an area where a bass has staked a claim. For most anglers, the walk is executed with a downward twitch of the rod tip. Keeping slack in the line is critical. It gives the bait freedom to swing to either side while advancing toward the angler little or not at all.

"You want a little more slack line than you think you need when you're walking that frog in place," advises Crane. "You don't want to pull it far from cover."

Roumbanis switches to a slower reel to enhance the effectiveness of a walking retrieve.

"I like to switch from my usual 7:1 to a 6.5:1 gear ratio reel if I'm working that bait in a small area," he says. "It won't pick up line as fast when you are twitching it."

Pause the bait intermittently during the retrieve. Many strikes come during that pause.

Practice walking a frog so that you can impart that action blindly — literally. A frog is made to skip, so learn to skip it with confidence under willow trees, boat docks or other overhanging cover. Seawalls, flooded buck brush, and rip rap also represent good areas to walk a frog.

TRUE COLORS

To a bass, a frog is not always a frog. It can be a mouse, a rat or a bird, too. But it is most likely that bass mistake our hollow-bodied offerings for baitfish.

Today's frogs come in an impressive and sometimes wild array of colors. A simple rule of thumb on color selection is to use a dark-bodied frog that silhouettes through a mat



COLOR: NAVY SEAL
WEIGHT: 1 OZ.

COLOR: BLACK WIDOW
WEIGHT: 1/5 OZ.



COLOR: SPOOKY NASTY
WEIGHT: 1/2 OZ.

HAIL TO THE KING!

Go big and tie on a Spro Bronzeye King Daddy Frog when you need a large profile for giant bass. It's Spro's largest offering, pictured here with the Bronzeye Poppin' Frog 40 - their smallest frog.



“TO A BASS, A FROG IS NOT ALWAYS A FROG.”

SHOW 'EM SHAD

The Spro Bronzeye Shad 65 is the perfect tool when bass are eating baitfish and you need a frog that walks effortlessly in the water, completing turns in excess of 180 degrees.

against a bright sky and lighter-colored frogs on dark days.

Beyond that, picking frog colors and patterns is largely a match-the-hatch judgment.

"Our fish are shad eaters," Crane says of bass from the Deep South. "We always have a shad-color frog tied on. It's not white but a silver color, something that gives flash — more like a shad than a bluegill."

White frogs have an almost cult-like regional following in scattered pockets of the country. Roumbanis feels that white "magnifies in the water," whereas "a black one silhouettes." He has a white frog with sky blue and chartreuse highlights, called Diva, in his Boom Boom line. It can be deadly in early mornings during a shad spawn. For a bluegill imitator, he opts for his Gilly and Fred's Frog patterns. His Kelly Green Boom Boom is an "old school" frog color.

Color preferences can differ greatly from region to region. Crane notes that brown colors — particularly reddish browns — are popular in the North, for reasons unknown.

Where bluegill are primary prey, green pumpkin and other bream-type colors prevail.

"Sometimes I like a light yellow or an orange throat," Crane said. "Light yellow for a female; orange for a male bluegill. Bass really key in on that throat patch."



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANLEY

Careful now, froggin' is addictive and leads to big boxes of frogs.

Then there are the wild card colors. Roumbanis carries a yellow-headed black-bird color called Dirty Bird seemingly made to order for bass on California's Clear Lake.

"I always have a black-and-red frog close at hand," adds Crane. "I don't know what it is about that little bit of red in there. It just triggers big bites."



MLF pro Mitch Crane is a froggin' fanatic.

PHOTO BY JOEY WHITE

"YOU CATCH A BETTER QUALITY OF BASS WITH A FROG."

READING THE MATS

Much frogging action takes place in dense mats, thick jungle cover comprised of aquatic plants such as hydrilla, Eurasian milfoil, filamentous algae, duckweed and assorted assemblies of matter living and dead. That often necessitates a different approach than walking the bait in open water.

"There are times with duckweed or algae or matted hydrilla where you need to use a heavier frog, something that will go through that stuff and sit lower in the water," says Rojas. "With a lighter frog, bass are more likely to knock it off the mat or totally miss it."

Mats are never uniform in thickness. They vary in density and composition. Some mats are comprised of fresh growth, others of dead or decaying matter. The best frog-

gers pay close attention to patterns within mats. One key feature can be thinner sections, often identified by a variation in color.

"I was the last man standing in a tournament on the Mississippi River near La Crosse, Wisconsin," recalls Roumbanis. "Half the field was throwing frogs to the mats. The only thing I was doing different-

ly was making more accurate casts to areas with lighter color and targeting those areas. I didn't waste time throwing to super dense stuff."

Crane agrees. "You want holes in that upper mat," he says. "Any time you chug that frog in thick cover and you see the water ripple around the frog, you know the mat grass is thin there. So you look for the ripples and other signs. Maybe brighter green grass or cheesy areas where fish are hanging out. Always pay attention to where you are getting bites in heavy cover."

MODIFICATIONS

There's no end to the things anglers do to get the most out of their frogs. "They bend out hooks, add weight, cut the tails off or half off, paint them, boil them, do things to make them softer or harder," says Rojas. "In the end, you need to balance attributes that improve your hook-up ratio with those that affect its overall usability."

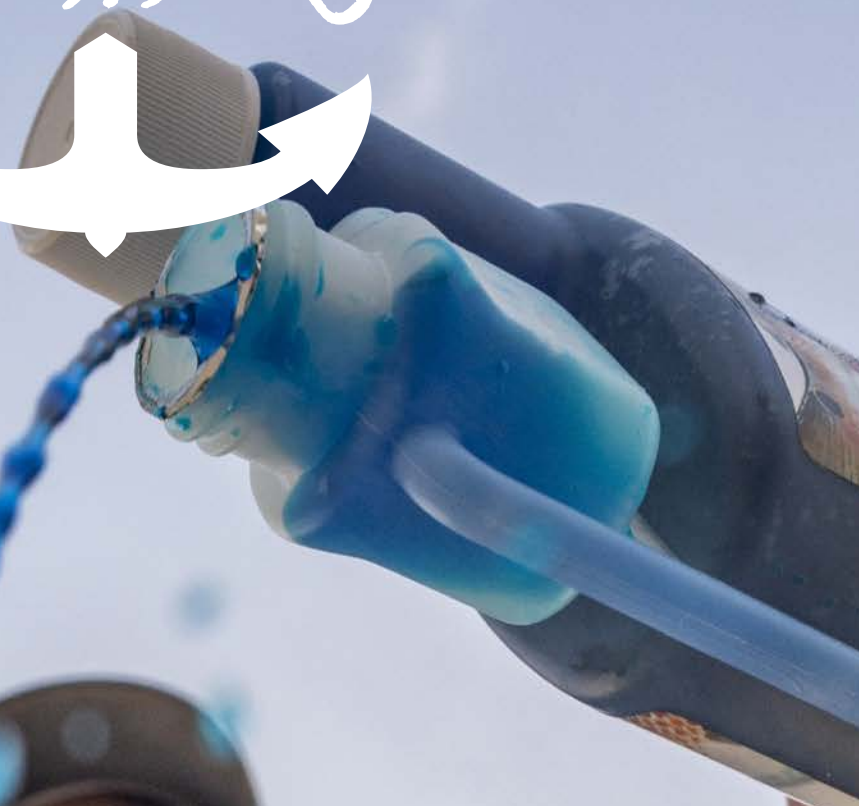
Hook-up ratios tumble in the mats. Bass are apt to inhale a mouthful of salad with the frog, if they reach the bait at all. Frogging aficionados often trick out their frogs to help bass find and engulf them.

"Some put glass rattles in the frog when fishing heavy cover," says Crane. "It gives them something to home in on. You can also add BBs or a 1/4-ounce tungsten weight inside the frog. It makes the frog sag through the mat."

In pressured areas, Cox will insert a bell from a craft shop or a rattle into the body of his frog.

"A frog that fills with water can work to your advantage in a cheese mat, as well," he says. "It sits lower in the mat, and fish are less likely to knock it out of the water. Sometimes I'll just add a tungsten nail weight."

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HUNT 'EM DOWN
Cover water quickly with the Spro Flappin Frog 65. The kicking legs provide a buzzing action that stays weedless through the heaviest cover.

SEARCH FROG

The hollow-body frog may be one of the game's most underrated search baits. Work it over a mat or grass-filled flat and bass are apt to show themselves.

On practice days, Rojas bends the hooks into the body of the frog to prevent hook ups. He works the bait quickly, noting areas with concentrations of bass and where bass are situated with respect to the cover.

"You can cover a lot of water, break down an area quickly and identify the high-percentage spots," he says. "When you are trying to break down a 30,000-acre reservoir, you need to utilize your time effectively."

Some frog anglers remain in search mode during tournament time. They work their frogs quickly, waiting for a fish to show itself.

Cox always has a follow-up bait ready to pitch to the exposed location — a General, Gilly or Creature Hawg from the Berkley Powerbait line. Rojas is similarly armed, usually with a Fighting Frog or Trick Stick from Big Bite Baits.

DARE TO LIVE THE FROGGIN' LIFE

Want to be a better frogger? Fish it. Fish it. Then fish it some more. Don't get discouraged. You will enjoy the ride, and the results are worth it.

"You catch a better quality of bass with a frog," says Cox. "When bass get on it, there's nothing better.

"And it is, by far, the funnest way to fish!" ■



Dean Rojas



Fred Roumbanis



John Cox

FROGGING WITH THE CHAMPS

FROG FIENDS can thank Dean Rojas for popularizing the hollow-bodied bait. Nearly two decades ago, Rojas brought the frog into the contemporary age when he designed the Spro Bronzeye Frog. A durable frog available in a wide array of colors, it presented a versatile range of presentation options and set new standards for quality.

In addition to Rojas' original Bronzeye Frog 65, Spro's frog lineup now features walking frogs in smaller (40/50) and the larger King Daddy (90) sizes. It also continues to spawn new frog variants. The cup-faced Bronzeye Pop 60 was followed by the Bronzeye Shad 65, a.k.a. the Glide, a bait specifically made for walking. More frogs have since followed.

"The one I like best is the Bronzeye Spit Shad," says Rojas of the bait that led to his BPT win on Smith Lake in 2019. "It is a hybrid of the popping frog and 'shad' models. It has a cut mouth but a release on the bottom, so it spits, walks and chugs really well, and it has a great hook-up ratio."

Another variant is the Spro Flappin' Frog 65, a hybrid lure that mates a pair of paddle-tail legs to a hollow frog body for a buzz-type presentation.

Fred Roumbanis learned to frog on famed California waters like the Sacramento River Delta. He designed his own deep-bodied, textured Boom Boom Frog along with a companion model, the Boom Boom Poppin' Frog, both marketed by Stanford Baits. The former was designed to walk. The Poppin' Frog, he says, offers a more subtle action than other lures in the category. "It spits more than pops," he says. "It has more of a pencil popper design, best worked in open water situations like next to laydowns, under boat docks and undercut banks. It excels in pressured water."

For the past two seasons, John Cox has frogged with prototypes of two Berkley frogs, a regular hollow-body (the Swamp Lord) and a popping version. The baits were released to the public at the 2023 ICAST show.

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By Mitchell Forde

HERE'S WHAT SHOULD BE IN YOUR FROG BOX THIS SUMMER AND FALL

Combining the visual appeal of topwater fishing with the physicality of flipping heavy cover, it's no wonder throwing a topwater frog is a favorite technique of many anglers.

It also happens to be one of the most effective ways to tempt big bass in late summer and early fall, when water temperatures reach their warmest, vegetation is at its thickest and fish often burrow into the most dense cover they can find.

The frog market has exploded in the past 20 years, since Bass Pro Tour angler Dean Rojas introduced the fishing world to the power of the hollow-body bait at the 2004 Bassmaster Classic. During that time, anglers have discovered that the amphibious offerings can mimic just about any species of forage and be fished around all types of cover, not just grass mats or lily pads. That's led to the perennial introduction of new baits in the category, designed to impart a different action or navigate certain situations better than their predecessors.

Whether you're trying to skip a bait into a hard-to-reach, shady spot, navigate a field of lily pads or call bass out of thick grass mats, here are five innovative hollow-body frogs you should consider adding to your arsenal.

BERKLEY SWAMP LORD

Pure Fishing filled one of the last holes in its lure line-up with the Swamp Lord, which was unveiled at ICAST in July. One of the reasons it took so long for the bait to hit the market was that Berkley made sure it lived up to the exact specifications of REDCREST 2022 champion Bobby Lane, who designed the Swamp Lord. The Florida native and grass-fishing guru said the bait is two to three years in the making.

Lane's primary objective with the Swamp Lord was to achieve a better hook-up ratio than is offered by other frogs on the market. Anyone who regularly throws a frog knows that the technique can be as maddening as it is exhilarating, with blowups often resulting in empty hook-sets or bass spitting the bait halfway back to the boat. To combat that tendency, Lane combined Berkley's signature Fusion19 hooks with "the softest frog on the market today" — no modification required.

"What we've all always done is try to make the frog softer by heating it up or letting it sit in the sun for three days," Lane said. "Nobody made a soft frog. And then the most important thing is to have a good hook in a soft frog. So getting all those attributes together to make the Swamp Lord what it is today took a lot of work."

It isn't just the softness of its body that gives the Swamp Lord a

better chance of pinning bass, according to Lane. He said the aspect that took longest to perfect was finding the ideal angle and configuration for the hooks in relation to the body "so the frog has a great bite to it."

The other attribute of the Swamp Lord that Lane is proud of is its versatility. Offered in both a standard, walking shape and a popping version, Lane said the bait can "do it all." He noted that the walking version is slightly larger than most other frogs on the market, which makes it ideally suited for attracting bass through matted vegetation. But it can just as easily be walked in open water.

"The Swamp Lord is designed to do it all, man," Lane said. "You can pop it hard like we do down here at Okeechobee. You can walk it side-to-side. Our standard walking frog, you can literally throw it into a one-foot hole and you can walk it side-to-side in that hole without it moving forward a lot. You can keep it in that strike zone a lot longer. The popping frog, you can make it chug, you can make it spit, you can make it walk. There's just so many different ways to do this."



SCUM FROG LAUNCH FROG XS

Scum Frog added this miniature version of the popular Launch Frog to its lineup at ICAST last year. While a quarter of an inch shorter (2 1/2 inches) and smaller in profile than the original Launch Frog, it still weighs 5/8 ounce, making it extremely castable and giving it enough heft to attract bass through mats. Like the original, it's exceptionally soft, which boosts landing rates. The Launch Frog XS is offered in seven colors.



\$9.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

G-RATT CON FROG HOLLOW BODY FROG

Another ICAST 2022 creation, the Con Frog was created to address another issue frog fishermen face: baits fouling up or rolling over when they contact emergent cover, particularly pads. G-Ratt's solution is a denser nose section, meant to allow the Con Frog to push grass aside as it walks. Plus, at 2 1/2 inches and 3/4 ounce, it, too, packs plenty of casting distance into a smaller package. The Con Frog comes in six colors.



\$12.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

SNAG PROOF SMASHMOUTH FROG

Snag Proof became the latest frog manufacturer to add a popping-style bait to its frog family when it released the Smashmouth Frog at ICAST last year. The bait incorporates all the most popular elements of Snag Proof's Bobby's Perfect Frog (the unique body shape, the water evacuation system, the detailed paint schemes), but with a cupped face. That allows the bait to cause a bit more commotion, ideal for breezy conditions or stained water, and to walk better in place. The Smashmouth Frog is offered in 15 fishy colors.



\$10.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

LIVE TARGET ULTIMATE FROG

It shouldn't come as a surprise that LiveTarget sought to create the most realistic frog imitator on the market with this bait, introduced in 2022. When an angler twitches the Ultimate Frog, its jointed legs kick back and then retract, similar to how a live frog propels itself through the water. LiveTarget includes an extra pair of legs with each bait to improve longevity. The Ultimate Frog is offered in both 2- and 2 1/2-inch sizes and eight realistic colors. Casting distance shouldn't be an issue for either model, as the smaller size weighs 3/4 ounce and the larger offering comes in at 1 ounce.

\$12.99 | tacklewarehouse.com



color: fluorescent green yellow

TECKEL SPRINKER FROG

Japanese lure manufacturer Teckel has brought several unique frogs to the American market in recent years, the Sprinker Frog being the most popular among Tackle Warehouse consumers. With a boot tail attached to the rear of the bait, it essentially combines a traditional hollow-body frog and a prop bait. The frog body makes the lure far more weed-less than, say, a Whopper Plopper, and unlike a soft plastic toad, it will continue to float when paused or twitched slowly. While pricey, the bait can both show bass something they haven't seen before and make anglers looking to cover large expanses of grass or pads more efficient. The Sprinker Frog is available in 12 colors. ■

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color: green pumpkin

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TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE





THE FOREST FOR THE TREES ... ER, GRASS

Fishing being a water-based sport, casual observers might be a little confused by the total lack of the wet stuff in a series of photos of Florida pro Keith Carson shot by MLF photographer Matt Brown during the recent Tackle Warehouse Invationals event on the Potomac River.

Carson worked his way to a ninth-place finish in the event, cranking the mouths of both Mattawoman and Leesylvania creeks and flipping pads in Mattowoman and Chickamuxin creeks. His flipping bite was best when the tide was low ... so low that all the water disappeared, if you didn't know better.

Of course, Potomac River locals and anglers who have competed on this mega-diverse fishery – where skinny water and innumerable small breaks in the vegetation are part of the charm – likely didn't think more about Carson's spot than, "Man, I wish I had gotten there first."

PHOTO BY MATT BROWN





OH TO BE A FLY ON THE WALL

One of our favorite games to play in the airport while traveling to tournaments is “Who’s saying what?” You know how it goes: two people talking animatedly at a distance (out of earshot), you make up the conversation for them. Such was definitely the case when we spied Bass Pro Tour anglers Jordan Lee and Alton Jones Jr. chatting in the parking lot immediately after Lee had been awarded the big red-and-silver trophy for winning General Tire Stage Six Presented by John Deere Utility Vehicles on Lake St. Clair in Michigan.

Lee had just earned his fourth big MLF trophy to go along with his 2020 Angler of the Year award, his Heavy Hitters 2020 belt and his Stage One win at the first-ever BPT event (in 2019). Jones had just finished second to Lee at St. Clair but owns a BPT trophy of his own (from Stage Two in 2021), along with his own Heavy Hitters belt (from earlier in the 2023 season) and \$165,000 in “Happy Gilmore” big-fish checks from Heavy Hitters 2022.

Maybe they were talking about their Heavy Hitters belts (Lee: “Mine is heavier;” Jones: “Mine is shinier”). Maybe they were talking about their kids. Or maybe they were just two bass heads chattering about the piles of smallmouth they had just finished catching. Whatever the subject, we’re sorry we missed out!

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJIRA



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

**1. GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES
BASS PRO SHOPS
CHAMPIONSHIP PRESENTED BY
B&W TRAILER HITCHES
Clermont Chain of Lakes**

Aired May 6-June 18

A new tournament format introduced by MLF last year ended with a familiar result: Jacob Wheeler hoisting the trophy. Only this time, Wheeler wasn't alone. Team Crockett Creek, which paired Wheeler with fellow BPT pros Jason Lambert and Dylan Hays, dominated the inaugural championship for the General Tire Team Series. The final event for the first-of-its-kind series was filmed in December on Florida's Clermont Chain of Lakes and aired on Outdoor Channel in May and June.

Nine of 27 teams qualified for the season-ending event, with the top three contesting the Championship Round on Lake Apopka. That's when Wheeler found the mother lode. Wielding a new jerkbait from Rapala, Wheeler caught 56 of his team's 68 scorable

bass, which weighed 133-4. That easily beat Team Smoky Mountain Herbal Snuff & Pouches (Bryan Thrift, Terry Scroggins and Anthony Gagliardi), who finished second with 60-12, as well as Team Builders FirstSource (Jeff Sprague, Randall Tharp and Cliff Crochet).

**2. PHOENIX BASS FISHING
LEAGUE ALL-AMERICAN
PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE
Lake Hartwell**

May 31-June 2

While contested in South Carolina, the 40th All-American had a Georgia flavor to it, with the top three finishers all hailing from the Peach State. Emil Wagner got the better of his fellow Bulldog Division anglers with a three-day total of 55-11.

Wagner, a guide on Lake Lanier, utilized his knowledge of blueback herring and extensive pre-tournament practice to earn the career-altering win. In the months leading up to the tournament, he spent hours graphing the lower portion of Hartwell and marking high-percent-

age spots. He then ran as many as he could during the event, eventually honing in on dropoffs.

Using a trio of herring-imitating staples — a Zoom Super Fluke, a Sebile Magic Swimmer and a walking topwater — Wagner opened the event with an 18-12 limit, then cracked 20-2 on Day 2 to move into first place. He consolidated his lead with 17-7 on Day 3. The victory earned Wagner a \$122,300 payday and a spot in REDCREST 2024.

**3. BASS PRO TOUR FAVORITE
FISHING STAGE FIVE
PRESENTED BY ATG BY
WRANGLER
Cayuga Lake**

June 6-11

While much of the field started the event targeting largemouth bass, Adrian Avena was committed to chasing spawning smallmouth from the outset. That allowed him to dial in his ability to find less-pressured fish, which proved to be the difference once the tournament turned into a smallmouth slugfest.

Avena dedicated hours both during practice and the Qualifying Rounds (once he caught limits of more than 21 pounds both days) looking through a flogger for small-mouth on deeper beds. The New Jersey pro also refused to waste time fishing for bass that he believed to be smaller than 5 pounds. That strategy paid off in the form of five small-mouth over 6 pounds that Avena boated across the Knockout and Championship Rounds. Using a Berkley Gulp! Minnow on a drop-shot, he caught the field's biggest bag both days, following up a 29-6 limit with 28-10 to earn his first national tour-level win.

**4. TACKLE WAREHOUSE
INVITATIONALS STOP 5
PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE
Potomac River**

June 17-19

Seeking his first professional victory, Nick Hatfield took a risk on the final day of competition, leaving the area that had him in second place through two days to fish new water.



5.



6.



7.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

PHOTO BY GARRETT DIXON

It didn't take long for the gamble to pay off: with a few hours still to fish, Hatfield literally turned to the camera in his Phoenix and called "game."

Hatfield sacked up 20-11 on Day 3, the biggest bag of the tournament, to win by more than 5 pounds. Virtually all of that weight came from a few patches of bream beds that he discovered during the final day. Hatfield used a variety of baits to fool bass that were preying on the bluegill, including a wacky-rigged Yamamoto Senko and a pair of topwaters. The victory earned him a berth in REDCREST 2024 and has him in contention to qualify for the Bass Pro Tour.

5. HIGH SCHOOL FISHING NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP
Mississippi River

June 21-23

Despite mechanical trouble that forced them to swap boats with a camera crew, Zachary Piescher and Cole Semler erased a final-day deficit and bested the nation's top high school anglers on the Upper Mississippi River. The duo from

Minnesota's Isanti-Cambridge High School initially thought they wouldn't be able to make their planned run from takeoff in Pool 7 to Pool 8 on Day 3 due to a broken fuel pump, but camera boat driver Brad Wessling came to the rescue. Fishing out of Wessling's boat, Piescher and Semler caught a three-bass limit of 10-12, which boosted their total weight to 32-7. That proved to be enough to edge JD McBroom and Carter Pjesky of Illinois' Kaneland High School by 6 ounces.

For their win, Piescher and Semler each earned \$5,000 in scholarship money plus qualified to compete as co-anglers in the 2023 Toyota Series Championship.

6. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS NORTHERN DIVISION PRESENTED BY RABID BAITS
Lake Champlain

June 22-24

Ryan Carnright was already regarded as one of the top Lake Champlain locals, especially when it

comes to catching spawning small-mouth. So it's not a shock that, with the weather cooperating and a wave of brown fish hitting the beds during the first Northern Division event of the year, Carnright was able to capitalize.

With strong winds moving dirty water around the northern end of the lake, conditions weren't ideal for sight-fishing. But that actually helped Carnright. He had marked a plethora of beds prior to the event, and the water conditions kept other competitors from finding them. While the reduced visibility meant he had to use a flogger and forward-facing sonar to catch several of his fish, Carnright still managed to boat 59-11 across three days using a drop-shot and a finesse swimbait. That was enough to edge Ryan Latinville, Carnright's cousin, by 11 ounces.

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7. BASS PRO TOUR GENERAL TIRE STAGE SIX PRESENTED BY JOHN DEERE UTILITY VEHICLES

Lake St. Clair

June 24-29

Even though he knew he couldn't make a cast, Jordan Lee made up his mind that he would spend his practice searching the Canadian waters of Lake St. Clair, where bass season didn't open until the first day of competition. The gamble paid off in the form of Lee's first BPT win since 2020. Lee located a grass line that featured a few bare spots postspawn smallmouth were using to feed. He mimicked their primary forage, perch, by drop-shotting a Berkley Flatnose Jerk Shad.

Putting the right bait in the right places allowed Lee to catch a different caliber of fish than the rest of the field. He boated the Berkley Big Bass during each of the four days he took the water, as well as the biggest fish of the event. Lee's 24-9 bag led the way during the Knockout Round, then he sealed the championship with 23-4. ■

2024



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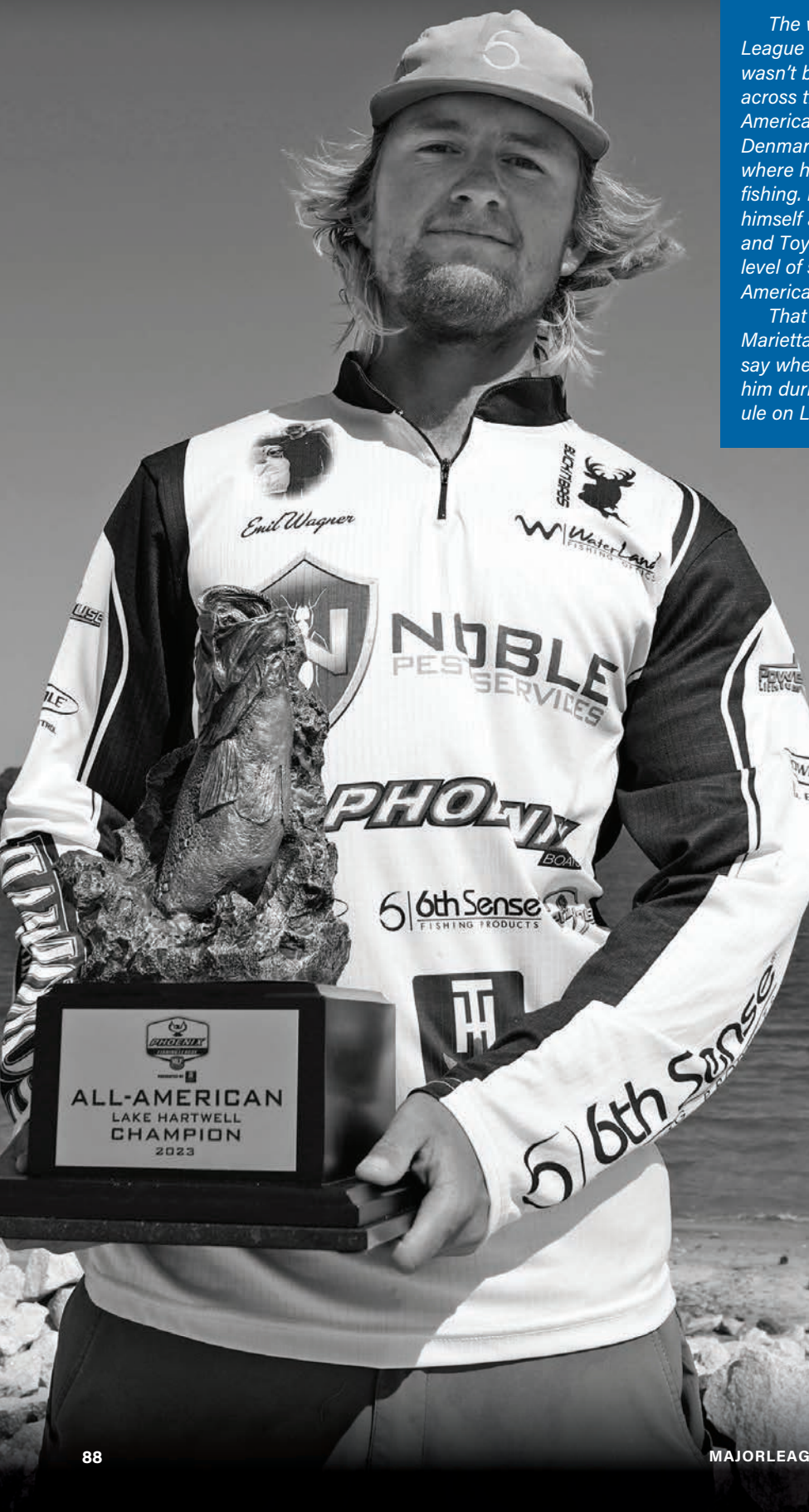
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PROFILE: EMIL WAGNER

MARIETTA, GEORGIA



The winner of the 2023 Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine All-American wasn't born in America, but his journey from across the pond to REDCREST 2024 is about as American as it gets. Emil Wagner was born in Denmark and moved to the U.S. as a toddler, where he became the first in his family to get into fishing. Now 25 years old, Wagner established himself as a skilled regional pro through the BFLs and Toyota Series (13 Top 10s), then hit a new level of success when he won the 40th All-American on Lake Hartwell in June.

That seems like only the beginning for the Marietta, Georgia, angler. Here's what he had to say when MLF writer Matt Naber caught up with him during a break in his summer guiding schedule on Lake Lanier.

Q&A

By Matt Naber

Belated congratulations on winning the All-American in June. You not only won the 40th edition of a grand old tournament but took home \$122,300 and an invite to REDCREST 2024. How do you sum up those things and what they mean to you?

REDCREST was big. The money is awesome, but the trophy and REDCREST is what I was there for, and I'm jacked up for REDCREST. I grew up watching those guys fish, and to fish against them is incredible. I don't know much about Lay Lake since I've only been there once. But it has spotted bass, and I'm super excited for that.

Has it really hit you yet how much potential that big cash prize and those two championship berths might mean to you? You told MLF.com Managing Editor Jody White that you want to fish for a living. I can't think of a better boost than winning the All-American.

This is excellent. I guide full time, so I have that five to six days a week, and when I'm not guiding, I'm at a tournament. The (All-American) money is huge; I invested some of it and it will help keep me going. REDCREST will be

awesome just for getting sponsors, and I hope to do well there with decent publicity and coverage. I've had some sponsors step up to the plate after the All-American, and it's done nothing but good for me, that's for sure.

Do you have a timeline in mind for hopefully being a full-time touring bass pro?

I feel like it's almost impossible to have a timeline. I'm fine with where I'm at now, fishing for a living. This was my first year doing the Toyota Series, and I expected to win a check or two, but I only missed one, and I've learned a lot, too. My goal is to go full time as soon as possible, and I'm just enjoying the process. I've been going to different lakes and meeting a bunch of people. I'm definitely not letting up any time soon; it's full steam ahead.

The 2023 Toyota Series Championship is on Table Rock Lake in Missouri, and REDCREST 2024 is on Lay Lake in Alabama. How much do you know about those fisheries and how do you like your chances to compete on them?

I've never been to Table Rock, but I'm excited for it because I know it's deep and clear and has smallmouth and largemouth and all the stuff I love to do – so I think it'll fit my style. I'm super jacked up for Lay Lake, too. I've learned more about river systems, and I've seen so many lakes in the last year or two that I think I have a good chance. For example, if it was at Guntersville, I would be excited, but not as excited as I am for Lay Lake or Table Rock. Overall, I think Table Rock fits my style the best.

You're a guide on Lake Lanier and Lake Allatoona and Lake Hartwell. How long have you been guiding?

I'd say 90% of my guiding is on Lanier and the rest is Hartwell, and just a few are on Allatoona. I've been doing this since last May. I graduated from Ole Miss in May 2021 with a degree in digital marketing and then worked for Pure Fishing for a year. I enjoyed it, but I can't be in front of a laptop for eight hours a day, and I wanted to be a guide, so I figured I'd try it out and fish some tournaments and practice.

They say the best way to learn something is to teach it. What have you learned as an angler from your experiences in teaching others to fish?

From the guide route, my job is to put people on fish 24/7, and there's a stigma where people think it will mess you up for tournament fishing by going to holes and getting numbers instead of adapting and learning. Everyone I guide wants to do something different, and I try to cater to everyone's style. So, I'm fishing new water and learning from different people. I've learned things from people I wouldn't have expected to learn.

What's a typical monthly/weekly guide schedule for you?

A typical bit is I'm booked all summer and I don't guide on weekends. I'll go Monday through Friday with (trips) that are 4, 6 and 8 hours, and even some that go from sunup to sundown.

Lake Lanier has become one of the favorite "stopover" fisheries for multiple Bass Pro Tour pros traveling through to tournaments. You're probably a little partial, but would you rate Lanier as the best spotted bass fishery in the country right now?

It was ranked fourth or fifth in Georgia, but they don't know what's been happening here. I almost don't want to say it, but it's unbelievable how good it is. You need at least 20 pounds, and in the winter it's 21-22 pounds, to win a tournament – and it's all spotted bass. It's a true gem, and not a lot of people have caught onto that yet.

If you could describe a picture-perfect lake and the best conditions for you to win a tournament, what would those be?

It would be any herring lake from May to October with clouds and wind. I can deal with all types of weather.

On the flipside, what are some fisheries and conditions that you feel like you could use some improvement on (or flat-out just don't like to fish)?

I could use some work on offshore grass fishing like Guntersville. I was scared of Chickamauga and the TVA in the summertime – not that I don't know

how to do it, it's just somewhere I need improvement. For instance, I've done well on Florida lakes before like Harris and Okeechobee.

You moved to the U.S. from Denmark as a toddler and have a large family. What was it like growing up with two older siblings and four younger siblings in a first-generation immigrant home in Georgia?

It was fun. We had a packed house and it made me good with people since I had to deal with siblings all the time. It's nice when you get older and appreciate having a big family more and more since it's nice having a bunch of them to reach out to. I've done interviews with some Danish fishing magazines, and a lot of people there don't know bass fishing is a sport. Fishing is huge in Denmark, but it's for pike and sea trout, since there's no bass there. So, to have someone from there win the All-American is super cool to them.

You're the first in your family to get into fishing. How did you first catch the fishing bug, and who/what helped you get from the neighborhood pond to where you are today?

I'm the only one who fishes in our family, and I don't know how I got into it. I'd pond fish when I was young, and my earliest memories were walking to the pond. My dad fished before back in Denmark, but nothing crazy, just did it a few times. He got me a rod and reel and I'd catch bluegill and use that as live bait for some giant bass. Then in middle school I met my buddy William, and we'd fish out of his canoe every weekend. Then I got a bass boat in high school, and we fished every week.

You're multi-lingual, so what languages do you speak? And what are some fishing phrases in English that just don't translate – or sound pretty goofy – in other languages?

We speak Danish at home all the time and I'm fluent in that and English, then I took Spanish in high school, but that's more basic. Danish and English are my main languages. I don't know of any fishing phrases that they would have in Denmark, but there's a lot that don't translate well in English. ■



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MINNESOTA'S PIESCHER AND SEMLER, ARIZONA'S GIFFEN AND MLADICK TAKE HOME TROPHIES AT HIGH SCHOOL FISHING NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP AND WORLD FINALS

THE DUOS EARNED SCHOLARSHIP MONEY WITH THEIR WINS OVER MASSIVE FIELDS AT THE BASS FEDERATION'S COMBINED HIGH SCHOOL FISHING CHAMPIONSHIPS

Every year since The Bass Federation became the first organization to sponsor high school fishing tournaments in 2007, its participation and prizes have increased. That trend continued when the organization crowned two tandems and doled out more than \$3 million in scholarship money and prizes at the High School Fishing National Championship and World Finals at La Crosse, Wisconsin, from June 20-24.

Zachary Piescher and Cole Semler from Minnesota's Isanti-Cambridge High School earned the top spot in the three-day national championship, overcoming boat trouble to sack up 32 pounds, 7 ounces. Then, weights reset for the final day of the World Finals, and Jeff Giffen and Dylan Mladick of Arizona's On Track School capped off their win in the 393-boat event with a 10-9 limit.

PIESCHER, SEMLER CAME BACK OUT OF BORROWED BOAT

Swapping boats with the camera crew isn't how Piescher and Semler envisioned it. But they left the Upper Mississippi River with both the win and the story of a lifetime.

The Minnesota duo, who ran from takeoff in Pool 8 to Pool 7 each day, bagged a three-bass limit of 9-13 on Day 1, then weighed in 11-14 on the second day despite some interruptions from a broken fuel pump. That had them 1-6 back of leaders JD McBroom and Carter Pjesky of Illinois' Kaneland High School.

It looked at first like they might not get a chance to erase that deficit, as more fuel pump issues on Day 3 left their engine inoperable. Help came from an unlikely source. Camera boat driver Brad Wessling offered his boat so that the team could finish out their improbable championship run.

"Brad was a life saver today," Piescher said. "We wouldn't have gotten even nearly close to top five without him. I don't think we would have been able to catch the same quality in Pool 8."

TBF president Robert Cartledge said it's not uncommon to allow anglers experiencing boat trouble to fish out of a camera boat. However, he noted that the organization made sure the anglers couldn't gain any sort of an advantage from the electronics on their borrowed vessel.



2023 HIGH SCHOOL FISHING NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP TOP 10

1. Zachary Piescher & Cole Semler | Cambridge-Isanti HS (MN) | 32-7
2. JD McBroom & Carter Pjesky | Kaneland HS (IL) | 32-1
3. Carsen Adcock & Jase White | Houghton Fishing Team (LA) | 31-0
4. Rhett Anderson & Jessie Green | Ruston HS (LA) | 28-1
5. Jaden Hoffman & Jayden Lintner | Piedmont Academy (GA) | 27-4
6. Ryder Kahny & Taylor Wagner | Star City HS (NE) | 27-3
7. Rylan Hamlin & Jack Swihart | Jackson Bass Fishing (MI) | 26-12
8. Andrew Jones & Carson Underwood | Hewitt-Trussville HS (AL) | 26-10
9. Miles Allen & Ethan Roths | St. Xavier HS (KY) | 26-7
10. Blake Edwards & Caleb Edwards | North Paulding HS (GA) | 25-14

"It's certainly a testament to the boat owners and volunteers and camera boat drivers, guys like that, who's willing to say, 'Hey man, these kids got a lot on the line, I'll let them use my boat until you can get a rescue boat out here for them,'" Cartledge said. "But we do take precautions. ... We make the camera boat drivers, because they're local a lot of times, we make them take their electronics off. Or at least they have to take their chips out or hide their waypoints. We can't give them any help, other than keep them floating."

Once the teammates made the run to Pool 7 and settled their nerves, it didn't take long to pick up where they had left off catching shallow largemouth. They quickly boated a limit and culled up to 10-12.

"We were expecting to get them, and we could almost call our cast," Semler said. "This place is something special. After the camera crew left, especially, we calmed down a lot and were able to cull two times."

Not wanting to risk any further misfortune, Piescher and Semler returned to the boat ramp early. They knew they'd given themselves a chance, but didn't think the abbreviated day would produce enough to take first place.

Weigh-in brought yet another twist, this one for the better. The Kaneland team brought 9-0 to the scales, which left it 6 ounces shy of Piescher and Semler's three-day total.

"For the past three days it's been the most adrenalin I've ever had," Piescher said. "Problems come with the good and the bad. We had a couple close calls out there, and then we win this when we weren't expecting to get first."

champions. Weights were zeroed and 31 boats took the water for one last day to decide who would take the win in the World Finals.

Giffen and Mladick earned the trophies by bringing two largemouth and one smallmouth weighing a combined 10-9 to the scales. That gave them a 6-ounce cushion over second-place Cole Fitzpatrick and Neil Kleinertz of nearby La Crosse Central High School.

The Arizona duo credited their pre-tournament preparation for allowing them to best competitors with more experience fishing shallow, grassy rivers — including the Upper Mississippi itself.

"We were up here nine days before the off-limits period pre-fishing for this tournament," Mladick told WXOW. "It wasn't out of the blue. We put in the work, and it paid off, thankfully."

Most of the Top 10 teams received college scholarship offers and all earned prizes. Giffen and Mladick also received \$6,000 each in scholarship money from TBF to be used at the schools of their choosing.



Jeff Giffen and Dylan Mladick

ARIZONA DUO DEFEATED LOCALS FOR WORLD FINALS WIN

TBF wasn't done handing out hardware after crowning the newest national

2023 HIGH SCHOOL FISHING WORLD FINALS TOP 10

1. Jeff Giffen & Dylan Mladick | On Track School (AZ) | 10-9
2. Cole Fitzpatrick & Neil Kleinertz | La Crosse Central HS (WI) | 10-3
3. Cayden Harmon & Will Shepherd | CW Bass Club (KS) | 10-0
4. Carsen Adcock & Jase White | Houghton Fishing Team (LA) | 9-15
5. Logan Bullinger & Ryan Bullinger | Century HS (ND) | 9-14
6. JD McBroom & Carter Pjesky | Kaneland HS (IL) | 9-7
7. Miles Allen & Ethan Roths | St. Xavier HS (KY) | 9-4
8. Brett Boswell & Dylan Thayer | Winder-Barrow HS (GA) | 9-3
9. Carson Dewald & Alex Martel | Jamestown HS (ND) | 9-3
10. Rylan Hamlin & Jack Swihart | Jackson Bass Fishing (MI) | 8-13

SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING STATE CHAMPIONS



California | California Delta ▲
Ian Maynard, Mateo Garcia
 San Joaquin Bassmasters
 19.26 pounds

Colorado | Pueblo Reservoir
Ryan Steinhoff, Dominic Spengler
 Colorado Jr. Bass Club
 11.79 pounds

**Connecticut/Massachusetts/
 Rhode Island | Singletary Lake**
Jack Houghton, Nick Frumkin
 Good Spirit Academy
 12.59 pounds

**Delaware/Maryland/New Jersey
 Lake Anna**
Trey Richardson III, Beau Richardson
 Free State Bass
 13.64 pounds



Georgia | Clarks Hill ▲
Bryson Dover, Angel Cornejo
 Lanier Longhorn Team
 20 pounds, 8 ounces

Hawaii | Wailua River
Cassius Olson, Dawson Afos
 Hawaii HS Bass Fishing
 4.45 pounds



Iowa | Lake Okoboji ▲
Will Neville, Ways Raasch
 Odebolt Arther Battle Creek Ida Grove
 Falcons
 18 pounds, 6 ounces



Illinois | Lake Kincaid
Maddox Crain, Brandon Skelcher
 Carterville High School Lions
 13 pounds, 12 ounces

Kansas | Melvern Lake
Colton Hutchinson, Cydney Hutchinson
 Bobcat Bass
 13.67 pounds



Kentucky | Lake Cumberland ▲
Austin Hatton, Mason Whitt
 Montgomery County High School
 17 pounds, 0 ounces



Minnesota | Clearwater Lake ▲
Maxwell Keeler, Camron Muir
 Monticello Fishing Team
 16 pounds, 6 ounces



Montana | Noxon Reservoir ▲
Drake Dawson, Christian Rensel
 Columbia Falls Wildcats
 18 pounds, 15 ounces



Nebraska | Lake McConaughy ▲
Tristan Campbell, Brody Graham
 McCook High School Bison
 15 pounds, 0 ounces

SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING STATE CHAMPIONS

North Carolina | Lake Norman

Robie Vines, Alvin Martin
Minor League Anglers
10.93 pounds



North Dakota | Lake Sakakawaea ▲

Ryan Bullinger, Logan Bullinger
Century High School
11.29 pounds



Ohio | Ohio River ▲

Evan Potter, Braydon Brown
Oak Hill Oaks
4 pounds, 5 ounces



Oklahoma | Grand Lake ▲

Kolby Cox, Kellen Lanman
Texoma Area
14 pounds, 14 ounces

Ontario | Bay of Quinte

Evan Erwin, Rhys Erwin
Eastside Secondary School
15.34 pounds

Oregon | Columbia River

Berkley Osborn, Emily Butler
Thurston High School
14.15 pounds

Pennsylvania | Oneida Lake

Trent Carey, Josh Kauffman
18.84 pounds

South Dakota | Enemy Swim Lake

Max Flatten, Sam Spies
Watertown High School
15.30 pounds

Utah | Pelican Lake

Michael Alexander, Dace Woolley
Uintah High School Utes
8 pounds, 11 ounces

Wisconsin | Buffalo Lake

Preston Koehler, Sawyer Strey
Fall Creek High School
18.22 pounds



West Virginia | Sutton Lake ▲

Wyatt Gabehard, Eli Ward
Winfield and Braxton County High School
10.02 pounds

UPCOMING STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS

- **New York:**
Onondaga Lake, Sept. 9
- **Washington:**
Riffe Lake, Sept. 30
- **New Hampshire:**
Connecticut River, Oct. 1. ■

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 grass-roots fishing, youth and conservation organization. TBF, our affiliated state federations and their member clubs conduct more than 20,000 events each year and have provided a foundation for the entire bass fishing industry for more than 50 years. TBF founded the Student Angler Federation and the National High School Fishing program in 2007 to promote clean family fun and education through fishing, and are proud partners in fishing with MLF. Visit bassfederation.com or highschoolfishing.org and "LIKE US" on Facebook.



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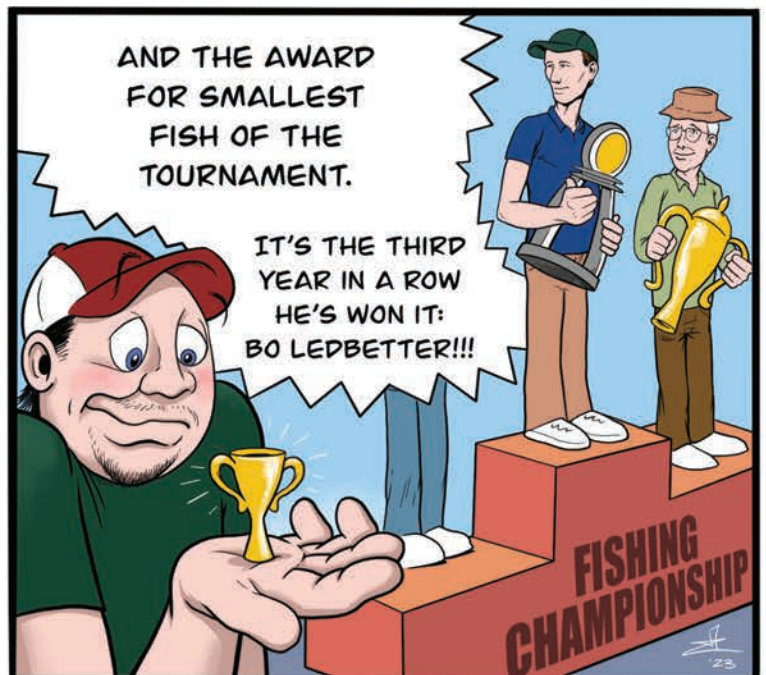


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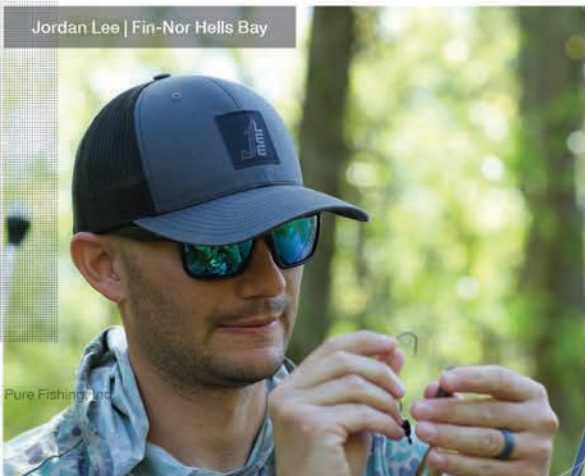
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