



JUNE-JULY 2023

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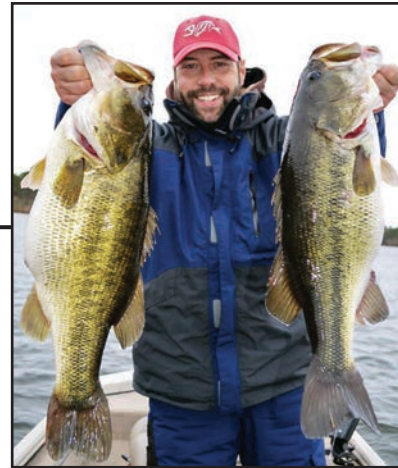
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THE VIEW FROM THE MIDWAY POINT OF 2023

As I sit down to write this, the Internet is still percolating over the dominant performances of Jacob Wheeler at Bass Pro Tour Stage Four on Lake Guntersville and Alton Jones Jr. at General Tire Heavy Hitters on Bussey Brake in Northern Louisiana. As you'll read later in this issue's Tournament Report, Wheeler claimed his sixth BPT trophy and Jones completed one of the most epic championship days in MLF history with a 59-pound beatdown of a Top 10 with a half-dozen Angler of Year awards.

Those two events in April and May signified the halfway point of the 2023 MLF major-tour season – a perfect time to assess and acknowledge the most interesting, successful, story-worthy anglers, trends and events of the season to date. Without further ado ...



EBARE WAS THE HOTTEST ANGLER ON THE PLANET

To say that Texas pro Dakota Ebare is having a good season is an egregious understatement. Let's remove "good" and sub in "phenomenal" or "astounding" because Ebare was both of those through the first half of 2023. The second-year Bass Pro Tour pro started the year with a win at the Toyota Series kickoff at Sam Rayburn in February and then claimed the trophy and winner's check at the Clarks Hill Tackle Warehouse Invitational a month later.

He also added a pair of second-place finishes (Bass Pro Tour Stage Three at Cherokee Lake and Heavy Hitters) and a couple more BPT Top 20s to boost his midseason winnings well past the \$300,000 mark and place him in the Top 10 in both Bass Pro Tour and Invitationals AOY standings.

As Bass Fishing magazine columnist Joe Balog says in this issue's feature on Ebare (see page 20), "windows of opportunity don't open themselves" and the halfway point of 2023, Ebare has done a yeoman's job of capitalizing on the windows he's created.

THE BALLY BET AOY RACE IS ANYBODY'S GAME

The list of Top 10 pros in the 2023 Bass Pro Tour standings tells an interesting story that I'm excited to watch develop over the final four tournaments of the season. Ott DeFoe perched in the No. 1 spot is nothing new – DeFoe has lurked near the top of the AOY standings virtually ever year since the 2019 start of the BPT – but the anglers in hot pursuit of the Tennessee pro are a compelling mix.

Edwin Evers is in second, a resurgent Chris Lane sits at No. 4, Bass Pro Tour rookie Matt Becker is No. 5, fellow rookie Nick LeBrun holds down the No. 10 spot and all-time greats like Andy Morgan and Wheeler lurk as well. Wheeler was notable in his absence from the AOY race until his Guntersville win, but now that the two-time defending AOY has some momentum ... look out.

As the schedule heads into smallmouth country in New York and Michigan – and to a season finale on a Saginaw Bay fishery that very few of the pros are familiar with – I'm betting on this season's AOY race to come down to a spectacularly interesting finish.

... AND WHAT ABOUT JONES JR.?

It would be a disservice to Jones to rush past his Heavy Hitters performance without adding a little context, because it really was THAT extraordinary.

Jones finished the final round of Heavy Hitters with 19 fish for 81-15. Ebare finished second with five fish for 22-15. *The entire rest of the field (places 2 through 10) accounted for 21 fish for 98-10.* Regardless of how well he fishes the rest of the season – and odds are that he'll do well in the smallmouth fisheries that remain on the schedule – Jones' performance was an all-timer.

Let's see what the second half brings, shall we?

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

SWIMS & SCUTTLES, DIVES & RISES, CASTS & TROLLS

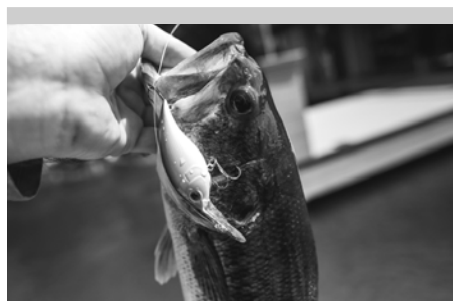
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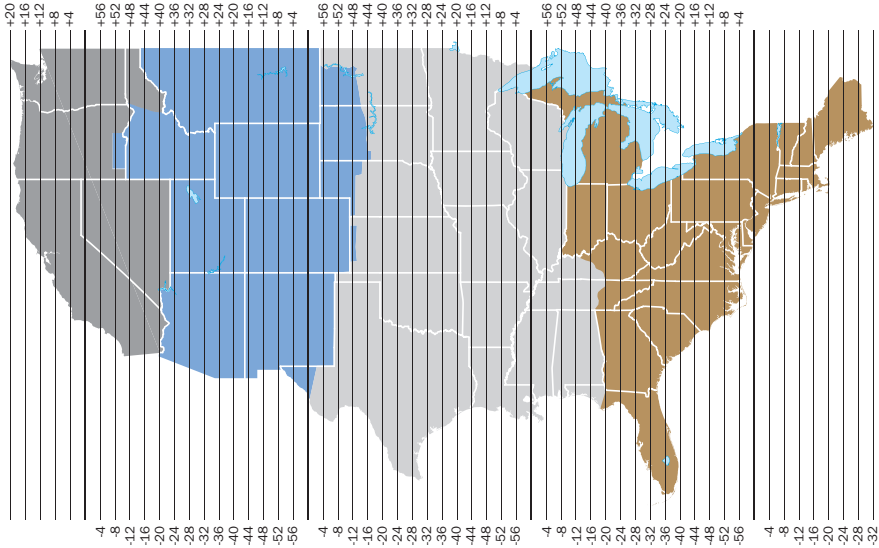


GHOST RED CRAW

SOLUNAR TABLES

JULY-AUGUST 2023

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



JULY Date	Day	AM		PM		Moon Phases	AUG. Date	Day	AM		PM		Moon Phases
		Minor	Major	Minor	Major				Minor	Major	Minor	Major	
1	Sat	2:25	8:35	2:45	9:05		1	Tue	4:10	10:25	4:35	10:55	☉
2	Sun	3:20	9:35	3:45	10:05		2	Wed	5:15	11:30	5:40	11:30	☾
3	Mon	4:20	10:30	4:40	11:10	☾	3	Thu	6:10	12:00	6:45	12:30	☾
4	Tue	5:25	11:45	5:55	11:55	☾	4	Fri	7:10	1:00	7:40	1:25	☾
5	Wed	6:30	12:20	7:05	12:50		5	Sat	8:05	1:55	8:35	2:20	☾
6	Thu	7:35	1:25	8:10	1:55		6	Sun	8:55	2:45	9:25	3:10	☾
7	Fri	8:35	2:25	9:05	2:50		7	Mon	9:50	3:40	10:20	4:05	☾
8	Sat	9:30	3:20	10:00	3:45		8	Tue	10:40	4:30	11:10	4:55	☾
9	Sun	10:20	4:10	10:50	4:35		9	Wed	11:30	5:20	11:55	5:45	☾
10	Mon	11:10	5:00	11:40	5:25	☾	10	Thu	12:00	6:05	12:15	6:35	☾
11	Tue	11:55	5:45	12:25	6:10	☾	11	Fri	12:50	6:55	1:10	7:20	☾
12	Wed	12:25	6:25	12:35	6:50		12	Sat	1:35	7:45	2:00	8:10	☾
13	Thu	1:05	7:10	1:20	7:40		13	Sun	2:25	8:30	2:45	9:00	☾
14	Fri	1:55	8:00	2:10	8:25		14	Mon	3:15	9:20	3:35	9:45	☾
15	Sat	2:40	8:50	3:00	9:15		15	Tue	4:00	10:05	4:20	10:25	☾
16	Sun	3:30	9:35	3:45	10:05		16	Wed	4:40	10:45	5:00	11:05	☾
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21	Fri	7:30	1:20	7:55	1:40		21	Mon	8:20	2:05	8:40	2:25	☾
22	Sat	8:15	2:05	8:40	2:25		22	Tue	9:00	2:50	9:25	3:10	☾
23	Sun	9:00	2:50	9:25	3:10		23	Wed	9:50	3:40	10:20	4:05	☾
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27	Thu	11:50	5:40	12:15	6:05		27	Sun	1:00	7:15	1:25	7:50	☾
28	Fri	12:20	6:20	12:30	6:55		28	Mon	2:05	8:10	2:20	8:45	☾
29	Sat	1:10	7:25	1:35	7:55		29	Tue	3:00	9:15	3:25	9:45	☾
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TAKING A DEEP DIVE INTO CAYUGA LAKE SMALLMOUTH

Early June Bass Pro Tour event benefits from catch, weigh, immediate-release format



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

The early June return of the Bass Pro Tour to Cayuga Lake, New York – for Favorite Fishing Stage Five Presented by ATG + Wrangler – refocuses the world’s attention on the outstanding smallmouth fishery that thrives in this gem of New York’s Finger Lakes region. It also reminds us that there are probably a lot of fishing fans out there who might enjoy a deeper dive into Cayuga.

CAYUGA LAKE AT A GLANCE

- Cayuga Lake is the second largest of the 11 Finger Lakes in Upstate New York, spanning 42,956 surface acres, reaching a maximum depth of 435 feet and stretching north/south for a length of 38 miles.
- The lake has a two-tier sportfish population, supporting both cold and warm water species. The sportfish opportunities include

rainbow trout, Atlantic salmon, brown trout, lake trout, lake sturgeon, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, northern pike, bluegill, black crappie, yellow perch and channel catfish.

- Forage fish are primarily open-water species such as alewives, rainbow smelt, gizzard shad and various shiner minnow species. Larger forage species including yellow perch, pumpkinseed and bluegill sunfish also exist and are abundant at times. More recently, exotic round goby have established a thriving population, supported by their ability to consume zebra mussels.
- The upper end of Cayuga is shallower, with dense submerged vegetation that include milfoils, curly leaf pondweed, coontail and hydrilla. This diverse environment produced the New York state

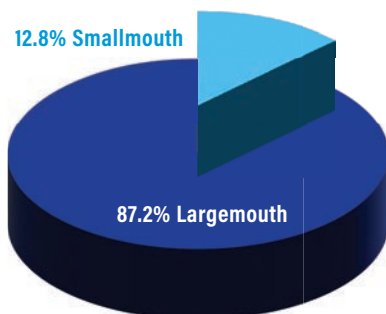
record 8-pound, 6-ounce bass in 2022 and is the primary reason the Bass Pro Tour events held here are so prolific.

WHAT SCORETRACKER® DATA TELLS US

The June Cayuga event is one of three fisheries on the 2023 Bass Pro Tour schedule where we can compare data for the “every fish counts” format to the best-five-fish format. In 2022, Bass Pro Tour Stage Six on Cayuga used a 2-pound variable minimum weight and turned out to be an extraordinary showcase of the fishery. In total, 2,532 bass were recorded into SCORETRACKER®: 2,209 largemouth and 323 smallmouth. Dustin Connell won the event with a Championship Round total of 25 smallmouth for 96 pounds, 12 ounces. Dakota Ebare had Berkley Big Bass for the event with a Bass Pro Tour-record 7-10 smallmouth.

When we look into the 2022 data and start thinking about how things might play in five-fish tournaments on Cayuga, we first see a big difference in the average weight of smallmouth versus largemouth. Using our SCORETRACKER® data, we calculated the average smallmouth weight during 2022 to be 3 pounds, 11 ½ ounces while the average largemouth was 3-2. That's a huge difference when we only count five fish this year. It will result in a 2 ½-pound difference between an average bag of smallmouth versus largemouth, which will likely be relevant around the cut line.

Percentage of Fish Caught by Species in 2022



The most notable change for five-fish events held on Cayuga instead of the every-fish-counts format is the species that will likely determine a winner. In the 2022 Bass Pro Tour event here, 79 of the 106 bass over 5 pounds were largemouth, which means that anglers looking to win will likely need some green fish in their daily five-fish limits.

When we rerun the numbers from 2022's Knockout and Championship rounds using the best-five-fish scoring structure, we see a rare occasion where a different field and eventual winner would have emerged.

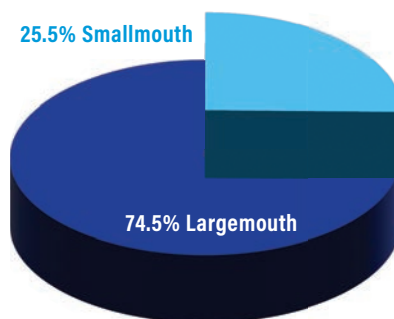
- Instead of being eliminated in 19th place with 11 fish for 46-12, Anthony Gagliardi would have had an impressive five-fish limit of 25-12 to lead the Knockout Round.
- The remaining top five for the Knockout Round would have been Zack Birge (25-0), Josh Bertrand (24-2), Ebare (22-2), and Connell (22-2) – Bertrand weighed only largemouth, and Gagliardi only smallmouth.



Dakota Ebare's 7-10 demonstrated the quality of Cayuga's smallmouth fishery.

- On the final day, Birge would've had 21-14, Connell would've had 25-8 and Ebare a whopping 27-4 (with his 7-10 smallmouth being the difference-maker).

Percentage of Fish 5lbs.+ Caught by Species in 2022



NEW YORK C&R SEASON

The format isn't the only big change that makes Stage Five special this year. New York has a statewide black bass regulation that allows for the daily harvest of five fish above 12 inches from June 15 through Nov. 30, and it's strictly catch and release with artificial lures only Dec. 1 through June 14. "Harvest" for almost all states is considered to occur at the time a fish enters into a livewell, which means all

traditional weigh-in tournament anglers technically harvest up to five fish for their weigh-in. This restricts the tournament season on Cayuga to June 15 through Nov. 30, or by a special permit from the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC).

Our Bass Pro Tour anglers hit the water for official practice on June 4 and tournament days were June 6-11, which is obviously during the catch-and-release season. The BPT format naturally avoids the harvest aspect of the regulation since no fish will ever technically be harvested. For the MLF Fisheries Management Division in Partnership with Berkley Labs, this is an opportunity to showcase the science behind both the regulation and allowing a catch, weigh, immediate-release tournament to take place during the state's catch-and-release season.

STUDYING THE KEY INFLUENCERS

The primary reason fisheries managers limit harvest seasonally (or in certain areas) is to protect fish while they're actively spawning. The impact of angling on spawning activity, nest and fry guarding, and nest abandonment is a fairly-well researched area of fisheries management.

GOBY PREDATION

For Cayuga Lake, round gobies now represent the most likely nest predator. A study published in 2011 titled "Round Goby Predation on Smallmouth Bass Offspring (sic.) in Nest During Simulated Catch and Release Angling" by Geoffrey B. Steinhart, Elizabeth A. Marschall, and Roy A. Stein addresses the potential for goby nest predation. In this study, smallmouth bass nests located around Bass Island in Lake Erie were observed from May through June of 1999, 2000, and 2001 via divers and cameras. They had treatment groups that included a control group with no angling, angling with divers preventing predation, and angling with predation allowed.

Angled fish were held for various durations, including immediate release, 6 minutes, or 12 minutes. This study found extraordinary results for the impact of round gobies.

First, the round goby accounted for 99% of all nest predation but only when a nest was unguarded. In fact, in 10 hours of video recording, only once did a round goby successfully eat an offspring when a male was present guarding the nest. For unguarded nests, the average time for first entry by a round goby was 78 seconds. Gobies appeared to enter the nest with unhatched eggs at a greater rate than hatched eggs, with an average of 20 gobies in unhatched and nine gobies in hatched nest after 5 minutes. In total, nest predation for unhatched eggs was calculated at 2.8 eggs per second; for hatched eggs, the rate was one egg per second.

Knowing these facts, we can see the potential impact round gobies could have on a nest if a guarding male was caught by an angler and placed in a livewell.

NEST ABANDONMENT

The question of how much predation is needed to lose a nest is also important. One of the key pieces of research in nest abandonment in the past 20 years comes from Cory D. Suski and co-authors J. H. Svec, J. B. Ludden, F. J. S. Phelan, D. P. Philipp in an article titled "The Effect of Catch-

and-Release Angling on Parental Care Behavior of Male Smallmouth Bass." The article was published in the Transactions of American Fisheries Society in 2003.

The study started in 1999 on Charleston Lake in Ontario, where they observed 64 smallmouth males guarding nests and assessed nest abandonment using six different treatments that ranged from simple observation to catching fish with hook and line to removing eggs from the nest. Of these six treatments, only the two groups with a 50% nest reduction showed a substantial abandonment (between 67% and 70%). Angling alone resulted in only one of 11 nests abandoned for a 9% abandonment rate.

This study showed that predation is one key (if not *the* key) factor in nest abandonment and that angling alone was not a factor.

The Bass Pro Tour's fish-friendly catch, weigh, immediate-release format provides the solution for tournament organizations to compete on fisheries with seasonal restrictions on harvest. Bass Pro Tour anglers average 24 seconds of out-of-water time per fish caught, which is much faster than any scientific study uses, so we should expect an even lower impact than those calculated for everyday catch-and-release anglers. Limiting out-of-water time and fish-handling stress is fundamental to improved spawning success. ■





2023 BALLY BET ANGLER OF THE YEAR RACE TAKING SHAPE

Interesting facts, figures and storylines surround Bass Pro Tour trophy race

Heading into the back stretch of the 2023 Bass Pro Tour season, the demolition-derby battle for the Bally Bet Angler of the Year hardware (and \$100,000 payday) is shaping up to be as interesting and unpredictable as any major-tour AOY race in recent memory.

As of this writing – right after Stage Four at Lake Guntersville – the Top 10 in the AOY had undergone noticeable rearrangement as a handful of anglers faltered and others surged. But regardless of what happens next, two anglers vying for the No. 1 spot (Chris Lane and John Hunter) are worthy of some extra analysis.

LANE IS LAYING THE LUMBER

As mentioned briefly in this issue's Editor's Note, Alabama pro Chris Lane has been an immovable presence in the AOY Top 5 throughout the first half of the season. Lane started the season with a "Powwww!" at Stage One on the Kissimmee Chain, claiming his first-ever MLF win while fishing waters where his bass-fishing career began 20-plus years ago. Lane carried that momentum to Stage Two at Douglas/Cherokee (20th) and Stage Three at Lake Murray (fourth), and survived a 49th-place finish at Guntersville to remain in the top five.

It seems like a stretch to call Lane's season a "resurgence" – he's only 11 years removed from his Bassmaster Classic win on the Red River and racked up five tour-level wins from 2012 to 2015 – but his performance in the best-five-fish format this season is notable. Lane's previous AOY finishes on the Bass Pro Tour (2019 through 2022) were 52nd, 16th, 61st and 25th, respectively (a four-year average of 39th).



Lane will be an angler to pay close attention to as the schedule points north to Cayuga Lake, Lake St. Clair and Saginaw Bay to finish the season. He's had mixed results at Cayuga (63rd last year at Stage Five, 27th and 72nd in 2016 and 2014 Elite Series events there), but has posted two top-five finishes on St. Clair (including a win in 2013).



HUNTER LEADS ROOKIE RALLY

The "rookie class" of 2023 seems intent on claiming a hearty percentage of the berths in REDCREST 2024, judging by the first-half success of Nick LeBrun, John Hunter, Mitch Crane, Matt Becker, Josh Butler and Jacob Wall.

Perhaps the most compelling performance to date is that of Hunter. The Kentucky pro's career AOY average on the Pro Circuit from 2018 to 2021 was 72nd, but he fished his way to the Bass Pro Tour thanks an eighth-place AOY finish in 2022. Hunter has remained in heady AOY territory since then, earning a Top 10 at Lake Murray and hovering stubbornly near the top of the AOY race through the first half of the season.

Go to majorleaguefishing.com to follow the Bally Bet Angler of the Year race as it continues through Bass Pro Tour stages Five, Six and Seven. ■

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

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Live Stream at MajorLeagueFishing.com or MyOutdoorTV.com

June 17-19: Tackle Warehouse Invitational @ Potomac River

June 24-29: Bass Pro Tour General Tire Stage Six @ Lake St. Clair

July 25-27: Tackle Warehouse Invitational Presented by Mercury @ Mississippi River

Aug. 1-6: Bass Pro Tour Minn Kota Stage Seven Presented by Suzuki @ Saginaw Bay and Saginaw River

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

June 17: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops - Knockout Round @ Lake Palestine

June 24: General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops - Championship Round @ Lake Palestine

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

June 17: Bass Pro Shops Championship Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches: Championship Final @ Clermont Chain, FL

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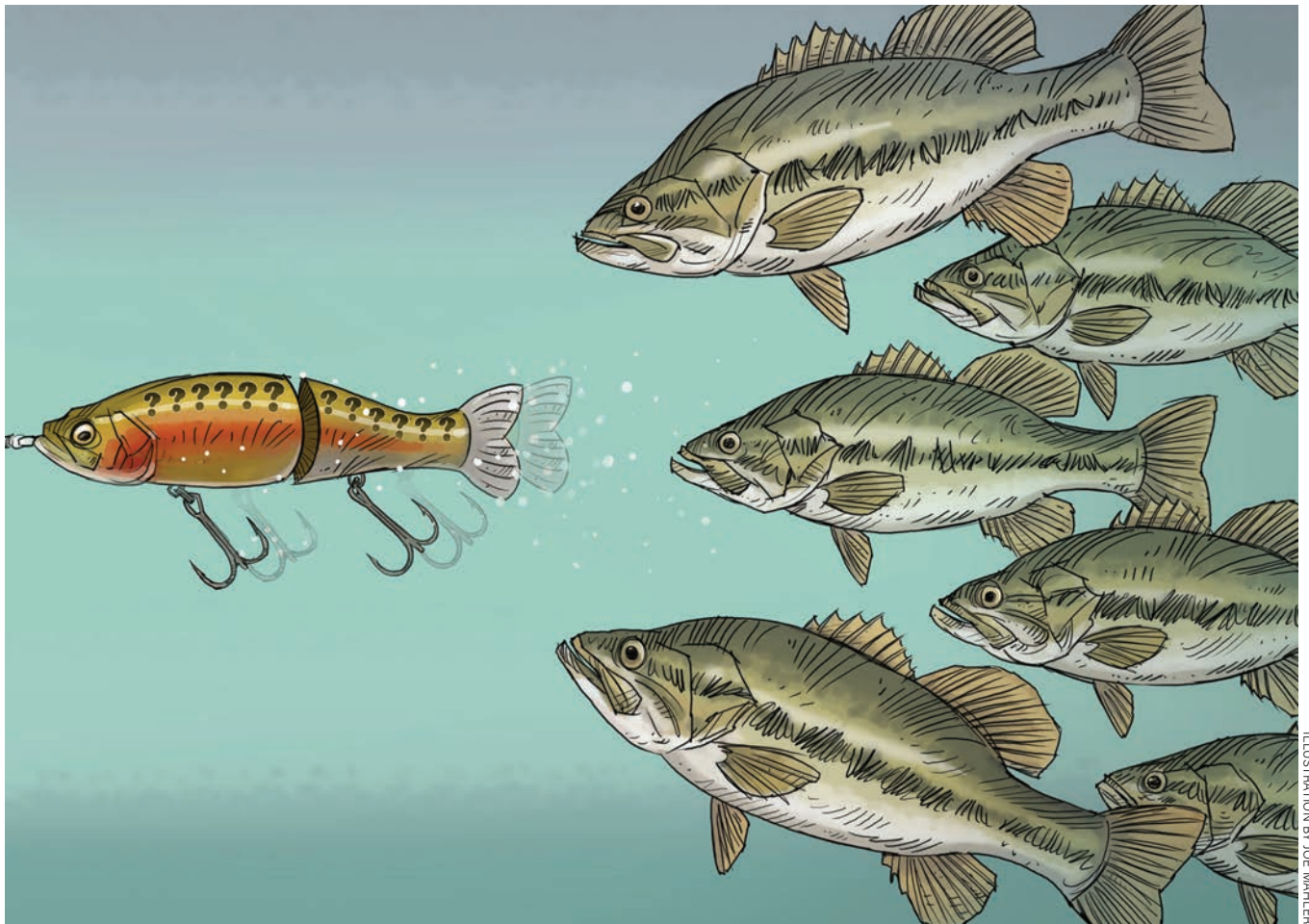


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

CAPITALIZING ON CURIOSITY

Pros now combining big baits, forward-facing sonar to appeal to bass' inquisitive nature



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.

Ever since fishermen began using artificial lures to catch bass over 100 years ago, anglers have learned a tremendous amount about the different moods and attitudes of bass through the use of lures. Over time, anglers have learned to use certain classes of lures to directly poke a bass' current demeanor in order to provoke a strike.

Temperaments such as being defensive, competitive, reactionary, hungry and curious are all moods that anglers take advantage of through the use of certain lures.

Most anglers are familiar with provoking a bass' sense of defense when fishing for a bass guarding a bed. Continually aggraving a bass bed with any type of soft-plastic lure eventually makes the bass bite out of the inherent need to defend the bed.

Hunger usually presents itself in the form of schooling bass that are in a full blown all-you-can-eat mode. Topwaters are great tools for appealing to that appetite. Along the same lines, competition among bass is another mood anglers can target. Usually competition is

for food, but during spawning season, male bass get competitive for females and may "flex their jaws" on prey just to show off.

In the reaction category, lipless rattlers, ChatterBaits and even punching mats are all techniques that suddenly flash a lure in an unsuspecting bass' face, making it react in a millisecond, usually by opening its mouth and inhaling the annoying offender.

In summary, hunger, competition, defensiveness and reaction tend to be the most common moods anglers use to

provoke bites. However, it's the state of curiosity among bass that seems to be the newest frontier.

BASS ARE CURIOUS CREATURES INDEED

Indeed, bass have always been curious creatures. Shoot a laser pen into a "hawg trough" demo tank and they'll follow the red dot around like cats. Bass will certainly bite out of curiosity, but more often than not, curiosity is more neutral in terms of aggressiveness and leads to a lot of following behavior with lures.

Anglers didn't realize the magnitude of bass curiosity until forward-facing sonar came along and revealed that literally hundreds of bass per day follow and check their offerings on the regular, mostly because bass are downright nosy.

What's been noteworthy on the Bass Pro Tour this year is pros who are mixing big swimbaits and huge glide baits with forward-facing sonar to purposely appeal to the curiosity streak in bass. This is being done not so much by directly catching bass on these big lures, but rather using them as spectacles to capitalize on their curious nature.

To some degree, this is nothing new. Anglers from the West have been tapping into the snooping nature of bass for years, casting tennis-shoe-sized baits in clear water to tempt giant bass. Long before forward-facing sonar, Western anglers were the first to dub the term "drawing power" to explain how large lures inherently "draw in" bass from the depths for a closer look. This was originally done with full-size trout imitators in clear lakes stocked with trout to tempt big bass with their favorite meal. With it came the incidental realization that multiple bass, of all sizes, will habitually approach and follow big baits with no real intent to eat them, especially in open water.

It was not uncommon to have a pack of bass tailing the bait down below. As these big trout impostors made their way to the clear waters of the East, it became apparent that bass in all types of lakes were intoned by these giant baits. Even in lakes with low fertility, where

the primary forage base is small threadfin shad, huge baits still had enormous drawing power to bass of all sizes.

The magnum flutter spoon craze that hit the TVA ledge lakes some years ago – pre-forward-facing sonar – is another example of this. Measuring in at 8 inches in length of solid metal, the magnum spoon is meant to imitate big gizzard shad. Upon its introduction, big bass were caught on the monster metals, but it took true commitment to throw it all day. Soon, anglers realized the giant spoons also pulled double duty as an instigator in activating dormant schools.

At that time, anglers only had side and down scan to locate bass schools; they could only mark the schools and then turn around and fish them. Since the fish could not be "viewed" in real time, there was not a way to check their precise location or attitude. The shortcut to dialing them in was to heave a giant spoon out there and rip it around several times and then follow up with a more traditional sized crankbait or swimbait. Something about that big profile drew the nosy bass together for a look-see. Bringing the bass into close proximity of each other in the TVA's stained water made them competitive. Even if they never bit the spoon, following up with more traditional size lures got the bites.

Forward-facing sonar has only proven this phenomenon further. Multiple bass will follow lures of all shapes and sizes just for fun. Curiosity is the only explanation for this odd behavior, but a common denominator is that it's the biggest baits that seem to have the most drawing power to "pull" the fish off the bottom and away from cover, so they become more apparent on forward-facing sonar.

Of course, the real thrill is to have a big bass straight up commit and crush a big swimmer or glide. But even if it's just used as a "drawing" tool of curiosity, it's worth having on the deck. With forward-facing sonar, anglers can track the progress of their big swimmers and glides to see just how many bass follow them, no matter the water color or forage base.

"TRANSFERRING CURIOSITY"

Increasingly, pros are figuring ways to initially appeal to the curiosity streak to get bass to show themselves, then transfer that curiosity into one of the stronger moods of competition or reaction to ultimately score a bite.

At REDCREST at Lake Norman this year, pros were using the beam-and-swimbait combo as an efficient search process to find the key docks holding wolfpacks of staging bass. With eyes on the screen while winding the 6- to 8-inch baits, the pro could see how many bass were "pulled off" the dock toward the big thumper out of curiosity. If one particular dock had a gang of looky-loos, they would mark the dock and keep on fishing past it. The idea was to give the fish time to set back up under the key dock. A while later, the pro would return and skip a wacky-rig or shaky head under the dock to cash in. Curiosity "exposed" the fish, then returning with a different offering to tempt a hunger or reaction streak got them on the hook.

When dealing with schools of bass, big glides seem to have enough drawing power to "pull fish back together" once they have broken up. Spencer Shuffield has become a glide bait freak in the last few years, and he confirms that glides can certainly pull scattered fish together. He used a glide at Douglas Lake to help propel him to a fourth-place finish at Stage Two this year.

Similarly, John Hunter used a big glide at Lake Murray to help keep his best schooling spot warm when it cooled off. Once the schooling activity dwindled and the fish scattered out on the point, Hunter figured out that a cast with a big glide bait would, "pull them back up," to look at it. After several casts with the big bait, the fish would start schooling again. Once they got fired up, he could catch them on more traditional schooling lures.

As the old saying goes, nothing attracts a crowd like a crowd. When crowds get too crowded, things get rowdy. Increasingly, it looks like giant baits have a tendency to attract a crowd of bass through curiosity, and from there things can turn rowdy. ■

ANGLERS DIDN'T REALIZE THE MAGNITUDE OF BASS CURIOSITY UNTIL FORWARD-FACING SONAR CAME ALONG.






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WHEN YOUR PASSION IS OBVIOUS

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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THE RISE OF DAKOTA EBARE

Hard work has paid off for former 'rodeo bum'



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.

Texas pro Dakota Ebare is one of the hottest tournament anglers in America. This year alone – in the span of a month – Ebare racked up back-to-back wins on the Toyota Series Presented by Phoenix Boats and Tackle Warehouse Invitationals, and has crested the \$1 million mark in career winnings. Fans know Ebare as the ultimate road warrior, never letting off the gas, competing anywhere and everywhere.

Born and raised in Watson, Louisiana, Ebare moved to the bass-fishing Mecca of Sam Rayburn Reservoir at the age of 24. From there, he took on an intense practice and touring schedule to learn everything he could about bass fishing, spending as many as 200 days a year on the road (and nearly every other on the front deck of his boat on Rayburn). But Ebare's story is much more than one of practice makes perfect. It's a timeline

of intense dedication – coupled with a few lucky breaks – that molded Ebare into one of today's top competitive anglers.

SCRAPING BY TO GET STARTED

To learn the story of Dakota Ebare, it's necessary to start in 2010. Totally consumed with bass fishing through his high school years, Ebare competed in the old family boat, complete with a 90-horse engine and a rusty trailer. All he wanted to do was fish. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday featured night tournaments around home, followed by an overnight camp-out at the boat ramp to get in line for the Saturday derby.

Ebare quickly won his fair share, but the good times couldn't last. The old outboard finally blew, leaving a cash-strapped teenager at a standstill.

"I couldn't get ahead," Ebare said. "It was extremely frustrating."

Always a competitor, Ebare turned to his other passion as a youngster: rodeo. An amateur bull rider and son of a livestock hauler, Ebare knew his way around a ranch, and felt rodeo could be the next step toward an athletic career – or at least pay some bills.

A scholarship opportunity came along to Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas, to work as a bull-fighter – a key role to ensure cowboy safety in the arena. In 2013, Ebare packed up his Honda minivan and moved, sight unseen, to Texas.

“I didn’t know a single person, I was completely a rodeo bum,” Ebare readily admitted.

There’s not a lot of money in college rodeo, but Ebare was able to lock down a job and earn a few hundred dollars each weekend. Blessed with a diligent sense of financial responsibility, the youngster was happy with what he was able to scrape together.

Ebare soon befriended a fellow Tarleton student with similar interests – Jacob Bare – who just happened to own a boat. Sitting in on a few meetings of the Tarleton Fishing Team with Bare stoked Ebare’s bass fishing fire once again. He and Bare jumped in a tournament on the Red River, totally oblivious to the ways of modern bass fishing.

“We showed up in white T-shirts,” Ebare said. “Everybody was wearing jerseys and making fun of us. We didn’t know anything about all of that.”

The teasing came to an end when Ebare and Bare placed fifth in the event, thus qualifying them for the Conference Championship.

Ebare would continue to flex time between rodeo and bass fishing – from the Conference Championship came Nationals. But just as he was gaining steam, a freak accident occurred.

Ebare broke his pelvis while setting up for a rodeo, leaving him unable to walk for three months. But while it would’ve been easy to give up, Ebare doesn’t think that way. The first day he could walk again, Ebare was at the FLW College Fishing qualifier.

“Jordan Lee had just won the Classic, and he was a big college fishing story,” Ebare said. “Instantly, a light bulb went off. I thought ‘Man, that could be me.’ I

realized this thing – this college fishing – could be a pathway to make it to the next level.”

TWO GOOD BREAKS

Recognizing the dangers of rodeo, Ebare went all in on bass fishing, working on a ranch and scraping by in an effort to self-finance his career. But then the first of two lucky breaks came his way.

A close friend and younger angler, Kyle Hall, was also bitten by the bass bug and wanted to try his hand at life as a bass pro. Hall’s father Keith saw in Ebare a mentor for his son and offered to sponsor the youngsters through the Hall’s tackle store, Tri Lakes Tackletown.

That was the break Ebare needed.

He jumped into the Toyota Series, earning “just enough to keep going.” That’s the key goal for Ebare: to keep moving forward competitively, and never go in the hole financially. From the beginning, Ebare recognized his need to fish as much as possible and learn everything he could about bass fishing. Another opportunity would allow him to do just that.

“I had recently done an interview for a local news show,” Ebare said. “I was practicing for a Toyota Series event on Grand Lake, and this guy walks up to me, and tells me that he enjoyed the interview, and that he was impressed by the way I handled myself. He said he would like to talk to me more about helping me out.”

That guy would turn out to be Bob Keeland, a successful businessman and big fan of competitive fishing. Keeland helped Ebare with entries into the Toyota Series, as well as offering lodging at his camp on the shores of Sam Rayburn. Keeland encouraged Ebare to fish every day possible, and Ebare jumped at the opportunity.

“I’ve always wanted to be as well-rounded as possible, I never want to be uncomfortable with any technique or at any lake,” he said.

With Keeland’s backing, Ebare fished two divisions of the Toyota Series, quickly qualifying for the FLW Tour, where he’d earn a spot in the Forrest Wood Cup his first year. But yet again, the sport proved expensive, even with some help.



PHOTO BY GABRIEL DIXON

Ebare's 2023 success is the result of years of hard work.

“I didn’t have a girlfriend, I didn’t have a dog, no kids; everything I made went back into fishing, and I was still sleeping in my truck,” Ebare said. “I was doing whatever I could to get down the road.”

MAKING THE MOST OF WHAT HE HAS

Ebare had been building credit with a local bank since the age of 16, which allowed him to purchase his first new boat and improve his equipment.

“I focused everything on making (bass fishing) a business since day one, I knew I was going to have to be fully dedicated to make it work,” he said.

Ebare put 750 hours on his new outboard in two years. He fished every event he could logistically get to, regardless of his level of experience at the venue.

“I’d have no help, and I’d get my butt kicked – but I learned,” Ebare said.

That experience was the building block of Ebare’s success; putting himself in the competitive arena and starting from scratch, over and over.

“If you go somewhere new and get help, you don’t learn anything, you just go and catch some fish,” Ebare said. “But I’m confident that I’ve been to more big tournaments than anyone in the world in the last five years. That’s the reason I’m now having as much success as I am.”

Ebare still continues to work on all aspects of his game, and he fishes to win.

“I’m getting better each day. Now, I find that decision-making is the top variable between struggling and having success, so I’m consciously working on that more. With more financial freedom now, I’m freed up to focus on winning instead of getting checks.”

That freedom came as a result of 100% dedication to a goal. Ebare’s hard work paid off. Or did he just get lucky?

“Every time my path was blocked, something else opened up,” Ebare confirmed.

Those windows of opportunity, however, don’t open themselves. ■



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJIRA



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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



THE CASE FOR BAIT “FINESSE”

There are tremendous benefits to downsized presentations offered up on baitcasting gear

It seems like there are more boats on the water than ever these days, and fish are adapting to the pressure. Speaking for myself, it’s getting tougher to get bit on traditional methods and I find myself reaching for finesse options more than ever before. Insert “bait finesse,” the hottest new trend in bass fishing!

Over the past two years I’ve discovered the incredible fun that can be had with light line, tiny baits, and a baitcaster ... yes, a baitcaster! Bait finesse (Also known as “BFS,” “bait finesse system” or “bait finesse

style”) is a method of finesse fishing with ultra-light baitcasting gear. Anglers are essentially replacing their spinning tackle with casting gear that is even more capable of casting light lures with accuracy and stealth than the spinning gear we’re all accustomed to.

Specialized baitcasting reels give anglers the ability to cast baits as light as a gram or two with ease. Some of the key benefits of this method over traditional spinning tackle is the lack of line twist (far less wind knots), the ability to pitch baits low to the water and feather the spool for soft landings, and

of course, having that familiar baitcasting feel as you work your lures. If you’re not familiar with the system, the notion of throwing Ned rigs and micro baits with baitcasters may seem like a joke, but it’s serious and it’s likely already being used to catch fish on your lake while you’re struggling to adapt.

WHY I’M SO INTO BAIT FINESSE

So what’s the deal and why should you care about this fishing trend, you might ask? It’s all about having fun!

I’ve dedicated decades of my life to the pursuit of giant

largemouth bass. There have been entire years that I fished with nothing but heavy tackle and giant swimbaits. I still use those methods today, but I now find myself leaning to bait finesse more and more. One side of my deck may have a couple swimbait rods and a jig laid out, but the other side is covered in bait finesse gear. I'm not just having more fun with light tackle, I'm catching more fish with these downsized presentations than I do with traditional methods.

In places where I would've thrown a big topwater, I'm finding myself using micro poppers. In places where I would've flipped a big Texas rig on heavy braid, I'm flipping with 6-pound fluorocarbon, micro plastics, and a 1/16-ounce weight. I'm catching more fish than ever before, I'm converting more of the fish I see cruising, and I'm having more fun!

Bass fishing has become too serious, in my opinion. Perhaps it's our innate desire to be competitive, or maybe social media just makes it too easy to compare our angling to those around us. Whatever the reason may be, it's made fishing less fun for the average angler and it's time for that to change. Bait finesse is shifting that trend back to catching fish and enjoying the experience. When you're bowed up on a 2-pounder and your drag is screaming, you feel like a kid again! It doesn't matter if you're on Lake Fork or just a little pond, you'll be laughing at yourself as you're losing the fight with a 2-pounder!

If you happen to luck into a giant bite, you're in for a real ride; if you don't get that big bite, you'll still go home smiling and telling your friends about the fun you had, instead of how much you struggled to get a bite.

Bait finesse isn't a new concept. This method of fishing has been employed in Japan for decades, but has been very cost-prohibitive until recent years. The impetus for the recent boom in the U.S. was the launch of Shimano's Curado BFS reel, which made this style of fishing attainable for the average angler. Since it's the Curado BFS' explosive launch, a handful of brands have answered the call with finesse rods and a mix of downsized lures, with many more sure to be on their way. It's been nothing short of extraordinary as empty pegs and shelves are often all you'll find when searching for these downsized lures.

YOU HAVE SOME OPTIONS

The rewarding part of bait finesse is you can take it as far as you want to go and you'll be smiling all the way. You can just use it as a replacement for a preferred technique. Perhaps you'd like to cast a popper a little further and land it more accurately under docks. Maybe you're on a herring fishery and a few more yards on the end of a cast would make all the difference. Maybe you enjoy the fight more than the catch but never realized that you could flip grass with micro Texas-rigged plastics. Or perhaps you want to spool his baitcaster with 3- to 4-pound line and fish the smallest plastics possible for clear water smallmouth or spotted bass? Whatever you choose, this fishing method can take you there.

The three bait finesse methods I've found most useful are downsized topwaters, jerkbaits and craws. I'll give you some examples from my own fishing to help you visualize just what I mean.

POPPERS

I love throwing poppers in spring and early summer. There is just something about that little "bloop bloop" of a popper on the surface on a calm morning that drives bass crazy! Normally I fish full-size poppers like the Megabass Pop Max or Damiki D Pop, but this spring I've focused my attention entirely on the **Rapala Ultralight Popper** and the **Damiki Umpa BFS Popper**. These tiny baits are so small they're hard to see at the end of a long cast, but they still move a lot of water on the pop. In clear water, I can clearly see that fish aren't afraid of them at all (even when the sun is high), and I believe I'm catching more fish because of them.

Rapala Ultralight Popper
Color: clown



Damiki Umpa BFS Popper
Color: real shad



JERKBAITS

When it comes to jerkbaits, there's one tiny lure that blurs the lines between bait categories. The **Megabass Karashi** could be a topwater, it could be a jerkbait, but it's really in a league of its own. This downsized hard bait draws reaction strikes like nothing I've ever seen when twitched quickly on (or just below) the surface. I'm constantly amazed by how aggressively fish pursue this bait, often striking it over and over again until they get the hooks.



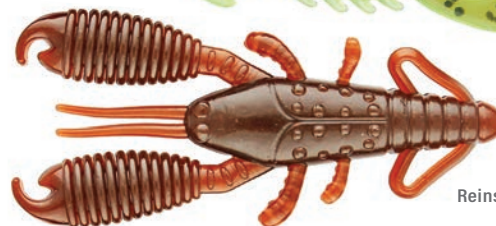
Megabass Karashi
Color: Wagin Oikawa KS

CRAWS

Finally, we come to the micro craws. In my personal fishing, the **Z-Man TRD CrawZ** and the **Reins 2.5-inch Ring Craw** have been the clear standouts. I fish these baits on a micro Texas rig (No. 1 or 2 wide gap hook with a 1/16-ounce tungsten weight). I throw them anywhere I traditionally throw a jig or worm. I've found success fishing them around docks, on offshore structure, and even flipping heavy cover. The possibilities are endless!



Z-Man TRD CrawZ
Color: green pumpkin chartreuse



Reins 2.5-inch Ring Craw
Color: scuppernong

Trends come and go, but it's been a long time since we've had a trend come along that helps the average angler have more fun on the water every day. There's no doubt in my mind that I'm catching more fish on every trip to the lake because of these downsized baits. It's true that you don't need a baitcaster to throw these finesse techniques, but if you want to have more fun on the water and feel more connected to your gear, it's definitely worth giving bait finesse a try. This trend is here to stay. ■

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PUSHING TIM

WHEN, WHERE AND HOW ALUMINUM BOATS ARE BECOMING GO-TO BOATS FOR “OFF-THE-GRID” BASS

By Sean Ostruszka



PHOTO BY I.D. BLACKBURN

For decades, they were scoffed at for being inferior. But in recent years, aluminum boats are more and more becoming options for serious everyday anglers and even legitimate tournament players.

Just look at recent history.

Ott DeFoe has long used his 17-foot Tracker Grizzly 1754 SC "river" boat in mid-level tournaments with great success. (and has developed a hearty flow of content during his shallow-water excursions). Keith Poche recently won a Bass Pro Tour event on Douglas and Cherokee lakes from an aluminum boat (not to mention multiple other victories and Top 10s). Jeff Gustafson took home the 2023 Bassmaster Classic on Fort Loudon-Tellico lakes from a metal boat. And John Cox, arguably the angler who pioneered the resurgence of aluminum boats, has won a Forrest Wood Cup, won eight other top-level events, and nearly won Angler of the Year twice in the last decade all from a "tin boat."

Now, does this mean fiberglass boats are no longer the cream of the crop? Absolutely not! As much as aluminum boats have advanced, they certainly have limitations compared to their fiberglass brethren, especially in tournament settings (more on that later).

That said, the mindset that you needed a fiberglass boat to be taken seriously as an angler or competitive in a tournament is shifting. It's more common nowadays for anglers to find success in aluminum boats, thanks to evolving mindsets on how (and where) they fish.

"The way I look at using an aluminum boat, especially for just a day fishing, it is can make fishing fun again," DeFoe said. "It's a whole new mindset of thinking because you get to fish places that don't see ton of baits. That and figuring out places to fish and how to get there, it's all really fun."

OPENING DOORS

May of 2011 may have changed everything.

That's when a little-known Cox squeezed an aluminum boat through a culvert to access a backwater pond en route to winning an FLW Tour event on the Red River. It was one of the most (if not *the* most) high-profile victory from an aluminum boat in decades.

METAL ELEMENTS

MANY TOP-LEVEL aluminum bass boats come as decked out as their fiberglass counterparts in terms of storage, electronics, motor, fishability, etc. Yet, even if you can't (or don't want to) take on the price tag of the top-of-the-line metal boats, smaller models still offer plenty of fishability, especially with how customizable they can be for an angler.

Here's a look at Ott DeFoe's "river" boat, with all the customizations he's made to make it not just a fun boat, but also one suitable for tournament fishing.

TRACKER GRIZZLY 1754 SC

LENGTH: 17 FEET, 1 INCH | WIDTH/BEAM: 6 FEET, 6 INCHES



RUN THE RIVER

Ott DeFoe's "river boat" - a 17-foot Tracker aluminum boat that he's decked out with custom features - has provided him and his family with a means to access fish in shallow waters that he simply can't get to in his fiberglass tournament rig. DeFoe's boat features a tunnel hull, an oversized fuel tank and multiple other custom pieces that make it the ultimate rig for accessing smaller waters. DeFoe and son Parker capitalized on the tin-boat advantages on a summer trip to some small waters in East Tennessee.

PHOTOS BY J.D. BLACKBURN





PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

A couple years later, Cox switched full-time to an aluminum boat; a year after that (2015) saw him winning a FLW Tour event on Lake Hartwell, the Forrest Wood Cup on Wheeler Lake and finishing runner-up in the AOY standings, all from an aluminum.

But that original win highlights exactly why he, DeFoe, Poche and others are choosing to fish from them more and more, be it fun fishing or in tournaments. They simply can get places fiberglass boats can't.

The lack of weight of an aluminum boat compared to the weight of a fiberglass boat allows them to sit higher and draft far less water. For Cox, that meant he could squeeze his boat through the culvert, using wood two-by-fours to push his way through because the weight was so much less.

DeFoe's aluminum Tracker can float in only 8 inches of water and drafts less than 3 inches when on plane (and he even uses a jet motor so there's no skeg to hit). That means it's the perfect bet for when the water comes up in spring and he wants to get way back into areas of newly flooded brush. And according to Poche, he can raise his jack plate high enough that his boat only drafts an inch or two of water (including the prop) when he's running full out. Thus, stumps, rocks and pretty much everything else underneath the

***“THEY’RE DURABLE AND
CAN GET JUST ABOUT
ANYWHERE, OPENING UP
POSSIBILITIES TO FISH
UNTAPPED AREAS.”***

water suddenly are no longer an issue for guys like DeFoe and Poche. If they can't see it, they're not going to worry about hitting it.

To get to his winning spot on Cherokee – near a dam far up the Holston River – Poche had to run a couple little stretches of super-shallow rock shoals. DeFoe joked that had he been able to use his aluminum boat for that event – per MLF rules, an angler has to use the same boat for every event of the BPT – Poche would not have been alone up near the dam, as DeFoe has long been one of the few locals who fished that spot because of his own aluminum boat. But because DeFoe had his fiberglass boat, there was no way he was risking it in that event.

And the thing is, even if DeFoe or Poche can see an obstacle, they're still not worried. Poche recently posted a

video on his Instagram of him jumping a concrete dam. And DeFoe remembers what he ran (and ran over) en route to the first time he won a boat in a tournament.

“I was fishing a team tournament on a small river in Mississippi in my old jet boat,” DeFoe said. “We were literally jumping dry logs on plane. You'd hit logs at 20 to 25 mph and go right across them. Some were about even with the top of the water, but some were 6 inches above surface. You'd just hit them with the nose of the boat, you'd pop the nose up, and then go completely over them.”

METAL MINDSET

What the above outlined more than anything is that when it comes to aluminum boats, there are endless possibilities, both from a fishing perspective and a customization perspective (see sidebar on DeFoe's setup). But in order to maximize those possibilities, an angler needs to think differently.

“With so many of these bodies of water, the main lake gets so much pressure,” Poche said. “Everyone knows most the spots and can fish them. In an aluminum boat, I have the opportunity to get off the beaten path and find hidden spots where there may be fish who have never been fished for before. That's a huge advantage.”

DeFoe agrees, as he says when he gets in those “hidden” places, he definitely sees fish that react a lot different than those he sees out on the main lake.

“They're definitely a little less boat shy because they're not used to seeing boats,” DeFoe said. “They don't associate a boat with anything. It's not like those you see cruising an open bank that spook the second they notice a boat or who leave after you ping them with forward-facing sonar. They just do their thing.”

Does that mean the fish are easier to catch? Yes and no. DeFoe joked it's not like 5-pounders are just going to start jumping in the boat. It still takes skill to catch them, just like it does to hit a golf ball. But like using an oversized club, these hidden fish are a bit more forgiving if a presentation is not perfect.

As for hidden places, those places can be found from one end of a system to the other. Yes, they're frequently far back in creek arms and up rivers, but they can also be tucked away behind marinas right off the main lake (check out the YouTube video of Poche squeezing behind a marina at the Lake Murray event this spring to show just how tight a space you can fit with an aluminum boat).

The biggest thing is having a trained his eye to see the little spaces and think "I can get my boat in there." And then, often, doing your homework and planning on how to get back in there. For Poche, that often means spending an entire tournament practice running around figuring out where he can squeeze his boat as opposed to fishing. For DeFoe, he remembers spending hours and hours walking the shorelines of various places he felt he might be able to get his boat on the rivers and lakes near his home in East Tennessee.

"You need to plan your route, because once you commit to running it, you can't stop," DeFoe said. "That is, unless you want to do a lot of pushing."

A LITTLE RUSTY

While there are definitely some serious pros to fishing from aluminum boats, like everything else in life, there's a give and take. And in talking with Poche and DeFoe, the give is obvious.

Speed.

"That's the single biggest drawback," DeFoe said of small aluminum boats with small motors. "Keith's boat goes around 45 mph. So, if it took you 45 minutes in a fiberglass boat to get to a spot, it might take you an hour or hour 15 in an aluminum. For my boat, it can only go 30 mph. So, it'd be at least double the time. That's pretty limiting."

Both pros admit that they're fortunate on the BPT that they only need to run one way, as there's no weigh-in to get back to at the end of the day. If Poche takes forever to get far up a creek arm or something, he doesn't have to worry about doubling that time on the way back. But to be honest, that lack of speed and subsequent fishing time can be a seriously limiting thing



DeFoe shows off the results of an upriver jaunt in his 17-foot aluminum boat.

PHOTO BY J.D. BLACKBURN

for many anglers thinking of using them as tournament boats.

Then there's big and rough water. The fact is, aluminum bass boats simply don't handle waves as well as fiberglass ones. The bumpy ride is one thing, but the lack of speed plus the lack of weight demand extra caution when fishing big water in an aluminum boat, both for time and safety's sake.

"I can make big runs in big water when I need, but I just have to watch the wind," Poche said. "It can eat up so much time if have to go slow, and if you're not aware, it can become a safety issue. You don't want to get yourself in a bind."

Finally, if there's one thing an angler needs to make peace with when fishing out of an aluminum boat DeFoe says, it's that you're going to get stuck.

"Sure, you can fit it in places you can't get a fiberglass boat, but that doesn't mean it will be easy," DeFoe

said. "When considering an aluminum boat, don't get one so big you can't get it loose by yourself. That's extremely important."

DeFoe always carries a push pole in his aluminum boat for that very reason, and Poche actually has a winch on his boat in case he really gets wedged.

So, yes, there are some great pros to aluminum boats. They're durable and can get just about anywhere, opening up possibilities to fish untapped areas. Yet, the lack of speed, big-water safety and hassle of changing mindsets probably means they're not for everyone. And that's OK.

As we mentioned, fiberglass boats are getting more and more remarkable every year. But if nothing else, hopefully this article opened your eyes to new possibilities. At the very least, maybe you won't scoff the next time you see a guy putting in his aluminum boat at the ramp. ■

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S T A L K I N G SHALLOW SMALLMOUTH

'Go deep' and 'drop-shot' aren't always the rules for targeting summertime smallies

By Tyler Brinks

The smallmouth bass is known for inhabiting deep, clear water, but this tiger-striped dynamo is also highly adaptable to its diverse environments and can be found throughout all levels of the water column.

During the summer, especially in northern climates, many anglers head to deep water and employ finesse tactics for smallmouth, and for good reason – it's proven to be an excellent approach for bronzebucks.

However, you can catch smallmouth just as easily by staying in shallow water and stalking them with power-fishing tactics.

MLF pros Luke Clausen, Jonathon VanDam, and Matt Stefan all cut their teeth fishing for smallmouth bass in their respective home states: Clausen on the diverse fisheries of the Pacific Northwest, VanDam and Stefan in the smallie-rich waters of the Great Lakes and their tributaries. And when push comes to shove, all three would much rather stay shallow for smallmouth if given a choice.

THERE'S ALWAYS SOME FISH SHALLOW

Michigan native VanDam has succeeded with shallow smallmouth on his home waters around the Wolverine State and throughout the Midwest and Northeast. He believes that many smallmouth anglers overlook the shallow bite.

"Most anglers automatically think you have to go out deep and find a rockpile and pull out a drop-shot," VanDam said. "That's how most anglers target smallmouth in the warmer months, especially on the Great

Summer is primetime to find smallmouth bass feasting on the bounty of bait found in shallow water.

PHOTO BY ENGBRETSON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

“I’LL ALWAYS LOOK FOR THEM WHEN FISHING FOR SHALLOW SMALLMOUTH.”

— MFL pro Jonathon VanDam

Jonathon VanDam finds shallow smallmouth on sunny, windy days by fishing near pencil reeds with a fast-moving bait, like this Strike King swim jig.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



Lakes, but you can catch them shallow, too. In my experience, catching them in shallow water will get you better-than-average fish, but it's not a numbers deal like you'll find out deep."

Washington's Clausen agrees and theorizes that not all bass head to deep water, even in the summer heat, and anglers don't always have to fish off-shore to find them.

"The water temperature never gets too warm for them in northern waters," Clausen said. "The baitfish – whether crawfish, perch, gobies, or sculpin – live shallow, too. Smallmouth are comfortable in the shallow water and have plenty of food, so they never have to leave. I think it's more fun to catch in shallow water anyways because you can fish a lot faster and use different baits."

Wisconsin's Stefan has similar thoughts on why some smallmouth always tend to be shallow.

"I believe there are two groups of smallmouth," he said. "Those that head offshore after they spawn and the others that stay shallow all year long. They stay there until the fall, when they head to deeper water and their wintering holes."

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Among this trio, the common first starting place is flats, which offer the perfect area for bass to roam and look for food in shallow water. While flat areas are essential, subtle things within the flats tend to hold more smallmouth than others.

"I generally look for flats between 4 and 14 feet," Stefan said. "I'm looking for little key differences in the bottom composition, whether rock transitions, little humps, or areas with some sand or gravel mixed in. If you can find some grass, that doesn't hurt either – just something with a nice mix of bottom cover."

Stefan likes to mark key areas on his electronics and run through them multiple times during the day, as he has learned that new fish will continually appear when they're ready to feed.

"I'll cycle through all of these areas throughout the day," Stefan said. "The fish will gravitate to these very specific spots, and you may catch one or two, but if you come back later, more fish will have shown up and you'll catch one or two more. These fish are constantly looking for the same kinds of places to feed."

VanDam also seeks flats with bottom composition transitions from rock to sand, sand to grass, or slight changes in contours. Another telltale sign is the presence of pencil reeds. While they make a great largemouth habitat, even on the Great Lakes, VanDam knows they grow in the perfect places for smallmouth.

"(Pencil reeds) will only root and grow in places with a hard bottom, which is what the smallmouth want," he said. "Largemouth will generally be tucked up into the reeds and the smallmouth will be out in front of them on main lake stuff that's more current-oriented. You can find these reeds on classic smallmouth waters like the St. Lawrence River in New York, Lake St. Clair in Michigan, and Lake Erie has some of it. I'll always look for them when fishing for shallow smallmouth."

When searching flats for sand spots, grass, and other bottom compositions, VanDam also pays attention to other tiny (but important) details.

"You want the bottom to be clean," he said. "Many times during the summer, there will be moss on the bottom in some places and that's no good. The fish gravitate to the cleanest bottoms

and can be particular about which places they like to use.”

Clausen looks for the same ingredients, but says that efficiency is vital as vast flats can be daunting to find fish quickly.

“The easiest and best way to find where the fish are is to get on your trolling motor and put it on high and look with your eyes,” he said. “You can also idle with your big motor to be even more efficient. I’ll do this and won’t even make a cast until I see what I’m looking for – either seeing fish swimming around or finding something different than the rest of the flat.”

These subtle differences are like magnets to shallow smallmouth, according to Clausen.

“Whether it’s a sand spot or some grass or rocks mixed in on a big flat, just something different,” he said. “When you find the right areas, bass will be around, and it shouldn’t take too long to catch them because they’re there to feed.”



HEDDON ONE KNOCKER SPOOK
COLOR: PEARL SHAD

The topwater bite for shallow smallmouth can last all day long during summer and fall.

SHALLOW SMALLMOUTH TACTICS

One of the most critical parts of successfully stalking shallow smallmouth is the location, but utilizing the right bait for the conditions is the other half of the equation. This is how VanDam looks at it and uses several different lures and varies them based on the wind and sun.

“One of the best conditions you can have is sunshine and some wind, but not too much of it,” he said. “That’s my ideal situation because they love getting up shallow when the sun shines. I’ll throw several baits, from a Strike King Red Eyed Shad lipless crankbait to a spinnerbait, swim jig, or topwater.

These are baits that allow you to fish quickly. If you have calmer conditions, you’ll want to use something different where you can slow it down.”

While calm conditions dictate different baits, it also opens up more opportunities, according to VanDam.

“In the clear water up shallow, you can see a lot of these fish cruising around and it can become a great sight-fishing bite, where you’re casting out in front of fish swimming along,” he said. “It’s a trade-off because they bite better when the wind blows, but you can see them much better when it’s calm. When I see cruisers, I use a marabou hair jig or spybait, but you can also catch them with a drop-shot

**“I GENERALLY LOOK FOR FLATS
BETWEEN 4 AND 14 FEET.”**

— MLF pro Matt Stefan

Wisconsin pro Matt Stefan believes some smallmouth stay shallow for most of the year.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

**“BLACK ALWAYS TRIGGERS
SMALLMOUTH, ESPECIALLY
IN CLEAR WATER.”**

— MLF pro Luke Clausen

or tube. For my drop-shot baits, I like smaller profile baits like a Strike King Half Shell or Baby Z-Too.”

Stefan also mixes in the power fishing and finesse approach and will alter his approach based on the conditions and the fish’s activity.

“Topwater is always a killer for shallow smallmouth and not just for low light conditions – they work all day long throughout the summer and into fall,” Stefan said. “For finesse, it’s hard to beat a Ned rig or hover-strolling with a variety of soft plastics rigs on a Core Tackle The Hover Rig in the 3/64-ounce size. With each rod movement, that rig gives the bait a stuttering side-to-side motion and looks much different than a standard drop-shot-rigged soft plastic. I’ll fish a Berkley Flat Worm, Keitech Shad Impact, or small fluke-style bait on The Hover Rig and go with a standard Z-Man Finesse TRD on my Ned rig.”

For topwaters, Stefan likes walking baits like the Berkley J-Walker or a Heddon One Knocker Spook. Clausen also loves walking topwaters for shallow smallmouth but employs a spinnerbait, a hair jig, flick shake, and glide baits, depending on the situation.



Some true giants lurk in the shallows; don’t overlook the skinny bite when hunting for big smallmouth bass.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

“Burning a 3/4-ounce Z-Man Sling BladeZ spinnerbait is a great way to trigger a reaction bite and you can cover a lot of water with them,” Clausen said. “I change the color based on how sunny it is. I like red perch for low light conditions because it has some chartreuse in the skirt. Greenback shad is my favorite color when the sun is shining bright because it’s very natural.”

When faced with calm conditions, Clausen is more likely to go finesse.

“I’ll swim a black marabou hair jig or use a 1/10-ounce flick shake jig head with Z-Man Big TRD in yoga pants,

which is solid black,” he said. “Black always triggers smallmouth, especially in clear water. I’ll also throw a big glide bait around, it’s great to locate groups of fish and if they follow it, you can throw the flick shake in and catch them most of the time.”

Three highly accomplished smallmouth anglers agree that stalking shallow smallmouth is a blast. When most anglers are finesse fishing in deep water, there’s always another bite to be had in shallow water. You may get fewer bites, but the quality is there and there are countless ways to catch them. ■

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Three-man teams worked together throughout Team Series qualifiers.

GENERAL TIRE

GO TEAM!

MLF COMPLETES DAZZLING FIRST RUN OF GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES COMPETITION

\$300,000 up for grabs at Bass Pro Shops Championship in Florida

By Mason Prince
 Photos by Garrick Dixon

From its inception, Major League Fishing has been an innovator in the world of competitive bass fishing. Starting with the introduction of SCORETRACKER® and the every-fish-counts format at the very first MLF competition on Lake Amistad in 2010 and continuing through the creation of the 80-angler Bass Pro Tour in 2019, MLF has never been shy about forging new ground in the sport of tournament bass fishing.

As the calendar flipped to 2023, fishing fans were introduced to MLF's latest dynamic development, the General Tire Team Series on Outdoor Channel; a unique bass-fishing competition where three-man teams of Bass Pro Tour pros fished out of individual boats, but were linked together via real-time telephonic communication throughout each competition day.

From original concept to completion, getting the new series off the ground was a massive undertaking, according to Randy White, MLF's Vice President of Broadcast Operations.



Shin Fukae ready for action at the first Team Series qualifier.



Teams competed throughout the fall to qualify for the Bass Pro Shops Championship in Florida.

“We had great success with the MLF Cups, but everyone felt that it was maybe time to do something new,” White said. “I believe Don Rucks – who was the MLF Commissioner at the time – came up with the idea of a team series. I wasn’t completely on board to start, but I came around to the idea once we really started to talk about the details of how we were going to pull it off.”

As soon as the first day of competition started on the very first “match” – and the three-man teams began to attack Lake Le Homme Dieu at the Lucas Oil Qualifier in Minnesota while MLF cameras rolled – White knew that the league had captured lightning in a bottle. In a sport where secrecy and individual accomplishment define the winners and losers, the teamwork and communication required for success in the Team Series was a dynamic new development that White and crew were eager to explore.

THE TEAMS ARE FORMED

The first task in the Team Series was to build the basic structure of the teams. There were multiple options and opinions about how to best select 27 three-man squads, but instead of teams being assigned based solely on an Angler of the Year points system, MLF decided to try something professional bass fishing hadn’t seen before – a draft.

“It was a unique idea to hold a draft for teams in the first place,” White said. “Taking the top 27 anglers in the AOY race from the previous year and making them captains seemed like the easiest and fairest way to do that. Then, to have those guys go one by one and pick their teammates was an interesting process. It’s definitely a unique thing that we’ve never seen in bass fishing before.”

COMMUNICATIONS ARE KEY

Does nine anglers, nine cameras, nine boats and nine officials with wide-open communications for 7 ½ hours of competition sound like a logistical challenge? No doubt about it; but White and MLF Productions came up with a somewhat simple solution for such a high-tech broadcast.



"We knew that we didn't want to have two guys in a boat with a camera, because everyone has seen that before on fishing television throughout the years," White said. "We came up with the plan to give everyone their own boat and each team member was given a headset to call into a conference call. Once we figured out the logistics of juggling nine different phone lines, we were well on our way."

That open communication is the hallmark of the General Tire Team Series and a creative new component that makes the Team Series such a fantastic watch, according to White.

"Having nine professionals in constant contact with each other is something that you don't get to see in fishing," White said. "We've heard guys talk about what baits they're using or what they target, but now you hear these guys tell each other what their retrieve speed is, really dialing in the depth and retrieve. This is stuff we don't normally hear. Because these guys want to win, they're so explicit with their teammates on all the finer details."

Here's a look at how the first-ever season of the General Tire Team Series went down:

LUCAS OIL QUALIFIER

**Lake Le Homme Dieu & Lake Ida
Alexandria, Minnesota
Sept. 26-Oct. 1, 2022**

In the first match of the qualifier, Team Crockett Creek (Jacob Wheeler, Jason Lambert and Dylan Hays) racked up a two-day total weight of 310 pounds, 7 ounces for the win, fending off a crowded field from a honey hole where Lambert piled up 131-9 in two days fishing a vibrating jig.

In Match 2, it was a dominating effort from Team Knighten (Wesley Strader, Mike McClelland and Scott Suggs) as they won by more than 100 pounds. The trio spent part of the offseason fishing together while mimicking a Team Series competition – seems as though practice made perfect as Team Knighten accounted for a whopping 369-13 over two days.

Match 3 featured a rally from Team Fox Rent A Car (James Elam, Jonathon VanDam and Brent Chapman), who overcame a 26-2 deficit on the second

day of competition to earn a 32-pound win. All three pros accounted for 100 pounds apiece over two days of competition, highlighted by VanDam's 81-pound flurry on Day 2. All three anglers leaned heavily on a vibrating jig in mid-depth grass, a can't-miss pattern for Minnesota that time of year.

COSTA QUALIFIER

**Stockton Lake
Stockton, Missouri
Oct. 10-15, 2022**

Typical fall fishing in the Ozarks greeted the nine teams fishing the Costa Qualifier Presented by Toyota. Team B&W Trailer Hitchers (Kevin VanDam, David Walker and Todd Faircloth) overcame a 6-pound deficit on the second day of competition to win, led by VanDam's 58-12. Team communication was key as VanDam urged Walker and Faircloth to throw spinnerbaits around standing timber, which proved to be their best option. The result: Faircloth exploded for 17 bass for 24-6 in the third period after going fishless for the first two periods. It was an 8-4 win for Team B&W.

Team Knighten anglers Scott Suggs, Wesley Strader and Mike McClelland advanced out of the first Qualifier.

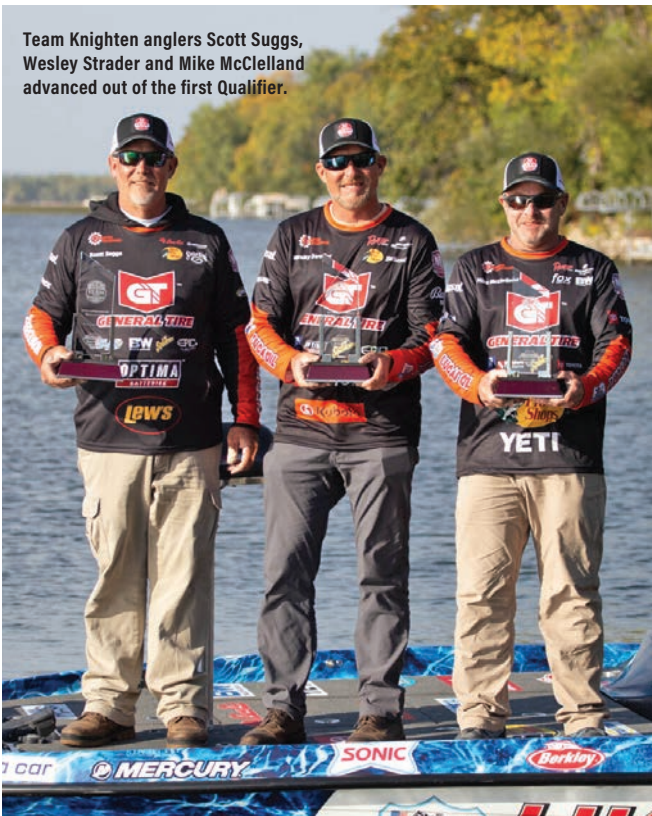


PHOTO BY RACHEL DUBROVIN

Team B&W picked up the win in Missouri.



Team Builders FirstSource was the final team to qualify for the Championship.



Match 2 was never a doubt for Team Fox Rent A Car (Mark Daniels Jr., Adrian Avena and Randy Howell), who finished with a two-day total of 170-9. Daniels kept a solid pace for two days, piling up 71-6 while primarily cranking Stockton's steep, rocky banks. Howell and Avena followed his lead to the tune of a 30-pound victory for the team.

Team Star brite (Skeet Reese, Shaw Grigsby and Jeremy Lawyer) led Match 3 from the start, finishing the first day with a scant 2-pound cushion and then expanding on the second day for a 21-3 win. Lawyer — a Missouri native — brought a stout history of Ozarks knowledge to the match, advising Reese and Grigsby to focus on Stockton's shallow creeks as opposed to heading down the river to locate standing timber. The team caught 61 bass for 104-3 over two days.

BUILDERS FIRSTSOURCE QUALIFIER

**Gibbons Creek Reservoir,
Lake Somerville
College Station, Texas
Nov. 8-13**

The first match of the final Team Series Qualifier saw Team Fox Rent A Car (Ott DeFoe, Keith Poche and Kelly Jordon) rack up 110 bass for 204-1 over two days for a 34-pound win. DeFoe accounted for 95-13, capitalizing on

“SPRAGUE'S 37-15 ON DAY 2 PROVED TO BE THE DIFFERENCE MAKER.”

standing timber on Gibbons Creek Reservoir with a crankbait, a strategy that Jordon and Poche quickly picked up en route to the win.

In Match 2, Team Smokey Mountain Herbal Snuff & Pouches (Bryan Thrift, Terry Scroggins and Anthony Gagliardi) weighed 58 bass for 108-6, more than 40 pounds ahead of the second-place team. Thrift led the charge with 23 bass for 44-4, mostly on a variety of topwater baits. Scroggins and Gagliardi followed suit, but both also capitalized on vibrating jigs in deeper water.

With the final spot in the Team Series Championship up for grabs, Team Builders FirstSource (Jeff Sprague, Randall Tharp and Cliff Crochet) held off a surging Team Ferguson (Mark Rose, Jordan Lee and Luke Clausen) by just 1-13. Sprague and company began their second day with a 17-5 cushion, but saw that lead quickly dissipate as the day went on. Sprague's 37-15 on Day 2 proved to be the difference maker.

GENERAL TIRE TEAM SERIES BASS PRO SHOPS CHAMPIONSHIP

**Clermont Chain of Lakes
Clermont, Florida
Dec. 5-11, 2022**

Nine teams, four matches, one championship squad and a reward of \$300,000 for the last team standing on Florida's Clermont Chain of Lakes.

The Bass Pro Shops Championship began with Sprague, Tharp and Crochet (Builders FirstSource) advancing to the final day thanks to a 1-2 punch of topwater and vibrating jigs (and a 7-1 big fish from Tharp). The team caught 61 bass for 104-2 in two days of competition.

On to Match 2, where the Wheeler, Hays and Lambert (Crockett Creek) were able to hold off Kevin VanDam, Faircloth and Walker (B&W) by just 11 pounds. Vibrating jigs, swim jigs and jerkbaits were the keys for Wheeler's team in advancing to the final.

Despite starting the second day of Match 3 in last place by more than 15 pounds, Thrift, Gagliardi and Scroggins (Smokey Mountain) mounted a furious comeback over the final few hours to win the match by 4 pounds and lock in the three-team roster for the Championship Match. The trio mixed it up with crankbaits and a variety of plastic baits to get the finicky Florida bass to bite in December.

EDITOR'S

NOTE: *The Championship Final of the General Tire Team Series Bass Pro Shops Championship*



had not yet aired at press time. For a full rundown of how the battle for Team Series supremacy played out, this QR code will take you to full coverage (plus photos and video) at majorleaguefishing.com. ■

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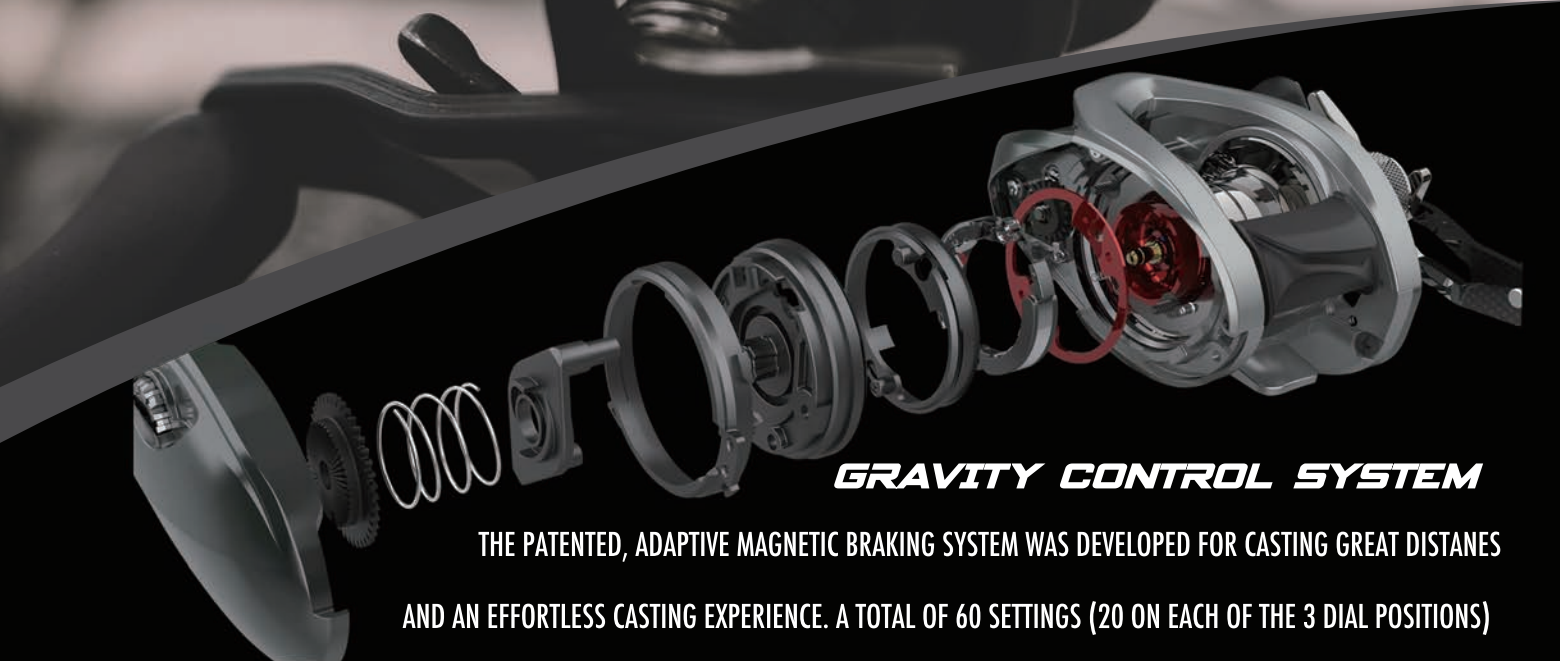
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the must-have bass baits of the 90s

By Rob Newell



AN ALLURING TRIP DOWN MUST-HAVE BASS-BAIT MEMORY LANE (PART 2)

MLF reporter Rob Newell revives the most “fly” bass baits of the 1990s

It’s time to roll back the clock again to examine a few more lures that became fish-catching sensations over the years. In Part I of the trip down must-have memory lane, we reviewed the frenzy that Slug-Gos, Carolina-rigged lizards and neon floating worms created in the late 1980s and early 90s.

This time around, I’m going to venture through a few of more these red-hot must-haves from the 90s.

CLACK AND STACK

In 1992, I attended my first Bassmaster Classic in Birmingham, Alabama, and witnessed the real world of professional bass fishing. Finally, I saw a group of guys who

had a true obsession (like my own) for tournament bass fishing. For the first time, I got to see Denny Brauer and Tommy Biffle in person – real pros who used real lures to catch real bass.

Goodbye pink worms, hello Lunker Lure Rattle Back Jigs.

The hot buzzwords on the Classic show floor that year were Rattle Back Jigs and flipping sticks, and both sold like crazy. After all, who wouldn’t want to buy a fishing tool called a “flipping stick?” The name just echoes bravado, like it could double as a personal protection device.

I had come to the mecca of tournament bass fishing to be anointed as a “flipper and a pitcher.” Along with everyone on the show floor, I walked around clutching a bag of Rattle

Back Jigs and a couple of 7-foot, 6-inch heavy action flipping sticks. Full disclosure: Yes, my flipping sticks had Denny Brauer's name on them.

I hadn't even wet a Rattle Back yet, but just carrying the "sticks," automatically gave me the poetic license to talk "stick." I'd bump into my buddies on the floor and I'd say, "Here's the deal, I'm just fishing for five big bites in the club tournaments this year." Or, "Yeah, well, I'm not going to get many bites, but when I do, they'll be big ones."

When you carry Denny Brauer signature-edition flipping sticks around on the show floor, these words flow easily.

To be clear, jigs had been around for many years previous to the Lunker Lure Rattle Back. They were a staple in many angler's tackle boxes and had a solid reputation as fish producers. Pitching and flipping was not exactly novel, either, but the loud clack in the Rattle Back was the new wrinkle that made this whole package a must-have.

The ingenious design of the Rattle Back featured a large, loud rattle chamber molded into the head of the jig, but it still left clearance for any kind of chunk, craw or bug you wanted to thread on as a trailer. When you shook the jig in midair, the rattle was loud (and even louder underwater). I know this because I used to snorkel down to the dark depths of 2 feet in lakes to see how far I could hear the rattle. The clack could be heard from 10 to 15 feet away, teasing fish for the entire circumference of a healthy willow or buck bush. The longer you left it in the cover and just shook it, the more efficiently bass could hunt it down and find it due to the clacking.

The aggression of the bite was "full send." Pitching a Rattle Back was like playing with electricity - when you got hit with a jolt, there was no question about it. I caught enough fish on a Rattle Back to understand the thrill of being thumped in shallow water cover. To boot, I even had the privilege of sharing a boat with Tommy Biffle during a BASS Invitational on Lake Eufaula in the mid-1990s where I got to see a true short-string master at work. Biffle and I spent the day fully involved in a Rattleback clack and stack (I did most of the clacking, he did most of the stacking).

MEGA TUBES

Once flipping and pitching became a hot technique through the 90s, a lot of shallow-water cover throughout the country got pummeled by



bass anglers of all skill levels. Bass eventually wised up to big, loud, bulky presentations and the dedicated flippers had to reach into their bag of tricks for a sneakier offering.

In order to downsize a flipping bait for a more subtle presentation, flipping experts in the Ozarks simply took a finesse staple - a 3-1/2-inch tube jig, or Gitzit - and began pitching it on heavier line into shallow cover. Once this little morsel was exposed nationally by pro angler Doug Garrett with his 1997 BASS Megabucks win, the flipping tube or "mega tube" was born. Beefed up to 4 inches, with additional thickness and toughness, the mega-tube flipping craze was on. Brauer would eventually push the flipping tube to universal bass fishing must-have status with his 1998 Bassmaster Classic win.

The flipping tube was often used with an offset EWG style hook or a Shaw Grigsby HP hook, a kahle-style hook that clipped to the head of the tube to keep it from "balling up" upon hookset. In the skilled hands of a flipping technician, the bait made a splash-less entry into the water that would earn a 9.9 in Olympic diving. Due to its hollow nature, the tube would often "burp" up a couple of air bubbles upon impact to the bottom, which added another subtle affect to the bait.

There were a few tricks guys imparted to the tube as well. The cavity allowed anglers to get creative with sweeteners such as small glass rattles and absorbent material that held scent.

The flipping tube was the first lure that opened my eyes to the real impacts of fishing pressure. I've had many anglers tell me the tube was literally magic when fishing



shallow cover on heavily pressured shallow banks, especially around the spawn. I've watched guys in tournaments fish circles around other guys in popular areas with tubes. These days, the flipping tube still has a place in pro angler's arsenals, but they're not near as prevalent as they were when they reigned supreme in the 90s.

FLUKES AND SENKOS

Following in the weightless footsteps of the Slug-Go and floating worms of the 80s came the Flukes and Senkos of the 90s. Specifically, the Zoom Salty Super Fluke and the Gary Yamamoto Senko were massive must-have sensations when they hit the market and are still absolute staples in bass fishing to this day.

If memory serves me correctly, the Super Fluke was actually the first to catch fire in the mid 90s, and shortly after, the Senko blew up right at the turn of the millennium. As a side note, there were two other forces that really helped propel Flukes and Senkos to the top of the must-have charts during this time. One was the increased availability of fluorocarbon line and the other was the co-angler boom.



Due to its faster sink rate and low visibility in the water, fluorocarbon improved the performance of weightless plastics tremendously compared to monofilament or braid. Fluorocarbon was mostly used for leader material early on because of its high price. But once production increased and price came down, anglers could spool up entire reels with the magic of fluorocarbon. Incidentally, the co-angler movement exploded about that same time, thanks to FLW's tremendous growth in the early 2000s. With that, a weightless plastic tied to fluorocarbon was a deadly combination to use in the back of a pro's boat.

This only fueled the Fluke and Senko to sensational levels.

The 5-1/4-inch Super Fluke originated as a soft plastic, shad-shaped twitch bait that was usually fished weedless on a standard offset hook, giving it a darting flair and subsequent natural quiver as it glided helplessly in the water column between jerks. The Super Fluke has proven its merit in all seasons, starting with all phases of the spawn. It's also a

killer bait in the shad spawn, an awesome summer schooling bait, a fall shad-migration bait, and a dead-stick winter bait.

With time and use, tournament anglers across the country proved its versatility was limitless and it has earned a permanent spot in the rod locker for many anglers. Today, there are dozens of iterations of this revolutionary lure that have names that begin with "jerk," "twitch," "hyper" or "caffeine" and end in "shad," "slug" or "dart."



Yamamoto's ingenious Senko was one of those lures that made anglers bang their heads against the console because it looked so lackluster, yet caught so many fish. It looks lifeless out of the water, yet so alive in the water. The Senko's magic is its seductive shimmy as it falls – pros often refer to it as "the quiver" because of the subtle wiggle which big bass can't resist.

The best way to fish a Senko is literally to do ... nothing. Cast it out weightless, and let it waggle its way to the bottom. This is why it was such a crush bait for co-anglers – just cast it out and hang on.

In addition to their traditional weightless rigging with an offset hook, there are numerous ways to rig both Flukes and Senkos. You can literally use five or six different hook types to rig these, depending on what kind of action you want from them. They're both baits that you can trick out to your own specs by adding a sneaky weight here and there.

In my tournament reporting over the years, anglers have told me, "Oh, I'm just throwing a Fluke," or, "I'm just throwing a Senko." Through binoculars it looked like "just a Fluke." In pictures it looked like, "just a Senko." But upon physical inspection, I have come to discover all kinds of nail weights, tiny screw-in weights, lead tape wrapped around hooks and other types of paraphernalia hidden in the "just a Fluke or Senko." In addition, the amazing array of colors these plastics come in is mind-boggling. You can literally get them in any color you can imagine – yes, even in pink.

Next time around, we'll take a look at how the West captured the East in bass fishing with their barrage of finesse techniques at the turn of the millennium. ■

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THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS





Z-MAN HELLRAIZER

By Matt Williams

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY Z-MAN

It's always refreshing when a mass-production bait comes off the building blocks that's entirely different than any before it, especially one that catches fish. The 5/8-ounce Z-Man HellraiZer is a reflection of innovation, with a cutting-edge design that brings an unprecedented combination of spit, sputter and chatter to the world of surface scratchin'.

First Impressions

Just when I thought I'd seen it all regarding topwater fishing, ChatterBait inventor Ron Davis took the game to a whole new level with a bait that might be best described as hybrid cross between a walking topwater and a vibrating jig, engineered to rock the surface in a steady, straight-line retrieve.

Z-Man unveiled the odd-looking contraption at ICAST 2022 and we got our hands on one late last fall. At first glance, the peculiar design might cause a topwater junkie to back away and scratch his head. It's just that different. Here's the description:

The Main Body: Made from hard plastic, the slender, elongated body is shaped similar to a Pencil Popper, except the bottom is shaved flat at an angle for about half the length of the 5-inch bait. It features a stainless split ring line tie strategically placed on the bait's chin about 2 inches below the nose. A nasty No. 1 treble attaches near the belly using a split ring for freedom of movement.

The Tail: A modified ChatterBlade dangles from a

stainless wire shaft that protrudes from the butt of the main body. The shaft creates a pivot point that allows the 1/4-ounce blade to vibrate and flash erratically on the retrieve. A No. 2 treble hook trails the counter-weighted blade on a split ring. The hook is feathered for additional action and visual appeal.

Colored Right: Comes in 10 attractive colors with 3-D eyes and that are slightly recessed. Factory colored silver, gold and black blades are used to coordinate with the finish.

In Action

The HellraiZer doesn't just look different than any other bait. It behaves radically different, too.

The Action: There's loads of it. Put the HellraiZer

in motion and the pointed nose rises to the surface, cutting hard left to right while the rear-mounted blade creates a combination of flash, vibration and chatter to lure bass and other surface-feeding fish from afar. The bait is meant to be fished in a straight line using a steady retrieve with minimal effort. Just chunk, wind it and hold on tight. It's just that simple.

Something else to be aware of is the bait doesn't float like most hard body topwaters. It sinks quickly when idle and relies strictly on forward motion to do its thing. A reel with a fairly fast gear ratio (7.1:1 or a little faster) is ideal for getting the bait up and running quickly when fishing around grass and other cover that might be submerged a few feet

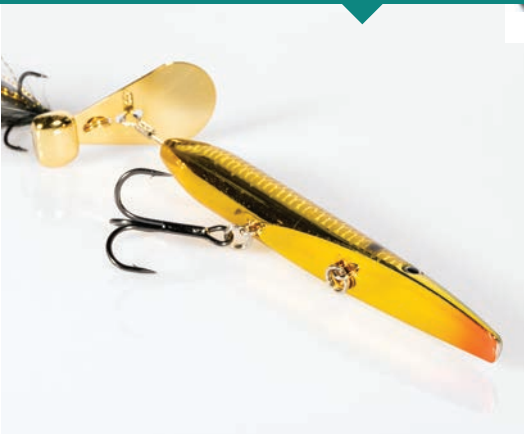
BOTTOM SIDE SHAVED FLAT:

About half of the elongated body is shaved flat on the bottom side to create resistance when the bait is in motion. This helps drive the nose to the surface and creates a radical head up/tail down walking action on a steady retrieve. A counter-weighted ChatterBlade at the tail and a strategically located line tie help facilitate the erratic action.



PIVOTING TAIL SECTION BLADE:

The tail section is equipped with a 1/4 ounce counter-weighted blade that pivots on a wire shaft, creating gobs of flash, vibration and a chattering sound beneath the surface while aiding in bombing long casts. A No. 2 treble dressed with a feather adds to the appeal.



BLACK NICKEL TREBLES:

Fish that eat the bait are just about good as caught. The HellraiZer comes with a pair of nasty black nickel trebles, a No. 2 on the tail and a No. 1 on the belly. Both hooks are submerged just beneath the surface when the bait is in motion.



The HellraiZer doesn't just look different than any other bait. It behaves radically different, too.

beneath the surface. A small piece of trash can foul the action.

Blow-Ups and

Hook-ups: I missed the prime widows for Texas topwater fishing during field testing but still caught enough bass to realize the HellraiZer is something special that's sure to fool some big ones when conditions are right. Strikes were violent and the hook-ups were solid. A high percentage came on the rear treble — a good sign the fish were attracted to flash of the blade or the flutter of the feathered trailer.

Casts with Ease:

Bombing long casts with a quality baitcaster is hardly a problem. With the majority of the

weight at the tail, it cuts the wind like a slab spoon.

Final Thoughts

There's no such thing as a silver bullet in bass fishing, but this is one topwater lure sure to give the fish a look they've never seen before. In addition to its peculiar design and enticing action, the HellraiZer is built for distance and may be just the ticket for drawing explosive strikes when the conditions say topwater, but the fish seem reluctant to commit to a buzzbait or other walking-style stickbaits.

Applications

- Cast long range to schooling fish

- Fish it over grass flats
- Around stumps, docks or grass edges
- Around bream beds or shad spawn
- Open water
- Clear or pressured water

Performance Tips

The bait sinks fast when it idle, so it's not a bad idea to use a reel with a fairly high gear ratio of 7.1:1 or higher. A faster gear ratio helps get the bait up and running quickly while allowing for a burning retrieve with less effort if the need arises.

Fish it on 7- to 7 1/2-foot medium/heavy rod in combination with 12- to 15-pound fluorocarbon for solid hooksets.

HITS & MISSES

- + Unique action
- + Stout hooks
- + Casts a mile
- + Large profile
- + Rattles built in
- + Runs true, slow or fast
- + Simple to use
- + Works fine with fluorocarbon
- + All stainless components
- Sinks when idle

DETAILS

- Length:** 5 inches
- Weight:** 5/8 ounces
- Colors:** 10
- Trebles:** 2 BKK, No. 1 and No. 2
- Feather Teaser:** Yes
- Rattles:** Yes
- Floats:** No
- MSRP:** \$14.99
- Contact:** zmanfishing.com ■



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Terry Scroggins

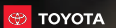
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LIVING ON THE (L)EDGE

The latest generation of electronic tools has put the spotlight on suspended bass. But what are we learning about bass on deep structure — those schools of lunkers living on the ledge?

By Mike Pehanich

Head-to-head face-offs with suspended open-water bass through the medium of forward-facing sonar (FFS) dominate dock discussion today. But, don't expect veteran tournament anglers to forsake their down- or side-scanning systems any time soon. Nor are they likely to abandon those schools of bass still hugging mid-lake bottom structure.

"The problem with any type of electronics is that if you rely on it exclusively, it can negatively impact your fishing," says Jacob Wheeler, the Tennessee-based pro with milestone accomplishments at every stage of his still-young angling career. "Forward-facing sonar electronics are great, but they don't show us everything that's down there. You still have to fish what looks good."

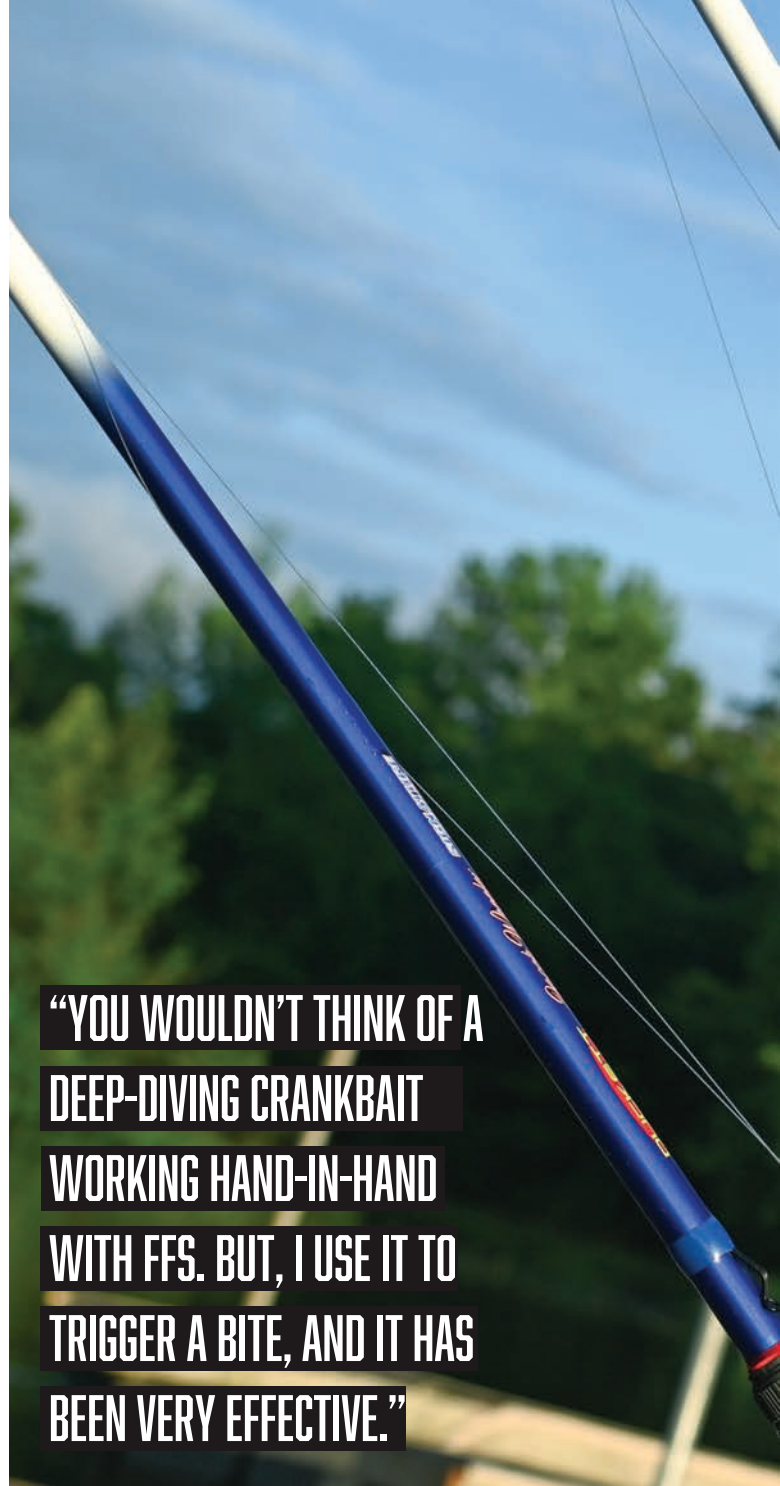
And what has "looked good" to seasoned anglers since the days of the Lowrance Green Box looks even better today in the high-def world of modern marine electronics. As long as bass are bass, many will be "living on the ledge," using breaklines, points, grass edges and the other structural elements of reservoirs and natural lakes as need and convenience permit.

LEDGE ENLIGHTENMENT

Locating concentrations of bass on offshore ledges and other deep structure was once the hallmark of a seasoned pro, the savvy veteran. For a generation of fishermen who have taken to bass fishing in the video game era, hunting for offshore points, ledges and rock piles with the hope that they house aggregates of big bass may seem a tediously round-about — if not archaic — manner of finding fish.

After all, why look for structure that *might* hold fish when you can "flashlight" fish directly with FFS?

"Bass are notorious for their ability to hide, to put themselves in ambush positions, which is why side-scan and down-scan viewing is so impactful in offshore bass fishing during summer," Wheeler says. "Your side-scan allows you to see shadows or a white dot when bass are positioned tightly along the bottom where forward-facing sonar is not as effective. When fish are suspended, you're almost exclusively relying on FFS technology."



"YOU WOULDN'T THINK OF A DEEP-DIVING CRANKBAIT WORKING HAND-IN-HAND WITH FFS. BUT, I USE IT TO TRIGGER A BITE, AND IT HAS BEEN VERY EFFECTIVE."

The mix of electronic tools at the bows of bass boats today have become continuous sources of enlightenment. One of the revelations of FFS has been the surprising degree to which bass are prone to suspend.

"The biggest thing I have learned with forward-facing sonar is that there are a lot more fish spread throughout the water column," says Mark Rose, who has successfully mined offshore structure for tournament-winning fish for most of his career. "Before, we thought that bass were on the bottom most of the time, and that if we didn't catch any, the fish weren't there. FFS has shown us that a lot of fish migrate with bait and just suspend — just hang in the water column. Whether they're prespawn females soaking their eggs in the sun, feeding schools or just traveling packs, they're catchable!"



Some classic ledge-friendly baits and tactics helped Jacob Wheeler score a second-place finish at Watts Bar Lake in 2022 during the Bass Pro Tour's General Tire Stage Five Presented by Covercraft.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

“WHEN YOU’RE OFFSHORE FISHING, YOU’RE LOOKING AT HOW THE FISH ARE REACTING TO YOUR BAIT, 100%.”

-MLF Pro Mark Rose

Ledge fishing expert Mark Rose scoops up a hard-fighting bass from the offshore waters of Pickwick Lake.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



Big bass live deep, like this 6-pounder Michael Neal caught from Lake Chickamauga.

These roaming practices are neither universal nor set in stone. Some bass clearly follow baitfish balls. Others set up at ambush points, waiting for baitfish schools to arrive. Many may adopt one or the other practice depending on season, conditions or ability to compete for food with other bass.

Tennessee pro Michael Neal is frequently surprised, if not humbled, by what he's learned about bass movement through his electronics.

"You think you're throwing to the right spot, only to find when you look down at your forward-facing sonar screen that the fish have moved 30 yards," Neal says.

Bass on Tennessee River impoundments, where current often dictates bass position and activity levels, seem as oriented as ever to prime ledge locations along the highways of main river and feeder creek channels. But, on lakes where current is a non-factor, bass may cruise more randomly in relation to structure.

Higher resolution object definition, an ongoing objective for makers of marine electronics, is making it easier to decipher screen imagery, giving anglers a better view of the underwater landscape. Grass areas, too, are becoming more relatable. Discerning the density of vegetation, the movements of bass around and through it, and the types of aquatic plants bass are relating to can pay big dividends.

"You can see the density of the grass, its thickness and sometimes even the kind of grass, whether it is coontail or eel grass, hydrilla or milfoil," Wheeler says. "That helps you find what types of grass bass are on, where the thicker patches are, how grass is growing down a tapered slope, and those steep edges that

stand like a bluff wall. You can see all these and the irregularities along them. These are big keys in bass fishing."

Forward-facing sonar can help you be more efficient fishing grass, but you may be utilizing it completely differently than you would when bass are suspended, according to Wheeler.

He references a situation he faced on his way to a second-place Bass Pro Tour finish on New York's Cayuga Lake last August. Bass were crushing a Rapala DT 16 crankbait on a deep grass line. His electronics helped him dial in.

"I utilized (FFS) to see how many fish were following the one I hooked," Wheeler says. "When I see 20 following, I know I'm in a good spot."

Scouring underwater vegetation with today's advanced tools has clarified some of Neal's perceptions about bass in the grass.

"I feel bass don't 'bury up' as much as I once thought," Neal says. "We often see them off the outside edges of grass or suspended around it as opposed to buried in it. You would think with high sunny skies that they would bury themselves in the grass. We are learning so much that challenges what we thought bass did."



Bass focused on yellow perch or bluegill will likely position near aquatic vegetation.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROWAN

FORAGE AND MOVEMENT

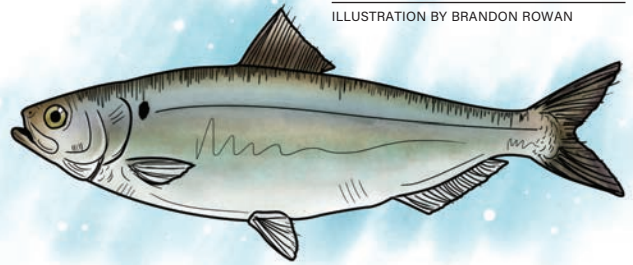
Fish for bass anywhere, and the predator-prey relationship comes into play. Find concentrations of baitfish and bass are seldom far away.

North or south, the type of forage bass key in on is likely to determine their location and structural preference. Bass that are oriented to yellow perch or bluegill/sunfish populations, for example, are likely to position themselves near beds of aquatic vegetation, distinct grass clumps and edges, and adjacent drop-offs.

The revolution in marine electronics has only amplified this critical link. On natural lakes in the North, bass tend to relate either to ambush cover where they await the arrival of

Blueback herring play a key role in bass behavior wherever they are present.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROWAN



"BLUEBACK LAKES REPEATEDLY SHOW JUST HOW SMART BASS HAVE BECOME."

prey or to the baitfish concentrations themselves. This latter behavior of segments of the bass population, particularly smallmouth, has led some to refer to thick bait concentrations as "moving structure."

"There are a lot more pelagic fish, bass that will suspend in northern bodies of water, than I thought," Wheeler says.

Bass keyed in on pelagic bait species such as alewives, shad and smelt may roam with the bait in open water or assume ambush positions on convenient structural elements. Forward-facing sonar has illuminated much of that offshore bass/prey interaction.

"Bait hardly ever sits in one place," Neal says. "We always thought bass would sit on a spot because that was where the bait was. But, often in summer you find ledge bass positioned where there's no bait. They are sitting (on structure), waiting for bait to come by."

Another pelagic forage species to which bass often show distinct preference is the blueback herring. A fast-moving baitfish that seems too quick for bass to shadow constantly, but too nutritious to pass on, bluebacks bring out the opportunist in black bass, whatever the species.

"On Smith Lake, we see bass setting up on manmade structure, brush piles and cane piles," Wheeler says. "Bluebacks swim over them, giving bass the best opportunity to feed on them. Fortunately, that gives anglers the best opportunity to throw a bait over them, too. Our electronics have shown us that many bass can be on one piece of cover, whether it's brush or cane - though we may only be able to catch one!"

Blueback lakes repeatedly show "just how smart bass have become," according to Wheeler. With Lowrance's ActiveTarget 2, for example, he's able to get a sense of how many bass are relating to the manmade structure and to dial in on lure, color and presentation to coax a strike. These brush-pile fish are the "ultimate tinkering kind of fish," he says, particularly when the areas are subjected to intense fishing pressure.

On lakes like Lanier and Murray, it can take a lot of time to dial in on what bass want," Wheeler says. "Electronics help you cut that learning curve."

**“IT’S SOMETHING
I HAVE USED FOR
30 YEARS.”**

— MLF pro Kevin VanDam



Storm SuspensDots on this Strike King 6XD crankbait (color Sexy Green Shad) alter the lure’s buoyancy and the resulting slow rise can drive offshore bass crazy.

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

IMPACT ON TACKLE AND TECHNIQUE

Forward-facing sonar might play second fiddle to earlier technologies when it comes to finding deeper structure, but FFS offers face-to-face advantages once fish are found.

Rather than running the gamut of ledge baits – crankbait, trailed jig, worm, swimbait, drop-shot, spoon, etc. – the dialed-in pro can observe the bass’s response to his bait in real time and make quick adjustments.

“When you’re offshore fishing, you’re looking at how the fish are reacting to your bait, 100%,” Rose says. “Swimbait, spoon, crankbait – it doesn’t matter. And, yes, you’re changing up your retrieve more, doing things to trick them into biting. Snap a jig off bottom. Let it sit. Work the bait a little slower. Shake your rod a little more ... It’s all just trial and error.”

Rose sees the expansion of aquatic plant growth from eel grass to milfoil and hydrilla along classic TVA ledges. Where present, he limits his ledge-lure selection. He substitutes his workhorse treble-hook lures like his Strike King 6XD crankbait with baits more suitable to deep grass duty such as Texas-rigged worms and skirted jig combinations.

Advanced electronics are also demonstrating that offshore bass can be as finicky and quirky in their preferences of bed bass.

“It’s like every fish has its own personality,” Neal says. “With some, you have to burn it by their face to get them to bite. With the next one, you may have to let the bait sit still for five or six seconds. If you can target a fish far enough from your boat, you may be able to do two or three things on that single cast to see what his mood is without having to reel all the way to the boat to try each.”

Witnessing fish reaction to rips and twitches with FFS has put a fresh face on jerkbait fishing, to be sure. Wheeler is playing similarly with cadence, pause and subtlety working crankbaits offshore.

“I never truly understood how effective a crankbait can be when it’s not hitting the bottom,” Wheeler says. “I can stop and twitch and impart action to it just like with a jerkbait. I can adjust the cadence, slow it down, speed it up, twitch it. You wouldn’t think of a deep-diving crankbait working hand-in-hand with FFS. But, I use it to trigger a bite, and it has been very effective.”

FFS frenzy has inspired lure makers to design baits that optimize the technology’s utility. To date, most have been lures that can be worked slowly and enticingly within the strike zone of suspended fish. For offshore duty, Rose notes a growing preference for jigs crafted from harder metals like tungsten. The bulky profile of an Alabama rig has resurrected interest in that multi-bait as well, if only as an FFS learning aid or practice tool. Beyond those modest adjustments, few new baits built for ledge duty seem to have been crafted with FFS in mind.

Yet, bass anglers are inveterate tinkerers; lots of creative tools, both old and new, are earning stage time under the spotlight of forward-facing sonar.

Kevin VanDam credits Shaw Grigsby with an adjustment that has brought added advantage to crankbaits like the Strike King 5XD and 6XD he uses on 15- to 20-foot ledges. Carefully chosen snap weights or SuspensDots added to the baits enable the lures to suspend or affect a slow rise. So weighted, he can play as liberally and experimentally with his



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crankbait as he can with a jerkbait and observe how bass react.

"It's something I've used for 30 years," VanDam says of a modification that's taken on added value with his use of Humminbird MEGA Live.

OFFSHORE FRENZY

Mass pressure on offshore "mega-schools" of bass is shaping some contrarian strategies on the ledges.

"My approach to fishing ledges has shifted," Neal says. "I find myself fishing for either smaller groups or single fish scattered along a ledge. Those mega-schools get so much pressure now that it's hard to generate bites from them. Now, I would rather find four or five fish just off the ledge that I can make an exact cast to than try to find and work that school of 100 fish. That's just the way it's starting to turn."

Decades ago, large schools of big offshore bass seemed the stuff of legend – but, not anymore! The mix of down-scan, side-scan and forward-facing sonar coupled with precise mapping technology has removed much of the mystery of finding prime structure and the fish that use it. On tournament days, prime ledge locations can look like parking lots.

"I love to ledge fish as much as anybody, but I don't like ledge tournaments anymore simply because everybody is on top of one another," Rose says. "Those fish are so pressured that it's hard to get them to cooperate."

In many cases, the spread of success with ledge fish has come at the cost of courtesy and etiquette. Rose suggests that a habit of direct but cordial communication will serve anglers everywhere. He would like to see the practice take hold in the pro ranks in particular before bad blood between anglers takes a toll.

"If I come up on a spot a guy is fishing, I won't pick up a rod until I've communicated with a guy already fishing the area," he says.

Responses will range from accommodation to outright refusal. The reasons behind those responses will vary vastly, too, Rose acknowledges. But he believes that simple consideration and a habit of "ask before you cast" will head off most potential run-ins.

Rose offers his own personal guideline as a rule of thumb: "If a guy is casting and you come within a cast's distance of his boat, say 100 to 120 feet, you're too close in my opinion."

If you're fishing on the ledge, it's worth considering. ■

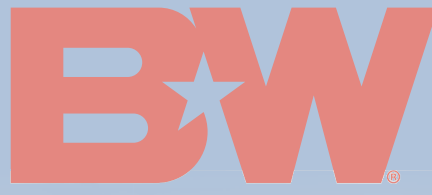


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

It pays big to fish deep. Kevin VanDam captured the win on Lake Chickamauga in 2021 by fishing offshore with Strike King crankbaits.

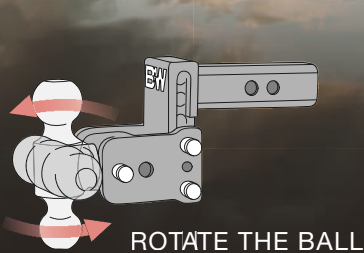
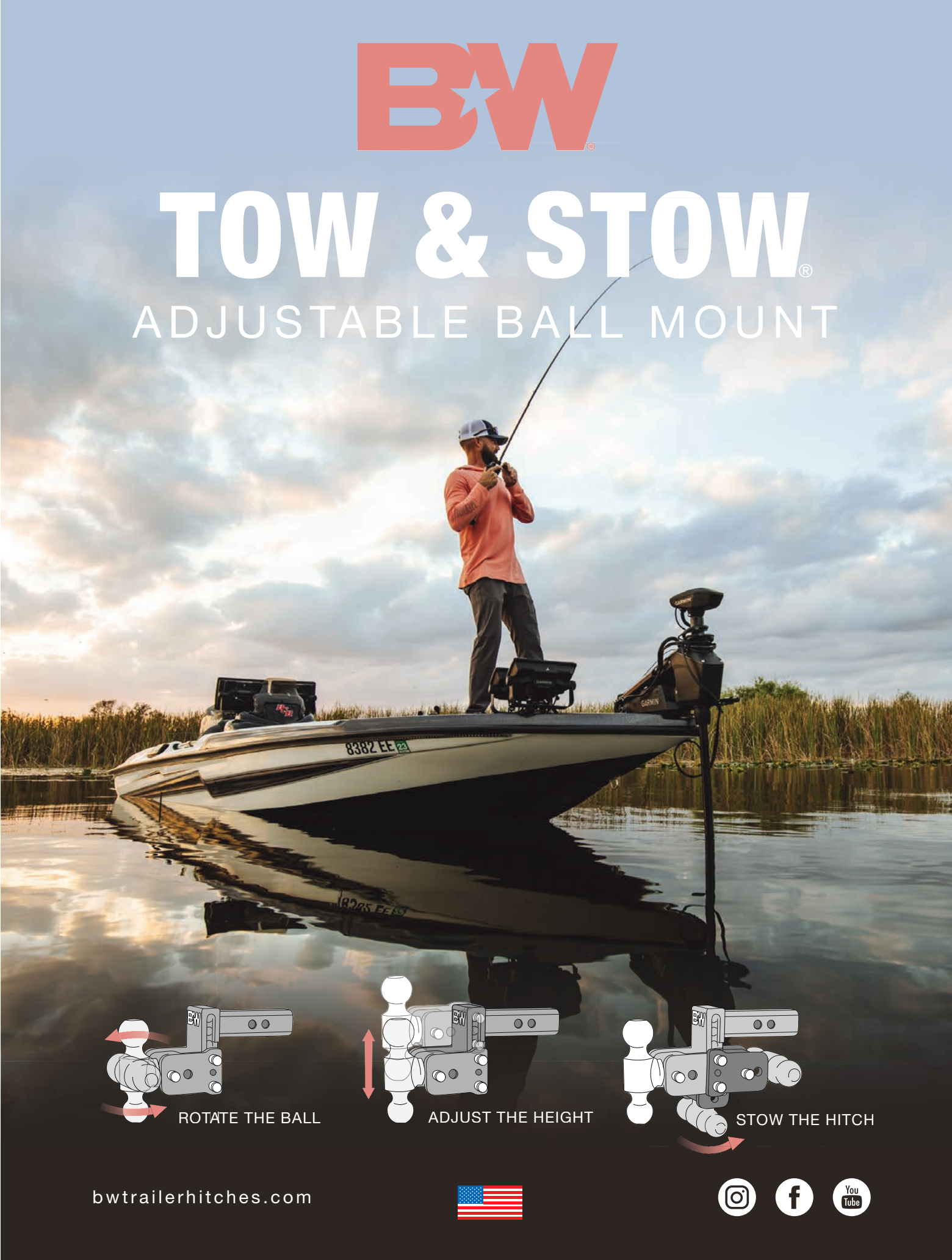


Work on your ledge-fishing game and start catching 6-pounders, like this toad Jacob Wheeler caught on Lake Chickamauga.

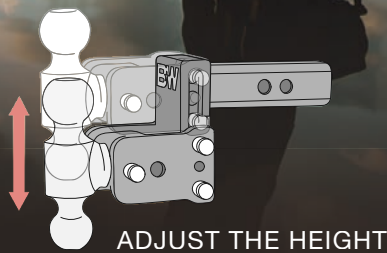


TOW & STOW[®]

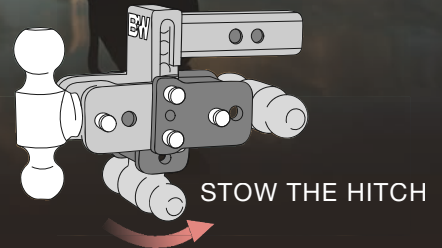
ADJUSTABLE BALL MOUNT



ROTATE THE BALL



ADJUST THE HEIGHT



STOW THE HITCH



DOG DAYS OF SUMMER

In the dead of summer, long days and high heat create challenging fishing conditions for most anglers, but for those who know how to adjust, it can also be one of the most productive. These unique conditions open up nocturnal bite windows that are non-existent throughout most of the year, giving anglers an opportunity at big fish that might not normally bite during the day. Check out our top baits for fishing the dog days of Summer and night to keep your fish counts in step with the rising temperatures.

TOPWATER WALKING BAIT

Arguably one of the most exciting ways to catch a bass, topwater walking baits are a staple of summertime fishing throughout most of the country. Responsible for big catches and countless tournament wins, there's no debating the effectiveness of a topwater walking bait in the summer.



SOFT JERKBAIT

Subtle, fun, and effective, soft jerkbaits work wonders around shad-hungry bass, whether they are hiding under docks to escape the heat of the day, or corralling bait in the backs of pockets.



DROP SHOT

In the middle of the day, when the temperatures are at their absolute highest, the dropshot excels at scratching out a few extra bites that can make the difference between first and second place.

& NIGHTS

BY TACKLE WAREHOUSE



SPINNERBAIT

A go-to for many nighttime anglers, the thumping action of a spinnerbait, often of the Colorado or Indiana variety, calls to big fish once the sun goes down. If you want a strong pulsing attraction that bass can locate easily without a visual cue, the spinnerbait should be your first choice.

CHATTERBAIT

Delivering a steady, high-frequency signal that bass can't pass up, the chatterbait's erratic action and weedlessness make it top choice for efficient nighttime fishing. Any time you are going fishing at night, the chatterbait makes the perfect midnight snack for hungry bass.



JIG

One of the most reliable tools in any angler's arsenal, the jig makes it easy to pick apart deep structure and target ledge-dwelling bass in the summer. Add an acoustic element of attraction, like a rattle, and the jig becomes one of the most consistent ways to conjure a big bite at night.



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Trailers

TOP 10 PRODUCERS

It wasn't too terribly long ago that a majority of soft plastics were designed to be fished as individual, stand-alone baits. Shapes, sizes and colors were engineered to work best on, say, a naked 5/0 Texas-rigged hook, a football jig or even a drop-shot – where the plastic was/is the sole instigator of the wiggle/shimmy/shake/pulse action of the technique. The more recent boom of baits like the swim and bladed jig, though, have opened up a whole new world of plastic trailers that are designed as enhancements to the primary bait/lure.

The act of adding a cut, shaped, dyed and otherwise-enhanced piece of material to a lure to catch black bass dates back 100 years, to when Allen P. Jones and Urban Schreiner – the creators of Uncle Josh – first sold the No. 11 Pork Frog in the early 1920s. Plastic shapes on hooks are far from new. However, the “art of the trailer” is an interesting offshoot of the plastic-worm market. Here are some of the most productive trailers whose fish-catching (money-earning) potential we've witnessed firsthand.

\$9.49 | tacklewarehouse.com

GECCRACK BELLOWS SHAD

Based on the amount of money that Bass Pro Tour pro Alton Jones Jr. has won on the Geecrack Bellows Shad, a more appropriate name might be “Cha-chinnng Shad” or “AJ's ATM”: Jones has taken this funky-looking plastic to the bank to the tune of \$250,000 in just over a year. The 3.8-inch Bellows Shad is the little brother of the Geecrack Bellows Gill and the Bellows family of baits, which can trace their lineage to the legendary big-bass waters of Lake Biwa in Japan.

Like the Bellows Gill, the Bellows Shad's calling card is its deeply ribbed body, which creates a natural, lifelike ripple action as the bait falls or swims. The ribs also translate into an abundance of surface area for Geecrack's proprietary S.A.F. (Salts + Aminos + Flavor) scent, which – when combined with the supple texture of the rippled formation of the body – encourages bass to hold onto the bait longer.

Jones' design input on the Bellows Shad called for a slimmed-down body and tapered tail, a shape that more resembles a shad versus the previous Bellows bluegill/panfish profile. The result is a more diverse bait that Jones has proven to be perfect in multiple applications, including as a trailer on a vibrating jig or spinnerbait. And that's exactly how Junior fished the “Cha-chinnng Shad” when he obliterated the Championship Day field at Louisiana's Bussey Brake in General Tire Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops at Bussey Brake – as a trailer on a ½-ounce white spinnerbait.

The Bellow Shad is available in nine colors.



color: muddy gill

\$5.99-6.49 | basspro.com

YAMAMOTO ZAKO

The Yamamoto Zako is hardly a new shape family – the original 4-inch iteration hit tackle store pegs in 2017, and you've seen it in multiple Top 10 Baits stories courtesy of Brett Hite, Brent Ehrler, Randy Howell, Tai Au, etc. Yamamoto added to the family in 2020 with a paddle-tail design, and again in 2022 with a 3-inch version of the forked-tail Zako, which provided smaller vibrating-jig and underspin devotees a downsized version of the popular basic shape.

The Zako's original forked-tail design originated from Hite's ChatterBait-rid-dled brain, which gives you some clues about its structure and application: the forked tail is meant as an enhancement to the already hearty action of a ChatterBait Jack Hammer (some action but not too much action), and the segmented “mid-tail” section connecting the body to the forked tail acts as a collapsible “accordion” when fish bite it, allowing the hook to get full purchase.

Yamamoto and Hite engineered the Paddle Tail Zako in 2020, boosting the original forked-tail design with the heavier action of a paddle tail and making it a great option for swim jigs. The 3-inch Zako was the next natural addition, owing to the truth that smaller baitfish + smaller vibrating jigs = the need for a smaller trailer (the old “one size does not fit all” philosophy).

The Zako family is available in 22 colors.



color: fading watermelon/black flake

color: small mouth magic

BIG BITE BAITS KAMIKAZE SWIMON

\$4.99 | basspro.com

20
COLORS



Back-to-back Pro Circuit Angler of the Year Michael Neal can thank the Big Bite Baits

Kamikaze Swimon for a handful of Top 10s over the past three years (Grand Lake, Gunterville, Lake Eufaula to name a few). The Kamikaze Swimon rocks a unique design, starting with an elongated, salt-impregnated body and twin flapper tails with holes, which contribute to the bait's enticing action as a bladed-jig trailer (the task it was designed for). Eight ribs on the midsection of the body contribute extra water displacement, while a boost of Bite Juice in the plastic give it some extra flavor for fish to latch onto.

The Kamikaze Swimon is available in 3 3/4- and 4 1/4-inch sizes and 20 colors.

color: *green pumpkin*

BASS PRO SHOPS SWIM-N-ELITE CHUNK

\$3.99 | basspro.com

A favorite trailer of Bass Pro Tour Ott DeFoe, the Swim-N-Elite Chunk was part of the Tennessee pro's main setup for plying the lily pads of the Kissimmee Chain during BPT Stage One in February. DeFoe fished the 3 1/2-inch Swim-N-Elite Chunk on a 3/8-ounce Terminator Heavy Duty Swim Jig, but its high-action flapping claws and six legs make it an attractive addition for any application (pitching, punching, etc.) that benefits from a craw-shaped trailer/attractor.

The Swim-N-Elite is salt-impregnated and the plastic is injected with BPS' 8Up Scent to encourage more enthusiastic bites.

The Swim-N-Elite Chunk is available in 12 proven bass-catching colors.



color: *magic red flake*

12
COLORS

LAKE FORK LIVE MAGIC SHAD

\$6.49 | tacklewarehouse.com

Tackle Warehouse Invationals fans who paid close attention to Kelly Jordon's winning gear at the Lake Eufaula, Oklahoma, tournament in April likely noticed the white trailer on the vibrating jig setup that helped him catch 22-9 on the final day and run away with the win. A product of Lake Fork Trophy Lures (one of Texas' most revered small bait manufacturers), the Live Magic Shad's calling cards are a lifelike swimming action and profile, which make it an excellent imitator of fleeing baitfish.

The Live Magic Shad is made of extremely soft plastic; that suppleness, combined with a garlic scent infused in the plastic, encourages bass to hold on to the bait when they bite, boosting your chances of getting fish to the boat.

The Live Magic Shad Comes in three sizes (3 1/2 to 5 1/2 inches) and 21 fishy colors.



21
COLORS

color: *blue gill*

DAMIKI ARMOR SHAD

\$4.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

Anybody who has followed MLF pro Bryan Thrift's career has witnessed an astoundingly thorough application of the Damiki Armor Shad in lakes throughout the South/Southeast. Yep, the 3-inch version of Damiki's signature soft jerkbait shape was the star of the show when the Damiki rig was first hatched in East Tennessee, but Thrift has proven that it's a versatile bait which can/will win you money on the end of an underspin (\$300,000 at REDCREST on Lake Norman), as a trailer on the ubiquitous Z-man Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer that Thrift favors, or jerked on a 5/0 Damiki D-Hold Weightless Hook.

There are reasons for the Armor Shad's productivity: ribbed body, soft texture and injected scent that translate into a more natural feel in a fish's mouth; enticing darting/swimming action when fished as a jerkbait; abundant color options that match any fishing conditions you'll encounter.

The Armor Shad is available in 2 1/2-, 3- and 5-inch models and 17 colors.

color: *watermelon red-black*



17
COLORS



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TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY RACHEL DUBROVIN



PHOTO BY COBI PELLEGRINO

PHOTO BY GARIBICK DIXON

1. U.S. AIR FORCE STAGE TWO PRESENTED BY POWER-POLE Douglas & Cherokee Lakes

March 18-23

There's really no better way to describe Keith Poche's victory in the second regular-season Bass Pro Tour event of the season than "epic." Returning to a location that he had previously fished high up the Holston River - 90 minutes from takeoff on Cherokee Lake through some notably "skinny" water - Poche parked on a honey hole below a dam and rang up 19 pounds, 2 ounces on the final day to pick up the first major tour-level win of his career.

Poche plied the swift-moving waters in the dam's tailrace with a Berkley Hollow Belly and a Berkley Finesse Jig with a Berkley PowerBait Shape 108 trailer, plucking fish out of small eddies in the turbulent dam flow to nudge Dakota Ebare by a pound.

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

March 21-23

There's just something about the Wiggins family and Smith Lake - it's called "domination." Jordan Wiggins - brother of Bass Pro Tour angler Jesse Wiggins - took home the trophy on the Alabama reservoir with a three-day total of 44 pounds, 14 ounces to win by 3-3 over Emil Wagner.

Wiggins targeted spawning spotted bass on shelf rock and structure that had immediate deep-water access, catching 14-8 on the final day. Wiggins focused on darker-colored banks that featured large chunk rocks and docks, a mix he felt was key to attracting spawners. Big brother Jesse drove in from BPT Stage Two to watch Jordan weigh in on the final day and earn his first Toyota Series win.

3. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHERN DIVISION Lake Okeechobee

March 30-April 1

Strong winds were the big story for the first two days of the Lake Okeechobee Southern Division event, until Day 3 when it died down in a big way. As the wind died, Jessie Mizell's frog bite pattern gained new life.

Bobby Bakewell came into Day 3 with a lead thanks to his success with a pattern that wasn't affected by the blustering wind - fishing shell beds up the Okeechobee River. But when Bakewell's pattern failed to reload on the final day, leaving him with only four fish in the livewell, it left the door open for Mizell and his frog to make a move.

Following a backflush of clean water near Harney Pond and Tin House, Mizell made pinpoint casts to mats with cattails or buggy whips

nearby. The Florida native caught 22-7 on his final day, giving him a three-day total of 51-15 and his first Toyota Series win.

4. FOX RENT A CAR STAGE THREE PRESENTED BY MERCURY Lake Murray

April 2-7

In the history of tournament bass fishing, it's pretty difficult to name an angler/lake tandem that fit together better than Anthony Gagliardi and Lake Murray, South Carolina. As a resident of this South Carolina lake, Gagliardi entered Stage Three with modest expectations, based solely on a handful of spawn-timing-related conditions that nullified his "home field advantage." So, Gagliardi developed another advantage, a mid-depth drop-shot pattern that he had never tried before on Murray.



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEETH

The result was terrific. Gagliardi put 20-15 on SCORETRACKER® in the Knockout Round and then blasted 26-13 on the final day to finish with a two-day total of 47-12, more than 4 pounds better than Ott DeFoe in second place. Gagliardi's primary bait was a simple morning dawn finesse worm fished on a drop-shot, a bait that helped push his career winnings on Murray to over \$800,000.

5. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION Lake Dardanelle

April 4-6

Zach King proved that patience and persistence pay off as he finally got a win on his home lake of Lake Dardanelle after countless Top-10 finishes without a champion's trophy. Three straight days of 18-plus-pound bags earned King a comfortable 4-13 win over Todd Castledine.

King used his local knowledge to maneuver his way back into the Spadra Creek region of the lake, an area that most other anglers found difficult to navigate into. While there, King found shallow shoots and drains that had multiple bedding fish, which he capitalized on all three days of competition.

The "King of Dardanelle" utilized a Texas-rigged YUM Dinger for sight-fishing along with a War Eagle spinnerbait and a Booyah swim jig when he took a break from bedding fish.

6. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS EPIC BAITS STOP 3 PRESENTED BY B&W TRAILER HITCHES Lake Eufaula

April 14-16

A giant bag of 22-9 – the biggest of the tournament – vaulted Kelly Jordan from fourth place to first on the final day to win Stop 3 on Lake

Eufaula. Dead trolling motor batteries couldn't keep Jordan from the top of the podium as he made two final-hour culls to bring his three-day total to 57-3.

Finding a limit all three days, Jordan relied on extensive pre-event research on Eufaula to scout areas he would end up utilizing throughout the tournament. His win is all the more impressive in light of a truncated practice time due to a family emergency. Jordan fished secondary rocky points with a Lucky Craft Fat CB BDS 2 as well as a ½-ounce vibrating jig with a Lake Fork Live Magic Shad. This was Jordan's first Tackle Warehouse Invitationals win and he earns an automatic bid into REDCREST 2024.

FOR ALL THE MOST RECENT TOURNAMENT HIGHLIGHTS, ACTION AND RESULTS, VISIT MAJORLEAGUEFISHING.COM.

7. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS WESTERN DIVISION PRESENTED BY TACKLE WAREHOUSE California Delta Presented by Psycho Tuna

April 19-21

It was two wins in one week for Conrad Demecs – a win on the Cal Delta and the birth of his son, Kopeland. Demecs had three straight days of 19-pound limits for a total of 57-6, and he needed all of them to hold off Christian Ostrander by 2-6.

The Arizona angler burned 30 gallons of fuel a day running across the middle/southern sections of the Delta, which offered warmer water and better grass. The bulk of Demecs bites came from 3/8- and a 1/2-ounce vibrating jigs. Demecs works as a roofing superintendent, but will take some hard-earned time off in November to travel to Table Rock Lake for the Toyota Series Championship.

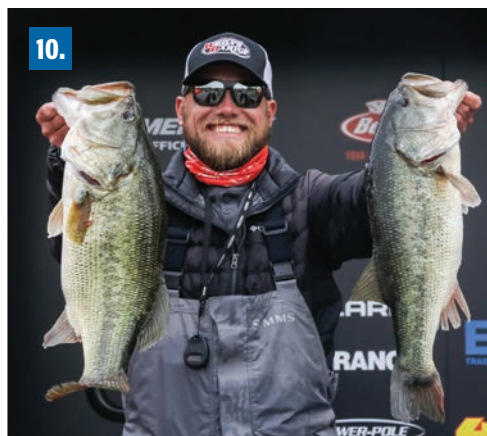


PHOTO BY GARRETT DAVIDSON

PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

8. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS PLAINS DIVISION
Kentucky-Barkley Lakes
 April 20-22

Kentucky pro Jake Lawrence led wire to wire on Kentucky and Barkley Lakes in late April, posting his second Toyota Series win on his home waters (but his first since 2018). Lawrence posted the biggest Day 1 weight (19-3) and chipped away for a three-day total of 57-5 to claim the victory over Adam Bartusek (55-15).

Lawrence targeted spawning smallmouth on the north end of the lake, fishing so far north that the familiar fishery looked like a brand-new lake to him. Locking in with his Garmin LiveScope in 4 to 7 feet of water, Lawrence used a tube and a swimbait to catch spawning smallmouth and a 6-pound largemouth kicker. Lawrence shortened his practice time on Kentucky Lake to simulate what his practice length would be on a professional circuit, a sure sign that he has a berth on the Tackle Warehouse Invationals in his sights.

9. GENERAL TIRE HEAVY HITTERS PRESENTED BY BASS PRO SHOPS
Caney Creek Reservoir, Bussey Brake
 April 24-29

If the Bass Pro Tour only fished big-fish events like Heavy Hitters, we get a feeling that Alton Jones Jr. would be first in line to sign up. One year after racking up \$150,000 in big-fish bonuses at General Tire Heavy Hitters 2022 on Lake Palestine in Texas, Jones was at it again at Heavy Hitters 2023 in northern Louisiana. Jones blew away the competition in the Championship Round on Bussey Brake, piling up 81-15 of largemouth to win the \$100,000 top prize by nearly 60 pounds!

While the rest of the final-day field was flipping and pitching at Bussey Brake, Jones pulled out a 1/2-ounce spinnerbait with a Geocrack Bellows Shad trailer and went to work. He finished the day with 19 scorable fish – the other nine anglers in the field accounted for 21 altogether – and one of the largest margins of victory in MLF history.

10. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS CENTRAL DIVISION
Lake Chickamauga
 April 25-27

Powered by a 29-7 bag on Day 2, 26-year-old Brody Campbell won on Lake Chickamauga by an impressive 11-11 margin to earn the fourth MLF win of his young career. With the rain falling in Eastern Tennessee, Campbell hoisted his first Toyota Series champion's trophy and a check worth \$52,300, by far his biggest win yet.

Campbell worked his way through community holes he had knowledge of in the Chester Frost area of the lake, but really keyed in on isolated pieces of cover with a drop-shot and a morning dawn-colored Roboworm Straight Tail Worm. His key focal points were individual stumps on a pair of humps near Chester Frost and an isolated grass patch on the end of an offshore bar. Those areas provided him two 7-pounders and a 9-pounder in his astounding Day 2 bag, helping him cruise to a win.

11. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVATIONALS PHOENIX BOATS STOP 4 PRESENTED BY MYSTIK LUBRICANTS
Lake of the Ozarks
 May 4-6

John Cox held off a surging Keith Carson by 1-1 on the final day at Lake of the Ozarks to claim his latest MLF win with a three-day total of 55-14. Carson – Cox's longtime friend – finished second with 54-13 but with one less fish than Cox; one more keeper would have been the difference and given Carson the win instead.

Fishing in the clear water near the dam, Cox roamed the pockets on the south side of Lake of the Ozarks, sight-fishing for bedding fish. The Florida pro staked his tournament on fish that seemed to be less pressured, which paid off in a big way for him as he opened the tournament with 20-1 on the first day. A Berkley PowerBait MaxScent The General and a Berkley PowerBait Jerk Shad were Cox's winning baits (and his tickets to REDCREST 2024).

**SKEET REESE
PRO ANGLER**

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

WHY LENS COLOR MATTERS



WX PEAK

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

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Photo: MLF

12.



PHOTO BY ERIK GAFFRON

13.



PHOTO BY KORY SAVAGE

14.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

12. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHERN DIVISION

Lake Eufaula Presented by Chewalla Creek Marina

May 11-13

Bass Pro Tour pro Justin Lucas is no stranger to hoisting MLF trophies, having claimed the champion's hardware at multiple levels on multiple pro circuits throughout his career. The Alabama pro's May win at Lake Eufaula, however, was his first Toyota Series title fishing as a pro (he racked up four FLW Tour Series wins as a co-angler in 2008-2009).

Lucas totaled 51-13 for three days on Eufaula, bringing 17-12 and 18-13 to the scales the first two days by taking advantage of a good shad-spawn bite with a Berkley Power Blade spinnerbait. That bite dissipated on the final day, however, prompting Lucas

to focus on postspawn transition spots with a drop-shot and a 5-inch Berkley PowerBait Power Hawg. The result: 15-4, enough to hold off Bobby Bakewell by 5 pounds and claim a \$79,000 payday that included a \$35,000 Phoenix Boats contingency bonus.

13. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION

Sam Rayburn Reservoir

May 18-20

As far as Toyota Series first-tournament splashes go, it's impossible to imagine anyone making a louder, more noticeable wave than that of New York angler Alec Morrison. Fishing his first-ever Toyota Series event on a fishery he had never competed on before - Texas' massive Sam Rayburn Reservoir -

Morrison 'scoped his way to a 73-5 in three days on Big Sam to post an MLF-record 24-pound win.

Working his way around a series of deep brush piles with a handful of basic plastic worms on a drop-shot and Texas rig, Morrison plunked 27-9 on the scales on Day 1 and then backed that up with 29-9 on Day 2 and 16-3 on the final day to crush an experienced field of pros and pick up a \$70,000 payday (made possible with the sweet \$35,000 Phoenix Boats contingency bonus).

14. TORO STAGE FOUR PRESENTED BY BASS CAT Lake Guntersville

May 16-21

It felt like it was only a matter of time before defending Bally Bet Angler of the Year Jacob Wheeler hoisted a Bass Pro Tour trophy and

\$100,000 winner's check, and sure enough, Wheeler claimed the trappings of a BPT champion (for the sixth time!) on a river system which he's proven to be the master.

Wheeler put 54-15 of Lake Guntersville largemouth on SCORE-TRACKER® in the Knockout and Championship Rounds to earn his first BPT win since he won back-to-back events in 2021, beating local resident Jacob Wall by 9-7. And he did it all offshore, connecting with postspawn fish hovering around Guntersville's famed ledges thanks to a new soft-plastic bait - the Freeloader - that will be released at ICAST.

Wheeler quietly worked his way through the first two days of his Qualifying Round, catching 20-15 and 22-8, but then put the hammer down in the Knockout Round to the tune of 29-9 before finishing out with 25-6 on the final day. ■

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SAGINAW BAY AND SAGINAW RIVER

By Sean Ostruszka

Great Lakes tournaments often mean two things: big waves and big smallmouths.

Whether it's Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River, Lake St. Clair, the Detroit River, Sturgeon Bay or Green Bay – all recent sites of top-level Major League Fishing events – the story has seemingly been the same time and again.

So, seeing Saginaw Bay and the adjoining Saginaw River as the seventh and final stop of the 2023 Bass Pro Tour regular season, it'd be safe to assume we're about to watch another drool-fest of giant brown fish.

... and you'd probably be wrong (kind of).

"I think guys are going to be surprised when they get up here," Jonathon VanDam said. "And, I think the secret of this place is going to finally get out."

A DIFFERENT KIND OF BAY

Any time we're talking about the Great Lakes, we're talking about massive bodies of water. Seeing as Saginaw Bay is part of Lake Huron, the Michigan fishery is no different in that respect. We're talking 1,143 square miles of water, and that doesn't include the Saginaw River, which is 22 miles long.

For the longest time, walleye and perch have dominated the fishing talk in the region, as both are world class. In fact, according to VanDam, it hasn't been until recent years that even local bass tournaments have started popping up here, let alone regional or top-tier events.

Why it took so long for the bass-tournament crowd to catch on, VanDam doesn't really know, but he certainly knows why there are increasing numbers on the schedule, and why the Bass Pro Tour is coming.

"No joke, Saginaw Bay is the best fishery in Michigan right now," VanDam said. "And it's probably not going to fish as well as it could because the water levels are down a little since we didn't get a lot of ice this winter. The place fishes the best when the water is higher, but it will still be incredible fishing."

Considering that the state of Michigan can lay claim to Lake Erie, the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair, along with countless incredible smaller bodies of water, calling it "the best" is an eyebrow-raising statement. Then again, with what VanDam shared about the fishery, he backs it up.

FLORIDA OF THE NORTH

"It looks like Lake Okeechobee."

Yes, you read that right. That's how VanDam describes the rim of the bay and a good portion of the river, and for good reason: Saginaw Bay resembles the Big O quite a bit.

You see, Saginaw Bay actually contains the largest contiguous freshwater coastal wetland system in the United States. It's a waterfowl hunter's dream of marshes, reeds, matted vegetation and the like, just like what you'd find down on Lake Okeechobee. The river is much like the bay, only with more current and more laydowns, but still chock full of vegetation.

Where you find all that vegetation, you're going to find plenty of bass – and we do mean plenty.

"It's nothing to go out and get 75 to 100 bites a day largemouth fishing up there," VanDam said. "And you're doing it in the most fun way possible: flipping, punching with a 65-pound braid and big weights, and frogging. If the BPT was still the catch-all-you-can format, largemouth would dominate, and you'd see some really big numbers. Possibly record-breaking numbers."

There's plenty of quality to go with those numbers, as 15 to 18 pounds is about average, with 20-pound limits still very possible. Hence, VanDam expects a good portion of the field to stay in the bay and river and never worry about going to the big water.

BROWN RISKS

Yes, the largemouth fishing can be ridiculous; but VanDam admits if a guy wants to win, it's usually smallmouth that take it home.

"A guy can definitely make the Top 10 fishing for largemouth, but smallmouth usually win up there," he said. "You're talking average bags between 20 and 24 pounds, with bags over 25 pounds very possible. So, (smallmouth) are a huge X-factor but also a huge risk."

Again, Saginaw Bay is massive, and guys looking to chase brown fish may have to run 50 miles out to the best spots – which can be nothing compared to the runs guys make on the St. Lawrence River and is kind of the norm for other

"No matter how guys fish that week, this place is going to shock them. It's going to be a phenomenal finale."

ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROWAN



Great Lakes events. That said, VanDam says Saginaw's smallmouth can be notoriously hard to find compared to those in the other Great Lakes, and the "better" areas are typically so far apart that it doesn't leave a pro many options once they're out there.

Then there is the always-present risk of rough water, as it only takes a little wind from the wrong direction to make it treacherous to head out into open water. That could completely scrap any plans for a pro.

Thus, VanDam expects some pros sample the smallmouth in attempts to shoot for the win – it's hard to pass up chasing 4- and 5-pound smallmouth, after all. But, he says they better spend at least one day in the bay or river dialing in the large-mouth bite as a fallback plan in case Mother Nature decides not to cooperate one day.

"No matter how guys fish that week, this place is going to shock them," VanDam said. "It's going to be a phenomenal finale." ■



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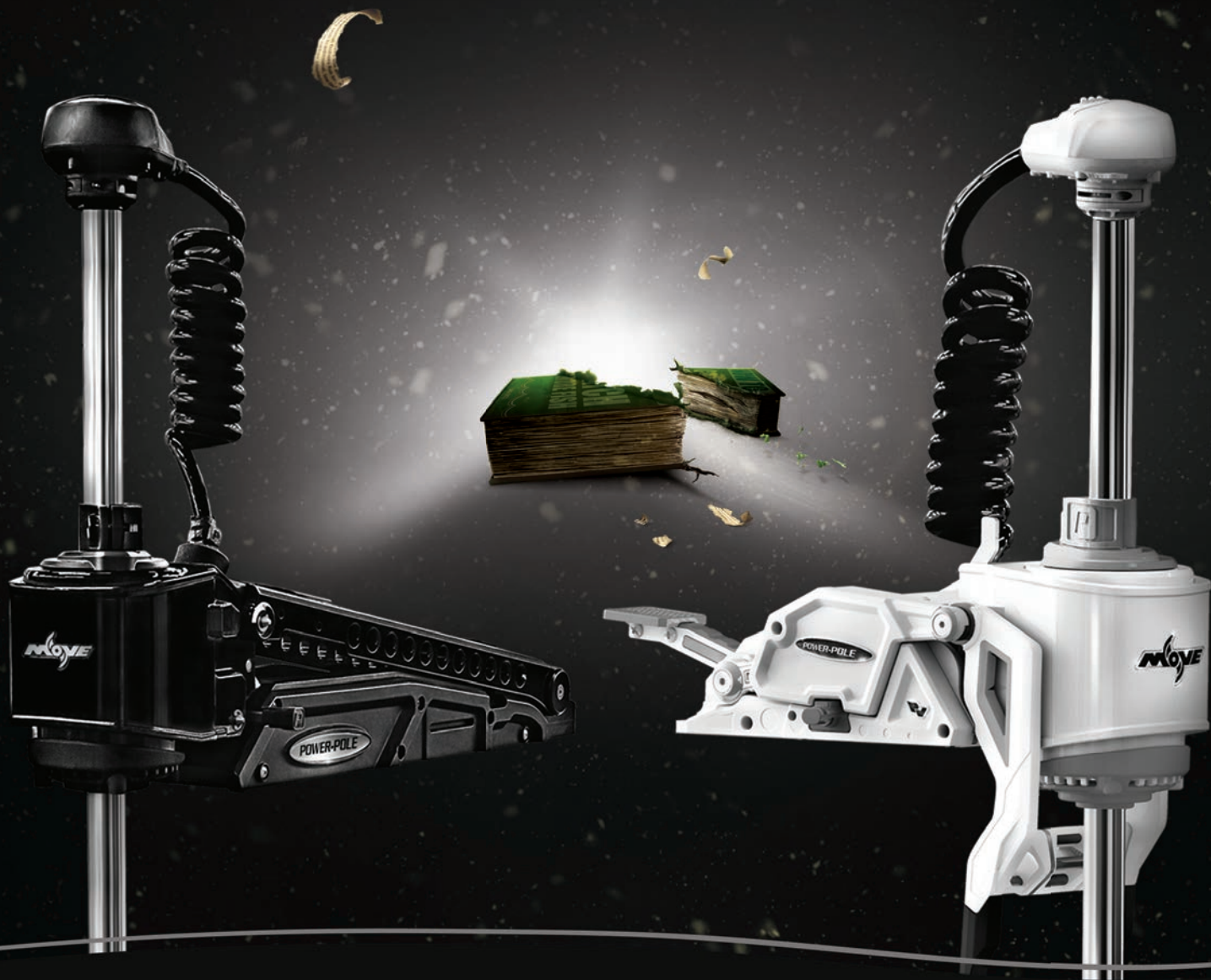


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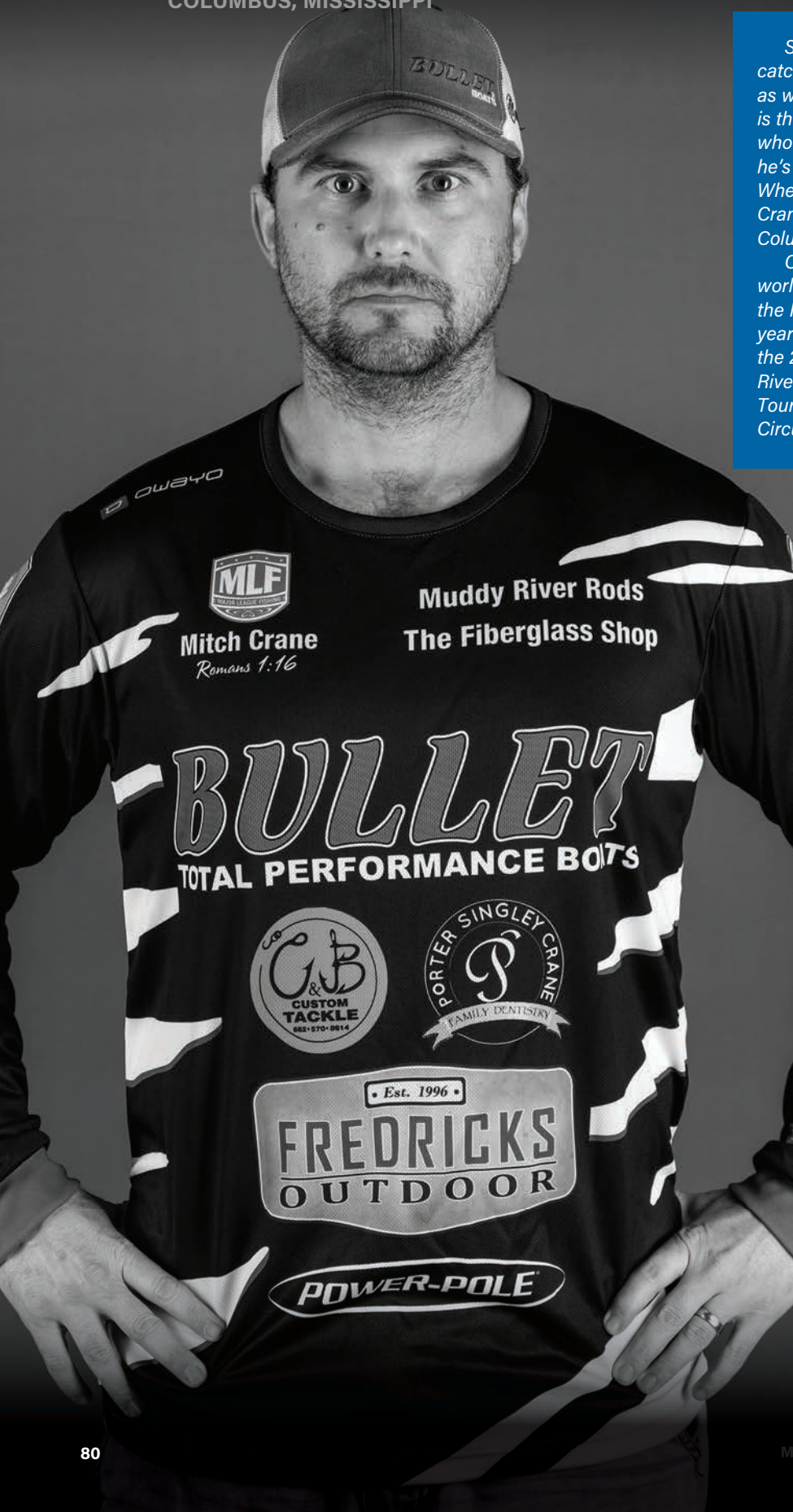
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PROFILE: MITCH CRANE

COLUMBUS, MISSISSIPPI



Sometimes on those dead-slow days, catching bass can feel like pulling teeth. As far as we know, Bass Pro Tour rookie Mitch Crane is the only high-level tournament bass pro who could ever make that comparison: when he's not competing against the likes of Jacob Wheeler, Kevin VanDam and Ott DeFoe, Crane is a full-time dentist in his hometown of Columbus, Mississippi.

Crane made a fast, splashy entry into the world of tour-level bass fishing, qualifying for the FLW Tour in 2020 after fishing only two years in the Toyota Series, finishing fourth at the 2021 Pro Circuit TITLE on the Mississippi River and then qualifying into the Bass Pro Tour via his fourth-place finish in the 2021 Pro Circuit Angler of the Year race.

Q&A

By Matt Naber

The fishing world knows you as Mitch Crane, Bass Pro Tour pro. At home in Mississippi, though, you're known as Dr. Mitchell Crane DDS. How does one go from being a dentist to competing on the Bass Pro Tour?

In 2014 I was fishing in local events around the house, but then was sixth in points my first year ever fishing the BFLs [in 2016] and said, 'maybe there's something here.' I kept learning and made the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit [in 2020]. Most of my tournaments would be great but I'd have a bomb or two. In 2021, I finally had a year without any bombs and made the Bass Pro Tour.

You travel a lot for tournaments, but you still maintain a busy dental schedule - how does that all work?

Life is very hectic. I have a 2-year-old (Bowen), a 6-year-old (Bella), and two fulltime jobs. There are other dentists in my office and 20 employees, and they're my biggest fans. They want me to fish and do dentistry, so if I'm not fishing, I'm in there working 8 to 5. It's hectic, but we make it work.

How did your family and friends react to your decision in 2020 to fish the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit, and then to you qualifying to fish the Bass Pro Tour this season?

My wife (Ashley) wanted me to go for it, but we didn't know if I was ready because I had only fished local Toyota Series events. We took a leap of faith that this is what God wants us to do. I surprised myself because I didn't know I could do it. I don't take myself too seriously and try not to be any different than I was before, so this is a big blessing from God above – whatever he has in store is what we'll do.

Once I got the Bass Pro Tour invite in 2022, my family said 'If you don't take it, then why fish the Pro Circuit?' Basically, 'If you're not going to go on the top of the mountain, then you shouldn't have started climbing it.' So we might as well see what it is like up there [on the Bass Pro Tour] – it'll be tough, but hopefully I'll stay on top of that peak.

I won the first BFL I ever fished, and my wife expected nothing but wins from then on. Nobody is harder on myself than me, but she (Ashley) is a close second – in a loving way. She's super competitive. Most wives are like 'Oh it'll be OK baby you'll get it next time,' but not mine; she makes me learn from it and it keeps me sharp.

What's more challenging, catching bass or fighting cavities?

Catching a bass is more complicated for sure. Most doctors have a specialty, so you have a realm of things and it's rare to see something you haven't seen before. People have clues on what is hurting their tooth. Before I see an X-ray, 90% of the time I know what the problem is. A LiveScope is like the X-ray of the fishing world, but fish [aren't like teeth], they do what they want.

It might be harder to get into dental school than it is to catch a bass. I wanted to be a bull rider until I was 10 years old, then I wanted to be a doctor but didn't like how much doctors work on weekends. When I was in college, my mom went to a new dentist (Dr. Steve Porter), and he had me check out their office and it was super instrumental in me becoming a dentist. I shadowed that office and then they

hired me to work there that summer, and I fell in love with it. I got into dental school and then they built a branch for me to work in. I worked in that office for six years before becoming a dentist.

Frog fishing is one of your favorites and we learned in 2021 that your daughter Bella signs certain frogs. What's the story behind this?

It was at the Mississippi River in 2021 at the TITLE. I was throwing a frog, and really liked the frog with hunter green on the top and sides and the legs were brown. But the water was so clear and the yellow and orange on the bottom of the frog was too bright. So, I grabbed a Sharpie and I drew a circle on it, and had Bella color it in so the yellow and orange weren't so bright. I said, 'You know what, you could write your name on it if you want to,' and she thought that was so cool. I had her do that on some more frogs, too. Any tournament I know I'll frog a lot, I'll have her sign some of them. The legend of the Bella Frog grew from there, she's my good luck charm.

You placed 15th at your first Bass Pro Tour event, are hovering in the Top 20 in Angler of the Year standings and well within qualifying for REDCREST and Heavy Hitters in 2024. How do you feel about your start in the BPT?

I don't think I'll fish professionally for 20 years, but I want to try to make the Top 10 while I am here. Whenever we sit down as a family and decide 'This is it,' it'll be done for good I'll be thankful and gracious for the years the Lord gave me. I'm no different than anyone at the local rounds fishing-wise. The goal was never to make a pro tour, it was to fish BFLs and then to fish a Toyota and see a new body of water, and God really blessed me.

I'm a dreamer, but I'm a realist as well and I realized how small the chance was that would happen, so I never dreamed that big about it. It just kinda happened, and I don't know if that's why I did OK. I put pressure on myself, but I guess I do OK with pressure. I don't have the physical tools a lot of these guys possess. I'm only pretty good at five things, but I love the mental challenge and it keeps me on my toes.

While in Kissimmee for Stage One, you actually stayed at Disney, correct? Could you tell us about that experience? And what's more exhausting, a day fishing Lake Toho or a day at Disney World?

I am thankful that Kissimmee is in my wheelhouse because my mind was so little on fishing. Disney will wear you out. When you get to the resort, you don't want to do tackle, you just want to go to sleep.

What did you learn early in the season at Kissimmee that you've applied since then? For example: how has it been knowing the score at all times on SCORETRACKER®?

I feel like I don't move around as much as I once did. At the first circuit, you had eight hours and didn't know the score and you could feel good about moving around 10 miles here and 7 miles there. But with SCORETRACKER®, I want to fish more and run less, and it's been an adjustment. Until the Knockout Round at Murray, I had a camera in my boat every day. The only time I was up against the wall was Day 2 at Douglas and I needed one fish, but my heart was beating so hard I could hear it. I asked my camera guy if he knew CPR. I had 45 minutes to catch one but didn't make it happen.

You'll finish the season in three northern fisheries: Cayuga Lake, Lake St. Clair and Saginaw Bay. How do you feel about those northern smallmouth fisheries and what would be one word to describe how ready you are to compete on those fisheries?

I don't think I'll fall apart up there, but I've never been to any of those before. I'd been to Murray and Guntersville, but not the others. I'll go up there with a different mindset this year.

I'm excited! After seeing what they caught at Cayuga last year, how could you not be excited? St. Clair is a bucket-list fishery. I'm excited about Saginaw too because if I can compete with largemouth there, I'll be frogging and buzzbaiting. I'm never not excited to go north, because I've never been there before. I make it too complex sometimes, though, so I'll try to simplify – I'm excited and need to simplify. ■



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FRYER, GARTON EARN FIRST-PLACE AWARDS AT THE BASS FEDERATION NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

OHIO BOATER, NEBRASKA
CO-ANGLER CLAIM LIVING
THE DREAM PRIZE PACKAGES



Andy Fryer (left)
and Chad Garton

The Bass Federation National Championship gets bigger every year, and this year's stage was the 54,000-acre Lake of the Ozarks, which played host to 51 boaters and 51 co-anglers from all over the United States and Canada. The tournament began (surprisingly) with sub-freezing temperatures on Day 1, but that didn't stop some of the most talented grassroots anglers in the country from catching 'em on March 29-31.

Ohio's **Andy Fryer** walked away as the winning boater with a three-day total of 48 pounds, 15 ounces, while winning co-angler **Chad Garton** of Nebraska caught 37-6.

FRYER FOUND SUCCESS IN THE GLAZE ARM

Fryer was consistently strong throughout the first two days of competition. He ended Day 1 with 16-2 (thanks to a 6-pounder to start off) – that put him 7-12 behind leader John Levesque. Fryer didn't panic about that deficit, however, believing that he had plenty of time and productive areas to mount a comeback.

"I had three places that I caught fish during the tournament, and two of those I found during practice," Fryer said. "I would start my mornings in Kinchlow Hollow Cove, throwing an Alabama rig along big secondary points. That's where I caught my 6-pounder for my first bite of the tournament."

That 6-pounder was the biggest fish Fryer had ever weighed in during a tournament and gave him the confidence to continue focusing on his pattern.

"I would finish out my day in the Glaze Arm, where I would catch about five or six keepers a day on a double Colorado-bladed ½-ounce spinnerbait," Fryer said. "The water was a lot more stained up there and the shad seemed to be higher in the water column. I would slow roll that spinnerbait across the laydowns and the rock outcroppings there."

Day 2 saw Levesque come back to the pack after jumping out to the big lead, and Fryer climbed from fourth to second with a 13-11 limit. Fryer was still 4-8 back heading into the final day, so he had plenty of work ahead of him. His plan for Day 3 was to keep doing what he was doing and, most importantly, continue catching limits. Only four anglers and one co-angler had caught limits in both days on a surprisingly stingy Lake of the Ozarks, but Fryer knew that if he stuck to his guns, he'd have a shot at overtaking Levesque.

"I always aim for consistency in my fishing and my goal every time I go out is to catch five," Fryer said. "I don't care what size they are; I just want to catch five. That's why the Glaze Arm was so important to my success, because that's the area that got me to my limit every day in the last hour. Knowing that I was going to be able to fill my limit at the end of the day was a big relief and helped me fish more relaxed."

Fryer needed to have his best day and Levesque would have to falter for Fryer to walk away with the win. After a couple of good bites in the morning followed by solid keepers in the Glaze Arm to round out his day, Fryer had collected his best bag of the tournament with 19-2.

Levesque needed a bag of 14-11 to keep his lead, but the New Hampshire boater was only able to catch three bass on the final day weighing 5-13.

"I remember when I was announced as the winner and I felt like I was going to lose it," Fryer joked. "It was such a cool moment because I had my wife, my mom and my 4-year-old daughter there to support me the whole week. To get to share that moment with them is something I won't ever forget."



Andy Fryer (left) and Chad Garton

Fryer earned the \$125,000 "Living Your Dream" prize package, which includes a \$20,000 cash prize, \$5,000 paid entry fees into the professional series of the angler's choosing, a brand-new Ranger Z520L and more. The biggest prize in that package, according to Fryer, is the paid entry fees into the Toyota Series, something he's been eyeing for a while.

"The plan right now is to fish one of the Toyota Series divisions next year, I'm just not sure which one," Fryer said. "I've always wanted to fish in the Toyota Series, but the entry fees have always been a limiting factor for me. Now all I have to do is figure out which division I'll fish."

Fryer also earned an automatic bid to fish the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American on Lake Hartwell. Along with Fryer, six other boaters and the top seven co-anglers also earned a bid to fish in the All-American.

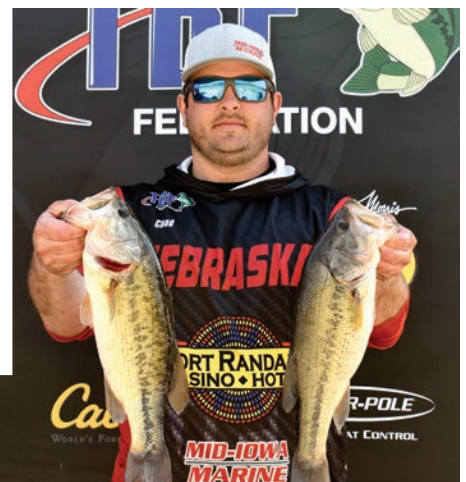
GARTON WINS CO-ANGLER SIDE

Chad Garton hoisted a prize package check of \$35,000, including \$20,000 cash, advancement opportunities, \$2,500 in paid entry fees, travel stipends, clothing package, a MinnKota trolling motor, Lowrance electronics, a Power-Pole and more for winning the co-angler National Championship. However, the Nebraska co-angler isn't your traditional co-angler.

"I'm not normally a co-angler, I just filled in for a buddy back home during qualification and we did well enough to earn a spot for the National Championship," Garton said. "I'm not used to fishing behind people, so that was definitely an adjustment for me."

Garton was paired with three different boaters during the competition, fishing a different way each day. On Day 1, Garton and his boater fished shallow, dirty water, where Garton caught five for 13 pounds even. On Day 2, Garton's boater opted for cleaner water and watching fish on forward-facing sonar. On Day 3, Garton had to long cast to docks or other structure with a jerkbait and Alabama rig.

"I knew that I just needed to catch a limit every day," Garton said. "If a co-angler can catch a limit, that's the biggest boost you can have. It's hard being a co-angler, especially trying to figure out the tackle you need to bring with you. I was prepared for pretty much anything and everything."



Although he bounced around the lake, Garton's lead was never in real jeopardy. The Nebraskan was the only co-angler to catch a limit all three days and ended with a total of 37-6. He headed home with a boost to his bank account and a few decisions to make about his future in bass fishing.

"I'm going to take the money and run with it as I try to advance my career as a boater," Garton said. "I plan on jumping into the Toyota Series, as well as fishing some other open events. I'm good friends with Jordan Hirt, who won the National Championship last year as a boater and now fishes on the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals, so we'll probably team up together for a few events as well."

SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING STATE CHAMPIONS

Arizona | Roosevelt Lake

Tanner Despain, Creek Johnson
Arizona High School Bassmasters
16 pounds, 8 ounces



Arkansas | Lake Ouachita

Ramsey Gilbert, Chandler Perkins
Mount Ida Lions
14 pounds, 10 ounces



Indiana | Patoka Lake

Ross Peacock, Henry Vincent
Rose City Fishing
17 pounds, 10 ounces



Louisiana | Lake D'Arbonne

Caleb Johnston, Colin Cosenza
Many High School
13 pounds, 13 ounces



Missouri | Lake of the Ozarks

Mitch Geiser, Danny Swallow
De Smet Jesuit High School
12 pounds, 13 ounces



Mississippi | Pascagoula River

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



Nevada | Lake Mohave

Isabelle and Markus Avalos
Boulder City Bass Club
12 pounds, 6 ounces



Tennessee | Kentucky Lake

Jaxon Sherfield, Jack Houston Rushing
Brighton Cardinals
22 pounds, 10 ounces



Texas | Lake Conroe

Wyatt Ford, Reece Findley
MISD Fishing Team
21 pounds, 4 ounces



Virginia | South Holston Lake

Joshua Smith, Landon Ray
15 pounds, 9 ounces



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June 10, Lake Sakakawea

WISCONSIN

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National Championship
June 21–24, Mississippi River

COLORADO

SAF State Championship
June 25, Pueblo Reservoir

ONTARIO

SAF State Championship
June 25, Bay of Quinte

PENNSYLVANIA

SAF State Championship
July 9, Oneida Lake

MAINE

SAF State Championship
July 15, Crescent Lake

MICHIGAN

SAF State Championship
July 16, Lake Charlevoix

VERMONT

SAF State Championship
July 16, Lake Champlain

ALABAMA

Open Challenge
Aug. 5, Mobile, Tensaw River & Delta

NEW YORK

SAF State Championship
Sept. 9, Onondaga Lake

WASHINGTON

SAF State Championship
Sept. 30, Riffe Lake

NEW HAMPSHIRE

SAF State Championship
Oct. 1, Connecticut River

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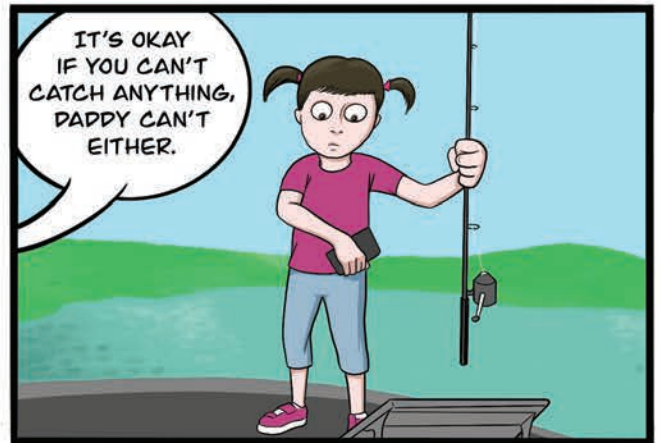
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