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OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2023




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## MATT BECKER

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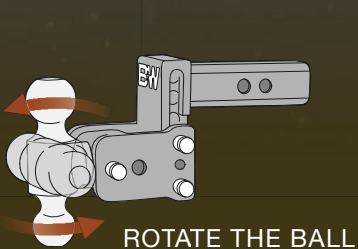
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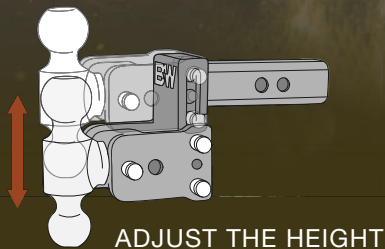


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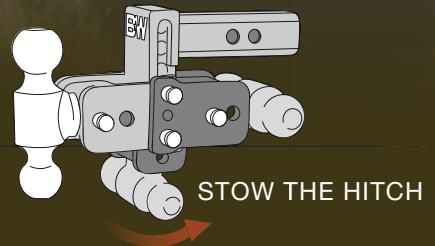
## ADJUSTABLE BALL MOUNT



ROTATE THE BALL



ADJUST THE HEIGHT



STOW THE HITCH



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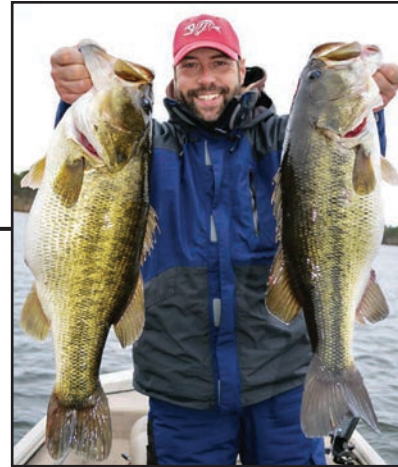


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# FISHING TECH'S LATEST QUANTUM LEAP: SEEING IS BELIEVING



I think it's safe to say that we're living in the most bullish technology boom that the world has ever seen.

Proof is all around you: home-automation systems that control appliances, door locks, thermostats and lights with a simple spoken command; robots that play basketball; cars that drive themselves; smartphones with 24mp cameras and laser autofocus; artificial-intelligence applications that can do everything from detect diseases to paint pictures in the blink of an eye.

We are, as they say, living in wondrous times. The same can be said of the tournament bass-fishing world.

In 1996, Mercury introduced us to the first direct-fuel-injected, two-stroke outboard and dramatically changed how we power our bass boats. In 2000, John Oliviera bestowed the wonder of the Power-Pole shallow-water anchor upon the fishing world, a modification of which now exists on virtually every tournament bass boat from your local Wednesday-nighter to the Bass Pro Tour. Humminbird introduced side-imaging technology to the masses in 2005, and Lowrance blessed us all with Structure Scan in 2009, the progeny of which you've all undoubtedly embraced over the past 15 to 20 years.

Ditto high-modulus graphite rods, tungsten weights, lithium batteries, cable-steer trolling motors, hyper-accurate GPS mapping and bait scents created in a laboratory. All of the above help us catch more fish (ergo, make our pursuits of these little green and brown creatures more fruitful and enjoyable).

Which leads to my confusion about the recent uproar of debate about forward-facing sonar.

This most recent advancement in fishing technology arrived in retail form in 2018 with Garmin LiveScope, a tech leap that was soon adopted by other major electronics manufacturers and embraced by a hearty percentage of anglers who recognized a powerful new tool in their fishing toolboxes. I happened to be looking over future Hall-of-Famer Edwin Evers' shoulder when he first activated his Lowrance ActiveTarget at a product demo on Table Rock Lake and will never forget his reaction: sheer astonishment at what he was seeing on his screen, followed by the gears in his angler brain starting to turn as he instantly began to process how he could best use FFS to catch more fish.

As is the case with almost any new technology, a percentage of tournament anglers went "all in" on forward-facing sonar. They invested time in learning how to use it, folded it straightaway into their everyday tournament processes and began to expand upon the technology's capabilities to locate and catch fish. Another percentage of anglers chose not to adopt FFS as lustily, for various, valid-to-them reasons.

The impact of this latest advancement in fishing technology - and the benefit to those anglers who went from "early adopter" to "expert" - has been irrefutable, as pros like Jacob Wheeler, Dustin Connell, Michael Neal, Justin Lucas, Matt Becker, Dakota Ebare, etc., rack up tour-level wins and Top 10s at a supersonic rate while using forward-facing sonar.

A kerfuffle of social media debate erupted in late summer about FFS' efficacy in tournaments, with non-adopters challenging that the technology is "too good" (their words, not mine). But whether you enjoy the act of "video gaming" or would prefer instead to Power-Pole down and punch mats all day, the GOAT himself - Kevin VanDam - sums up best the true potential of live sonar as a fish-catching tool.

"(Live sonar) is here to stay, and it's only going to get better," VanDam said. "It is, by far, the most potent learning tool in fishing I've ever experienced. For the first time ever, we have live testimony of how fish really behave. There's no more guessing or wondering what they're doing, you can see it in real time. Seeing [all the dots] doesn't mean catching all the dots. Seeing is believing. And believing is what leads to change to become a better angler."

Thoughts? I'd love to hear them: [Joel.Shangle@MajorLeagueFishing.com](mailto:Joel.Shangle@MajorLeagueFishing.com).

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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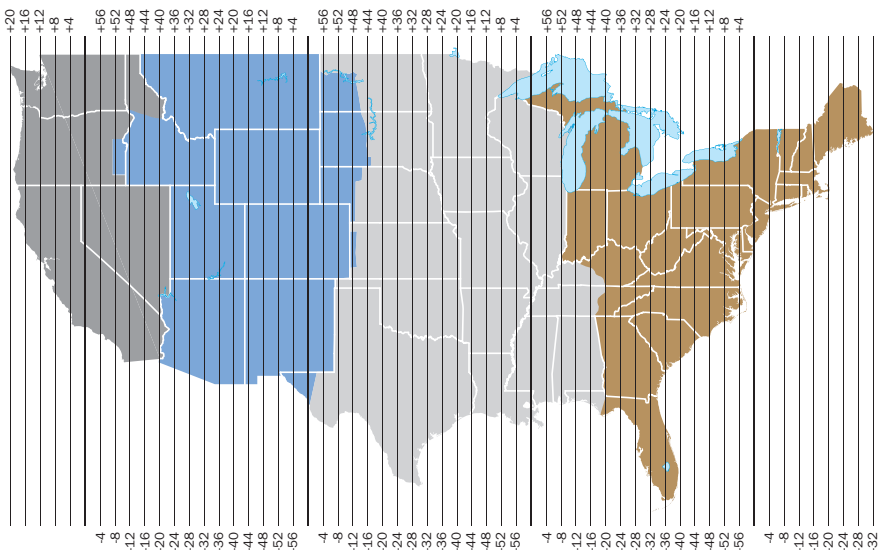
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# SOLUNAR TABLES

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2023

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

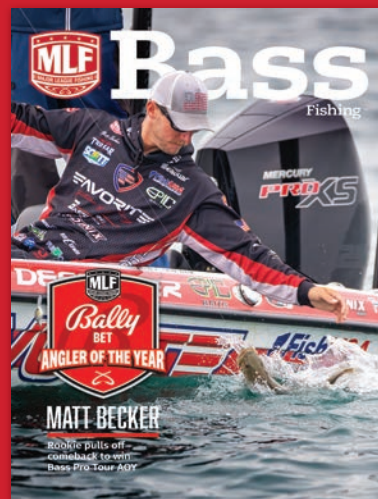


NOV. Date	Day	AM		PM		Moon Phases	DEC. Date	Day	AM		PM		Moon Phases
		Minor	Major	Minor	Major				Minor	Major	Minor	Major	
1	Wed	7:25	1:15	8:00	1:45		1	Fri	8:00	1:50	8:30	2:15	
2	Thu	8:25	2:15	9:00	2:45		2	Sat	8:55	2:45	9:20	3:05	
3	Fri	9:30	3:20	9:55	3:40		3	Sun	9:45	3:35	10:10	3:55	
4	Sat	10:20	4:10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

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# FINGERLING STOCKING FACTORS

MLF Fisheries Management Division, MLF anglers, state agencies join forces to enhance local fisheries with largemouth stocks



By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

One of the most popular conservation efforts supported by national and local angler groups alike is fingerling bass stocking. There's something special about seeing fingerling bass going into your favorite body of water. Stocking is a much-needed enhancement to support recreational opportunities in new fisheries, to help bass populations recover from natural disasters or fish kills, to supplement low spawning seasons or to improve or restore specific genetics.

These circumstances, however, are rare. Most reservoirs contain abundant largemouth bass populations that have high annual spawning success, so the true need for stocking programs is often a subject of debate.

## FINGERLING FACTORS

There are a few obstacles that fisheries managers must overcome before implementing a stocking program.

- First and foremost, fingerling stocking takes a lot of fish (and therefore money) to be successful. A program requires eggs to be hatched and fingerlings to be grown, transported from a hatchery and placed into a reservoir. As a result, a single fingerling largemouth from a commercial hatchery can carry a cost between \$1 and \$5. The number of fish needed to be stocked is often determined primarily by the cost, which can quickly consume even the largest budget.
- The number of fish needed to be impactful in the fishery is very high and dependent on an extraordinary number of

factors. One of those factors is initial mortality from being consumed by adult largemouth. Studies have shown that this number can be as high as 50 to 95% of all fish stocked. This can be somewhat minimized by site selection for release and by stocking a larger size of fish. But stocking larger fingerlings, of course, carries a higher cost and takes pre-planning up to a year in advance with the fish hatchery.

- Another component of how impactful a stocking will be is the number of fish naturally spawned versus how many fish are stocked. Each spawning season, a single female largemouth bass can lay 2,000 to 7,000 eggs per pound of body weight. Even at a survival rate of 1 to 10%, that adds up quickly. It's practically impossible to stock enough bass fingerlings to completely replace natural spawning; instead, fisheries managers stock based on the number of fish per surface acre and do it over multiple years. The closer this ratio can get to 10 fish per acre, the more likely that stocked fish will be found in the adult population.

- A final tough question is simply how or why stocked fingerlings might out-perform native fish. This can be looked at from a genetic or an ecological perspective. Ecologically, every fishery has a carrying capacity. Once that capacity is reached, introducing new individuals will not result in improvements until competition is reduced or capacity increases. That could be accomplished via habitat improvement, increase in plankton productivity, increased forage abundance or more participation in selective harvest. A prime example is the Major League Fishing Fisheries Management Division DNA project on Paintsville Lake in Kentucky (details can be found on the MLF FMD site). In this project, we helped a local angler group conduct a comprehensive population level genetic study and collect the data needed to determine how genetic diversity was impacting growth. The findings allowed the group to identify and implement numerous measures to improve the fishery.

## THE TEXAS SUCCESS STORY

In some fisheries, using stocking to alter a bass population's genetics by introducing more Florida-strain largemouth can result in improved growth rates or overall size. Doing so requires a highly productive fishery with environmental factors that allow for such genetics to be showcased.

The state agency that has likely put the most time into doing so is the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) with the Toyota ShareLunker program. The ShareLunker staff collect DNA from all 13-plus-pound fish, which are used to



Fingerlings can be the life blood of conservation and enhancement efforts for local bass fisheries.

BPT angler Gary Klein shows off a Texas-sized ShareLunker.



breed bass for future stockings, as well as via a voluntary scale sample submission program for anglers who catch fish over 8 pounds.

This research has led TPWD to conclude that advanced growth in Texas is tied to Florida genetics, that it takes 10 years on average for ShareLunker offspring to reach 13 pounds, and — possibly most important — that 14% of the 8-plus-pound largemouth scale samples came from fish with familiar DNA of a ShareLunker.

This is important because TPWD's annual stocking over the past 10 years has averaged 7.7 million Florida largemouth fingerlings and 110,000 ShareLunker offspring — meaning 1.4% of fingerlings stocked statewide are

ShareLunker offspring, but 14% of the 8-plus-pound fish sampled have ShareLunker genes. This data provides proof that, if a fishery possesses the ecological factors necessary to grow giant bass, then selecting the right genetics will, in time, result in more larger fish.

### MLF FMD LUNKER DNA

Major League Fishing, the MLF FMD and the MLF Anglers Association (MLFAA) have each made a concerted effort to further our understanding of

how genetics play a role in advanced size growth geographically, as well as supporting stocking projects that focus on building community and inspiring the next generation of anglers.

The MLF FMD Lunker DNA project collected 60 more samples from 7-plus-pound largemouth caught on the Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Invationals in 2023. These samples were sent to Auburn University, and the results will hopefully be available for distribution before the end of the year. The 2023 results will be added to the past two years' data and provided to state agencies to inform stocking decisions.

### MLFAA STOCKING AT GUNTERSVILLE

BPT pro Chris Lane — with the support of the MLFAA and Southern Pond Professionals — started a stocking program with local youth in 2019 benefiting Lake Guntersville. Over the past four years, the group has stocked 62,500 pure Florida largemouth bass. This year's event took place before official practice started for BPT Stage Four on Guntersville in May. Local youth joined BPT anglers and the Southern Pond Professionals staff in stocking the fish across the iconic reservoir. This program will continue in 2024 and be a highlight of REDCREST 2025 at Guntersville.



MLF pro Dakota Ebare landed three swab-worthy largemouth during General Tire Heavy Hitters. The DNA from those fish will be analyzed and sent to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.





Cliff Crochet raised more than \$80,000 for stocking efforts at two fisheries in his home state of Louisiana.

### CLIFF CROCHET: 'EVERY FISH MATTERS'

Working with the MLFAA in 2022, BPT pro Cliff Crochet hosted the first Every Fish Matters banquet to raise money for stocking F1 largemouth (first-generation offspring of Florida and Northern bass) into Lake Verret and the Atchafalaya Basin in his home state of Louisiana. The event proved to be an extraordinary success, raising \$80,000 in one night.

This spring, 65,000 F1 largemouth were stocked during two community events, the first during a local fishing tournament and the second at Veterans Park, with the entire community invited. Crochet followed up with a second fundraiser this summer, raising money for more stocking in 2024 plus starting a hurricane relief fund for future emergency use.

### VANDAM FOUNDATION AT REDCREST

At REDCREST 2022 on Grand Lake and 2023 on Lake Norman, the Kevin VanDam Foundation made \$5,000 donations to groups supporting F1 largemouth stocking programs at the host fisheries.

The first went to the Oklahoma Wildlife Conservation Foundation. This donation was matched and multiplied several times before REDCREST ended. The program resulted in 93,000

2- to 3-inch F1 largemouth bass being stocked in June 2022, with plans to maintain this stocking schedule for the next 10 years.

The 2023 donation went to a non-profit called NCF1, whose mission is to build stocking programs throughout North Carolina. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission pledged to match the donation three-to-one. It will provide 40,000 F1 fingerlings to be stocked in Norman, Lake Gaston and Jordan Lake. The foundation plans to

make similar donations in Alabama in 2024 and 2025.

As genetics analysis continues to improve our understanding of the potential for largemouth to grow to an advanced size, the MLF FMD will continue to build programs around anglers and fisheries that can benefit from stocking. Ultimately, the most important role of stocking will always be building community and youth engagement, which will benefit more than just today's anglers. ■



The Kevin VanDam Foundation's REDCREST donations have translated into tens of thousands of fingerling stocks.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

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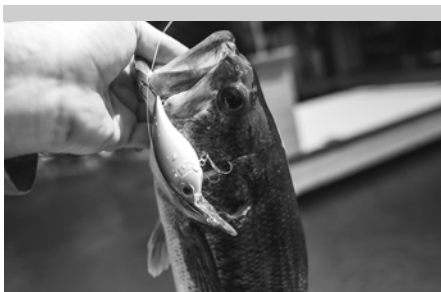
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# BY THE NUMBERS

Breaking down the dramatic 2023 Bally Bet AOY race

The final chapter of the closest Bally Bet Angler of the Year competition in Bass Pro Tour history lived up to its billing. Rookie Matt Becker caught and passed veteran stars Ott Defoe, Jacob Wheeler and Alton Jones Jr. in the points with his 22-pound, 11-ounce limit of smallmouth bass on the final day of Stage Seven, which also earned him the victory at Saginaw Bay.

Becker's title made history; he's the first rookie to win Angler of the Year on a national tour since Shin Fukae in 2004. But it was far from the only compelling storyline of the season. Here's a look at the numbers that tell the story of the 2023 AOY race.

## 0 ANGLERS WHO MADE EVERY KNOCKOUT ROUND

Becker finished the year just 4 points clear of DeFoe and Wheeler and 5 points ahead of Jones. Never in the first four BPT seasons had an angler come within five points of the AOY champion, much less three of them.

One reason no one could create separation at the top of the leaderboard: Everyone missed at least one cut during the regular season. It marked the first time since the inaugural BPT campaign in 2019 that at least one angler hasn't participated in every Knockout Round. A pair achieved the feat in 2022 (Wheeler and Jordan Lee) and 2020 (Lee and DeFoe).

Almost as much as his win at Saginaw Bay, Becker can attribute his title to the fact that his lone hiccup — at Stage One on the Kissimmee Chain — resulted in a 47th-place finish. Wheeler and DeFoe both had worse slip-ups, with Wheeler finishing 77th at Lake Murray and DeFoe 59th at Lake St. Clair.

## 5 CONSECUTIVE TOP-FOUR FINISHES FOR WHEELER

Wheeler's streak of two straight AOY titles might have been snapped, but another strong season further padded his unmatched BPT resume.

Wheeler has now finished fourth or better five years in a row. No other angler has finished among the Top 10 every year. Of course, Wheeler is also the only multi-time winner of the AOY trophy.

That said, there's one angler who is at least on pace to match his perennial prowess. Dakota Ebare finished fifth in the AOY standings in 2023 after a fourth-place campaign as a rookie. Expect Ebare to be on the short list of 2024 favorites.

## 8 REPEAT TOP-10 FINISHERS

While there might be an element of randomness to winning tournaments, the 2023 standings show that's not the case when it comes to Angler of the Year success. Virtually everyone in the Top 10 has been here before.

Excluding Becker, who didn't compete on the Bass Pro Tour prior to this year, eight of the other nine Top 10 anglers had finished there at least once prior. Three — DeFoe, Brent Ehler and Jeff Sprague — have now logged three Top 10 finishes in five seasons. Lee has done so four times.

## 50 SPOTS IMPROVED BY POCHE

While success (or lack thereof) in the points race tends to be sticky, a few anglers rebounded from disappointing 2022 seasons in a major way. Among the most notable surges in the 2023 AOY standings was that of Keith Poche, who leapfrogged from a 67th-place finish a year ago to 17th.

Poche's 50-place improvement was highlighted by a memorable win at Stage Two on Cherokee Lake. Other anglers who finished among the top 20 in 2023 after missing out on REDCREST qualification a year ago: Bradley Roy, who vaulted from 54th place in 2022 to 13th, and Takahiro Omori, who improved from 63rd to 20th. ■





# 2024 SCHEDULE STRENGTH

Bass Pro Tour, Tackle Warehouse Invitationals tournament locations offer diversity, big fish

The late-summer announcement of tournament locations for the 2024 Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Invitationals unveiled a lineup of lakes, reservoirs and rivers that should serve up maximum intrigue when MLF's highest-profile pro events commence competition in 2024.

## 'NEW' AND 'FRESH' ARE THE BUZZWORDS OF 2024

MLF's schedule makers opened wide their virtual Rolodexes and pulled out some alluring locations for the Bass Pro Tour and Invitationals anglers to prepare for in 2024.

Starting with the late-January season opener at Toledo Bend, Louisiana, the Bass Pro Tour will compete on seven fisheries that have never before appeared on a BPT schedule: Toledo Bend; Santee Cooper; Lay Lake for REDCREST 2024; Dale Hollow Lake; Lake Eufaula; Chowan River; James River.

Stage Five on North Carolina's Chowan River system is the wildest of wild cards. There's never been an MLF/FLW event held on this tributary of Albemarle Sound (although local single-day, five-fish team events sometimes take 26 to 28 pounds to win).

Invitationals Stop 2 at West Point Lake in Georgia will represent the first time MLF has brought a tour-level competition to this impoundment of the Chattahoochee River.

## 2024 FULL SCHEDULES

You can find full schedules and tournament-entry information for all MLF circuits - including the Toyota Series Presented by Phoenix Boats; Phoenix Boats Bass Fishing League presented by T-H Marine; Abu Garcia College Fishing presented by YETI and High School Fishing - at MajorLeagueFishing.com. ■



### STAGE ONE TOLEDO BEND

Jan. 30- Feb. 4 | Many, La.  
Host: Toledo Bend Lake Country

### STAGE TWO SANTEE COOPER LAKES

Feb. 20-25 | Clarendon County, S.C.  
Host: Clarendon County Chamber

### REDCREST 2024 LAY LAKE

March 14-17 | Birmingham, Ala.  
Host: Greater Birmingham CVB

### STAGE THREE DALE HOLLOW LAKE

April 9-4 | Byrdstown, Tenn.  
Host: Byrdstown-Pickett County CC

### STAGE FOUR LAKE EUFAULA

April 30-May. 5 | Eufaula, Okla.  
Host: Vision Eufaula

### GENERAL TIRE HEAVY HITTERS KISSIMMEE CHAIN

May 18-23 | Kissimmee, Fla.  
Host: Kissimmee Sports Commission

### STAGE FIVE CHOWAN RIVER

June 4-9 | Edenton, N.C.  
Hosts: Town of Edenton,  
Chowan Co. Tourism Devel. Authority,  
Harbor Towns Cruises

### STAGE SIX JAMES RIVER

June 25-30 | Richmond, Va.  
Host: Richmond Region Tourism

### STAGE SEVEN ST. LAWRENCE RIVER

Aug. 6-11 | Massena, N.Y.  
Host: Town of Massena

### STOP 1 SAM RAYBURN RESERVOIR

Feb. 9-11 | Brookeland, Tx.  
Host: Jasper County Development  
District

### STOP 2 WEST POINT LAKE

March 1-3 | LaGrange, Ga.  
Host: Visit LaGrange

### STOP 3 KENTUCKY LAKE

April 19-21 | Calvert City, Ky.  
Host: Kentucky Lake CVB

### STOP 4 LAKE EUFAULA

May 10-12 | Eufaula, Ala.  
Host: Eufaula Barbour County CC

### STOP 5 LAKE CHAMPLAIN

June 15-17 | Plattsburgh, N.Y.  
Host: City of Plattsburgh,  
Adirondack Coast Visitors Bureau

### STOP 6 DETROIT RIVER

July 26-28 | Trenton, Mich.  
Host: Detroit Sports Commission

PHOTO BY MATT BROWN



# WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

## TV BROADCASTS

Discovery Channel — Saturdays **7-9 a.m. ET**

- Oct. 14: Bass Pro Tour Toro Stage Four Presented by Bass Cat Championship Round @ Lake Guntersville
- Oct. 21: Bass Pro Tour Favorite Fishing Stage Five Presented by ATG by Wrangler Knockout Round @ Cayuga Lake
- Oct. 28: Bass Pro Tour Favorite Fishing Stage Five Presented by ATG by Wrangler Championship Round @ Cayuga Lake
- Nov. 4: Bass Pro Tour General Tire Stage Six Presented by John Deere Utility Vehicles Championship Round @ Lake St. Clair
- Nov. 1: Bass Pro Tour Minn Kota Stage Seven Presented by Suzuki Championship Round @ Saginaw Bay and Saginaw River



CBS Sports — Saturdays **9 a.m. ET**

- Oct. 14: Tackle Warehouse Invationals Epic Baits Stop 3 Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches @ Lake Eufaula
- Oct. 21: Tackle Warehouse Invationals Phoenix Boats Stop 4 Presented by Mystik Lubricants @ Lake of the Ozarks
- Oct. 28: Tackle Warehouse Invationals T-H Marine Stop 5 @ Potomac River
- Nov. 11: Abu Garcia College Fishing 2023 Championship @ Lake Toho
- Nov. 11: Phoenix Boats Bass Fishing League 2023 All-American Presented by T-H Maine @ Lake Hartwell (**10 a.m. ET**)
- Nov. 14: Tackle Warehouse Invationals Mercury Stop 6 Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches @ Mississippi River

CBS Sports — Sunday, Dec. 3 @ **3 p.m./5 p.m ET** (depending on market)

Dec. 3: General Tires Heavy Hitters Presented by Bass Pro Shops Special @ Caney Creek Reservoir and Bussey Brake

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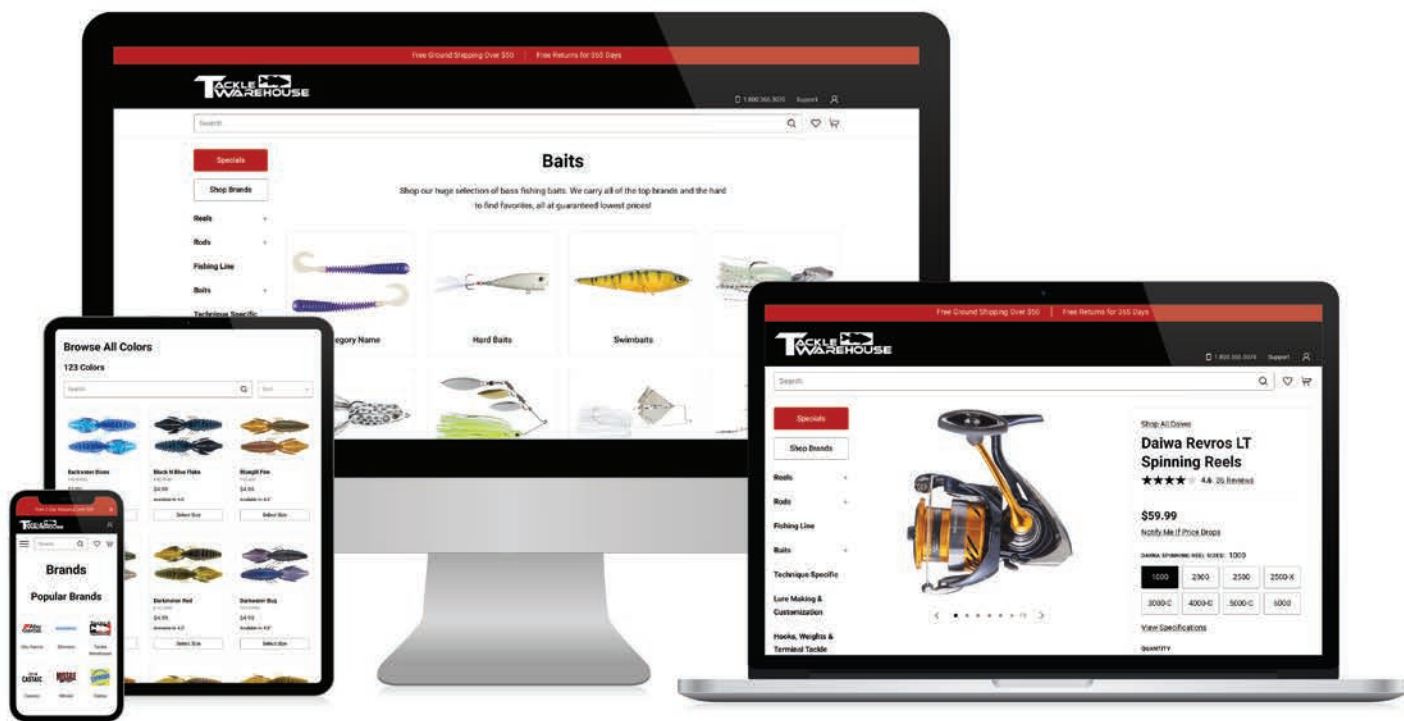
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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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.

## GOD'S GIFT TO BASS FISHING

**A**bout 50 years ago, tournament bass fishing was a fledging avocation trying to gain traction as a professional sport. It wanted to be like pro golf, tennis or auto racing, complete with big events, prizes, stars and audiences. But back in the 1970s and '80s, it was considered more of a hobby than a legitimate way to make a living.

The biggest obstacle was the public perception of fishing

being "just luck." The bass were the slot machines, the rod the handle – keep making casts until a big one bit for a jackpot. Convincing the average viewer that fishing was based more on human ability, skill and strategy – as opposed to luck – was a steep hill to climb. Yes, a few early pioneers turned heads on the luck-versus-skill debate. Recurring wins from icons like Roland Martin, Rick Clunn, Larry Nixon and Denny Brauer

brought merit to the idea that some anglers are better than others. However, unlike other athletes, many "pros" still worked other jobs to afford their tournament fishing hobby. What's more, tournament bass fishing was born in the South and largely based there. Consequently, it was regarded as a good old boys' game.

Then, in the early 1990's, Kevin VanDam walked into the competitive bass fishing arena



VanDam fished as through he had a Mercury-powered rocket attached to his boat. That approach changed the game of tournament bass fishing.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

and turned it on its ear, shattering all preconceived notions that tournament bass fishing was just a bunch of country boys dragging worms and trying to get lucky. The “Kid from Kalamazoo” upended every convention in tournament fishing: First, he was from Michigan. Second, when he launched his full-time touring career, he was 24 years old. And third, he fished “way too fast.”

### THE KID FROM KALAMAZOO

I first met Kevin in 1995. Fishing as a co-angler, I drew him in a BASS Invitational event on the Potomac River. He had already claimed his first BASS Angler of the Year title by that time, so I had heard rumblings about his signature blitzkrieg style.

But when I stepped in his boat, I had no clue as to the rocket ride I was about to take to another fishing universe.

For starters, I had never met an angler in such a hurry. He did everything fast. His overall demeanor was high octane. As we ripped and roared up and down the Potomac, he never fished a place longer than 2 minutes. At the time, I wouldn’t even classify what he was doing as fishing. It looked more like he was trying to pelt isolated laydowns with a spinnerbait. After five or six casts, he would snatch up the trolling motor, zip his life jacket and rip off to the next stop. By the time I dug out my Texas-rigged lizard, made a cast, and drug it halfway to the boat, he would say, “We gotta roll, let’s go.”

After watching him barrage laydowns and dock pilings for 30 minutes, I finally suggested that we might need to, dare I say, slow down. To which he immediately replied, “Dude, we don’t have time to wait for the fish to bite, we need to make them bite or move on. This isn’t a worm-soaking contest, you know.”

At that point, I remember thinking: *Make them bite? Who does this guy think he is? God’s gift to bass fishing?*

Yes. I will fully admit it: I said that to myself about Kevin VanDam while fishing with him in his boat.

Yeah. I know. Not cool. Dear Lord, please forgive me.

That was, of course, before Kevin won his *seven more* Angler of the Year titles and *four* Bassmaster Classics. I had no idea.

As the day progressed on the Potomac, his intensity and frenetic pace only increased. He fished with such tenacity. He blitzed cover with his baits in a way I had never witnessed. It was frenzied and chaotic, yet accurate and precise at the same time. Whenever he crashed the cover just right with his spinnerbait, he was rewarded with yet another chunky, 3 1/2-pound largemouth.

At times, he would think out loud, verbalizing the method to his madness. I can still recall some valuable bits of gold I seized from his conversation that day.

*Tournament fishing is a game of efficiency; the goal is to make more presentations than the other competitors.*

*The more water you cover, the more information you gain.*

*The idea is to make the fish react to your bait – don’t give them time to think about it.*

*Fast lures like spinnerbaits and crankbaits both increase efficiency in covering water and provoke reaction bites.*

At the time, it was an up-tempo, no-huddle offense unprecedented in bass fishing: a unique style that was all his own. No one had directly taught Kevin how to fish this way. I believe he inherently understood that bass have a disposition that can be triggered through reflex. He truly believed he could cover more water than anyone else — and yes, even make bass bite. He proved that with his third-place finish in that Potomac event.

## RAISING THE BAR ON AND OFF THE WATER

Once KVD refined his patented blitzkrieg style in the late 1990s, his utter domination of the sport began. It would extend more than a decade. He always seemed to be two steps ahead of his competitors. In practice, he would make a hot lap around a whole lake in the time it took others to fish a single creek. His ability to process water at high speed was uncanny. He had the foresight to program the weather forecast into his long-term tournament strategies and know where the fish were going to be. By the last day of an event, he would be fishing where the bass had moved to instead of where they had been.

To tune into the Bassmasters TV show and see Kevin take the water on Championship Sunday one pound off the lead was every bit as thrilling as watching Tiger Woods turn onto the back nine one shot back. The closing

ability of both transcendent stars on the final day of their respective competitions was eerily similar.

And like Woods, Kevin elevated his sport to unprecedented heights. His sustained domination proved there was far more to excelling in competitive fishing than just luck and pushed tournament bass fishing into the professional realm. He became a superstar, bringing in new viewership from all demographics and all parts of the world.

In addition to his on-the-water dominance, Kevin is a polished individual who exudes positivity, class and integrity off the water. The sport is extremely blessed to have a star who, to this day, works tirelessly to go above and beyond for sponsors, engage fans and meet a never-ending slew of media requests.

Without a doubt, the GOAT helped put professional bass fishing on the map in so many ways. He propelled the popularity of the sport and paved the way

for many others to have careers in different facets of the fishing industry. From pro anglers themselves to tackle store owners, boat dealers, sale reps, product engineers, tournament organization employees, production companies, reporters, photographers – if your job has to do with bass fishing, chances are Kevin helped make it possible.

Earlier this year, when I heard KVD was retiring from regular season competition, I had to chuckle. The name Kevin VanDam is not exactly synonymous with “retirement.” Retirement is for slowing down, taking it easy, soaking worms. That will never be Kevin. You can bet he’ll still be making hot laps around big outdoor sports shows, filming fishing content, designing better fishing products, educating people on fishing and inspiring us all to become better anglers – and better people.

Indeed, Kevin, you are God’s gift to bass fishing. ■

WITHOUT A DOUBT, **THE GOAT** HELPED PUT PROFESSIONAL BASS FISHING ON THE MAP IN SO MANY WAYS.

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To say that bass lures come in a rainbow of colors is an understatement. But does color REALLY matter?

## COLOR BLINDNESS

When is color important ... and when is it not?

PHOTOS BY BRANDON ROWAN



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If it's creative, national award-winning writer **Sean Ostruszka** is all about it. He combines mad ingenuity with 20 years of knowledge and experience in the fishing business to design lures for professional anglers and top brands in the bass industry.

**S**ome things in life simply don't make much sense. Lure color is definitely one of them.

There are jerkbaits that look like the real thing and others that look like they were painted in my daughter's first-grade art class. Yet, both catch fish. There are 132 colors of the Yamamoto Senko on the market, but most anglers only throw some version of green pumpkin (which, while we're on the subject, doesn't actually look anything like the color of a real green pumpkin).

And while plenty of anglers think any silver or pearl crankbait looks enough like a shad, others get hyper focused on the subtle nuances of their shad patterns, even willing to plunk down \$10, \$20 or more for a custom paint job with scales

that are 0.4 mm in diameter and juuuuuust the right shade of periwinkle blue on the gill plates.

But why? Does it really matter?

Whether you think it does or doesn't, you're right. I mean that in the sense that I know there's not much I can say to sway you off your stance. So, I'm not going to try. I will, however, examine a few different scenarios like the ones above that don't seem to make sense on the surface and try to apply a little logic. Let's start with the latter one.

### CRANKBAITS

If there's a lure that gets custom painted more often than a crankbait, I don't know it, but I get it.

There are few things prettier than a custom-painted crankbait. It could be hanging in the

mouth of an 8-pounder or off the end of my thumb thanks to an 8-ouncer burying a treble hook into me, and either way, it's a gorgeous work of art.

... Which, more often than not, doesn't make one bit of difference. That's not a knock on your favorite painters' talents. But let's think about the reality of the situation.

Do you really think a bass has the time to scrutinize the scale pattern on a crankbait as it burns by at half the speed of sound? Heck no! It's a blur, and the fish's pea-sized brain has a nanosecond to decide whether or not said blur looks edible.

Now, anyone fishing smallmouth on the Great Lakes might take offense to this assertion, as it's clear there's a certain color of the OSP Blitz DR crankbait that seems to get bit quite a lot. Same thing goes for a specific hue of the Megabass S Crank on Lake Murray. You could argue those colors catch more fish because someone caught a big bag on them once and everyone else joined the bandwagon, or perhaps those examples point to another truth about color...

## WATER CLARITY

Ever tried to read the label of your K-Cups to figure out which one is French roast without turning on all the lights in the kitchen? Not exactly an easy task.

Welcome to what a bass deals with all the time.

While we have the benefit of viewing the world through clear air (unless you're someplace like Los Angeles), bass view it through water. And most of the time, it's stained water.

So, thinking back to the coffee example: You're more likely to identify the right coffee pod by the contrast of colors on its top versus the detailed writing on the label, especially in the dark. Bass are no different in stained water. The dirtier the water, the more likely that contrast will win out over detail. However, in clear water, like on the Great Lakes or lakes like Murray, there are definitely times when that extra realism pays off. That's because (I hope you're sitting down) the fish can actually SEE it. The better look bass can get at the lure, the more they can scrutinize it, which leads us to ...

## JERKBAITS, SWIMBAITS AND OTHER SNAILS

Want to drop \$20 on a gorgeous paint job and make it count? Put it on a jerkbait.

Why? Because when a jerkbait is sitting suspended in the face of a bass, it has to hold up to intense scrutiny. That's when that periwinkle-blue gill plate may actually be the thing that convinces the fish to open its maw.

Swimbait is no different — at least when it comes to the large, slow-moving ones. They offer a lot of surface area to scrutinize and are generally fished at a pace that allows bass to get a good look, especially ones that follow the bait for a while. Spring for a bait that looks the part versus a cheaper option. Or try ...

## CUSTOM PAINTING SOFT PLASTICS

Seriously, how is custom painting soft plastics not more of a thing?

We go nuts over custom-painted hard lures, but when it comes to soft plastics, the biggest color "advances"

seem to be adding glitter or laminating two colors together. Even when it comes to soft plastics that are already painted by the manufacturer — frogs, swimbaits, etc. — most still just settle for whatever colors the company decides to release as opposed to thinking up their own custom hues.

Why the discrepancy?

Sure, people dye tails and claws of their soft plastics all the time, but there are numerous options for both airbrush and hand painting that can turn a plain pearl swimbait into a living fish or a frog into something that truly stands out when it comes off a lily pad. Yet, few people think to do it like they would a hard lure.

It doesn't make sense.

Then again, not much about bass fishing colors does. The only two rules I've found that consistently hold true: Whatever color gives you confidence is the right color, and most colors were made to catch fishermen, not fish. ■



A sampling of the crazy quilt of colors that bass may see on a given day.

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Shaw Grigsby went under the knife multiple times during his 40 years on tour. He's had surgeries performed on his back, shoulders, knees, hips and thumbs.

## THE WALKING WOUNDED

*A long touring career can come at a physical cost*

**Mark Davis and other veteran anglers explain why playing through — and preventing — pain is just as important in bass fishing as any other sport.**

*By Mitchell Forde*

**T**he first time Mark Davis arrived at the hospital for surgery, his doctors tried to talk him out of it.

It wasn't that Davis didn't need the procedures. The pain emanating from the Bass Pro Tour veteran's right shoulder and left elbow had gotten so bad that he couldn't wield either casting or spinning gear without discomfort. The problem was Davis attempted to get both limbs repaired at the same time. This being the mid-1990s, before medical records were digitized, the two separate specialists he had seen about each ailment didn't realize until they arrived at the operating room that

Davis had actually booked both for the same day.

The doctors warned Davis that, if he went through with his plan, he'd be without use of both arms for weeks while he recovered. They were right, by the way. Davis remembers feeling "completely helpless" afterward, relying on his wife, Tilly, for everything, even using the restroom.

"I was an invalid, pretty much," he said. "I remember when I woke up, they had me wrapped up like a mummy in a strait jacket. I didn't have use of either arm."

But Davis, at the time less than a third of the way into his Hall of Fame career, felt like he didn't have a choice. If he didn't address both injuries early in the offseason, he might have to miss the start of the following tournament year, and he couldn't afford to do so.

"(The doctors) both walked in and said, 'Hey, we don't need to do this,'" he recalled. "I said, 'Yeah we do. I don't have any choice. We've got to get it

done, and I'll just suffer through it. I've got to get it done and get rehabilitated and get back going before the season cranks up again."

Fast forward more than 20 years, and Davis has put together one of the most decorated careers in tournament bass fishing history. In his 37 seasons on tour, he's notched six wins, including a victory at the 1995 Bassmaster Classic, and three Angler of the Year titles. But to get there, he's had to persevere through an equally impressive litany of injuries. Since those first surgeries on his right shoulder and left elbow, Davis, who will turn 60 around the time this issue arrives in readers' mailboxes, has undergone a second surgery on his right shoulder, another on his left shoulder, a hip replacement and a three-level fusion in his neck.

Davis is proof that a long angling career comes with a physical cost — and that preventing, toughing out and treating injuries is just as much a part of bass fishing as any other sport.

# Doctor's notes on MARK DAVIS

## SPINAL FUSION DISCS C4, C5, C6

Patient underwent a cervical spinal fusion to correct pinched nerves caused by degenerative vertebrae in the neck. A three-level fusion of discs C4, C5 and C6 was necessary to correct the problem and restore function.

## TORN LABRUM REPAIR 2X

The labrum is a thick piece of tissue attached to the shoulder socket that helps keep the ball of the joint in place. The patient required two procedures to repair this section of cartilage in the right shoulder.

## HIP REPLACEMENT

A surgical replacement of the patient's right hip was necessary to ease pain and increase mobility. Decades of standing on the front deck of a boat increased stress and wear on this major joint.

## TORN ROTATOR CUFF REPAIR

The rotator cuff consists of muscles and tendons that hold the shoulder in place. Repetitive motions and overuse can lead to injury. Patient required surgery to repair the left shoulder.

## TORN LIGAMENT

The elbow is a highly complex joint with ligaments susceptible to injury from repeated stress. The patient suffered a ligament tear in the left elbow that required surgical repair.

**“DAVIS IS PROOF  
THAT A LONG  
ANGLING CAREER  
COMES WITH A  
PHYSICAL COST.”**



No pain no gain: Despite chronic pain, Grigsby has maintained a busy tour-level career.

Brent Chapman has committed to a rigorous program to combat fishing injuries.



## THE TOLL OF THE TOUR

Shaw Grigsby can't recall the last time he fished without pain. The Tackle Warehouse Invationals pro estimates it's been 20 years, at least.

Grigsby, who completed his 40th season on tour in 2023, might be the one angler who can rival Davis in terms of injury history. He's undergone two back surgeries, two shoulder surgeries and one each on his knee, thumb and hip. That doesn't include a pair of serious non-injury procedures: a triple bypass in 2004 and an operation to remove cancer from his kidney in 2020.

That list might shock those who don't closely follow the professional circuits, who view fishing as a relaxing pastime. After all, it's not a sport that puts a premium on physical traits like size, strength or speed. Davis has often struggled to explain to those unfamiliar with the sport why he's experienced so many ailments — including some of the doctors treating them.

"People who don't know anything about the sport, they're like, 'Oh man, you fish for a living? I bet that's great,'" Davis said. "I tell those people, I say, 'Yeah, you ought to try it sometime.' They have no idea."

In reality, the cause of most anglers' injuries is no mystery: The hundreds of hours they spend each year casting, being jostled by waves and driving their boats or trucks add up.

"Most athletes go play a game for an hour or two," Bass Pro Tour veteran Brent Chapman explained. "On a tournament day, [we fish] 7 ½ hours. On practice days, it's 12, 14, 15 hours. And then when we're not doing that, we're driving for ridiculous amounts, which is horrible for your body."

Monte Ketchum, a non-surgical sports medicine physician for Andrews Sports Medicine, has treated several BPT pros during the past 10 months. Andrews Sports Medicine partnered with the Major League Fishing Anglers' Association during the 2023 season, allowing Ketchum and fellow physician Daniel Smith to provide on-site consultations and care at two BPT events and treat a handful of anglers at their three Alabama clinic locations. Ketchum said the most common ailment he's observed is inflammation to anglers' shoulders, elbows and wrists due to repetitive use. Several pros, including Chapman, cope with arthritis in their joints.

Over time, the repeated motion can lead to torn muscles, tendons or ligaments. Davis knows that all too well. He's confident that a distinct cast he used to throw light lures on a baitcasting setup is the reason he's torn the labrum in his right shoulder twice. He's also torn his left rotator cuff and a ligament in his left elbow.

"It was a real powerful, underhanded roll cast, and I could cast a light lure and keep it real low to the water — like a little, small jig or little popping

bait that I could cast under these bushes and under these boat docks," Davis said. "It was a hard, a high-velocity cast. ... And when you extend your arm out and then come around and down with it, and you do it abruptly and do it hard and fast, your shoulders aren't made to do that. But here I was doing it day in, day out, and I had to quit casting that way. I just quit. After two surgeries, you're like, 'Yeah, I'm going to change that.'"

Meanwhile, hours spent standing on the front deck can lead to back, hip and knee injuries. Davis and Grigsby have both undergone hip replacements, while Grigsby also had a torn meniscus in his knee surgically repaired. Davis said doctors told him his right hip looked like that of an 80-year-old while his left hip looked like it was 30. He believes that's a result of spending years standing with his right foot on a trolling motor pedal in the days before Spot-Lock.

Fellow BPT pro Terry Scroggins has had both knees replaced within the past three years. While the 55-year-old believes his knee issues predate his fishing career, years of bouncing in waves and bending down to land fish exacerbated the wear on them.

"We do take a beating in the boat, especially when we go up north," Scroggins said. "We get out there, get jarred around over and over and over, and the practice days are so long. They're 14, 15 hours, sometimes longer than that — just however long you want to stay out there. And it does, it pays a toll on you. I don't care if you're 20 years old or 50, over time, it's going to get you."

## PLAYING THROUGH PAIN

Out of all the ailments he's experienced, the one that scared Davis most, that he wasn't sure he could endure, was the least painful.

Davis started the first morning of a 2012 Bassmaster Elite Series event at Oneida Lake dragging a jig offshore. After setting the hook on a sizable smallmouth, he tried to fight the fish, but his fingers wouldn't cooperate. He felt no pain, yet he couldn't get a strong enough grip to turn the handle of his baitcasting reel. The bass eventually threw the jig, and Davis panicked, thoughts of ALS or some other career-threatening disorder creeping into his mind.

"I just was sitting there in the boat, and it dawned on me, something is bad wrong with me, and I don't know what it is," Davis said. "In your mind, you start thinking, oh my gosh, I have Lou Gehrig's Disease. I've got who knows what wrong."

Ultimately, Davis found out he had three degenerative vertebrae in his neck, resulting in pinched nerves, which necessitated another operation. But first, he switched entirely to spinning tackle and finished the tournament (finishing 26th out of 97 competitors), plus fished the MLF Summit Cup on Chautauqua Lake the following week.



Davis' multiple surgeries haven't prevented him from competing at a high level on the Bass Pro Tour.



BPT pro Terry Scroggins had both knees replaced within the past three years.

It wasn't the first time in his career Davis had to adapt his fishing based not only on the conditions and cover but his body. He also used exclusively spinning gear during the 2001 Bassmaster Classic on the Louisiana Delta — a power fishing paradise — due to one of his shoulder injuries.

Davis' experiences might be extreme, but he's far from the only touring pro to grit through injuries even as they impacted his ability to put fish in the boat. Ketchum noted that several of the anglers he's worked with said they've been battling pain for years, and they often don't seek medical help until it becomes unbearable.

"These guys are tough, man," he said. "They're not coming in unless they're just absolutely miserable, and even when it's like that, they can't take the time off, and so they just keep plugging along."

Several anglers pointed out that, even if it doesn't limit them from a technique standpoint, dealing with chronic pain makes it difficult to stay focused, and thus to make good decisions on the water. Chapman credits a stretching and exercise regimen that he adopted following the 2011 season for alleviating his back pain and helping boost him from a 36th-place finish in the season-long standings for the Elite Series to an Angler of the Year title in 2012. Scroggins, who tried to manage his knee pain using cortisone shots for several years, said he's both feeling and fishing better after his surgeries.

"It was just hard getting up and down in the boat, everything was hurting, and you get in rough water, you couldn't stand there like you normally would," he said. "And when you're competing at that high level, when everybody else is so good, you start hurting a little bit like that, your mind's not functioning right, and things just don't work right."

According to Ketchum, there's a simple fix for the issues ailing most anglers: rest. But during the tournament season, that's not an option many are willing to consider. Time on the water is everything to touring pros. And sitting out events not only them costs

potential paychecks in those tournaments but could limit their opportunities the following season. With seven events in the BPT regular season, scoring zero points in one of them makes qualifying for REDCREST difficult and losing a spot on the tour roster a real possibility.

"To stay competitive, you can't miss stuff," Grigsby said. "It's not like a golf tour where the golfer, if he's good, he can participate in X amount and make enough money in those tournaments that he stays qualified. In fishing, you have to fish them all."

## HOW TO AVOID THE OPERATING ROOM

Do the experiences of Davis and Grigsby mean everyone who wants a long career should prepare to become friendly with their local orthopedic surgeon? Thankfully, no. There are things anglers can do to limit their pain and avoid trips to the operating room.

## ***"THE BEST ADVICE I THINK I COULD GIVE A YOUNG ANGLER, OR ANY ANGLER, IS THERE'S SOME MAINTENANCE."***

For one thing, modern technology has made fishing easier on anglers' bodies. In addition to Spot-Lock taking the burden off his right leg, Davis believes the advent of hydraulic steering and longer-handled, lighter rods has reduced wear and tear on anglers' arm joints.

"No one uses a pistol-grip rod anymore, but we used to use them all the time," he said. "I remember cranking all day with a pistol grip. Can you imagine the torque on your wrist — and if it's on your wrist, it's also on your elbow — of doing everything with a little, short-handled rod?"

Exercise science has also come a long way during Davis' career, and he believes young anglers would be wise to take advantage by incorporating some sort of mobility and stretching routine. Ketchum agrees. While medicines and injections can help anglers cope with repetitive-use ailments, the

best thing they can do is try to prevent them by increasing flexibility and building muscles around their joints.

"The key is the preventative side, because we know we're going to get the use during the season," Ketchum said. "If they can do a lot of this rehab and strengthening prior to the season and come in in pretty good shape with it, that's going to greatly decrease their risk of having issues throughout the year."

Chapman is walking proof of that. At one point, he was prescribed pain medication to manage the arthritis in his left shoulder, and his doctor recommended he undergo surgery. Viewing that as a last resort, he instead tried out a daily, 10-to-15-minute exercise routine recommended by his friend Travis Perret, the proprietor of Exercise Therapy of Kansas City. Nearly a decade later, Chapman is still using the regimen, and he's mostly pain free.

"I'm 10 years older, but really I'm more flexible than I was at 39, and knock on wood, I don't have any pain to speak of," Chapman said. "So yeah, it's pretty amazing how just a little, simple routine can make a world of difference."

Davis and Grigsby have incorporated similar regimens in recent years to minimize further wear on their joints. More than any technique tip they've picked up during their combined 77 years on tour, the two veterans advised aspiring anglers to remain diligent about their health. Staying active (it doesn't have to be through traditional workouts, per se; Grigsby said he gets a lot of his physical activity by helping a friend capture nuisance alligators) and incorporating regular exercise routines has helped extend both anglers' careers. They only wish they'd done so sooner.

"The best advice I think I could give a young angler, or any angler, is there's some maintenance," Davis said. "Just like we have to maintain our equipment, but we tend to ignore our bodies. But there certainly is some maintenance we could be doing that, if they know what to do, it could possibly prevent a lot of the stuff that's happened to me." ■

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# 'THERE'S STILL A CHANCE'

## MATT BECKER STAGED A REMARKABLE COMEBACK TO WIN 2023 BALLY BET ANGLER OF THE YEAR

*Bass Pro Tour rookie outlasted two-time reigning AOY Jacob Wheeler in the closest race in league history.*

*By Rob Newell*

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE





Becker celebrates a big smallmouth catch on the first day of competition at Bass Pro Tour Stage Six on Lake St. Clair.

Looking back over his 2023 Bally Bet Angler of the Year-winning season on the Bass Pro Tour, Matt Becker points to a single, pivotal moment. It came not during one of the 24 days and nearly 200 hours he spent on the water competing, but while he sat in a rental house in Michigan.

It was June 27, the second day of qualifying for Group B during Stage Six on Lake St. Clair. Becker had already qualified for the Knockout Round in Group A. But he still found himself glued to SCORETRACKER®, paying particular attention to one name: Dakota Ebare.

Ebare entered the event in second place in the AOY race, 28 points back of leader Ott DeFoe. However, DeFoe had already stumbled in Group A, missing the Knockout Round. His 59th-place finish ensured that his points lead would evaporate entering the final tournament of the season. Now, all eyes were on Ebare, who had a chance to assume the top spot if he turned in a solid finish at St. Clair.

## WHAT IF ... JUST WHAT IF BECKER COULD WIN THE BPT AOY AS A ROOKIE?

"I checked SCORETRACKER® about mid-morning and I saw Dakota was having a tough day," Becker recalled. "For about an hour, I became obsessed with SCORETRACKER®, checking it constantly."

Eventually, Becker realized that his fixation with the live leaderboard wasn't productive. He would be better served preparing his tackle for the Knockout Round.

"I finally put my phone down and went outside to work on tackle," he said. "I decided I wouldn't look at SCORETRACKER® again until lines out."

The next time he checked his phone, he was stunned. Ebare had finished 37th in Group B, putting him in 73rd for the tournament.

"I stared at my phone in disbelief," Becker said. "At that moment, chills

went down my spine and I got goosebumps. I had a feeling like I've never had in six years of fishing professionally. I was processing the fact that the door was now open to possibly win the Bass Pro Tour Angler of the Year as a rookie. I still had a chance."

## PREPPING FOR THE FINAL PUSH

Becker had been in the thick of the Angler of the Year race since his fifth-place finish at Stage Four on Lake Gunterville. But in that moment, it started to feel a lot more real. He couldn't sleep that night, different points scenarios racing through his brain.

"Suddenly my whole perspective shifted," he said. "AOY went from just being in the back of my mind to front of my mind."

Becker knew he had a few positives working for him. For one, even before arriving on the Bass Pro Tour, he'd proven his consistency in earning points. In 2021, he won Angler of the Year for the Northern Division of the Toyota Series. Becker also won the Rookie of the Year race on the 2018

# A FRAME-BY-FRAME SNAPSHOT OF MATT BECKER'S ANGLER OF THE YEAR-WINNING SEASON, AS TOLD BY BECKER

## STAGE ONE - KISSIMMEE CHAIN OF LAKES

48th place/AOY=48th

Toho was actually the low point in my season. I caught them pretty well the first day and was in ninth place. The next day I went practicing in a different area, thinking I could catch 12 pounds and make the cut, no problem. That was a bad mistake. I only caught nine pounds and missed the cut. I learned right then, never get too cocky from the first day's catch and think, "I can make the Knockout Round just practicing." The rest of the year, I made sure I was in the cut before I went practicing. With a 48th-place finish, I figured I had already blown my AOY chances for the year.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

## STAGE TWO - DOUGLAS AND CHEROKEE LAKES

6th place/AOY=23rd

In 2022, we moved to Tennessee, near Watts Bar, to be in the Tennessee Valley. TVA lakes were my nemesis, so I moved down there to learn TVA bass better, from the ledges in the summertime on Chickamauga and Guntersville to Damiki rigging in the winter on Dale Hollow, Douglas and Cherokee. My Top 10 at Cherokee was a result of that homework. I used a jerkbait and flat-side crankbait to get to the Knockout Round and then LiveScoped them at Cherokee with a jerkbait and a Damiki Rig.

## STAGE THREE - LAKE MURRAY

23rd place/AOY=14th

I don't know why, but I love herring fisheries. Lanier, Smith Lake, Clarks Hill, Murray - if it's got blueback herring in it, I love it. I guess because herring are so nomadic and in a way that reminds me of Great Lakes smallmouth fishing: The fish are always on the move. Plus, I had a lot of confidence going into Murray due to my Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit win there in 2021. The Bass Pro Tour was three weeks earlier, but the fish seemed to set up on the same places to ambush herring in the prespawn as they did in the postspawn. Once I realized that, I felt comfortable there all week.



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

## STAGE FOUR - LAKE GUNTERSVILLE

5th place/AOY=5th

I was most proud of this finish out of all of them this year. I've never felt like I understood Guntersville, and it's one of the reasons we moved south. The Bass Pro Tour was the same week as the Tackle Warehouse event there last year, and I learned a lot during that event. Before the tournament started, I spent lot of time on Chickamauga keeping up with the postspawn fish as they moved out offshore and experimenting with different ledge techniques, which all paid off at Guntersville.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

## STAGE FIVE - CAYUGA LAKE

6th place/AOY=3rd

Once the Tour headed back up north to smallmouth country, I was back to the way I grew up fishing. I've spent so many hours looking for smallmouth on beds, it's second nature to my eyes to see what kind of terrain they like to spawn around. We had horrible conditions for looking during practice for that event. But I found enough fish to get me through the first day, and I started looking for new fish from that point on. Out of the four days I fished - basically 32 hours - I spent 20 hours just practicing and looking for new fish.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

## STAGE SIX - LAKE ST. CLAIR

17th place/AOY=4th

St. Clair is where AOY became a real possibility to me. Up until then, Ott DeFoe and Dakota Ebare had such big leads, it was kind of an afterthought. But after they left the door open at St. Clair, my whole perspective and focus changed toward Angler of the Year. As long as I had a chance, I was all in for winning it.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

## STAGE SEVEN - SAGINAW BAY

1st place/AOY=1st

Given the fact that Alton Jones Jr., Jacob Wheeler and Ott were in the AOY race right up until the last day, I would never say I knew I could win it. They are all great anglers and they are closers. But as long as there was a chance to win it, I wasn't backing down at all. I kept getting those little goosebump feelings that I could win it. Every time one of those happened, it pushed me harder. As long as I could still see light in the crack where the door was left open, I was gunning for it. Everything just went my way the last day. The wind, the weather, finally figuring out those big smallmouth that were roaming on flat sand - it all came together just in time to finally bust through the door that had been left open.

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit, finishing 18th overall. Secondly, the final event of the season, Stage Seven, would bring the BPT field to Saginaw Bay, which figured to align with his Great Lakes smallmouth wheelhouse.

What if ... just what if Becker could win the BPT AOY as a rookie?

He knew he had to do everything in his power to turn the possibility into a reality.

"It immediately changed my plans for the rest of the season," he said. "Championship Day on St. Clair was the last day of pre-practice for Saginaw. If I did not make the Championship Round, I planned to drive up to Saginaw on that last day before cut-off and get a few more hours of scouting in."

He also planned to go to Alpena, Michigan, a few days prior to the start of Stage Seven and fish Lake Huron, outside the Stage Seven playing field, to get some extra time on the water with Huron smallmouth.

Becker finished 17th at St. Clair and made the haul to Saginaw the next day. In retrospect, the journey proved fruitful.

"I had pre-practiced Saginaw back in May and spent most of my time on the northwest side of the bay," he said. "I didn't really find anything that great. So when I came back for the final day of pre-practice, I spent all my time in the Oak Point area on the east side, which paid off."

By the end of that day, not only had Becker added to his arsenal of spots for Saginaw Bay, he knew exactly where he stood in the AOY race. Alton Jones Jr. ascended to the top spot, followed by Jacob Wheeler, DeFoe and Becker. Just 10 points separated the four anglers with one event left.

## A CLUTCH ADJUSTMENT

It should come as no surprise that Becker, who grew up frequenting the waters of Lake Erie, figured targeting smallmouth represented his best chance at erasing his deficit at Saginaw Bay. He weighted his practice heavily towards brown fish, with just a couple of hours dedicated to largemouth.

Returning to Oak Point, he found a group of smallmouth during practice and started the tournament there. Strong northeast winds gusted up to



A Top-10 finish at Stage Four on Lake Gunterville put Becker in real contention for the AOY trophy.

PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

20 mph during his first day on the water, making the fishing difficult. He scratched out a five-fish limit of 12 pounds, 13 ounces, which put him 26th in Group B.

He returned to the water with an entirely new strategy. Becker spent his second day of the event fishing exclusively for largemouth. While often perceived as a smallmouth guru, his moxie as a largemouth angler may be the thread that earned him the AOY trophy.

Becker figured he needed 15 pounds to make the Knockout Round, and green fish represented the most prudent way to get there. But in order to commit to largemouth, Becker had to take extreme measures.

"The night before my second qualifying day, I removed all the smallmouth rods out of my boat," he said. "I did not want to even have that temptation with me. I took just flipping sticks and swim jig rods – it was largemouth or bust."

At first, Becker's choice looked to be a good one. In the first hour he caught about 14 pounds and zipped up the

leaderboard. Most of his largemouth came on a swim jig in shallow reeds or by punching thicker, deeper reed heads.

"It seemed like the right call," he said. "But when I hit a dry spell for upgrades in Period Two, I began thinking about smallmouth, which is exactly why I took all my smallmouth tackle out of the boat. I had committed to largemouth. There was no turning back."

During Period Two, Becker couldn't produce any upgrades, and he steadily drifted down SCORETRACKER®. By 3 p.m., he'd fallen to the dreaded 20th place — right on the Toro Cut Line.

"I could feel the tension building," Becker recalled. "I had to make that Knockout Round to keep my AOY hopes alive. Things were looking grim. I was moving around, trying new places; my smallest fish was a 2-12."

With less than an hour to fish, his need for an upgrade was answered with a 3-pound, 3-ounce bass that bumped him up to 14th place. He would finish the day in 19th, 10 ounces clear of the cut.

Becker's mastery of offshore ledge fishing for largemouth put him in position to contend for the title with his specialty: Great Lakes smallmouth.

PHOTO BY GABRIEL DIXON



"That's when I knew I had made the Knockout Round," Becker said. "I literally laid down on the deck to catch my breath and felt the same chill and goose bumps I had at St. Clair. All I could think was, 'I still have a chance.'"

## DOWN THE HOME STRETCH

Becker advanced, but so did the rest of the AOY contenders: Jones Jr., DeFoe and Wheeler. With weights zeroing, the Knockout and Championship Rounds set up as the final two laps to the AOY checkers.

"Of those in contention for AOY, I was the fourth man down," Becker said. "The Knockout Round was the opportunity to make up ground. In my mind, smallmouth were the only way to do it. Largemouth let me be conservative and stay in the game. But now it was time to take risks and fish new water to find bigger smallmouth."

With that in mind, Becker swapped tackle again. This time all the largemouth gear came out of the boat and the smallmouth spinning rods, rigged mostly with drop shots, went back in. Again, he didn't want to be tempted by another species.

"I had a score to settle with the bigger smallmouth around the Charity Islands," he explained. "I spent time out there in practice and only caught one 4-pounder. I knew there had to be more out there, so I planned to spend the Knockout Round dedicating myself to finding them."

Becker had perfect weather on his side for the smallmouth hunt. Light winds and sunny skies allowed for extreme efficiency in terms of running around, trying different spots and having stable sonar signals.

Despite the premium conditions, Becker got off to a slow start, catching just three fish in the first period. But he started to realize something interesting about the Saginaw Bay smallmouth.

"I kept looking for them on rocks or breaks, something with steep contour change," Becker says. "That's pretty typical for Great Lakes smallmouth. In Erie, smallmouth relate to boulders and steep breaks on points or humps. I found that kind of stuff around the Charity Islands that looked perfect, but there were no fish on them."

Using Garmin LiveScope, Becker discovered the smallmouth seemed to prefer roaming around coverless bottom.

"I finally quit trying to force the object-oriented stuff and started scoping nothing-looking flats in 15 to 20 feet of water," he recalled. "The scenario was more like smallmouth in an inland lake like Cherokee or Douglas, or even St. Clair, where they just meander around on flat sand."

Once that clicked, Becker began picking off smallmouth that were cruising the bottom in pairs or triples.

"I was scoping along a slow-tapering point that ran out into the lake about a half a mile," he said. "It was basically just a long, flat sand point with nothing on it."

Around noon, Becker hooked into a 4-2 smallmouth that had a school of big ones behind it. When he saw the school, he got goosebumps again. The problem, however, would be keeping track of them. The nomadic pod would not lock down or relate to anything.

"I don't know if it was because these were resident fish just roaming or if smallmouth on Huron are more roamers by nature, or maybe both, but

I could not contact the school again," Becker explained. "I think I might have I hit them one more time at the end of the day because I caught a 4-15, which really boosted my confidence in the area."

Becker ended the Knockout Round in fifth place with 17-14, which put him 3-10 behind Kevin VanDam's lead going into the final day.

## HURRICANE MATT MAKES LANDFALL

The final Championship Round of the 2023 season turned into one for the history books, chock full of intertwined storylines. VanDam entered the last day of his last regular season tournament in the lead. Close behind him, the key AOY players - Wheeler, DeFoe and Becker - sat third, fourth and fifth, respectively. At that point, Wheeler held a virtual four-point lead over Becker and DeFoe, who were tied.

The scene seemed to be set for a storybook season ending: VanDam winning the last event of his unprecedented career while Wheeler claimed his third consecutive AOY crown, arguably the two biggest current stars of the sport soaking up the limelight. What the guidance models didn't factor in, however, was the increase in Becker's intensity. Being overshadowed further fueled him.

"Yeah, that motivated me a little bit," Becker admitted. "All eyes were on VanDam and Wheeler; I knew I was the dark horse in that scenario. I needed to beat Wheeler by four spots on the last day to win the AOY. In order to do that, I would basically have to win the tournament to give myself the best shot. It was theirs to lose, and that took a lot of pressure off me. I wasn't

*Kevin VanDam*  
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the one with a target on my back.”

In addition, Becker liked the forecast for big winds out of the north.

“I love fishing for smallmouth in big water and big waves,” he said “If I have a wheelhouse, that’s it. As crazy as it sounds, that’s my idea of fun. It is an adverse condition that doesn’t suit everyone, which is one of the reasons I like it.”

Championship Day started with sunny skies, brisk winds and a chance of rain in the afternoon. Most of the final day field got off to a decent start. But Becker stumbled out of the gates, catching just two fish for 5-2 in the opening period. With just two periods left in the season and Becker sitting in last place, his chances of winning either AOY or the tournament appeared slim.

“All I kept thinking is, I still have a chance,” he said. “After burning the first period in the Oak (Point) area, I knew that place was done. So I made my move out to the big water around the Charity Islands to try to reconnect with those bigger fish from the Knockout Round.”

Around 11 a.m., the wind began to pick up into the 20-mph range, and dark rain clouds loomed. The Charity Islands were already awash in 3-footers, the swells only increasing. The perfect storm was brewing.

“It was about to get ugly, just the way I like it,” Becker said. “The wind was picking up, the waves were getting bigger, the rain had started. It was perfect out there.”

Becker found some momentum with a 3-12 smallmouth. Minutes later, he caught a 4-14. And then he caught fire. By noon he had rocketed up the leaderboard from 10th place to first with the day’s heaviest catch of 17-8.

The waves kept getting bigger, now crashing over his bow. The “chance of rain” had turned into an all-day deluge. Hurricane Matt was making landfall,

The final three tournaments of the season put Becker on smallmouth waters, where he made up 44 1/2 points in the AOY race.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



## **“I GUESS THAT’S WHY THE BIG WATER, BIG WAVES AND BIG SMALLMOUTH ARE MY HAPPY PLACE.”**

washing out the other nine competitors. None of the forecasts had predicted this. As the wind, waves and rain raged on, so did Becker’s catches. He caught three more 4-pounders and delivered his final blow with a 5-5 smallmouth, the biggest bass of the day.

“I had reached my happy place,” Becker recalled. “Big water. Big waves. Big smallmouth. I just love it. When I’m in that zone, I just feel so comfortable. Everything just clicks.”

All tallied, Becker landed 22-11 in a three-hour period, the biggest limit of the tournament. He’d done all he needed to win the event. Now the AOY race was in Wheeler’s hands. If Wheeler could finish the tournament in fourth or higher, he would win his third AOY in a row. But as the stormy, wet afternoon wore on, Wheeler began to lose his grip on the trophy, slipping to eighth place.

“I just figured Wheeler had something in his back pocket for the third period,” Becker said. “He was only like 1 pound, 5 ounces off of fourth place. If he caught a high three, he would catch me. With each passing minute, I kept

telling myself, ‘I still have a chance.’”

Becker continued repeating his motto right up until the official 4 p.m. lines out call. At that moment, his chance became reality, as his boat official informed him he’d won both Stage Seven and Angler of the Year. He’d take home two trophies and \$200,000 in winnings, becoming just the fourth person on earth to own a Bass Pro Tour AOY trophy. And he’d done it as a rookie.

“After I won, I didn’t want to go back in,” Becker laughed. “I was right where I wanted to be; out in the wind and waves and pelting rain – in my happy place.”

Becker sat on his front deck, rain still pouring on him, in disbelief. Then the tears came. This perfect storm, he realized, had been years

in the making; starting when he fished alongside his father on Lake Erie, picking up steam when he advanced to the Bass Pro Tour, forming on the horizon when he realized he had a legitimate chance to win the trophy he coveted more than any other and culminating with him running down two legends – VanDam for the tournament win, Wheeler for AOY – to announce his arrival to the top of the tournament game.

“All of the memories of the hard times, sacrifices and the hours and hours spent alone out on the water chasing this dream just came flooding back to me,” Becker said.

“I remembered winning my first Toyota Series at 1000 Islands in 2017 in weather similar to this. I ran way out into Ontario in huge waves on the final day and caught a 25-pound limit to come from behind and win that one. Without the winnings from that tournament, I would have never been able to turn pro and get to this point in my career. I guess that’s why the big water, big waves and big smallmouth are my happy place.” ■

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# A RETURN TO THE MOUNTAINTOP

Renewed conviction and relentless positivity helped **RON NELSON** join an elite list of multi-time AOY winners

By Mitchell Forde

**R**on Nelson could taste it. Nelson had taken the water on the third and final day of the Tackle Warehouse Invationals event at Lake Eufaula in Oklahoma with a 4-pound lead over his nearest pursuer, and in the first five hours or so of competition, he'd boated another solid limit. The only thing standing between him and his first national win, he believed, was one or two more big bites.

Then he got the news that completely shattered his outlook. Tournament officials informed Nelson that he'd caught four of his five keepers in an area marked off limits to competitors. He'd have to throw those fish back.

The perpetually positive Nelson made it clear that he's long since moved past the frustration he felt in that moment. But he did pinpoint the instance as the most daunting adversity he's faced on the water.

"I would say that was probably the toughest, mentally, point of my career," Nelson said. "As far as like, hey, you've got a 4-pound lead, you've worked hard for this, you've got a real shot to take home a title, and then it doesn't happen."

That was also the day that, more than any other, the Michigan pro believes won him the inaugural Invationals Angler of the Year title.

Forced to scramble with less than half the fishing day remaining – on a lake he'd never competed on before and where his mobility was limited by 4-to-5-foot waves, no

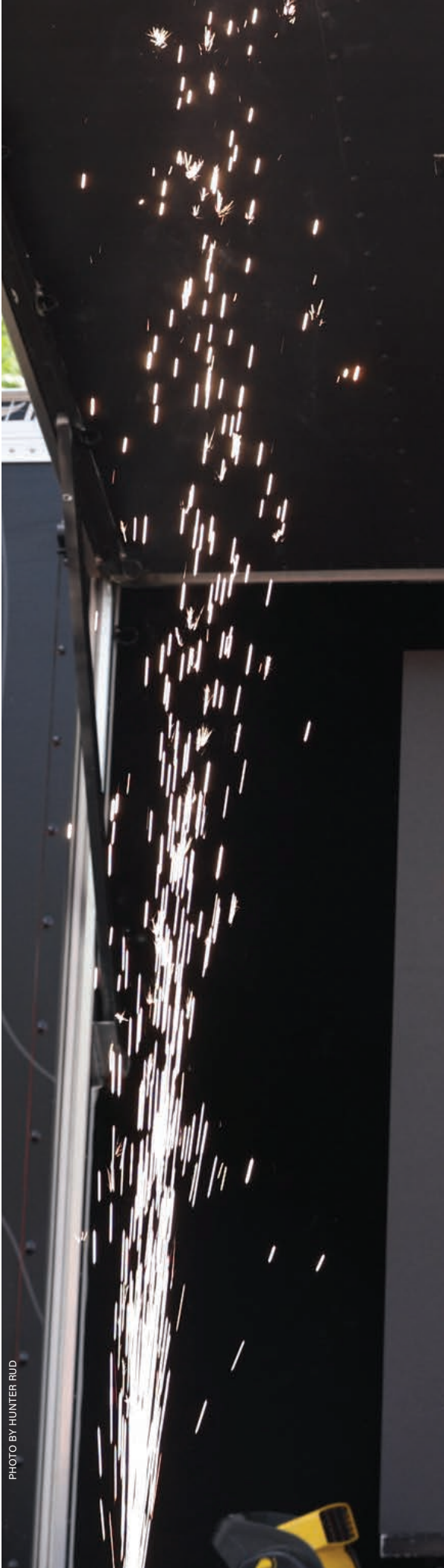
less – Nelson thought for the briefest of moments about heading back to the ramp, calling it a day. Instead, he found the closest bank that looked good to him and "just went fishing." He scratched out a five-fish limit that weighed 11 pounds, 14 ounces.

While that wasn't enough to maintain his lead, it salvaged a third-place finish. Had he quit or let the mishap derail him and failed to catch another keeper, he would have fallen to 22nd in the event and finished second to Michael Neal in the season-long points standings.

"The easy way out would have been to have just a big fit, have a meltdown, put the boat on the trailer and go home," Nelson said. "And my mindset was, no, I'll deal with adversity, and I'll figure a way out to go forward and give it my best."

Nelson points to that mindset, one of relentless positivity and conviction, as the primary reason he was able to author another dominant season. He logged top-25 finishes in five of six Invationals events, placing among the top five three times. His Angler of the Year victory marked his second on a national tour, as he also won the 2020 title on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit. That puts his name alongside an elite list of pros who have won AOY multiple times on the tour, which has evolved from the FLW Tour to the Pro Circuit to the Invationals through the years: David Dudley, Andy Morgan, Bryan Thrift, Clark Wendlandt, Jay Yelas, Neal and now Nelson.

PHOTO BY HUNTER RUD





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### LEADERBOARD

1	T. MONSOOR	45-14
2	C. LAUFENBERG	44-7
3	A. DAVIS	42-5
4	J. RITTER	41-1
5	J. COOPER	40-1
6	K. RUH	40-1
7	J. HIRT	40-4
8	H. LITCHFIELD	40-0
9	M. MCCLELLAND	39-12
10	G. BUCK	39-9

TOYOTA



YETI

POLARIS

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## A WINNING MINDSET

Ask Richard Lowitzki or John Voyles, Nelson's roommates on the road during the 2023 season, what makes him so consistently successful, and neither can quite put his finger on it. Sure, he's an exceptional sight fisherman. If there's one technique Nelson is known for, that would be it. All three of his Toyota Series wins came primarily by looking at bedding fish, and he sight-fished his way to a fifth-place finish at Lake of the Ozarks this year.

But nine Top 10s and two AOY titles in five years on the national tour prove that Nelson's arsenal is well-rounded. No matter the time of year, fishery or species, he flat catches bass.

"If I knew what it was, I would try to duplicate it," said Voyles. "Some guys just have a nose for it and can smell the fish."

The one trait of Nelson's that stands out most to Lowitzki is his confidence. He likened Nelson to another repeat AOY winner, Dudley, in that regard.

"I remember early on, David Dudley would say to me, 'Rich, why do you think David Dudley can go into a creek behind four or five other anglers and catch fish?'" Lowitzki said. "I said, 'Well I don't know, David Dudley, you tell me.' And he said, 'Because I'm David Dudley, and I believe I can.'"

"I believe there's something to that, because that is how Ron thinks. Believe me, when Ron goes out, he knows he's going to catch 'em. He just knows."

That confidence shouldn't be conflated with cockiness. Even after his most recent AOY triumph, Nelson said, "I don't

think I'm a good fisherman." But he attributes the upbeat attitude that he so prides himself on for his conviction on the water. During his 18 years on tour, Lowitzki said he's never roomed with someone quite as earnestly positive as Nelson. At times, it can almost seem phony – but only if you don't know him.

"I would come in and I'd say, 'Man, I hope I can catch 10, 11 pounds,'" Lowitzki said. "And he would look at me, and he goes, 'You're going to win the tournament, Rich.' That's what he would say to me. And I would look at him, and I'd think, you know what? He really means that. Because in his mind, that's what you have to think. ... He would just be that guy that, if there was rain outside, he would find sunshine. He would make you think that it's not raining out there."

## LIVING UP TO A LOFTY GOAL

Nelson's optimistic disposition has long helped him on the water, especially when the fishing gets tough. But he clarified that staying positive in the face of adversity takes conscious effort.

After winning the AOY title in 2020, a hint of complacency crept into Nelson's mindset. In his words, "my heart wasn't in the sport." Sure, he wanted to do well at each event and earn paychecks, but he wasn't fighting for every ounce with quite the same tenacity he had during his first two years on tour. So, entering the 2023 season, he identified a single goal: win Angler of the Year. Knowing that every point mattered toward achieving that objective gave him extra fuel to push past whatever obstacle he encountered.



**"SOME GUYS JUST HAVE A NOSE FOR IT AND CAN SMELL THE FISH."**

— John Voyles

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJIMA

Nelson shows off one of the 85 keeper bass he caught en route to winning the 2023 Invationals Angler of the Year crown.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

"I think you have to have that mindset, that determination already established before you start the season," Nelson said. "Like, you can't get mentally bogged down, you can't mentally give up, or lay up for that matter. You have to have that mental desire or that predetermined idea, like, I'm gonna fight, I'm gonna fight, I'm gonna fight, and I'm gonna somehow catch the right fish."

The bad break on Lake Eufaula was far from the only adversity Nelson faced across his 17 days on the water in 2023. The event prior, at Clarks Hill, he told Lowitzki during practice that he'd found the fish to win. But when he arrived at the spot on the first morning of competition, he found a local boat sitting on it, its anglers tossing the bass they caught into a cooler. The boat stayed there all day. The spot didn't replenish until two days later, when Nelson sacked up 22-13 to vault from 23rd place to fourth.

Nelson pulled off a similar Day 3 rally at the Potomac River. After narrowly making the cut, he put together his best bag of the tournament, moving from 45th to 25th. Those two final-day surges would loom large, as Nelson edged Neal by 13 points in the final standings. Nelson, of course, chalks them up to his attitude.

"You've got to be mentally all in and have a certain tenacity to you, or a certain not-give-up type of mentality," Nelson said. "Because all it takes is one cast to take you from 10th place to 30th place."

**A DRAMATIC FINISH ... THAT NELSON NEVER SAW**

The one Championship Day Nelson had to watch from shore came at the final event of the season, on the Mississippi River. Nelson's 65th-place finish left him frustrated. Had he landed every fish he hooked, he thinks he would have not only slammed the door on the AOY race but had a legitimate chance to win the event.



Nelson prided himself on his ability to overcome adversity this season.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA

But as badly as Nelson wanted to hoist the AOY trophy, he didn't spend the last day of the season glued to the live stream. He didn't even find out about the dramatic final hour – which saw each of the top five finishers in the event, plus a few other anglers, nearly miss weigh in due to barge traffic in a lock – until Voyles called him. At the time, it seemed a real possibility that, should the group arrive late and fall to the bottom of the standings, it would push Neal above Nelson in the points. Nelson never gave that possibility much thought.

"I'm a Christian, and I believe everything comes from the Lord above, and everything I do belongs to Him," Nelson explained. "So if I'm supposed to take home that title, then I'm going to take that title home, and I'm okay with it. And if I'm supposed to show up and shake Michael's hand and him take it home to his family, then I'm okay with it. So I didn't even watch any of the coverage at all."

That's the other side of Nelson's personality that Lowitzki believes sets him apart. On the water, he's as intense as anyone. But at the end of a day or a tournament, he doesn't let things linger. His mind doesn't get muddled with what-ifs or worries about what other anglers are doing. He's mastered the oft-repeated fishing axiom of controlling what he can control and not worrying about the rest.

"He does not allow outside interference to get in his mind," Lowitzki said. "He does a lot of homework, no doubt, a lot of research. But he's absolutely not one of these guys that will call people and say, 'Hey, have you ever fished Clarks Hill? What's going on?'"

## READY FOR THE NEXT STEP

In addition to his trophy, Nelson's stellar season earned him a spot in REDCREST 2024 and a promotion to the Bass Pro Tour. For many pros, it might seem like a no-brainer to

make the jump to the BPT with its increased exposure for sponsors. But Nelson took a couple months after the season to mull his options. He'd said no to the Bass Pro Tour once before, following his 2020 AOY win.

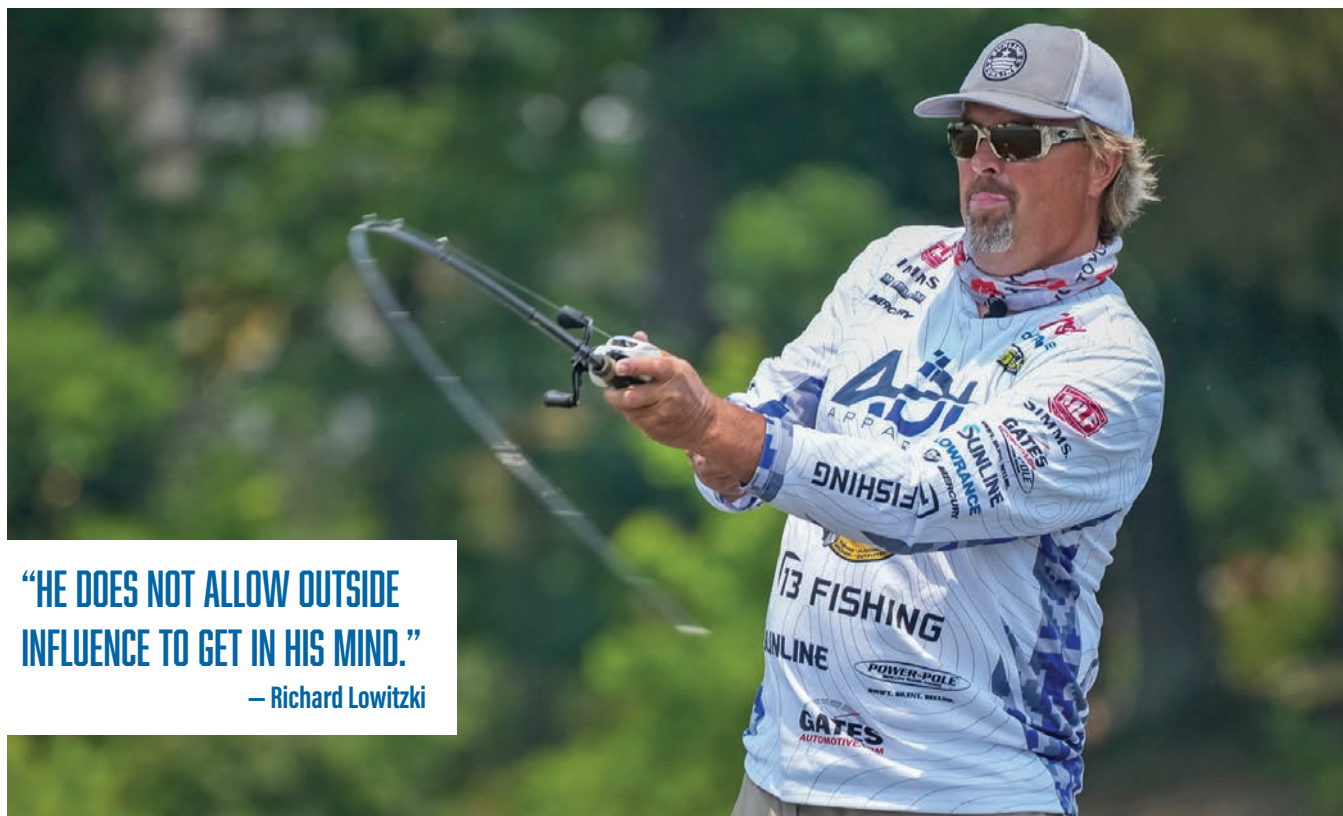
Like many of his peers, when Lowitzki heard that Nelson still wasn't sold on joining the BPT this time around, he was incredulous. But the more he thought about it, Lowitzki realized that's perfectly Nelson. He truly doesn't care what other people think, and he believes that, wherever he decides to fish, he's going to catch 'em well enough to earn a living.

"He believes in himself so much that he knows that if he doesn't want to fish next year on the BPT, he'll be able to fish again the following year," Lowitzki said. "He doesn't care about celebrity-ism."

This time, however, Nelson has decided to take the leap; he's committed to fishing the Bass Pro Tour in 2024. The timing is better for him and his wife than it was three years ago, and he believes the five-fish-limit format – which the BPT adopted in 2023 – suits his style better than every fish counts.

After all, Nelson isn't going to be happy just to have a spot on the top circuit. His goals will be just as lofty. He believes he'll be better equipped to achieve them thanks to his experiences this year – the not-so-fun ones, in particular. He proved that, even when things didn't break his way, he could overcome any adversity by staying true to his positive, persistent mindset.

"I think that day on Eufaula toughened my skin up a lot," Nelson said. "It definitely solidified my character. ... A great angler, if you're fully committed with your full heart into what you're doing, when you get jostled, you feel it. You bleed. And so I just felt like it'll make me a much better angler this next year and going forward, because I'm like, hey, I can handle this." ■



**"HE DOES NOT ALLOW OUTSIDE INFLUENCE TO GET IN HIS MIND."**

— Richard Lowitzki

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJIMA



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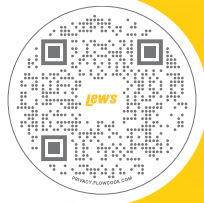


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# STAYING POWER



**HOT BAITS COME AND GO, BUT THE VIBRATING JIG CHANGED THE GAME**

*Nearly 20 years after its arrival on the national tournament scene, the ChatterBait and its offspring remain as effective as ever*

By Mike Pehanich  
PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

It's hard to keep a secret in the bass fishing game.

But once Bryan Thrift saw what a funny-looking jig with a hexagonal blade attached to its head could do during the 2005 season, he had to try. Despite winning back-to-back Stren Series events as a co-angler with the bait, Thrift managed to keep it under wraps, at least temporarily.

"From the first cast I made with it, I could tell the ChatterBait was unique," Thrift reflects today. "At that point, it was up to me to figure out the situations it would excel best in."

Figure it out, he did. But after his first tournament as a pro the following January, the jig — the vibrating jig, that is — was up.

Thrift bagged 22 pounds, 7 ounces of bass on the final day to win that Toyota Series event on Florida's Lake Okeechobee. Two of his five keepers topped 8 pounds. The 3/8-ounce ChatterBait he used to fool them — invented by Ron Davis and made by Rad Lures in Greenwood, South Carolina — could no longer be kept a secret.

Thrift was reluctant to show the world he had an ace up his sleeve. But his success — and pleading from the struggling lure makers — forced the hand of the young pro. Word of the hot new bait was out.

The rest is history.

Orders poured in at a rate that Davis' fledgling company couldn't meet. In stepped Z-Man Fishing Products, a company Davis and the Rad Lures team had met at the 2005 Bassmaster Classic in Pittsburgh.

"We were a small operation run by five people and behind 60,000 pieces on our orders when we sold to Z-Man," recalls Davis, who was grateful for the rescue. "When Z-Man made its offer, we really had no choice."

Since Thrift revealed it to the bass fishing world, the ChatterBait has created a whole new lure category. It has won dozens of tournaments, earned pro anglers millions of



Bryan Thrift was one of the first pro anglers to see firsthand the big bass allure of the vibrating jig.

PHOTO BY M.L.F.

THE Z-MAN CHATTERBAIT CFL IS AN UNDER-THE-RADAR CHATTERBAIT VARIATION DESIGNED TO STAY DOWN EVEN WHEN BURNED DEEP.



PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

dollars and spawned countless derivatives and imitations. Today, the vibrating, or bladed, jig has become a staple in just about every bass fisherman's arsenal.

"Nearly every top angler on the pro circuits has a vibrating jig tied on a rod on his deck almost every day of the year," says Brett Hite, who has ridden a bladed jig to an estimated \$600,000 in tournament winnings in his career. "It catches fish. And bigger ones, too!"

But what is it about the vibrating jig that has given it the prominence and staying power of no bait type since the plastic worm? A few of the pros who have helped expand the category explained the fish-catching power and versatility of the lure.

## GAME CHANGER

Most anglers agree that bass seem to become conditioned to baits they see frequently over time. Catch rates drop, often dramatically. Not so much with these jigs.

Davis points to the ChatterBait's "unusual vibration," a characteristic he sought to capture more than a decade before his lure reached the marketplace, as the reason. On fishing outings with his son at the Lake Wiley dam, Davis noted a frequent occurrence: bass attacking a sunfish that struggled frantically at the end of the boy's line. Bass, he concluded, were clearly attracted to a prey species in distress.

An inveterate tinkerer, Davis challenged himself to create a lure that would simulate the vibration of struggling prey and trigger that predatory instinct. He pondered ideas and made prototypes. A model with a blade that swung right and left, clacking against a jighead, showed promise.

The effectiveness of the bait rested on a simple dynamic: a blade that produced intense vibration within a short unit of "pull," like how a struggling baitfish might kick its tail frantically while making minimal forward movement.

"He probably designed 20-plus prototypes over a 10-to-15-year period," says Ron Anthony Davis, the creator's son and Rad Lures founder, who, like his dad (James Ronald Davis) also goes by Ron. "Once he got the hole placement of the blades correct, the material correct, the thickness and hardness of the material correct, the distance between the blade and the head correct, we had that heavy head banging and making noise and creating a lot of vibration. And the bait hunted. Fish would miss and come back to hit it two, three, five times. We just knew we had something special. Clear water, dirty water, cold water, warm water, prespawn, ... It didn't matter."



## ONE TOOL, MANY USES

For a brief time, it seemed as though the vaunted vibrating jig had hit its peak.

"Sales tailed off about 10 years ago, but then the bait experienced a resurgence, and sales shot through the roof," recalls Bass Pro Tour pro Stephen Browning

What caused the renaissance? Browning credits part of the revival to timely tournaments on grassy lakes, in which the baits have always shined. But other factors have come into play, as well. For one, the mere presence of bladed jigs on so many boat decks invited more usage and experimentation among pro and weekend angler alike. And the more people have played with different trailers and retrieves in a wider range of scenarios, the more they've learned and liked.

"People have caught on to how versatile a bait it is," says Brett Hite. "Every season, they're finding other ways to use it."

The bait's applications are limited only by anglers' imagination. Here are a few examples in which bladed jigs shine:

- **Dock skipping** - Vibrating jigs are deadly dock-skipping lures. Edwin Evers says the Berkley Slobberknocker "skips like a flat rock," its head shape ideal for getting it to hard-to-reach places. "It's amazing how well a ChatterBait skips," echoes Hite. "With it, you can put a reaction bait in places most people can't get to."

- **Shad spawn** - "The first time I saw a ChatterBait outshine every other lure was during a shad spawn," says Bryan Thrift, recounting early success with the lure on Carolina lakes. "Working the bank, it was night and day better than anything else. It was just amazing how much better it was than a spinnerbait or a topwater."

- **Working the water column** - Once upon a time, anglers considered the blad-

ed jig to be strictly a shallow-water lure. Today, pros frequently plumb depths of 15 feet or more with baits weighing 3/4 to 1 1/4 ounce. Kevin VanDam reaches bass at lower depths with the 3/4-ounce Strike King Thunder Cricket. He credits a lower center of gravity for the bait's ability to hold its depth - and to clean up on clear-water smallmouth. The Z-Man ChatterBait Freedom CFL (available in 3/8, 1/2, & 3/4 ounce) is an under-the-radar ChatterBait variation designed to stay down even when burned deep.

- **Finesse conditions** - Hite led development of a more compact variant, the Jack Hammer Stealthblade, for pressured waters and high skies with little wind. It features a transparent, polycarbonate blade with less aggressive action and quieter chatter. He's fished the bait as deep as 25 feet on the clear waters of Lake Mead. The ChatterBait MiniMax (1/4, 3/8, & 1/2 ounce) is an upscale, compact jig with a 2/0 black nickel hook designed for smaller trailers. "It is a downsized package with a 30-percent smaller blade and great natural swimming action," says Thrift.

- **Shallow wood** - Bladed jigs are deadly when deflected off dock posts and other wood. "They're great around shallow standing timber," says Browning. "In the old days, that's where I'd be fishing a squarebill or a spinnerbait."

**"BLADED JIGS ARE DEADLY WHEN DEFLECTED OFF WOODEN DOCK POSTS AND TIMBER."**

— MLF pro Stephen Browning



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

## PATENT PROTECTION

If imitation is, indeed, the sincerest form of flattery, the Davises and Z-Man have been awash in flattery for the past 18 years. Copycat efforts started early. A hundred imitations seemed to challenge the original ChatterBait in the marketplace while the Davises awaited patent approval.

The patent application process itself was a wild ride. Ron Jr. understood the subtleties of his dad's design, and he wrestled with the patent office as well as imitators to protect his father's intellectual property, spending \$100,000 in pursuit and protection of a patent that even baffled the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. The primary attribute he sought to trademark was the blade-to-head connection, which the younger Davis says gives the bait its erratic, hunting action and namesake chatter.

"The connection point of the blade directly at the eyelet of the jig provides the true stop of oscillation," he says. "That's what the patent revolves around - the fact that the blade oscillates in one direction, then reverses direction and goes the other way. That's what makes it different."



Kevin VanDam likes to impart an erratic action on his Strike King Thunder Cricket.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Z-Man, too, has protected the ChatterBait patent vigorously. Over time, however, several other vibrating jigs have arrived on the market, thanks either to designs that differ enough to avoid patent violation or formal agreements negotiated with Z-Man. The Berkley PowerBait Slobberknocker (3/8- & 1/2-ounce; 12 colors) and Strike King's Thunder Cricket (3/8-, 1/2-, 5/8- & 3/4-ounce; 13 colors) are two of the more prominent competitors in a category likely to grow even more crowded when the initial 20-year patent runs out.

Z-Man itself is responsible for a hearty percentage of category expansion. The company has produced a steady stream of ChatterBaits featuring different sizes and head shapes; baits designed to run shallow or deep; baits with big blades, small blades, metal blades and polycarbonate blades; baits with varied hook styles and sizes and keepers.

The Cadillac of its line is the Z-Man Evergreen Jack Hammer ChatterBait, a joint venture between Z-Man and Japanese lure maker Evergreen International. Designed by Hite and Morizo Shimizo of Japan, the bait boasts premium components to match its \$15.99 price tag. Z-Man's latest iteration is the Z-Man ChatterBait Elite EVO. The lure (which won Best New Freshwater Hard Lure at ICAST 2023) sports a longer hook shank and dual-element bait keeper to hold plastic trailers securely.

"Z-Man looked at every element of ChatterBait design for ways to make it better," says the company's marketing director, Cory Schmidt.

## TRAILER TALK

The plethora of soft-plastic trailers on the market has added yet another dimension to the bladed jig category.

Hite rarely strays from his personal preference, the 4-inch Yamamoto Zako for the Jack Hammer and the 3-inch Zako for his downsized Stealthblade.

"It has the swimbait profile and belly of bluegill or gizzard shad," says Hite.

Evers similarly sticks with a favored minnow-style trailer, the Berkley PowerBait PowerStinger (available in 16 colors).

"It fits the Slobberknocker perfectly," he says.

Kevin VanDam favors a 3.25-inch Strike King Rage Swimmer, a paddletail swimbait, on his Thunder Cricket.

Others tailor trailer and jig to resemble the size and shape of a specific forage, or to maximize or diminish the lure's oscillation and running depth. When plying water in the 4-to-5-foot range, Bass Pro Tour angler Stephen Browning opts for a paddletail swimbait on a light bladed jig. The thump of the tail, and in some cases the added bulk of the body, enables him to work the bait higher in the water column at a slower sustained speed. The slimmer profile of a fork-tailed trailer, meanwhile, allows him to fish the combination more quickly.

"I seldom slow roll with the (Z-Man) Razor ShadZ trailer," says the Arkansas pro. "I burn it. I get a reaction strike like when I'm burning a lipless crankbait."

For downsized finesse applications, Browning adds a fluke-style trailer to a ChatterBait MiniMax. With a Big Blade ChatterBait from Z-Man, he adds either a minnow-style trailer or Z-Man GOAT, the latter well-suited to a slower retrieve or working the bait high in the water column.

For deep-running offerings, a slim, do-nothing trailer will reduce drag, help to keep the bait at desired depth, and even improve hunting action by offering less resistance. The new Z-Man Chatterspike was designed with that specific intent.



PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN



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Brett Hite has won more than \$600,000 on a vibrating jig during his pro career.



PHOTO BY MLF

## THE ART OF PRESENTATION

Bladed jigs owe their sweeping success to equal parts science and art. While tackle creators have continually advanced the quality and variety of vibrating jigs, anglers have devised more and better means of presenting them.

Finding the best rod, reel, and line combination to deliver a bladed jig is a topic worthy of its own article. Many manufacturers have developed rods specifically tailored for the technique. The consensus across the industry seems to be that a rod with a moderate action, which allows the lure to roam and hunt freely and the bass to load up on the strike, is essential. As for how to use the rod and reel to impart action on the bait, that's up to the angler. There don't seem to be any hard-and-fast, right-or-wrong rules.

"As with any bait, you have to vary the retrieve with the Slobberknocker, whether it's as simple as holding the rod high or low to the water to vary the depth the bait is traveling," says Evers. "At times, that is all it takes. Other times, I burn it, almost wake it. A good angler varies his retrieve until he figures it out."

VanDam takes a similar approach to fishing the Thunder Cricket, constantly tweaking his retrieve. Bass seem ever eager to hit a bladed jig ripped free from vegetation. Simulating that sudden stop and start, which mimics fleeing or injured prey, can deliver similar results in open water.

"Just casting it out and reeling it back to the boat is not the way you want to fish these baits," says VanDam. "You want to twitch it. You want to shake it a little bit. When you are fishing it in grass, the bait is doing that for you. But if grass is sparse, you may want to change up the action a little bit. A lot of times, bass are following it, and when you stop it or start it real quickly, they react and bite it."



PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

Working vibrating jigs in deeper water is its own art form. Thrift, who designed the Big Blade ChatterBait, which features a 6/0 hook and extra-large blade, fishes as deep as 22 feet with the 3/4-ounce version and a soft jerkbait trailer.

"I've been working that bait in deep water for two years," he says. "I just stroke it, like you would a football jig on the ledges."

Thrift dares to fish his Jack Hammer in deep wood, too.

"A lot of guys are afraid to fish one in a deep brush pile, but the heavy 3/4- or 1 1/4-ounce bait is its own plug knocker," he says. "Nine of 10 times, it will come free if you position the boat over it."

Browning finds another reason to fish the heavier bait in deep wood.

"That bigger bait allows better deflection," he says.

To be sure, nothing lasts forever, not even the most beloved baits in our tackle trays. For now, however, the vibrating jig seems here to stay — if not forever, at least for years, if not decades, to come. And rumor has it yet another version of the vibrating jig could arrive in the near future when a second Ron Davis patent under his new company, Air-E-Is, brings a new lure to market.

Stay tuned! ■

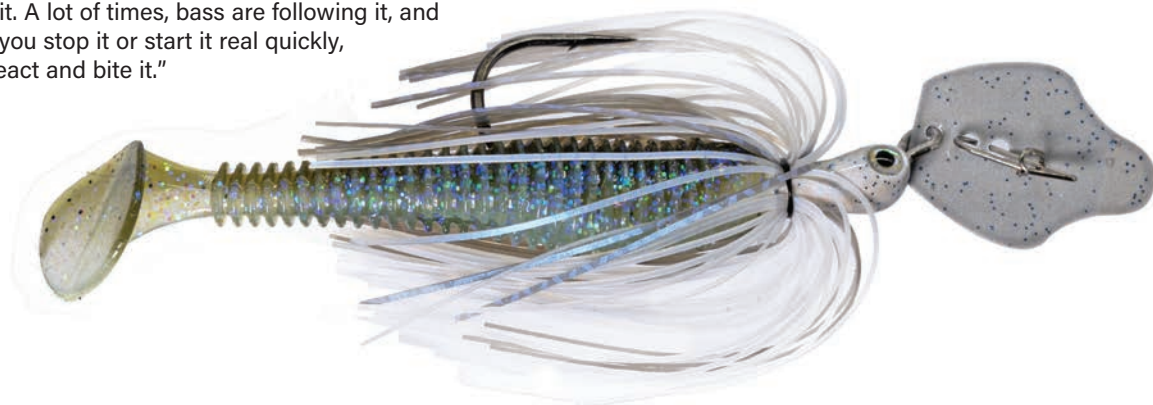


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TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS



## ICAST 2023 CRANKBAITS

By Mitchell Forde

When it comes to bass tackle, the crankbait is about as ubiquitous as it gets. The first crankbait patent was filed more than 100 years ago, and in the decades since, just about anyone who's fished for bass has thrown some version of the tried-and-true diving plug.

But, as those of us who have amassed boxes of the lures can attest, a crankbait is not a crankbait. Basement tinkers and mass-production manufacturers alike have produced a steady stream of new baits through the years, pursuing the perfect combination of size, wobble, diving depth and snag-resistance for every situation. As a result, the crankbait category has become perhaps the most crowded and nuanced in the entire lure landscape.

Every year, it seems, dozens of new plugs hit the market, all claiming to do something different than their predecessors. 2023 has been no different. Here's a run-down of eight crankbaits that were introduced at ICAST in July, including an overview of how each might fit into your cranking arsenal.



1

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A serendipitous discovery by Major League Fishing pro and Strike King lure designer Todd Castledine resulted in the newest addition to the company's popular line of crankbaits. Seeking to create a wide-wobbling plug ideal for traversing rocky terrain, Castledine made his first prototype by supergluing the bill from a Pro Model Series 4 crankbait onto the body of a KVD Squarebill 1.5.

The creation was meant to be a starting point. But during Castledine's first trip on the water with it, the bait fooled a handful of bass, and he knew he had something special. "I was like, well, I'm out here catching fish on a superglued bait," he said. "This can't be a fluke."

The feedback Castledine received from Kevin VanDam and the rest of the Strike King pro staff confirmed that the Gravel Dawg can be a year-round fish catcher. What he didn't expect was that the mid-depth runner would excel not only around rocky cover but wood, as well. Castledine said the bait possesses the hunting action of, say, an old-school Wiggle Wart, but it never blows out, even when burned or retrieved up a slope. The angle of the bill also makes it exceptionally snag-proof. A few anglers reported to Castledine that, despite its name, the plug has become their go-to for cranking brush piles or standing timber.

"It was cool that they were telling me, 'Oh, it does this good, or it did that good,' but they all ended it like, 'Hey, I caught 'em on it,'" Castledine said. "And I'm like, 'Yeah, that's all I wanted to hear.'"

The Gravel Dawg, which will hit the market in 2024, will be offered in models that dive 8 and 10 feet. It will be available in several exclusive colors painted by Mike Russell of Bag 5 Baits, including 10 new crawfish patterns, in addition to a handful of Strike King staple hues.

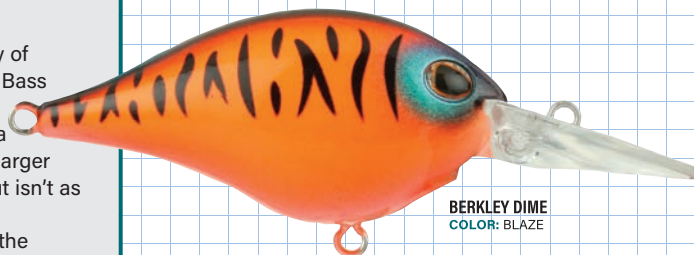
2

### BERKLEY DIME

\$10.99 | [tacklewarehouse.com](http://tacklewarehouse.com)

The latest addition to Berkley's fast-growing family of crankbaits is built to be its most versatile offering yet. Bass Pro Tour angler Justin Lucas said the Dime, which is offered in models that dive to 4, 6, 10 and 15 feet, fills a sweet spot in the Berkley lineup. It features a slightly larger profile and wider wobble than the popular Frittside but isn't as aggressive as the deeper-diving Dredger.

Like the Frittside, Berkley built the Dime to mimic the action of a balsa bait, but its plastic body and FlashDisc technology allow for longer casts and a wider range of colors — 20, to be exact. Each bait comes stock with a pair of Berkley's Fusion19 treble hooks.



BERKLEY DIME  
COLOR: BLAZE



RAPALA OG DEEP TINY 7  
COLOR: BREAM

3

## RAPALA OG DEEP TINY 7

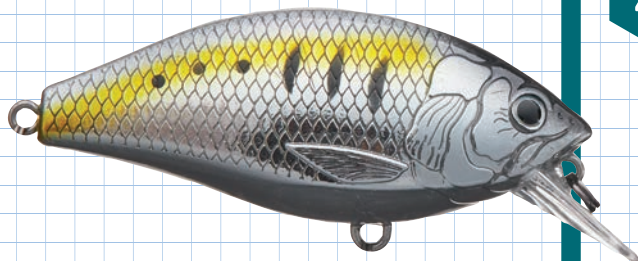
\$10.49 | [tacklewarehouse.com](https://www.tacklewarehouse.com)

The popular Ott's Garage family of crankbaits from Rapala, designed by Bass Pro Tour angler Ott DeFoe, welcomes another member this fall. The OG Deep Tiny 7 possesses the same balsa body as the OG Tiny 4, making it a similarly silent, ultra-natural presentation. However, it offers more diving depth, plunging to about 7 feet. DeFoe noted that the bait's larger and less steep bill also makes it a bit easier to cast than the 4-foot version.

"Tiny is such an effective size and action, we knew we wanted it in a deeper model," DeFoe said. "It opened the doors to be able to use it more times and places."

Like the rest of the OG line, the Deep Tiny was inspired by baits DeFoe has been carving for years. He knows from experience that, while the lure might be best known for its ability to garner strikes in cold water, it can put fish in the boat across the country and throughout the year, especially as fishing pressure increases.

Like the OG Tiny 4, the OG Deep Tiny 7 measures 2 1/4 inches and weighs 5/16 ounce. It will be available in 19 colors.



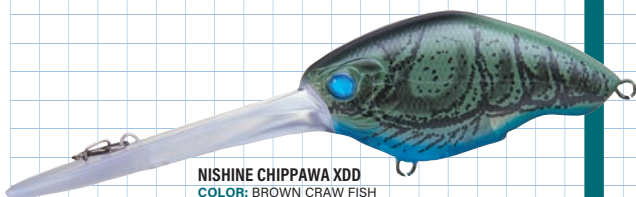
FREEDOM TACKLE RAD SQUAREBILL  
COLOR: STREAK SHAD

4

## FREEDOM TACKLE RAD SQUAREBILL

\$4.99 | [americanbaitworks.com](https://www.americanbaitworks.com)

American Baitworks added to its RAD line of hard baits with a squarebill designed for ultra-shallow applications. It only dives 2-3 feet, allowing anglers to efficiently cover shallow flats or swim it over submerged grass without it bogging down. It also features a durable bill and an internal weight transfer system designed to make the 3/8-ounce bait more castable. Perhaps its most attractive quality is its \$4.99 price tag. The RAD squarebill is offered in 12 colors.



NISHINE CHIPPAWA XDD  
COLOR: BROWN CRAW FISH

5

## NISHINE CHIPPAWA XDD

\$17.00 | [nishinelureworks.com](https://www.nishinelureworks.com)

It only takes a glance to see how this creation from Japanese lure designer Hiroshi Nishine differs from other crankbaits on the market. As Nishine joked in a video introducing the bait, "you can use this lip if you forget your spoon for lunch." Indeed, the narrow bill of the bait is longer than its 2.4-inch body. The result is a deep-diving crankbait that offers a significantly smaller profile than other plugs that can reach the same depth — up to 14 feet on 16-pound line. Nishine said the Chippawa XDD's size, combined with its tight wobble, makes it ideal for targeting smallmouth or fooling largemouth living in clear or heavily-pressured water. The bill length also helps the lure deflect off cover without getting snagged. The Chippawa XDD is available in six colors.

6

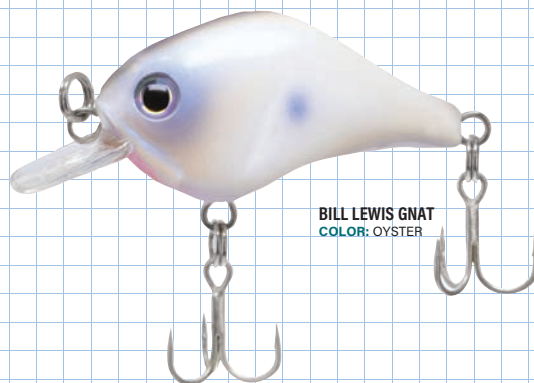
## BILL LEWIS GNAT

\$4.49 | [rat-l-trap.com](http://rat-l-trap.com) | Available December 2023

The newest squarebill from Bill Lewis takes the emerging trend of downsized crankbaits to the extreme. The GNAT measures 1 1/2 inches long and weighs 1/8 ounce, making it the perfect tool when bass zero in on tiny baitfish, according to BPT pro Mark Daniels Jr.

"So often, those fish get keyed in on that little, tiny bait," Daniels said. "And it's like, I don't even have anything in my box to match that. Well, now you've got something."

The GNAT profiles as a bit of a niche bait for tournament anglers, especially given that it probably can't be thrown effectively on traditional casting gear. However, its diminutive size should make it an ideal multi-species offering. The GNAT dives to three feet and will be offered in eight colors.



BILL LEWIS GNAT  
COLOR: OYSTER

7

## BILL LEWIS HAMMER TRAP

\$8.99 | [rat-l-trap.com](http://rat-l-trap.com) | Available December 2023

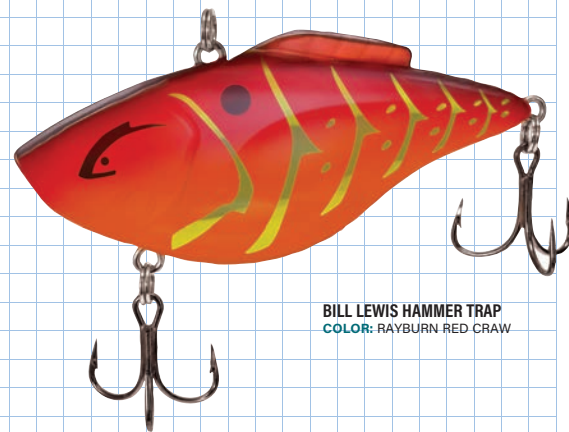
Bill Lewis' Hammer Trap will provide a new spin on the original Rat-L-Trap, offering a larger profile and more aggressive action that is designed to trigger bigger bites.

"It feels like a ChatterBait when you throw it," Daniels said. "That thing hits hard. It's very loud, it's very aggressive, and I just think in the right conditions, it is going to out-perform all other lipless baits."

The Hammer Trap features three distinct sound chambers that emit different frequencies as it vibrates. As a result, Daniels said it shines in dirty water. He also believes it could generate strikes from bass that see lipless crankbaits on a daily basis.

"When fish are pressured, I tend to go one of two ways," Daniels said. "You either go the stealthy, finesse-y way, or you go obnoxiously large, loud, crazy. So I think this will play a role in that scenario, too, on places like Sam Rayburn, Toledo Bend, where they've seen just your traditional Trap year in, year out, and here you come with this big, loud, obnoxious one."

The Hammer Trap will be available in both 3/8- and 5/8-ounce sizes and 16 colors.



BILL LEWIS HAMMER TRAP  
COLOR: RAYBURN RED CRAW

8

## LUNKERHUNT BOSHI BLADE

\$9.99 | [tacklewarehouse.com](http://tacklewarehouse.com)

Whispers about anglers affixing bladed treble hooks to their hard baits have grown louder in recent years. Lunkerhunt's latest creation saves you the trouble of swapping out a hook to do so. The Boshi Blade crankbait comes with a plastic blade attached to its belly by a split ring. The blade is intended to give the relatively small-bodied bait (2 1/4 inches) a little extra drawing power. The plug dives 4 to 6 feet and is offered in nine colors. ■



LUNKERHUNT BOSHI BLADE  
COLOR: SASSY



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# BILL ME

NO TWO CRANKBAIT BILLS ARE BUILT ALIKE





Rapala DT 4  
Crankbait



Spro Little  
John Crankbait

## Understanding the nuances of bill design and functionality can take your crankin' skills to the next level

By Sean Ostruszka | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON ROWAN

**C**rankbaits are maddening. On the surface, they seem like some of the easiest lures in your arsenal. Pick a plug that goes the desired depth, then throw it out, reel it in and repeat. Yet behind their simplicity is a complex lesson in fluid dynamics — a Chinese-algebra-level equation involving body shape (length, width, density, volume), weight (placement and amount), buoyancy, pull point and water resistance. It takes all those factors coming together correctly to make a lure to wiggle under the water in a specific way and at a specific depth.

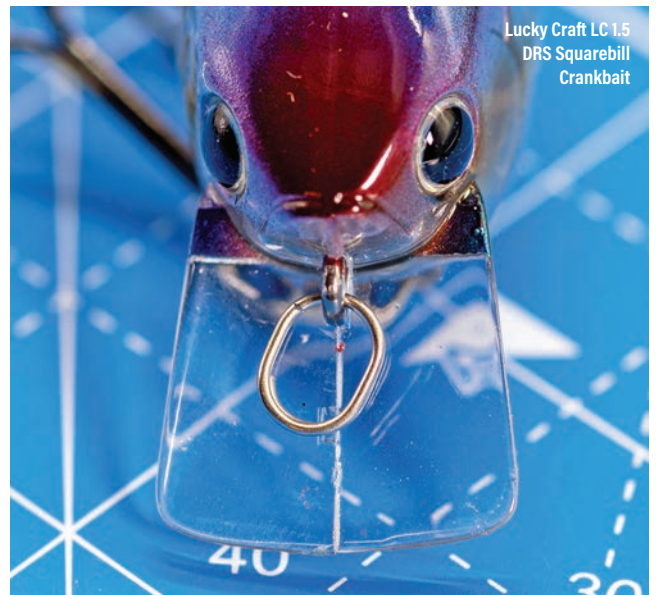
Even the slightest change to any of the equation's variables completely alters the end result. Anything from flat sides versus round, weight being placed a couple millimeters toward or away from the head, the coating being a little too thick or thin, the grade of balsa or type of plastic, or a pull point angled even a butterfly's eyelash in any direction will impact the action of a bait.

Yet if you ask pros like Wesley Strader of the Bass Pro Tour, one crankbait characteristic reigns as most important — the attribute that makes them crankbaits to begin with.

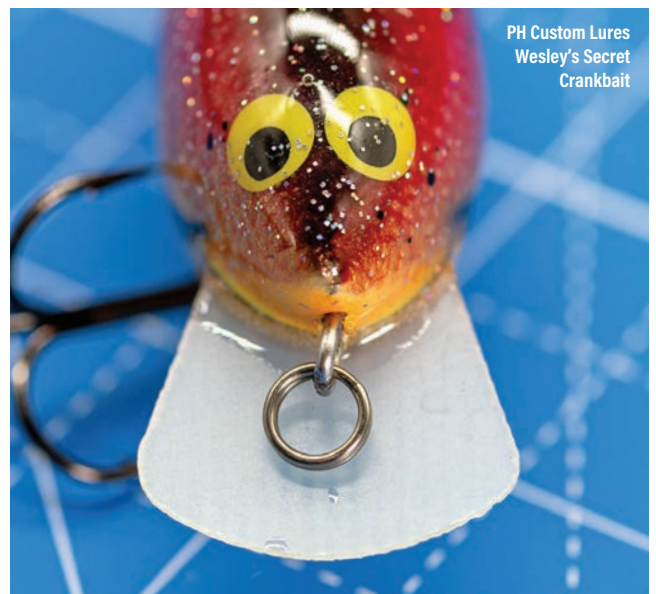
The bill.

"(The bill) is how you get a crankbait to run," Strader says. "It gives the plug its action, deflection, depth, wobble, and many people don't truly understand that or all that goes into the bill."

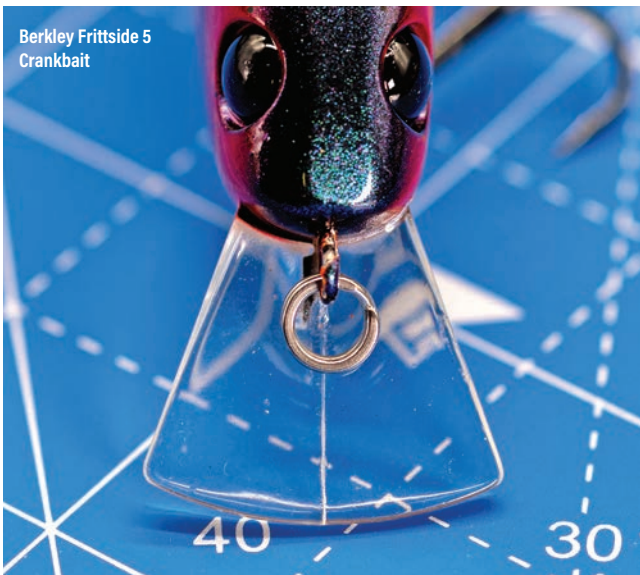
To become one of those enlightened anglers, you'll need to understand the three key aspects of crankbait bills: material, angle and shape.



Lucky Craft LC 1.5  
DRS Squarebill  
Crankbait



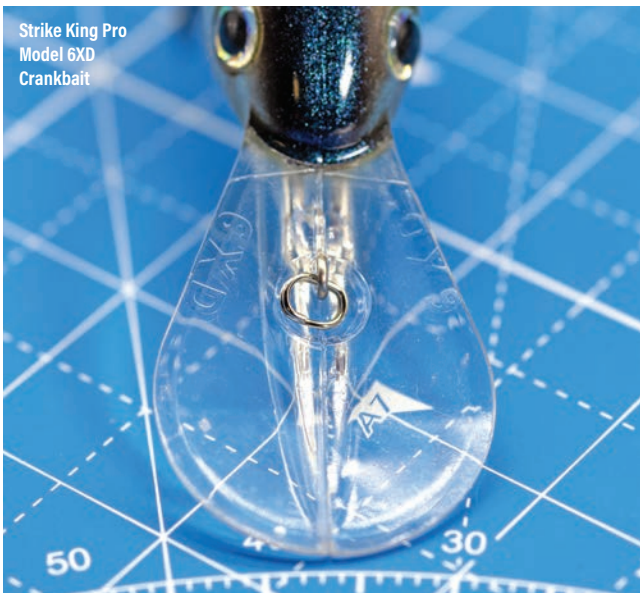
PH Custom Lures  
Wesley's Secret  
Crankbait



Berkley Frittside 5 Crankbait



13 Fishing Jabber Jaw Deep Squarebill Crankbait



Strike King Pro Model 6XD Crankbait

## MATERIAL WITNESSES

Technically, there are three materials that comprise crankbait bills: metal, lexan (or plastic) and circuit board. While a few niche exceptions still exist, most metal-lipped crankbaits went the way of the dodo decades ago, or at least got relegated into the “vintage” category.

That leaves lexan/plastic and circuit board, and both have their pros and cons.

Lexan is by far the most common, whether the bill is a separate piece glued into the nose of the crankbait or molded as part of the body. Lexan bills are often the most aesthetically pleasing, as they’re clear and thus give the effect of not being there at all in the water, creating a more natural look.

Yet, what really sets lexan lips apart is their durability.

“Lexan plastic is going to last a lot longer because it’s stronger,” Strader said. “The material doesn’t flex like circuit board, which allows it to be better for deeper-diving crankbaits, and if you’re grinding it against shell beds or rip rap, it’s not going to wear down near as fast.”

Case in point: When Strader won a 2018 Bassmaster Elite Series event on Kentucky Lake, he did so cranking riprap and pea gravel bars with a PH Custom Wesley’s Secret crankbait, which has a circuit board lip. After three days of doing so, he said one side of the lip had almost completely worn away.

## “YET THERE’S NO FACTOR MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE BILL.”

So, why use circuit board if plastic is stronger?

First, a circuit board lip with a tighter weave can still be quite strong. But any circuit board lip can be stronger than a plastic version in a key scenario – cold water. You see, lexan lips have no give, and if you’re cranking cold water (55 degrees or less), that rigidity can actually cause the bill to break if the lip is not thick enough. Hence, why so many anglers love circuit board bills for their flat-sided crankbaits or cold-water squarebills.

That brings us to another key attribute of circuit board material: the thickness, or lack thereof. It’s so thin it’s able to cut through water better and get a crankbait down to its desired depth quicker. It also tends to create a faster wobble at slower speeds thanks to less water resistance, which again bodes well for those cold-water scenarios. However, because of its flexibility, trying to tune a deep-diving circuit board bill can be about as frustrating as it gets, according to Strader. That’s why you don’t often see circuit board bills on crankbaits that dive deeper than 10 feet.

## SHAPE SHIFTING

Round, square, coffin, diamond, spade, stair-stepped, double rounded — pick a shape and you’ve probably seen it on the front of a crankbait.

That said, while there are niche shapes out there, like the staggered bill on the Strike King Hybrid Hunter or coffin of the Jackal Dagle, round and square represent the two bill designs anglers are most likely to encounter.

Despite being the same length, these two Rapala DT series crankbaits dive to vastly different depths. A longer bill with a shallow angle pushes the DT8 twice as deep as the DT4.



Rapala DT8 Crankbait  
COLOR: *Ike's Penguin*

Rapala DT4 Crankbait  
COLOR: *Ike's Smash*

Again, the action these two shapes create can differ greatly based on the lure's body and the bill's angle. That said, there are some general rules that can help you understand how a crankbait will run based on its bill shape.

Round bills (those that are rounded in the front) tend to give crankbaits a tighter action with more roll, with the body of the crankbait wiggling less side-to-side and possessing some top-to-bottom rotation, creating a "rolling" action. This makes them ideal for colder conditions and fishing more open water.

Meanwhile, squarebills (those that are flat or squared in the front) tend to displace more water and give lures a harder, side-to-side wobble. That makes them ideal for deflecting off cover, as the hard edges will cause the lure to kick away from cover versus roll over it, which can cause the hooks to catch.

Now, you may also notice there are plenty of crankbaits that seem to combine the two, especially when it comes to deep-diving models. That's intentional.

While the idea of a squared bill deflecting off a deep shell bed seems ideal, given how hard most squarebills pull with a short lip, making that lip longer would mean an angler would need Popeye forearms to consistently get the bait deep enough. Thus, you'll often see deeper-diving bills with squared sides and a rounded front. Some manufacturers take it further, creating bills with narrow sides near the body of the crankbait and a much wider end. Such a shape reduces the bill's drag in the water, making it easier to get deeper with less pull, while still providing some degree of snag resistance.

Regardless of shape, bill length also plays a big role. A longer lip is needed to displace enough water to get a crankbait down further. Again, lip angle also factors in (more on that shortly), but a good rule of thumb is the longer the bill, the deeper the lure runs.

## WHAT'S YOUR ANGLE?

We've references bill angle a couple of times; now it's time to delve into it.

Fortunately, it's pretty simple.

"The more the bill points down (perpendicular to the body), the shallower it's going to run," Strader says. "The more it sticks straight out the nose (parallel to the body), the deeper it will go."

For an illustration, take a look at the Rapala DT Series of crankbaits. The bodies are all similar in shape and size, with the main difference being the angle of the bill. A DT6 has a bill that's narrow and angled more downward, thus only allowing it to dive to 6 feet. Meanwhile, a DT10 possesses a slightly larger bill that's nearly perpendicular to the body, allowing it to get down to 10 feet. The DT20 features the largest bill in the series. It points straight out the nose, designed to send the bait to the depths.

The Berkley Frittside is another example – the No. 5 and No. 7 versions feature almost identical bodies. Yet, the lip on the 5 is shorter and angled more downward. The 7 has a longer, more parallel, coffin-shaped bill, allowing it to get deeper than the 5 despite having the same body.

Now, it's important to stress these are general rules of thumb. As established earlier, a lot goes into making a crankbait run to begin with, and even more into make a "good" one.

Yet there's no factor more important than the bill. Understanding what each bill does and why will go a long way toward helping you determine when to choose a specific crankbait depending on the situation — and hopefully making crankbaits a little less maddening. ■

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## SEVIIN GF REELS SERIES

By Matt Williams

**T**he folks at St. Croix celebrated their 75th anniversary in the rod-building business this year, and they surprised the 2023 ICAST crew by stepping outside the box with the introduction of the SEVIIN brand baitcaster. Available in three gear ratios in left or right hand models, the low profile GF Series features some high-performance design features anglers might expect to find in reels with a significantly higher price point.

### First Impressions

Built around a rigid graphite frame, the GF feels solid in the hand and features a lightweight carbon fiber handle, big EVA grips, an audible carbon fiber drag and a clickable dial with 20 settings for fine tuning the magnetic braking system. The

handsome outer shell is matte black with a dash of red trim and includes a handy line clip on the face of the gear box, as well as a recessed line size memo indicator tucked away on the inner wall of gear housing, right next to the gear ratio insignia.

Pop open the side plates and you'll find a ported aluminum spool that rides on a durable stainless steel shaft supported by a pair of Japanese stainless bearings and a hardened brass and pinion gear drive.

### In Action

It takes more than a few fishing trips to make an accurate assessment regarding a reel's durability, but you can tell a lot about how well one performs in pretty short order. SEVIIN shipped us an 8.1:1 gear ratio

(RH) model for review in early August, and I'm really liking it so far. Spooled with 65-pound braid for frogging and flipping around heavy cover or 17-pound Berkley 100 Percent Fluorocarbon for tossing Texas rigs, Carolina rigs and 'Traps, the reel has been a true pleasure to fish with.

We found plenty to like:

- Fine tuning the magnetic braking system for different lure sizes and changing conditions was simple using a clickable dial with 20 modes of adjustment.
- Both long and short range deliveries were nearly effortless and trouble free.
- The reel has only five stainless ball bearings, but you might think there are more has based on how smooth the reel casts and how quietly it retrieves.

- Smallish in size, the reel sits tight to the seat and cradles nicely in the palm.
- The custom carbon fiber handle is designed to bring the big, EVA grips close to the reel's center line, resulting in less side torque and more power when fighting fish.
- The carbon fiber drag is super smooth and emits audible clicks when it slips under load.

### Final Thoughts

I've always been a fan of St. Croix rods, and I'm equally impressed by the company's first stab a building a bait-caster. You'll be hard pressed to find another reel for the same money that delivers more high-performance features or performs any better out of the box than the moderately priced GF Series. The

## MAGNETIC BRAKING SYSTEM:

The magnetic braking system allows for precision tuning and casting control in varied conditions using a clickable dial with 20 modes of adjustment.



## LINE MEMO DIAL:

The inner wall on the handle side is equipped with a recessed line memo dial to eliminate guesswork about which size line is on the spool. There are eight primary line test settings ranging from 10-pound test up to 65.



## CARBON FIBER HANDLE:

Equipped with a custom carbon fiber handle designed to reduce side torque, the lightweight handle is tipped with large EVA grips that are textured to limit slippage and enhance control.



only question is how well it will hold up to day-to-day abuse.

Not to worry — if something does happen to break prematurely, SEVIIN reels come with a one-year warranty covering defects in workmanship or materials, although it does not cover reels that are damaged due to misuse, abuse, normal wear, or neglected maintenance. The warranty applies to the original purchaser.

## Applications

> The GF Series comes in three gear ratios ranging from 6.6:1 to 8.1:1 in left or right handed models. SEVIIN recommends the 6.6:1 for crankbaits, spinnerbaits, bladed jigs, umbrella rigs and swimbaits; the 7.3:1 for stickbaits, Texas rigs, Carolina rigs, jigs, topwaters, jerkbaits and frogs; and the 8.1:1 for flipping, pitching, plastics, top-

waters, buzzbaits, jerkbaits and lipless cranks.

## Performance Tip

Use the micro-adjustable cast control dial for fine tuning the reel's magnetic braking system to optimize casting performance and presentations with baits/lines of different sizes in changing weather conditions and fishing situations.

## HITS & MISSES

- + Affordable price point
- + Casts great
- + Tunes easily
- + Solid gears
- + Smooth, audible drag
- + Compact size
- + Custom carbon fiber handle
- + Big EVA grips
- No low ratio for hard-pulling cranks
- Reel must be removed from the seat for adjustments to line memo indicator

## >> MORE FROM THE SEVIIN FAMILY

The all-new SEVIIN family also includes a pair of high-quality spinning reels — the GS and GX — both stacked with high-performance features that consummate bass anglers will certainly appreciate.

Available in three models options (2000, 2500 and 3000), the GS Series features:

- > A carbon fiber/polymer body
- > 7 stainless steel bearings

- > 6.0:1 gear ratio
- > Aluminum spool with braid band
- > Custom handle with soft-touch knob and custom drag knob
- > Multi-stack carbon fiber/stainless steel drag system
- > Premium gearing
- > S-Curve slow-oscillation system for better line management

## DETAILS

**Gear Ratios:** 3 (6.6:1, 7.3:1 and 8.1:1)

**RH and LH:** Yes

**Weight:** 7.3 ounces

**Audible Drag:** 16–19 pounds

**Brakes:** Magnetic, 20 adjustments

**Bearings:** 4+1 Stainless

**Spool:** Ported aluminum

**MSRP:** \$120.00

**Contact:** [seviinreels.com](http://seviinreels.com) ■

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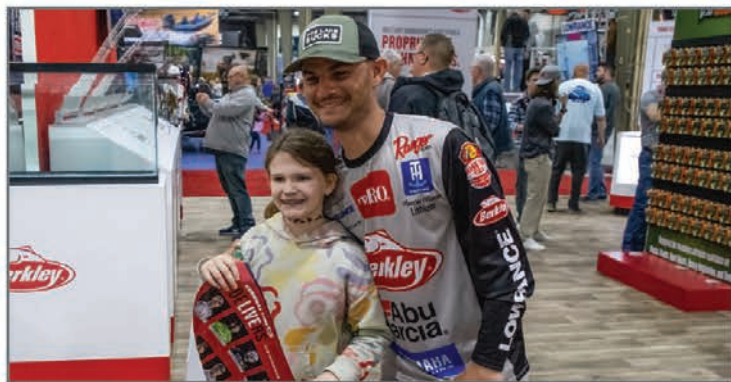
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# TOURNAMENTS







## THE CAT IS OUT OF THE BAG!

**I**magine, if you can, the “thrill of victory/agony of defeat” emotions surely pumping through Wisconsin pro Matt Stefan’s body at the moment this photo was taken. Snapped by MLF photographer Jody White at the Tackle Invationals Invationals Presented by Phoenix Boats Stop 6 on the Upper Mississippi River in Wisconsin, this photo shows Stefan wrestling with a 30-pound catfish that he hooked on the second day of competition in the final event of the 2023 season — an impressive specimen, to be sure, but definitely not the kind of heavyweight catch that Stefan was aiming for.

At the time, the Wisconsin pro was fishing for the highest of stakes. He entered Stop 6 in position to challenge for the Angler of the Year title, as well as a coveted invitation to fish the Bass Pro Tour in 2024. To top it off, Stefan was a serious contender to win the event: At the time, he was in fourth place, less than 2 pounds off the lead.

But as they say, all’s well that ends well. Stefan would eventually go on to win Stop 6 – the first tour-level win of his career – and qualify for a Bass Pro Tour invitation. His big bass for the event (5 pounds, 3 ounces) paled in comparison to this chunky cat, which Stefan (now) considers a memorable snapshot in his thrill-of-victory week.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE





## “THE MAN” LOST IN HIS THOUGHTS

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**A**sk almost any athlete who has ever competed in a sport from high school up and they'll confess that the playing of the National Anthem is the catalyst for some powerful emotion. The 2 minutes in between “Oh say can you see ... ” and “... the home of the brave” can stir up everything from outrageous nerves to downright competitive rage. But in this quiet snapshot of the final morning of the 2023 Bass Pro Tour finale at Saginaw Bay, Michigan, the emotions for Kevin VanDam were a lot more thankful: peace, gratitude and a touch of nostalgia.

Just moments before this photo was shot by MLF photographer Garrick Dixon, VanDam had admitted tearfully that it was “hard to believe this day is here”: his final day of competition in tour-level bass tournaments. VanDam had spent the 2023 season on an extended farewell tour as he fished his way through the BPT schedule, and he managed to extend that tour to the very last day of the season by qualifying for the Championship Round at Stage Seven.

At the end of a 33-year career that witnessed a level of greatness that will likely never be matched - VanDam claimed eight Angler of the Year titles and 26 tour-level wins - the sport's unquestioned “GOAT” (Greatest of All Time) took a few minutes (two minutes, to be exact) to count his blessings and embrace the moment.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

1.



PHOTO BY HUNTER RUO

2.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

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PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

**1. TACKLE WAREHOUSE INVITATIONALS STOP 6 PRESENTED BY MERCURY**  
**Mississippi River**

July 25-27

An emotional roller coaster like no other ended with Matthew Stefan riding high. Stefan, who came to the season finale focused on clinching an invitation to the Bass Pro Tour, found himself needing to make up 12 ounces during the final day to claim his first national win.

Fishing a wacky-rigged Berkley MaxScent The General in holes along a stretch of eelgrass, Stefan put enough weight in his livewell to do so. Yet for about two hours, it looked like he'd never get the chance to weigh his catch, as a barge blocked the anglers who had run to Pool 7 from locking back into Pool 8.

Ultimately, Stefan (along with the rest of the top five finishers) made it through the lock and blasted back to the ramp with minutes to

spare. Stefan's 15-8 stringer gave him a 10-ounce cushion over Steve Lopez, earning him \$80,000, a trip to REDCREST 2024 and a win in his home state.

**2. BASS PRO TOUR MINN KOTA STAGE SEVEN PRESENTED BY SUZUKI**  
**Lake Hartwell**

Aug. 1-6

Matt Becker capped his first season on the Bass Pro Tour with the ultimate mic drop. Becker's dominant Championship Round, during which he boated 22-11 of smallmouth, not only earned him a runaway win at Saginaw Bay but an additional trophy and \$100,000 check as the Bally Bet Angler of the Year.

Becker, known as a Great Lakes smallmouth specialist, couldn't get the brown bass to cooperate on the first day of qualifying, when he weighed in 12-13. He adjusted on Day Two, targeting shallow large-mouth instead. That proved pivotal;

a clutch 3-pounder caught in the final hour kept him above the Toro Cut Line.

With weights zeroed for the Knockout Round, Becker resumed chasing smallmouth. He sacked up 17-14 to make the Top 10 but found himself 3-10 back of Kevin VanDam in the event and still needing to make up points on fellow AOY contenders Ott DeFoe and Jacob Wheeler. While a weather system slowed the bite for each of those anglers during the Championship Round, Becker caught the heaviest bag of the tournament — all on the same bait, a Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm on a drop-shot. The magical day put him 5-1 clear of VanDam and four points ahead of both DeFoe and Wheeler in the AOY standings.

.....  
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**3. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY PHOENIX BOATS**  
**NORTHERN DIVISION PRESENTED BY RABID BAITS**  
**St. Lawrence River**

Aug. 10-12

Consistency and time on the water paid off for Brent Anderson in the form of his first Toyota Series win. Anderson, who hails from Tennessee but has lived and guided on the St. Lawrence River for the past several summers, wasn't quite able to match the big bags that catapulted anglers to the top of the standings each of the first two days. But in the end, he was the only person on the water to weigh 22 pounds each day, which added up to a 10-ounce victory over Gary Miller.

Anderson decided against making the long run west to the Thousand Islands area. Instead, he drifted a prototype, 1/4-ounce GOBY 1 jig with a Z-Man Finesse TRD as a trailer in more riverine water. The victory earned him an \$80,500 payday. ■



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# PROFILE: MARSHALL ROBINSON

LANDRUM, SOUTH CAROLINA



*Be it on the dance floor or the water, 2024 Bass Pro Tour rookie-to-be Marshall Robinson will bring a level of finesse next season that's uniquely different from that of his father, 17-year tour-level pro and BPT veteran Marty Robinson.*

*Just before turning 20 in August, Marshall was crowned the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals Polaris Rookie of the Year and qualified to fish alongside his dad on the Bass Pro Tour. Shortly thereafter, younger brother Mitchell confirmed that he'll join Marshall and Marty in some Toyota Series competitions in 2024. It's been an exciting, heady time for Marshall as he prepares for his first year on the biggest stage in the sport.*

## Q&A

By Matt Naber  
PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

**You recently earned Polaris Rookie of the Year on the Tackle Warehouse Invitationals and qualified to fish the Bass Pro Tour in 2024. Describe what you were feeling onstage after you'd been given the trophy.**

Rookie of the Year felt super good. It was a feeling of relief to know all the work I put in paid off. You only get one shot at Rookie [of the Year], and I knew I'd never have another opportunity to go for it. BPT felt like a dream come true. No joke, I'd been dreaming about going pro since I was 4-5 years old.

**It's pretty remarkable that you've qualified to fish the highest level of professional bass fishing after only one year of fishing as a full-time pro. When you were a kid, dreaming about being a pro, did you ever imagine it would happen this soon?**

I've thought about it, and it's pretty amazing to be one and done and not have to face much adversity as far as failures. It built my confidence up for next season, so I feel like I can accomplish anything now if I really work for it. I didn't know [it would work out like that], all I knew was I really trusted myself and had worked my whole life and I wasn't going to let myself get out-worked. I was going to work harder than anyone else and not let it be on me if I failed.

### **What's going through your mind as you prepare for your Bass Pro Tour debut next season?**

I'm super excited since it (the schedule) just came out. I'm [already starting] to plan out the pre-fishing for each event.

### **Are there any places on the schedule that you're especially excited about?**

I'd say there's two that got my attention. One would be Santee because I fished one big tournament there and finished fifth, and it had been cut short, but I felt like I could win it. It's hard for that to happen, where there's a feeling like that with all the good anglers out there. The other is Dale Hollow (Stage Three). I've never been there, but my buddy Jack Daniel (Williams) won there, and Drew Gill talks to me about it. You can really mix it up with [LiveScope] and blind cast, and it has big smallmouth and big largemouth, and the water's clear and it'll be cold, so it sets up to my strengths.

### **You had an interesting rookie season. You started with a Top 20 at Okeechobee, stumbled pretty hard at Eufaula at Stop 3, but then rebounded with a third-place finish at Stop 4 at Lake of the Ozarks. What was going on during that point in the season and how did it influence the remainder of the season?**

Eufaula is definitely where I stumbled, but the craziest thing is that was one of my best practices, so it sucked to not put it together at the tournament. I knew I'd hurt my shot to make the BPT and had a lot of work to do and didn't have any room for error and would have to put my work in – and it ended up paying off with three really good tournaments. I really saved myself at the Potomac. I was 111th on Day 1 and came back with a better bag on Day 2 and moved up to 28th. Looking back, it was my best single day of fishing. It meant the most and had the biggest effect out of any other day I've had.

### **You'll get another crack at Eufaula in 2024 on the Bass Pro Tour. What's the plan next time around?**

I feel good, like I don't feel lost or at a disadvantage. I think I rushed myself and fished too fast and fished over the

bass, so when I go back, I'll figure out where to hit and at what speed and if I need to finesse. If I can put the puzzle together, I feel like I can have a good tournament there.

### **You learned the basics from your dad but have grown into your own style of fishing. What are the differences and similarities in your fishing styles?**

I'm sure without even knowing it that I have some habits from him, but for fishing style, he moves fast if he needs to but likes to fish slower-moving baits. He likes to throw a jig or crawl a blade runner or shaky head, and it seems like he's always dragging something. But I like to cast and wind. It's not that I don't have patience; I just have so much anticipation. If I have a ChatterBait and crankbait, I feel like I cover more water and improve my chances of hooking a fish. I'd also say that even though I learned to fish from instinct, I like to catch on my LiveScope. But my dad has so much history and knowledge that [LiveScope] collides and messes with his confidence.

### **Aside from your dad, who else have you learned from?**

My dad is the main one, and I fished with Terry Scroggins some and Casey Ashley a few times. I also fished with Jonathon VanDam and talked to a lot of those guys while growing up. Kevin VanDam gave me some pointers and advice, and it's cool to hear from him because everything he is saying is super good to know since he's considered the best to ever do it.

### **In addition to the BPT with your dad, you'll also get to fish with your younger brother, Mitchell, on the Toyota Series in 2024. Your family has to be excited about that, right?**

We've looked forward to this for so long. Any fishing tournament is fun, and I enjoy competing, but it makes it even more enjoyable if the whole family is there and you're fishing against each other. And, when the day is over, you tell stories. It makes the whole experience better, like you're having fun again even though you're competing. If the competitive aspect takes over, it takes the fun out of it, but with your brother and dad there, it brings the fun back into it.

### **Do you and Mitchell have a sibling rivalry?**

We do have a rivalry, but we're pretty good about not getting aggravated with each other and don't let it get in the way of our friendship. If he pulled up on me, it wouldn't bother me. When we were younger, we were more for our parents to deal with. We would argue and were hot-headed and got into fistfights over a dang fish.

### **What's your favorite technique and bait – the one thing you'd love to fish 365 days a year?**

A ChatterBait, that's my favorite way to catch them.

### **What's the most important lesson you learned this season that you'll apply to the 2024 BPT?**

I'd definitely say the most important lesson is to stay with it and it's never over. If I had given up on myself, the season would've been over at Eufaula – but it's not over until the last cast of the last tournament. It's a big mental game, so keep casting until the last minute is up. People think some guy has it, but then it will blow your mind how quick something will happen if he has a bad day and you catch some. You have to stay on your game.

### **You've decided to go straight into pro fishing instead of doing college first, but do you plan to go to college later? What are your career plans/goals?**

Nah, I'd say one of the best things I had going is my dad owns a plumbing business, so coming out of high school the plan was to work with him and start fishing. I did that instead of college because in plumbing you don't need a college degree. It was one of the best decisions I have made in my life.

### **Your dad's nickname is Marty "The Party" and he's known to bust a move onstage. Can you dance, too?**

Oh yeah, man, we were burning the dance floor up at Laker Howell's wedding (in August), and I would go head-to-head with him on the dance floor any day. I'd say I'm the better dancer, but you'd have to ask him the same question. ■



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## STEINER BRINGING FRESH ENERGY, IDEAS TO WASHINGTON TBF CHAPTER

FIRST-YEAR PRESIDENT TONY STEINER RALLYING SUPPORT NOT ONLY FOR TBF BUT BASS ANGLERS STATEWIDE



**W**hen Tony Steiner took over as president of The Bass Federation's Washington chapter, he felt light years away from actually hosting a tournament. First, he had to wade through a laundry list of tasks to rebuild the organization from the ground up: appointing a Board of Directors, re-writing the Federation's 20-year-old bylaws, setting up its first bank account.

Nine months later, Steiner presented \$10,000 to the winner of the organization's second big bass open and fifth total event of 2023. Austin Sandmann and Cody Stentz, who boated the winning fish, posed with an oversized check as confetti fluttered from the sky.

The scene illustrated just how far the Washington chapter has come during Steiner's initial year of leadership. Steiner has injected new life into the organization, expanding its event schedule and rallying support not just for his group but for bass fishing as a whole in a state where salmon and trout have traditionally ruled the roost.

Steiner, who grew up fishing TBF tournaments with his father, first noticed that former president Dez Ruffin was short on help about five years ago. He offered his assistance, and Ruffin asked if he'd take over the presidency. Steiner declined, his job at the

Puget Sound Naval Shipyard not providing him enough time off. But after stepping in for Ruffin to run the state's annual three-day jamboree event during Memorial Day Weekend 2022 (Ruffin had to leave town and initially announced that the event would be canceled), Steiner realized how much he could offer the organization.

So, he went to Ruffin with a proposal: He would serve as vice president for the rest of the year, essentially shadowing Ruffin, then take over the presidency in 2023, with Ruffin moving to VP at that point.



"I said, 'Hey Dez, I'll take over for you, but we've got to do this right,'" Steiner recalled. "And he's like, 'Man, you're the first person in five years that's ever said that they would help. If you want to come and take this over, I'll be right behind you, and we'll do this together.'"

After spending the first few months of his presidency rebuilding the federation's infrastructure, Steiner shifted his focus to the tournament trail. In recent years, the jamboree had been the organization's only adult tournament, serving as the qualifying event for the National Semi-Finals. Steiner felt that didn't jive with its family-friendly ethos. He wanted to host separate qualifiers for TBF members while also using the tournaments to attract potential new members.

His solution: a pair of single-day, big bass events that doubled as Semi-Finals qualifiers, one on each side of the state. TBF members competed against one another in a best-five-fish format for spots in the National Semi-Finals, while unaffiliated anglers paid \$200 to get in on the competition for the biggest fish. Steiner was able to generate \$7,200 for the big bass winners of the initial event. He then hit his goal of cutting a \$10,000 check to the top team in the second. That payout — plus the atmosphere he created during weigh-in — turned heads.

"Since we've got pictures of somebody holding a \$10,000 check — and only 30 people entered this tournament, 30 boats — people are like, 'I had a 1-in-30 chance at \$10,000? Where do I sign up for this?'" Steiner said. "I'm like, 'I've been advertising this thing for months and you guys didn't want to sign up.' Now there's going to be 70 boats at the next one."

## MORE GROWTH AHEAD FOR WASHINGTON FEDERATION

Steiner's work improving and expanding the Washington federation is just getting started. He plans to further grow the tournament schedule in 2024. In past years, each of the state's eight separate bass clubs has typically hosted its own tournament. Steiner wants to bring those under the TBF umbrella. He's proposed a circuit that would consist of 10 events, one hosted by each club plus two by the state federation. Anglers' three best finishes would earn points in the season-long standings, which would be used to determine who qualifies for the National Semi-Finals.

"Now I have this huge umbrella that, hey, TBF is putting on 10 of these events, we're putting on five high school events, we're putting on a statewide jamboree," Steiner said. "I've got 18 events that TBF is going to be doing next



Tony Steiner

year — do you want to be part of that sponsorship and give statewide coverage to everybody? Instead of, yeah, we did one tournament, we did this jamboree. That's what it looked like when I took over; this is what it's going to look like next year."

Unifying bass anglers across the state, Steiner believes, would not only boost angler awareness and sponsorship interest in TBF, but benefit all warmwater anglers in a region where bass fishing has been an afterthought.

In 2019, a state House bill aimed at increasing salmon population sought to declassify bass, channel catfish and walleye as "game fish," which would have removed all size and creel limits for them. A handful of anglers succeeded in getting the language of the bill altered. Steiner believes having a unified coalition of bass enthusiasts — not to mention proof of bass fishing's popularity based on federation membership and tournament participation — would make it easier to thwart similar legislation in the future.

"At that time when they were doing that, the people in the game department said, 'You guys are unorganized and you're not a viable group. If you want to fight for your rights of what you guys are doing, you need to be organized,'" Steiner said. "And that's one thing that I want to put together with all of these clubs. They've all been gone doing their own thing. I want to get them all united. We want to all be on one front the next time that we have a House bill that comes up that's going after our fish."

## MONSTER FINAL DAY LANDS OHIO DUO JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP CROWN

Grayson Goodwin and Colton Baker picked the perfect time to unlock the bite on Oklahoma's Sooner Lake. After sneaking into the final day of the Junior World Championships — the annual title event for TBF's top youth clubs, held July 26-28 — the Ohio duo hauled in the biggest bag of the tournament after weights zeroed for the third day of competition, boating five bass for 15 pounds, 8 ounces.

The 54-boat field comprised of anglers in eighth grade and younger was whittled to 12 on Day 3, with the top two overall teams and the two best from each of the five national divisions taking the water to decide a champion. Like many of the contestants, Goodwin and Baker initially found the fishing slow due to the summer heat, but their two-day total of 8-2 was enough to earn them second place in the northern division and a spot in the championship day field. They nearly doubled that weight on the final day.



Grayson Goodwin and Colton Baker

Goodwin and Baker topped the second-place duo of Pennsylvania's Ty Magargle and Quinten Bergey by an even 3 pounds. They earned \$6,000 in scholarships to be used at the postsecondary institutions of their choosing. Oklahoma's Kade Evers (the son of Bass Pro Tour pro Edwin Evers) and Grady Vogele finished third.

## NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS UNDERWAY

Earning a trip to the Federation National Championship represents the ultimate goal for every TBF angler. A handful have already punched their tickets for 2024.

As of this writing, six of TBF's 22 districts have staged their National Semi-Final (NSF) events. The highest-finishing boater and co-angler from each state will qualify for the National Championship, where the winner will take home the Living Your Dream prize package, which includes a fully-outfitted Ranger Z520 and paid entry into whatever national circuit they choose to fish the following year. States that enter more than 40 boats in their respective NSF will get to send a second tandem to the National Championship, while those with 80-plus representatives will send a third, and so on. The location and dates for the National Championship will be announced in November, once all qualifying tournaments have been contested.

## DISTRICT WINNERS

District 6: Arkansas  
Lake Dardanelle  
Boater: Kevin Brown (25.16 lbs)  
Co-angler: Dewey Larson (12.10 lbs)

District 6: Oklahoma  
Lake Dardanelle  
Boater: Bradley Sullivan (20.90 lbs)  
Co-angler: Brett Taylor (13.68 lbs)

District 21: New Mexico  
Wilson Lake  
Boater: Jeremy Fuentes (19.20 lbs)  
Co-angler: Mike Estrada (12.10 lbs)

District 21: Colorado  
Wilson Lake  
Boater: Ron Giebel (16.23 lbs)  
Co-angler: Tim McClintick (15.43 lbs)

District 22: Utah  
Starvation Reservoir  
Boater: Tyler Ivie (19.60 lbs)  
Co-angler: Dave Cole (14.18 lbs)

District 22: Nevada  
Starvation Reservoir  
Boater: Doug Jones (14.69 lbs)  
Co-Angler: Jonathan Jackson (14.72 lbs)



Left to right: Kevin Brown, Bradley Sullivan, Jeremy Fuentes and Ron Giebel

# SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING STATE CHAMPIONS

**Idaho | Cascade Lake**  
**Eli Meckert, Haden Ryza**  
 Idaho Student Anglers  
 13.58 pounds



**Maine | Crescent Lake**  
**Barrett Lewis, Jaden Meehan**  
 Maine Bass Catchers of SAF  
 15.63 pounds



**Michigan | Lake Charlevoix**  
**Calvin McMurtrie, Dylan Nichols**  
 Western Panthers  
 19.02 pounds



**Vermont | Lake Champlain**  
**Ethan Bromley, Isayah Isham**  
 Mt. Aberham Eagles  
 17.65 pounds



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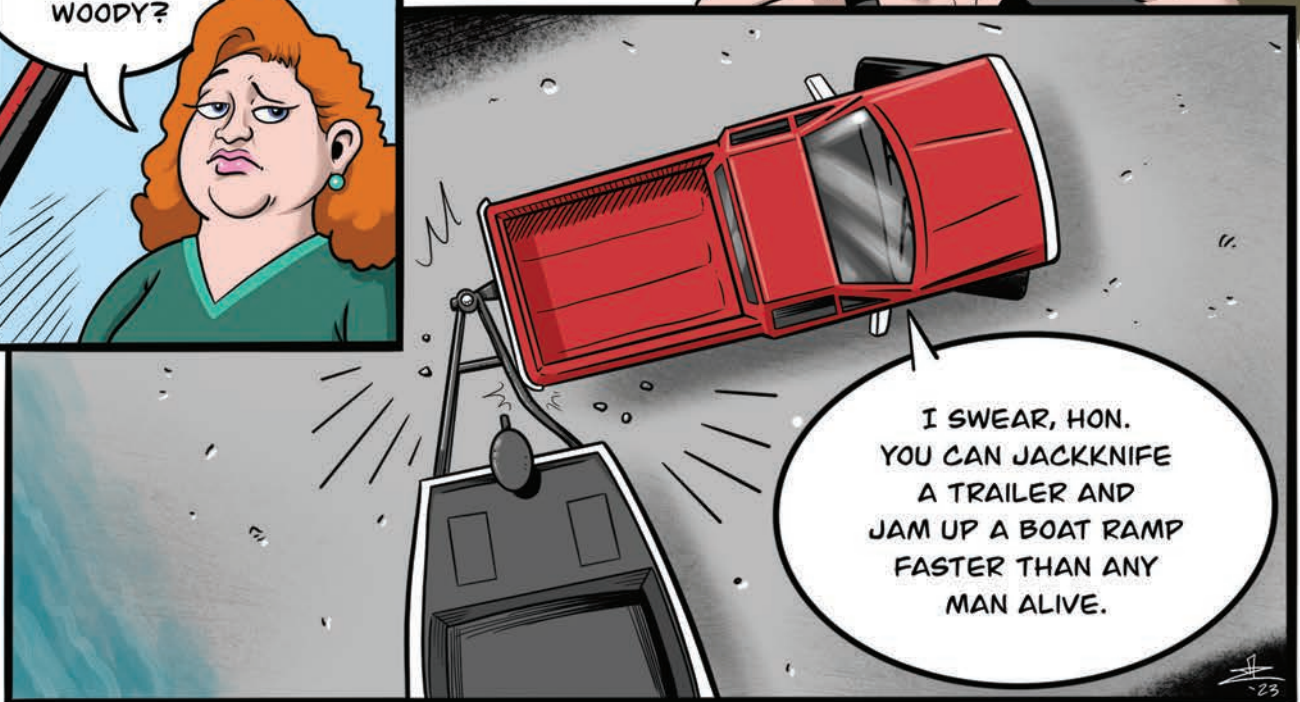
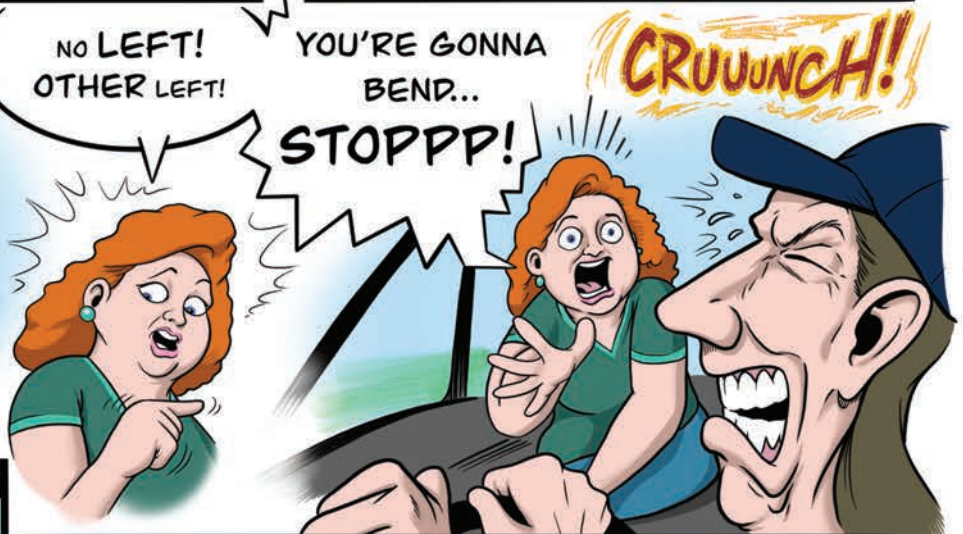
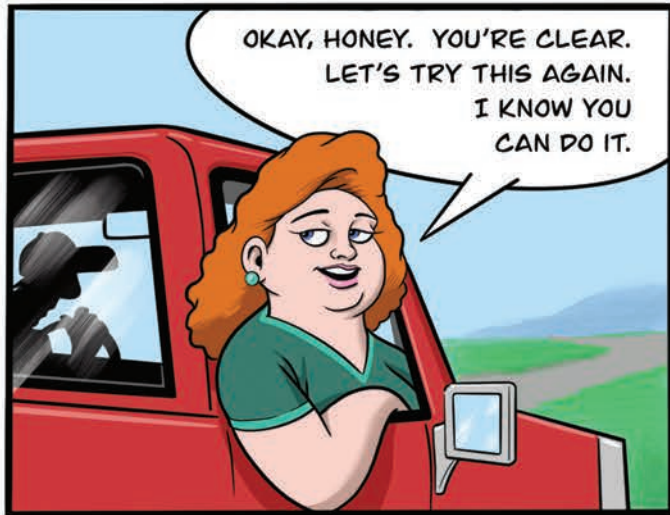
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