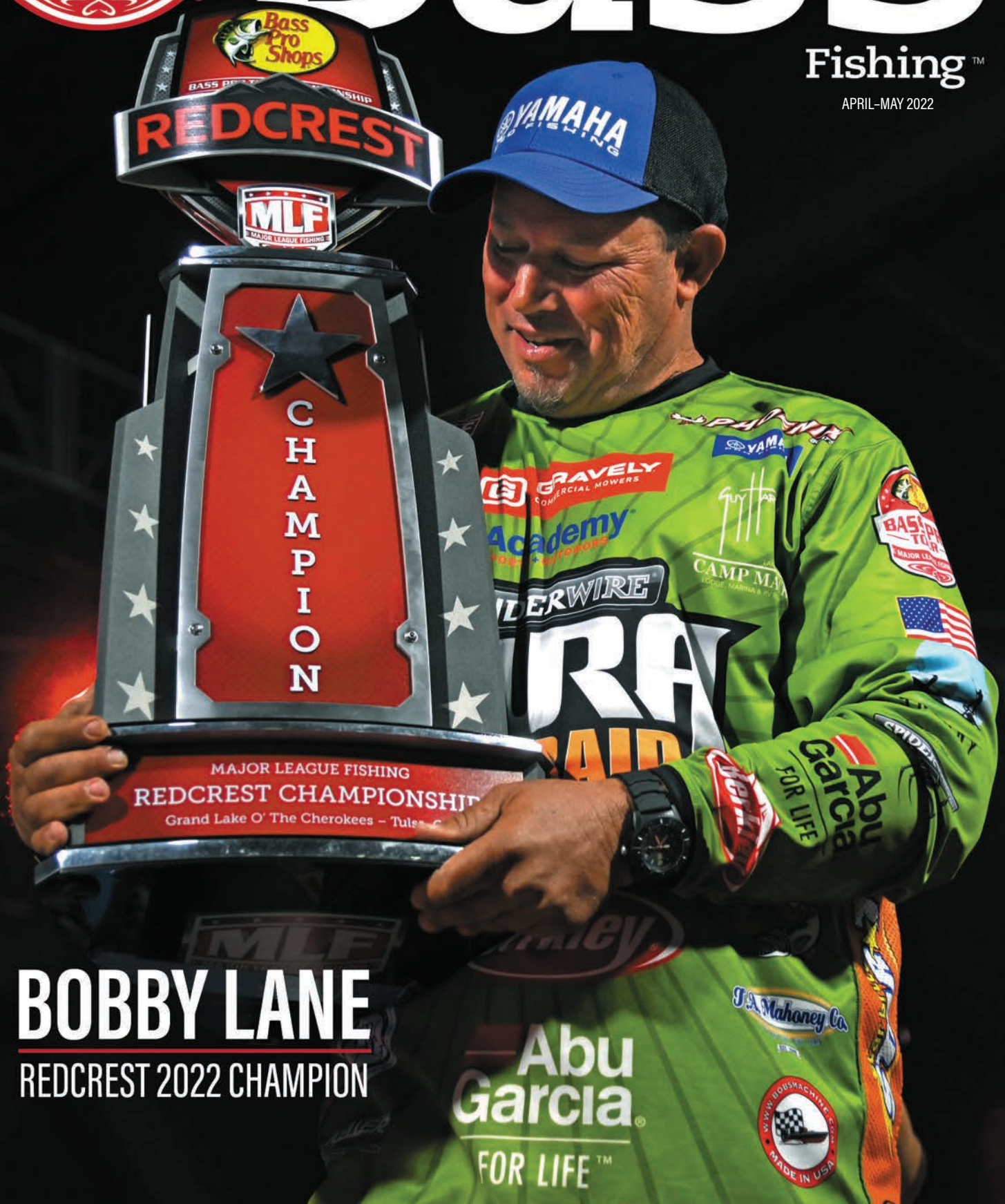




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APRIL-MAY 2022



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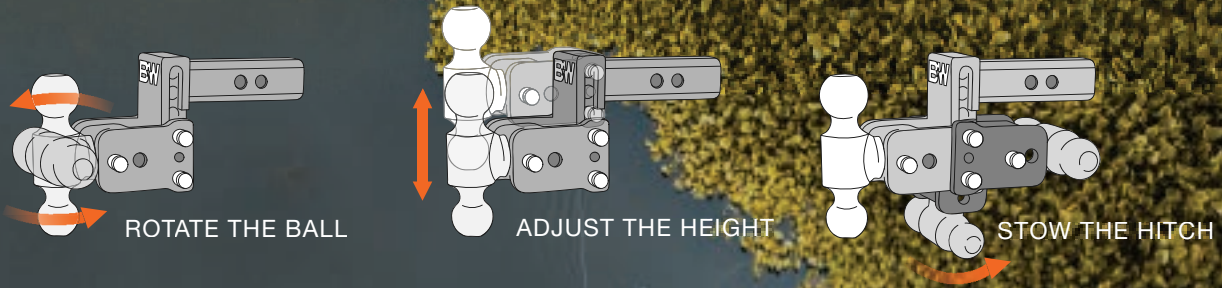
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## IT'S ALL RELATIVE

“Big fish” means something different to everyone. To folks who love the thrill of wrangling massive tarpon in the Gulf, 200 pounds might constitute a truly special specimen. To a youngster just beginning his or her fishing journey, it might be a 6-inch bluegill or a 1-pound bass. To my wife, it’s any bass I catch and show her a photo of, regardless of size, in a display of loving support.

To professional bass anglers, “big fish” is often relative to the fishery. A 4-pound largemouth on one lake might be a prize, especially when it contributes to a quality tournament stringer. That same fish might not even make it to the weigh-in stage on some lakes. And if your home fishery is Lake Fork – site of the Bass Pro Tour’s Toro Stage Two Presented by Grundéns back in February – a big bass to you probably isn’t anything south of 5 or 6 pounds. Just ask Bradley Roy (11-11) or Alton Jones (11-2) or Zack Birge (10-14) or Dustin Connell (10-7) or Brandon Coulter (10-2), who all got to experience the thrill of adding double-digit behemoths to SCORETRACKER® during that event.

And then there’s experience. To a seasoned bass angler with decades of catches to recall, a “big fish” is likely one that slots somewhere in the top 10 percent of his or her lifetime catches. If you’ve never caught a 5-pound largemouth or a 4-pound smallmouth, those fish might be trophies to you. If you’ve caught hundreds, your perception of “big” is probably a little different.

But here’s the thing: Regardless of what size a fish has to be for you to consider it “big,” we all still celebrate those fish as something *worth* celebrating. We’re all inherently enamored with catching the biggest fish we can catch. We’re always chasing special. We want to experience the next, better thing. And as bass fishing fans, we also tend to live vicariously through those who get to live that experience.

That’s why, as you turn the pages of this magazine, you’re going to notice a theme throughout. From the Tactical Bassin column (wherein Tim Little gives insight on how to catch your personal-best bass this spring) to “Tales of Tanks” (Joe Sills’ handywork in getting several pros to give firsthand accounts of *their* personal bests) to Sean Ostruszka’s uncovering the secrets of downsizing baits to catch bigger bass (page 62), we’re all about big bass and helping you catch them.

Hopefully the words and images in this issue inspire you to go out and pursue your own personal-best bass – whether that’s a 3-pounder or a 13-pounder – not as a feather in your cap but as a rung on a ladder. Because that’s the truly special thing about bass fishing: There’s always a bigger fish to be caught, a new goal to accomplish and another memory to be made.



**JUSTIN ONSLOW, MANAGING EDITOR**



Official Vehicle

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Prototype vehicle shown with options.



*Kevin Van Dam*

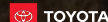
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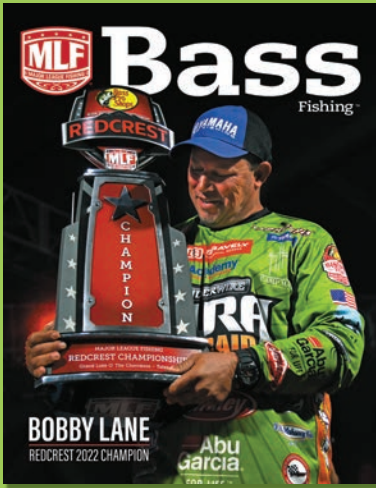
As shown, vehicle has 12,000 lb. of towing capacity. See Owner's Manual for towing instructions and limitations.  
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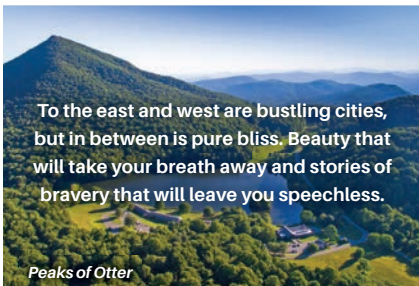
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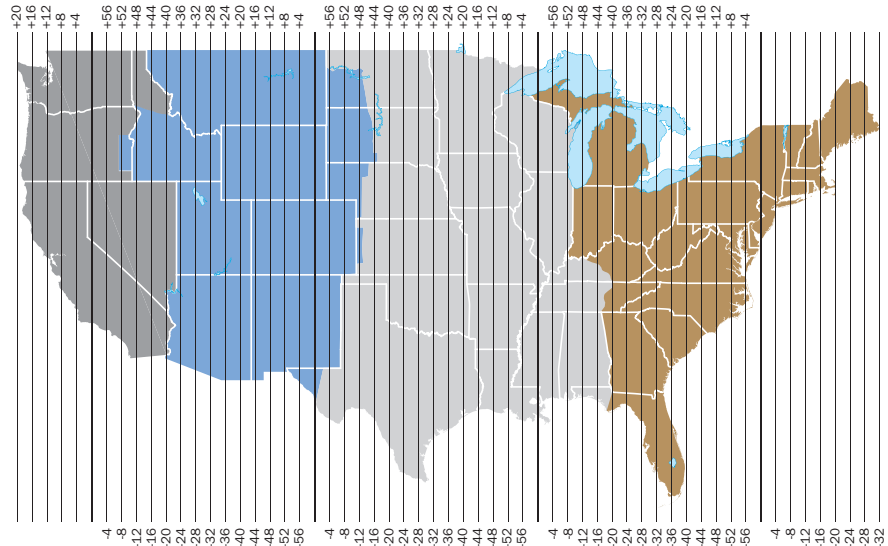


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## SOLUNAR TABLES

MAY-JUNE 2022

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



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

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

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PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

## “BIG TIME” BOBBY!

### Lane Secures REDCREST 2022 Win With Late Heroics on Grand Lake

*Florida pro catches final scorable fish with just minutes to spare*

In a 17-year career that spans more than 200 tour-level tournaments, Florida pro Bobby Lane has weighed in literal tons of largemouth bass. Known affectionately (and accurately) throughout the tournament world as “Big Fish” Bobby, the Berkley pro has made a comfortable living putting heavy weights in his boat.

But as he stared intently at the scale in the waning minutes of the Championship Round of REDCREST 2022 Presented by Costa on Oklahoma’s Grand Lake, Lane’s entire existence for a few nervous seconds shrank to the smallest of weights: 1 ounce.

Lane had already done the nearly unthinkable in chasing down Jacob Wheeler and Dustin Connell after entering the final period of REDCREST with an 11-pound deficit. But after correctly surmising that his fish had transitioned from the rocky structure where he had made hay all week cranking a Berkley Frittside 5 to shallow docks and switching to a green pumpkin jig with a Berkley PowerBait Meaty Chunk Jr. trailer, Lane had methodically chipped away at the lead.

First came a 3-pound, 10-ouncer. And then eight minutes later, the Berkley Big Bass of the day, a 6-3. And then three more fish totaling 7-13 that brought him to within 6 ounces of the lead with 12 minutes remaining in the period.

And then the 1-ounce difference-maker.

With just over 4 minutes left on the official clock, Lane set the hook on a largemouth that looked to be right on the cusp of the minimum 2-pound scorable weight, clipped it on the Brecknell scale and watched as the weight displayed: 1-15, just 1 ounce shy of the minimum. Per Bass Pro Tour rules, Lane asked for the first of two allowable re-weighs: 1-15 again.

“One more,” Lane said as his official reset the scale for what would turn out to be the last fish of REDCREST.

With 3:12 remaining, Lane’s fish settled on the scale exactly where he needed it to: 1 ounce heavier and officially scorable at 2-0, giving him a lead he held on to for the biggest win of his career. The Florida pro finished the day with 10 scorable fish for 29-14, edging out Luke Clausen (28-11) and Wheeler (28-4).

“I’ve never been hungrier for something big,” Lane admitted.

### LANE LANDED ON THE RIGHT PATTERN

Throughout the first several years of his career, Lane built a stout reputation as the prototypical Florida hammer, piling up Top 10s in shallow-water locales where you’d expect a Floridian to excel (Florida, southern Alabama, Texas, Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana, etc.) Along the way, however, the youngest of the three Lane brothers quietly showed

off a staggering level of bass-catching diversity with Top 5s on clear, deep spotted bass lakes and claiming his first major win (a 2009 Bassmaster Elite Series) by cranking deep structure on the Tennessee River.

Consequently, it came as no surprise when Lane cranked his way through the Qualifying and Knockout rounds on Grand Lake (and the first two-thirds of the Championship Round) with an HD brown Frittside 5 and then veered 180 degrees to the shallowest of cover as fish slid further into the pockets he was fishing in Drowning and Horse Creeks.

"The fish started just slapping at my Frittside," Lane said. "I went through these stretches where I had caught plenty of fish all week in 3 to 7 feet of water. I'd have fish slapping the Frittside and think to myself 'I know that's a perfect spot, they should be biting'. I just felt like they were changing. I went back around the back side of the bluff wall where I was cranking and pitched a jig to a tree laying down in 2 feet of water. I caught one right off the bat and then lost one - that's what keyed me in."

Lane put the cranking rod away for good then, putting his REDCREST hopes on the handful of pieces of shallow cover he knew existed in the very back of his pocket. He caught a 3-11 on a laydown and the 6-3 off of a shallow dock, and kept flipping the Meaty Chunk Jr. until lines out.

"Once I caught those first two fish, I told myself 'You stay shallow and don't you dare leave,'" Lane said. "If I found a log or a bush with a foot to a foot-and-a-half of water over it, that's where the fish were starting to key on. It's springtime; the water is warming up and getting stable. I think those fish were just over winter and ready to move up."

## LANE COMPLETES THE CIRCLE

In the afterglow of the trophy ceremony in front of a packed house at the REDCREST Outdoors Sports Expo Presented by Costa at Tulsa's SageNet Center, Lane admitted to a life-changing sense of relief at claiming the flashy new red-and-silver REDCREST 2022 trophy and the \$300,000 champion's payout.

"I can't really even describe how good it feels," Lane admitted. "I've been so close to a career-defining win a few times, and a guy can't help but start think 'Am I ever going to get that big win?'. I thought I had it in me after the first couple of days (on Grand Lake), but man, to have everything happen like it did and to be able to call myself the REDCREST champion is an unbelievable feeling."

## REDCREST COVERAGE ON MAJORLEAGUEFISHING.COM

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## RECORD-BREAKING BASS PRO TOUR SEASON JUST GETTING STARTED

The 2022 season has already churned out record largemouth and spots. Could smallmouth be next?



The 2022 Bass Pro Tour season started off with three unbelievable, record-breaking events. Randy Howell put on a giant largemouth bass spectacle during the Knockout and Championship rounds of Stage One to start the season, three anglers put themselves into the big-bass record books at Stage Two at Lake Fork, and, quietly, Stage Three saw the league-record spotted bass weight broken five times at Lewis Smith Lake.

Watching all these records fall got us thinking about how to highlight the fish, the anglers carving their names into the early Bass Pro Tour history books, and the fisheries that are producing such exciting events. We partnered with MLF analyst Marty Stone and dove into the BPT stats to pull out as much information as we possibly could to highlight these three events – as well as give you the records that may fall the rest of the season.

### RECORD-SHATTERING LARGEMOUTH

When the 2022 schedule was released, we all circled Caney Creek and Bussey Brake as fisheries that could have potential to be extremely special – and they certainly proved us right. Since the implementation of the variable

minimum-scorable-bass weight, Lake Fork had the highest average catch weight for any fishery for a full-field stage event at 3 pounds, 8 ounces. This came during the five days of competition during Stage Three in 2020, with the single best day of that event averaging 3-10 per fish caught. The one-day Knockout Round on Caney Creek broke that record by 2 ounces with an average catch weight of 3-12.

The previous heaviest largemouth bass in league history also came from Lake Fork in 2020, weighing 10-8. Randy Howell broke that record on Caney Creek by landing a largemouth weighing 10-11. The record breaking continued at Stage One in the Championship Round at Bussey Brake when Howell smashed his own record by catching a 12-14 behemoth largemouth. Bussey Brake fished tough, producing only 31 scorable bass, and with that low total and the true giants caught there, Bussey Brake broke the single-day average fish weight record as well, at an unbelievable average weight of 5-4 per bass weighed in.

Stage Two was held on historic Lake Fork in Texas, and Howell's reign holding the No. 1 and No. 2 largest fish in Bass Pro Tour history was short-lived, as Stage Two proved to be just as magical as the previous event. On Qualifying Day 1 of

Group A, Bradley Roy and Zack Birge both landed fish to join the top five. Roy's fish weighed in at 11-11, putting it at No. 2 all-time. Birge's fish weighed 10-14, temporarily taking the No. 3 spot.

During the Knockout Round, that third spot was taken by Alton Jones Sr. with an 11-2 largemouth. Here's how the top five biggest largemouth bass in league history looked after Stage Two:

- 
- 1st: Randy Howell – 12 pounds, 14 ounces – Bussey Brake (2022)
  - 2nd: Bradley Roy – 11 pounds, 11 ounces – Lake Fork (2022)
  - 3rd: Alton Jones – 11 pounds, 2 ounces – Lake Fork (2022)
  - 4th: Zack Birge – 10 pounds, 14 ounces – Lake Fork (2022)
  - 5th: Randy Howell – 10 pounds, 11 ounces – Caney Creek (2022)
- 

Lake Fork didn't just produce record fish – it was consistent. With 45 fish over 7 pounds (which were DNA swabbed), 20 of those were over 8 pounds and three were over 10 pounds. Fork also doubled down on the average fish-weight record for a fishery. During the six-day event, the average fish weighed was 3-13 and the largest average for one day was 4-2 in the Championship Round, falling a little short of Bussey Brake's record.

## SPOTLIGHT ON BIG SPOTS

Stage Three on Smith Lake proved to be a record-setting event as well. It's not widely known that we keep record of species for every fish caught, but we certainly do. That means we have records not just for largest bass caught, but also for largest bass caught by species.

Coming into Stage Three, the largest spotted bass caught in league history was 4 pounds, 5 ounces in 2019 at Smith.

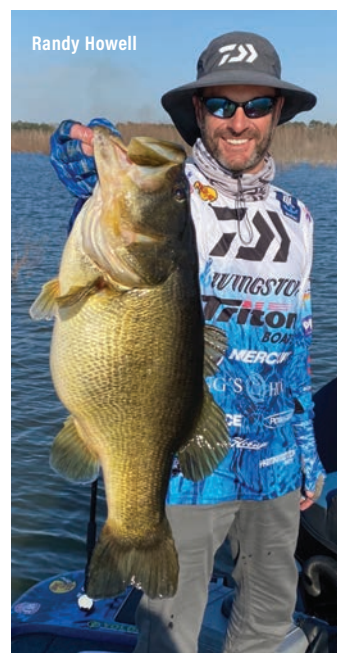
Andy Montgomery broke the record on Qualifying Day 2 for Group A by 1 ounce. During the Knockout Round, Jordan Lee took that record from Montgomery again by 1 ounce. The Championship Round started off with Jesse Wiggins breaking the record with a 4-9 spot. This was later surpassed by Brent Ehrler and Edwin Evers, who both brought in 4-pound, 10-ounce spots.

So, after it was all over, the record for largest spotted bass was broken or tied a total of five times during the event. Here's where the top five spotted bass in league history stand now:

- 
- 1st (tie): Brent Ehrler and Edwin Evers  
4 pounds, 10 ounces – Smith Lake (2022)
  - 3rd: Jesse Wiggins – 4 pounds, 9 ounces – Smith Lake (2022)
  - 4th: Jordan Lee – 4 pounds, 7 ounces – Smith Lake (2022)
  - 5th (tie): Andy Montgomery and Jesse Wiggins  
4 pounds, 6 ounces – Smith Lake (2022)
- 

And just to round out the category (and preview records we could see broken as the Bass Pro Tour heads north to close out the season), here are the top five smallmouth bass in Bass Pro Tour history. These records will be put to the test in 2022, possibly at Mille Lacs Lake during Stage Seven in September:

- 
- 1st: Justin Lucas – 6 pounds, 13 ounces  
St. Lawrence River (2021)
  - 2nd (tie): Jared Lintner and Jeff Kriet – 6 pounds, 10 ounces  
St. Lawrence River (2021)
  - 4th (tie): Randall Tharp and Jacob Wheeler – 6 pounds, 6 ounces  
St. Lawrence River (2021) ■
- 



# WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

## MLF NOW!

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

April 9–14: Bass Pro Tour General Tire Heavy Hitters @ Lake Palestine

April 21–24: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Lithium Pros Stop 3 @ Pickwick Lake Presented by Covercraft

April 30–May 5: Bass Pro Tour Stage Four @ Lake of the Ozarks

May 12–5: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Stop 4 @ Lake Guntersville Presented by A.R.E.

June 4–9: Bass Pro Tour Stage Five @ Watts Bar Lake

## TV BROADCASTS

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

April 2: Bass Pro Tour 2021 Stage Three Championship Round @ Harris Chain of Lakes

April 9: Bass Pro Tour 2021 Stage Four Knockout Round @ Lake Chickamauga

April 16: Bass Pro Tour 2021 Stage Four Championship Round @ Lake Chickamauga

April 23: Bass Pro Tour 2021 Stage Five Knockout Round @ St. Lawrence River

April 30: Bass Pro Tour 2021 Stage Five Championship Round @ St. Lawrence River

May 7: Bass Pro Tour 2021 Stage Six Championship Round @ Lake Champlain

May 14: Bass Pro Tour 2021 Stage Seven Championship Round @ Lake St. Clair

DON'T FORGET TO FOLLOW MLF ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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

April 2: Patriot Cup Elimination Round 1

April 9: Patriot Cup Elimination Round 2

April 16: Patriot Cup Elimination Round 3

April 23: Patriot Cup Sudden Death Round 1

April 30: Patriot Cup Sudden Death Round 2

May 7: Patriot Cup Championship Round

May 14: Summit Cup Elimination Round 1

May 21: Summit Cup Elimination Round 2

May 28: Summit Cup Elimination Round 3

June 4: Summit Cup Sudden Death Round 1

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

April 2: MLF All Angles – 2022 Patriot Cup Elimination Round 1

April 9: MLF All Angles – 2022 Patriot Cup Elimination Round 2

April 16: MLF All Angles – 2022 Patriot Cup Elimination Round 3

April 23: MLF All Angles – 2022 Patriot Cup Sudden Death Round 1

April 30: MLF All Angles – 2022 Patriot Cup Sudden Death Round 2

May 7: MLF All Angles – 2022 Patriot Cup Championship Round

May 14: MLF All Angles – 2022 Summit Cup Elimination Round 1

May 21: MLF All Angles – 2022 Summit Cup Elimination Round 2

May 28: MLF All Angles – 2022 Summit Cup Elimination Round 3

June 4: MLF All Angles – 2022 Summit Cup Sudden Death Round 1



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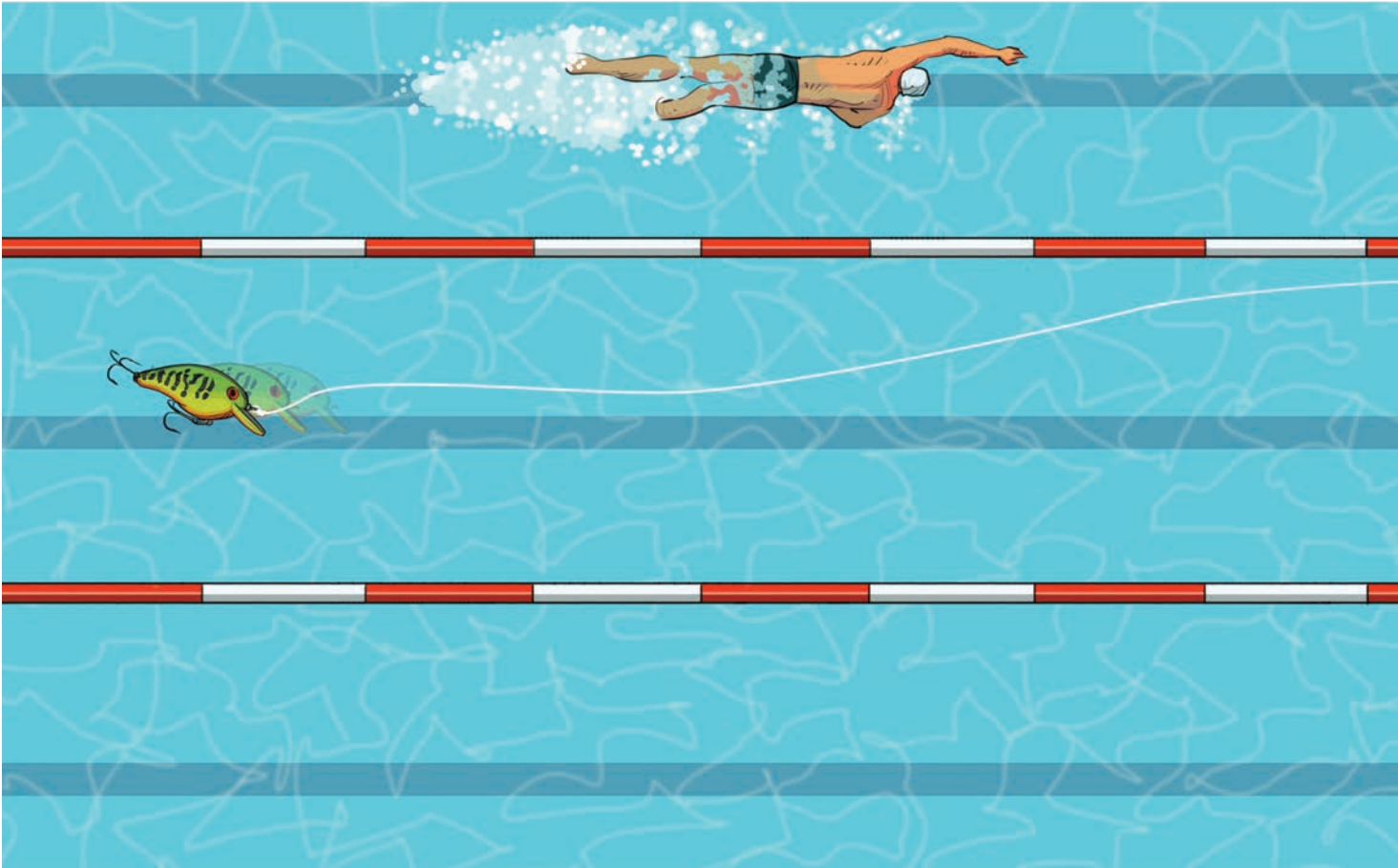
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## POOLING DATA

If you're ever invited to a bass pro's pool party, you better bring a rod



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

**B**ack in the 1980s and '90s, there was a joke among pro anglers who had swimming pools: "That's not my swimming pool," they would say. "That's my 'lure-testing facility.'"

Today, a pro angler installing a swimming pool to test lures is not a joke – it's a reality. Some have even made their pools into tax write-offs in the name of "testing lures."

If you're with the IRS and that sounds like a stretch, consider that in 2003, pro angler Takahiro Omori put a large pool in his back yard for the sole purpose of testing lures. Measuring in at an odd 40 feet by 15 feet, the pool is not a normal backyard pool by any means; it's a long lane of water with a depth that slowly descends from 3 feet in the shallow end to 8 feet in the deep end. He had a line painted on the bottom, straight down the middle, the entire length of the pool.

"I had it built that way to allow for a long cast, which is important to really see how a lure runs," Omori said. "I put the line down the middle to help me tune the baits to run certain ways."

Omori has an obsession with squarebill crankbaits, and after the pool was built, he spent hundreds of hours studying, tuning and experimenting with crankbaits. In August of 2004, Omori won the Bassmaster Classic on Lake Wylie with a squarebill.

"There is no doubt that studying those crankbaits for so many hours in that pool helped me win that Classic," he added.

A big advantage he derived from the pool was specifically tuning his crankbaits to run slightly one way or another, to match the speed of his boat as he fished down a bank.

"If I am cranking down a bank and the boat is moving from my left to right, I want my bait to run just a little bit to the right to keep up with my boat," Omori explained. "Same when I go the other way; I

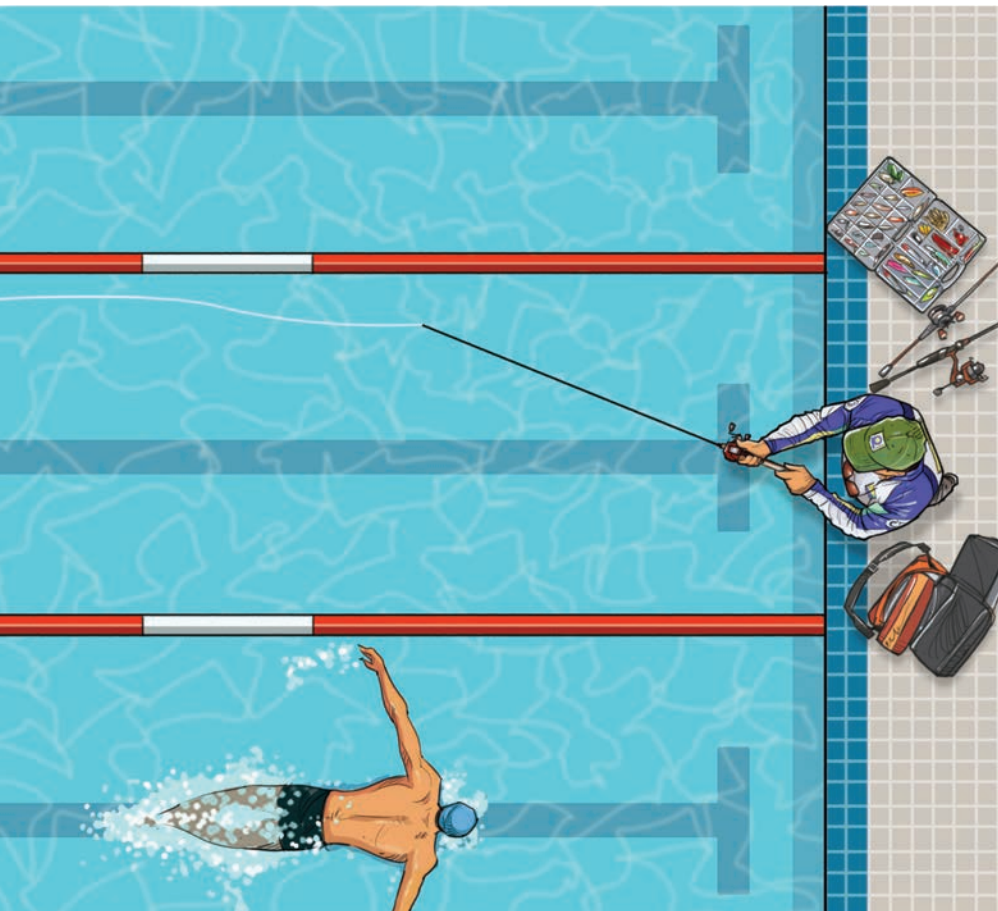


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

“Some lures are liars. They tell you they’re doing their job at the boat, but when you send them out there to work, they’re goofing off.”

So stunned by these revelations, Dudley is in the process of completing his own “lure-testing facility” that will be next level. The dimensions will be 50 by 70 feet and he plans to line the bottom with real-world bass cover like stumps, pilings, rock and gravel. The testing facility will serve as the center stage for his new YouTube series where he’ll run all sorts of lures through the facility and film them underwater for the world to see.

Ott DeFoe is another pro who has identified the benefits of backyard lure testing. At his home, he took a normal family-sized pool design and stretched out the corners to make it a little bigger.

Like Omori and Dudley, DeFoe claims that one of the most critical lessons about pool testing is seeing just how long it takes a lure action to totally engage after the reel handle has been turned, especially with winding baits like crankbaits, swimbaits, swim jigs and vibrating jigs.

“Sometimes lures don’t start really running right until a couple of cranks into the retrieve,” he said. “If you’re fishing isolated targets, that’s critical.”

Following DeFoe’s logic, a reel that takes up 25 inches per turn and takes two turns to get the bait running right equals 4 feet of movement needed to get the presentation right.

DeFoe has also run hundreds of crankbaits through his pool and has been surprised at the variations in the descent speed.

“I test my crankbaits by casting from the shallow end into the deep end to see how fast it dives to contact the bottom,” DeFoe said. “Some baits don’t dive as fast as we think, especially on little short casts. To remedy that, I’ll now go to a 5- to 7-foot runner when fishing tight targets in 3 to 5 feet, just to make the bait dive faster to hit the target better on less line. That was a big key to my Bass Pro Tour win at the Harris Chain last year – using a deeper-diving bait on shallow targets just to make faster contact with the targets.”

Just another little trick he learned from watching lures in his pool...or, uh, *lure-testing facility*. ■

want it to run a little bit to the left. This allows me to cover water a lot faster.”

In recent years, Omori has studied vibrating jigs and swim jigs in his pool, experimenting with a multitude of different line sizes, trailers and head sizes to see how they affect the depth they run.

“Just changing the trailer style on these baits can change the depth it runs by 6 inches to a foot,” Omori said. “That’s a big deal when fishing over grass. I would never know any of this if I couldn’t see exactly how deep they run in the pool.”

David Dudley candidly notes that seeing his lures in a pool for the first time was a sobering experience. Dudley’s most shocking revelation was discovering what lures do – or don’t do – at the end of a long cast.

“Lures are always on their best behavior at the finish line,” Dudley said. “In that last 10 feet that we see with our eyes, they’re always thumping, vibrating and wiggling at their best. Even if you

pitch out there 10 or 20 feet for a ‘test cast’ and watch it come back, it looks great. That’s why testing lures in a standard backyard pool is not a real test.”

Dudley would know. Several years ago, he secured access to a college’s Olympic-size pool (164 feet in length) and spent dozens of hours casting different makes and models of common lures a true distance like he would in a tournament. He wanted to see what the lures looked like where anglers never see them – at the end of the cast. The results were not always pretty.

“The last 10 feet is not the test; the first 10 feet is the real test, which is usually where the target is,” he explained. “That’s when you’ll see just how lazy a lure can be. Swimbaits that run on their side, jerkbaits that roll over and wacky rigs that fall like a stick with no wiggling. We have no idea this is happening because we never see our lures that far out where line drag is hindering the lure, so we just assume they’re running fine.

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PHOTOS BY JOEL SHANGLE

## A TRIP TO OTT'S GARAGE

It's a happy marriage between Rapala and the master of the flat-sided crankbait



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

**O**n the stage at the 2019 Bassmaster Classic in East Tennessee, winner Ott DeFoe credited the success he found in his back yard to a new Rapala crankbait. Other pros added to the hype, acknowledging the same lure as the reason for much of their catch.

Dan Quinn, Rapala's Director of Field Promotions, perked up and took notice, a smile brought on by both pride and anxiety. You see, according to Quinn, the company didn't have a new crankbait in 2019.

Such was the beginning of Ott's Garage.

By now, most hardcore bass anglers have heard of the OG ("Ott's Garage") Series of baits offered by Rapala. First came the OG Slim, DeFoe's hand-made flat-sided plug, responsible for helping him win the Bass Pro Tour event on the Harris Chain - his second win in three stage events to begin the 2021 season that propelled DeFoe high into the AOY race. It may come as a surprise to many fans to learn that the original "Slim" lure, used in exact

specifications to mass produce the baits on the shelf today, was created, from scratch, by DeFoe. Not a single detail has been changed.

"He gave it to us on a silver platter," said Quinn.

Normally, that's extremely unusual, as most ideas coming in from the field need numerous tweaks to be produced en masse. But it's par for the course when working with DeFoe.

"He's in a league of his own," Quinn continued. "Every time, he hits the nail on the head. He's truly gifted."

### EAST TENNESSEE CRANKBAIT BLOODLINES

So where did this come from? How is it that DeFoe can simply look at a lure (or draw one from a vision in his head) and produce something that catches more bass than anything on the market?

"I fished my first tournament when I was nine," DeFoe said. "By the time I was 12, I was all-in."

His bass upbringing in East Tennessee placed DeFoe in crankbait country, or, more specifically, flat-side central.

"[Flat-sided crankbaits] fit our fisheries," he added. "We have older lakes, a lack of cover and hard bottom. Here, it's crankbaits 365."

It didn't take DeFoe long to learn, though, that hand-carved baits could be budget-busters. A friend's father, Steve Nichols, was a premier lure maker in the area. DeFoe figured that if he could learn to make lures like Nichols, he could save some serious cash.

With lessons learned from Nichols and others, DeFoe started tinkering with crankbaits. Bodies were cut from balsa blocks, sides and shoulders rounded by hand. Bills were cut from LEXAN and circuit board using snips. Wire hook hangers were installed. Special glues were used. Lures resulted from hundreds of hours in the shop and testing on the water.

"At the time, I didn't realize the education I was getting," DeFoe reflected.

I doubt he thought about his nearly \$3 million in future earnings, either.

DeFoe's early tinkering quickly resulted in success. He recounted several instances where, after making a lure the night before, he and a buddy would rack up high finishes in a team tournament the following day. Oftentimes, they'd have only one single lure to share between them. In fact, according to DeFoe, the original prototype for his now famous Slim was just such a bait, resulting in a 3-pound bass on his buddy's first cast.

## FROM FAILURE TO SLIM SUCCESS

The OG Slim is actually the result of an invention paired with modification. Prior to DeFoe's dabbling, Rapala manufactured a similar flat-sided crankbait called the DT Flat, but it never caught on.

Back at headquarters, Quinn admits the DT Flat was doomed at that point.

"It had no sales; it was on its way out," he said. "But once a lure is gone, it can't come back. And we knew Rapala had to have a flat-sided crankbait."

Coincidentally, DeFoe's wheels got to spinning around the same time.

"It was such a good shape," he recalled of the DT Flat lure. "It was very similar to a lot of the homemade ones - I just didn't like the bill and the angle."

DeFoe can usually look at a lure in a package and know exactly how he would refine it to match his needs. Industrial shears in hand, he started in on a carton of DT Flats. After cutting off the bills and sanding down some rough spots, DeFoe was left with blanks, very much like those he'd turned by hand years earlier.

"I really didn't have to do much," he said of his early modifications.

From there, DeFoe tweaked the bill and angle, added premier hooks and quickly had a lure that would become a prototype for a smashing success - at least once he'd caught a couple hundred bass on it.

Rapala viewed DeFoe's passion as a monumental opportunity.

"A lightbulb went off," Quinn said. "We knew it was a definitely a home run."

The connection not only represented a big seller, but also a lure that could be used by Rapala pro staff to excel in competition. Members of the group were polled to determine the best colors to present on the new OG Slim, duplicating the hand-painted hues used by Rapala's top anglers. The unique palette will cycle through the OG Series, then down to Rapala's popular DT Series of crankbaits.

## MORE COMING FROM OTT'S GARAGE

New for the upcoming year is DeFoe's second creation, the OG Tiny. A smaller, shallower-running bait than Slim, Tiny perfectly matches small forage common in the fall and excels in tough fishing conditions. DeFoe used the Rapala OG Tiny to finish third at Lake Champlain on the 2021 BPT campaign, cranking pressured largemouth off grass beds.

Often, DeFoe has both Slim and Tiny tied on, each on Bass Pro Shops cranking sticks, rotating between the two to match the specific circumstance of each cast.

Not surprisingly, expansion is on the horizon for the OG Series.

"The third bait is done," he confirmed. "That one I needed a little more help with - I couldn't just make it at home in the garage."

"Number four is being worked on. I need some ammo in reserve."

The OG series of lures has been selling out everywhere.

"It's been a huge launch," Quinn said. "The marriage is working."

Not surprisingly, DeFoe remains humble in spite of the success of his designs and his success on the water with those lures in hand.

"I'm just thankful that Rapala had a leap of faith and believed in me," he said.

How couldn't they? He's Ott DeFoe. ■



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SMITTYBILT



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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

# CONNECTICUT'S LUNKER KING

Think holding one state record is cool? Try two (or three).

**W**hat bass angler hasn't dreamed of catching a state or world record bass? In Georgia, the state record largemouth is the world record. It's the same for the smallmouth in Tennessee and Kentucky, and for the spotted bass in California.

Being fortunate enough to hook and land a state record bass would be a dream come true for all of us. We'd be in the record book, our friends would be jealous, we'd hold crowds spellbound with tales of the giant, and - if we're extra lucky - we might hold state bragging rights for the rest of our lives.

But what about having two records? What about holding the state record for two bass species ... simultaneously? Impossible, you say. Outrageous! Unfathomable!

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## MEET FRANK DOMURAT

For nearly 20 years, a Connecticut angler held his state's record for largemouth bass and smallmouth bass. What's more, both fish came from the same 297-acre lake.

The angler's name was Frank Domurat, a barber, entrepreneur and civic leader from Newington, a suburb of Hartford. Domurat was born in Connecticut in 1912, and he was an avid angler. He pursued several species over many decades, but bass were his specialty, and he had things dialed in on his favorite body of water – little Mashapaug Lake.

Domurat's gear wouldn't impress anyone today, but it certainly got the job done. He fished from a 28-pound kayak that he built himself and used a Heddon "Pal" tournament casting reel mounted on a rod he cobbled together from an old Shakespeare handle and Silaflex blank wrapped with spinning guides. He spooled the Heddon with 4- or 8-pound-test braided nylon line, which he preferred to monofilament because it didn't stretch. The braided nylon might have presented visibility issues for some anglers, but Domurat did most of his fishing at night or in the low-light hours around dawn and dusk.

And night fishing in that era usually involved the legendary Arbogast Jitterbug. Domurat liked the 1/4- and 3/8-ounce versions in black (night) or perch (dawn and dusk), and he threw the bait whenever the water was calm. The rhythmic "plop, plop, plop" of the Jitterbug must have been mesmerizing to both bass and bass angler. His standard retrieve was slow, with plenty of pauses.

But if the wind ruffled the surface, Domurat ditched the Jitterbug in favor of a 1/4- or 2/5-ounce red and white Dardevle spoon. He'd cast it out near heavy cover – usually brush or rock – and start a medium retrieve almost as soon as the lure hit the water.

Domurat was fishing the spoon late in the afternoon of September 24, 1954, catching just a few little fish when he moved his kayak into a small cove and cast to some rocks.

"When I began the retrieve," he recounted, "the spoon felt snagged, but then a lunker smallmouth jumped and identified himself."

That fish weighed 7 pounds, 10 ounces and was Domurat's first entry in the Connecticut record books.

## RECORD NO. 2

A little less than seven years later, on the night of June 5, 1961, Domurat was back on Lake Mashapaug in his kayak, fishing about 200 yards from where he took the giant bronzeback. This time it was calm, and he was casting the Jitterbug to some lily pads.

"As the plug hit the water, I heard a tremendous crash," he said, "as if someone had really fallen in along the shoreline." When he finally landed the big largemouth, it weighed 12 pounds, 14 ounces and was the largest bass ever taken in the New England states until 1975. It is still the Connecticut state record.

That lunker bested Domurat's previous personal best – a Mashapaug largemouth weighing 9-2 that he caught in 1953 – by nearly 4 pounds!

By the way, his 9-2 was the previous state record.

Domurat's two-lure approach matched his fishery and covered both bass species that lived there. His little kayak got him close to the action without disturbing the fish, and Mashapaug Lake was obviously a big-bass factory in that era.

"You don't need a great number of lures to be a successful fisherman, just a few lures worked correctly," Domurat told an interviewer in the 1970s.

He maintained that anglers waste too much time changing lures and believing they need a different type, size or color when they're probably just fishing in the wrong place.

Domurat was a big believer in fishing alone when targeting giant bass.

"All the big catches were made when I fished alone," he admitted. "Your concentration is greater then, and this is a contributing factor to my success. Learn to leave your problems at home or work. Enjoy the outdoors and concentrate on fishing techniques only."

Words to live by.

For nearly 30 years, Domurat held both the largemouth and smallmouth bass marks in the "Nutmeg State." He lost the smallmouth record in 1980 to a fish that bested his smallmouth by just 2 ounces, but he still retains the largemouth title and no discussion of New England trophy bass anglers could be complete without paying tribute to this man who was also a skilled glider pilot and avid coin collector.

By the way, during much of the time that Domurat owned the Connecticut records for largemouth and smallmouth bass, he also held the state record for northern pike. He caught that fish from the Connecticut River in 1960 – between his record bass catches – and it weighed 16-11. His pike mark was eclipsed in 1974, so for more than a decade, the Newington angling phenom held three of the most coveted fishing records in the state. It's a distinction that will likely never be equaled.

Domurat died in Florida in 1995 at the age of 82.

Earlier, I mentioned that individual anglers held multiple bass records simultaneously in the same state more than once. Frank Domurat in Connecticut was the first of those anglers.

The other double record holder is another interesting story for another time. ■



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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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



# THE PERSONAL-BEST BASS CHECKLIST

Now's the time to catch giants - and preparation is key

**N**ow is the time to catch the biggest bass of your life. That's not hyperbole. It's fact.

The biggest bass in your fishery are currently transitioning to or from their spawning areas. Regardless of which side of the spawn you're facing on your home lake, the big bass are feeding. They may be bulking up to spawn, or they could be recuperating after a successful spawn, but the end result is the same: They're looking for a meal, and if you're prepared with the right lures, the right game plan and the right mentality, you can be the one to give it to them.

I've been blessed to catch some truly remarkable bass over the years. Whether largemouth, smallmouth or spotted bass, the right fish have seemed to come my way time and again, and I feel truly lucky to have caught them. And one common thread that runs between them all: The biggest fish have all come this time of year.

Here are my personal-best bass to date:

**LARGEMOUTH**  
*15 pounds, 0 ounces*

**SMALLMOUTH**  
*7 pounds, 0 ounces*

**SPOTTED**  
*10 pounds, 6 ounces*  
*(former IGFA World Record)*

## AN ENORMOUS LARGEMOUTH BITE

My big largemouth came first. It was an early spring day in 2009, and I was throwing large swimbaits in search of a giant bite on Collins Lake in Northern California. I knew I probably wouldn't get many bites that day, and as it turns out, I was correct. I got two bites the entire day.

I was intentionally targeting fish along secondary points leading into spawning bays, hoping to cross paths with a prespawn giant. After a subtle "tick" on the line, I set the hook into a monster bass. After a short battle, I held up the big ol' bass and was amazed when she

tipped the scales at 9-13. After some high fives and good laughs, I regrouped and made the exact same cast again. This time, the impact of the bite was so violent it nearly ripped the rod out of my hands.

I set the hook and the fight was on. I immediately knew this fish was different. She had so much more power – the head shakes were huge – and I wasn't the one in control of the fight. After an intense battle, the bug-eyed behemoth rose next to the boat. My first thought was that she could eat the 9-pounder I had just caught. I'd never seen anything like it. She measured an incredible 28 1/2 inches long and sported a massive 24-inch girth. She weighed 15 pounds even and was truly the fish of a lifetime.

### **PB SMALLMOUTH: JUST LIKE IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE**

Next came my personal-best smallmouth. I spent years honing my finesse skills in search of giant brown bass, knowing the day would come that I'd battle a true monster on light tackle. That, however, is not how this story played out. Matt and I were fishing during flood conditions caused by a combination of spring runoff and snowmelt. The combination had the lake rising by the minute, and the bass were following the rising water up the bank. The water pouring into the lake was so intense that the fish were actually using eddies and current seams as if it were a river.

I was fan-casting a small paddle-tail swimbait along a current seam when the giant 7-pound smallmouth hit. It was an intense battle, but thankfully I was using heavy tackle and subdued her quickly. Sometimes fish stories aren't as crazy as you'd think.

### **A SPOTTED BASS RECORD**

Finally, my giant spotted bass. Again, Matt and I were fishing together. This time we were on a clear highland reservoir. Matt set the hook first on a smaller

spot. I followed up behind him hoping to take advantage of any schooling fish that might have been fired up by the activity – and it worked. After an intense battle full of long runs and screaming drag, the beast came to the boat.

We both knew immediately this fish would qualify for the IGFA All-Tackle World Record. We began making phone calls and taking all the necessary steps to certify the catch. After submitting all the required documents to the International Game and Fish Association, I waited patiently for an answer. When it came back, it was the news I was hoping for. I was officially granted the all-tackle spotted bass world record, which stood for a short time until Bullards Bar in California started pumping out potential world record after potential world record in short order.



### **SOME BIG-BASS TRUTHS**

While all these catches were on different fisheries and under very different conditions, there are a few common threads that you can apply to your fishing this time of year. First, all these

fish were caught around the spawn. Two were before the spawn and one came after the spawn. Regardless of which side of the spawn your lake is on as you read this column, there's a window of opportunity right now; a time when the giant bass are in the shallows and are susceptible to being caught. You need to take advantage of this opportunity.

Next, all three of these fish were targeted intentionally. What I mean is, we weren't just going down the bank casting at every piece of cover we saw. We had studied maps ahead of time and were specifically targeting the kinds of structure and specific locations that big bass use to feed. All three came from "likely locations" – the kind of places you'd put your finger on the map and say, "If I was a big bass, I'd be right here."

Finally, I was prepared. I wasn't fishing with old line, rusty hooks or knots that had been tied last month. I was fishing with the mindset that I was going to catch a giant, and I needed to be prepared when it happened.

With so many variables outside of your control, it's important to control every variable that you can. Use the best gear you can afford, keep your hooks sharp, and be ready when the fish of a lifetime finally bites. If you've done your due diligence, you've got a great shot at getting that monster bass in the boat. ■



Tim's 7-pound smallmouth he caught on a paddle-tail swimbait on a flooded lake in the Pacific Northwest.

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Jacob Wheeler / Photo: MLF

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WX OMEGA


JACOB WHEELER SIGNATURE SERIES



# ROCK ON!

Bass love rock wherever they can find it. Top anglers from the MLF pro ranks chime in on their rock favorites and how you can “rock on,” too.


By Mike Pehanich | Photography by Brandon Rowan



Rapala X-Rap Jerkbait  
Color: Moss Back Shiner



NetBait Little Spanky  
Color: Houdini



Mustad Elite  
Series  
Football Head




NetBait Paca Tiny Chunk  
Color: Green Pumpkin  
(chartreuse dipped)



Berkley Powerbait  
Finesse Jig  
Color: GK Spring Craw

Silver Buddy Blade Bait  
Color: Stainless Steel



Z-Man Sling BladeZ  
Colorado Willow  
Spinnerbait  
Color: Greenback Shad

Z-Man David Walker's  
Grosseyez Football Jig  
Color: Money Maker

Z-Man Hella CrawZ  
Color: Bama Bug

Rapala DT6  
Color: Ike's Penguin

**ROCKIN' RIPRAP**  
Manmade rock structure near bridges and roadways is host to a diverse menu of bass delicacies like fry, crawfish, shad and more. A variety of baits can be effective around this fishy habitat.

**W**hen rock and water mix, good things happen. Algae grows. Periphyton flourish. Crawfish crawl. Insects hide. Baitfish gather.

And where rock rules, so do bass – largemouth, smallmouth and spotted alike. They grow fat in the food court, slurping up crawfish, feasting on baitfish.

Rock offers bass hospitable habitat. It soaks up solar heat in cold months, provides comfort stops on featureless plains and offers long underwater highways with plentiful food along the way.

Rock's structure, configurations and types are diverse and mixed, its variety ranging from fine-grain particles and pea gravel to chunk rock; from sheer bluff walls to car-sized boulders. Manmade rock constructs such as riprap and buoy anchors factor into the mix as well.

"A lot of rock's appeal is due to interstitial space – the gaps between

the rocks," said Joe Rush, biologist and owner of JadEco, a lake management company. "The gaps allow small organisms to hide, feed and reproduce. Crayfish and baitfish follow, moving in and out of those interstitial spaces, and the bigger fish congregate. You have a lot of diversity in species and sizes and multiple year classes of fish. Rock provides plenty of opportunity for fish to find the food source they require based on their size and needs."

Orchestrating a game plan for working rock requires recognition, know-how, the right tools and a versatile skillset.

We mined the experience of MLF tour pros for some hard rock how-to.

### EARLY HEAT

When it comes to smallmouth bass, spring is *the* season. And rock is the reason.

Big-water bronzeback guru Scott Dobson of Clarkston, Michigan locates smallmouth in 6- to 8-foot depths after last ice on his home waters, which include Lake St. Clair and the north-west corner of Lake Erie.

"Sun is always your friend when you're fishing shallow rock (in the early season)," said Dobson, winner of MLF's 2020 Toyota Series event on the Detroit River and seven other Toyota Series and Phoenix Bass Fishing League events up north. "Shallow rock warms quickly after ice-out on the Great Lakes and the Canadian Shield. Bass move to that warming water. Crayfish and baitfish are attracted, too." His first choice for ice-out smallmouth is a football head jig with a NetBait Little Spanky (3.25-inch) swimbait.

"I fish a lot of swimbaits on a football head jig (3/8 to 1/2 ounce) in this late winter/early spring period with water temperatures in the high 30s and



**Strike King Tour  
Grade Skipping Jig**  
Color: Blue Craw

**Strike King  
Baby Rodent**  
Color: Blue Craw

low 40s," Dobson said. "I fish them as slow as I can through the rocks, just keeping that paddletail barely moving."

Blade baits like the Silver Buddy are a deadly second choice. He also likes a downsized jig/craw combo.

"A compact finesse jig with a mini craw trailer like the NetBait Tiny Paca Chunk (2.25-inch) – green pumpkin with a little chartreuse in it – can be phenomenal," he added.

As water warms to around the 45-degree mark, bass become more active.

"That's when I can get them on a suspending jerkbait," Dobson said. "That's a lot of fun."

**EARLY SEASON TIP:** Live sonar and side-scan sonar technology offer anglers fishing rock a huge advantage. Dobson favors Lowrance's ActiveTarget Live Sonar technology in "Scout" mode, which enables him to see an ultra-wide, 180-degree overhead view of structure and fish actively moving on structure.

## RIPRAP

"Riprap is a special rock situation," said Miles Burghoff, Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro with nearly \$300,000 in career earnings. "It's manmade rock structure, placed there to stop erosion in key areas such as roadways, causeways, bridges and near housing or industrial developments."

Riprap facilitates bass movement vertically and horizontally and provides easy access to deep water. The rock absorbs heat and provides a diverse menu – aquatic insects, crawfish, fry, baitfish and more.

"Riprap areas have depth and, especially around bridges in rivers or bays or creek arms, they create chokepoints or funnels for fish moving in or out to feed or spawn or

**"When it comes to  
smallmouth bass,  
spring is the  
season. And rock  
is the reason."**

whatever the intent of their migration," Burghoff said.

It is a four-season fish magnet, too.

"Fish are generally there all the time because of the depth, the condensed current and the presence of baitfish year-round," he added. "If you're having trouble finding a pattern, a causeway with riprap will usually produce some bites."

Burghoff opts for a jerkbait when bass are high in the water column or working a mid-depth zone. His second choice is a crankbait, a squarebill or a medium diver like a Rapala DT6 or Bandit 200.

"Slow-rolling a spinnerbait like the Z-Man SlingBladeZ can be very effective, too" he added.

More often than not, he parallels the structure. The steeper the slope, the tighter he holds the boat to the rock. If he encounters a more gradual slope, he moves farther from the rock and launches quartering casts.

The regularity of riprap can be deceiving. Causeway rock is rarely as uniform beneath the surface as it is above. Burghoff looks for extended rock fingers where construction operators dumped extra rock. Navionics maps sometimes enhance his search for this hidden structure.

"For those areas, I may pick up a slow-moving bait like a shaky head worm," he said. "One of my favorite rigs is a 3/16-ounce shaky head with a Z-Man Big TRD."

Another favorite is a Z-Man Cross-Eye football jig paired with a Z-Man Hella CrawZ trailer. The craw's buoyant ElazTech material enhances the action.

"As it crawls along, the claws lift up in a defensive position," said Burghoff, who favors a lighter 1/2-ounce jig in the snag-filled terrain.

**RIPRAP TIPS:** Often overlooked are the "trenched out" areas at the bottom of riprap – prime bait- and fish-holding structure.

"Make sure your jerkbait hooks are sharp," advised Burghoff. "If you're cranking riprap all day, you'll be surprised how often hook points lodge in rock and wear down. I change the stock hooks out on my jerkbaits with premium Hayabusa treble hooks and sometimes change out dulled hooks three or four times during the day."

## BLUFF BANKS

Bluff banks hold bass throughout the season, but they become bass havens in winter.

"Bass are looking for a place to move vertically, to move up and down easily in winter," said Dakota Ebare, who notched a third-place finish at MLF's Toyota Series event on Sam Rayburn in February. "With weather conditions changing, bluff walls are definitely places to do that. They provide a readily available food source and crevices for crawfish, bluegill and small baitfish to hide. They offer bass good opportunities for ambush, too."

Bluff walls marking channel swings are prime locations. Current and structure funnel baitfish toward the wall face.

Ebare's first choice is a crawfish imitation, a "low-profile compact jig." He usually starts with a 7/16- or 1/2-ounce skirted jig trailed with a Strike King Baby Rodent.

"I don't want a trailer with a lot of action in winter," he explained. "A Rodent or beaver-style bait gives the combination a little bit of bulk, but it's still a compact target."

Depth influences his jig adjustment. He favors a 1/4-ounce jig on a shallow slope, a 5/8-ounce or heavier jig with a deeper drop.

"It depends on the day," he added. "I'll fish a heavier jig with a little bit faster fall if the fish are reacting that

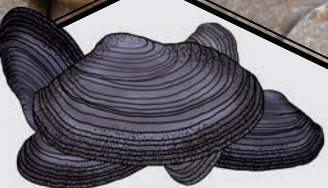


NetBait Little Spanky  
Color: Trash

Z-Man/Evergreen  
ChatterBait Jack Hammer  
Color: White

Netbait STH Finesse  
Series Drifter Minnow  
Color: Killer G

**HARD ROCKIN' RIVERS**  
MLF pro and smallmouth bass guru Scott Dobson focuses on massive car-sized boulders when fishing big rivers. Chatterbaits, drop-shot rigs and jerkbaits are his baits of choice.



**SHELL BEDS**  
**The Other "Rock"**

**THE LEDGES** of TVA lakes in Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama are renowned bass-holding structures. Their productivity is often enhanced when "shell beds" are present.

Burghoff hunts for these productive "high spots," especially on lakes like Douglas and Chickamauga near his Tennessee home. But he thinks the shell beds themselves have less to do with the attractiveness of these areas than the conditions that produce them.

"The clams and mussels that make up the shell beds are filter feeders," Burghoff said. "They're looking for the particulate in the water that current brings to them. Shad are there for the same reason. They feed on zooplankton and phytoplankton. Baitfish concentrate in these areas. The bass are there to intercept them."

day. With post-frontal conditions, a slow fall is probably what they want. I can also use my trailer size to adjust the fall rate, too. But I don't want too much action. I almost want a do-nothing jig."

**BLUFF BANK TIP:** When bass suspend off the bluff, Ebare switches to a suspending jerkbait.

"If they're suspending at 10 feet, I want a jerkbait that will work at the 6- to 8-foot range. I want them to feed up."

**ROCK TRANSITION: SHALE**

One of Burghoff's favorite rock features is shale, a dark sedimentary rock characterized by thin, shingle-like rock slices. It's abundant in impoundments like Douglas and Chickamauga, near his home in Dayton, Tennessee.

"Shale is a great type of rock, especially in the colder months, if you have a vein of shale surrounded by some other type of rock or transition," Burghoff said.

Like other rock features, a shale deposit is only as good as its placement.

"On Douglas, the fish are on main-lake points, outside major bays, creeks

and pockets in the colder months," he said. "I look for those big creeks and pockets on my Navionics maps. If I see shale, I'm on bass. It's almost a sure thing."

Burghoff again favors a football jig (3/4 ounce) with the Z-Man Hella CrawZ trailer, especially in cold water conditions.

"Fish are focused on crawfish that time of year," he explained. "A football jig also helps me feel when my jig has moved from shale to softer bottom."

**SHALE TIP:** Shale forms in thin, brittle layers that shatter into relatively sharp-edged fragments.

"It's important to use a line with extra abrasion resistance," said Burghoff, who uses Seaguar AbraxX fluorocarbon, a line optimized for performance in sharp-edged environments.

**RIVER ROCK**

Dobson scouted typical structure on the Detroit River in practice-day preparation for the Bass Pro Tour event there last September. He scanned bass-holding points, shoals and island flanks, but his main targets were boulders.

**“The key is transition — change from one recognizable form of rock to another.”**

“I was looking for big boulders, some the size of a Volkswagen, in 12 to 20 feet of water,” recalled Dobson, who was rewarded with a third-place finish. “Those were key to my success. So were boulders up on the shallower 7-foot flats.”

Dobson’s knowledge of Great Lakes connecting waters like the Detroit River, St. Lawrence River and St. Clair River/Lake St. Clair has led him to repeated tournament success throughout his career.

“When you have current, any obstruction will be a natural magnet for smallmouth and largemouth, too, for that matter,” he said. “Boulders can hold fish year-round in 2 feet of water or 40 feet. But in late summer and early fall, this pattern really shines.”

Forward-facing sonar imagery from his Lowrance ActiveTarget unit has added significantly to his already prodigious talent. The technology’s worth has proved most valuable when he’s working deeper rock, particularly boulders in the 15- to 30-foot range.

Typically, he’ll start with a 1/2-ounce ChatterBait paired with a white NetBait Little Spanky swimbait and go to a 3/4-ounce model to work deeper boulders in 12 to 20 feet. He likes the hooked-to-landed ratio he gets with single-hook baits.

Other preferred choices include a jerkbait and a drop-shot rig, with a dropper weight (up to 1 ounce) matched to depth and current velocity. The NetBait Drifter Minnow and flat-sided shad-type plastics are preferred drop-shot baits.

“Green pumpkin with gold and purple flake is a no-brainer smallmouth color,” he said.

Dobson also stocks up with colors resembling shad, smelt and alewives.

Strike King KVD 1.5 Squarebill Crankbait  
Color: Orange Belly Craw



**ROCKS IN A HARD PLACE**

MLF pro Kevin VanDam uses - as you might have guessed - Strike King KVD squarebills and crankbaits to seek out bass on highland reservoirs.

**BOULDER TIPS:** Manmade “boulders” located on big water hold bass, too. Navigational buoys, often positioned along channels dredged for shipping traffic, are secured with giant cement anchors.

“The buoys sit in the 25- to 40-foot depth zone,” he added. “They are havens for bass.”

**ROCK TRANSITION: HARD BOTTOM PRESPAWN AND SPAWNING BAYS**

Hard bottom in any form can attract bass when the surrounding features are soft or silty. But what draws bass when the lake basin is essentially rock? Such is the case on many highland reservoirs throughout the country, particularly the Ozarks, Kentucky and Tennessee and many waters in the West?

The key is transition - change from one recognizable form of rock to another.

Bass fishing legend Kevin VanDam proved the importance of identifying lake areas where rock composition shifts from one form to another one April on Missouri’s Table Rock Lake.

With bass staggered in prespawn, spawn and early postspawn conditions, VanDam focused on key rock transitions.

“On highland reservoirs, you’re always looking at the rock on the bank,” he explained as we scoured a large bay for the lake’s mixed popula-

tion of largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass.

Spawning bass would largely spread their eggs on gravel. VanDam sought areas where the bottom composition shifted from one form of rock to another. On rocky reservoirs, what lies below the waterline is an extension of what you see on the exposed shoreline, he explained. He scanned the shoreline for shifts in composition - pea gravel transitioning to chunk rock or a mix of the two, or a shift from large broken rock chunks to smaller, more uniform rock.

VanDam covered water vertically as well as laterally that day with mid-depth and squarebill Strike King crankbaits - KVD series, of course - and spinnerbaits. Bass spawn at widely varying depths in these highland reservoirs, particularly with multiple bass species and staggered spawning within each species. He preferred a floating/diving crankbait because it enabled him to work shallow to moderately deep structure quickly yet effectively.

**HIGHLAND RESERVOIR TIPS:** Large boulders, stumps and bushes enhance the attractiveness of prime spawning areas and are likely to hold fish.

“Wind blowing onto a flat or secondary point can be a key factor, whether it’s stimulating a bite or steering spawning fish into either deeper or better protected bedding areas,” VanDam said. ■

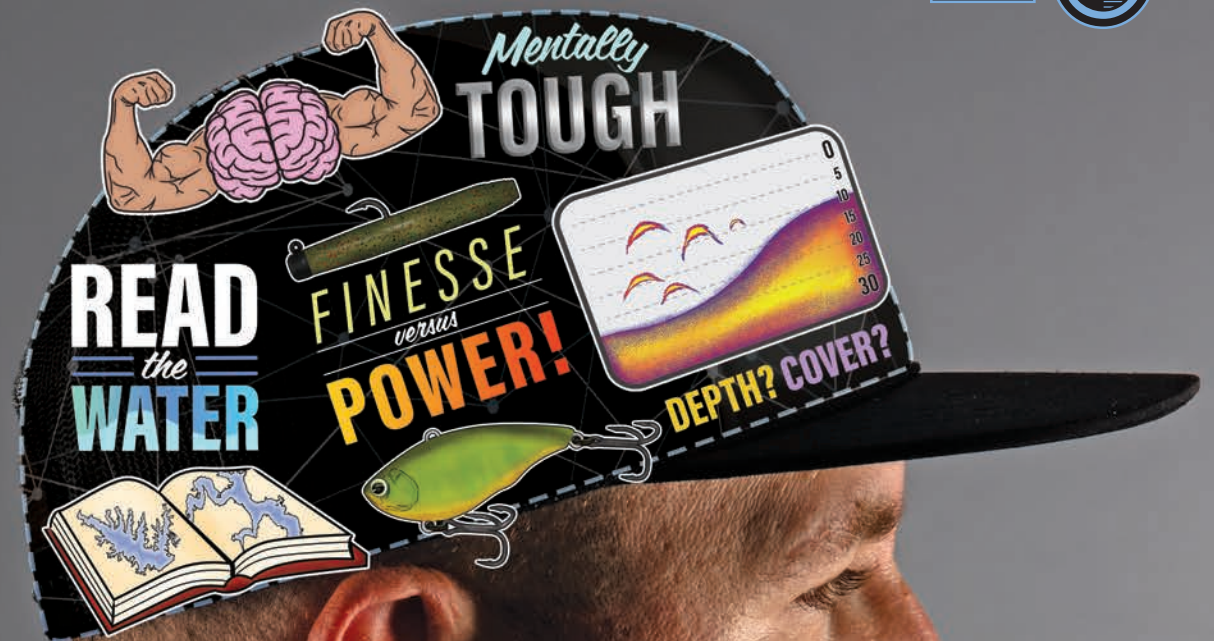
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# MIND GAMES



The ability to assess and confidently adapt to changing conditions faster than anyone else has made Jacob Wheeler a dominant force on the Bass Pro Tour for the past several years.

## THE MENTAL SIDE OF TOURNAMENT BASS FISHING

There's more to being a tour-level champion than flipping and pitching. VanDam, Wheeler, Reese, Ehrlinger on what it means to "put your mind to it."

By Joel Shangle



# INTELLIGENCE WINS CHAMPIONSHIPS

— Michael Jordan

**B**arely a heartbeat passes after he hears the quote from Michael Jordan before Kevin VanDam nods his head and answers emphatically: “Absolutely,” says the only man to surpass the \$7 million mark in career tournament winnings. “Intelligence – what’s in your brain – is THE most important aspect of tournament bass fishing.

As an eight-time tour-level Angler of the Year and the most successful tournament bass fisherman of all time, it’s impossible to argue with VanDam’s assessment. Mind games, according to VanDam, are just as important as the ability to flip, pitch, cast and crank like a pro.

“The mental part of the game is the difference between the top anglers and the rest of the field,” VanDam continues. “It’s more so than ever these days, with all the technology and all the information out there. Everybody’s gear is more equal than ever now, too. The difference now is what’s between your ears.”

## EXPLORING THE MIND OF A CHAMPION

*“Good is not good when better is expected.”*  
— Vin Scully

At its most basic, bass fishing is a simple game. You choose a location where you think a bass lives, you choose a bait that you think a bass will bite, you place that bait in a location where you believe a bass will bite it, and then you do it over. And over. And over.

But when you add the multitude of factors and influences that the highest-level tourna-

*“INTELLIGENCE – WHAT’S IN YOUR BRAIN – IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF TOURNAMENT BASS FISHING.”*

— KEVIN VANDAM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHOENIX MOORE AND JOSH GASSMANN

ment pros must consider on a day-to-day, hour-to-hour – even minute-to-minute – basis, and “simple” gives way to complex in a hurry. The ability to mentally process those conditions becomes the most valuable weapon in the angler’s arsenal.

VanDam has demonstrated that truth more than anyone in the history of the sport. As a 26-time tour-level champion, four-time Bassmaster Classic champion, multiple-time MLF Cup winner and Bass Fishing Hall-of-Famer, the “Kalamazoo Kid” has made a hearty living fishing, thanks in large part to his ability to identify trends and patterns, quickly assess conditions on the fly and solve the proverbial fishing puzzle faster than the anglers he’s competed against for 35 years.

“Every tournament – and every tournament format – has its strategy,” VanDam says. “It’s no different than NFL football, NHL hockey or Major League Baseball: You have to have the faculties to gameplan your strategy, and then be honest enough with yourself that you can make a change when you identify that things are changing and your original gameplan isn’t working.

“You want to give a pattern or an area or a technique time enough to develop, but you also have to understand when ‘the ship has sailed’ and it’s time to move on. Being focused while still being open-minded isn’t easy; it’s a mind game that the best (anglers) seem to be better at than the others.”

VanDam names several anglers who he believes have strong mental games – “Alton Jones outperformed everybody last year at Heavy Hitters because he had better focus and was more dialed in mentally than everybody else,” he says – but eventually comes around to the defending Bass Pro Tour Angler of the Year, Jacob Wheeler.

The Tennessee pro had one of the most dominant years in the history of the sport in 2021,



• “WORK ETHIC AND  
• DEDICATION ARE  
• MENTAL THINGS. I  
• CAN NEVER HALF-ASS  
• ANYTHING WHEN IT  
• COMES TO DETAILS  
• AND PREPARATION.”

– BRENT EHRLER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRANDON ROWAN

winning three events and finishing in the Top 10 multiple times. Wheeler's "bass fishing IQ," according to VanDam, was the biggest factor in his AOY run.

"To win a tournament is a great accomplishment, but to win an AOY is much, much more difficult and mentally demanding," VanDam asserts. "No matter how good you're fishing, you're going to have off days where it's hard to keep your focus and your confidence. But you have to have the mental capacity to never, ever get down and battle for the best possible outcome every single day. You make a good decision and move up 10 places with a late run, maybe those 10 points are the difference in winning or losing the AOY at the end of the year.

"I've known some really great anglers who are incredible at finding fish and breaking a lake down, but just mentally weren't strong enough when it came to the competition aspect. Jacob is as good mentally as anybody I've ever seen, and especially (in 2021)."

## BRAIN POWER EQUALS WINNING POWER

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*"If you truly believe in it, if you become vocal with it, you're creating that law of attraction and it will become reality."*

— Conor McGregor

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Mark Daniels Jr. has to stop and think for a few beats as he considers the question he's asked about Wheeler, his Bass Pro Tour travel buddy: "What's the one thing that Jacob does better than anybody else?"

Considering Wheeler's success in the 10 years since he won the BFL All-American as a 20-year-old – and the level of domination he's exerted since 2018 – it's a question that likely has several correct answers. Daniels lists Wheeler's eagerness to learn and improve, his skill set with multiple techniques and a work ethic that seems to know no bounds. But his final answer confirms VanDam's assessment of Wheeler.

"Mental game," Daniels says flatly. "That dude has a brain unlike anything I've ever seen. The way he processes things is unreal. I don't know how he

does it, honestly, but he 'gets it' faster than anybody I've ever been around."

Wheeler himself struggles to explain exactly how his brain works.

"There's so much to it, it's hard to pinpoint," Wheeler says. "Some of it comes down to understanding and studying the game, but there are so many things going on during a tournament day that it takes some pretty serious mental gymnastics to keep it all straight. You add SCORETRACKER® to it and it becomes even *more* of a mental game. You have to keep a *constant* understanding of what's happening in the game, and it can speed you up to the point of losing your concentration. Keeping your mind clear and focused on a tournament day is no joke."

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***"YOU HAVE TO BE MENTALLY STRONG ENOUGH TO BELIEVE THAT YOU'RE MAKING THE RIGHT DECISIONS ALL THE TIME."***

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Both Wheeler and VanDam share the mental characteristic that the highest-level alpha athletes in professional sports – the Michael Jordans and Tom Bradys of the world – have demonstrated in abundance: confidence and the knowledge (even when it's inaccurate) that they're going to win.

"It really comes down to trusting in yourself – if you don't trust and believe in everything you're doing is right, you're not in the right mindset," Wheeler says. "Spend some time around Kevin during a tournament; he's oozing with confidence. He believes that every decision he makes is going to be right, and it's pretty hard to argue with his success. You have to be mentally strong enough to believe that you're making the right decisions all the time. Sometimes it's naïve and sometimes you're just flat wrong, but I really believe there's something to the power of confidence."

## BEING DETAILED IS MENTAL (AND SO IS WORK ETHIC)

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*"It's the little details that are vital. Little things make big things happen."*

— John Wooden

The detail work of tour-level tournament bass fishing is relentless. Anglers on the Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit dedicate an exorbitant number of hours to tweaking split rings, hooks, knots, reels, line, nearly unending lists of boat, motor and electronics busywork. It's not unlike a spreadsheet, according to California pro Brent Ehrler: Sloppy attention to the small details of the equation lead to a poor result at the end.

"Work ethic and dedication are mental things," Ehrler says. "I can never half-ass anything when it comes to details and preparation. I probably over-prepare, but when you're trying to accomplish a goal in a tournament, I need to have *everything* ready. I need to go over the details multiple times to be sure that everything is right. Leaving one or two things unfinished at the end of the day doesn't make any sense to me.

"When you're on the clock, you can't be messing around with a piece of gear that you had time to fix when you were doing your tackle but didn't do it. There are no excuses. You just didn't focus hard enough. You were lazy. Your time management wasn't good. Those are conscious choices you made; you can't be mad when you hook a fish on a rod that you didn't put fresh line on and it broke off."

## WINNING (AND LOSING) THE MENTAL BATTLE

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*"Make sure your worst enemy doesn't live between your own two ears."*

— Laird Hamilton

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There's virtually no competitive sport (or competitor) that's immune to a slump.

Jordan shot 32.5 percent in the first three games of the 1993 NBA Eastern Conference Finals against the New York Knicks – nearly 20 percent below his career average. MLB Hall-of-Famer Frank Robinson admitted that an 0-for-20 slump in his second season made him believe "I didn't think I was ever going to get another hit."

Bass-tournament slumps are even worse, according to one of the sport's most successful performers, Skeet Reese. As one of the Top 10 money

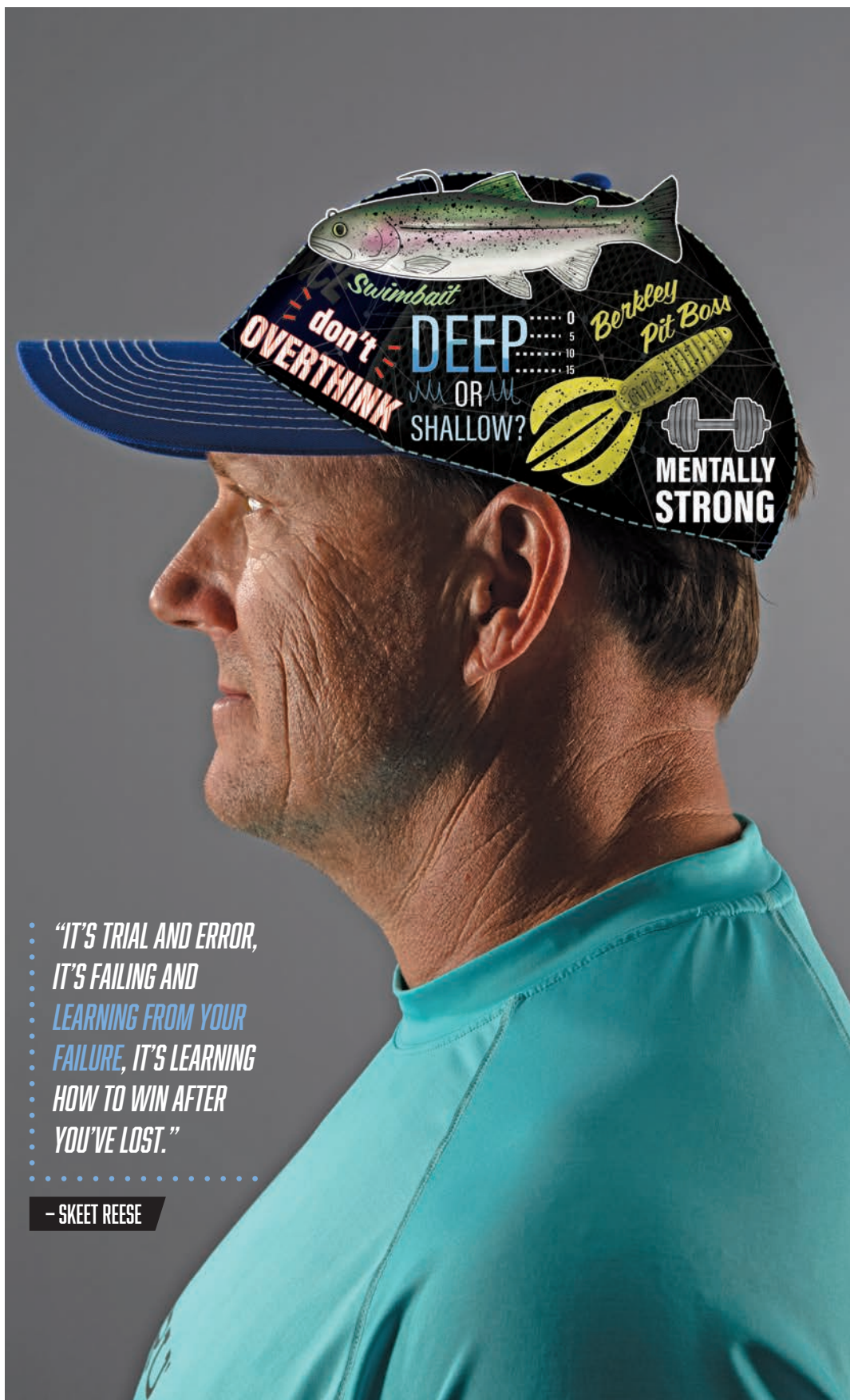
winners of all time, a tour-level Angler of the Year and Bassmaster Classic winner, Reese has enjoyed a 25-year career full of highlights ... but learning from the lowlights (and the mental acrobatics of recovering from a disappointing string of tournaments) have been some of the defining moments of his career.

"Everything we do on the water is controlled by our mindset and our process - it's trial and error, it's failing and learning from your failure, it's learning how to win after you've lost," Reese says. "It's hard. If you're a competitor, you don't take losing lightly. It's pretty easy to keep asking yourself 'What did I do wrong? Why did I not catch them?' and get into a slump. Slumps in this game are real. They can last a couple of days, a couple of months, heck, a couple of years."

Reese is a keen student of the mental side of bass fishing, and competition psychology and mental health in general. He speaks enthusiastically about the benefits of a sports psychologist and therapy, and the importance of actively managing the lowlights of a tournament season (or life, for that matter).

"Picking yourself up from being down is hard for people when they just suffer through it and grind it out on their own," Reese says. "The most important thing I've ever done to help my mental game is to get the help of a sports psychologist or therapist in getting my head straight. It was a huge changing point in my life - not just my career - when I started to understand that one bad tournament doesn't define me."

"I still get mad when I have a bad tournament, but if I could give somebody some advice about bad tournaments, I'd tell them 'After you back up and decompress, it's easier to realize that bad events are learning experiences and a few bad days of fishing doesn't define you.'" ■



• "IT'S TRIAL AND ERROR,  
• IT'S FAILING AND  
• LEARNING FROM YOUR  
• FAILURE, IT'S LEARNING  
• HOW TO WIN AFTER  
• YOU'VE LOST."

— SKEET REESE

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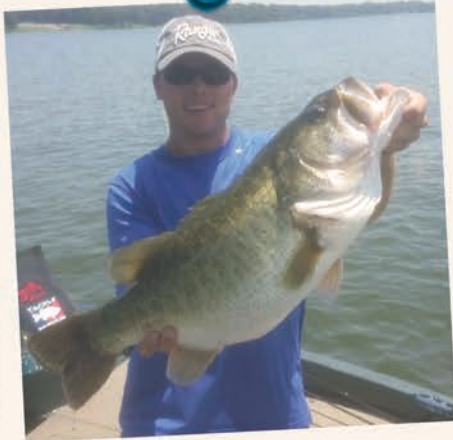
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# TALES OF TANKS



Pros Dish on  
Their Personal  
Best Bass

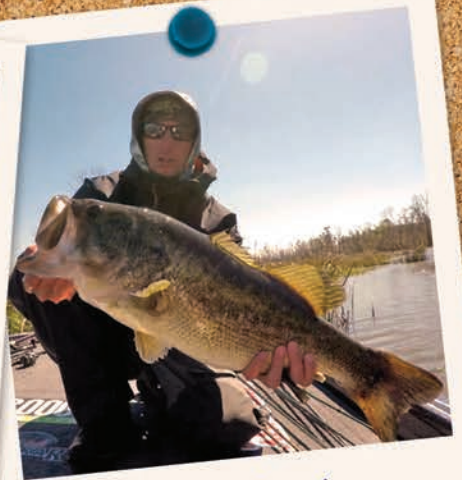
By Joe Sills



Jimmy Washam



Blake Dyer



Matt Becker



Brian Latimer



Andy Montgomery



Fred Roumbanis

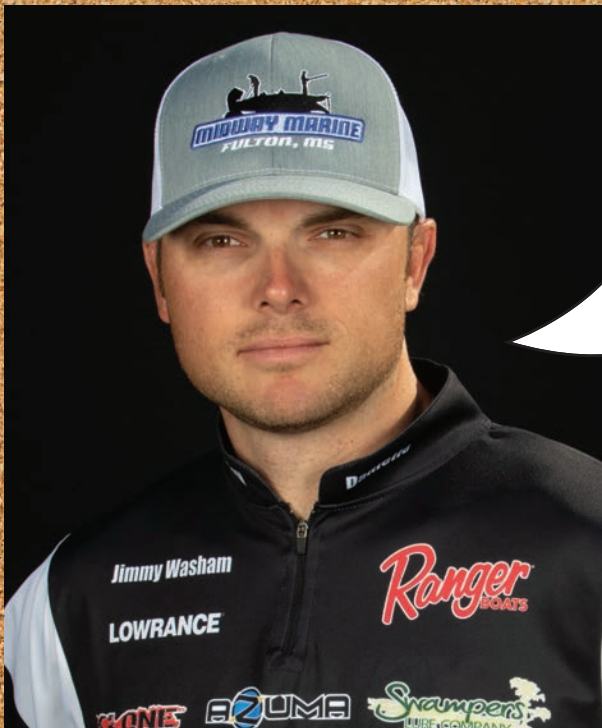
## WE SAT DOWN WITH PRO ANGLERS FROM EVERY LEVEL OF MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING TO DISCUSS THE BIGGEST BASS THEY'VE EVER CAUGHT

There's something about the big ones. The bite. The fight. The location. The cast. For most anglers, landing a personal-best bass comes with an indelible memory of the exact moment the catch took place. The photos of those fish are ones we cherish forever. Heck, even in the age before cell phones, those special catches seemed seared into our memories, to the point where many anglers can still locate the exact stump, log or bush their personal best came off of years after the event took place.

Whether your personal best is a 4-pounder or a 14-pounder, it's likely etched in your brain for life. That was the case for these Major League Fishing pros, who sat down to tell us the tale of their most memorable big bass catch.



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SHANKLE



JIMMY WASHAM

TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT

*Personal Best: 10 pounds, 7 ounces  
Location: Gibson County Lake, TN*

**IT WAS AUGUST OF 2016** and it was literally 100 degrees outside. It was one of those hot, miserable days in the Mid-South, and I went to a TWRA lake called Gibson County Lake. I remember getting to the ramp at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and my truck saying it was 100 on the dashboard.

I put my boat in and headed across to a little stretch where I had caught some fish before. About 100 yards ahead, I saw an isolated stump and a fish blowing up beside it. So, I fished my way up to it and Power-Poled down.

I threw in a 12-inch worm that landed next to the stump. When the bait hit the bottom, it kept moving. That was the telltale sign.

I never felt the fish bite. She was just easing off with it. The first thing she did when I set the hook was try to jump, but she was too big to jump. That's when the panic set in. I didn't have a net. I fought that fish around to the back of the boat, got her in the back corner and as I put my hand in her mouth, the hook fell out. I mean it was simultaneous.

Of course, I was beside myself. I look around and there's an older gentleman crappie fishing several hundred yards away. He was like 85. God bless him for being out there fishing in that heat.

I told him I had just caught the biggest bass I had ever caught in my life and asked if he could take a picture. He said he didn't know how to use a phone, so I gave him a quick tutorial and after about five minutes of him taking pictures of my feet, the sky and the trolling motor he finally got a decent shot. It's halfway blurry because it was so hot that there was fog on the lens. Right after that, I put the fish back.

I went on to catch a few more big ones that day, but a 7-pounder is pretty disappointing after you catch a 10.



**BRIAN LATIMER**

TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT

*Personal Best: 9 pounds, 12 ounces*

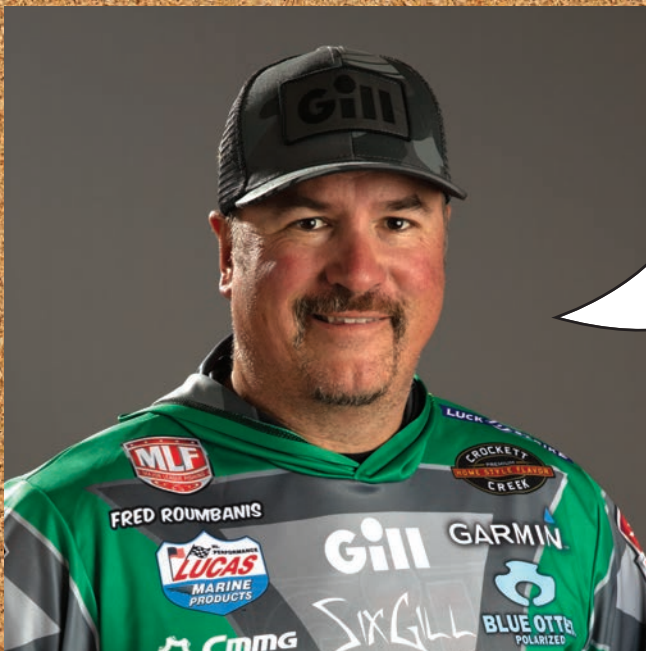
*Location: Lake Secession, SC*

**I HAVE TO GO WAY BACK** for this one, because it was a small lake near home called Lake Secession. I think it was around 2012, because side-scan imaging had been out for a while, but I had just gotten my first unit. I was out on the lake playing around with it and just looking at structure. I was trying to figure out what structure looked like and trying to learn how to find fish of any significant size.

I saw a little group of fish and cast a deep-diving crankbait toward it. I was actually fishing near one of the most popular boat ramps on the lake, and when I cast at the school a 9-pounder popped out.

I was by myself so there was no net or anything like that. I got the fish to the boat, and it kind of laid up on its side as I brought it in. I immediately took it to a little marina and got it weighed. Of course, the guy inside was an older fellow and this was before cell phone cameras and GoPros got really good, so he didn't take a great picture.

I remember being so excited because I was just testing out a new toy, and I was really excited about having side-imaging capability. To this day, it's the closest I have come to catching a double-digit bass; but I would be surprised if I break the record on Lake Secession again. It's a different kind of fishery these days.



**FRED ROUMBANIS**

BASS PRO TOUR

*Personal Best: 13 pounds*

*Location: California Delta*

**MY PERSONAL BIGGEST** verified bass is 13 pounds. I caught one when I was 13 years old that might have been bigger than that, though. We weighed it on a little spring scale and it dropped down to 12 pounds. However, looking back on the photo, I can't say what it was. I mean, it could have been 14.

Anyway, the biggest verified bass was a 13-pounder on the California Delta. I was fishing a team tournament in 2001 with my partner Jason Cordiali. I had a Texas-rigged brush hog on 17-pound-test monofilament line, because back then that's what we used.

The water was clear and the tide was going out. I remember seeing a ripple in the water and Jason told me it was a stump. I told him it was a bass, and I picked up a weightless 6-inch Senko and threw it over there. As soon as it hit the water, the bait disappeared. I set the hook and all I got back was the hook. So, I quickly asked Jason for another Senko, but he didn't have any. That's when I picked up the Brush Hog and threw it in.

She did the same thing and sucked it in. When I set the hook, I knew I had it. It was surreal, dude. I remember looking at this thing and being amazed that its eyeballs were as big as quarters.

The fish was on some secondary cover, and we eventually found a little male nearby. Actually, we went on to catch a 10 that day as well. We weighed a 37-pound bag, which I believe was a record at the time, even though it only stood for a few weeks. We also won \$6,000.



**ANDY MONTGOMERY**

**BASS PRO TOUR**

*Personal Best: 9 pounds, 6 ounces*

*Location: Lake Conroe, TX*

**I CAUGHT THREE** 10-pounders in one year, but I didn't weigh any of them. Two of those came in practice for FLW events and I didn't want to lift them out of the water with other boats around. One was at Sam Rayburn and one was at Kentucky Lake. Another one was in a private pond, and I didn't have a scale. Those were also in the time before GoPro's and whatnot, so there aren't really even any good pictures or anything of them.

The biggest one that sticks out was on camera. It was at the very first Bass Pro Tour event on Lake Conroe. We had a new format. We had a clock ticking down. I was fishing lily pads early in the year with a Strike King Thunder Cricket, which wasn't even out at the time, but I had a few. I was fishing a ditch that ran back through a spawning flat, looking for fish that were waiting for me to roll up.

With about 20 seconds left to go, I got a bite. I was hustling, just trying to get this fish in because the official was counting down. I didn't realize how big he was until it came out of the water and I tried to boat flip him. I immediately saw that this fish was bigger than a 5- or 6-pounder, and I jumped down beside the gunwale trying to get my hand in his mouth. The fish had my bait so far down his throat that he would shut his mouth every time I pulled on the line.

I grabbed him and got him over the gunwale with less than a second to spare. Of course, our weights zero, but I did advance to the next round and ended up in the Top 15 of that event.



**BLAKE DYER**

**TOYOTA SERIES**

*Personal Best: 11 pounds, 2 ounces*

*Location: Lafayette Reservoir, CA*

**THIS STORY IS GOING** to be different, because I bet most of the guys will have caught one during a tournament or at least from a boat. I actually caught mine on a hike.

I was at this place called Lafayette Reservoir. There's a path that goes around the lake that's maybe a little over three miles. You can't even put a boat on the lake unless it's like a rowboat or a canoe - and I actually did use a rowboat to fish there in high school. We rigged a rowboat with a Walmart trolling motor and a car battery to fish it.

Anyway, I went for a hike there sometime around 2015. I knew there were giant bass in that lake because I had caught a couple of 10-pounders out of it. I also knew there were tules all around the bank, so I brought a flipping stick with me. I was hiking and punching my way around the lake when I got to a section of dead tules near a dock. I flipped the dock - just like I do on the Delta - and in one swing I had this gigantic fish on the bank.

I was stunned. My mouth just dropped to the ground.

Hilariously, there was a guy trout fishing on the dock right next to me. He just looks at me and says, "Oh my God. Yo, man, I've got a scale."

We weighed the fish and it was 11-2. It was freaking crazy. I was using a Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver with an 8-foot G. Loomis flipping stick and 65-pound-test PowerPro braid. I feel like most guys are going to have a story about somewhere like Sam Rayburn, but I was just kind of walking through the woods on a hike.



### MATT BECKER

TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT

*Personal Best: 9 pounds, 1 ounce*

*Location: Lake Seminole, FL*

**I WAS ACTUALLY PRACTICING** for an FLW Tour event on Lake Seminole in 2019. It was fairly cold, so I picked up a flipping stick and went towards this perfectly placed mat that had blown in against the shore. I flipped a big weight through there. It went about 6 inches and stopped.

Because I was practicing, I hadn't been setting the hook a lot that day, but this was such a good bite that I had to. I felt it all the way down through the rod and down into my elbow. It was almost like instinct kicking in. I just set it without thinking about it and it didn't move at all. That's when I knew it was a big fish.

There wasn't much of a fight at all. I pulled it up through the mat and it kind of laid there on top. I just trolled over and grabbed her. I didn't realize just how big it was until I actually grabbed it and put it in the boat. Then, I realized how long it was. It wasn't a fat fish or a thick fish. It was just an extremely long, old fish. I actually put her in the livewell for a minute while I was getting the scale ready. Then, I got a camera out, got a good picture and sent her on her way.

I don't regret catching her during practice, but I did revisit that spot several times during the tournament.

I also landed my best smallmouth in 2018 during a tournament. This was before I had forward-facing sonar, so I was using 2D sonar. I was just kind of trolling around and looking for a big arch when I saw one 10 or 15 feet off the bottom. I was fishing in about 40 feet of water and the fish was sitting up high, so I thought it was a walleye. I dropped my bait down on it and it didn't react, so I thought for sure it was a walleye. But when I came back around and tried again, the fish followed my bait to the bottom and picked it up.

That one didn't fight a whole lot either. It was pretty much a vertical fight and the fish ran to the surface. The whole thing lasted maybe 10 or 15 seconds. We netted her, put her in the livewell and went back to fishing. I actually didn't realize how big that one was until we went back to fizz it. That's when I realized it was a 6-12 smallmouth.



### RANDY HOWELL, BASS PRO TOUR

*Personal Best: 12 pounds, 14 ounces*

*Location: Bussey Brake, LA*

I had a special two days at the first Bass Pro Tour event of 2020 in Louisiana. I made it to the Knockout Round on Caney Creek Reservoir and caught the biggest bass of my life at the time, 10 pounds, 11 ounces. That fish beat the Major League Fishing record by 3 ounces, so I was really excited about it.

Lo and behold I go to Bussey Brake the next day, fishing was tough, really cold water and not many bites, and lightning struck twice: I caught a 12-pound, 14-ounce behemoth!

The water was stained there, so I was flipping a blue-black laminate Yamamoto Senko and a red quarter-ounce XPS Tungsten weight. I use that red weight sometimes when I'm sight fishing but also when water is stained - I think that red flash sometimes creates a reaction strike when it's falling. When I hit that fish I knew I needed to keep her head up. If you can get their head to break the water and keep them from digging down with power, you have a better chance of keeping them from breaking you off.

I've fished all over the country for almost 30 years and had never caught a bass over 10-8, and then caught the biggest fish of my life on back-to-back days. It was just unbelievable, I don't know if I'm ever going to top that. ■



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# MASTERS SERIES

## BLADED JIGS

*As told by Brett Hite*

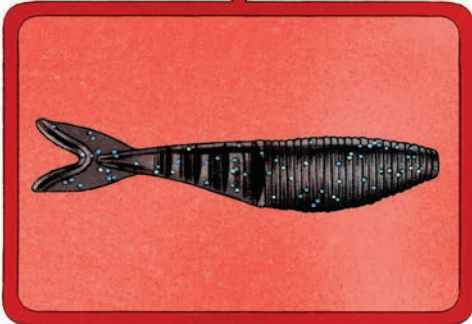
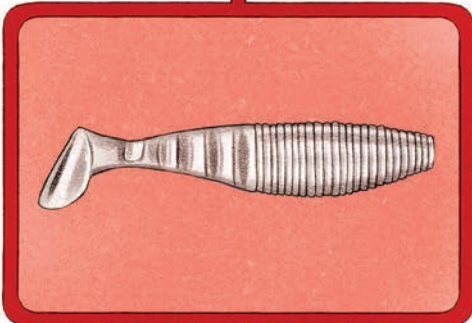
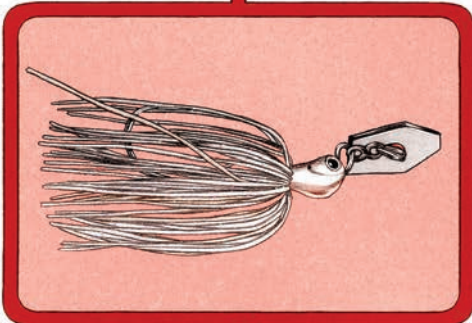
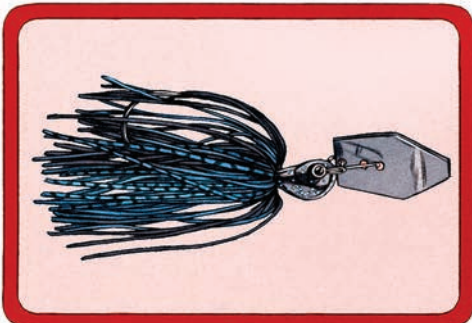
PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

IN EVERY CRAFT, THERE IS A MASTER: AN ARTIST, PLAYER OR PERFORMER OF CONSUMMATE SKILL WHOSE WORK SERVES AS A MODEL OR IDEAL ...

**I** first fished with a bladed jig in 2006 on Clear Lake in California. It was a Phenix Vibrator Jig, and I caught a few fish on it, so I definitely saw potential with that bait type very early.

I began to experiment with different trailers and how they impacted the action of the lure, and the first time I tried a swimbait-style trailer, I was practicing for a fall tournament and caught a 5-pounder on my first cast. That was probably in late 2007, and I had a Top 10 finish in that tournament, even though I only used the bladed jig on the last day when my other pattern was fading on me. I caught an 18-pound bag in just three hours and realized I should have gone to the bladed jig earlier.

Since then, it's always been a part of my arsenal.



.....

“THERE’S REALLY NOT BAD TIME TO FISH A BLADED JIG, BUT I’D HAVE TO SAY THAT IT REALLY SHINES IN THE PRESPAWN AND SPAWN.”

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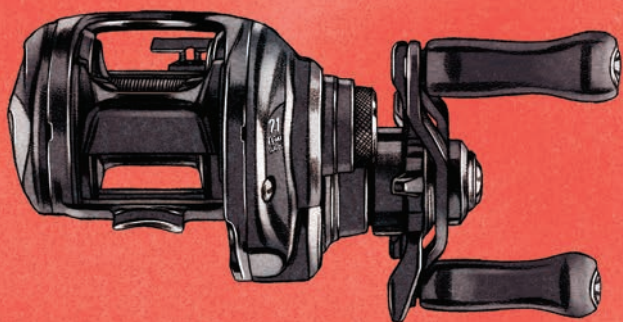


## HISTORY

In 2008, I won the FLW Tour event on Kissimmee Chain in Florida with one of the biggest winning margins in FLW history. On the final two days, I had 10 bass that weighed 38 pounds, 9 ounces. Second place was just over 18 pounds. A couple weeks later I won a big tournament on the California

Delta, so the bladed jig earned me more than \$250,000 in just three weeks.

Since then, I won the 2014 Bassmaster Elite Series event on Lake Seminole and had a lot of other good finishes – all on bladed jigs. In all, I’ve won more than \$1 million on the ChatterBait and bladed jigs.



.....  
"WHEN I FEEL THE  
BAIT IS HITTING  
SOMETHING, I TWITCH  
THE ROD TIP. THAT  
CAN HELP TO KEEP IT  
FROM GETTING HUNG  
UP, BUT THAT'S ALSO  
WHEN YOU'RE MOSTLY  
LIKELY TO GET A  
STRIKE."  
.....



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL HOEHLER

## WHEN

There's really no bad time to fish a bladed jig because it's so versatile, but I'd have to say that it really shines in the prespawn and spawn, when the water temperature is between about 55 and 65 degrees. The bladed jig is a lure that you can fish almost anywhere. It comes through cover

as well as just about any lure, it "hunts" (so it's erratic), you can skip it easily, and you can cast it a long way. It really has a lot going for it.

## WHERE

At first, I thought bladed jigs were just for fishing aquatic vegetation, but I've learned a lot since then. I've fished the bladed jig on all types of waters and in all kinds of cover and caught fish everywhere. I've caught bass on bladed jigs in the salad bowl lakes of Florida and in the deep, clear waters of Lake Mead in Nevada.

Generally, though, I'd say a bladed jig is going to be effective in the same kinds of situations that you'd fish a spinnerbait. If the bass are 10 feet deep or shallower and hitting reaction baits, the bladed jig is going to work for you.

## TACKLE

My style of bladed jig fishing is a lot like crankbaiting. As a result, I like a fiberglass rod. My favorite is the 7-foot, 3-inch Evergreen Brett Hite Combat Stick. It's got a heavy action, and that rod is definitely a key to my success. A lot of anglers think they need a jig rod because the lure is called a bladed jig, but since the lure has a solid body with no flex to it – like a crankbait – you need to compensate for that with a softer action. Spinnerbaits flex on the hookset, so you need a stiffer rod. Bladed jigs don't flex, and that glass rod sets the hook just right and keeps them buttoned up.

My reel is a Daiwa Tatula Elite with a 6.3:1 gear ratio. That sounds a little slow these days, but it's just right for me and the slower retrieves that are generally most productive. I use that gear ratio about 90 percent of the time. Occasionally, I'll go to a 7.1:1 if I'm fishing really shallow grass and need to speed things up.

I spool the Tatula Elite with 20-pound-test Sunline FC Sniper fluorocarbon line about 98 percent of the time I'm fishing the ChatterBait Jack Hammer. The other two percent is when I'm fishing super clear water or very deep water. Then I'll drop down to 16-pound-test Sniper FC.

When I'm fishing the Jack Hammer StealthBlade, I'll throw it on 16-pound Sniper most of the time, but will drop down to 14-pound in really clear water.

I never fish a bladed jig on braided line.

## LURES

I use two bladed jigs: The Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer and the Jack Hammer StealthBlade. I throw the Jack Hammer about 60 percent of the time and the StealthBlade about 40 percent of the time. Japanese pro Morizo Shimizu and I designed the Jack Hammer in 2015 and 2016 as a collaborative effort between Evergreen and Z-Man.

When I'm fishing the Jack Hammer, I'm usually using the 1/2-ounce model, but I'll go as light as 3/8-ounce in Florida (shallow, grassy water) or as heavy as 1 1/4-ounce in very deep water. With the StealthBlade, I'm usually using the 3/8- or 1/2-ounce version. I like the StealthBlade when I feel I

“A LOT OF ANGLERS THINK THEY NEED A JIG ROD BECAUSE THE LURE IS CALLED A BLADED JIG, BUT SINCE THE LURE HAS A SOLID BODY WITH NO FLEX TO IT, YOU NEED TO COMPENSATE FOR THAT WITH A SOFTER ACTION.”



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

need to show the fish something different, when they want a tighter vibration, or when conditions are tough – cold water, no wind, heavy fishing pressure.

When it comes to colors, I keep things simple. I think you need something dark like black/blue, something light like white or spot remover, and something in-between like green pumpkin or bruised green pumpkin.

Trailers are important when you're bladed jig fishing. You can use them to alter the action of the bait or to change the profile of the bait or just to add some buoyancy and color. My favorite ChatterBait trailers are the Yamamoto Zako and Paddle Tail Zako. I helped to design and create these baits just for the purpose of having the ideal bladed jig trailer.

The Paddle Tail Zako adds some action, and that can be great when the water's warm or they respond better to more action. Usually, though, I'm throwing the regular Zako because the ChatterBait has plenty of action on its own.

## BASICS

I usually fish a bladed jig on what I consider a medium retrieve. If there's aquatic vegetation around, I want my lure to be ticking the tops of that vegetation. I'll make a long cast and start reeling. If I don't feel the grass or other cover, I slow down until I do. If my bait gets mired in the cover, I speed up until I'm just contacting it – “ticking it.”

If I feel the bait hit something, I twitch the rod tip. That can help to keep it from getting hung up, but that's also when you're most likely to get a strike.

Even if my bait isn't ticking cover, I'll twitch it occasionally to give it that same action. It makes the bait move erratically, and that often triggers a strike.

## BONUS

I throw the ChatterBait a lot, and it's a real confidence bait for me. It catches numbers, and it catches big fish, so it's hard to put down whether I'm fishing for fun or in a tournament. And if you're in a situation when you're not getting a lot of bites with any bait you try, you can be pretty sure that your ChatterBait bites will be quality fish.

If you're new to bladed jigs, I recommend putting some time in with them. The more you throw them, the better you get with them, and the more you appreciate what a great tool they are for bass fishing almost anytime and anywhere. ■



“THE BLADED JIG CATCHES NUMBERS, AND IT CATCHES BIG FISH, SO IT'S HARD TO PUT DOWN WHETHER I'M FISHING FOR FUN OR IN A TOURNAMENT.”

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

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# THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES,  
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## FAVORITE FISHING

By Matt Williams

# DUSTIN CONNELL SIGNATURE SERIES ROD



**F**avorite Fishing recently teamed up with six MLF pros to develop signature series rods specially designed to suit some of their preferred fishing styles and techniques. They looked to 2021 MLF REDCREST champion Dustin Connell to take their Summit family to new heights. The result is a high-performance “all-purpose” rod Connell loves to use when presenting small and mid-size baits to tight targets where precision and accuracy are especially important.

### First Impressions

I've handled Summit Series rods before, so it came as no surprise to find many of the same top-notch design features in Connell's signature stick. Built around a super-sensitive 46-ton Japanese Toray graphite blank with iGrip Technology, the 7-foot, 2-inch rod comes with a medium-heavy power and soft, extra-fast tip that lends to accuracy without sacrificing crucial power when you need it. The one feature that makes this rod unique from the standard SMTC-

721MH is a slender EVA hand grip. It's saddled with nine Fuji Torzite guides (plus the tip) and features a handsome charcoal finish with silver, gold and red accents. Weighing in at only 3.8 ounces, it's like holding next to nothing.

### In Action

I got my hands on the rod late last fall and the first thing I did was pick Connell's brain to learn more about its strengths and limitations. Though it's rated for baits as large as 1 ounce, the Alabama pro pointed out that there are other rods in the Favorite lineup much better suited to handle the heavy artillery. Conversely, there may not be a better one for finesse applications in select power-fishing situations using lines as big as 20-pound test.

“This isn't a rod I'm going to throw 3/4-ounce baits on,” he said. “It's an all-purpose rod that is really technique specific.”

Designed by Favorite's Brian Harper, the rod is ideal for skipping jigs under docks and delivering accurate casts

tight to targets like bushes, stumps, trees or grass edges with small spinnerbaits, ChatterBaits, swim jigs, big shaky heads, poppers, soft jerk baits and stick baits.

“It's also a pretty dang good buzzbait rod,” Connell added.

It takes a special rod to cover all those bases effectively. Here are some things that make this one unique:

- **Action/Power:** The blank has an extra-fast taper and soft tip to bolster casting accuracy and snap hooksets while the medium-heavy power delivers plenty of backbone for tangling with large fish. I can't skip very well, but this is going to help my skipping game enormously.
- **EVA Hand Grip:** Connell isn't a fan of a slick handle. Likewise, he requested some EVA foam to provide a little better grip while adding only a fraction of an ounce to the overall weight compared to the SMTC-721MH. At only 3.8 ounces, the featherweight rod is a true pleasure to fish with all day.

## FOAM GRIP:

Favorite added a slim EVA foam grip for anglers like Connell who like something to hold onto besides a bare handle.

## GRAPHITE BLANK:

The 46-ton Japanese Toray graphite blank is wrapped with nine premium Fuji Torzite guides (plus the tip) and features Favorite's iGrip technology, creating a durable rod that is super sensitive, powerful and extremely lightweight at only 3.8 ounces.

➤ **Weight/Sensitivity:** The high-tech Japanese Toray graphite blank, Favorite's iGrip Technology and Fuji Torzite guides help keep the weight down while making the rod sensitive enough to stay in contact with the bait and detect subtle strikes that frequently come on Texas rigs, flukes and Senkos.

### Final Thoughts

Favorite's Summit Series are among the most sensitive and lightweight bait-casting rods available. Retailing for \$349.99, Connell's signature series stick is for the consummate angler who doesn't mind paying extra for a custom-built rod fashioned using some of the industry's most premium components.

### Performance Advice

If you're in the market for a rocket launcher to bomb a Whopper Plopper or something heavy to take to dense grass mats in Florida, keep on looking. This rod can do plenty but will serve you best in close-quarters situations or when fishing tight to targets where accuracy is key.

### Applications

- Skipping docks with jigs and plastics
- Soft jerkbaits and stick baits
- Light-duty flipping
- Small spinnerbaits (1/2 ounce or less)
- ChatterBaits
- Swim jigs around scattered cover
- Small swimbaits
- Casting small poppers, prop baits and buzzbaits to targets

### HITS & MISSES

- + Works with multiple bait styles and presentations
- + Lightweight (3.8 ounces)
- + Very sensitive
- + Foam handle for better grip and comfort
- + Extra-fast taper lends to accuracy and fast hooksets
- + Solid backbone
- + Premium guides
- + Well balanced

— Cost

### >> SIGNATURE SERIES FAMILY OF RODS

Favorite's Signature Series family also includes all-purpose and specialty rods designed by MLF pros Andy Morgan, Brian Latimer, Zach Birge and Mark Daniels Jr., which are available at a variety of price points.

➤ Latimer's BLat Sick Stick series includes two casting rods designed with shallow-water power-fishing applications – a 7-foot, 2-inch medium-heavy and 6-foot, 10-inch medium – plus a 7-foot, 1-inch medium-heavy spinning rod suited for all sorts of finesse tactics.

➤ Morgan's 7-foot, 6-inch Pro Battle Rod is built exclusively for flipping in heavy cover, as is Daniels' top-tier Hex, a 7-foot, 8-inch heavy/extra-fast rod built using a patented hexagonal blank to promote more power and sensitivity.

➤ Birge's "Rush Rod" series includes a 7-foot, 3-inch medium-heavy all-purpose rod, a 7-foot, 7-inch heavy action and a 7-foot, 1-inch medium-heavy spinning rod.

### DETAILS

**Length:** 7 feet, 2 inches

**Power:** Medium-heavy

**Guides:** Fuji Torzite, nine plus tip

**Taper:** Extra-fast

**Lure Rating:** 3/8 to 1 ounce

**Line:** 12- to 20-pound test

**MSRP:** \$349.99

**Contact:** favoriteusa.com ■



# LESS IS MORE!

SCALING DOWN YOUR OFFERINGS TO SCALE UP YOUR CATCHES

By Sean Ostruszka  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON ROWAN



Strike King Pro Model  
8XD Crankbait  
Color: The Shizzle



Strike King KVD 200 Jerkbait  
Color: The Shizzle



Strike King Red Eye  
Shad Tungsten 2 Tap  
Color: The Shizzle

**SLIM DOWN YOUR SHAD IMITATIONS**  
Fat-bodied crankbaits, like Strike King's 8XD, can attract big bass, but sometimes the slender profile of a jerkbait or lipless crankbait is preferred for coaxing bites from big fish.

13 Fishing - Coalition Bait  
Co BAMF Shad SwimBait  
Color: Purple Shad



Keitech Swing Impact FAT 2.8" on a Dirty Jigs  
Matt Stefan Guppy SwimBait Jig Head  
Color: Pro Blue Red Pearl



**LESS > MORE** :  
Big bass will eat  
smaller shad more  
often than big shad,  
because there's more  
opportunity to do so.  
A big swimbait might  
be ignored if bass are  
actively feeding on 2-  
inch shad.  
.....

**"Big baits for big fish"**

**N**o doubt you've heard this adage before. Probably multiple times. On the face of it, it makes sense. A big fish probably doesn't want to waste its energy only to eat a snack. It'd much rather eat one big meal to hold itself over for a while. And who could blame it? If you had to chase down your next meal, would you want to run after a French fry or an entire cheeseburger?

Hence why "trophy bass hunters" are often seen throwing massive swimbaits, the largest crankbaits and bulky jigs to try to coax that one giant bite.

But just because that's what conventional wisdom and everyone at your local tackle shop says doesn't always make it so.

"Everyone likes seeing pictures of bass with giant shad sticking out of their throats," said MLF pro Brian Latimer. "But when you catch a fish - even a really big one - they typically regurgitate shad that are 2 to 4 inches. That's what they're usually eating."

Big bass will eat smaller offerings (and often do so more than larger prey) simply because there's more opportunities to do so. There are far more 2-inch shad in a lake than there are 6-inchers.

And in delving into this more, you begin to realize there are actually times top pros like Latimer, Jeff Sprague, Jeremy

Lawyer and others will actually downsize their offerings with the goal of targeting bigger fish. How and when do they do this? That's what we asked them.

**THE DAWNING AGE OF SMALL?**

If you watched any of the Bass Pro Tour or Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit events to start the 2022 season, you probably noticed a couple interesting trends.

First, there were some absolutely giant fish caught, like Michael Neal's 8-pounder that helped him win the Pro Circuit event on Sam Rayburn, or Randy Howell's back-to-back days with double-digit lunkers during Stage One of the Bass Pro Tour in Louisiana.

The second, though, is the sudden influx of finesse and/or smaller techniques catching these fish.

Neal caught his giant on a jerkbait and commented earlier in the same event that he felt like he was fishing on Lake St. Clair thanks to him and almost everyone else using spinning gear on a legendary big-fish, power-fishing lake.

Meanwhile, Howell caught his 10-11 on a lipless crankbait (not exactly a large offering) and his 12-14 on a Yamamoto Senko, which he chose for its diminutive vibration (more on that in a bit).

That's three fish eclipsing 30 pounds in total, all caught on subtle and/or smaller



**"THE SLENDER BODY  
OF A JERKBAIT IS  
FAR LESS INTRUSIVE  
THAN A FATTER  
CRANKBAIT."**



Strike King Baby Burner Spinnerbait  
Color: Chart/White

## APPEARING SMALL

**FALL FISHING** can be some of the toughest of the year for a simple reason: the size of the bait bass are chasing.

With the young-of-the-year shad flooding the system, bass have so much of the real stuff swimming around that it's hard to get them to eat our fake stuff. Plus, those tiny shad are far smaller than most anglers' offerings. And even if you can find a tiny offering, casting it can be a royal pain.

Fortunately, there are ways to appear small without actually decreasing the size of your offering.

"I remember when we had the TITLE on Wheeler in August," said MLF pro Jeremy Lawyer. "There was a late shad spawn and there were tons of tiny 1-inch shad swimming around. Everyone was downsizing, because the smaller you went, the bigger the fish got. I was throwing hair jigs and a tiny homemade jigging spoon, but what I also did was switch to a 1/4-ounce spinnerbait with little double willows. Those tiny blade perfectly mimicked those tiny shad."

Another trick is throwing a translucent color or adding a feathered treble hook. The see-through color doesn't allow the bass to see much, which can make it appear smaller, and an added feathered treble is the perfect tiny target.

offerings. Which begs the question: Is that a fluke? Not if you ask Sprague. In fact, he feels you're only going to see a lot more of it in coming years.

"With what I'm seeing every day on my Lowrance ActiveTarget, (smaller presentations) are definitely not going away," Sprague said. "It's the fishing pressure. These fish know what's up."

According to Sprague, what he's seeing on his sonar are fish actually "running for their lives" when larger presentations come near them. And by larger, we're not just talking size. We're also talking vibration, profile and action. So, from this point on in this article, when referencing "larger offerings," think loud and/or intrusive.

Sprague finished fifth at Stage One thanks in large part to him downsizing to catch bigger fish.

"I could see quality fish in the brush piles," he said. "But when I'd flip in a jig or Texas rig, they'd scatter. I ended up pitching a drop-shot and shaky head to catch a lot of my key fish.

"It was all about that smaller profile that was less intrusive, and you're only going to see it more and more with the better electronics and the pressure these fish get."

### WHAT IS "SMALL?"

Size is always relative.

A 7-year-old is gigantic next to a 2-year-old, but to an adult, a 7-year-old is tiny. The 7-year-old didn't change, but the perspective did, and that's what matters.

It's easy to get caught up in only thinking about the physical size of a lure when talking about downsizing, but it can actually fall into multiple categories. Remember, we're talking about how intrusive a presentation is to a bass.

**Physical size/profile:** This can mean going from a 6-inch soft plastic stick bait to a 4-inch version, but it can also mean changing profiles. The slender body of a jerkbait is far less intrusive than a fatter crankbait. The same goes for a Texas rig compared to a jig, and a shaky head compared to the Texas rig, and a drop-shot compared to a shaky head.

"Smaller-profile offerings are less intrusive and look more natural," Sprague said. "The fish are not going to be as intimidated. Yeah, there are times of year they want to eat bigger baits, but a lot of times the smaller stuff will get a lot more looks."

**Vibration:** Remember Howell's 12-14 referenced earlier? A big reason he caught that fish was that he was paying close attention to vibration. While he easily could've been flipping a Texas-rigged creature or craw to the brush he was fishing, the tough bite meant he opted for the more subtle Senko because it was less intrusive. And as we've stressed, less intrusive means more looks from fish, including giants.

Sprague has watched fish in grass scatter out of the way of a vibrating jig only to eat a swimbait the same size because it was less intrusive. The same thing went for Carolina rigs, where if everyone is throwing a creature or lizard, he'll go with a ring fry because it's the same size but far more subtle in action.

You don't need to actually decrease the physical size of a bait sometimes to make an offering less intrusive. When Latimer won a Pro Circuit event at Lake Seminole, he spent the final day flipping a Z-Man Palmetto BugZ, which is only 3 1/2 inches long.

"Don't let it fool you because it's short," Latimer said. "It has a big vibration, which I needed as the water in my area got dirtier. But what never got on camera was me getting to Championship Sunday fishing a 6-inch weightless stick bait when the water was clear."

**Weight:** This might seem like an odd one, but it's actually the thing both Latimer and Sprague brought up first when it comes to downsizing.

"Changing the weight, or really, changing the rate of fall is often the first thing I'll do when downsizing anything," Latimer explained.

Take a Texas rig. Instead of switching soft plastics if they're not getting bit, the first thing both do instead is switch the weight, especially in shallow water.

"There's only a little bit of water if you're fishing shallow," Latimer added. "So the fish are always going to be a bit more spooky."

"A heavy Texas rig splashing in and falling fast to the bottom can be a lot. I might switch from a 3/8-ounce to a 3/16-ounce or even weightless to see if that slower, more subtle fall rate is less intrusive enough for them to bite."

## SMALL FINAL THOUGHT

If you're still on the fence about this whole small movement, here's one last thing to consider.

When looking at the Top 10 Baits galleries after every major MLF tournament, what do you see?

"You see the winning tackle is usually finesse to normal size," Latimer said. "Any time you step outside that realm, you're flirting with not getting bit. And you can't weigh fish you're not catching. For me, I like to be swinging the bat, and I don't need to be swinging big. I just need to be swinging because eventually I'll hit that home run."

### Z-Man David Walker's CrossEyeZ Flippin' Jig

Color: Candy Craw

### Berkley PowerBait Crash Craw

Color: Green Pumpkin Party



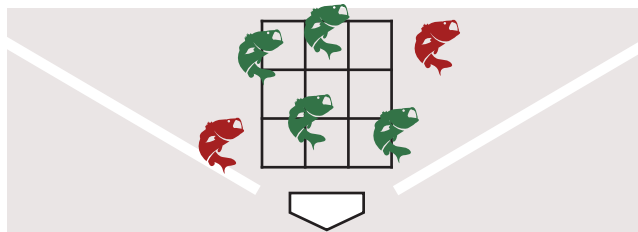
Owner Shaky  
Ultrahead 3/16oz

Berkley PowerBait MaxScent D-Worm  
Color: Bold Bluegill



Gamakatsu SuperLine  
Offset EWG Hook 4/0

Yamamoto Senko  
Color: Baby Bass



## JUST KEEP SWINGING

**WHEN IT COMES** to catching big fish, anglers usually take the less-is-more, quality-over-quantity approach. In other words, they'll forgo catching a lot of fish in hopes of catching a couple big ones.

Again, this makes sense - until you look at it through a slightly different lens.

In baseball, sluggers known for hitting home runs follow the same mindset: They'll forgo getting a lot of hits for just the ones that really put runs on the board. Yet, if they really followed that mindset like anglers do, sluggers would be extremely selective about their pitches and only swing at perfect ones ideal for them to hit home runs. In the meantime, they'd get on base a lot via walks.

The problem is, it's almost the exact opposite in reality. Home run hitters strike out far more than most other batters.

So where is the disconnect between sluggers and anglers?

Math.

"I can't catch a big fish if I'm not getting bit," Latimer explained. "And if I'm throwing large stuff, I'm not going to be getting bit as much. The more times I can swing the bat, the more likely I am hit a homer. It's simple math."

Basically, Latimer follows the same approach as a big-league slugger. He sets his mind big and puts himself in position to hit home runs, and then he just starts swinging (setting the hook) as many times as possible, knowing that eventually one of those swings is going to be a home run. ■

### WORMS FOR WARY BASS :

A heavy flipping jig with a bulky trailer can scare off spooky big fish. Downsize to a shaky head or a Texas-rigged worm for a more natural presentation.

## 1 LEW'S 2022 XD CRANKING SERIES

All models \$149.99 | [lews.com](https://lews.com)

Brilliant design at an even more brilliant price, the new Lew's 2022 XD Cranking Series (announced in the second half of 2021) was designed with the explicit goal of giving anglers the perfect cranking sticks to pair with the Strike King XD series of crankbaits. Though these rods are undoubtedly well-suited for other crankbaits, Lew's made it a point to tailor each of its five new models to the XD series in particular, with each model corresponding to one of the five sizes of XD baits (3XD, 5XD, 6XD, 8XD and 10XD) for perfect tuning on every cast. Constructed with HM50 graphite and S Glass hybrid blanks, SeaGuide X-Frame guides, Lew's SoftTouch graphite skeletal reel seats and full-handle Winn Dri-Tac Ultra grips, every model offers excellent quality at a tremendous price point. Models range from 7-3 to 7-10 with powers and actions to match.

## 2 SHIMANO EXPRIDE B

\$279.99-\$299.99 | [fish.shimano.com](https://fish.shimano.com)

A redesign of the popular Expride A line (which was itself a redesign of the original Exprides), Shimano updated several key features for the new Expride B series - most notably, a hollow carbon monocoque handle that's meant to allow vibration to travel all the way down the rod and into anglers' hands for 30 percent more sensitivity. Fuji SiC guides cut down on overall weight, as does a CI4+ reel seat, creating a rod that's every bit as good as the prior generation - only better. The Expride B lineup consists of 22 different models (16 casting and six spinning) with a model for every technique. Lengths available from 6-foot-10 to 7-2 (spinning) and 6-10 to 8-foot (casting) in powers from medium-light to extra-extra-heavy and actions from moderate to extra-fast, meaning anglers can have a rod available for everything from finesse to power.

## 3 ABU GARCIA FANTASISTA X

\$299.99-\$329.99 | [abugarcia.com](https://abugarcia.com)

Abu Garcia has completed a redesign of one of its most popular rods, rolling out the Fantasista X lineup at ICAST 2021 as an upgrade over the Fantasista Premier series. The Fantasista X offers many of the great features found in the prior generation with some notable improvements that include molded carbon split grips to cut down on weight and increase sensitivity as well as strong, lightweight titanium alloy guides with zirconium inserts for better balance and casting. Abu Garcia built the Fantasista X lineup around its proprietary Powerlux 500 resin system for an unbeatable strength-to-weight ratio. Nine casting and four spinning models available from 6-10 medium-light to 7-6 medium (spinning) and 6-10 medium-light to 7-11 extra-heavy (casting).





4

## G. LOOMIS GCX

\$249.99-\$279.99 | [gloomis.com](http://gloomis.com)

There's something to be said for the technique-specific rod trend, and G. Loomis is doing the talking with the new GCX lineup. With 23 different models of spinning and casting rods within the GCX lineup – and every combination of length, power and action imaginable – anglers can fill their rod lockers with a whole series of rods for every technique. Each rod is carefully designed with different blends of graphite moduli and resin materials for optimum balance and sensitivity while making each model just a little different throughout the lineup. Moderate-fast cranking rod? Check. Heavy, fast punching rod? Check. The GCX lineup has it all – including a pleasant price tag of \$249.99 to \$279.99 depending on model.

5

## ARK RANDALL THARP HONEY BADGER

All models \$129.99 | [arkrods.com](http://arkrods.com)

MLF Bass Pro Tour ace Randall Tharp put his expertise and experience into every model of his signature series of rods from Ark, from the 7-3 medium-heavy “Moneymaker” model to the 7-11 extra-heavy “Okeechobee Special.” Every model in the 10-rod casting lineup (in addition to a pair of spinning rods) is built on Japanese Toray 40T high modulus carbon fiber blanks for superior strength, lightness and sensitivity and fitted with Fuji K Concept guides with F-Ring inserts for a high-quality series of rods at unbelievably affordable prices. If Tharp himself believes his signature rods give him a competitive edge over his competition, so should you.

6

## DAIWA STEEZ AGS

From \$549.99 | [daiwa.us](http://daiwa.us)

As premium fishing rods go, the new Daiwa Steez AGS is among the cream of the crop. Daiwa field marketing manager Mark Mills called it one of the finest rods he's ever seen, and we'd have a hard time disagreeing. Daiwa knows what anglers expect from its premium rod lineup: everything. Luckily, the Steez AGS delivers on that with a rod that boasts 10 percent less weight than the previous version thanks to SVF Nanoplus graphite technology and Daiwa's exclusive, patented Air Guide System (AGS) built with carbon fiber frames that outstrip the prior generation guides in terms of weight and sensitivity. Available in 10 casting and three spinning models designed to be “concept-specific” instead of technique specific for anglers who know what they want. ■



# TOURNAMENTS ARE DECIDED BY OUNCES. SO ARE THE REELS THAT WIN THEM.



**A tournament win can come down to a bass having one extra baitfish for breakfast. Or using Abu Garcia's lightest premium spinning reel. Introducing Zenon™. With a super light hybrid spool sitting on a seemingly weightless magnesium body wrapped around a silky-smooth gearbox, it promises the heaviest weigh-ins on the tournament trail.**



**FISH TO WIN™**

# TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD





## PARDON MY REACH

**I**t's been almost a year to the day since Alabama pro Dustin Connell claimed the biggest win of his career at REDCREST 2021 on Lake Eufaula in Alabama. But as the final day-and-a-half at Favorite Fishing Stage Two Presented by Mercury unfolded on Lewis Smith Lake in northern Alabama, it seemed that Connell was positioned for yet another 'Bama beatdown.

One of the most accomplished spotted bass fishermen on the planet, Connell had spent the first few days of the early March tournament grinding his way through 2 1/2 days of spotted bass fishing that was good enough to advance past the cutdown from 80 anglers to 40, but probably not good enough to sneak into the Top 10 and a Championship Round berth.

But history has a way of repeating itself. And in Connell's case, literally: The Favorite Fishing pro made a move late in the Knockout Round to a location near the Smith Lake Dam that he had fished several years prior and promptly put eight spots on SCORETRACKER™ for nearly 17 pounds. That was enough to propel him into the final round, where Connell leaned hard on that same area (as well as his Lowrance ActiveTarget and a drop-shot) to the tune of 33 spotted bass for 71-2 – a runaway win by 15 pounds over Jordan Lee in second.

If his REDCREST win wasn't proof, Connell's win at Smith Lake proved that he's on the leading edge of the forward-facing sonar revolution, and a spotted bass fishermen of the highest caliber. And that's no reach!

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



**1. LUCAS OIL CHALLENGE CUP PRESENTED BY B&W TRAILER HITCHES**  
Lake Wateree, Lake Wylie

January 1-February 5

Call it a 10-year anniversary, if you will. Or maybe just call it Brent Ehrler's time to win another MLF Cup event. Ehrler started off his MLF career with a win in the league's very first event, the 2012 Challenge Cup on Lake Amistad in Texas. So when the California pro sealed the deal on the 2022 Lucas Oil Challenge Cup Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches 10 years later, it seemed fitting.

Ehrler connected with 12 scorable bass on South Carolina's Lake Wylie for 20 pounds, 12 ounces to outpace Alton Jones Jr. (18-3) in the Championship Round to secure his second Cup trophy. He did it with some of the tools that have earned him the reputation as a finesse ace: a Neko rig and Yamamoto bait that he skipped around docks.

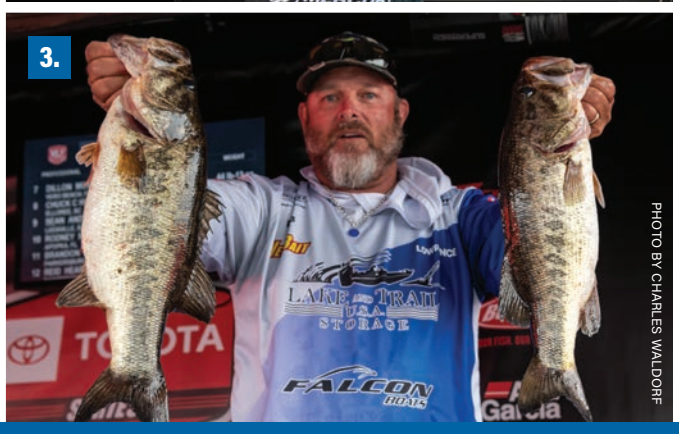


**2. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT GUARANTEED RATE STOP 1**  
Sam Rayburn Reservoir

January 27-30

Earning his second major-tournament victory in four months - after clinching 2021 AOY honors on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit - Michael Neal might be the hottest angler on the planet. The Dayton, Tennessee pro started off his 2022 season with a bang at Sam Rayburn, jumping out to fifth place on Day 1 with 18 pounds, 7 ounces before tallying 15-2 on the second day of competition (Day 2 was cancelled due to adverse weather conditions) to jump into first.

With weights zeroed on the final day, Neal kept the momentum going with the largest bag of the tournament (26-5) to clinch the victory by more than 8 pounds over Josh Bragg. To get it done, Neal called an audible and moved away from his typical morning spot in the Canyons



**3. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. SOUTHERN DIVISION**  
Lake Okeechobee

February 3-5

Rob Branagh was the most consistent angler during the Toyota Series Presented by A.R.E. opener at Okeechobee, and his reward was 51 pounds, 5 ounces of bass over three days and a \$65,000 check. The Malabar, Florida pro, who fishes Okeechobee "about once a week" knew he needed a secluded spot to catch big largemouth moving up shallow to spawn on the heels of the recent cold snap. He found one at the south end of the lake - a shallow spawning area full of grass and devoid of other boats - and huntered down with a Texas-rigged NetBait Big Bopper worm.

area, opting for a drain near Mud Creek where he went on to land a mammoth 8-9 kicker on a jerkbait.

There, Branagh caught bags of 15-1, 16-9 and 19-11, respectively, to jump from seventh to first and unseat Okeechobee hammer and Day 2 leader Brandon Medlock.

**4. BASS PRO TOUR B&W TRAILER HITCHES STAGE ONE PRESENTED BY POWER-POLE**  
Caney Creek, Lake D'Arbonne, Bussey Brake

February 5-10

Ask MLF pro Bradley Roy what he remembers most about the final hours of his first-ever tour-level win and he'll answer bluntly: "It was brutal."

Roy emerged from northern Louisiana's Bussey Brake after the final day of the B&W Trailer Hitches Stage One presented by Power-Pole with a shiny red BPT trophy after landing five largemouth for 26-2, but he also probably earned a few grey hairs with it. The Kentucky pro went fishless for the final three hours of



4.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



6.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE



5.

PHOTO BY KORY SAVAGE



7.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

the day, watching his lead diminish to less than 2 pounds as Alton Jones Jr. made a late charge.

Roy had taken a seemingly comfortable lead with an 8-4 and a 5-8 midway through the day, but then spent an agonizing afternoon flipping and pitching a creature bait to Bussey Brake's woody cover with no takers. But Jones stalled at 24-5, giving Roy his first major win and the \$100,000 payday.

**5. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION**  
**Sam Rayburn Reservoir**

February 10-12

Glen Webb didn't even need a limit on the final day to earn the victory at the Southwestern Division opener on Sam Rayburn, thanks in no small part to monster bags on Days 1 and 2. Webb tallied 26-15 on Day 1 and 28-5 on Day 2, putting him more than 9 pounds ahead of

Rayburn ace Derek Mundy heading into the final day of competition. Webb brought four fish to the scales for 8-8, but it was enough to hold off Mundy by 1 pound, 14 ounces.

The Bethel, Oklahoma pro leaned on a special stretch of stumpy, rocky bank throughout the event, utilizing an umbrella rig to catch his megabags. On Day 3, though, changing weather conditions stifled that bite and necessitated a switch to a Carolina rig to scrounge up his four keepers for the \$54,000 payday.

**6. ACADEMY SPORTS + OUTDOORS HERITAGE CUP PRESENTED BY MAGELLAN OUTDOORS**  
**Douglas Lake and Fort Loudoun**

February 12-March 19

Andy Montgomery took to the "anywhere is possible" structure of the MLF Cups - where anglers don't know where they're fishing until

they arrive at the ramp - fishing his way into nine Championship Rounds from 2017 to 2022. Montgomery had fallen short in his previous eight final-day appearances heading into the 2022 Cup events, but the South Carolina pro's experience finally paid off in eastern Tennessee: Montgomery grabbed the trophy at the Academy Sports + Outdoors Heritage Cup Presented by Magellan Outdoors, winding a Strike King Thunder Cricket and a spinnerbait around Fort Loudoun for nine fish and 16-10 to skate past Greg Vinson (13-8).

**7. BASS PRO TOUR TORO STAGE TWO PRESENTED BY GRUNDÉNS**  
**Lake Fork**

February 19-24

After falling one bite shy of winning his first Bass Pro Tour trophy just 10 days earlier in northern Louisiana, Alton Jones Jr. could accurately be

described as being "on a mission" when Championship Day rolled around on Lake Fork for Stage Two. Jones grabbed a lead at the start of the third period and then withstood a furious rally by Dakota Ebare that cut Jones' lead to just 10 ounces.

Ebare's rally ended there, though, and Jones finished the day with 13 fish for 46-2 to Ebare's 45-8 - one of the smallest margins of victory on the Bass Pro Tour.

Jones used a variety of baits to advance through the Qualifying and Knockout Rounds, but cranked his way around stumps in Little Caney Creek for all of his scorable bass on the final day.

**8. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. CENTRAL DIVISION**  
**Lake Guntersville**

February 22-24

A retired hatchery manager for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



8.

PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN CALDWELL



9.

PHOTO BY ROB INOBUWA



10.

PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

who has called Guntersville home for the last seven years, Kent Ware has an innate understanding of how bass behave amidst everchanging weather conditions. That's why, as rain inundated Guntersville throughout the week, Ware was able to roll with the punches to tally 59-15 over three days to earn an \$80,000 check and a Toyota Series champion's trophy.

Ware found an area he really liked and stayed put throughout the week, covering water with a 1/2-ounce Bill Lewis Rat-L-Trap to catch limits of 18-15, 18-8 and 22-8, respectively. The key to his spot downriver of Scottsboro was clean water, which remained fairly clean each day thanks to its being shielded from current by an island.

To contend with the thick grass, Ware opted for a stiffer heavy-power rod to effectively rip his traps through cover to catch his winning fish.

**9. ABU GARCIA COLLEGE FISHING PRESENTED BY YETI OPEN**

**Lake Chickamauga**  
February 24-25

Hunter Fillmore and Dylan Fogarty of Bethel University blew out the competition in the Abu Garcia College Fishing Presented by YETI Open on Lake Chickamauga in late February, leading by 2-13 after Day 1 and going on to win the event by 14-3 over the Georgetown College team of Conner Johnson and Jordan Nicely.

On Day 1, the Bethel duo started out fishing one of Chickamauga's notorious community holes, though most of what they weighed came from a patch of shallow grass near the main river. On Day 2, they switched from lipless crankbaits to vibrating jigs at that same grass patch and caught a few keepers before leaving that spot. They came

back around 11 o'clock to catch a 4-pounder and a 9-5 to finish out their 22-10 limit for the blowout win and Bethel's first-ever Open title.

**10. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. AT LAKE OF THE OZARKS PRESENTED BY SMART DIGITAL**

**PLAINS DIVISION**  
**Lake of the Ozarks**  
March 1-3

Brock Reinkemeyer guides on Lake of the Ozarks, so he's familiar enough with the fishery to know exactly how to adjust when conditions call for it. Fishing out deep in the Gravois arm of the lake, Reinkemeyer - who struggled to get bit up shallow anywhere else - leaned on an umbrella rig and a jerkbait to target brush piles and rock in 14 to 22 feet of clear water.

Forward-facing sonar clued Reinkemeyer in on how his fish were set up, finding the early morning bite to be the most productive. He wrangled up 21-2 and 21-7, respectively, over the first two days for a 3-pound, 2-ounce lead before weighing in 17-4 on the final day to seal the deal and take home a \$41,700 check.

**11. BASS PRO TOUR FAVORITE FISHING STAGE THREE PRESENTED BY MERCURY**

**Lewis Smith Lake**  
March 2-7

Just in case his 2021 win at RED-CREST hadn't already cemented Dustin Connell's reputation as one of the most skilled practitioners of forward-facing sonar, the Alabama pro proved it again on Smith Lake in the Championship Round of Favorite Fishing Stage Three Presented by Mercury.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY ERIK GAFFRON

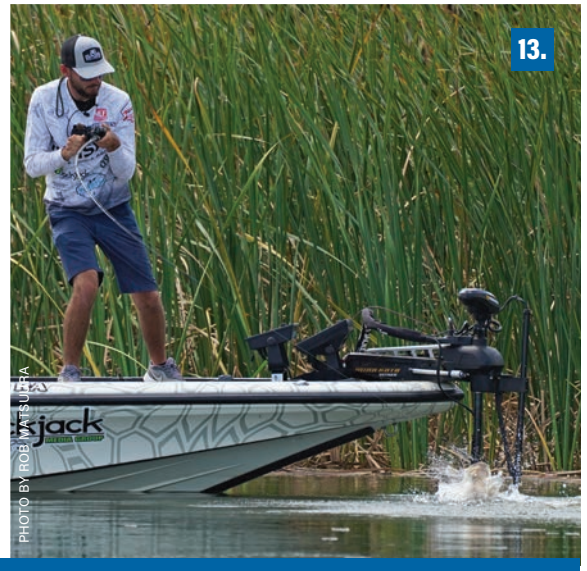


PHOTO BY ROB WATSON

Connell had doggedly worked his way through the first two rounds of the event, catching enough fish to advance, but (in his own words) not enough to win. That is, until the Favorite Fishing pro decided to fish some history at a spot he'd had some success with years earlier, near the Smith Lake Dam. History paid off: Connell racked up 71-2 on 33 fish, drubbing second place by more than 15 pounds.

His keys to victory: Lowrance ActiveTarget and a drop-shot, with which Connell caught all of his scorable fish on that day.

## 12. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. WESTERN DIVISION

### Lake Havasu

March 3-5

No one could touch Patrick Touey in the Toyota Series Western

Division opener. With the biggest bag of the day on both Days 1 and 2, the Santa Maria, California pro carried a lead of 12-12 into the final day of competition and ended up winning wire-to-wire by a margin of more than 17 pounds.

Touey has had some experience on Lake Havasu in the past, and leaning on the knowledge of what worked well and what didn't, he put together a solid game plan predicated on medium-sized swimbaits to target fish chasing gizzard shad. Despite not seeing what he wanted during practice, warm weather moved in and grouped up some fish in a couple of his selected areas – fish more than willing to bite his swimbait.

On Day 1, Touey fished in an area with steep banks in pockets with shade lines. The weather changed on Day 2, so he moved to a different area with 45-degree banks, where

he returned on Day 3 intent on just catching a limit to seal the deal. The result: 66-7 over three days and a \$28,718 payday.

## 13. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT BASS BOAT TECHNOLOGIES STOP 2 PRESENTED BY FROGG TOGGS

### Harris Chain of Lakes

March 13-16

Pro Circuit rookie Christian Greico, a Tampa native who knows a thing or two about Florida fisheries, leaned on his considerable experience fishing in the Sunshine State to put together a winning program predicated on fishing offshore shell bars with a Carolina rig to target mostly unpressured postspawn largemouth.

Through three days, Greico plied several shell bars to tally 15-

11, 22-5 and 11-4, respectively, but he knew his pattern was waning as he backed into the final day in eighth place. He did some probing of those shell bars early on Day 4 before calling an audible and proceeding to Lake Apopka – a backup plan he'd put in place the night before when he looked at the weather forecast and realized the south end of Apopka wouldn't get blown out from the southerly winds.

In Apopka, Greico turned to his confidence technique – flipping – and managed to land 18-5, including a 6-pounder he caught around 1:30, which was only about 15 minutes before he had planned on making the run back to weigh-in. That 6-pounder proved to be the winning ticket, as he edged out fellow rookie Andrew Loberg by just 1 pound, 8 ounces to secure the trophy and a \$100,000 payday. ■



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By Tyler Brinks

## THE JAMES RIVER

The Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit tackles this tidal fishery in June

**T**he fifth stop of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit will visit the James River in Virginia June 16-19. It's a famed river with plenty of historical significance both for Americans in general and for the sport of bass fishing in particular. It's also sometimes referred to as the "founding river" because the first English colony, Jamestown, was formed on the banks of the river in 1607.

The James has hosted the Forrest Wood Cup (won by David Dudley in 2003), and three Bassmaster Classics – won by bass fishing legends

Guido Hibdon, Hank Parker and Rick Clunn – over 30 years ago.

There's no shortage of lore when it comes to the James, and recent tournament results show a healthy fishery with some of the best fishing in the history of the river.

### THE STATE OF THE JAMES

For years, the James River was a popular tournament destination known for challenging fishing. That's all changed in recent years, and the river is as healthy as it's ever been. The fish are getting bigger, too, thanks to the

stocking of Florida-strain largemouth.

"The river has come a long way in the last 10 years," said Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Cody Pike, who lives about 30 minutes away in Powhatan, Virginia. "They've stocked Florida-strain bass every couple years since then, and the fish have gotten way bigger. It used to be that 15 pounds would win every event and now 17 pounds won't even get you a check in most single-day events. There are now 8-, 9- and 10-pound fish and the real potential for a 30-pound bag."



"Ninety percent of the tournaments are won there because it has everything: lily pads, grass and cypress trees," Pike said. "It's full of fish over 3 pounds but also doesn't hold up very well to pressure. You've seen that at some of the three-day events in the recent past, and guys have a huge bag one day with two smaller weights to win it."

Villa also believes the majority of the field will focus on the Chickahominy but says there are other options for success.

"Any of the creeks below the Appomattox have some milfoil, but it gets more prevalent as you go towards the Chick," he added.

"There's also plenty of manmade structure to target like barges, concrete and other structures."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRANDON ROWAN

Another pro angler from the Commonwealth of Virginia and fellow Pro Circuit pro, Martin Villa, echoed Pike's assessment.

"It's the best fishery in the state, and I don't know a single person who doesn't like fishing the James," he said. "It's good in all seasons and has gotten a lot better in recent years. We'll see a bunch of 7-pounders with the possibility of a double-digit fish coming to the scales."

## HOW IT SETS UP

The James is a tidal fishery covering nearly 350 miles. It starts in the Appalachian Mountains and eventually reaches the Chesapeake Bay. Along the way, several major tributaries connect with the main river and nearly all have potential, but the bulk of the attention is on the Chickahominy River. Most anglers in the field will make the 40-mile run from Osborne Landing to the mouth of "Chick," as it's often called.

## TIMING THE BITE

As with all tidal fisheries, the key is timing the bite based on the tide chart. The transition between the spring and summer months will also factor into what the fish are doing.

"It should be a case where you will find some fish up shallow, wrapping up the spawn or guarding fry and also be plenty of fish on the main river," Villa said. "There will be guys who run and gun and chase the tide windows and some who find fish and don't leave; you can do it either way."

The bite on tidal fisheries like the James changes daily along with the moon phase, with a full moon taking place during the first day of practice for the event.

"With a full moon, you get higher highs and lower lows," Pike said. "Heavy winds or a hard rain can also change everything and will be something to watch leading up to the event. Timing is going to be critical in this

event and you can't expect to camp in one spot and stay all day long like you can on the grass on the bays of the Potomac; it's not the same here because the banks are more vertical and hard cover is more of a factor."

## PREDICTIONS AND TACTICS

According to Pike and Villa, the Pro Circuit's arrival in mid-June should allow anglers to find success with a plethora of different lures.

"It depends on the weather we have in the spring leading up to the event, but the frog bite usually turns on right around then," Pike explained. "You'll also see guys cranking the brush piles and drops on the river if they are all done spawning. I'd say a topwater, frog and crankbait will be some of the most common ways to catch fish with some flipping mixed in."

Villa shares some of the same thinking but added that anglers can fish their strengths on the river that time of year.

"You can catch them any way you want to," he said. "The frog, spinnerbait and flipping guys should do well. It will likely be a little too early for the punch bite, but that heats up in the summer months."

As for the fishing quality and winning weights, both anglers believe limits will be standard and will include some quality bags each day.

"It will take around 15 (pounds) a day to make the final day and then you'll have to have over 20 pounds to win it," Pike said about the 10 anglers all starting even for the final-day shootout, where the best weight of the final day takes the win. "The river is stacked with 12-inchers to 2-pounders – they're everywhere – so I think there will be plenty of limits crossing the scales."

Villa had a similar prediction as Pike on advancing to the final day but thinks the winner will need more on the last day to get the trophy.

"It should be about 15 pounds a day to make the final round and that will probably be a 20-plus-pound bag with two smaller limits," he predicted. "The final day, someone will catch 22 or 23 pounds to win. That's the coolest thing about the new format; all 10 guys will have a chance to win it, and someone will catch a big bag that last day and win it all." ■

PROFILE: **KEITH  
CARSON**

DEBARY, FLORIDA



*Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit rookie Keith Carson is a rookie by only the strictest definitions. A native Floridian (and noted life-long best friend of MLF superstar John Cox), the 34-year-old Carson has fished all over the country for years, piling up accolades along the way – including a Bassmaster Open win and Bassmaster Classic appearance, as well as Angler of the Year honors during the inaugural season of the National Professional Fishing League last year.*

*Through two events to start the 2022 Pro Circuit season, Carson is already proving he's more than ready for a new challenge, cashing checks at Sam Rayburn (41st place) and the Harris Chain (28th) and positioning himself well for a potential run at Rookie of the Year honors.*

## Q&A

By Justin Onslow  
PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

**Does it feel weird being called a "rookie" this year on the Pro Circuit? You're certainly not a rookie bass angler. You've kind of been all over the place fishing professionally for a long while.**

Yes. It feels odd, but at the same time, I am a rookie on the Pro Circuit. I'm a rookie in the sense that we only have two days of practice for a four-day tournament. That's new to me. That's a whole different mindset. There's a big difference between two days of practice and three.

**What made you want to tackle the Pro Circuit this year? How much influence did John [Cox] have on your decision?**

John had a ton of influence on me. He's always pushed me to get to the next level. I'm the type of angler that I believe you should come up through the ranks. I fished BFLs, I fished Toyota Series and kept moving up, and every level I fished at I truly loved fishing at that level. I would do well and John's like, 'You've got to move up; it's time to move up, man.' He talked me into and I'm sure glad I listened to him.

**Has he given you any advice about fishing the Pro Circuit?**

He said make sure you cash a check at each tournament and try not to focus on winning. Try to focus on cashing checks and then sometimes you get lucky and you're on really good fish and instead of just cashing a check you end up winning or finish Top 10 or something.

**Does having a best friend traveling and fishing with you make it easier to kind of get into a groove? So many pros leave the touring circuits after a year or two because there just isn't a comfort factor and it's hard to adjust to the lifestyle.**

Certainly. It makes it a lot easier to have John there. As far as the friendship goes, some pros drop out after a few years because of the comfort level, and it does help the comfort level off the water and sometimes on the water, but other times not on the water. There's times where maybe we both want to fish the same area and I'll just completely go somewhere else because at the end of the day our friendship is more important than ever aggravating one another. John is the leader. He's been fishing pro for a long time, so I would never infringe on his area or anything like that.

I don't want people to think I'm John's friend and I follow him around and he does all the work and I catch the fish that he's found throughout the years – that's not the case at all. At Sam Rayburn, I fished near the ramp and he fished 30 miles away and we both did well. There are dynamics to it that are greatly beneficial and there are dynamics that are not as beneficial as a competitor.

**I picked you to win Rookie of the Year this season for a lot of the reasons we discussed: your experience level, the fact that you and John are so close. But the other reason I picked you is because I've seen you make some wild decisions just based on instinct and trusting your gut. Do you remember that long run you made at the St. Johns Toyota Series event a couple years ago when you finished fifth?**

I do.

**Those are the kinds of decisions you only make when you have confidence in yourself as an angler. I think a lot of guys would maybe play it safer in that situation and fish closer just to have a full day to fish. You basically gave yourself an hour or two to fish knowing you were making the right decision. That's the mark of a true pro.**

Thanks a lot, man. It's humbling to hear you say that. I agree with you. Each year I fish I work very hard on my weakest aspect, whatever that may be. Back in 2014, the weakest part of my game was bailing. Let's say I have a great practice and come tournament time it's not working out, instead of bailing I'd just stay and catch what I could and sometimes I'd have two fish or zero or a small limit.

That particular year I worked very hard on bailing when things weren't working. When you bail on a spot in the middle of a tournament and have to make a split-second decision like that, my mindset is that I don't know exactly where I'm going or if I'm going to catch any fish when I get there, but I know I'm going to die if I stay where I am. By trusting that instinct, trusting that mindset, it's opened doors for me in ways that are unbelievable.

**You're a Florida guy, but you've really fished all over the country the last several years. How comfortable are you in looking ahead to the Pro Circuit schedule this year? Any tournaments you're really excited about or really nervous about?**

My favorite lake in the nation is Champlain. That's where I caught my first smallmouth. That's where I fell in love with smallmouth fishing. I'm equally excited and equally terrified of it because of the sheer size of it. You could go up there and practice for weeks and weeks and not find the winning spot.

**How did you feel heading into the opener at Sam Rayburn?**

I was very nervous, man. To be honest, I was so nervous that I lost 11 pounds in 10 days. I was eating, but not enough. I kept it together, but I was so focused on fishing that I wasn't paying attention to eating properly and sleeping enough. I was looking at the map for hours and hours at night lying in bed.

**You started off super hot and then you came in with three fish on Day 3. Walk me through what happened.**

It sucks to fall that much after doing so well, but what happened was, what was supposed to be Day 2 of the tournament was cancelled due to terrible conditions – which was the right call. Over that two-day period, we had low temperatures, we had windy conditions, and when I caught them on Day 1, the water temperature was 57 degrees and the fish were up shallow.

Day 2, the water temperature dropped and all the fish had moved out and the only fish that were left were little buck bass. The water got really clear, too. I was throwing a [Berkley] Frittside 5 and they wouldn't eat it as well because they could see it too easily. Had I gotten five (keepers), I think I only needed 10 pounds to make the Top 10.

**What's your favorite boat snack?**

People are going to kill me. It's usually a banana.

**We need more people dispelling the banana superstition.**

When I won the Open on Lay Lake, I ate bananas. I had them in the boat, I had them for breakfast and for lunch sometimes.

**What's the biggest bass you've ever caught?**

A 13 1/2. It was the first bite I ever got on an Alabama rig. I caught it in April of 2018 on the Harris Chain.

**If that happened to me, I don't think I'd put down the rig ever again.**

That's what I said. I fished an ABA the next week and they had just made the Alabama rig legal again. I won the tournament and I caught big bass at 9 1/2. I was like, this thing is awesome, and then they banned it again the next year.

**What's your favorite bait of all time?**

The Frittside 5.

**And that's a relatively new bait.**

I'm constantly evolving as an angler, so they never stay the same, but right now it's the Frittside 5.

**Who's the better angler: you or John?**

John. John is. He's the best. ■

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# HIRT LIVES HIS DREAM, WINS TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP ON LAKE CONROE



**T**exas and big bass go together like peanut butter and jelly. That fact proved to be true once again during The Bass Federation National Championship, held on Lake Conroe the first week of March. But it wasn't a native Texan, a Floridian or anyone else from the southern U.S. who earned the title – it was Nebraska TBF representative Jordan Hirt (who actually lives in Iowa).

Hirt built a a three-day total weight of 47 pounds, 1 ounce on Lake Conroe on his way to claiming the National

Championship, breaking his own personal best twice during the process.

Hirt was able to beat out Minnesota representative Scott Bonnema for the win by 2 pounds, 7 ounces in earning the \$125,000 Living the Dream prize package, which included \$20,000 in cash, \$5,000 in paid entry fees, a brand-new and fully-loaded Ranger 520R boat and spots in the Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine All-American and the Toyota Series Championship.

## HOW HE GOT IT DONE

Hirt could tell it was going to be a good week for him when he managed to catch an 8-pound, 4-ounce lunker during practice. At that point, that 8-4 was his personal best, but it would be shattered once more during his memorable week in southeast Texas.

On his first day of competition, Hirt was the first boat out on Lake Conroe. He spent the majority of his day targeting brush piles in about 14 feet of water, winding a swimbait on a 1/8-ounce Berkley Fusion swimbait head over the top of the brush piles with his eyes on his Lowrance ActiveTarget, trying to wind the swimbait just over top of the brush.



That strategy paid off in a big way, as he got bit on one of those brush piles and hauled in a 10-12 largemouth – his new personal best and the biggest one in his bag for the day. Hirt's five-fish Day 1 limit weighed 18-15, positioning him in second place and just 11 ounces behind the leader.

Hirt continued on Day 2 with the strategy that got him there, this time turning to a Berkley jig and finding similar success to his first day (minus setting a new personal best). Hirt ended Day 2 with another five-fish limit weighing 17-1, bringing his total weight to 36 pounds and putting him in sole possession of first place on the leaderboard and more than 5 pounds ahead of second place.

Day 3 was a different story as Hirt had to sweat it out as weigh-in approached.

Unlike the first two days, he wasn't able to catch five on the day, so three is all he had heading up to the stage as the final angler weighed in ahead of him. He needed his bag to weigh 8-6 if he wanted to earn a life-changing victory.

Hirt put his fish on the scale, waited for the word from the man on the mic and got the confirmation he was looking for: "11 pounds, 1 ounce." With that, Hirt secured the TBF National Championship win in the Lone Star State to cap off a magical week.

## PROCTOR'S PRESSURE-FILLED FINAL DAY LEADS TO CO-ANGLER TITLE

On the co-angler side, South Carolina's Marc Proctor blanked on the final day of competition, but the work he put in on the previous two days was enough to still seal the deal.

The Southern Division co-angler representative started off in the lead after Day 1, catching five bass for 13 pounds out of the back of the boat. Proctor then added four fish for 9-5 on Day 2, which pushed his total weight to 22-5 and kept him on top of the co-angler field.

However, much like Hirt, Proctor's final day was quite stressful. He was unable to bring in a single largemouth the entire day, and he came in with his boater with an empty livewell and a knot in his stomach. All Proctor could do was wait to see if his first two days of competition were enough to earn him a win.

It came down to Proctor and New Mexico co-angler Riley Nielsen for



the National Championship title. Nielsen only caught two fish on the day and needed them to weigh more than 5-7 to take the win away from Proctor. The two fish were put on the scale and only registered 4-6. It was relief and excitement for Proctor but heartbreak for Nielsen.

With his win, Proctor took home a \$35,000 prize package that included \$20,000 in cash, a \$2,500 entry fee stipend, MinnKota trolling motor, Lowrance HDS LIVE unit, Power-Pole certificate, \$500 T-H Marine package, Humminbird Helix 10, Lew's and Strike King prize package and a Berkley prize package.

Hirt and Proctor also earned berths in the Toyota Series Championship.

While Proctor and Hirt will take these wins and use the prizes to live their fishing dreams, it's not just the winners who were able to walk away with something. Fourteen anglers – seven boaters and seven co-anglers – earned trips to the 2022 BFL All-American. ■



## HIGH SCHOOL STATE CHAMPIONSHIP WINNERS

The 2022 Student Angler Federation fishing season is underway all over the nation with representatives in 48 states and Canada. Some state championships have already been decided through the first couple of months in 2022. Here's a look at the students who took home a state championship in January, February and March.

**ALABAMA | LAKE MITCHELL**  
 Luke Coleman and Bobby McCray  
 12 pounds, 5 ounces



**FLORIDA | LAKE TOHO**  
 Gains Redman and Garrett Redman  
 16 pounds, 14 ounces



**GEORGIA | LAKE LANIER**  
 Coby Thompson and Bentley Floyd  
 17 pounds, 14 ounces



**S. CAROLINA | LAKE HARTWELL**  
 Hunter Dill and Austin Short  
 14 pounds, 0 ounces



**TEXAS | LAKE CONROE**  
 Fallon Clepper and Wyatt Ford  
 25 pounds, 13 ounces



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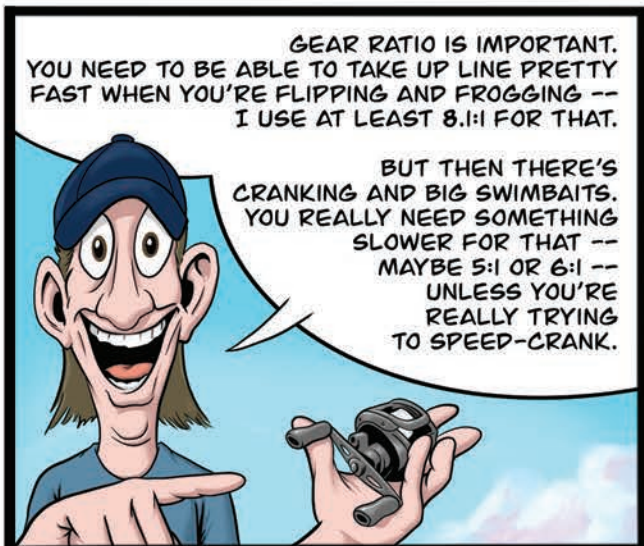
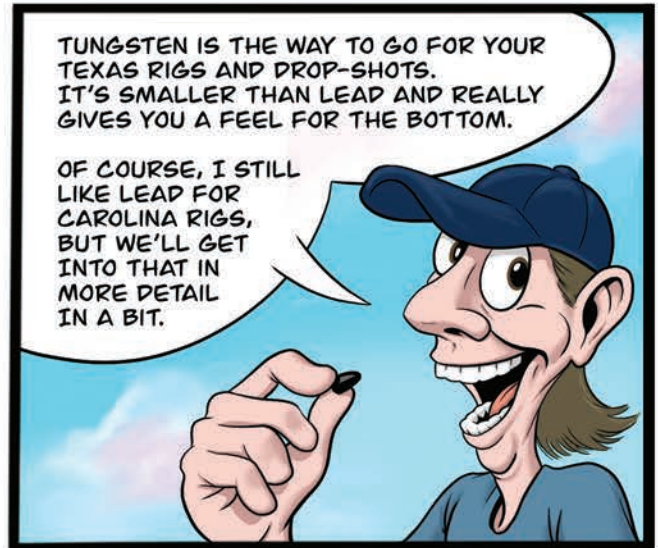
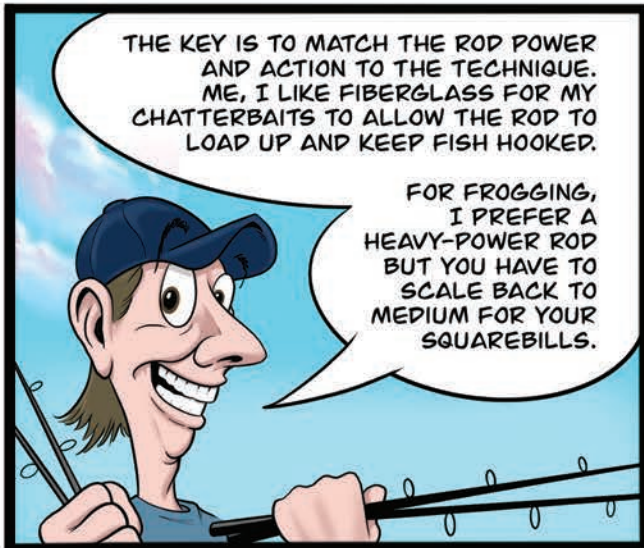
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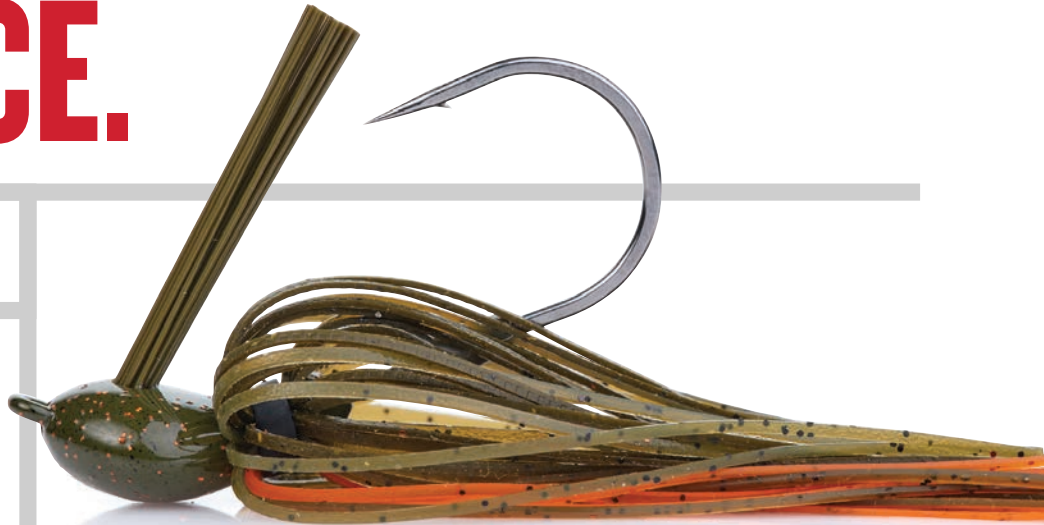


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This is your jig game on performance enhancers, courtesy of the scientists at Berkley® Labs. Our first-ever infusion of PowerBait with silicone jig skirts creates an unrivaled attraction radius and provides a surface area 10.4x larger than the average jig. This allows the enzymes to do their work and means fish smell it, taste it and hold on dramatically longer.



JOHN P.  
Berkley Labs



  
**PowerBait**

**FUSION 10™**  
HOOKS

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**7 STYLES | 23 COLORS**



SWIM



FOOTBALL



FINESSE



SKIPPIN'



FINESSE  
SWIM



HEAVY  
COVER



FLIPPIN'