



AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2022

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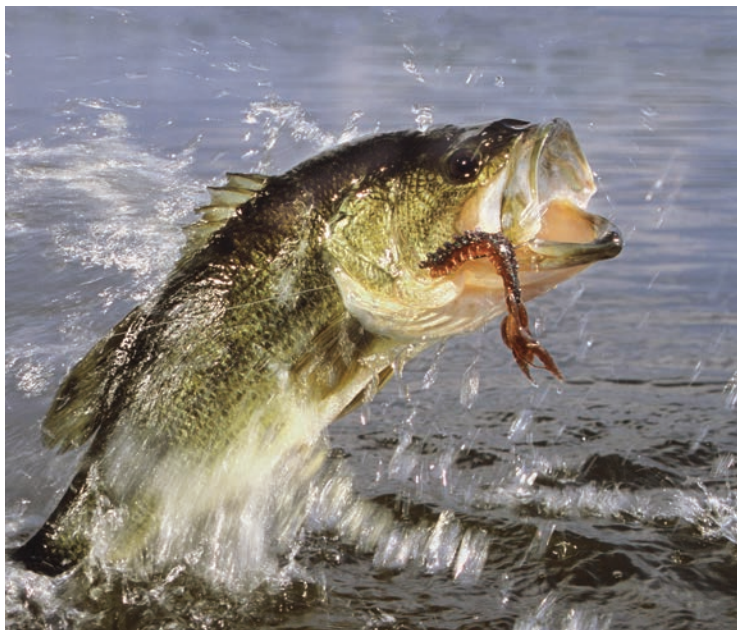
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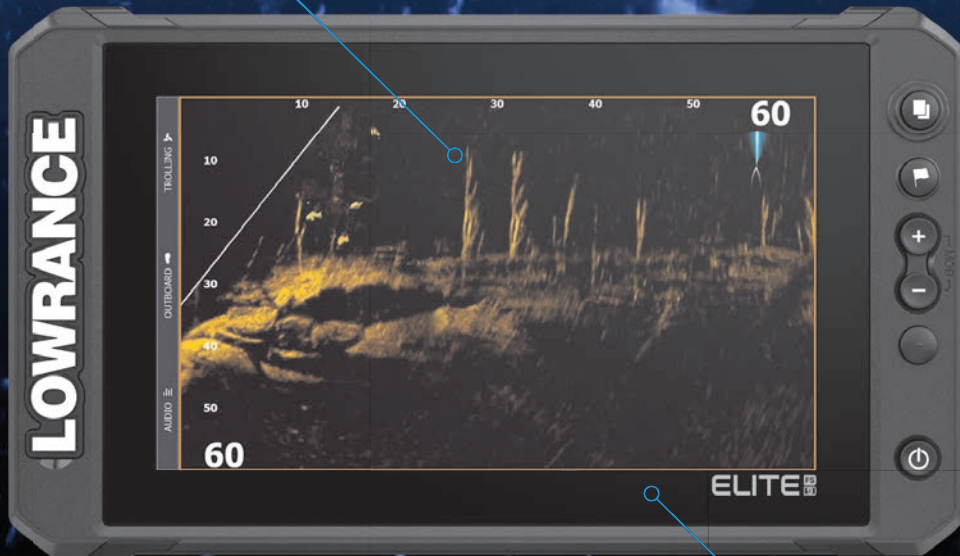
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## THE GREATEST GIFTS

Every few months I'm fortunate to be tasked with penning the first words of *Bass Fishing* magazine. It's something I enjoy immensely, mostly for the appeal of being able to connect with you, the reader, in a more personal way than I can in writing a product review or a feature about cutting-edge bass fishing techniques or on recent tournament winners.

And every few months the process begins the same: I recognize the need for a topic, I spend a few days or a week going about my business, keeping my mind open to all the threads I could pull and stretch and weave together into a topic of interest that somehow relates to bass fishing. Sometimes I sit down to write with a vague idea that requires a little massaging. Other times, like this one, the topic is chosen for me.

I'm not talking about being assigned a prompt. Rather, I'm referring to the kinds of life events that are so important

– so impactful – that every moment of every day can be related back to them in some way. A few months ago, not long after I'd written my last editor's note, my wife and I were blessed with our first child, a beautiful and healthy baby boy who, at 8 pounds even, constitutes my personal best (yes, I realize that's the sort of thing every bass angler says when they have their first child – cliché though it may be, I couldn't imagine having a hand in anything else so great as that).

Every day that has followed has called to mind that there are people in my life who felt the same way when I was born – people who instilled in me the love of fishing, and in the outdoors in general. That's the beauty of this sport and in a lifestyle that celebrates being outside and interacting with nature. When you have the bug yourself, you want to pass it on to those you love. You spend time with those people doing those activities, just as I plan to do with my son when he's old enough to hold a rod and pay attention to anything for more than 15 seconds.

And as a new father, I think more and more these days about the fathers and sons who have fished MLF events together. Alton Jones Sr. and Jr.; Chris and Cal Lane; the late, great Guido Hibdon and his son Dion (and Dion's sons Payden and Lawson), Brent and Mason Chapman, Randy and Laker Howell, and on and on. It's no coincidence there are so many legendary fishing families in our sport – fathers and sons, brothers, cousins, etc. When you have a passion for something as great as fishing, you want the people you care about to see in that passion the things you love most about it. You want to share it with them and create memories that will last forever.

I don't know what my son will choose to be when he grows up; what activities he'll choose to pursue or what career path he'll decide to follow. He probably won't be an editor for a bass fishing magazine, and he may not want to fish for a living. But, as is the case with the Hibdons and Lanes and Joneses, Chapmans and Howells and too many others to mention by name, he'll have grown up with precious memories of time spent on the water with a loving father who wants nothing more than to give him a gift he received from his own parents: the gift of fishing, and of moments that will endure multiple lifetimes.



**JUSTIN ONSLOW, MANAGING EDITOR**

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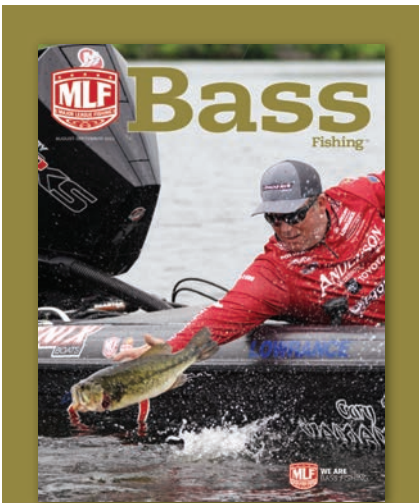
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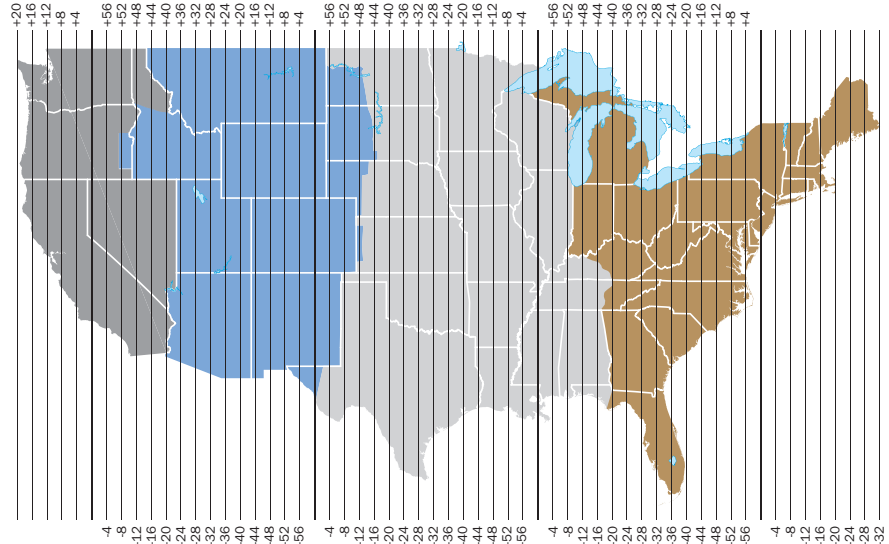


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## SOLUNAR TABLES

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2022

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



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

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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# WHEELER ROLLING: BALLY BET AOY RACE HEADS INTO FINAL LAPS

## Can anybody catch defending 2021 AOY Jacob Wheeler at Cayuga, Mille Lacs?

By Joel Shangle



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

**W**ith two events left in the seven-tournament race for the 2022 Bally Bet Angler of the Year trophy and accompanying \$100,000 payoff, one name/face remains comfortably perched atop the 80-angler standings – a position he’s held for a hearty portion of two years: Jacob Wheeler.

The 2022 race has seen a steady procession of new names, faces and firsts capturing headlines in the league’s eight-month-long season. Four anglers (Bradley Roy, Alton Jones Jr., Jesse Wiggins and Ryan Salzman) have earned their first major tour-level wins, and two other previous winners (Dustin Connell and Bobby Lane) have added new hardware to their trophy cases. But through it all, Wheeler’s dominance has been undeniable.

The Tennessee pro finished second in early June at Stage Five on Watts Bar Lake to boost his AOY points total to 379 out of a possible 400 points, giving him a stout 58-point lead over 2021 Bally Bet AOY Jordan Lee (341) and a comfortable cushion over Andy Morgan (315), Kevin VanDam (302.5) and Randall Tharp (302).

The BPT field had an eight-week break before the season enters the back stretch at Cayuga Lake in New York (Aug. 6-11) and Mille Lacs Lake in Minnesota (Sept. 10-15).

### THE WISE MONEY IS ON WHEELER

As we begin the last two laps of the 2022 Bass Pro Tour regular season, it almost feels like the Bally Bet AOY race should be renamed the “Bally Bet on Wheeler” AOY race. That’s not being flippant or dismissive of the other anglers

pursuing the Tennessee pro; it’s just examining the numbers and thinking like an educated bettor.

Wheeler outlasted Ott DeFoe in the final two events of 2021 to win his first career AOY by 15 points (494 to 479), completing one of the best individual seasons in the 50-plus-year history of the sport. But as astounding as it might sound following an epically great 2021 season, Wheeler’s 2022 campaign might be even *better*.

The defending Bally Bet AOY has finished in the Top 10 in seven of eight tournaments in 2022 (including REDCREST and Heavy Hitters) and has finished no lower than eighth in the five regular-season BPT events contested. Based on just that Top 10 performance trend, there’s an 88 percent chance Wheeler will earn at least 71 points at both Stage Six at Cayuga Lake and Stage Seven at Mille Lacs Lake.

Wheeler’s average finish in five Bass Pro Tour events this season is 5.2, which means that if Wheeler fishes to his season average – say that again, his average finish is fifth! – he’ll earn 75.2 points at each remaining event. That would put him at 529.4 out of a possible 560 AOY points, which would be a 6.3 percent improvement over his AOY-winning performance in 2021.

Wheeler’s second-place finish at Watts Bar boosted his season AOY points total to 379 out of a possible 400, which extrapolates to an average of 75.8 points earned per event. His 2021 per-event average – a year in which he won three events and rang up just shy of \$390,000 in winnings – was 70.6.

To borrow one of Wheeler’s favorite expressions ... unreal.



So here's the task at hand: For Jordan Lee (341) to run Wheeler down in the final two events, he'll have to finish 19.5 places higher at both Cayuga and Mille Lacs. The raw numbers tell us just how tall of a task that is:

- Wheeler's average finish in 2022 (counting REDCREST and Heavy Hitters) is seventh.
- His two-year average finish in all Bass Pro Tour-related events is eighth.
- Wheeler has finished in the Top 10 in 16 of the past 19 tour-level events he's fished, dating back to the first event of 2021 (and including the three Pro Circuit "Super Tournaments" he fished that year).

That third statistic is mind-blowing, approaching historical and unprecedented. I'll dig deeper into those numbers next issue, but for the 2022 Bally Bet AOY discussion at hand, suffice it to say that Wheeler hasn't allowed 19.5 places ahead of him more than two times in two years (he finished 19th at 2022 Heavy Hitters).

## LEE ISN'T LETTING UP

Despite Wheeler's daunting lead in the AOY race, it still feels pretty foolish to ever bet against perennial AOY threat Jordan Lee, who has been exceptional in 2022. The 2020 Bass Pro Tour AOY has two Top 3 finishes of his own this season and has gone 3, 11, 2, 23, 23 in five events, doggedly pursuing Wheeler throughout the season, averaging 68.2 points per event in 2022 – barely behind his AOY-winning pace of 70.2 two seasons ago – and staying within striking distance as the schedule heads north to New York and Minnesota.



Jordan Lee enters the final two events in second place.

PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

Lee surrendered 43 points to Wheeler in Stages Four and Five, but the upcoming swing through the North put the Alabama pro on waters he's routinely excellent on: Lee has nine Top 10s on northern fisheries and finished second on Cayuga in 2016 and ninth on Mille Lacs in 2017.

The Alabama pro is simply unavoidable in tour-level AOY races – he's finished in the Top 10 in four of the six full seasons he's fished since his rookie year in 2015 – and he historically performs well in end-of-season events (three Top 10s in six season-ending events).

## MORGAN, VANDAM: TWO GOATS DOING GOAT THINGS

The anglers lurking in third and fourth place, respectively, own 13 tour-level AOY awards between them: Andy Morgan (315) won three FLW Tour trophies (2013, 2014, 2016); Kevin VanDam (302.5) has claimed eight AOYs (FLW in 2001; Bassmaster in 1992, 1996, 1999, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011). Morgan was nicknamed "The Goat" during his AOY battle with Cody Meyer in 2014; VanDam simply IS the G.O.A.T.

They both trail Wheeler by a nearly impossible margin, but let's celebrate the facts:

- Morgan has been a horse you want to bet on in a tour-level AOY race since 2007, when he finished seventh in the FLW Tour Angler of the Year. Since that time, the Tennessee pro has finished in the Top 10 in AOY 12 times
- VanDam owns 15 career Top 10s in northern fisheries, including a win at Cayuga in 2016 and finished 10th at Mille Lacs just three months later.

## THARP PUTTING TOGETHER A CAREER YEAR

There's a Honey Badger lurking in the five spot.

Randall Tharp has quietly (or, maybe not so quietly considering a serious flirtation with the win at Watts Bar) put together one of the best seasons of his 13-year tour-level career. He enters the New York/Minnesota stretch with a pretty legitimate shot at climbing into the No. 3 spot, which would match the Florida pro's career-best AOY finish (Tharp was third in AOY his second year on the Elite Series in 2016). Shout out to the Honey Badger's diversity. He's done it in a season without a single tournament day in Florida, or on Gunter'sville or Eufaula to his benefit.

Tharp has been the model of consistency in 2022, owning the mid-20s spot in stages One through Four (he went 23, 23, 26, 27) before hair-jigging his way into a fourth-place finish at Watts Bar and climbing into the Top 5. Tharp has been solid on Cayuga and Mille Lacs as well, landing in that mid-20s to mid-30s spot the few times he's competed there. ■

# BALLY BET ANGLER OF THE YEAR\*

1 JACOB WHEELER	379
2 JORDAN LEE	341
3 ANDY MORGAN	315
4 KEVIN VANDAM	302.5
5 RANDALL THARP	302
6 BRYAN THRIFT	286.5
7 ALTON JONES	284.5
8 JESSE WIGGINS	283
9 CHRIS LANE	277.5
10 ZACK BIRGE	271.5

\*THROUGH 5 EVENTS



# LET'S TAKE A DEEP DIVE INTO HABITAT RESTORATION

## MLF Fisheries Management Division Fisheries Enhancement pillar in action

**H**abitat restoration is an extremely important component of reservoir management throughout the United States. The importance of habitat restoration is being driven by habitat loss that occurs over time in all reservoirs.

Natural wood materials degrade, silt and sediment cover hard structure and shorelines erode over time. These processes continue at an increasing rate as each reservoir ages. It's predictable, it's universal and it's a problem that will only increase over the next decade.

Habitat loss led the MLF Fisheries Management Division in Partnership with Berkley Labs to devote one of our core pillars to Fisheries Enhancement. Our goal was to tackle projects throughout each season by collaborating locally on specific issues pertaining primarily to habitat loss.

We're not just building fish attractors, but instead focusing on the materials we use, site selection and density to accomplish specific goals. Those criteria lead to the implementation of well-designed habitat projects that result in improved fish survival, increased overall abundance, more successful sampling efforts and better angler catch rates.

### ENHANCEMENT UNDERWAY IN ALABAMA

In May, while the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit anglers were preparing tackle on their off day before their event on Lake Guntersville, the MLF FMD was partnering with the City of Cullman and the Water Authority Board to deploy habitat in the Duck River Reservoir. This 640-surface-acre reservoir was filled in 2015 and has been open to the public for fishing since 2017.

During construction of the reservoir, the engineers required the removal of all brush and hardwood standing within the site. This was to ensure that water quality would be somewhat stable as the reservoir supplies drinking water to the residents of Cullman. With a lack of hardwood and limited aquatic plant growth, the reservoir is starting to be fairly habitat-limited at a very young age.

The MLF FMD designed a seven-part habitat deployment plan for the reservoir that focused on using dense materials that improve the survival of juvenile fish. This deployment focused on creating underwater edge habitat that improves ambush success, placing the habitats in popular fishing locations to immediately improve angler catch rates.

The target species in the reservoir were largemouth bass, crappie and bluegill sunfish. Each require certain habitat components throughout their lives, so diversity was important when selecting products for a habitat project. The habitats were provided by MossBack Fish Habitat and were made of recycled PVC that mimics brush piles and standing timber.

Topographic maps of the lake didn't exist, so one was created to most accurately determine water levels during drawdowns. This map was used by the MLF FMD to narrow down the seven sites to several-hundred-square-foot deployment locations.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



PHOTO BY TYLER BRINKS

Based on the depth range of each site, specific products were selected to provide the correct height and density of the product to accomplish our goals.

The success of this project was immediately seen with anglers catching fish while volunteers were still on site. In the long term, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources will survey the lake periodically to monitor crappie recruitment and largemouth bass health.

### HABITAT WORK AT LAKE CHICKAMAUGA

Our most recent project was at Lake Chickamauga during the first day of competition for the Bass Pro Tour Stage Five event at Watts Bar Lake. In the months leading up to the project, Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency (TWRA) biologist Joey Root and Mike Jolley met with our MLF FMD directors – myself and Gary Klein.

The group discussed the goals of the habitat project, narrowed down focus areas, created individual deployment sites and selected products to be used. With over 36,000 acres and 800-plus miles of shoreline, it's a daunting task to even select sites that will be impactful for a fishery like Chickamauga. Luckily, the TWRA has a multi-year reservoir habitat plan in place so we could easily incorporate our project into their established scope of work.

With the TWRA plan as our reference, we discussed the data they had available for tournament release locations, their fish sampling procedures, where they stock fingerling fish and where habitat has been most impacted by sedimentation. As the conversations continued, a pattern began to emerge. There were two creek arms – Richland and Grasshopper – that kept coming up as essential areas in need of new habitat.

Richland Creek hosts more tournament weigh-ins than any other area on the reservoir, which means it has a large number of adult fish transported and released within it each year. Years of research across the country have proved that the majority of tournament-released fish do not relocate the first year beyond one mile from their release site.



Their lack of dispersal is further hindered when deep water is present, as they need geographic markers to help determine their location within the reservoir. For us, this means we need habitat placed near common release sites that have defined edges that can provide them recovery positions out of current, and the ability to easily ambush forage.

Both Richland and Grasshopper Creeks are sites used by TWRA as largemouth bass fingerling stocking locations. These releases happen in late spring, typically after the natural spawn has occurred.

The largemouth fingerlings stocked by TWRA will greatly benefit from dense habitat that allows them to escape possible predation. They also need to feed on macro invertebrates until they can transition to smaller fish. These invertebrates will live on the surface of structures and feed on algae, so dense habitat that can grow algae easily is essential for improving both survival and growth of the TWRA fingerlings.

Grasshopper Creek is essential for the entire state of Tennessee as the TWRA uses it to capture the crappie broodstock they use for their hatcheries. This means we need vertical, dense habitat that will support large schools of adult

crappie. The time of year when broodstock are captured plays a role in the eventual depth of the habitat deployment, and we can't forget that Chickamauga experiences great fluctuations in water level as well as a winter drawdown.

Richland and Grasshopper Creeks are both target areas for TWRA fish sampling. Most reservoir managers use random plot timed electrofishing to capture and analyze largemouth bass, use trap nets for crappie species and various gear methods for catfish. All these sampling methods rely on randomness to correctly quantify population data, so we don't place habitat to try to increase the number of fish collected at a site, but instead hope to increase the overall abundance of fish resulting in an increase in catches across all sites. Over the next four to six years, we will be able to use this sampling data, DNA analysis and angler data to provide both the TWRA and the MLF FMD with proof of successful projects.

When we combined all these important uses of Richland and Grasshopper Creeks with the TWRA's existing habitat plans, it was easy to select those two areas as our targets. We then apply topography and water fluctuations to the selection process to start narrowing down deployment sites.

A target area for us may be as small as a couple hundred acres up to 1,000 acres. Within that target area, we'll find five to 10 locations that are a few hundred square feet each. Those magic spots become our deployment sites. For Richland Creek, we found seven deployment sites, and TWRA is still finalizing the Grasshopper Creek sites.



- Site 1** Depth: 8-10 feet (2) 40" and (2) 60" Conservation Cubes, (2) Trophy Trees
- Site 2** Depth: 5-8 feet (4) 20" Conservation Cubes, (2) Trophy Trees
- Site 3** Depth: 5-10 feet (2) 20" Conservation Cubes, (4) Root Wad
- Site 4** Depth: 6-12 feet (2) 20" (2) 40" and (2) 60" Conservation Cubes
- Site 5** Depth: 4-12 feet (2) 20", (2) 40" and (1) 60" Conservation Cubes
- Site 6** Depth: 5-15 feet (2) 20" and (2) 60" Conservation Cubes, (2) Trophy Trees

With partners like Ferguson, Berkley Labs, Minn Kota, Mercury and MossBack Fish Habitat, we've been able to complete three habitat restoration projects in 2022 and have a fourth planned for fall 2022. For each of these projects, we're fortunate to have volunteers from the Union Sportsmen's Alliance and our Major League Fishing anglers to provide labor to make the projects a reality. Each project is truly a collaboration between state agencies, industry leaders, local volunteers and the MLF FMD.

As you can see, each project takes a great deal of planning that results in successful, long-lasting habitat restoration projects. ■

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# WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

## MLF NOW!

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

August 6-11: Bass Pro Tour Stage Six @ Cayuga Lake

August 16-21: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE Championship @ St. Lawrence River Presented by Mercury

## TV BROADCASTS

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

August 6: Bass Pro Tour Heavy Hitters Qualifying Group A Day 2 @ Lake Palestine

August 13: Bass Pro Tour Heavy Hitters Qualifying Group B Day 2 @ Lake Palestine

August 20: Bass Pro Tour Heavy Hitters Knockout Round @ Lake Palestine

August 27: Bass Pro Tour Heavy Hitters Championship Round @ Lake Palestine

September 3: Bass Pro Tour Stage One Knockout Round @ Caney Creek, D'Arbonne, Bussey Brake

September 10: Bass Pro Tour Stage One Championship Round @ Caney Creek, D'Arbonne, Bussey Brake

September 17: Bass Pro Tour Stage Two Knockout Round @ Lake Fork

September 24: Bass Pro Tour Stage Two Championship Round @ Lake Fork

October 1: Bass Pro Tour Stage Three Knockout Round @ Smith Lake

October 2: Bass Pro Tour Stage Three Championship Round @ Smith Lake

October 8: Bass Pro Tour Stage Four Knockout Round @ Lake of the Ozarks

CBS Sports Network — Saturdays 9-11 a.m. (ET)

August 20: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit B&W Trailer Hitches Stop 4 @ Lake Guntersville Presented by A.R.E.

August 27: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Toyota Stop 5 @ James River Presented by PowerStop Brakes

September 3: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Covercraft Stop 6 @ Lake Champlain Presented by Wiley X

October 1: Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine All-American Championship @ Lake Hamilton\*

October 1: High School Fishing Presented by Favorite Fishing Championship @ Pickwick Lake\*\*

October 8: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE Championship Qualifying Group A Day 1 @ St. Lawrence River

\*9-10 a.m. (ET), \*\*10-11 a.m. (ET)

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

August 21: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit B&W Trailer Hitches Stop 4 @ Lake Guntersville Presented by A.R.E.

August 28: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Toyota Stop 5 @ James River Presented by PowerStop Brakes

September 4: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Covercraft Stop 6 @ Lake Champlain Presented by Wiley X

October 2: Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine All-American Championship @ Lake Hamilton\*

October 2: High School Fishing Presented by Favorite Fishing Championship @ Pickwick Lake\*\*

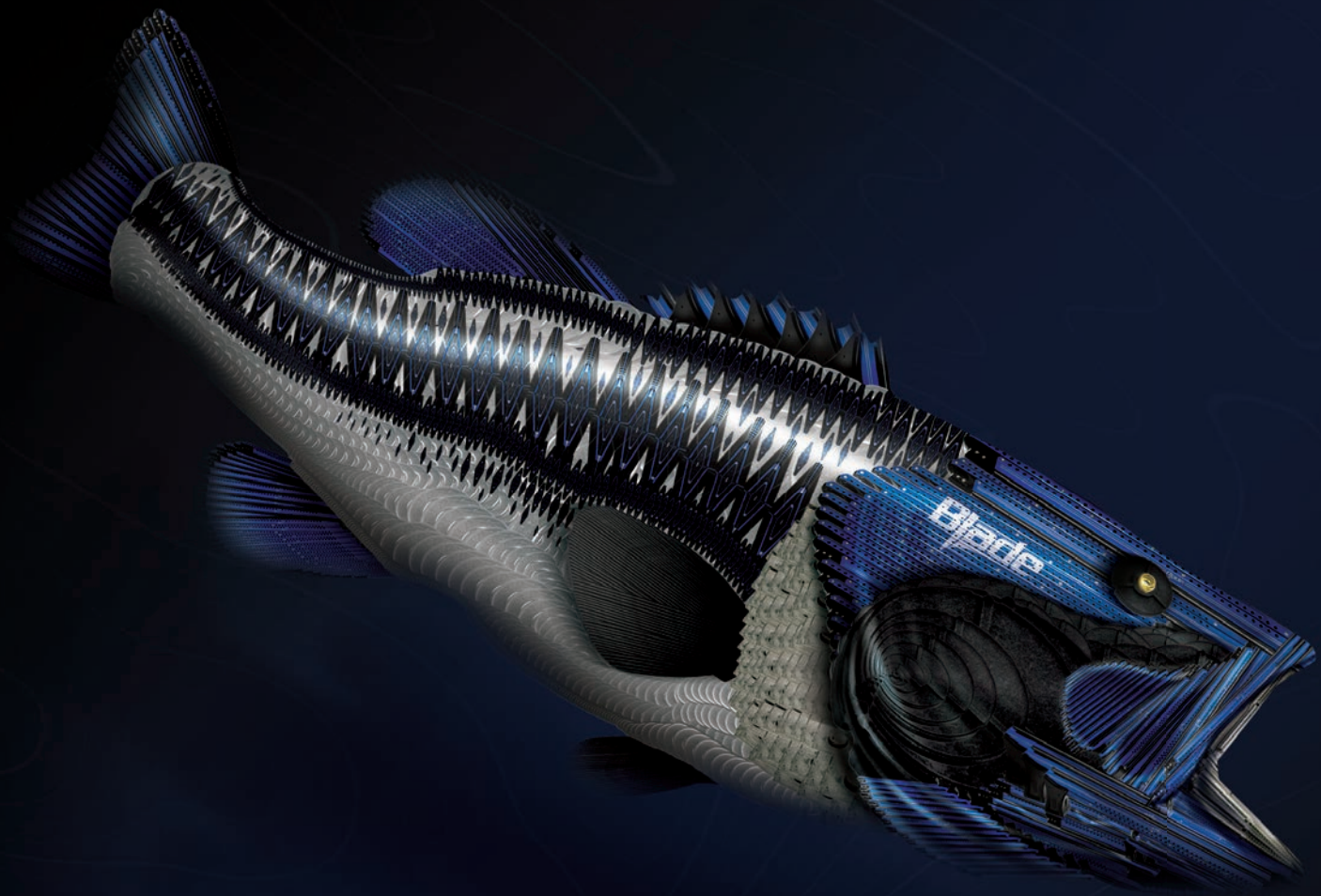
October 9: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE Championship Qualifying Group A Day 1 @ St. Lawrence River

\*2-3 p.m. (ET), \*\*3-4 p.m. (ET)



DON'T FORGET TO FOLLOW MLF ON SOCIAL MEDIA

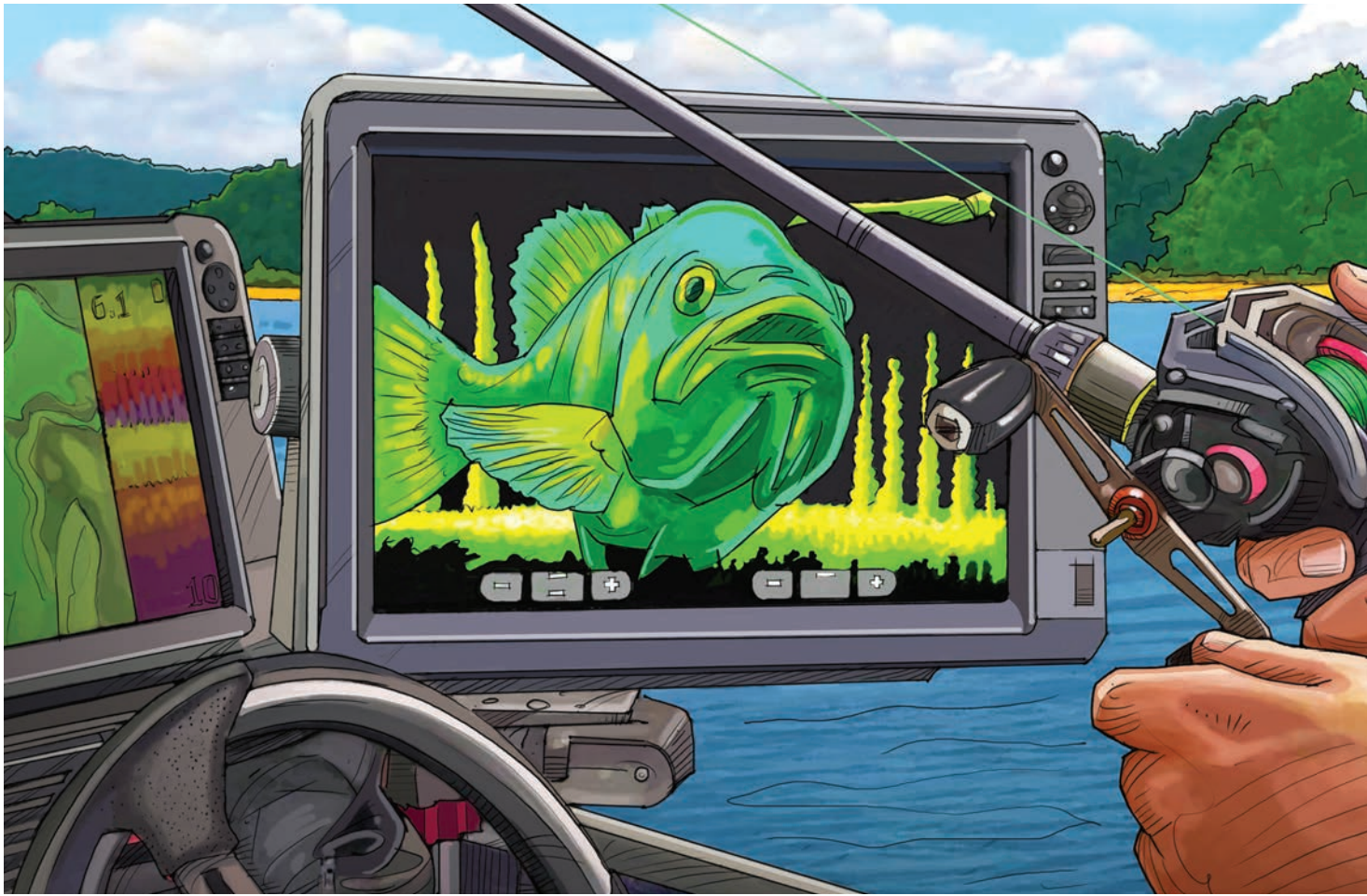




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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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.

# FORWARD-FACING SONAR SYNDROME

If you're experiencing any of these symptoms, consult your local tackle shop owner

**L**ove it or hate it, forward-facing sonar is here to stay. No matter what you think of it, the fact is, this technology allows anglers to see fish in the underwater world in a way never before observed in the history of sport fishing.

As the old saying goes, nothing beats live testimony, and watching fish behave in their natural environment in real time is as close to live testimony as it gets. To see how fish relate to cover, how they react to lures, how they feed, how they exhibit competitiveness and curiosity is extremely educational. The sheer amount of information revealed from a forward-facing sonar signal on a screen is a genie that's never going back in the bottle.

However, using forward-facing sonar does have some side effects that I feel compelled to point out. After fooling with the technology myself, observing the best anglers use it and having hours of conversation about it with pros, I've identified a condition called Forward-Facing Sonar Syndrome (FFSS), which occurs in several stages.

**EUPHORIA**

The initial stage starts with euphoria. The feeling of installing a new forward-facing machine on your boat comes with elation that rivals any thrill you had when adding other "game-changing" equipment to your boat. It's reminiscent of my first Power-Pole or GPS-lock trolling motor. After installing both of



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

those great tools, I didn't even fish with them for the first several hours. I just poked holes in the bottom of the lake with remote-controlled spikes and spot-locked in random places. After years of fighting a trolling motor pedal in the wind, I just wanted to relish the moment of holding boat position with no effort at all.

A new forward-facing sonar machine is just as exhilarating. The first time you launch the boat with the unit attached, you'll likely drop the trolling motor immediately and scope out the very ramp and dock where you just launched. To see those first signals is like seeing the first images that came from the moon; I had no idea what I was looking at, but my hair was on fire with excitement.

After a couple hours of scanning, you start to get an idea of what stumps, brush, timber and pilings look like. At some point you begin seeing sonar blobs. Blobs that suspend. Blobs that

move. Blobs that swim! Euphoria grows with every image that moves through the beam. Eventually, you cast a lure into the beam and watch it on the screen; yes, it's true, you can even see your lure on forward-facing sonar. With any luck at all, this experimentation results in a lure blob and a fish blob colliding as your first forward-facing sonar catch.

At this point, the euphoric stage peaks. To watch the blobs collide and feel the bite is extraordinary.

From here, FFSS will go one of two ways, depending on your age: If you're under the age of 30, you'll see this as just another app on a screen - no big deal. However, if you're over 40, euphoria turns to madness when you suddenly realize just how much of your life has been wasted casting at nothing. Unfortunately, I'm in this category...way in this category. After catching my first fish on forward-facing sonar, I remember thinking: Wow, it's like all these years I've been communicating with Morse code on a ham radio and someone just handed me an iPhone.

## DISILLUSIONMENT

No matter which way your path goes, both paths merge back together at the disillusionment stage. This is where two things happen simultaneously: First, there's confusion.

This sets in when you realize just how prolific fish activity is in lakes and how many different types of fish swimming around aren't bass. In addition, disillusionment can be fueled by rejection in the form of bass that follow lures over and over again, acting interested in them, only to ultimately reject them. No matter what you offer, they turn their nose up at it. This can get personal. It's sort of like asking your high school crush to prom multiple times and the answer is always, "No, but we can still be friends." The rejection cuts deep (not that I would know).

This is the darkest point of FFSS. You can see the fish. You're throwing your best \$50 dollar lures at them. And all they do is laugh at you. For some anglers, this is the breaking point - they simply can't take the torment of rejection anymore. The result can lead to a condition called Nobiteitis, a form of

depression caused by seeing fish that refuse to bite. For some, the only cure for this ailment is to head to the bank where they can flip shallow bushes and visible cover without looking at a screen.

## OBSESSION

For others, Nobiteitis invokes the obsessive stage of the syndrome: becoming so consumed with forward-facing sonar that one pushes their mind and body to extreme limits, oftentimes spending days on end out on the water, intently studying uncooperative blobs on a screen while enduring the pain of confusion and rejection. Their brains are taxed to exhaustion with hundreds of geometry problems per hour: at 2 o'clock there's a fish suspended 10 feet down, 60 feet away moving from right to left at .5 mph. At what angle, speed and trajectory does my cast need to be to lead the fish perfectly, allowing the lure to fall naturally right to its nose.

Sometimes the screen staring becomes so intensive that the angler develops torticollis, a real medical term for "crick in the neck." Though it can be challenging, the obsessive stage ultimately separates those who push past the novelty of these machines and learn how to harness their true power.

## ATTAINMENT

The final stage of FFSS is attainment. This could simply be thought of as mastery of the machine.

Those who have reached attainment with their forward-facing sonar have learned to conquer confusion and rise above rejection. They have put the grit time in to truly understand what the unit is telling them about the fish. They take command of the beam with confidence, telling bass apart from other species and reading their moods. They know how to accurately place lures in the fish's strike zone to test their appetite and disposition.

Above all, they know when to lean on the magic of the machine heavily and when to dial it back and go back to fishing the old-fashioned way. While I would like to tell you I have transcended all stages of Forward-Facing Sonar Syndrome to reach attainment, I'm still beaming the concrete ramp at the launch where I put the boat in. ■



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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

## THE FATHER OF FINESSE

There's no question about it: Bass fishing wouldn't be the same without Ned Kehde

**F**inesse fishing is nothing new, nor is it an adaptation to more common bass fishing tactics. It's not the result of fishing pressure, didn't originate out West, and certainly wasn't sent to us from Japan. In fact, finesse fishing is as old as organized bass fishing itself.

These statements may seem bold. However, they're not the product of my audacious opinion, but the result of an interview with the man himself. The man who was there in the beginning, has ridden the finesse wave longer than anyone, and possibly changed the most recent chapter in bass fishing more than any figure.

That man is Ned Kehde.

The story of Ned reads like one out of a vintage *Sports Afield*. Born on the heels of the Great Depression, Kehde still remembers his first outings to Cold Camp Creek in the Ozarks in 1948,

catching the feisty largemouth and spotted bass that lived there.

He remembers the bass he caught while working at Minnesota's Pothoff Lodge in the 1950s, those caught with Guido Hibdon in the '60s and many of the thousands he caught afterward all throughout the Midwest and near his home in Kansas.

Kehde is a historian of many things bass, proven both by training and practice. With a master's degree in history, Kehde worked as a collegiate librarian and archivist during his career. To the best of my knowledge, his attention to detail and documentation is unparalleled in our sport.

Such dedication to preserving history gives Kehde the unique qualification of reporting on the story of bass fishing, specifically those aspects centered on light-line angling.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

*“Drew Reese of Rantoul, Kansas placed seventh at the 1971 Bassmaster Classic on Lake Mead using a jigworm and a Beetle (precursor to the Beetle Spin panfish lure).”*

Kehde got the ball rolling right away. Reese was a key contributor in Midwest finesse, and his success in early organized events helped bring finesse to the West – not the other way around.

Reese himself has publicly credited other Kansans before him for introducing finesse fishing, dating back to the 1960s, well prior to the formal organization of bass fishing. And talks with Kehde continuously circle back to his influencers, including the Hibdon family and others.

*“Bert Hall of Missouri created the Road Runner lure, originally for bass. And Bill Fletcher, also from the Ozarks, competed in the earliest championship events using that lure.”*

The common thread is simple. Each of these Midwest pioneers were downsizing with the goal of catching as many bass as possible.

It’s tough for modern fans to understand the thinking of the time, but remember: This was well before fishing tournaments put the “limit” mentality in bass fishing. To the trailblazers of our sport, catching more, not bigger, was always the goal.

Kehde immediately picked up on the numbers mindset and really never let go. As a magazine contributor through the ‘80s and ‘90s, Kehde was often paired with a big-name pro during tournament practice periods.

“I was amazed at how few fish they caught,” he recalls.

Admittedly, numbers didn’t pay for the tournament bassers, and the finesse game had yet to make much of an impact.

“My way of fishing just wasn’t en vogue,” Kehde admits.

As we all now know, things would change over the next four decades. But major advancements would first be necessary.

The tackle with which Kehde and his counterparts started the finesse game seems archaic today, but longevity proved its effectiveness. Beginning in 1970, and carrying on until 2021, Kehde exclusively used the Abu Garcia Cardinal 4 spinning reel; the old green model sometimes seen in antique stores, originally imported by Zebco. Kehde still owns 20 of those reels. Throughout that 50-year lifespan, Kehde learned to remove the bail in order to prevent spring breakage, and to do all maintenance himself. During the early periods, line was light monofilament and rods were fiberglass.

Kehde’s mission is to catch 25 bass per hour, every day. Through his meticulous record-keeping, he can recognize those days he made the grade, the exact weather conditions and how they played a role, productive lures, measured water clarity, solunar influence



and more. Though some of his earliest journals were accidentally destroyed, Kehde has tallied over 50,000 bass catches since 2005 alone.

Original finesse lures of the day included jig worms and marabou jigs (says Ned: “The jig lies at the heart of Midwest finesse.”), Reapers (“This became a very important bait for Guido Hibdon and myself.”) and Beetle baits (“This was the first Senko.”)

Kehde is quick to point out that often these lures were fished using a swimming retrieve, keeping the bait off the bottom. Here, it’s important to note that the featherweight lures, combined with buoyant nylon fishing lines, created a presentation where the baits were essentially lost in space. This is paramount to Kehde’s technique.

“If I feel my jig, I’m fishing too heavy,” he would state at the time.

Kehde continues to use short, 6-foot rods for his finesse fishing, rarely finding the need to make long cats and



PHOTO COURTESY Z-MAN FISHING

instead catching many fish right below the boat. Originally, his rod choice was the cheapest available, and feel wasn't a concern.

"I didn't know what sensitivity was," he says.

Today, Kehde relies on custom sticks from Mud Hole - still short, but also ultra-sensitive. More transcending, though, was Kehde's switch to braided fishing line in 2000.

"I had four years before I had to respool," he remembers.

Even more importantly, the line "didn't throw loops" and continues to allow Kehde the opportunity to use diameters equivalent to 4-pound-test mono, perfectly suited for his delicate lures.

On October 12, 2006, Kehde experienced the greatest advancement of his fishing system to date, first using the "super plastic" worms that would change his now namesake technique forever. Fishing in post-cold front conditions, Kehde's records prove he and the late Dick Bessey of Lawrence, Kansas, caught

and released 109 bass in four hours of fishing, all on the same two lures.

"In my mind, that rests at the core of our change," Kehde reflects on the bait's evolution.

As Ned rig users across the world know, Kehde now works with Z-Man to develop and refine the small ElaZtech lures best fitting his methods. Popularity of the technique has exploded, without surprise to Ned himself.

"The popularity may be due to the increased interest in downsizing," he says. "It also works well in the colder areas where Florida bass have been stocked. And guys are surprised how effective the technique is for smallmouth."

All fit nicely into today's bass fishing culture.

And just how does Ned feel about the "Ned rig"? A conservative gentleman, whose name is tossed around more than perhaps any other in the sport today.

"I'm humbled by it," he says. "I'm embarrassed by it. I'm intrigued and surprised by it."

More than anything, Kehde is interested in remaining a record keeper. Still fishing over 100 days a year, often rushing ice-out to make it to open water, Kehde remains the historian. His catch logs reveal fishing patterns, but also important environmental changes, like the disappearance of vegetation in some waters. Currently, Kehde's journals are being catalogued by the Kansas State Historical Society as part of a collection on Midwest finesse.

Ned Kehde's impact on the sport has been monumental. Equally so, Ned himself credits others who changed our way of fishing.

"Lots of guys refined (finesse)," he says. "My biggest contribution is that I popularized it."

Still, Kehde's dedication remains unparalleled, for a logical reason:

"My goal is simply to educate people on how to enjoy and love fishing."

And what better way than helping them catch even one more bass? ■

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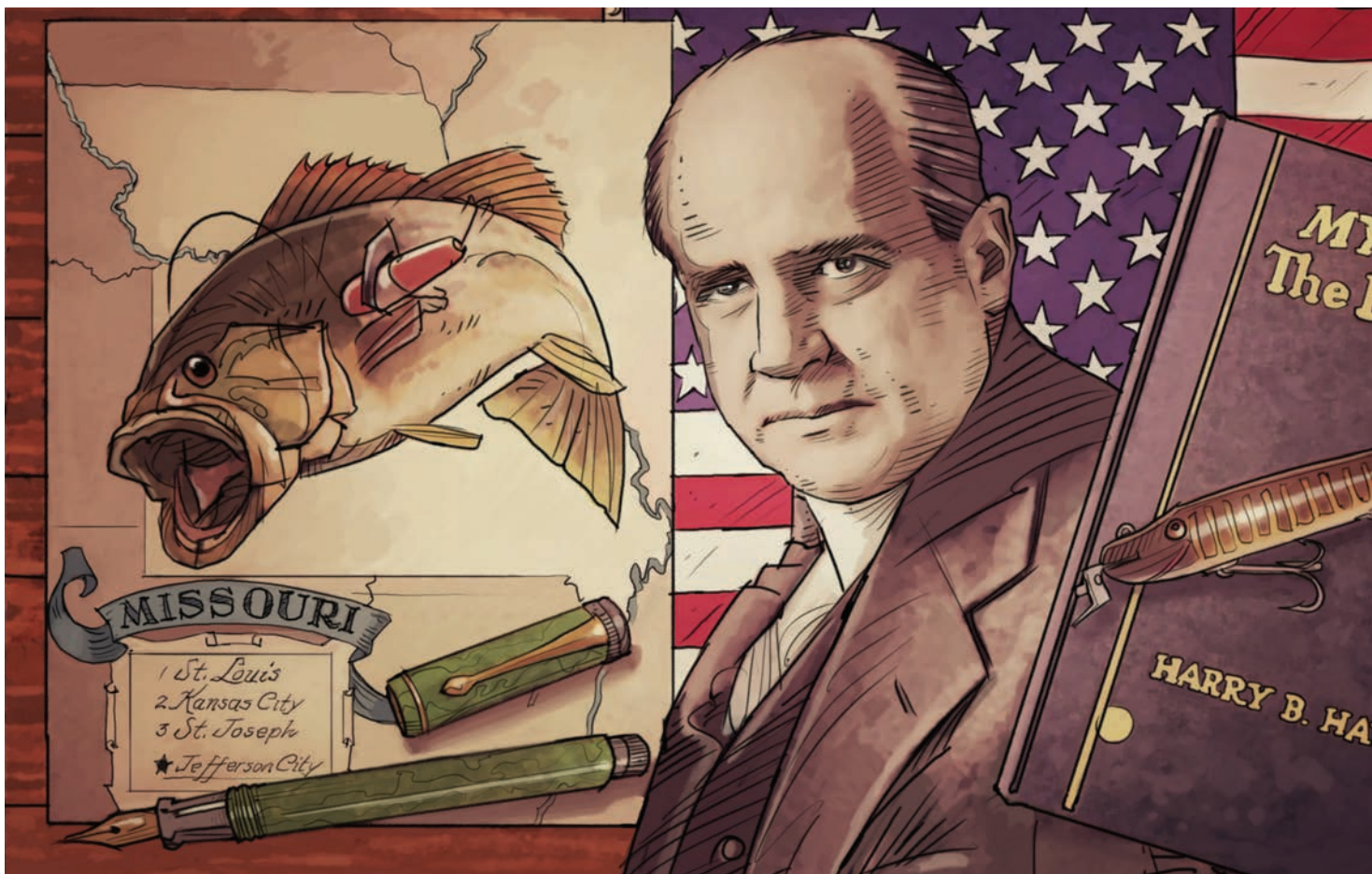
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## THE SAVIOR OF BLACK BASS

How Harry Hawes and the Black Bass Bill paved the way for bass conservation in the U.S.



### 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.

**W**e live in challenging political times, perhaps the most divisive United States political climate since the War Between the States (1861-1865). With any luck, tensions will ease, heads will cool, and we'll be less divided moving forward. For now, though, let's take a look at a politician that time has mostly forgotten, but who shared our passion and devotion for bass fishing. He used his influence to protect our beloved bass to a greater effect than perhaps anyone else in history.

His name was Harry Barton Hawes, and he was born in Covington, Kentucky – just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati – in 1869, not too long after the War Between the States ended. He came from a political family. His grandfather had been a U.S. Congressman and the second Confederate Governor of Kentucky. Other family members served the public dating back to the American Revolution.

When he was 18 and had finished his preliminary education, Hawes moved west to St. Louis, Missouri. He went to law school and became an attorney specializing in corporate and international law. He was interested in American expansion and the relationships between nations.

In 1898, Hawes received his first political appointment. The governor made him chairman of the St. Louis Police Board. Two years later, streetcar workers went on strike, and thousands of labor supporters did considerable damage to city property. Hawes formed a 2,500-man force to restore order. It wasn't easy or bloodless, but it worked, and it brought him considerable notoriety and prompted a run for the Democratic nomination for governor in 1904.

He lost by a wide margin. Another 12 years would pass before he would run for office again.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

## THE FISHIN' POLITICIAN

All the while from 1904 to 1916, Hawes was building his law practice ... and fishing. It was his escape and his passion. As he later wrote, "The angler does not search for fish alone. He seeks relaxation, peace, quiet, and the opportunity for reflection."

In 1916, Hawes was back on the campaign trail, running for the Missouri House of Representatives, and this time he won. But Hawes served for less than two years before the U.S. entered World War I. He resigned from his House seat to serve in the Army and was promoted to major before being discharged in 1919.

When Hawes came back to Missouri, he returned to politics ... and to bass fishing.

In 1920 he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Missouri's 11th District and was re-elected in 1922 and 1924. In 1926, he was elected to the U.S. Senate.

Along the way, Harry Hawes saved the black bass.

He did other things, too, of course, and he's certainly more famous for them, but not for our purposes. As you would imagine, Hawes was interested in flood control. After all, except for his time in the military, he'd lived his entire life within casting distance of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. He worked hard to balance the needs of nature with the demands of progress, and there's a pretty good chance that you've caught a bass from a reservoir authorized and created during Hawes' time in congress.

## THE BLACK BASS BILL

Hawes gave up his Senate seat in 1933, but only after he achieved his status as bass savior in the U.S. House in 1925. That's when he gave his most memorable and passionate political speech.

It was February 2, 1925, and Hawes was in the middle of his second term in the House. The speech is in support of House Resolution 10690, then known as the "Black Bass Bill." In essence, it was an effort to curtail the commercial sale of bass as food and to make it a federal crime to transport bass across state lines. Hawes authored the bill and sounded the alarm for bass protection.

"Without vigorous action, the bass ... will soon become extinct," he said, adding, "this greatest of American game fishes is certain to become extinct within 10 years unless extraordinary efforts are made to protect it."

As evidence that bass were deserving of these measures, Hawes tugged mightily at patriotic heartstrings with analogies comparing bass life to life in America: "... as the family grows, the male defends the nest like our frontiersman did his cabin."

"The bass is found everywhere. He is as adaptable as the American citizen..."

And if comparing the bass to the best America had to offer wasn't enough, Hawes wasn't nearly done. He made clear that bass and fishing were essential to a quality future.

*When we lose our pep, when good food tastes bad, when friends do not satisfy, when life becomes a bore, when music seems out of tune, when the old dog annoys, when the doctor fails, and the good wife irritates, there is but one remedy for the run-down, and it is found in the forests or on the streams in the big outdoors.*

Amen.

Hawes even wrapped the bass in the cloak of Old Glory and made it clear that fishing was a cornerstone of American life.

"When we lose the big outdoors, we lose part of our national pride, pluck, and patriotism. When we keep the big outdoors, we keep our best thoughts, our best resolutions, and, above all, our best traditions."

Hawes' Black Bass Bill was passed in 1926. It was a start. Subsequent legislation has served to further protect bass and bass fishing from the harms that Hawes railed against.

In 1930, Hawes wrote and published a book – *My Friend: The Black Bass* – which not only touched on those same themes but offered plenty of solid bass-catching advice along the way. Robert Paige Lincoln, in his book *Black Bass Fishing: Theory & Practice* (1952), said that Hawes' book "probably has a greater amount of readable fact in it than any angling book ever printed."

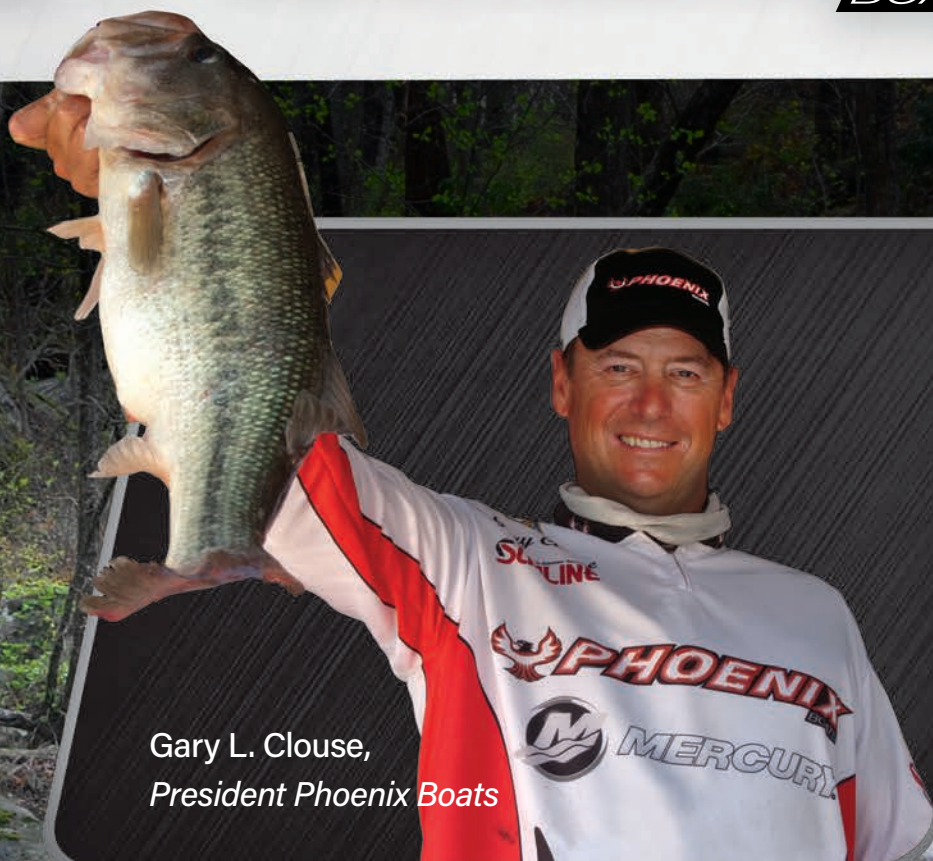
That's high praise, even for a savior.

Harry Hawes died in Washington, D.C., in 1947 at the age of 77. He was cremated, and his remains were sent to Missouri. Fittingly for a bass man of his considerable stature, his ashes were scattered in the Current River near Doniphan, Missouri, home to many of his black bass friends. ■






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# ***WHEN YOUR PASSION IS OBVIOUS***

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



***#builtbyanglersforanglers***



PHOTOS COURTESY TACTICAL BASSIN



**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.



# A WHOLE NEW PERSPECTIVE

Going beneath the surface can open new worlds for bass anglers

**A**dvancements in marine electronics give bass anglers a better-than-ever picture of what's going on below the surface of the water. Whether it's forward-facing sonar, Mega 360 or better mapping technology, anglers have more tools than ever to help break down a fishery and increase the size and amount of bass they can catch.

For Matt and me, in our many endeavors running Tactical Bassin, the one thing that has given us an even clearer picture of what happens below the surface is underwater videography. Whether it's filming bass behavior in their natural environment or comparing bait actions, our underwater videos have helped us

improve as anglers in ways we'd never imagined.

Over the last several years, we've been fortunate enough to record bass eating our lures and doing some amazing things underwater. Wolf packs of giant bass chasing down and eating swimbaits in front of our camera lens, topwater frog blow-ups recorded from below the surface, bass stalking and eating jerkbaits and spitting them out before we could react and set the hook.

Filming bass in their natural environment and seeing how they interact with other bass and with artificial lures has been truly eye-opening. Simply put, changing our perspective and going subsurface with slow-motion cameras to film

bass and lures with the ability to review the footage afterward has taught us many invaluable lessons - things like the way light rays penetrate and reflect off the bottom, how the above-water sounds like anglers talking or birds chirping sound underwater, how current can switch and change the sediment in the water and change a bass' aggressiveness or how each bass seems to have its own personality - variables we could scant account for in the past.

Every time I review our underwater footage, I'm constantly reminded of three things: Bass are unbelievably fast. Bass are unbelievably accurate with their bite placement. And not all baits have the "it" factor.

## A NEED FOR SPEED

We've always known that bass are fast, but just how fast are they really?

I'm not talking just about a bass' ability to swim faster than its prey; rather, I'm referring to how fast a bass can eat a lure, decide it's not real and spit it out before an angler ever knows his or her lure was eaten and have a chance to set the hook.

One day, not too long ago, Matt and I were out fishing and filming, trying to get underwater footage of different types of shallow-running jerkbaits. We were lucky enough (or unlucky enough depending on how you look at it) to have a big largemouth come all the way up to the camera and engulf the jerkbait Matt was working beneath the surface. The bass was just out in front of the boat and visible to us above the water. I was recording the action underwater when the bass visibly ate the entire jerkbait and spit it out before Matt ever had a chance to set the hook.

Matt anticipated and watched this bass eat the jerkbait and spit it out before he could physically react to what his eyes were seeing. Having the ability to play back the footage in real time, we were able to time the bite-and-release maneuver at just 0.21 seconds. The average visual reaction time for a human is around 0.25 seconds, meaning that bass was physically impossible to catch based on average reaction time.

That chance encounter opened our eyes (no pun intended) to just how fast bass can eat and spit out a bait, and it gave us something new to think about: How many bites have we gotten without even realizing it?

Food for thought: This anecdote speaks volumes as to the importance of good, sharp hooks. I've always changed out stock hooks on my lures, but that instance just reaffirmed the importance of being a stickler for sharp hooks on all my lures.

## BASS KNOW WHERE (AND WHERE NOT TO) BITE

Have you ever been out fishing and your lure gets absolutely crushed, prompting you to set the hook immediately, yet you swing and miss? Have you ever caught a bass on a topwater bait but

it only got the very back treble hook in its mouth? If so, you're not alone, and there's a very good reason for it.

Video after video has shown bass repeatedly eating or nipping at our lures directly behind the hook. It doesn't matter if it's a plastic worm on a shaky head, a finesse jig and trailer or a big glide bait – bass are extremely accurate with their bite placement. Unless they're fully committed and just engulf your entire lure, sometimes you're going to miss on the hookset because the hook just isn't in the bass' mouth.

One thing that we've found to help with this when fishing lures with multiple treble hooks is to change the front hook to a red treble hook or to add a feathered treble to the rear of the lure. In our experience, it seems that changing the hook gives bass something to target when biting your bait.

## SOME LURES CATCH FISHERMEN BETTER THAN THEY CATCH FISH

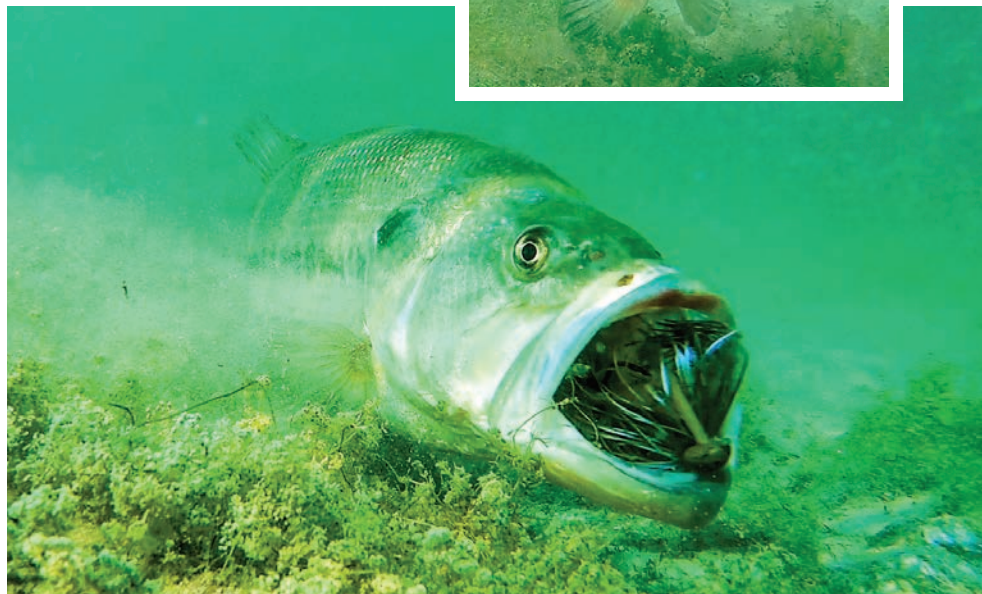
Have you ever heard a fisherman say, "That bait just has it" (meaning "it factor" or some other indication of a lure just flat-out working)? Some baits look good in the package or in your hand but don't catch fish as well as others when put to the test.

Recording lures underwater, in slow motion, and reviewing the footage afterward has allowed us to analyze and find subtle differences in action and sound.

The ability to review baits underwater has helped us with our bait selection, whether it's a jerkbait that has a little extra shimmy, a not-so-popular swim-bait that has a little bit of body roll to go along with a tail kick or a jig trailer that's a little softer with subtle movements that drive bass crazy. We've learned subtleties about baits that you wouldn't necessarily know or think about just seeing them in your hand or in the package.

When you can go underwater and slow a lure's movement down, you really get to see how these baits do what they're designed to do and what the key characteristics are that get bass to trigger and eat.

Sometimes, what we think we know about bass and how to catch them can steer us in the wrong general direction. Sometimes, to discern fact from fiction, it requires a different perspective. Check out our underwater videos and more on our YouTube channel, TacticalBassin. ■



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# BIG WATER, BIG MONEY



Kevin VanDam reflects on 35 Years at the St. Lawrence and previews what to watch for in the 2022 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE.



BY JOE SILLS | PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

MLF pro Ryan Salzman shows off a slob-sized smallmouth bass he hooked into while fishing the St. Lawrence.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

“COMBINED, THE MUSSELS AND GOBIES TRANSFORMED THE ST. LAWRENCE INTO A RIVER SYSTEM PERFECTLY SUITED TO GROWING MONSTER SMALLMOUTH.”



In September of 1987, high winds began to sweep down the St. Lawrence River as a field of more than 300 bass anglers scurried

through its islands and bays for a shot at a \$13,000 top prize. The field was a who's who of bass fishing icons. While an Oklahoman named Ken Cook was busy putting over 44 pounds in the boat for the eventual win, household names like Denny Brauer, Dion Hibdon, Hank Parker and Jimmy Houston followed him down the leaderboard.

In the middle of the pack, barreling his way through powerful swells in an 18-foot bass boat with a 150-horsepower outboard on the back sat a stunned 20-year-old angler fishing his first professional event. His name: Kevin VanDam.

“I've never been so wet in my life,” jokes VanDam, now 54 years old and securely atop the record books as the winningest bass angler of all time. “That was the first day of my first tournament. I was scared. I drew a guy that decided we were going to run the big water, and it got really rough. You



know, we didn't have the weather apps to know what the forecast was going to be. We had 8- to 10-footers on the main lake.”

VanDam didn't place well in the event (110th place), and while he only caught one fish the first day, he was genuinely grateful just to make it back to dry land. But despite that rough introduction, VanDam now ranks the

St. Lawrence as the second-best smallmouth fishery on the planet (right behind Lake St. Clair). It's a venue that he calls an “estuary of life,” one tailor-made for competition.

Thirty-five years after VanDam's first experience on the St. Lawrence River, Major League Fishing is headed back to one of the most legendary northern fisheries in professional bass

fishing for the 2022 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE Presented by Mercury. Today, the competitors are not only fishing for the coolest trophy in professional bass fishing – an actual wrestling championship belt – but are also on the hunt for a \$200,000 top prize, a significant jump from the haul VanDam was hunting down in his first pro event all those years ago.

According to VanDam, the winner's purse isn't the only major change anglers have seen on the St. Lawrence over the years. The fishery itself is a completely different animal.

"I've had a lot of great tournaments there, and it has changed immensely over the years," he says. "It used to be dominated by largemouth."

## BECOMING A SMALLMOUTH SMORGASBORD

In 2017, VanDam won the tournament that marked his 300th professional bass fishing tournament with B.A.S.S. Suffice to say the four-time Bassmaster Classic champion, three-time MLF Cup winner and eight-time Angler of the Year has racked up his

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



Ryan Davidson examines an invasive goby from the St. Lawrence River.

fair share of experience on the St. Lawrence along the way.

Just one year after his nerve-racking introduction to the sport, biologists detected the first invasive zebra mussels in the St. Lawrence. By 1997, they also began finding the first invasive gobies – a one-two punch that has altered the tournament landscape on several fabled northern fisheries.

Combined, the mussels and gobies transformed the St. Lawrence into a river system perfectly suited to growing monster smallmouth. And while VanDam says quality largemouth can still be found in the river, it's now a fishery where the best anglers need to put 27 pounds in the boat each day to compete for big wins in a five-fish event.

In 2017, VanDam tallied 90-3 over four days to take home the win. Last year, Chris Johnston needed 77-15 over three days to top his brother Cory in the most recent Major League Fishing event held on the river out of Massena, New York, the penultimate event of the Toyota Series Northern Division schedule.

To achieve similar results in a totally different format (TITLE anglers will employ the catch, weigh, immediate-



Virginia pro Cody Pike targeted big smallmouth to win Stop 6 of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit on the St. Lawrence River in 2021.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



PHOTO BY ROB MATSURA

The massive St. Lawrence River is truly a land of giants.

release format of the Bass Pro Tour), VanDam expects most of this year's contenders to concentrate on the fishery's predominant species, though he feels that every angler in the field can fish their strengths. Anglers hailing from the West Coast or southern U.S. can absolutely level the playing field under the right conditions.

"We haven't seen largemouth be a big factor in a lot of the tournaments in recent years," he adds. "But they're there. There's a lot of quality. It just depends on whether you want to fish that way or not. In this fishery, you can power fish, you can use jerkbaits or spinnerbaits or swimbaits. You can finesse drop-shots, wacky rigs or Neko rigs. You can go shallow or deep this time of year."

## MOTHER NATURE SETS THE TONE

St. Lawrence River 101: The river is big. The river is fast. The river gives you options. Then, Mother Nature takes some of those options away.

That's a lesson VanDam learned three decades ago when those giant, soaking swells burned an impression in his mind, and it's one that he says today's anglers would do well to remember.

"The hardest thing to deal with there is Mother Nature," he says. "You just never know, conditions-wise, what you're going to be dealing with. It can be brutal, or it can be amazing."

For VanDam, "amazing" means light winds below 15 mph. Under calmer, stable conditions, tournament weights are going to be high and tight. Those conditions play into the hands of anglers from Canada to Japan to Florida.

When the winds go up to 25 mph, the scene gets incredibly rough. Not only will storms force anglers to adapt in a challenging environment but they can also make navigating the lake a battle in itself.

Thankfully, bass boats have come a long way in the past three decades. Built-in safety redundancies like dual automatic bilge pumps help mitigate some risks associated with big swells. Savvy anglers know that multiple tie-downs for things like trolling motors are essential. Checking jack plate bolts and electronics mounts are also key to keeping gear intact. Meanwhile, larger hulls and more powerful motors have also made tournament vessels more capable of handling big water.

Still, VanDam believes those waves can be the deciding factor in where anglers are able to fish.

"This river has definitely taught me a lot on how to run rough water," he says. "You have to manage your time, because if you make a 20-mile run when it's rough out there, it can really take time off of the clock. It can also beat your equipment to pieces, so those are variables you have to put into your plans."

## ANYONE'S BALLGAME

Last year's all-time Toyota Series clash between the Johnston brothers sent a clear narrative running through the bass fishing world – northern anglers have an edge on northern waters. But lost in the fracas lies another angle. Alabama angler Justin Atkins was just a few ounces off Cory Johnston's second-place mark.

Meanwhile, the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit derby held just a few weeks earlier saw Virginia native Cody Pike take home the win (with 82-12 over four days).

VanDam has a high comfort level on the St. Lawrence due to its similarity to the Great Lakes waters near his Michigan stomping grounds, but he also remembers the days when Florida icon Roland Martin was a top dog on the waterway, and he rattles off anglers like Bobby Lane and Shaw Grigsby as more recent examples of southern fishermen capable of getting the job done on the Canadian border.

Defending TITLE champion Jimmy Washam won last year's event in La Crosse, Wisconsin, though that was on a vastly different fishery than this year's championship venue. The Memphis-area native still considers himself a rookie on northern waters, but he does feel that the learning curve for non-locals has lessened considerably in recent years thanks to the availability of research materials online and the help of sophisticated electronics on the water.

"The locals definitely have an edge," Washam posits. "It's probably not the same edge they had maybe 20 or 10 or even five years ago. There's so much media out there that helps lessen the required learning curve."

Washam, who recently relocated to Pickwick Lake – where southern smallmouth are a tournament staple – says his attempts to replicate Tennessee River patterns on the St. Lawrence have been met with mixed success.

"Last year, I went up there thinking that those patterns would translate," he

Defending TITLE champion Jimmy Washam took home \$205,000 by winning the 2021 event and the equally important champ's belt.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

one of the most unique waterways in bass fishing. Over four days, anglers from two separate groups will compete for berths in the final day's Championship Round. With weights zeroed on the final day, the final 10 pros will go to work fishing for a belt with the power to launch careers and claim a prominent place in bass fishing record books.

To make their mark on history, they'll need to navigate deep and shallow grass, current seams, sand flats and boulders. They'll have to decide whether to focus on the river's legacy largemouth or double down on the goby-gourged bronzebacks that have turned this river into a place of myth. And they'll need to do so under the

## "IT'S SOMETHING WE DREAM ABOUT EVERY NIGHT DURING THE SEASON."

admits. "I think that kept me from unlocking the door, because there's a difference between a Tennessee River smallmouth that feeds on gizzard shad and smallmouth up north that don't. There may be some traits that a smallmouth will carry from Alabama to Canada, but there are definitely many traits that don't equate."

VanDam also believes the playing field at the TITLE should be relatively even – the great equalizer being tournament experience.

"So many of the guys have been there so many times now that I wouldn't say the northern guys have an edge in calm conditions," VanDam says. "Where that comes into play could be big water experience or if conditions get rough, but really, everyone is so versatile now that it's hard to say so-and-so's got an advantage because of where they're from."

## ONE OF BASS FISHING'S GRANDEST PRIZES

Name any trophy in bass fishing and you will almost certainly find it in Kevin VanDam's trophy case. For more than 30 years, he's fished on and won at the sport's highest levels from B.A.S.S.



Kevin VanDam knows that big bronzebacks are the key to winning tournaments on the St. Lawrence.

PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

to FLW to MLF. However, you won't find the championship belt awarded to the winning TITLE angler – like the one Washam was awarded last year.

"It's something we dream about every night during the season," Washam, the defending TITLE champ adds. "For me, winning the TITLE was the kickstart I needed to become a full-time professional angler and open doors for the future. Beyond that, the history of the TITLE goes through some of the greatest names in the history of our sport. There are still prominent names in fishing that are really hungry for the TITLE championship, because it's one of the biggest deals in bass fishing."

This year, that championship will play out in front of the backdrop that is

shadow of bass fishing legends that have all written their own stories on the St. Lawrence before.

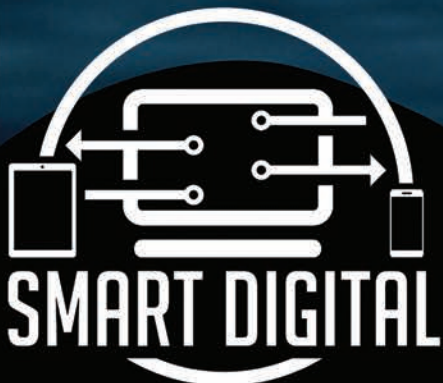
For VanDam, the St. Lawrence River is still a sacred place. Ask him about the site of his first tournament and he rattles off a laundry list of islands, flats and junctions with moving water found between 1987 and today. Ask him how he feels about the St. Lawrence, and he might wax poetic for a bit.

"When you have that much water dumping into the ocean, it becomes an estuary of life," he says. "Like Venice, Louisiana, the St. Lawrence River is a special, special place with incredible scenery. It's a great place to showcase the talents of the guys in this field." ■

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# GRASSIN' UP

**FIND FINE BEDS** of grass and you'll surely find fine bass. Four pros offer their best salad formulae. Read 'em and reap.

**By Mike Pehanich**

PHOTO BY ENGBRETSON  
UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY





River2Sea Ish Monroe Phat Mat Daddy Frog. Color: yellow head | Strike King KVD Popping Perch. Color: bluegill

## RISE ABOVE

Frogs and other weedless topwater baits are perfect for covering large overgrown areas without getting hung up.

PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN



war on grass has been raging for decades on our freshwater lakes and streams. When water skiers rule and property owners mistake their lakes for swimming pools, those life-giving plants, inappropriately dubbed “weeds,” face hostile mobs all too ready to force their extinction.

Too bad.

Aquatic vegetation is critical to the health of our waters, and a healthy

bass population is often a glorious byproduct of a fishery rich with underwater and lake-rimmed gardens provided by Mother Nature.

Knowledgeable bass anglers sing its praises and work the grass beds high and low. Yet vegetation poses its share of challenges to even the welcoming angler: Where to start? What to target? What baits to use?

The best way to make friends with bass-friendly grass is to understand how bass take to this splendid habitat and to adopt tactics to fish it effectively.

Here's how four veterans of Major League Fishing competition turn potential weed woes into full-on splendor in the grass.

## ISH MONROE: ONE-TWO (FROG AND) PUNCH

California's Ish Monroe is quick to recite a litany of reasons why aquatic vegetation supports a healthy bass fishery. He cites oxygen, cleaner water, protection for fry and a healthy food chain. But history makes the better case.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA

"Guntersville was great in its hey-day, but after they killed the grass, it sucked," Monroe says. "Now the grass is back, and so is Guntersville...Clear Lake in California, same thing...that tells you how important grass is to the ecosystem of any type of bass fishery."

Most grass fishing takes place in water less than 10 feet deep. While other anglers tend to retreat from tracts of thick grass, Monroe gravitates to the densest grass concentrations. Often, he's entering a bass world of brambles and briars, seemingly impenetrable, accessible only to a man with a plan.

## EDGES AND AMBUSH POINTS

"Grass also provides some kind of physical target, especially when we're talking about emergent grass where I can throw a frog or clumps where I can punch through with a punch weight. Those are my two favorite ways to fish it," he says. "Big bass like heavy cover. They also want an edge, whether the vegetation is emergent or submerged. An edge is an ambush point."

When facing a massive expanse of vegetation, he looks for irregularities – places where grass grows to the top, matted vegetation, or places where two types of vegetation converge such as hydrilla to milfoil or pads or reeds.

Monroe's two favorite tools are a hollow-body frog and a soft plastic creature bait beneath a punch weight.

"The frog allows you to cover a huge grass area quickly without getting hung up," he says, adding that he sometimes works a fast-moving toad over the tops of submerged vegetation or openings in the reeds. "I work fast at first to cover water. I slow down once I know where the fish are."

He focuses on holes and other prospective ambush points where a bass can grab an easy meal of frog or bluegill.

His frog choice is the River2Sea Phat Mat Daddy, a bait he designed.

"It's a 3/4-ounce bait, so it makes a good indentation, even in a thick mat," he says.

His punch setup is the Missile Baits D Bomb behind a 1- to 2-ounce weight or a 3/4- to 1 1/4-ounce jig.

"The D Bomb is my trailer on the jig, too," he says. "It's my 'go-to' for everything."



Trokar TK130  
Flippin' Hook 5/0

Missile Baits D Bomb  
Color: candy grass

Strike King Rage Twin  
Tail Menace Grub  
Color: MM moonlight

Epic Baits Tungsten  
Flip Weight 1 oz.

## PUNCH IN

Fish soft plastics behind heavy weights to punch through mats of thick vegetation, down to where the biggest bass lurk.

PHOTO BY  
BRANDON ROWAN

He works reed beds similarly, seeking out points, edges, holes and other irregularities.

"They might all look the same, but you will see holes – places where the reeds separate," he says. "In these areas, I prefer a jig to a punch bait."

## SHAW GRIGSBY: SIZING UP THE FIELD

On the subject of "bass in grass," Shaw Grigsby waxes rhapsodic.

"Bass love it," says Grigsby, beloved outdoor television personality and bass fishing legend. "It's beautiful. It pro-

duces oxygen. It provides cover. It offers a lot of the bass' favorite foods such as freshwater 'grass shrimp,' minnows, shiners, bluegill...everything!"

His home state of Florida hosts a vast variety of aquatic plant life, but hydrilla is clearly the most prevalent. The invasive plant can outgrow its welcome in some waters when it impedes navigation and suffocates other plant life. But bass are the last to argue against it.

"If you have hydrilla in the system, most of the time, you'll want to fish it,"



**“GRASS IN ITSELF IS  
GREAT HABITAT FOR  
BAITFISH AND THE  
WHOLE FOOD CHAIN.”**

PHOTO BY ENGBRETSON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

Grigsby explains. “Bass love it, especially if it’s fresh and crisp. When you come to a lake, it’s a great place to start.”

Florida Fish and Wildlife has a “no tolerance” policy on hydrilla, an invasive plant species that spreads fast.

“If you see a spread of hydrilla, it won’t last (in Florida), but it can be tremendous for flipping and pitching,” says Grigsby, who has garnered nearly \$2.4 million in tournament payouts in his pro career. “Bass love to get under it, hide in the hydrilla root system and eat little crawfish in the bottom of it.”

### GRASS WITH A DIFFERENCE

So where does a bass angler start on water with myriad grass varieties and greenery as far as the eye can see?

“You need to find something different – a point, an open hole, mounds of grass or a sharp edge,” Grigsby says. “Maybe

it’s a hole the size of your truck hood; a sharp edge with deep water next to it can be tremendous. Sometimes it’s a gradual decline in depth or an edge with clumps like mushrooms. When I find mounds like that, I punch the middle of them or work a topwater like the (Strike King) Sexy Dawg along the edges. When you find what the fish really like, you can repeat it.”

Hydrilla beds become prime frogging areas when algae forms over the beds, blocking sunlight and suffocating underlying growth. The decaying vegetation creates holes and pockets where bass can wait in ambush. These become prime “frogging” areas, which Grigsby works with baits like the Strike King KVD Sexy Frog or Popping Perch.

He punches mats of hydrilla, hydrilla beds and other thick growth with 1- to 1 1/2-ounce weights and an array of relatively small soft plastics, like the Strike King Rage Menace, with few appendages to hang in the tangles. His flipping hook of choice is the Trokar TK 130 in 5/0, 6/0 or 7/0.

Transition areas where two varieties of plant life conjoin often lead to a pro-

ductive pattern. The widely present hydrocotyle, also known as pennywort or dollar weed, frequently couples with other plants.

“A lot of times I get hydrocotyle and hydrilla mixed together; hydrocotyle with cabbage, or hydrocotyle with Kissimmee grass,” Grigsby says. “Often you will find this transition is what they want.”

### EARLY EDGES, SUNNY BURROWS

In the early morning, bass are often active and feeding on the edges of grassy areas.

“They may be within 20 feet of the mat, and you can throw a topwater lure, a spinnerbait, a (Strike King) Thunder Cricket or a lipless crankbait at them,” Grigsby says. “Once the sun is up, they crawl under the mat and can be 20 feet inside it. That’s when I take a big weight and punch a soft plastic bait through. One time I was fishing a hydrilla bed 25 feet in diameter. I punched through in the center and got a 12 1/2-pound largemouth. If I had continued working the edges, I wouldn’t have gotten that bite.”



**Berkley PowerBait Flippin' Jig**  
Color: black blue

**Zoom Fat Albert Grub**  
Color: green pumpkin purple

**Humdinger Tom Monsoor Swim Jig**  
Color: Tom's bream

**Stanford Baits Big Show Money Bug Craw**  
Color: black/blue fleck

**JIGGIN' IT**  
Imitate a variety of bass forage favorites, like crawfish and bream, with jigs and matching trailers.  
PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

## TOM MONSOOR: NORTH COUNTRY 'WEEDS ARE LIKE TREES'

"Ducks love it. Fish love it," says Tom Monsoor while combing grass beds of Lake Onalaska, a Mississippi River backwater near his home in La Crosse, Wisconsin. "It's my favorite because it's the fish's favorite. If there's eelgrass present, fish will be in it."

Monsoor's northern lakes and streams host abundant native plant species, his beloved eelgrass among them. It's a wispy plant that undulates like a wind-stroked wheat field in current. Found in relatively small parcels, it's a fish magnet that Monsoor tries never to ignore.

"It's spotty and easy to fish, and it's usually found in the 2-to-4-foot depth range," says Monsoor, the oldest competitor to win an MLF event. "Your lure slides through it nice and smooth. I fish it mostly with a jig, but you can throw about anything in it – spinnerbait, ChatterBait, topwater. It's the nicest of all the plants to fish."

Like most "Yankees," Monsoor has difficulty weaning himself off the term

"weeds" to describe healthy, life-giving, ecologically essential aquatic plants. But he's a strong advocate of protecting favorable vegetation, and he preaches caution and good sense when managing its spread.

"To a fishery, weeds are like trees," he says. "Without trees, we don't live. Without weeds, fish don't live. Trees produce oxygen for humans. Weeds produce oxygen for fish. The more 'good' weeds in a lake, the better the fishing is."

## SEASONAL FAVORITES AND MORE

Cattails rank second on Monsoor's list of favorite plants to fish. The emergent plants, identified by their spongy hot dog-shaped heads, line boggy shorelines and define wetland bays.

"Cattail areas are where bass spawn in spring and where bass move to in high water," Monsoor explains. "They provide some of the best spring-time bass fishing."

The most productive cattails offer suitable depth for bass to find cover and comfort to launch an effective ambush.

**"THE KEY IN FISHING MILFOIL IS TO LISTEN FOR BREAM. LISTEN FOR THOSE RICE KRISPIES 'POPS.'"**

"You need a couple of feet of water for cattails to be good – at least a foot," Monsoor says. "If the cattail bank is undercut, it will be productive all year. Bass get underneath it like a mat."

He plumbs the cattail rows with a jig, generally preferring to maintain his distance and make moderately long casts. Cattails over undercut banks are best worked by pitching and flipping. Add a grass mat rim to an undercut cattail bank and you have "flipping heaven."

"Take a black-and-blue jig 'n' pig and find some cattails and you will catch bass," he says. "There's nothing more true than that."

## READIN' THE REEDS

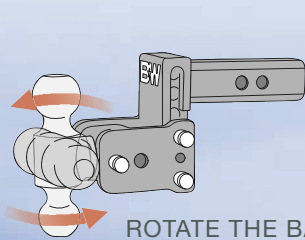
The tall green stalk emergent growth commonly called "reeds" are true grasses (phragmites). While they often grow in mixed company with cattails and other emergent plants, they can grow separately in small patches or over broad acreage.



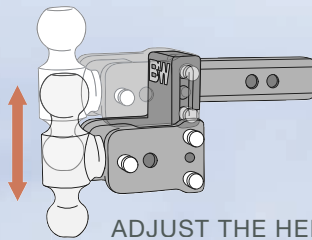
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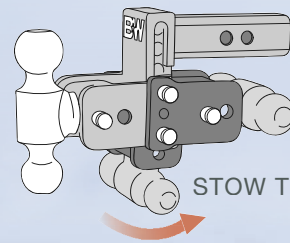
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Reeds have at the very least seasonal attraction to bass wherever they appear. But on some northern waters, particularly in the Northwoods where bigger predators like northern pike and musky roam in good numbers, reeds will host bass populations all year.

"On a lot of lakes up North, reeds are a big deal," Monsoor states. "They hold baitfish, sunfish, bluegill, perch – everything likes them."

Isolated 100- to 150-foot reed patches growing in the 4-foot range or deeper are his favorite targets. For the more expansive reed beds, he looks for distinctive features – points, indentations, outside edges,

"I start on the outside and work my way in until the fish show me where they are and what they're doing," he adds.

So-called "cabbage" plants from the potamogeton family, also called "pondweed," provide another favored bass grass.

"Bass love it, and smallmouth (in particular) really love it," Monsoor says. "It's scattered and easier to fish than a lot of other plants. It grows deep, too."

He works topwater lures over cabbage tops but has his greatest success in these areas with a swim jig. Often credited as the master of the swim jig, he fishes his namesake, the Humdinger Tom Monsoor Swim Jig, trailing it with a 3-inch Zoom Fat Albert Grub.

## TERRY SCROGGINS: WORKING THE THICK STUFF

"The key in fishing milfoil is to listen for bream," says Terry Scroggins, the man called "Big Show" with more than

\$2 million in tournament winnings to his credit. "Listen for those Rice Krispies 'pops.' It's bream sucking bait out of the grass. When you hear them, you know you're in the right zone."

Those telltale popping sounds are sunfish, mostly bluegill, feeding on grubs, minnows, grass shrimp and more in dense beds of milfoil. And they are just a hint of the activity going on beneath the mats and canopies.

Milfoil and hydrilla are the two most dominant submerged grass species in our southern and central waters. Both plant types are non-native to American waters, and, as invasive species, widely targeted for eradication whether or not they pose navigational challenges or annoyance to swimmers and water skiers. But they also provide valuable habitat in many manmade lakes without quality native aquatic plant species serving the ecosystem.

"Grass in itself is great habitat for baitfish and the whole food chain," Scroggins says. "Any time grass is present – whether it's eelgrass, milfoil, hydrilla, hyacinth or reeds – it's a plus. But throughout the country, hydrilla and milfoil are the two players I like to look for. They hold fish year-round."

Both species can grow surprisingly deep depending on water clarity. Scroggins finds hydrilla at 20-foot depths on occasion and commonly works milfoil in 12- to 14-foot water.

"Milfoil develops more of a canopy, and it has vacant space below it," says Scroggins. "It's not nearly as thick as hydrilla."

When milfoil mats at the surface and mates with surface algae, dying

vegetation forms a distinctive substance anglers often call "cheese." The decayed plant hollows out pockets and cavities.

"That's when I like to throw a frog on it or flip a creature-style bait through it," Scroggins details. "The perfect scenario is when you find two grasses mixed and where grass thickens and breaks up into clumps. If you have some current running through it, it's even better."

He also flips soft plastics and jig/trailer combos into the mats. The Big Show Money Bug, a lure he designed for Stanford Baits, is his jig trailer. He also fishes it solo behind a 1- to 1 1/2-ounce weight.

"It has a great profile and gives off a lot of kicking action," he says.

## SHAD SPAWN

Throughout much of the country, a shad spawn commences shortly after bass finish bedding.

"A grass line of milfoil and hydrilla is a great place to find spawning shad," Scroggins explains. "If you find a hard grass line on a lake like Guntersville, it'll be lights out very first thing in the morning."

Though crankbaits and lipless crankbaits produce fish, spinnerbaits and bladed jigs are more efficient at this time.

"I'll throw a spinnerbait most just because the flash will generate more bites," he adds. "I like a double willow with nickel blades. It creates a lot of flash. When you see shad following your spinnerbait, you know things are going to get interesting." ■



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUIRA

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# WESTERN





# WATER WOES

*By Tyler Brinks*  
PHOTO BY TREKANDSHOOT

## Historically low water levels continue to influence favorite bass fisheries

It's been well documented that several states west of the Rocky Mountains are in a severe drought - now referred to as a "megadrought" in some states - and that lakes and reservoirs in California, Arizona and Utah are suffering from record-low water levels. That includes some of the West's most popular bass fisheries: Lake Mead in Nevada and Lakes Shasta and Oroville in Northern California, for example.

It's not unprecedented for water levels to fluctuate wildly in these fisheries, as they're primarily used as water supply sources for nearby municipalities and agriculture. Some western reservoirs can rise and fall up to 100 feet yearly. But the dire situation currently facing West Coast water managers (and bass anglers) comes after scant annual precipitation the past two decades, which has failed to replace the water taken out of reservoirs like Mead, Shasta and Oroville by normal human usage.



The waters of Lake Mead are approaching alarming lows as the effects of the megadrought continue to plague the West.

## HOW IT GOT SO DRY

The reasons for historically low western water levels are a perfect storm of factors (no pun intended): 1) Lack of precipitation has plagued the region since 2000 (the driest stretch in 1,200 years, according to a study by Nature Climate Change); 2) Increased water usage in cities like Las Vegas (Lake Mead) and agricultural areas like the Southern San Joaquin Valley (Lake Shasta) has siphoned some reservoirs like never before; and 3) Warmer annual temperatures have dramatically reduced snowpack in mountain ranges that supply watersheds and have hastened evaporation.

This trio of factors has put the western states in uncomfortable new territory as lakes across the region are experiencing record-low water levels, with the drought forecasted to continue until 2030.

For western bass anglers, the above translates to dramatically changing ecosystems on their favorite bodies of water and an alarming lack of access. As water levels continue to drop and boat launches are left high and dry, getting a bass boat safely onto well known, popular lakes becomes difficult (bordering on impossible in some cases).

The drought has already taken its toll on fishing participation, with major tournaments being canceled or relocated and entire lakes are in danger of being unusable for boaters.

## LAKE MEAD AMONG THE HARDEST HIT

National media covering the drought are primarily focused on Nevada's Lake Mead, the historical impoundment of the Colorado River located 30 miles southeast of Las Vegas. The recent discovery of human remains on the dried-up lake bottom in May created a flurry of media attention – in addition to the grim discoveries, other relics (multiple sunken boats and jet skis, etc.) have appeared as Mead's water levels continue to plunge below historical lows.

As of this writing, Mead is over 180 feet below the high-water mark set in 1983, and the early July water level (1,043.8 feet in elevation) was the lowest recorded at the country's largest reservoir since it began filling up with the completion of the Hoover Dam in the 1930s. The dam produces hydroelectric power for millions in Nevada, Arizona and California, and although potentially years away, continued water

loss could endanger the power supply for the region as Mead creeps toward "inactive pool" status (a minimum of 950 feet is required to generate power through Hoover Dam).

These historically low waters forced the prestigious WON Bass U.S. Open to be moved one lake down on the Colorado River to Lake Mohave. The 2022 U.S. Open marks the 40th edition of the biggest bass tournament on the West Coast and the first time it will be held somewhere other than Lake Mead.

Bass Pro Tour angler John Murray won the event twice during high-water years in 1997 and 1999. He's fished Mead through many stages over a three-decade career and has witnessed the lake at capacity twice.

"I lived through two full water cycles, both in 1983 and then the late '90s," Murray says. "The last time it filled up was in 2000 after back-to-back 100-year storms – it'll never be that full again unless there's a miracle. With the population of Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Los Angeles taking the water, there's just too much draw on the water and it's worth more to sell than to keep the lake full. Looking at the lake now makes me sick; you can



PHOTO BY MIERCAT PHOTOGRAPHY/ADOBE STOCK

look half a mile up the bank and see rock piles you used to fish when there was water in the lake.”

## WATER LEVELS CHANGING BASS POPULATIONS

Debora Herndon, Lake Mead Fisheries Biologist at the Nevada Department of Wildlife, says the

quickly dropping water will change where the fish live and where anglers must look when fishing to find them.

“With the lake going down, most of the popular areas on the lake will be too shallow or on dry land now,” she says. “This could decrease the largemouth population, as much deeper, rocky areas may replace the shallow waters they prefer in coves.

The smallmouth bass population will likely not be affected as much because of their preferred habitat. Smallmouth bass numbers tend to go up and down in our angler studies, but last year we saw a slight decrease in largemouth with a slight increase in the smallmouth bass population, which may continue as the water levels fall.”

One reason largemouth may suffer is the that decreasing water levels will negatively affect shallow grass first.

“The lack of vegetation in the backs of coves will likely affect the largemouth population,” Herndon confirms. “It’s so important for the young bass to survive.”

Mead’s receding water has forced the closures of several marinas on the lake. Marina stores, motels, gas stations, campgrounds and large parking lots now look out of place in the Nevada desert, far away from the lake’s shoreline. Callville Bay, the largest marina on the lake and host of all major bass tournaments, is down to just one boat launch lane, while several other marinas are entirely unusable.

As boat ramp availability dwindles, fewer anglers will be fishing, which could affect the bass population, according to Herndon.

PHOTO BY JACOB FINE



West Coast natives like John Murray hope for a rebound on Lake Mead.

"Bass anglers on Lake Mead typically catch and release their catch 90 percent of the time, but we expect to see a decrease in harvest simply because there will be fewer anglers fishing the lake now," she says.

### NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S WATER WOES

California lakes Shasta and Oroville are the two largest reservoirs in the state and fluctuate yearly. But lacking adequate snowpack to replace water taken out of these two popular fisheries, both Shasta and Oroville have continued to drop. During the spring of this year – when the lakes are typically at their highest points – they sit over 100 feet below full pool, with Shasta at 40 percent and Oroville at 55 percent of capacity.

Kent Brown, a longtime tournament angler and host of Ultimate Bass Radio in Sacramento, confirms that water is low, but that it could have been much worse if not for some winter storms.

"All boat ramps were inaccessible until around the first of the year on Lake Oroville," Brown says. "The thing that saved us was record rains in the fall and big snow storm right after Christmas. The problem is that we started so low that the winter precipitation only helped for a little while. There's a great deal of draw for the water for farming in the state."

California is the nation's leading agricultural producer, including water-thirsty crops like almonds and pistachios. This has increased the draw on resources and, in turn, added to the low water levels in the reservoirs.

According to Brown, even though Shasta's and Oroville's water woes are well known, popular fisheries like New Melones Lake, Don Pedro Reservoir, Clear Lake – and even the tidal California Delta – have been noticeably affected by the drought.

"New Melones and Don Pedro have been hit hard," Brown says. "That impacts everyone because they're losing tourism dollars in the Mother Lode area, and nobody wants to go camping and have to hike way down to the water."

"Clear Lake, California's largest natural lake, is the one the bass anglers are talking about most. It doesn't have



While not as dramatic as Lake Mead, fisheries like California's Clear Lake will also suffer from diminished access due to low water.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

any major rivers feeding it, just smaller creeks, and the water levels are entirely based on rain and what rolls downhill into it."

While it hasn't seen the extreme depth changes as other lakes in the West, Clear Lake is down far enough to make a difference to anglers who are likely to experience diminished access by late summer.

"There's a good chance that all the paved ramps will be out of water by Labor Day," Brown says. "Clear Lake is a very popular venue for year-end championship tournaments in the fall, and all those tournaments are in danger of being moved elsewhere. The fishing is still good, but it's changed, and the shallow water has pushed grass further away from the shoreline than I've ever seen."

The California Delta is a legendary bass fishery and fed by the Pacific Ocean, but all the lakes that pour into the Delta system impact its water, even though the tide keeps the levels regulated.

"(Multiple creeks and rivers) flow into the Delta, and it affects the fishery when there isn't enough water," Brown says. "It affects the salinity of the Delta when there isn't enough (fresh water) inflow. It also encourages weed growth, which in turn creates more grass control with spraying. It's a trickle-down effect."

### EVEN A LITTLE WATER WILL HELP

While low water levels throughout the West are understandably troubling to residents of the area and anglers alike, Murry and Brown both remain hopeful that Mead, Shasta, Oroville and the rest can and will rebound quickly with an influx of water. Weed growth around the lakes during low water can quickly become excellent bass habitat when the water eventually rises.

"It doesn't take much of a rise to give the bass a good spawn and create better fishing," Murray posits. "The lakes in the desert that drop and stay down for a year or so and come up can give the fish a 'new lake effect' because of all the shoreline cover that grows. The cottonwoods, willows, and salt cedars grow very quickly. Water doesn't have to come up much and you can have a boom. That's what we're all hoping for."

Brown points to the winter influx of water to Lake Oroville that boosted the water level enough for boats to launch. That gave way to excellent fishing for anglers targeting bass that had been unpressured for months.

"Guys caught some phenomenal numbers when they first got back on it," Brown says. "The lake has been fishing good all year long." ■

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# MASTERS SERIES

As told by Lloyd Pickett Jr.

PHOTOS BY ROB MATSUURA

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

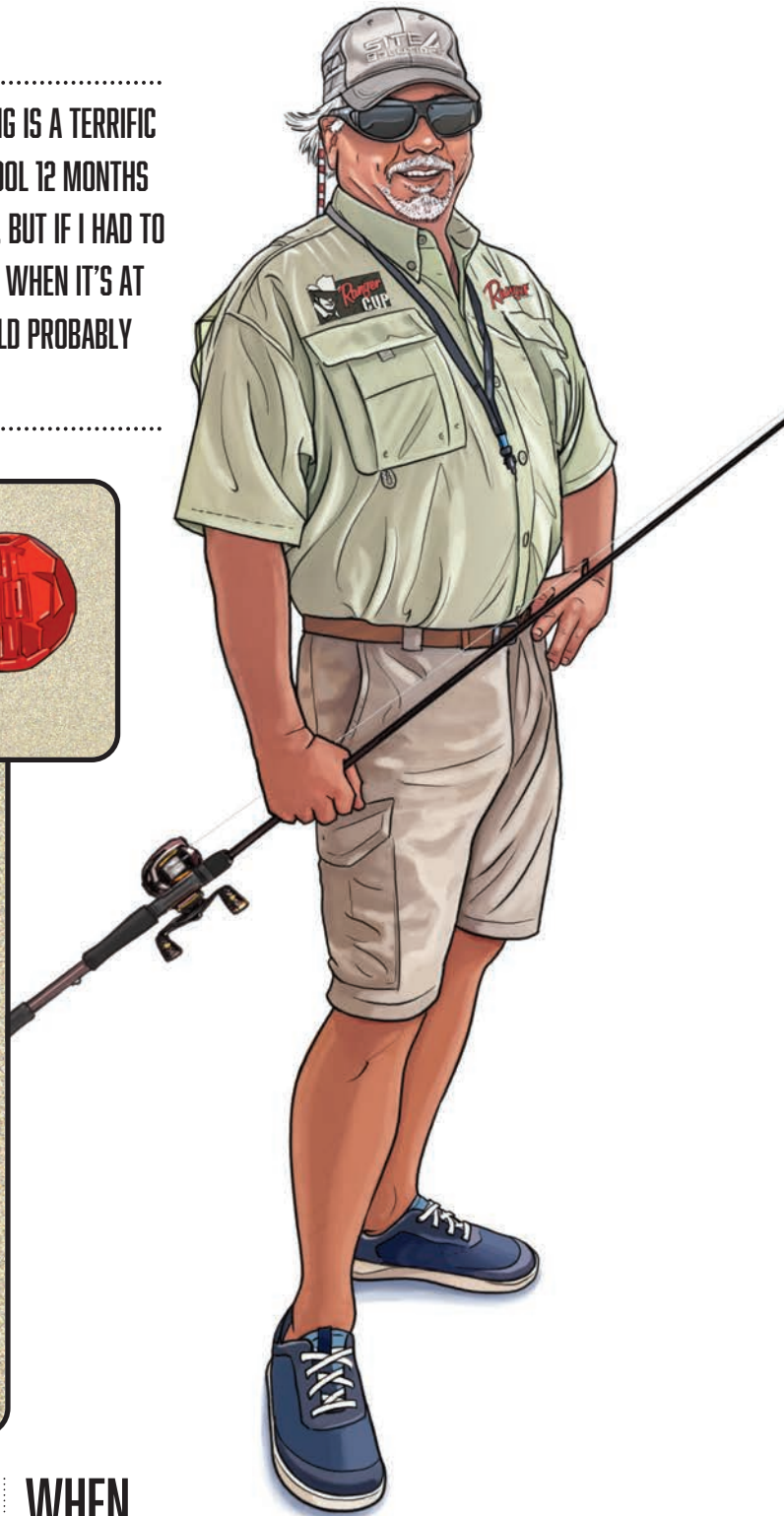
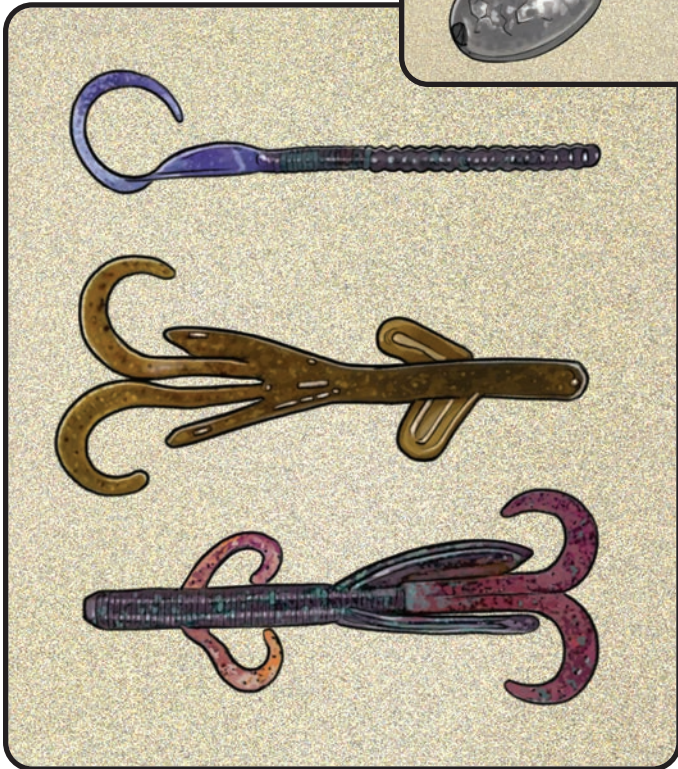
## THE CAROLINA RIG

**I** started getting serious about bass fishing in the late 1980s. I was fishing a lot of jigs and Texas rigs - and having pretty good success - when Bill Price and my father-in-law, Preston Davis, began my education on the Carolina rig. It appealed to me right away because I was getting a lot of bites on it.

I consider it a finesse technique because the bait is separated from the weight and acts a lot more naturally than a Texas rig or jig that might just sink into the mud. To me, the Carolina rig was and is the ultimate finesse tool. I can fish it at any depth. I can fish it fast or slow. I can use it to throw baits of any size, and it catches big bass.



“THE CAROLINA RIG IS A TERRIFIC FISH-CATCHING TOOL 12 MONTHS OUT OF THE YEAR, BUT IF I HAD TO PICK ONE SEASON WHEN IT’S AT ITS BEST, IT WOULD PROBABLY BE SUMMER.”



## HIGHLIGHTS

Over the years, I've won five Phoenix Bass Fishing League events, two Toyota Series events, qualified for eight All-Americans, won five boats and taken home more than \$500,000 in prize money. I've had Top 10 finishes all over the country, and the Carolina rig deserves credit for almost all of it. It's my go-to method, and you'll never find me on the water without several rods set up with Carolina rigs.

## WHEN

The Carolina rig is a terrific fish-catching tool 12 months out of the year, but if I had to pick one season when it's at its best, it would probably be summer. When surface temps reach the upper 80s, bass generally won't chase their food. They're stressed from high temperatures and low oxygen.

A big, slow-moving bait is usually just the thing to get them to bite. But the Carolina rig catches bass all year long

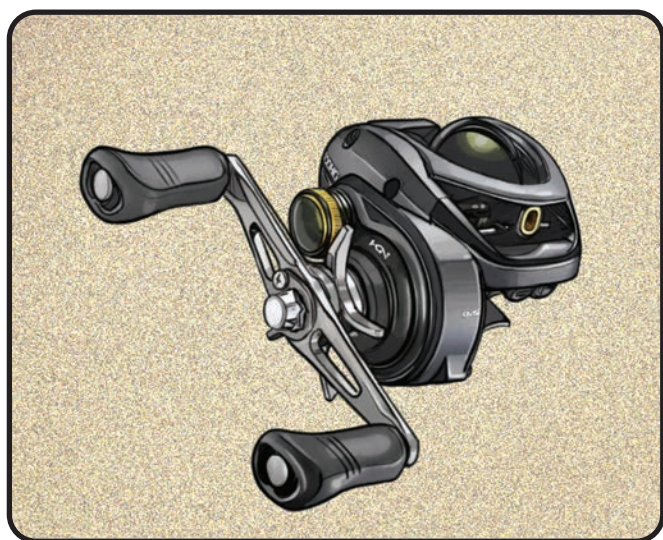
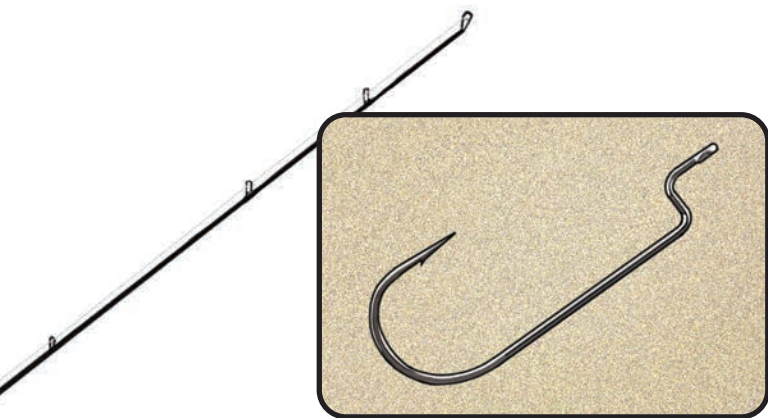


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

**“WHEN PUTTING A CAROLINA RIG TOGETHER, I START BY THREADING A ROUND, RED 5MM GLASS BEAD ONTO THE LINE. NEXT IS THE SINKER, FOLLOWED BY A RED 8MM BEAD AND THEN THE SWIVEL. NOT MANY ANGLERS START WITH A BEAD, BUT I THINK THE 5MM BEAD HELPS TO PROTECT THE HOLE IN THE LEAD SINKER.”**

in all kinds of waters and at every depth. In fact, the only time I wouldn't recommend a Carolina rig is when you're targeting fish that are suspended well off the bottom.

## WHERE

I'll throw a Carolina rig in a foot of water or 35 feet of water. I throw it in vegetation, in brush, around rocks, on points, on flats – anywhere I think there are bass. But if I had

to pick one type of structure where the Carolina rig is at its best, I'd say it's on ledges and drops. I like to work the rig up to the edge of ledges and drops and then “kill” it. The bait will settle slowly next to the structure or any cover that's there, and you can bet bass are looking at it. They can hear that big weight dragging across the bottom, and then they see the lure. It's usually too much for them to resist.

## TACKLE

I like a really long rod for my Carolina rigging: a 7-foot-11 “Ball and Chain” extra-heavy-action casting model from Muddy River Rods. They're made by my friend Jeff McLain, who fishes the Toyota Series, and the Ball and Chain has a fast tip to help increase casting distance. I pair it with a Shimano Curado (6.2:1) spooled with 15-pound-test Berkley Big Game monofilament. My leader is 12- to 15-pound Big Game most of the time, but if the water is extremely clear, I'll use fluorocarbon.

You might be surprised to hear that I like to use mono for my Carolina rigging, but there's a reason for that. Mono sinks slower than fluorocarbon, and that gives my baits a better action and keeps them in front of the fish longer.

My sinker selection is pretty basic. I use two weights and two styles. About 99 percent of the time, I'm using a 1-ounce sinker. If the bite is extremely finicky, I'll drop down to 3/4-ounce, but the weight of the sinker usually isn't critical since it's not in direct contact with the lure. No matter the weight, I use lead sinkers – not tungsten or brass or anything else. I've been using lead for so long that I have a feel for it, and if I were to change now, I'd have to re-learn that feel.

In grass, I like a bullet-shaped sinker because it comes through the vegetation better, but for most of my Carolina rigging, I use egg-style sinkers. For me, the egg sinker comes through rock and brush better than the traditional bullet sinker.

When putting a Carolina rig together, I start by threading a round, red 5mm glass bead onto the line. Next is the sinker, followed by a red 8mm bead and then the swivel. Not many anglers start with a bead, but I think the 5mm bead helps to protect the hole in the lead sinker. Without the bead, if the sinker is banging around on rocks, the hole can close up and damage your line. Also, the bead in front of the sinker helps to make a little extra noise.

My hook is a Gamakatsu offset round-bend model. I like a 2/0 for the small creature baits I use, and a 4/0 for the bigger creatures and big worms. I'm not too picky about my swivels – most are more than strong enough for this kind of fishing – but I do like a black swivel.

One of the most important considerations in Carolina rigging is leader length – the length of line between the swivel and the hook. I generally like a long leader. My average leader is about 3 feet, but I'll go twice that long sometimes when fishing ledges or drops or when I need an extremely slow presentation. And I'll shorten my leader to just a foot or two in current. When there's current, it can cause your lure to swing a lot and put you in an awkward position for setting the hook. A shorter leader keeps me more in control of my presentation in current.

The Carolina rig is a great tool for catching big fish if it's presented slowly and patiently.



## LURES

For most of my Carolina rigging, I use three baits: (1) A small creature bait like the Zoom Tiny Brush Hog or 4-inch Strike King KVD Perfect Plastic Game Hawg; (2) A big creature bait like the Zoom Super Hog or Strike King Magnum Game Hawg; and (3) A big plastic worm like the 10.5-inch Zoom Ol' Monster or 10-inch Strike King KVD Perfect Plastic Bullworm.

In the late winter and early spring, I like the small creature bait. After the spawn, I use the big creature and big worm. My favorite colors depend a lot upon water clarity, and I usually go with translucent colors like watermelon and watermelon candy in clear water, green pumpkin or junebug in stained water, and junebug or blueberry in dirty water.

## THE BASICS

For me, a basic presentation with a Carolina rig starts with a long cast. I think a long cast is important because it gets the lure away from the boat, away from any sonar "pinging," and it keeps them from being unnecessarily spooked.

As soon as the bait hits the water, I start to count it down. It'll sink at a rate of about 2 feet per second. Once the rig hits the bottom, I'll take up any slack and put myself in direct contact with the sinker. That's critical; you never want to lose contact with the weight.

I hold my rod tip at about 10 o'clock, and I face where my line enters the water. I slowly drag the sinker by moving the rod to my right (I'm right-handed). Each pull moves the sinker about two feet across the bottom. I generally fish faster in shallow water where there's more light and the fish can probably see the bait better and slower in deep water, but you have to figure out what they want every time out. Generally, I believe a slow retrieve is best.

I always drag the sinker. I don't hop it. I want it to come into contact with everything on the bottom, and when I feel it hit something like rocks or brush or anything different, I slow down or even stop. That's when you're most likely to get bit.

When I get a strike, I use the length of my rod to sweep the hook into the fish. That's another place where the long rod is a big advantage.

## BONUS

The biggest mistake I see from anglers throwing a Carolina rig is that they fish it too fast. Most often, another angler in my boat will make three casts to my one, but I'll catch a lot more – and a lot bigger – fish. I have a saying: The longer you leave the bait in a spot, the bigger the bass is going to be.

I think that's one of the reasons that traditional power fishermen have trouble with the Carolina rig. They can't slow down enough to be effective with it. Finesse anglers, on the other hand, understand that slower is usually better. ■

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# 13 FISHING JABBER JAW

## DEEP HYBRID SQUAREBILL

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY BRANDON ROWAN

**L**ike its shallow-diving predecessor – the Jabber Jaw – the Jabber Jaw Deep from 13 Fishing is built around an innovative stainless steel bill that chatters side to side as the chubby plastic body cuts a wide-wobbling path through the 7- to 9-foot depth zone. Think of it like a cross between a squarebill and a bladed jig that offers some of the very best attributes of both.

### First Impressions

The folks at 13 Fishing are all about building unique products that are just as functional as they are pleasing to the eye. The Jabber Jaw Deep is definitely something special in that regard.

- **Innovative Bill Design:** A traditional squarebill has a fixed lip, usually made

from plastic or circuit board material. The Jabber Jaw features a rigid, stainless steel bill that pivots on a metal pin recessed within a nose slit. This allows the bill to oscillate back and forth when put in motion.

- **Metal Jowls:** The inner walls of the nose slit are plated in metal, thus creating a metallic “clicking” sound each time the lip and jowl collide.
- The Jabber Jaw comes stock with high-quality VMC black nickel trebles (No. 4). It’s also equipped with a heavy-duty, clip-on line tie that centers on the bill for less restriction and sends constant vibration to the rod tip.
- Shaped similarly to a bluegill, the fat body is

anatomically correct and features recessed 3D eyes, carved gill plates and lifelike scales.

- Available in 12 color schemes that are top-notch in quality. Lighter-colored baits including natty light, regurgitated shad, citrus shad, black back shad, green gizzard shad and olive shad are equipped with a silver bill. Darker baits including day old guac, mudbug punch, tweetie pie, diamond craw, chartreuse root beer and green mudbug punch have black bills.

### In Action

It’s always a treat to throw a bait that breaks the traditional mold, and this one was a true adventure to go crankin’ with. It was cool

to see and feel the lure at work, especially since it fooled a few bass up to 4 pounds in the process.

The first things I noticed were the hard thump, wide wobble and erratic action created by the free-swinging lip and plump body. Put the bait in motion and the lip automatically oscillates side to side – similar to a bladed jig – providing gobs of vibration to rattle your rod tip. Another was how well the bait deflects off stumps and rock and feathers through submerged grass like hydrilla. The body is super buoyant, so it floated itself free pretty easily. As with any squarebill, it’s important to pay attention during the retrieve and be ready to pause on a dime so the bait can get itself out of trouble.

## METAL LIP:

The durable metal lip pivots on an enclosed nose pin. This allows the bill to oscillate freely side-to-side, giving the bait a unique wobble and sound while generating gobs of flash and vibration as it bumps and bangs through the water column.



## ANATOMY:

Featuring raised gill plates, 3D holographic eyes and high-definition finishes, the bait is anatomically correct in every way.



## PLATED JOWLS:

The inner wall of the jowls is plated in metal, creating a metallic clicking sound each time the bill collides with either side. It's a distinctive sound similar to that of a vibrating jig.



As castability goes, the 5/8-ounce bait does just fine so long as winds are mild. Just be careful when launching into strong headwinds; the Jabber Jaw will tumble on you.

## Final Thoughts

If you're on the hunt for a mid-diving crank to give the fish a different look and sound than anything else out there, the Jabber Jaw Deep is certainly worth checking out. The attraction isn't just about the wide wobble and maddening chatter created by the free-swinging metal bill, either. This baby traverses grass, stumps, brush, dock pilings and other hard cover like a 4x4. You can see and hear the Jabber Jaw Deep in action here: [13fishing.com/jabber-jaw-deep-9](https://13fishing.com/jabber-jaw-deep-9).

## Performance Advice

- The Jabber Jaw will reach maximum diving depths on smaller-diameter fluorocarbon lines like 12-pound test, but you may want to go up in line size when fishing around abrasive heavy cover, or if you are fishing a lake known for giving up lots of big ones.
- Switching to a larger-diameter monofilament or braid will cause the bait to run a little shallower if that's what you need.
- The bait is super buoyant, so it'll float itself out of trouble pretty easily.

## Applications

- Ideal for stained or muddy water
- Largemouth or smallmouth
- High pressure situations
- Mid-range depths
- Stump rows and brush
- Rocks
- Clipping grass tops

### >> SHALLOW DIVER

The Jabber Jaw Deep is built from the same blueprint (minus the larger, thicker bill) as the original Jabber Jaw, a 9/16-ounce squarebill designed for use in water 3-5 feet deep. The shallow diver is available in more colors (18) for a dollar less (\$11.99).

## HITS & MISSES

- + Oscillating bill design
- + Hard thumping action
- + Unique ticking sound
- + Clip-on line tie
- + Buoyancy
- + Large Profile
- + Premium finishes
- + High-quality hooks
- Price point
- Tends to tumble when cast into wind

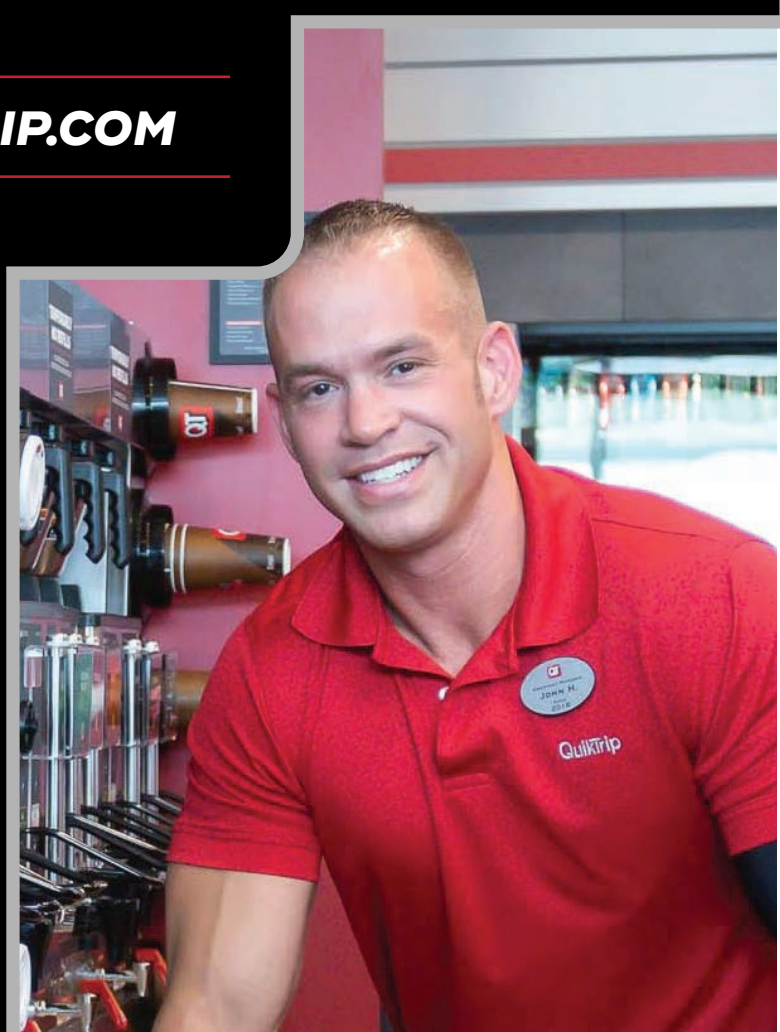
## DETAILS

**Colors:** 12  
**Weight:** 5/8 ounce  
**Length:** 2 3/8 inches  
**Depth Range:** 7-9 feet  
**Hooks:** No. 4 VMC black nickel  
**Lip:** Anodized stainless steel  
**Rattle Chamber:** No  
**Weight Chamber:** Yes  
**MSRP:** \$12.99  
**Contact:** [13fishing.com](https://13fishing.com) ■



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# THE NEXT GREAT FINESSE TECHNIQUE YOU (PROBABLY) HAVEN'T HEARD OF

*HOVER STROLLING IS THE NEXT RIG YOU NEED  
TO ADD TO YOUR BASS-CATCHING ARSENAL*

*By Sean Ostruszka*  
PHOTO BY BRANDON ROWAN

**W**hen it comes to odd finesse techniques, it's hard to beat what comes out of Japan. Drop-shots, wacky rigs, spybaits, flick shakes, Tokyo/J-rigs and plenty more all got their start overseas and found their way to North America with varying degrees of popularity among hardcore bassers.

We shared another new phenomenon - the Inu rig - in a recent issue of this very magazine that Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit ace Matthew Stefan detailed on his YouTube channel as the rig was seemingly gaining massive steam in the bass fishing community.

Stefan recently dropped a video about another rig that seems to have originated from Japan; one that has quietly been adopted with great success with the northern contingent of anglers looking for the next great finesse technique for clear water and suspended fish: hover strolling.

More than likely, you haven't heard of hover strolling before (unless you're one of the many pros who hope to keep the technique a closely guarded secret), but according to Stefan, it's a technique that, in the next year or two, is going to become a household name up there with the drop-shot and the wacky rig.

But what exactly is hover strolling? Why haven't you heard of it before and why is it about to blow up?

Let's dig in.

# WHAT YOU NEED

- Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flat Worm 4.25"
- No. 1 hook w/ 90-degree bend
- 1/32- to 3/32-ounce tungsten nail weight



## HOVER STROLLING 101

No technique catches more fish on the fall than a wacky rig. One could argue punching/flipping might, but even then, the fish often eat a flipping bait or punch setup once it's hit bottom – not to mention that those aren't exactly finesse techniques intended to target sheer numbers like the wacky rig can do.

When it comes to finesse fishing, the fall is key. It's what makes a wacky rig so deadly. That slow fall showcases an easy meal subtly quivering right in a fish's face as it drops through the water column.

Now imagine being able to replicate that tantalizing, slow fall but with a side-to-side, lazy gliding motion (which some might say looks more realistic to a bass) and to be able to fish a bait with that action in even deeper water than a wacky rig.

That's what hover strolling can do, and it's especially catching on as a bait to target suspended bass.

But what exactly does a hover strolling setup look like? Glad you asked.

In essence, hover strolling is a unique way to rig and fish a finesse worm or small soft-plastic minnow (though it can certainly be adapted to even bigger soft plastics if the situation calls for it).

With the right rigging and setup, Stefan can use the lure in several different ways.

"I can fish it vertically, but what I really like to do is cast it and let it fall to suspended fish," Stefan says. "If you pick the right weight, it'll have this slow, methodical fall the fish are not used to seeing. It just looks so natural because the weight is not solely in the head like if you used a jig head. The nail weight and the rigging allow it to actually swim."

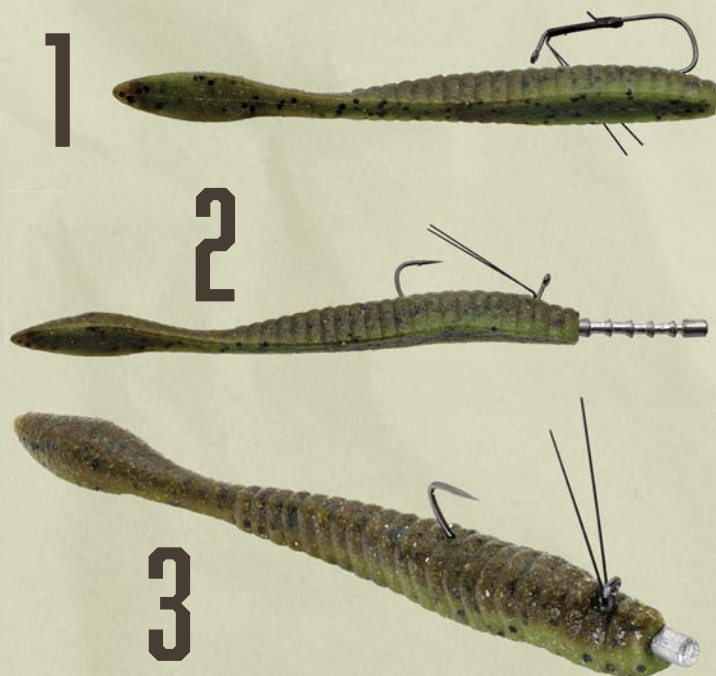
The key to a proper presentation is using the right weight so the bait doesn't just sink straight down, and to engage the reel and tight-line/pendulum it down to the bottom without ever reeling. That combo creates the seductive fall bass are proving to find irresistible.

Once it does hit the bottom, a hover strolling rig takes on a new action. Stefan slowly reels it straight back along the bottom like he would a swimbait, with the subtle tail of a finesse worm like the Berkley Powerbait MaxScent Flat Worm quivering on the retrieve. What really makes it great, though, is that by keeping a little bit of the nail weight protruding out the front, the bait creates a clicking noise when it comes in contact with rocks or hard structure for an added attraction.



Hover strolling allows anglers like Matt Stefan to mimic the action of a wacky rig in deeper water.





1. It all starts with the hook, which is usually a No. 1 hook with a 90-degree bend similar to what's used when pouring finesse jigs. Instead of threading the worm on the hook through the nose, you actually insert the hook point through the top about a quarter inch back from the nose. When it's done, it looks similar to a tube, with the bait threaded on the hook and the eyelet sticking out the top.

2. From there, you insert a 1/32- to 3/32-ounce tungsten nail weight right into the nose, leaving a little bit of the weight extending out in front of the nose (this point comes into play later).

3. That's it. Don't be fooled, though: This simple-looking configuration actually packs quite a bit of versatility when paired with the right setup. Stefan likes a 7-foot, 6-inch medium-light MHX SJ9000 for extra distance on the casts, and an Abu Garcia MG Extreme spooled with 10-pound-test Berkley x9 braid to a 6-pound-test Berkley 100% Fluorocarbon leader.

## DIVING DEEPER

You know what hover strolling is now, but the question remains: Why haven't you heard of it before?

Stefan feels the reasons are two-fold.

First, anglers in the Midwest and who employ hover strolling on northern fisheries have been trying to keep it quiet, as it's so deadly for catching fish in gin-clear water and/or fish that are heavily pressured.

The second is the hook. Prior to the recent release of hooks designed solely for the technique (like the Ryugi Hover Shot Hook and the Decoy jig and worm Hover Shot hooks), anglers simply were unable to buy the right hook to assemble the rig unless they wanted to buy them in bulk from jig-making product suppliers.

Now that the cat has started poking its head out of the bag, though, and the specialty hooks are now accessible to anyone, Stefan is convinced hover strolling is set to really become a deadly addition to many pros' arsenals soon.

Which only leaves the last question of when to use the best-kept secret fighting its way to the mainstream.

"I use it in the same circumstances as hair jig," Stefan explains. "I'm talking super-clear water for fish that have seen everything – or after a cold front.

"The hair jig is typically better fishing in 6 feet or less on shallow flats. Hover strolling works great on flats, too, but if it's too shallow, you don't get the advantage of the fall, so I tend to fish it more in the 10- to 20-foot range. I'll even fish it in 30 feet if the fish are suspended."

Of course, the more Stefan plays with it, the more ways he finds to use a hover strolling rig, such as snapping it off the bottom on flats like a tube (after all, it's rigged in a similar manner), which creates a truly tantalizing offering as it quickly snaps off the bottom and then "hovers" its way back down.

And it's no surprise the technique is a killer for small-mouth fishing, which is why so many northern anglers have adopted it. That said, Stefan has used it on a number of spotted bass fisheries like Lanier, Lewis Smith and others, and he says the results can be staggering.

And if you wonder if largemouth like it, too, remember the technique was pioneered in Japan, where largemouth dominate. Big green fish like it in the same way they like a wacky rig – maybe even more.

***"The hair jig is typically better fishing in 6 feet or less on shallow flats. Hover strolling works great on flats, too, but if it's too shallow, you don't get the advantage of the fall, so I tend to fish it more in the 10- to 20-foot range. I'll even fish it in 30 feet if the fish are suspended."***

Will hover strolling be a dominant tournament technique sooner than later? That's a question that can't yet be answered without a crystal ball or a time machine. Stefan sure feels it will, as it's far more practical than new finesse offerings like the Inu rig, especially with forward-facing sonar allowing for increased precision to place your bait. It's just a matter of whether anglers will give it a try or if it will be pigeonholed with the likes of the Damiki rig or even ice-fishing jigs used for vertical fishing. ■

## 1 GOOGAN SQUAD FILTHY FROGS

\$8.99 | [googansquad.com](http://googansquad.com)

Googan Squad didn't break the mold when they created the Filthy Frog and Poppin' Filthy Frog lineup. All they did was construct a couple incredibly effective, durable and eminently castable frogs that flat-out catch big bass.

Designed with all the features bass anglers have come to need (and love) from their topwater frog offerings, the Filthy Frog lineup is highlighted by a heavy internal weighting system that allows for massive casting distance without sacrificing buoyancy. Each frog is sealed water-tight to ensure proper balance when dragged over mats or walked or popped in sparse grass, and the narrow profile is perfect for being worked through heavy cover without picking up slop on the retrieve.

Available in seven colors for each model, there's no reason not to add the Filthy Frog lineup to your frog arsenal.



bone



nightclub

## 2 SPRO BRONZEYE BLADE FROG

\$12.50 | [spro.com](http://spro.com)

Fishing around grass mats and submergent vegetation often means multiple rods on the deck for various scenarios: thick cheese, sparse hydrilla, laydowns, overhanging trees and the like. With the SPRO Bronzeye 65 Blade Frog, there's really only one bait you need for each situation.

A pair of Colorado blades on the back (in place of traditional rubber skirts) make the bait perfect for swimming along grass edges and overtop of submerged vegetation with an added flash to mimic an injured or dying baitfish, giving anglers the ability to cover a lot of water at a faster pace. The Blade Frog also punches above its weight class in heavy cover – just as the traditional Bronzeye frog has done for years.

The Blade Frog comes in 14 great colors.



clown



flamingo

## 3 13 FISHING POWER SLIDE PENCIL POPPER

\$13.99 | [13fishing.com](http://13fishing.com)

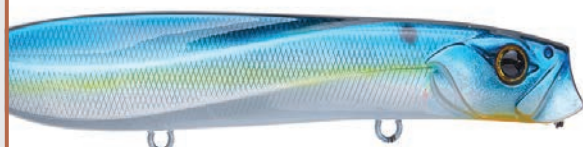
The 13 Fishing Power Slide – a big topwater walker – is designed for maximum disruption and magnum-sized fish.

The 4.75-inch, 7/8-ounce walker creates a huge surface disturbance with its cupped mouth and sculpted gill plates (displacing tons of water with each twitch) and calls fish up from the depths with a one-knocker chamber that makes the Power Slide sound like a machine gun beneath the surface. Equally well suited for schooling fish and target-specific casts, the Power Slide also features a weighted tail that allows for massive casting distance in open water and easy accuracy when it matters most.

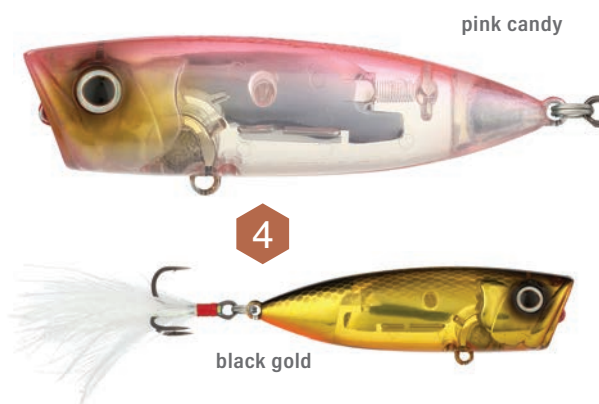
The Power Slide comes equipped with three premium VMC trebles and is available in 12 high-definition finishes.



chrome



stunner



4

## SHIMANO WORLD POP 69F FLASH BOOST

\$19.99 | [tacklewarehouse.com](https://tacklewarehouse.com)

Shimano may have struck gold with its proprietary Flash Boost technology. Equipped with internal springs that suspend pieces of foil inside the bait body, the World Pop 69F (along with various other baits like a jerkbait and crankbait) is designed to mimic wounded baitfish in ways no other bait can.

As the World Pop 69F is popped, twitched and paused, the suspended foil inside the translucent bait wobbles from side to side, emitting a “flash” as light bounces off the shiny surface. The strobing effect is different than anything else on the market and gives bass a new look at a bait category as old as bass fishing itself.

Shimano also incorporated its “Scale Boost” technology into the World Pop – a fancy way of saying it’s got high-definition translucent finishes that look ultra-realistic and allow the Flash Boost to do its thing so you can do yours.



5

## BILL LEWIS STUTTERSTEP

\$8.79-\$11.19 | [rat-l-trap.com](https://rat-l-trap.com)

The Bill Lewis Stutterstep isn’t a new bait, but we’d be remiss to not mention it in a spread about topwaters worth owning. The Stutterstep is designed to walk 90 degrees back and forth, meaning anglers can keep it in the strike zone nearly indefinitely.

In addition, the Stutterstep can be fished akin to a buzzbait with a medium retrieve with little to no rod action that makes the bait “wobble-wake” back to the boat, or in more traditional ways like a standard walk-the-dog retrieve for covering water around schooling fish.

At 5 inches long and 1 ounce in weight for the magnum size and 4 inches (5/8 ounces) for the standard, the Stutterstep also casts better than you might expect given its boomerang shape and comes in 14 colors options.



6

## BAGLEY Balsa WAKE 1

\$9.99 | [bagleybait.com](https://bagleybait.com)

Wake baits have boomed in popularity in recent years as anglers look for new ways to give shallow fish something a little different to look at.

Bagley recent got on board with a new wake bait offering that’s right in line with what the company is known for – balsa performance at a plastic price. Part of the reason for the Balsa Wake 1’s high durability marks is its Heat Compression molding process and wire-through design, which makes the bait more rugged and easier to cast than many traditional balsa baits.

If you’re looking for a subsurface topwater that can cover water, deflect off shallow cover and remain intact long enough to catch piles of fish, the Balsa Wake 1 is worth a serious look. ■



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**G3**

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## BULLY DOG BDX PERFORMANCE PROGRAMMER

By Britt Myers  
PHOTOS BY BRANDON ROWAN

**A**s a full-time major-tour-level bass angler since 2006, you probably (correctly) assume that I pay close attention to the performance of my boat. But it might surprise you that I spend at least as much time and attention on the performance of my tow rig.

The Bully Dog BDX Performance Programmer is a piece of performance technology that I've relied on for several years while driving my tow rig all over the country. Even if you aren't putting the miles and time on your rig that I do on the Bass Pro Tour - maybe you just want to get the most out of your vehicle in these times of skyrocketing gas prices - this programmer is worth a look.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

As the co-owner of a full-service shop in North Carolina that specializes in after-market customization of trucks - CM Motorsports in Gastonia - I'm extremely familiar with Bully Dog's products, because we've sold them for years.

■ The simple first step for anglers interested in this programmer is to jump on the Bully Dog website ([bullydog.com](http://bullydog.com)) and find out if the BDX Performance Programmer will work with their specific vehicle. All you have to do is type in the year, make, model and engine and the website will list all of the Bully Dog products available for that rig.

■ Right out of the gate it was obvious that Bully Dog did a great job with the BDX Performance Programmer in designing a sleek, user-friendly product that's simple to understand and use. It features a bright, easy-to-read, full-color display and simple gauges and readouts.

## IN ACTION

While you can always have a Bully Dog dealer help you connect and utilize this programmer, it's very simple to connect it yourself. There's a port underneath your dashboard (about where your knees are) called an OBD-2 connector – you plug the BDX Performance Programmer right into that connector and it goes to work analyzing your vehicle's systems. It's that simple.

Once the programmer has taken its readings, you can unplug it and start to assess any performance adjustments it suggests on the easy-to-read digital display. If you feel like making any changes to your vehicle's settings, you can simply do that on the device without having to plug it back in since it's connected with its own built-in WiFi.

■ **More power, more torque:** The quick explanation of the BDX Performance Programmer's function is that it reconfigures all kinds of things in your truck's computer (shift points, for example) to produce more horsepower and torque than you've ever had before. It almost feels like you're driving a new, better version of your vehicle.

■ **Improved gas mileage:** I've found that the BDX Performance Programmer helps tremendously with my fuel mileage by maximizing the performance of my powertrain. With gas prices being what they are right now, this is a no-brainer purchase if you're looking to get the most bang for your buck.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The Bully Dog BDX Performance Programmer is priced at \$419.00, and in my opinion, it's worth every penny. Its simplicity, ease of use and functionality in improving your vehicle's performance makes this an easy recommendation from me to anybody who's looking to tow anything with a truck or SUV.

You don't have to be a mechanic to use this programmer, but you'll sure feel like one when your truck performs better.

## PERFORMANCE TIPS

■ Bully Dog has tremendous, responsive tech support. If you ever have an issue with any product (or just aren't quite comprehending some of the options offered by the BDX Performance Programmer), Bully Dog tech support is notoriously on the ball at helping you find a solution.

■ I like to keep the handheld display within eyesight while I'm driving to keep a real-time readout of all the systems in my truck while I'm towing a boat. I use the BDX Performance Programmer as a tuner and a monitor so I can always be aware of things like horsepower, fuel economy, etc.

■ This programmer is also a wizard at reading and clearing your vehicles Diagnostic Trouble Codes (DTCs) with ease.

## HITS

- ✓ Easy installation/connection
- ✓ Easy to read and understand
- ✓ Built-in WiFi
- ✓ Unlocks more torque
- ✓ Unlocks more horsepower
- ✓ Responsive tech support
- ✓ Improves gas mileage
- ✓ Complies with Clean Air Act

## MISSES

- Not available for all vehicles

## DETAILS

**Models:** Fits multiple vehicles

**MSRP:** \$419.00

**Contact:** bullydog.com



## THRUSTER THROTTLE ENHANCEMENT DEVICE

This probably seems like an innocuous-looking device, but the Bully Dog Thruster Throttle Enhancement Device is a great little after-market addition that helps give you a boost in acceleration and throttle responsiveness when you need it.

■ This easy-to-install device goes inline between your vehicle's pedal position sensor and the vehicle's wiring harness.

■ The Thruster increases or decreases throttle response to perfectly fit your unique acceleration needs.

■ Adjustments to your throttle response can be made on the fly while you're driving, via a control knob that can be adjusted between one and 100 percent.

## HITS

- ✓ Reduces throttle lag time
- ✓ Increases vehicle acceleration
- ✓ Adjust on the fly while you're driving
- ✓ Waterproof
- ✓ Works on off-road vehicles
- ✓ OEM quality connectors
- ✓ \$299.00 price point

## MISSES

- Not available for all vehicles ■

(After a forward-facing sonar Q&A session...)  
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# TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE





## TANK CITY, U.S.A.

**L**ake Guntersville, like most every fishery in the county (and particularly like many of the Tennessee River fisheries it's connected to), has had its ebbs and flows – periods of immense fertility followed by years-long stretches of low tournament weights and bass anglers scratching their heads over once-productive areas going as barren as the Dead Sea. For every valley, though, there is invariably a peak soon to follow. For Guntersville, the valley is once again in the rear view.

As many pros on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit commented when they visited Guntersville in May, the Alabama big-bass factory is back on the rise after a few years of change (due in large part to removal of natural aquatic vegetation – intentionally or otherwise – and the proliferation of new grass species like eelgrass). Weights are up, tournament anglers are happy and Guntersville is back to making the list of best bass lakes in the country.

Ask Nick LeBrun and he'll certainly tell you how great Guntersville is. The Bossier City, Louisiana, pro and former All-American winner earned his first Pro Circuit win there in that mid-May event with 81 pounds, 10 ounces over four days, including two bags that neared the 23-pound mark. On the final day – a day that saw LeBrun hoist a big trophy and a \$100,000 check – he got the big bites he needed and the ones Guntersville is known for, like the tank pictured here, to assemble a limit of 22-15 and a 2-6 margin of victory over rookie Nick Hatfield.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA





## LIGHT TRAFFIC AT THE LOCK

---

**S**ometimes the “out of the way” spot isn’t out of the way at all. Just ask Alabama pro Justin Lucas, who parked his Phoenix on the northeast wall of the lock at Watts Bar Dam during Day 2 of Bass Pro Tour Stage Five on Watts Bar Lake.

With over 770 miles of shoreline, ample docks and an almost limitless number of offshore breaks and ledges to choose from on this impoundment of the Tennessee River, the 2,900-foot dam sticks out like a painfully obvious sore thumb on a Watts Bar fishery that most of the Bass Pro Tour field had never competed on prior to this early June event. But even though Alabama pro Ryan Salzman would eventually win the event along the face of the dam (less than 300 yards away from the lock), the six-day competition saw surprisingly few boats spending much time on the dam. Especially the lock: Lucas was the only angler that MLF photographers spotted there all week, quietly casting a drop-shot along the south/southwest corner, in front of the lock gates.

“It was super deep in there except right in front of the gates,” Lucas said. “(I was just fishing) manmade structure: concrete.”

It paid off pretty well for Lucas early in the week. He flirted with the lead fishing the lock the morning we pulled up on him here, and would eventually finish eighth in his qualifying group thanks in part to the fish he caught in two days parked along the lock wall.

PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

# LiFePO<sub>4</sub> trolling motor batteries

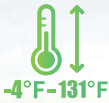
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**Headwaters Lake, Kenansville Lake, Garcia Reservoir, Stick Marsh**

*Aired May 21-June 5*

Throughout the (ongoing) course of a three-year run of excellence that very few anglers have enjoyed in the history of the sport, MLF pro Jacob Wheeler has won events in just about every conceivable fashion. The Tennessee pro has enjoyed a handful of blowout wins and has survived a couple last-minute charges by various anglers while racking up multiple MLF victories, but until the final day of competition at the 2022 Summit Cup, he hadn't pulled off a "buzzer beater."

Wheeler beat the buzzer (and Bryan Thrift) with his last scorable largemouth in the Championship Round on the legendary Stick Marsh, though, catching a 2-pound, 1 ounce

fish in the final two minutes to skate past Thrift for a 6-ounce win (50-6 to 50-0). Wheeler subscribed to "Florida 101" techniques to capture the Summit Cup trophy: He flipped and punched creature baits with a 2-ounce tungsten weight, connecting with 21 fish on the final day.

In doing so, Wheeler became the only MLF pro with four Cup wins to his credit (to add to his astounding five Bass Pro Tour wins).

**2. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. WESTERN DIVISION**  
**California Delta**

*June 1-3*

A bag of 24-11 got Stephen "Bub" Tosh Jr. off to a hot start in the Western Division finale and allowed the longtime Delta hammer the breathing room he needed to go to work on the final two days, weighing in limits of 16-6 and 17-15 to tally 59

pounds for the tournament to best Lane Olson by more than 4 pounds.

Tosh relied on both old-school baits and modern staples to get the job done, alternating between a Paycheck Baits Transporter Frog, a Paycheck Baits Punch Skirt, a ChatterBait, wacky-rigged stick bait and a Lobina Rico Popper. While he didn't weigh in any true California giants throughout the event, Tosh's best bags were anchored by multiple 5- and 6-pounders that ultimately netted the prolific vet a \$25,604 payday to push his total earnings with MLF over the \$230,000 mark.

**3. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE ALL-AMERICAN**  
**Lake Hamilton**

*June 2-4*

To win a Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American is a dream for

many. To win one going away, as Connor Cunningham did at the start of June, goes well beyond the stuff of fantasy. Cunningham went wire-to-wire to earn the most prestigious hardware in grassroots bass fishing and a \$120,000 check, besting second-place finisher Hunter Eubanks by 11 pounds, 11 ounces and finishing nearly 18 pounds ahead of 10th.

On Lake Hamilton, two schools of thought often prevail: fishing deep brush piles and targeting shallow docks and other structure and cover up shallow. While much of the field probed the depths in the June Arkansas heat, Cunningham caught almost all his fish up shallow on a River2Sea Whopper Plopper 110. To find the winning fish, Cunningham bounced around between 30 to 40 spots below the Highway 270 bridge, often cutting his day short after filling out his limit to allow his co-anglers a chance at theirs on brush piles in deeper water.

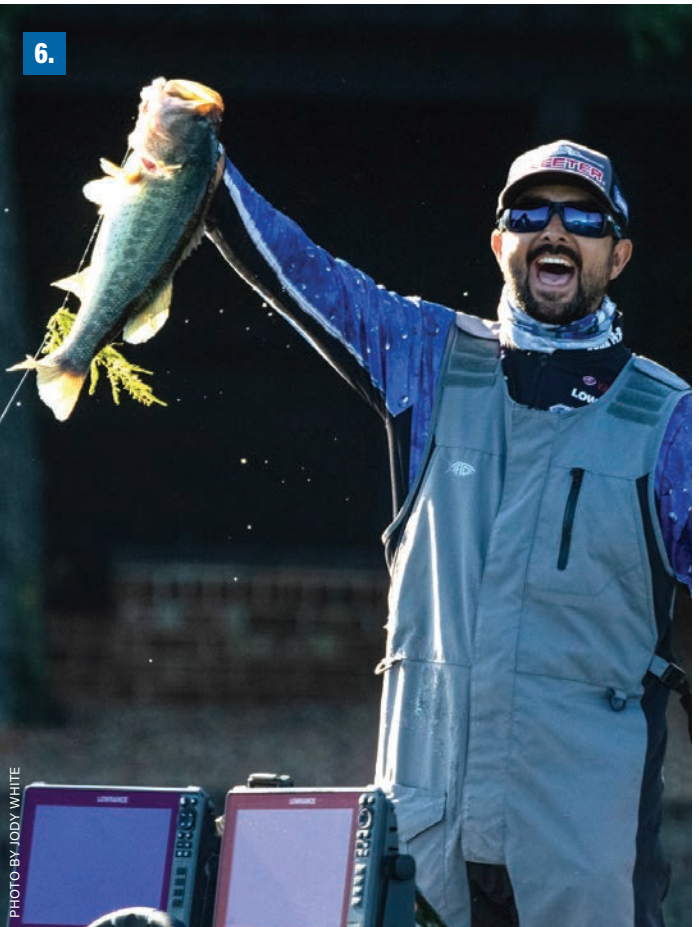


4.



5.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



6.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

#### 4. ABU GARCIA COLLEGE FISHING PRESENTED BY YETI WILEY X COLLEGE FACEOFF Smith Mountain Lake

June 4

The catch, weigh, immediate-release format of the Wiley X College Faceoff series meant the winning team of Ruth Caudle, Alex Moss, Kent Clark and Jackson Norton of Radford University had to make some adjustments on the fly and key in on some high-percentage areas to catch their 15 bass for 30-14 at Smith Mountain Lake. To do so, the eventual winners utilized topwater baits up shallow to target bass feeding on shad spawns in the morning before switching to drop-shots around docks to finish out the day.

That approach clearly worked, as the Radford crew edged out the King University team of Tyler Altzer, Dylan Thomson and Jacob Lovell,

who combined for 13 bass for 27-13. Teams from Western Michigan (24-15), Virginia Tech (24-9) and Penn State (8-7), respectively, rounded out the rest of the field.

#### 5. BASS PRO TOUR GENERAL TIRE STAGE FIVE PRESENTED BY COVERCRAFT Watts Bar Lake

June 4-9

It's extremely rare that a tour-level bass tournament is won in a 150-yard stretch of water. It's even more rare when that feat is accomplished on a fishery with 770 miles of shoreline and an immeasurable number of ledges, drains and other offshore structure to target. None of that seemed to matter to Bass Pro Tour rookie Ryan Salzman as he doggedly stuck to a small section of Watts Bar Dam for four competition days en route to the biggest win of his young career.

Tapping into a wealth of dam-fishing knowledge that he's collected over the years while guiding on Guntersville and fishing other impoundments of the Tennessee River through college, Salzman methodically plinked away at bass hovering just off the high side of Watts Bar Dam, working his way through qualifying days and the Knockout Round and eventually holding off Jacob Wheeler by 11 ounces on the final day to secure the win.

Salzman leaned on a 4.5-inch Roboworm Straight Worm in morning dawn and trio of small swimbaits to catch the majority of his 40 scorable bass, alternating between a drop-shot and a 1/8-ounce jig head, depending on the depth and strength of the current.

He made hay when water managers upped the flow of water through the dam, catching fish in flurries when increased current kick-started the bite.

#### 6. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT PRESENTED BY FUEL ME TOYOTA STOP 5 PRESENTED BY POWERSTOP BRAKES

James River

June 16-19

For five weeks in May and June, Nick LeBrun might have been the best bass angler on the planet. It's hard enough to win a tournament against 150-plus other touring professionals, but to do it twice – first at Guntersville and then again in back-to-back tour stops at the James River – is a feat we've witnessed just twice before on the Pro Circuit. Even more impressive, LeBrun's two wins came on vastly different fisheries in a Tennessee River reservoir and a tidal river system, showcasing his versatility and proving the fourth-year pro is really coming into his own.

The Bossier City, Louisiana, pro admitted it was the most stressful



tournament he'd ever fished, given the long runs he made each day on a fishery he'd never competed on before. Figuring out the tidal timing on the fly, LeBrun focused on a stretch in the Chickahominy River with a current seam that ran around and through some docks and cypress trees. There, he rotated through a few different squarebill crankbaits and a wacky-rigged 5-inch V&M Chopstick to sack up 47-11 over the first three days and 17-9 on Day 4 to edge out fellow fourth-year pro Dakota Ebare by 1 pound, 4 ounces.

**7. HIGH SCHOOL FISHING PRESENTED BY FAVORITE FISHING NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP Pickwick Lake**

June 22-24

Fallon Clepper and Wyatt Ford jumped out to an early lead over the 416-boat field in the High School

Bass Fishing National Championship and never relinquished control, going wire-to-wire for the win despite entering the final day of competition with just a 1-ounce lead over New Hampshire's Keene High School team of Bradyn Antosiewicz and Connor Holbrook (who went on to finish in second place).

The Montgomery, Texas, duo boated 12 pounds, 14 ounces on the final day at Pickwick (limits were capped at three fish for the event), anchored by the second-largest bass weighed during the tournament – a 7-8 caught by Ford on a Zoom Trick Worm – that sealed the deal and, along with Clepper's couple keepers, gave them a margin of victory of more than 5 pounds.

With the win, Clepper became the first female angler to win the National Championship and Clepper and Ford were presented with more than \$250,000 in scholarship offers and a set of the most prestigious trophies in high school fishing.

**8. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. NORTHERN DIVISION Potomac River**

June 23-25

The final day of a tournament featuring nearly 200 boats with a \$44,000 check on the line is a pretty good day to catch the largest bag of the event. Just ask Harry Linsinbiger IV, who rallied from sixth to first on Day 3 at the Potomac with a limit of 20-14 to top Robert Henderson by just 13 ounces for his first win in MLF competition.

It was only Linsinbiger's second Toyota Series event from the front of the boat, previously fishing a handful of seasons in the Phoenix Bass Fishing League and two prior seasons in the Series as a co-Angler. He felt he was ready to step up to the front deck in 2022, and a win at the Potomac – far from his home in Dover, Florida – only confirms that.

To earn the win, Linsinbiger spent his time around Chicamuxen, Mattawoman and Quantico Creeks fishing a mix of eelgrass and hydrilla on the outside edges of a big flat while everyone else who joined him in the area was fishing further back in the creek. At that spot, Linsinbiger employed a frog, a swim jig and a Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer to catch his fish, which "grew up" on the final day as the water dropped from high tide and he boxed 19 pounds in the first two hours of the day.

Linsinbiger found himself in 46th place after Day 1 with 14-11, and his rally on Day 2 was thanks in big part to simply crossing paths with better quality on the outside edges of his grass flats. But on Day 3, it was hard for Linsinbiger to avoid the right fish – he boated a 4 1/2-pounder and a pair of 4-pounders after having not caught a fish of that size class the prior two days. ■

PHOTO BY COBI PELLENTI

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By Mason Prince

# CAYUGA LAKE

The Bass Pro Tour takes on this unique fishery in August

**F**orty miles west of Syracuse, New York, sits a 42,502-acre lake that will play host to 80 of the best bass fishermen in the world: Cayuga Lake, the venue for the sixth stop on the 2022 Bass Pro Tour. This natural lake is the second largest of the New York Finger Lakes, extending over 38 miles in length, with an average width of just 1.75 miles. With a healthy mix of both largemouth and smallmouth, this fishery should see a plethora of fish catches when the Bass Pro Tour gets there in mid-August.

## CAYUGA AT A GLANCE

Casey Smith is a Phoenix Bass Fishing League angler with a win on Cayuga Lake to his credit just a year ago. The New York native spends his time relaxing on Cayuga with his family when he's not fishing, so you could say this Finger Lake is in his wheelhouse. Smith believes anglers new to Cayuga are frequently impressed with the size, but that the fishery's size can be deceiving.

"It's a big fishery, but there's not a ton of fishable water because of the massive drop-off in depth in the middle of the lake," Smith says. "The north end is where a lot of the fishable water can be found, but once you get about 6 miles south of there, it turns into a rim lake."

Reaching depths of over 430 feet in some places on the main lake, the drop-off is dramatic. Consequently, there's not a lot of natural structure or cover to be found in a large majority of the lake, which means that the cover that exists draws ample attention.

"The limited cover and structure you find on Cayuga is going to be loaded with fish," Smith says. "That's going to cause a lot of anglers to share areas with other guys just because there's not enough of that stuff to go around."

## A GRASP ON CAYUGA'S GRASS

With the cover being so limited on Cayuga, the main thing to look for when fishing for largemouth is shallow grass (which will be diminishing by the middle of August). When Smith won his BFL back in August of 2021, he was able to capitalize on isolated grass patches that were left after much of the other grass had died off. While he was the only one who

ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON HOWAN

really figured out that pattern in the BFL, Smith feels the Bass Pro Tour field will zone in on the best grass quickly.

"Certain types of grass are going to die off in mid-August on the north end of the lake," Smith explains. "A lot of fish were just sucked into that grass and hiding out (in the BFL), but the BPT guys are going to figure that pattern out pretty quickly and this lake will fish small."

That north end of the lake with the bulk of the grass covers about 5,800 acres, just about 14 percent of the total lake area

## THE GOBY INFLUENCE

Kevin VanDam, a previous winner on Cayuga in the summer of 2016, agrees that grass is the key to finding largemouth, but also notes the influence of zebra mussels and goby on the fishery.

"The north end is relatively shallow, has a lot of weeds and holds a lot of largemouth," VanDam says. "The zebra mussels really clear up the water and the goby population has really boomed. Because of that, the size of all the fish in the lake has gotten a big bump."

The goby influx into Cayuga is a recent development. This baitfish – which most likely migrated through rivers and streams connecting the Great Lakes and Finger Lakes – has caused the weights of both largemouth and smallmouth to boom in size, leading to the state record smallmouth being caught out of Cayuga in the middle of June. That smallmouth weighed in at a whopping 8 pounds, 5.8 ounces, beating the previous record by nearly 2 ounces.

The goby population is healthy and thriving, and both smallmouth and largemouth are taking advantage.

"It seems like the largemouth fishing is so good right now because the amount of goby in the lake," Smith says. "The largemouth feed on gobies as well as perch and bluegill. Smallmouth eat tons of gobies. They spit up gobies all the time when you catch them. I wouldn't be surprised if largemouth are fattening up on gobies as well because you can find gobies in shallow water as well as deep water."



MLF pro Jacob Wheeler fished a grassy stretch of Cayuga Lake during the 2020 Heritage Cup.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



Bass in Cayuga Lake are growing larger thanks to a recent influx of the invasive round goby.

PHOTO BY ERIC ENGBREITSON

## LARGEMOUTH IN ABUNDANCE, SMALLMOUTH INCREASING

While largemouth are the most prolific bass species in Cayuga, the smallmouth population is on the rise, making brown fish more of a player for tournaments.

"This lake is loaded with big largemouth, as they're the predominant species here, but there's more smallmouth here every year," Smith says. "Last year in mid-August there were a ton of smallmouth caught. I think that will be the case again this year, but I don't think anyone can win here just catching smallmouth."

VanDam believes there are benefits to catching both species, and he says

that either brown or green fish could help one of the Bass Pro Tour pros leave the Finger Lakes with \$100,000 and a spiffy new red-and-silver trophy. It just depends on which angler fishes to his individual strengths the best.

"I think both smallmouth and largemouth are going to play," VanDam predicts. "A Fred Roumbanis or an Ish Monroe type of guy will probably fish shallow with a frog for those largemouth on the north end. On the flip-side, a guy like Adrian Avena will probably be offshore drop-shotting for smallmouth on the rim of the main lake. Both smallmouth and largemouth will be grouped up in mid-August, so you could really go after either and find the numbers you need to compete." ■

# PROFILE: CHRISTIAN GREICO

TAMPA, FLORIDA



At just 23 years old, Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit rookie Christian Greico has already done something many touring professionals haven't done: win a major tournament. The Tampa, Florida, native took the top spot in his second professional event, which happened to be on a fishery in the Sunshine State, with which he already had some familiarity.

But stepping outside his comfort zone – Florida, to be more specific – Greico is learning how to compete on new fisheries and studying what it means to tour the country in search of big bass on big bodies of water he's never seen before.

Just days before Greico claimed eighth place at the Potomac River in the first event of the Toyota Series Northern Division season, we caught up with the Toyota Series Southern Division Angler of the Year to answer some questions about fishing, food and life on the Pro Circuit.

## Q&A

By Justin Onslow

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

**Let's start with the medicine before we get to the sugar. You're coming off a pretty tough event at the James River. Have you had time to think about it and dissect your performance?**

Just a little bit. We came to the Potomac (Toyota Series event) so quick that I kind of didn't think about it too much, just trying to move forward from it. I felt like I was doing the right thing. I just didn't run into the right size in the tournament. I looked back and saw what a lot of the guys were doing and I was doing the same general thing. It wasn't that I didn't fish well or didn't have areas to go to. I just didn't connect with the right ones.

**It's your rookie season fishing a major circuit against a lot of guys who have experience all over the country – rivers, lakes, tidal fisheries – and obviously there's a learning curve. It's all about time on the water.**

Yes, absolutely. That's part of the reason I jumped into the Northern (division). I don't have that much experience outside of Florida, so it's another way for me to get more experience.

**Why'd you pick the Northerns? Was it just a timing thing?**

Two of the events are basically right after Pro Circuit events nearby; I could just go to the next event after the Pro

Circuit without having to drive a whole bunch. I don't have much experience up north, so I need learn it, and I'd rather learn through some Toyotas before the Pro Circuit events up here.

**Where's your comfort level at right now in terms of being able to put in time on a new fishery, find the fish and catch them when it matters? Is the confidence still there despite a couple shaky events this season?**

I feel like I've had good practices for all the tournaments. I just haven't been able to put it together during the tournaments. I definitely think I can figure out how to fish outside of Florida and figure out how to catch fish. It's just putting together a game plan.

**Let's talk about one that wasn't shaky at all for you: Harris Chain. Mid-March. A \$100,000 paycheck. Big time for the rookie from Tampa.**

That one, everything went according to plan.

**I don't know what it is about the Harris Chain, but the last two times we've been there for the Pro Circuit, a local rookie has won. Have you talked to Laramy Strickland about that and his win there a couple years ago?**

Not the details of it, but I do talk to Laramy sometimes.

**Did winning early in the season change your mind set at all? I mean, having that financial stability so early in your career has to feel great. Did it take some of the pressure off?**

Financially it did, but as far as fishing, I still have the same outlook going into the rest of the season, just trying to fish as best I can and learn as much as I can. My goal is always to finish as high as I can in each tournament, so that didn't really change.

**What's your process look like for breaking down a new fishery?**

I do a lot of research prior to the event. I like looking back on past tournament results and seeing what kind of weights are caught at certain places, and what kinds of techniques kind of dominate and different seasonal patterns.

I come up with a game plan in my mind and then the first day of practice

just ride around and look for what looks good in my opinion. It usually ends up being stuff I'm comfortable with – shallow stuff, flipping and topwater – and then from there I'll see how that day goes and then branch out to something new the next day if I need to.

**Being a Florida guy, the flipping and topwater is kind of your bread and butter, right?**

Yeah, flipping and frogging. If I can get away with doing that, I can usually do pretty good.

**How do you think you're going to look back on your rookie season when it's all said and done?**

I think I'll look back on it pretty favorably, especially since I was able to win my second event. I definitely can look back and see I needed to gain some more experience outside of Florida and just putting in some more time on other fisheries.

**And that's a good way to keep it in perspective. You're a young guy and have a ton of fishing ahead of you.**

I didn't fish for college, so I didn't get that experience that a lot of guys get fishing the college series and traveling around. All my time during college was really put in in Florida, and I can see the results of that in Florida, but outside of Florida is where I need to put in more time and do some learning.

**Speaking of being a younger, you really seem dialed with the social media game, and especially YouTube. Our readers really need to check out your channel for some quality fishing content.**

Definitely.

**Has coming up with non-tournament content on YouTube changed the way you think about bass fishing? I guess what I mean is, when you're doing a video about gear or knots or a technique in particular, do you find that helps the ideation process for you as a tournament angler?**

I would say no on that one. I just share what I experience and the things I know. It's kind of just stuff I've already done out on the water or things I've had success with.

**How's the YouTube thing going for you? Do you find it a struggle to keep it going during the tournament season? And do you do all that yourself? The editing and everything?**

I do everything but the Pro Circuit events. For the Pro Circuit events I have a camera guy who's been working with me this year. He'll film those and edit those videos, but everything other than the Pro Circuit videos, I film and edit those myself.

**Is that something you've been doing for a while or did you kind of pick it up on a whim and figure it out as you go?**

I started about two years ago doing it. The past year is really when I've gotten into it and started pumping out a bunch of videos. I just saw that that's where the industry is going and knew if I wanted to fish long-term that it's probably something I needed to do, so I started doing it and it's something I actually really enjoy. I started doing it for all the tournaments.

**If you could fish for a day with anyone – literally anyone, bass fisherman, celebrity, whoever – who would you pick?**

That's honestly a really tough question. You could say someone fishing-related, but it'd probably be cool to fish with someone not fishing-related. I really don't know.

**What's your favorite lake you've fished outside of Florida?**

Lake Lanier.

**How about in Florida?**

Hillsborough River.

**I thought you might say the Harris Chain. What's your favorite bait?**

Probably a topwater frog.

**Any frog in particular?**

I mix it up depending on the cover. I don't have one particular favorite one.

**What's your boat snack of choice?**

Beef jerky. I like the sticks rather than the dry jerky.

**Is a hot dog a sandwich?**

I would say no. ■

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# CLEPPER, FORD CLAIM HIGH SCHOOL FISHING NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA

**T**he Bass Federation (TBF) has been putting on the High School Fishing National Championship and World Finals for 13 years, and for the first time ever, a female student angler walked away with the top prize.

Pickwick Lake played host in late June to the 2022 High School Fishing National Championship, which featured 200 boats from student anglers all over the country. With that large of a field on any impoundment of the Tennessee River, it's really anyone's tournament to win. With over 43,000 surface acres and an abundance of options to fish, Pickwick provided the field plenty of room to find productive areas.

But one team found its best spot on Day 1 and didn't stray from there for the rest of the tournament: the winning team of Fallon Clepper and Wyatt Ford.

"We stayed on our juice the entire time," Ford admitted. "That was the only spot we consistently caught fish over 2 pounds, so we figured we would try to win it all and stay there all day."

Ford and Clepper hail from Lake Creek High School in Montgomery, Texas, and led wire-to-wire over the three-day event, totaling nine bass for 39 pounds, 9 ounces (each team was limited to weighing in three keepers per day).

They got off to a stellar start on the first day of competition with 18-8 of largemouth that they boated before lunchtime, but they entered the final day with a scant a 1-ounce lead over second place.

"I was nervous at takeoff," Clepper said. "I thought we were going to get gapped by everybody, but when we got to our spot, there was only one other boat there."

Their winning 12-pound, 14-ounce bag got a massive boost early on the final day when Ford tossed a Zoom Trick Worm on a shaky head onto a ledge. He felt his line tighten and set the hook on what felt like a big one. When he was finally able to bring the bass to the net held by the team's boat captain – Clepper's dad, Julian – the fish revealed itself as a true difference-maker: A 7-8 largemouth, which was the second-biggest fish weighed in during the event.

"I was thinking that we had been here before," Ford said in reference to the team's first fish of the tournament, another 7-plus-pounder. "I knew if we got it in the boat that we might have a shot."

Add two more quality keepers from teammate Clepper, and the Texas duo secured a 5-pound win over New Hampshire's team of Connor Holbrook

and Bradyn Antosiewicz (34-4) on high school bass fishing's biggest stage.

While the championship trophy and accompanying scholarship opportunities represent major achievements for the Texas team, for Clepper, it signifies a first in the history of the sport: The Lake Creek High senior is now the first female to win the High School Fishing National Championship.

Clepper started to develop her passion for fishing at 11 years old with her father, and hopes the win proves to her competitors and other young female anglers that tournament bass fishing is truly a co-ed sport that offers opportunities to both girls and boys.

"I want to see more girls out here getting in it," Clepper said. "Just because a boy says you can't do it doesn't mean you can't. Just keep after them. It doesn't even seem real right now. I feel like I'm in a dream. I've always dreamed of this day and it finally came true."

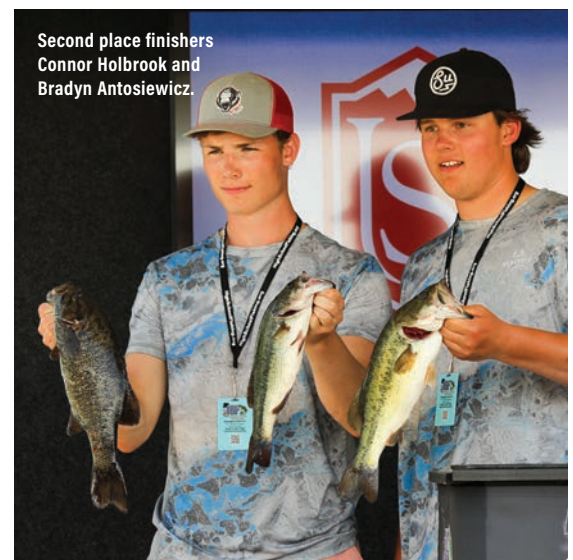
Clepper and Ford started fishing together when their parents, who were childhood friends, reconnected at a meet-the-teacher event during their freshman year.

"I asked (Ford) if he was going to fish," Clepper said. "He said 'yes' and that he didn't have a partner, so we ended up together ever since then."

Three years later, the two fishing-forged friends stood together on stage with one of bass fishing's most famous rivers as a backdrop. At their feet lay massive checks totaling more than \$250,000 in scholarship offers. The two most coveted trophies in high school bass fishing were hoisted above their heads. And in the crowd, a pair of overjoyed parents cheered feverishly for their kids.

## National Championship Top 10 Teams

1. **Fallon Clepper & Wyatt Ford**  
39-9 | Lake Creek High School
2. **Bradyn Antosiewicz & Connor Holbrook**  
34-4 | Keene Blackbirds
3. **Walker Krampitz & Brady Matz**  
32-5 | Owatonna Huskies
4. **Ian Carter & Colby Dark**  
32-3 | NE Louisiana High School
5. **Levi Harris & Zane Roberts**  
31-15 | Fairview Aggies
6. **Walker Larue & Joe Vaulton**  
31-9 | Alcoa High School
7. **Mark Andrew Trant & Noah Trant**  
29-2 | Calvery Baptist Academy
8. **Jackson Betker & Kennrick Kisch**  
28-9 | Osseo Senior High School
9. **Gerald Brumbaugh & Dalton Metzger**  
28-9 | Central Dragons
10. **Grey Allums & Zach Halbert**  
25-9 | Benton High Tigers



## NEWMAN, HATCH WIN HIGH SCHOOL FISHING WORLD FINALS



Newman and Hatch are picture-perfect examples of the “never give up” opportunity of the World Finals. Second Chance Round: While they went fishless for two days during the National Championship, the duo managed to catch three bass for 11-7 in the Second Chance Round, good enough to finish sixth. Thanks to their Top 10 finish that day, they qualified

to fish one more day on Pickwick, with every remaining team’s weight resetting to zero.

Soon after Clepper and Ford won the National Championship, their attention turned to the championship of the TBF High School Fishing World Finals, the culmination of a four-day event that featured more than 400 teams. The Top 10 teams from the National Championship advanced to take on 21 other qualifiers, some from as far away as South Africa, in the one-day final.

The Virginia duo connected with a three-bass limit for the second day in a row, this time for 13-7 – good enough to win the World Finals by more than 2 pounds.

Wes Newman and Kendall Hatch from Virginia came away with the win after catching three bass for 13-7, beating out second-place team Walker Krampitz and Brady Matz from Minnesota by 2-1 for the trophy.

Newman and Hatch earned over \$440,000 in college scholarships, two 6-foot-tall trophies and several other prizes for their win.

The High School Fishing World Finals and National Championship will be back next summer in La Crosse, Wisconsin (June 19-24).

### SAF World Finals Top 10 Teams

1. **Wes Newman & Kendall Hatch**  
13-7 | Chickahominy & Walsingham
2. **Walker Krampitz & Brady Matz**  
11-6 | Owatonna Huskies
3. **Kade Surratt & Hunter Brewer**  
11-5 | Lawrence County Wildcats
4. **Walker Larue & Joe Vaulton**  
10-9 | Alcoa High School
5. **Will Thomas & Michael Arienzo**  
10-7 | Morgan County High School
6. **Elijah Benson & Braedon Hubbard**  
10-0 | Dawson County Tigers
7. **Joel Gentle & Tyler Bryant**  
9-14 | Lake County High School
8. **Landen Dixon & Floyd Weaver Jr.**  
9-9 | Citronell Wildcats
9. **Jake Brown & Preston Kolisek**  
9-7 | Loretto Mustangs
10. **Brendan Vinton & Chase Martin**  
9-3 | Randolph Galloping Ghosts

### ABOUT THE BASS FEDERATION

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

# HIGH SCHOOL STATE CHAMPIONSHIP RESULTS

## CONNECTICUT, MASSACHUSETTS & RHODE ISLAND QUABOAG POND

Jack Houghton & Charlie Hinrichs  
19 pounds, 15 ounces



## NEBRASKA | LEWIS & CLARK LAKE

Matthew Nichols & Ryan Unger  
13 pounds, 10 ounces



## NORTH DAKOTA | LAKE ASHTABULA

Logan Bullinger & Ryan Bullinger  
22 pounds, 7 ounces



## OHIO | OHIO RIVER

Blake Caldwell & Owen Saunders  
6 pounds, 7 ounces



## OREGON | TENMILE LAKE

Shane Long & Sawyer Strong  
19 pounds, 6 ounces



## UTAH | BIG SANDWASH RESERVOIR

Parker Stewart & VT Vogelsberg  
13 pounds, 10 ounces



## WEST VIRGINIA | BURNSVILLE LAKE

Aidan Crockett & Eli Ward  
10 pounds, 8 ounces

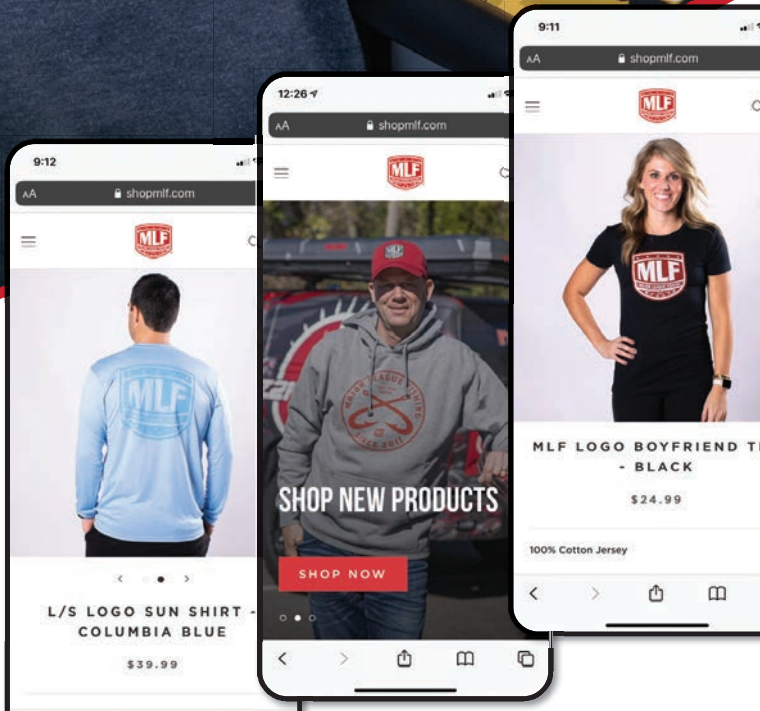


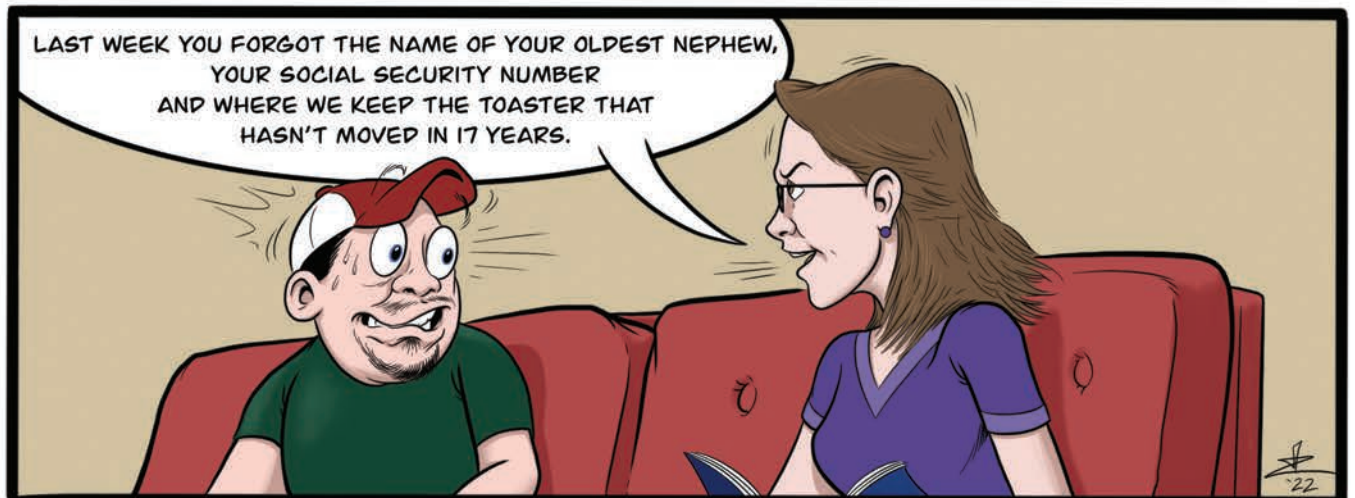
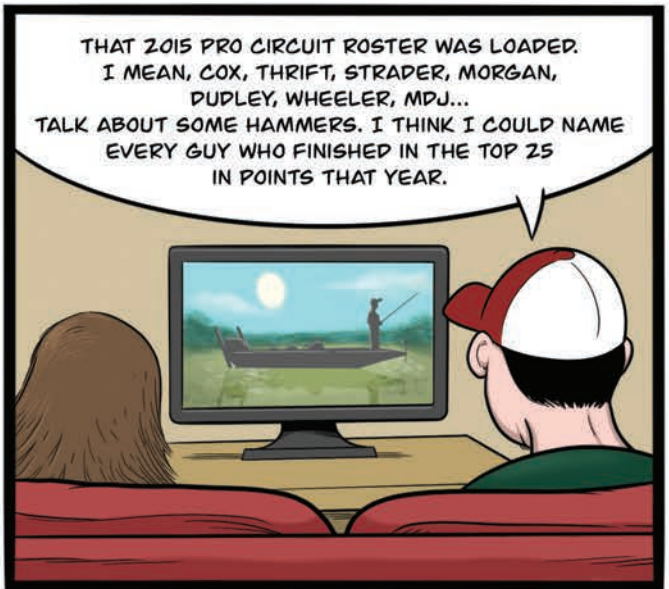
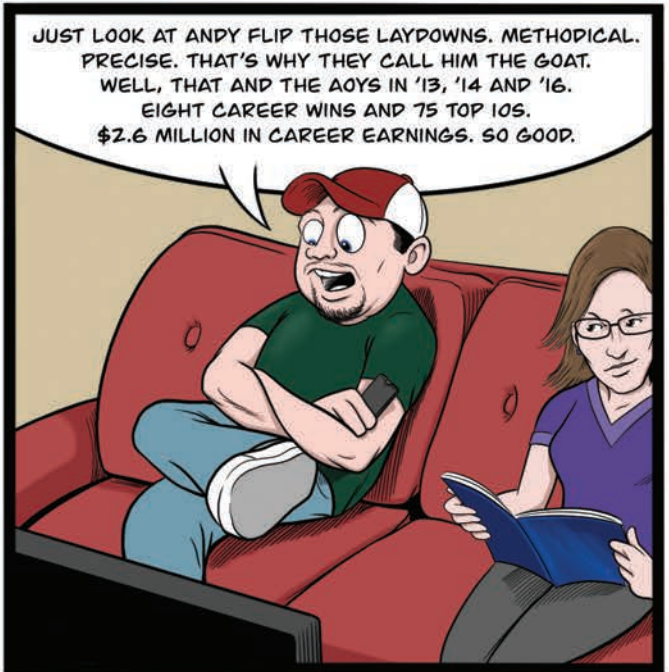
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TOYOTA



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# THE ONLY WAY TO TOW WHEN YOU'RE THE 'BIG SHOW.'

*Terry Scroggins*

Team Toyota Angler



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Before towing, confirm your vehicle and trailer are compatible, hooked up, loaded properly and that you have any necessary additional equipment. Do not exceed any Weight Ratings and follow all instructions in your Owner's Manual. The maximum you can tow depends on base curb weight plus the total weight of any cargo, occupants, and added vehicle equipment. "Added vehicle equipment" includes additional standard / optional equipment and accessories added by the manufacturer, dealers, and / or vehicle owners. The only way to be certain of your vehicle's curb weight is to weigh your vehicle without passengers or cargo. Vehicle loaned to paid talent. Other trademarks & trade names shown are those of their respective owners. © 2022 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A. Inc.



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\*Assembled in Texas with U.S. and globally sourced parts.



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**FISH TO WIN™**