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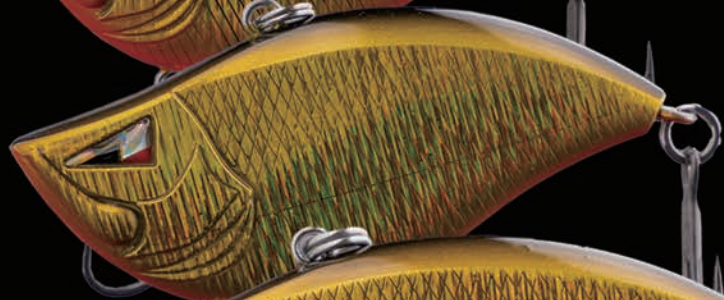
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7/8 OZ



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Z SWIMMER

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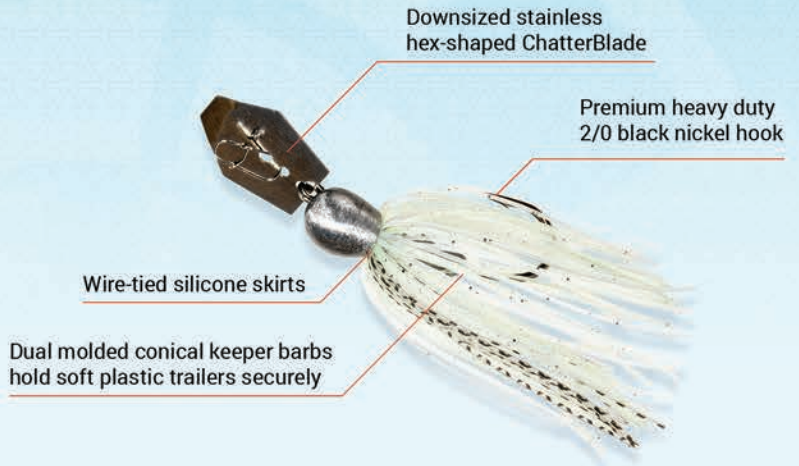


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REDCREST 2022: THE GOAT

When I was a child growing up in an extremely small town in northern Nevada, there was a time when every waking thought was occupied by (of all things) boxing.

Yep. The sweet science. Not baseball, not football, not basketball. Not even fishing or hunting. My third-grade PE teacher spent a couple of hours one week teaching us the basics of boxing (“left hand up, left foot forward, jab, jab, cross”), and as sometimes happens with 8-year-olds, my imagination ran away with me. I became enamored with the fight game and began an obsessive hunt for any information I could dig up about the history of the sweet science.

Not long after, I came across something that transcended every boxing book I’d ever scrounged up: a board game called “Title Bout” by a company named Avalon Hill. Without digging too deep into the minutiae, Title Bout was a simple but well-researched game that assigned attributes to the greatest boxers of all time and allowed you to simulate matchups between the best fighters in history.

You could pit, for example, Muhammed Ali against Jack Johnson, Sugar Ray Leonard against Sugar Ray Robinson and Marvin Hagler versus Harry Greb. It was a game-simulation geek’s dream come true, and it allowed me to simulate that Henry Armstrong, Joe Louis, Willie Pep, Roberto Duran and George Foreman were in the same arena, duking it out.

In 2022, the bass fishing world will call that “REDCREST.” Grand Lake, Oklahoma will be the arena, and it won’t be a simulation.

A GRAND LINEUP

The lineup of 41 anglers competing in REDCREST 2022 – a list that includes the best of the best from *four different decades* – is perhaps the greatest tournament roster of all time. That probably sounds like hyperbole, but it’s not. The field boasts combined tournament winnings of nearly \$80 million.

You don’t have to look very hard to spot the history-makers in the REDCREST 2022 lineup.

There’s Kevin VanDam, the only bass angler in the world to surpass the \$6 million mark in career winnings and the only bass pro to earn eight tour-level AOY awards.

And there’s Scott Suggs, the first angler in the history of the sport to claim a \$1 million payday for a single tournament (the 2007 Forrest Wood Cup).

Oh, and there’s David Dudley, the only angler in the world whose trophy room can display four FLW Tour AOY trophies (and the only other angler besides VanDam who has cleared the \$4 million mark in winnings).

And *that guy*, Jacob Wheeler: He’s the only angler in the world who owns five Bass Pro Tour trophies (plus a General Tire World Championship trophy, a Bass Pro Tour AOY award, a Forrest Wood Cup, an FLW Tour Super Tournament trophy and the hardware from an All-American championship). He was also the fastest angler in history to the \$1 and \$2 million marks in tournament winnings.

Scan down the list of anglers on page 42 and you’ll see a REDCREST field that owns over 50 Angler of the Year titles or major tour-level championships, starting with Mark Davis’ and VanDam’s dominance in the mid-1990 and continuing through Jordan Lee, Ott DeFoe and Wheeler’s ascension in the 2010s and 2020s.

REDCREST 2022 will truly be history happening before our eyes, and the boxing-simulation-game child inside of me can’t wait. Whether you hold this issue of *Bass Fishing* magazine in your hands as you stroll through the REDCREST Outdoor Sports Expo in Tulsa, or received it in your mailbox like usual, please join us. Immersive coverage of REDCREST 2022 on Grand Lake can be found at MajorLeagueFishing.com March 20-27.



JOEL SHANGLE, EXECUTIVE EDITOR



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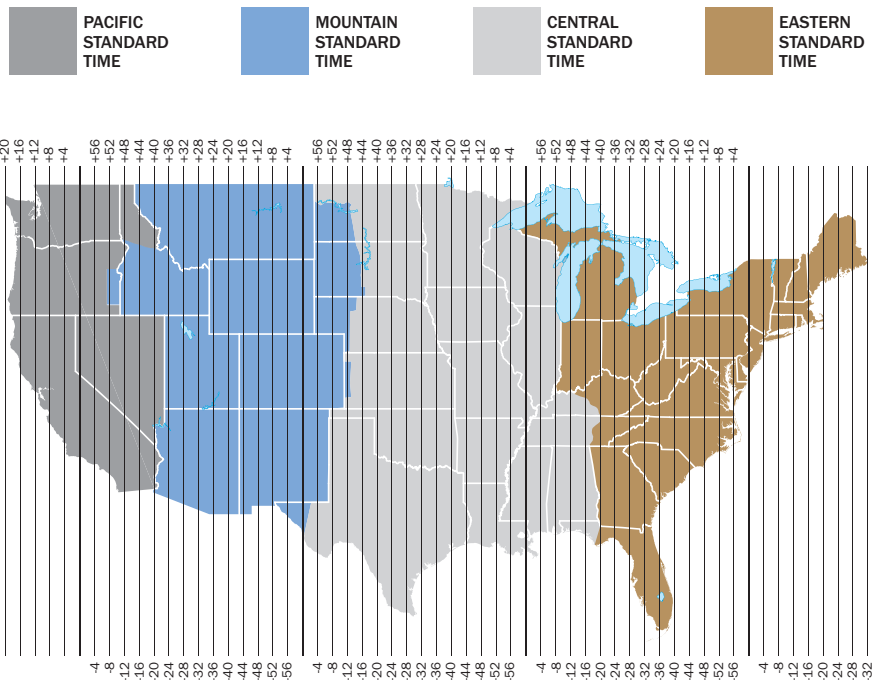
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MARCH-APRIL 2022



MAR. Date	Day	AM Minor	AM Major	PM Minor	PM Major	Moon Phases	APR. Date	Day	AM Minor	AM Major	PM Minor	PM Major	Moon Phases
1	Tue	3:40	9:50	4:00	10:15		1	Fri	4:45	10:50	5:00	11:10	☀
2	Wed	4:30	10:35	4:45	11:00	☀	2	Sat	5:25	11:35	5:45	--:--	
3	Thu	5:15	11:30	5:40	11:55		3	Sun	6:10	12:00	6:40	12:25	
4	Fri	6:10	--:--	6:35	12:20		4	Mon	7:00	12:50	7:30	1:15	
5	Sat	6:55	12:45	7:20	1:05		5	Tue	7:50	1:40	8:20	2:05	
6	Sun	7:40	1:30	8:10	1:55		6	Wed	8:40	2:30	9:10	2:55	
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10	Thu	11:00	4:50	11:30	5:15	☾	10	Sun	--:--	6:00	12:10	6:25	
11	Fri	11:45	5:35	--:--	6:00		11	Mon	12:40	6:45	12:55	7:10	
12	Sat	12:15	6:25	12:35	6:50		12	Tue	1:25	7:30	1:40	7:50	
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31	Thu	4:05	10:05	4:15	10:30								

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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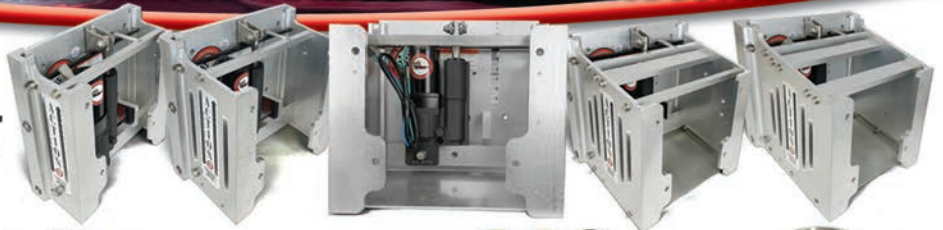


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THE SCOUTING REPORT ON GRAND LAKE O' THE CHEROKEES

Examining the playing field for REDCREST 2022

GROVE, Okla. – Fed by the Elk, Neosho and Spring rivers flowing into northeast Oklahoma, the reservoir known as Grand Lake O' the Cherokees – which will serve as the playing field for REDCREST 2022 (March 23-27) – was formed in 1940 with the completion of Pensacola Dam between the small towns of Langley and Disney. Encompassing 46,500 surface acres, Grand Lake has a maximum depth of 140 feet and contains an astounding 1,669,350 acre-feet of water. It's also proven itself an abundant provider of bass-fishing opportunities and an excellent venue for bass tournaments, which makes it a truly grand venue for the third REDCREST ever contested.

THE BASICS

The 10,300-square-mile Grand Lake watershed extends into four states (Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and Arkansas) and covers nearly 6.6 million acres of land. Most of the watershed falls along the Neosho River in Kansas and only eight percent is found within Oklahoma. The watershed is home to half a million people but is mostly agricultural land with 5 million acres dedicated to crop or grassland uses.

Like the majority of our older reservoirs in the U.S., Grand suffers from both nutrient and sedimentation. These processes have led to decreased water clarity, loss of depth, increased algal blooms, degraded water quality and even restrictions on the consumption of fish at times. Luckily, in 2007, a nonprofit called the Grand Lake Watershed Alliance Foundation was established to allow citizens to become active across all four states to help improve their impact on the reservoir. You can find more – including their action strategies – at glwaf.org.

MANAGING GRAND'S WATER LEVELS

Pensacola Dam is owned and operated by the Grand River Dam Authority (GRDA), which utilizes the dam for power production. The GRDA works with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to control the lake level and maintain appropriate downstream flows, maintaining the lake level below 745 feet mean sea level.

The GRDA's annual elevation plan since 2017 has been to control the reservoir capacity between 742 and 744 feet. This plan draws the lake down beginning August 1 to a level of 743 feet and again on September 15 to a level of 742 feet. This level is maintained all winter and spring. Throughout May and into June, the GRDA allows the elevation to increase to 744 feet, which is maintained until their annual drawdowns begin again.

If Grand's water level increases beyond 745 feet, the USACE takes control and manages the floodgates to regulate the water flowing downstream into the Arkansas River system. Grand has reached flood pool status numerous times in recent history – one of the worst was in 2019 when the lake swelled beyond the 745-foot mark to 755 feet. The USACE took control of the floodgates in May and worked to release water throughout May, June and into late July before restoring the lake to below 745 feet.

MANAGING GRAND'S FISH POPULATION

The fish population in Grand Lake is managed by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) as part of the Northeast Region. Forage consists primarily of gizzard shad, threadfin shad and bluegill sunfish. Largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass all can be found in Grand, but largemouth certainly have the largest population size.

The ODWC historically enforced six fish per day at a 14-inch minimum length limit on Grand Lake. The

ODWC revised state regulations in the fall of 2021, as research showed Oklahoma largemouth populations were experiencing stunting below the 14-inch harvest limit and that 80 percent of the fish in the state were below 16 inches. The ODWC's proposed changes were to allow six fish per day at a 16-inch maximum harvest limit. This would allow anglers to keep fish below 16 inches, but they must release all fish above 16 inches except one per day.

Long-term, this should result in more fish bigger than 16 inches while still allowing for some harvest. The ODWC is allowing for tournaments that compete with a live weigh-in to apply for an exemption to the bag limit, as many fish weighed will be released. ODWC conducted a statewide survey of licensed anglers in 2019 and found that 69 percent of anglers released every bass caught regardless of size.

The ODWC's first attempts to introduce Florida-strain largemouth genetics into the reservoir began in 1974 with 11,000 fry. They attempted again in 1975, using 1,500 1 1/2-inch fingerlings. From 1981 through 1995, an additional 389,418 Florida-strain largemouth were stocked into Grand ranging from 1 1/2 inches to 6 1/2 inches.

In the early 2000s, Grand was hit very hard by Largemouth Bass Virus, with around one-third of all largemouth testing positive for the virus at that time. The lake recovered by 2021, and a new record largemouth bass weighing 10.86 pounds was caught. That record was smashed a year later when a 12.30-pound fish was caught.

Although the success of Florida genetic fingerlings has been varied, ODWC continues to try to improve the lake's genetics, and in 2020 stocked a total of 950 mature Florida-strain largemouth. The survival of these fish should be much higher than the expected survival of fry or fingerling fish stocked in the past.

MANAGING THE HABITAT

Habitat in Grand is generally limited to the shoreline and includes mainly man-made structures such as riprap and boat docks. There are also brush piles and areas where artificial fish structures have been placed by ODWC. In 2020, the agency installed a total of 240 MossBack fish structures in 11 locations between the mouth of Honey Creek to the Highway 59 bridge. Brush piles were created in 21 locations in 2018 and 2019 using hardwoods and cedars, and 100 spider blocks were installed in 2016 in two locations.

You can find the Fish Attractor Map on the ODWC website as well as download GPS locations for all their habitat projects for the entire state.

Aquatic vegetation is not exactly abundant on the lake, but it's not for lack of trying.

A large-scale research project was conducted from 2004 to 2006 in partnership with ODWC, Oklahoma Water Resources Board, Lewisville Aquatic Ecosystems Research Facility and GRDA to attempt to learn the feasibility of establishing various plant species in Grand Lake. Researchers planted various aquatic plants in 10 locations on four arms of the lake – each area included exclusion fences to minimize the consumption of the plants by herbivores. In total, 12 surface acres of the lake were planted.

The most successful species were bulltongue, softstem bulrush, American pondweed and Illinois pondweed. Each of these species had substantial growth beyond the cages and showed signs of reproduction or establishment beyond the cage population. River bulrush, wild celery, water stargrass, arrowhead and coontail established but did not consistently expand outside of their cages. Water willow, pickerelweed, white water lily, American lotus, sago pondweed and spatterdock all were considered less than successful and showed no establishment outside of their cages.

The two biggest hurdles to establishing aquatic vegetation on Grand appear to be water fluctuation and herbivory.

To learn more about each site and the results visit https://www.owrb.ok.gov/studies/reports/reports_pdf/GrandLakeRevegProject2007.pdf



Josh Bertrand shows off a Grand Lake chunk.

EXOTIC SPECIES THREATS

Grand Lake has a varied past of potential exotic species introductions, but rarely have those threats matured to an established level. Adult zebra mussels have been found on two occasions: once in 2005 and again in 2006. Since that time, ODWC has not found any other signs of zebra mussels establishing a population. Adult bighead carp were found in the Grand Lake as far back as 2008, but beyond this sighting, ODWC has been unable to locate an established population.

MLF FMD AT REDCREST

As with all the Bass Pro Tour stops, the MLF Fisheries Management Department (FMD) will be collecting all the angler SCORETRACKER® data and providing it to Northeast Oklahoma ODWC biologist Brad Johnston. Specifically, we will be monitoring where and at what ratio spotted and smallmouth bass are caught compared to largemouth. We will also be collecting DNA mouth swabs from any largemouth over 7 pounds caught during the event to enter into our Lunker DNA Initiative program.

Understanding how successful Florida genetics are integrating into the population of Grand Lake will be very beneficial to both the ODWC and MLF for future fish stocking programs. ■



PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

The 2022 Bally Bet Angler of the Year will reward and recognize the angler who had an exceptional year like that of 2021 AOY Jacob Wheeler.

BALLY'S CORPORATION, BALLY BET GO ALL-IN ON BASS PRO TOUR ANGLER OF THE YEAR AWARD

Bally Bet AOY will be awarded \$100,000 as part of new partnership

Ask any of the 15 anglers on the 2022 Bass Pro Tour roster who have claimed tour-level Angler of the Year titles and they'll tell you bluntly: "The AOY is what I'm the proudest of."

Ask Kevin VanDam, who has racked up more tour-level wins (approaching 30 of them) and has earned more money in bass tournaments than any angler in the history of the sport, and he'll confirm that his astounding eight AOYs are the pinnacles of his career. That sentiment will be echoed by Mark Davis, David Dudley, Jordan Lee, Andy Morgan, Jacob Wheeler, Bryan Thrift and all the other MLF pros who have earned a coveted AOY title.

"Every win feels great and every trophy looks good in a trophy case,

but there's nothing in the sport of bass fishing that compares to being an Angler of the Year," said Morgan, whose display at his home in Dayton, Tennessee, includes three FLW Tour AOY trophies. "Those three (AOYs) are the best things I've ever accomplished in this sport. Everybody fishing at this

level can get hot for three or four days and win a tournament, but man, if you win an AOY, you've caught fish better and worked harder than everybody else all year long. It's very rewarding to win (an AOY)."

And thanks to a groundbreaking new partnership announced in January between Major League Fishing and sports gaming giant Bally's Corporation, that AOY will also be very lucrative to win in 2022.

Under the terms of the new deal, Bally's will serve as the exclusive Sports Betting, Daily Fantasy Sports (DFS), and Free-to-Play (F2P) Partner for MLF's tournament circuits – all firsts for the professional fishing industry. Even more importantly to the 80 anglers



"BALLY'S STEPPING UP LIKE THEY HAVE IS A BIG DEAL FOR OUR SPORT."

competing on the 2022 Bass Pro Tour, the partnership includes Bally's online sportsbook, Bally Bet, becoming the title sponsor of the coveted Angler of the Year award for the Bass Pro Tour.

That award – which will be acknowledged with Bally Bet Angler of the Year patches on the right shoulder of participating Bass Pro Tour angler jerseys – comes with a cash payout of \$100,000, the highest AOY payout in professional bass fishing.

"The guy who wins the AOY has had a great season, and the Bally Bet AOY is an excellent way to recognize what a major accomplishment that is," VanDam said. "You have to have a special year to win an Angler of the Year. I'm a fan of the sport first, and to watch an angler get in that zone is really fun. I've won several (AOYs), and I know how it feels to get in that zone, but it's been really intriguing to me as a fan over the years to watch guys have those years. Bally's stepping up like they have is a big deal for our sport."

MLF/BALLY'S DEAL IS A GAME-CHANGER IN THE BASS WORLD

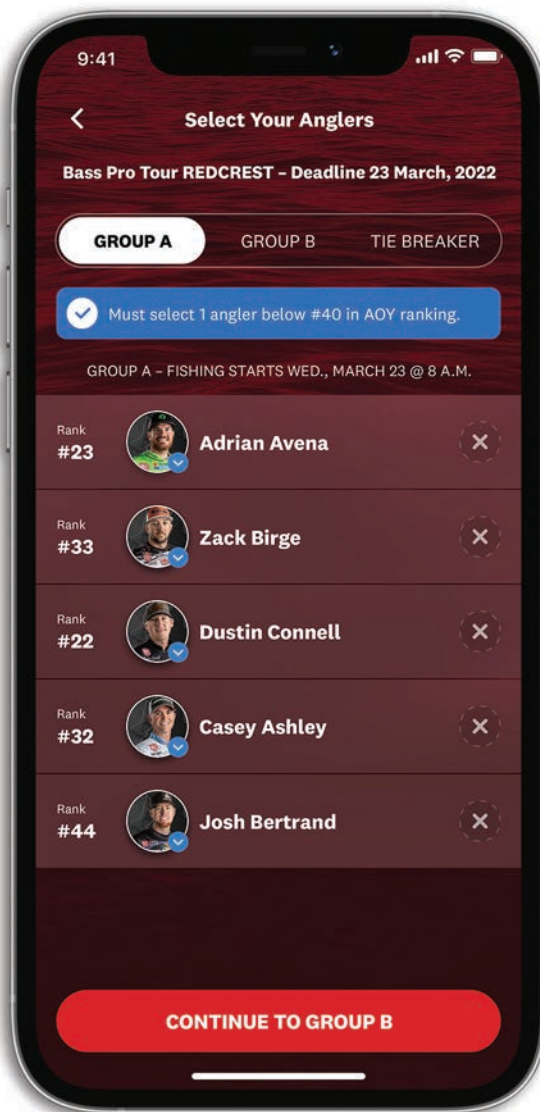
MLF's new arrangement with Bally's represents the sports betting titan's fifth such agreement with a professional sports league, following previously announced agreements between Bally's and the National Hockey League, the National Basketball Association, the Women's National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball.

The relationship further reinforces MLF's commitment to develop and connect with a broader fan base that includes followers of other major sports.

"Our partnership with Bally's will offer our loyal fans and anglers another unique avenue to engage with professional fishing and the Bass Pro Tour," said



"PHOENIX FANTASY FISHING PRESENTED BY ABU GARCIA IS NOW OPERATIONAL FOR BOTH THE MLF BASS PRO TOUR AND THE MLF TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT."



MLF President and Chief Executive Officer Jim Wilburn. "This partnership marks an important moment for Major League Fishing in the growing U.S. gaming and sports betting sectors. Integrating Bally's industry-best online sports betting and unique gaming offerings with MLF's SCORETRACKER LIVE® and fan-friendly platforms position us to drive viewership, participation and large-scale adoption among sports fans."

FANTASY FISHING UNDERWAY, POWERED BY BALLY'S

As part of the agreement, Bally's technology now powers two new fantasy fishing games for the 2022 season. The Fenwick MLF Predictor Game, an engaging game that offers fans the chance to make predictions at Bass Pro Tour events for prizes, will be available for the entire 2022 season. Phoenix MLF Fantasy Fishing presented by Abu Garcia is now operational for both the MLF Bass Pro Tour and the MLF Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit. The free-to-play game allows fans to select their team of anglers for each tournament, create private leagues with their family and friends and win tens of thousands of dollars in cash and prizes.

"We know how passionate the millions of recreational anglers are about the professional ranks of their sport," said Adi Dhandhanian, Chief Operating Officer of North America for Bally Interactive, the company's digital division. "This integrated partnership is a perfect showcase for Bally's, allowing us to leverage our sports betting, daily fantasy sports, and free-to-play games to enhance the fishing fan experience across MLF media and live events."

You can log on to the MLF Fantasy Fishing Center at MajorLeagueFishing.com. ■

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

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Live Stream at MajorLeagueFishing.com or MyOutdoorTV.com

Feb. 5-10: Bass Pro Tour Stage One @ Caney Creek, Lake D'Arbonne, Bussey Brake

Feb. 19-24: Bass Pro Tour Stage Two @ Lake Fork

March 2-7: Bass Pro Tour Stage Three @ Lewis Smith Lake

March 13-16: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Stop Two @ Harris Chain of Lakes

March 23-27: Bass Pro Tour REDCREST @ Grand Lake O' the Cherokees

TV BROADCASTS

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

Feb. 5: Bass Pro Tour: 2021 Heavy Hitters Qualifying Group B Day 2 @ Falls Lake, Jordan Lake and Shearon Harris

Feb. 12: Bass Pro Tour: 2021 Heavy Hitters Knockout Round @ Falls Lake, Jordan Lake and Shearon Harris

Feb. 19: Bass Pro Tour: 2021 Heavy Hitters Championship Round @ Falls Lake, Jordan Lake and Shearon Harris

Feb. 26: Bass Pro Tour: 2021 Stage One Knockout Round @ Sam Rayburn

March 5: Bass Pro Tour: 2021 Stage One Championship Round @ Sam Rayburn

March 12: Bass Pro Tour: 2021 Stage Two Knockout Round @ Lake Travis

March 19: Bass Pro Tour: 2021 Stage Two Championship Round @ Lake Travis

March 26: Bass Pro Tour: 2021 Stage Three Knockout Round @ Harris Chain of Lakes

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

Feb. 5: Lucas Oil Challenge Cup Championship @ Lake Wylie Presented by B&W Trailer Hitches

Feb. 12: Academy Sports and Outdoors Heritage Cup Elimination Round 1 @ Douglas Lake Presented by Magellan Outdoors

Feb. 19: Academy Sports and Outdoors Heritage Cup Elimination Round 2 @ Douglas Lake Presented by Magellan Outdoors

Feb. 26: Academy Sports and Outdoors Heritage Cup Elimination Round 3 @ Douglas Lake Presented by Magellan Outdoors

March 5: Academy Sports and Outdoors Heritage Cup Sudden Death Round 1 @ Fort Loudoun Presented by Magellan Outdoors

March 12: Academy Sports and Outdoors Heritage Cup Sudden Death Round 2 @ Fort Loudoun Presented by Magellan Outdoors

March 19: Academy Sports and Outdoors Heritage Cup Championship @ Fort Loudoun Presented by Magellan Outdoors

March 26: Challenge and Heritage Cup Major League Lessons

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

Feb. 5: MLF All Angles – 2022 Challenge Cup Championship Round

Feb. 12: MLF All Angles – 2022 Heritage Cup Elimination Round 1

Feb. 19: MLF All Angles – 2022 Heritage Cup Elimination Round 2

Feb. 26: MLF All Angles – 2022 Heritage Cup Elimination Round 3

March 5: MLF All Angles – 2022 Heritage Cup Sudden Death Round 1

March 12: MLF All Angles – 2022 Heritage Cup Sudden Death Round 2

March 19: MLF All Angles – 2022 Heritage Cup Championship Round

March 26: MLF All Angles – 2022 Challenge Cup Championship Round



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



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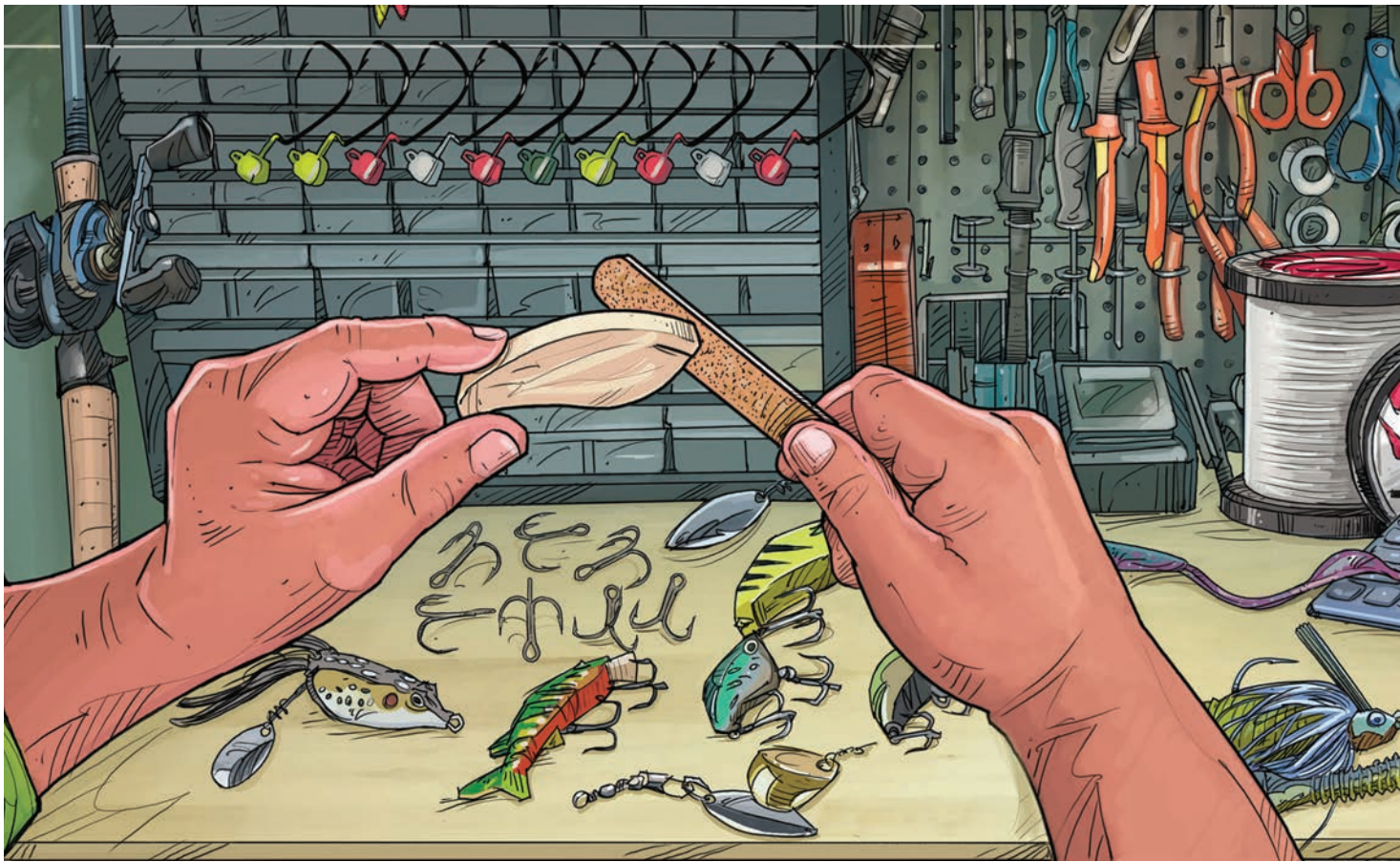
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OFFSEASON SHOP (AND SHOPPING) TIME

For bass pros, the winter months are for stocking up and paring down



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.

Shop time has become a critical component to success on the MLF pro tours. During the offseason, pros invest countless hours in the shop, organizing tackle, rigging boats, purchasing equipment and tinkering with everything from lures to electronics. But what's really brewing behind those shop doors? Here's a sneak peek at how some of the best in the business prep for a new season.

WHEELER STAYS UP TO DATE

The intensive shop time Jacob Wheeler puts in during the offseason helps contribute to his phenomenal success. For Wheeler, "shop time" doesn't just mean time in the shop - it's also the time he spends online shopping for new tackle.

"Competing at this level demands a constant discovery process," Wheeler explains. "I keep an eye on the tackle horizon by browsing tackle sites each week for hours. Each year, I spend thousands of dollars ordering new stuff just to test its potential to be a better mousetrap. Realistically, only about five percent of all that I order actually passes grade and makes it into my gameday boxes."

Wheeler stays tackle vigilant in hopes of discovering the next ChatterBait, Whopper Plopper or flutter spoon before the rest of his competitors do.

"If you can be the first one to find a groundbreaking lure, action or color, it provides a huge head start on understanding the when and where to use it," he adds.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

While being ahead of the curve with a new mousetrap constitutes a big advantage, the 2021 Bass Pro Tour AOY also says the meticulous browsing and buying of tackle constantly improves the efficiency of his entire arsenal as a whole.

Much in the way tungsten and braid have allowed pros to shed a lot of lead and monofilament from their traveling tackle arsenals, finding more efficient lures helps eliminate bulk from the boat.

"It's a constant process," Wheeler says. "Lures evolve and get better over time. As a pro, it's my job to stay up to date on improvements to tackle and use that improvement to increase my efficiency. If something new goes into my arsenal, something else must come out. I can't keep adding and adding every year without removing something or it's just too much to deal with in the boat."

Each year, Wheeler takes several different categories of lures and orders all the options. As a simple example, if he feels his jiggling spoons need attention,

he'll order every kind there is and spend a week testing them. If he finds something in a spoon that registers as an improvement over his current selection of spoons – composition, size, shape, action, rate of fall or color – he'll rotate the new ones in and cull out the old ones.

"A lot depends on how the schedule sets up," Wheeler continues. "Some years there might be more shallow, stained water on the schedule and winding baits need to be reviewed. Other years, clear, deep impoundments might be more prevalent on the schedule, and I'll focus on categories of deeper lures."

No matter the schedule, *everything* he uses for fishing gets reviewed every couple years. And it's not just lures. Wheeler spends time researching new weights, hooks, lines, rod actions and tools.

"If it has to do with catching a bass, I research it all winter to make sure there isn't something I'm missing," he says.

BIRGE'S QUEST FOR EFFICIENCY

Zack Birge spends hours of his off-season shop time organizing tackle to an admittedly obsessive level. He evaluates every lure and bag of plastics he carries, culling the has-beens and tediously cataloging the rest in hard boxes.

"Keeping too many unproductive lures in the boat is a waste of space," he says. "If it has rust on it or I haven't used it in the last four years, it's taken out to make room for something better. In the heat of battle, it makes me crazy to dig through lures I never use to find the ones that I do use – that's just inefficient."

Birge also monitors online tackle sites across the globe, but his reasoning for doing so is to find hard-to-get lures in certain sizes and colors that are proven performers. He's reluctant to reveal exactly which rare gems he hoards, but he does disclose that doing so constitutes a major advantage.

"In competition, I'm the guy who likes to throw what no one else is throwing," Birge says. "I'll stockpile lures that are nearly impossible to get. A lot of it is Japanese-made stuff in certain colors and sizes that are only offered in small batches and sell out very quickly."

"I'm not saying it's the only lure fish will bite. I'm just saying that having a lure that no else has helps my confidence."

OTT'S GARAGE

Ott DeFoe calls his shop "the garage," which is how his YouTube series *Ott's Garage (OG)* got its name. OG is also the name of DeFoe's signature line of crankbaits for Rapala. After spending hours and hours in the garage sanding down balsa baits to a perfect size and shape, the OG Slim was born.

DeFoe is a tinkerer at heart and says he likes to morph and "MacGyver" lures together to fit a certain need.

"I'll see a situation on the water that needs a certain kind of presentation," he explains. "It becomes a game of problem solving for me; I'll take parts and pieces from different lures and start cobbling them together to make something that fits that need."

"Maybe I need something small that runs subsurface with some subtle flash, but it also needs to cast far. I'll get in the garage and start adding things like swivels, split rings, lead wire, treble hooks and maybe even tiny blades to a soft plastic jerkbait. I love tinkering like that. The first time I catch a fish on something I created, it's a real thrill."

THERAPY FOR THARP

Randall Tharp knows that feeling of catching a bass on something he created himself. It's the reason he spends his shop time pouring his own jigs and adorning them with his own hand-tied skirts. His homemade creations include flipping and swim jigs in various sizes.

"I've been pouring my own jigs since my BFL days years ago," he says. "Back then, I did it because homemade jigs were much better than store-bought production jigs. Since then, production jigs have come a long way, and some are just as good as homemade jigs."

Still, each offseason, Tharp will pour a few dozen jigs, mostly because it's a yearly tradition that's therapeutic and evokes nostalgia.

"I've won a lot of money with the jigs I've poured," he says. "I still do it because it gives me confidence to fish with something I made. Professional bass fishing is probably the only sport where you can use stuff you made by hand in competition, and I think that's pretty cool. ■"

SAVE THE DATE! REDCREST 2022, MARCH 23-27



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BASS FISHING'S G.O.A.T.(S)

What does "Greatest of All Time" even mean, anyway?



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.

In any conversation about professional sports, there's always room for debate about the greatest to play the game. I love the topic in regards to golf. Bobby Jones took the honors, later upstaged by Hogan, then possibly Nicklaus, until the world was sure they'd found a king in Tiger, who later fell short in major championship wins.

For others, NFL quarterbacks are routinely the subject, the generation of the fan always swaying their pick. Brady? Manning? Elway? Montana?

In each case, the debate comes down to accolades, stats, longevity and talent.

For fans of professional bass fishing, however, there's never been a valid way to make a definitive argument.

The primary stumbling point, of course, has been the division of the professional ranks into separate leagues since 1996. For the two decades that followed, standout anglers on each side

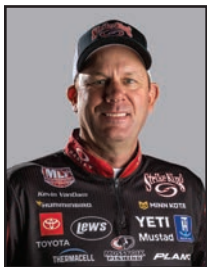
rarely faced each other, leading to debate over who really was the best in the world.

The 2019 inception of the Bass Pro Tour, however, pitted the majority of the world's best anglers head-to-head. Finally, we watched several of the best professional anglers of all time compete in the same arena.

Results were surprisingly inconclusive. While the kings of the ring often came through in victory, it was evident that a more rounded playing field led to less overall dominance. Jacob Wheeler's superhuman 2021 season may be the exception, though he's still building his resume.

So who is bass fishing's G.O.A.T., and can the acclaim truly be determined? In the upcoming third iteration of REDCREST at Grand Lake, we'll watch a world championship event hosting the majority of the possible "best ever" candidates for the first time this millennium.

What better time to revisit the debate?



KEVIN VANDAM

KVD stands out, in my mind, as the greatest to ever play the game. What started as a meteoric rise to the top (hardcore fans will remember KVD establishing the longest-running string of paycheck-earning performances in history) culminated in a number of records.

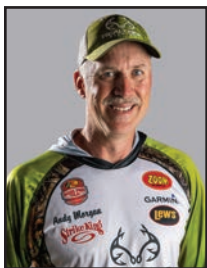
VanDam is tied for the most Bassmaster

Classic wins, sits second in AOY titles with vastly more than any other current angler, has posted nearly 30 national wins and has accumulated over \$7 million in earnings.

Still extremely competitive and physically fit, VanDam is extremely capable of winning any tournament he enters, especially championship events. Fans will recall his 2021 BPT performance at Lake Chickamauga as proof.

In the modern history of the sport, dating back to the early '90s, no angler has produced a more dominant, long-term display than VanDam. In addition to his Classic titles and AOY campaigns, it's also important to note that VanDam also had a brief, lucrative FLW career in the early 2000s (taking down an AOY title there, too), and hammered the competition in early MLF events a few years back.

KVD's only sore spot may be his sporadic performance overall in BPT competition. Facing down the momentum of today's hottest pros has been tough. But is a little slump enough to take away the title of G.O.A.T.?



ANDY MORGAN

I haven't heard much from the Andy Morgan camp recently, but remember, he was once coined the "G.O.A.T. of FLW." Morgan's performance on that circuit was inconceivable when looking back. Three AOY titles capped the most Top 10s in circuit history. Morgan's ability to take home big paychecks was the

strongest since the infancy of professional fishing, when competitors like Bill Dance and Roland Martin rolled the competition weekly, simply due to being more advanced in their skill set. Morgan, however, produced against 200 full-time anglers, many of whom now compete on the Bass Pro Tour.

Morgan's lacking a big win, for sure. A perennial Cup qualifier, he never closed the door in 20 attempts. A REDCREST win would help put Morgan back in the "best ever" conversation, but more than one would be needed to solidify a claim.



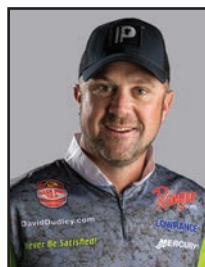
RICK CLUNN

Despite not competing in the upcoming REDCREST championship, I would be remiss not to mention Rick Clunn in any debate over bass fishing's G.O.A.T. Clunn's record is perhaps the greatest in the history of the sport due to the diversity of his resume. His Classic wins record (tied with VanDam) is end-capped by a

B.A.S.S. AOY title and an FLW All-American win. Clunn has also won the U.S. Open twice.

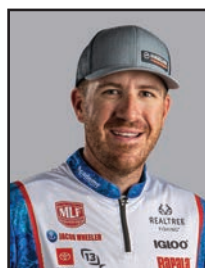
In the early days of FLW competition, Clunn brought his trademark high-stakes game to the table, taking down several wins and six-figure paydays and reaching the Forrest Wood Cup six times. He never won that event, despite voicing a strong desire to do so.

Clunn's career blossomed before the other entrants in our G.O.A.T. debate; his age often taking him out of contention today. However, Clunn's most recent B.A.S.S. wins on the St. Johns River further validate his ability to somehow supersede his competition at any time, placing him still atop the pyramid for many.



DAVID DUDLEY

Dudley was coined the most successful FLW angler of all time due to his incredible earnings record of over \$4 million. In addition, Dudley is a former Forrest Wood Cup winner and four-time FLW AOY (also a record). But Dudley lacks wins to enter a greatest-ever debate. Much like Morgan, Dudley's long career, lasting over 20 years, has been one more of consistency than top-end finishes.



JACOB WHEELER

Is Jacob Wheeler the greatest bass angler of all time? No; at least not yet, as he lacks the established track record to this point. Still, I wouldn't bet against him to one day lay claim to that title. Wheeler's recent track record reflects dominance seen only twice before in the history of the sport, through the performances of VanDam and Roland Martin at their career primes.

Wheeler has already established a strong BPT resume and is the league's top money winner to date - following a short but lucrative B.A.S.S. career where he threatened to win the 2019 Classic. And don't forget, Wheeler's FLW career included both All-American and Forrest Wood Cup victories.

Wheeler's shot at the G.O.A.T. designation is boosted by his age. Remember, Wheeler was the youngest winner of the big FLW awards. Today, at only 31 years old, he's likely yet to hit his prime.

Multiple championship and AOY titles will be necessary for Wheeler to truly cement "best ever" status, but he has time. Of late, Wheeler has been noted to pursue angling excellence with unwavering dedication, racking up thousands of hours of practice and relentlessly crisscrossing the country to pre-fish. Will his dedication last?

Perhaps there will come a time when Jacob Wheeler, or another professional angler in the future, will definitively blow the doors off the record books, establishing a clear bass fishing G.O.A.T. Until then, we'll continue to pick a favorite, pull up a chair and make our case, all along knowing we may truly never be able to define who (or what) Greatest of All Time even means.

But that's just part of the fun of being a nerdy fishing fan. ■



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A IS FOR AARON

Sometimes "history" is about preserving the memory of those who shaped us



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.

Where can I start when trying to tell you even a little bit of the story of someone like Aaron Martens?

Well, first I should point out that there never was and never will be anyone else like Aaron. He was unique in some of the best ways imaginable. Obviously, he was a great bass fisherman – one of the best of all time – but he ranked at least that high as a person. There wasn't a malicious or disingenuous bone in the body that eventually let him down, despite the great care he gave to it.

Aaron had a lot of nicknames. Some were flattering; some were not: "The Natural," "Deuce," "Spin," and "Rain Man" were just a few. That he was the best natural angler many ever knew is undisputed and explains the first. Four runner-up finishes in the Bassmaster Classic cover the second. His skills with a spinning rod and finesse fishing are well known, and

that's the third. And his savant-like powers in bass fishing are legendary.

There was an innocence and purity about Aaron that made you love him and want to be more like him. If he was preoccupied with petty interpersonal politics or silly posturing, he hid it well. Aaron could certainly get distracted, but he kept his focus on the important things – his family, his God, his fishing, his friends – and if you spent time around him, you knew he was "present" in that moment, and you knew he cared.

When he won his first of three Bassmaster Angler of the Year awards in 2005, it was my job to get him from the stage at Table Rock Lake to a makeshift media center, a long cast away. Once there, he had a seat, put his new trophy on a table and opened a bottle of cold water.

Reporter: "Aaron, how old are you?"

Aaron: "Oh dude, I should know that!"



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

He was 32, but it hardly mattered to him. Rather than do the quick math, Aaron just said what he was thinking – a dangerous proposition for those of us who lack that innocence and purity of spirit, but it worked for him.

A UNIQUE KIND OF GENIUS

Aaron was a genius, but not the kind that solves pointless calculus problems. He solved bass problems, and he made people feel better about themselves. One proof of his genius was his tournament record, which ranks among the eternal greats.

Yes, there is a certain genius to bass tournament success; there are special abilities, challenges and aptitudes. Aaron had those in a fascinating mix, unlike any other angler.

Another proof of Aaron's genius that I admired very much was his ability to think outside the constraints that bind most of us. We live in our own cranium-sized world and only rarely find ways to escape it. I think Aaron lived outside the box and not merely thought outside of it.

At a tournament on the Alabama River about 10 years ago, he was on stage, weighing his catch, when the announcer started saying something about tournament pros being big kids playing a game. It was a silly comment – a time filler – and it led to a sillier question.

Announcer: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Aaron: "A tiger."

The crowd roared. Aaron's answer was way outside the proverbial box, and it was perfect. Why not a tiger? Why would anyone want to be a cowboy, doctor, ballerina or President of the United States if you could be a tiger instead? Sign me up for tiger!

And Aaron's explanation was even better. When asked why he wanted to be a tiger, Aaron said, "Because you get to pounce on things."

In 2004, Aaron finished second in the Classic on Lake Wylie. He caught most of his fish around bridge pilings using underspins with fluke-style trailers. At the end of the final day, his boat deck was littered with soft plastics, and each of them was customized with Sharpie pens, Aaron-style.

They all had a pair of black eyes, a pair of red gill plates ... and a smile.

If you fish those types of baits, you've probably done your own customization and have likely drawn similar eyes and gill plates. I know I have.

And so, I had to ask. "Aaron, I understand the eyes and the gill plates, but what's with the smiley face?"

"I felt like they wanted a happy bait," he explained.

And they probably did.

I miss my friend. ■

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PHOTOS COURTESY TACTICAL BASSIN

CONFESSIONS OF A BASS FISHING GEAR HEAD

How my tackle addiction started, and how it can benefit YOU



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.



My name is Matt, and I'm a tackle addict. You might be one, too.

When the boxes start stacking up inside the front door as tackle order after tackle order arrives at the house, you start wondering to yourself: *Have I overdone it?* But it's not until new tackle orders start arriving faster than you can put away previous orders that you know for sure – you've crossed the line. There's no coming back. You've crossed over to the dark side.

Call it what you will. Perhaps you're a gear head, or maybe you fancy yourself a "tackle enthusiast," or maybe it's time to admit you're just a plain old tackle junkie, just like me.

I've long since faced the music. My name is Matt, and I'm no mere enthusiast.

When new baits hit the market, I buy them. When ICAST rolls around, I do everything I can to attend. New rods? I've tried those. New reels? I've probably already worn them out. It's an obsession, but I love everything about it.

While this lifestyle isn't for everyone (or everyone's wallet), I long ago realized my love of all things fishing tackle serves a real purpose in the fishing industry and in my personal fishing journey.

There's no shortcut on this path of discovery. We can't just buy in to hype like we once could. There are too many brands making too many products, all announcing the release of a new rod, reel or lure that's sure to be a "game changer."

If the fishing community is to actually know when some-

thing special is brought to market, it requires shameless gear heads to find out. We need guys and gals who are willing to buy it all, try it all, and who actually know what they're looking at when they do get their hands on it.

I'm willing to be that guy. I'll fall on that sword. I'll take one for the team, and when I find the gems, I'll continue to shout it from the rooftops (or your computer speakers). I open my wallet day after day, week after week, in search of the next Senko, ChatterBait or A-Rig. You might call me crazy – and you may be right – but its sure is fun.

HOW I GOT HERE

To be clear, I wasn't always this way. There was a time when I owned a couple Fenwick rods paired with more

inexpensive Shimano reels and I happily caught fish. The first “technique-specific” rod I purchased was a swimbait rod. When it made a tangible difference and I started landing more fish because of it, my course was set. It didn’t take long for me to decide I needed a dedicated flipping stick. After that, it was a crankbait rod, followed by a jig rod. Some niches were filled immediately; others continued to be a thorn in my side, taking years to find the right rod for the job.

What followed was a journey that was predicated on experience. Experiencing new gear and how it’s best used. Experimenting with new techniques based on the available gear and figuring out what works and what doesn’t. Through it all, I became (and am becoming every day) a better angler, thanks in no small part to my tackle obsession. The more I buy, the more I want to use it to be a better angler.

When this journey began, Tactical Bassin started to grow real momentum. Tim Little and I had already been fishing together for years, but it was when we agreed to formally become partners in Tactical Bassin that everything took off. Now, instead of one budding gear head, there were two, and there was a growing audience of real anglers along for the ride.

Somewhere along the way, we took the deep dive into high-end tackle. For me, it was when I got my hands on a Shimano Metanium that everything changed. From that single reel came a whole new world. In a few spins of the handle, it was clear that I would never be the same. High-end tackle brought new excitement, incredible levels of refinement and a boost to the gear-buying habit I never expected.

Soon, my closet wasn’t organized by style; it was organized by color. “Free” Tackle Warehouse shirts (if you spent \$150 or more) reached from one end to the other in every color of the rainbow as I dove deeper and deeper into this tackle adventure. I went from one rod rack to two to too many. And at the same time, I was beginning my deep dive (or spiral) into baits and lures, line and storage – you name it.

From my wallet’s perspective, this was a downward spiral of epic proportions. But for the angling community, something very special was happening.

Tim’s and my unique affinities for tackle began to create a database of real-world tackle information. Suddenly, anglers had a reference point by which to compare baits, rods and reels. We had become tackle fanatics like so many before us; the only difference was we’d been blessed with a platform and an audience that could benefit from our pursuits.

WE’RE HERE FOR YOU!

During this time, Tactical Bassin locked onto a new schedule, creating three videos per week (Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays) and haven’t missed a video since. We continue to share videos about our fishing adventures, techniques, seasonal patterns, and of course, tackle and gear reviews. If you’re not taking advantage of these videos, you’re missing out on a chance

to benefit from the time and money someone else spent to find out what’s really the best gear for you. Our content can be found in these pages, on most social platforms, our website and on YouTube.

Our journeys are far from over. The weight of this tackle obsession weighs heavy, but like I said, we fall freely on that sword for the good of the fishing community.

The garages may have to get bigger and the boats may go slower, but we’re just getting started. There’s a whole ever-expanding world of tackle just waiting for some dedicated gear heads to root through and discover the diamonds in the rough. From high-end to budget, from JDM to custom, the mission is clear.

My name is Matt, and I’m a tackle addict. ■



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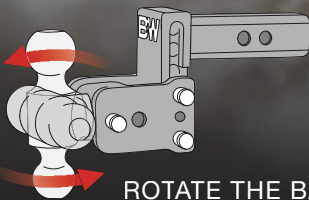


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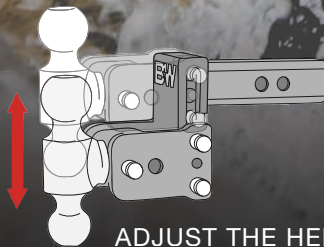


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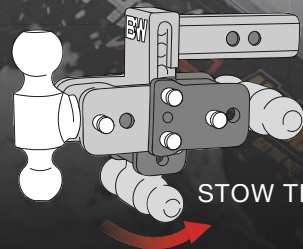
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2021 REDCREST champion Dustin Connell will look to defend the red-and-silver trophy when REDCREST 2022 kicks off on Grand Lake.



WHO'S

REDCREST 2022 ARRIVES ON OKLAHOMA'S GRAND LAKE FOR A SPRINGTIME THROWDOWN

By Tyler Brinks
PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

It's been a championship date two years in the making, but come March 23, 41 of the best bass anglers in the world will take to Grand Lake O' the Cherokees in northeast Oklahoma for a shot at the coveted REDCREST trophy and the \$300,000 payday that comes with it.

The 46,000-acre impoundment of the Lower Neosho River in the Ozark foothills was originally slated as the competition grounds for REDCREST 2021, but that event – won by Alabama pro Dustin Connell – was eventually contested in Alabama after extreme winter storms forced its relocation from Grand to Lake Palestine, Texas, and finally to Lake Eufaula.

Grand Lake is a fitting venue for the third-ever REDCREST: It's located 90 miles northeast of Major League Fishing headquarters in Tulsa, and boasts a rich tournament history that includes career-defining moments for multiple anglers in the 41-man field (including inaugural REDCREST champion and Oklahoma native Edwin Evers).

"I was lucky enough to win the first REDCREST (in 2019), and I really want to win it again here at home," Evers admits.

NEXT?

THE GRAND LAKE SETUP

Grand Lake O' the Cherokees is the official name of the lake created with the completion of the Pensacola Dam on the Lower Neosho River in 1940. Grand is a relatively large lake with over 46,000 surface acres and 1,366 miles of shoreline, and an abundance of cover and fishable water make it an immensely popular and productive fishery.

"One of the great things about Grand is that there's just so much to fish," says Oklahoma native Zack Birge, who has collected Toyota Series and Phoenix Bass Fishing League wins on Grand Lake. "It's consistent with rock pretty much everywhere around the entire lake and then you have docks and some isolated wood mixed in. You also have steep banks, creek channels and flats – and all of those will hold fish at times."

Grand Lake is deep by Oklahoma standards, averaging 36.3 feet. According to REDCREST qualifier James Elam (who won a BASS Open on Grand in 2017 and climbed the tournament ranks fishing Grand Lake and other Oklahoma waters), water clarity varies depending on which section of the lake you're fishing.

"You have clear water down by the dam and the water gets dirtier up the lake when it gets flatter and you start to have more mud banks," Elam says. "Then it gets cleaner again when you go further up the river."

By all accounts, the fishing quality has been improving on the fishery, and the late-spring timing of REDCREST should offer hefty largemouth moving shallow after leaving their deeper winter holding areas.

Fisheries biologist Steven Bardin – co-manager of MLF's Fisheries Management Division – describes Grand Lake as a

healthy fishery based on angler studies and electrofishing performed by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

"It's rare to have a lake this size with this size of fish, and it's a testament to the forage base of shad and management of the lake," Bardin says. "One big thing that happened recently is the partnership between the city of Grove and the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation in placing 250 pieces of MossBack Fish Habitat near the popular Honey Creek State Park Ramp. The ramp is one that many five-fish-limit tournaments use, and the habitat was all placed in 10 to 14 feet of water and will serve as places that fish can stage and recover after being released. It'll greatly help the fishery, and the state has an interactive map where anglers can get all of the coordinates of each piece of habitat to load into their electronics and fish."

GRAND LAKE TOURNAMENT HISTORY

Although it's been the site of multiple Toyota Series, BFL and College events, REDCREST 2022 will be the first tournament contested on Grand Lake held under MLF's catch, weigh, immediate-release format and 2-pound scorable-size minimum.

While the 41 REDCREST qualifiers haven't fished Grand under MLF rules, the majority of the anglers in the field are very familiar with it from Toyota Series, BFL and other tour-level competitions. Grand Lake has hosted two Bassmaster Classics won by MLF anglers; Cliff Pace won the event in February of 2013 and Evers took the title in March of 2016.



Pace didn't qualify for REDCREST 2022, but Evers will be competing and has a chance to become the first two-time REDCREST champion after claiming the inaugural event in 2019 on the Upper Mississippi River in Wisconsin.

Kevin VanDam is another angler in the field with past success on Grand Lake (he collected Bassmaster Elite Series wins here in 2007 and 2018). Those events were in a five-fish-limit format and the winning totals equated to roughly a 4-pound per-fish average. It'll be a much different scenario at REDCREST as anglers will count as many scoreable bass over 2 pounds as they can catch in a day.

EVERS EXPECTS REDCREST EXCELLENCE

Evers comes to REDCREST as one of the heavy favorites. The 2019 Bass Pro Tour Angler of the Year is intimately familiar with Grand Lake and lives roughly an hour away in Talala, Oklahoma. Evers is one of a handful of anglers who can refer back to a wealth of success on the fishery, including the 2016 Classic win and a pair of Top 5s on Grand in Elite competition.

Evers' Classic win came in early March, and the Berkley pro believes the fishing will be much better for the entire field because of the late-March timing of REDCREST.

"Late March is the best fishing of the entire year on Grand Lake," he says. "It's a time of year when you can catch fish just about any way you want to, and guys can fish their strengths. It's the best time of year to catch them on a variety of techniques, up and down the whole lake."

While there will likely be a wide variety of baits and depths in play, Evers points to a trio of Grand Lake staples to be the biggest players come late March.

The 46,000-acre sprawl of Grand Lake O' The Cherokees will provide nearly limitless options for the 41 anglers competing in REDCREST 2022.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Edwin Evers already has major-championship pedigree on Grand Lake, and expects REDCREST to produce some of the best fishing of the year there.

"Crankbaits, jerkbaits and jigs will be the primary baits, like they are on Grand every year in the late winter and spring," he says. "It's typical prespawn stuff, and we should be right in that late-winter and prespawn stage. If we get a good warming trend, there could also be some fish spawning, but I believe it will mainly be prespawn patterns."

WEATHER IS THE WILDCARD

As is the case during any spring tournament, the weather will certainly be a factor in the five-day REDCREST competition window. The March 23-27 timing should place the competition just outside of the worst weather of winter, but the potential for a cold snap is always present.

"Grand Lake – and Oklahoma bass fishing in general – is always volatile with the weather changes," Elam says. "It's an even bigger deal in the spring, and we're almost certain to have a cold front come through each week. The guys who do well will be the ones who pay attention to the changes and make the best adjustments to the weather."

Birge will also keep close tabs on the weather in the weeks leading up to the event, as it will significantly affect his strategy.

"Springtime fishing can be terrible or it can be lights-out; it just comes down to how cold it is and if we get any flooding," Birge explains. "If we have consistent weather and no high water, it's going to be great fishing – those bass will be up shallow and ready to eat."

Unpredictable weather notwithstanding, Bardin believes REDCREST week will be heavily focused on bass preparing to spawn, with the possibility of some fish spawning, and a small percentage settling into a postspawn pattern.

PHOTO BY JEFF SAWAGE

Oklahoma pro James Elam expects varying degrees of water clarity during REDCREST: clear water on the lower end and varying degrees of color the higher you go upriver.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

"March is prime time in the central parts of the country. There could be fish in all phases of the spawn – anglers should be able to fish a variety of different techniques," Bardin says. "The upper end of the lake will be dirtier and warm up faster than lower on the lake, where the water is fairly clear and stays cold longer. The fish down the lake will likely be a few weeks behind the other fish for spawning."

PATTERN PREDICTIONS

There are generally many ways to catch bass in the spring, but Elam agrees with Evers' assessment that a small handful of baits will be the most productive at REDCREST.

"Jigs and crankbaits are the meat and potatoes on Grand," Elam says. "Those baits will catch fish all year long; you just have to adjust sizes and weights for different seasons. This tournament should be shallow-diving crankbaits and square-bills and fishing jigs up shallow around the bank. Two other possibilities are jerkbaits and spinnerbaits."

Birge agrees with Elam, especially about the viability of jig fishing to catch a bunch of quality bass.

"It's a safe bet to say that a crankbait and jig will be the two most dominant baits," he opines. "They'll catch a bunch of fish, and if it warms up nicely, fishing shallow with a jig could be the way to win it."

Elam believes that any section of the lake could produce the winning fish and that there are groups of potential winning fish swimming from one end of the lake to the other

"I could see the tournament being won anywhere on Grand Lake; it just depends on which area proves to be the hottest while we're there," he says. "The lake fishes very big, and it's a place you can run patterns to catch fish. I think we'll see guys spread out up and down the whole lake. I don't think you'll see groups of guys gathered in [just] one or two areas."



Grand Lake's productivity and abundance of cover have made it one of the most highly regarded tournament fisheries in the country.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

THE STATE OF GRAND LAKE

Lakes go through cycles – peaks and valleys in fish populations and fishing quality – and the three Oklahomans in the field believe that Grand Lake is in an excellent point in its cycle as a top-flight tournament fishery.

“It’s in great shape right now. The lake is full of 2 1/2- to 3 1/2-pound bass with some bigger ones mixed in,” Evers says. “There are plenty of quality fish in there, and I’d say a good day on Grand in late March would be 15 scorable bass over 2 pounds.”

Grand receives plenty of fishing pressure from recreational and tournament anglers alike, and both Birge and Elam have paid attention to tournament results to gauge the fishing quality.

“I haven’t fished Grand as much regularly as I used to, but I still watch what’s going on,” Elam says. “It looks like it’s fishing pretty good this last year. It’s not to the level it was years ago, but after a few down years, it’s picking back up.”

Elam believes that coaxing quality bites will be critical because big numbers of fish are not as likely to be available in late March.

“Late winter and early spring are not the best times of year for sheer numbers of fish, but we’ll see some nice ones caught,” he adds. “I’m guessing a day with seven or eight bass will get you over 20 pounds and that’ll be enough to advance to the next round. Then, whoever makes the right

calls in the Championship Round and gets on them will take the win. I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s someone who barely gets into the Knockout and Championship rounds and then puts it all together after the weights are zeroed on the final day.”

Birge also believes Grand is on an upward swing for fishing quality based on recent tournament results.

“This fall was really good; [people] were catching solid bags,” he says of recent history on Grand, including from the Phoenix Bass Fishing League Okie Division finale in September. “I think the lake is getting better and we’re in a good part of the cycle right now.”

Recent science seems to back up those tournament results. Bardin is also part of the committee that decides the minimum weight for each Bass Pro Tour event. The goal is to showcase each fishery while setting the minimum for each tournament to be obtainable – but not easy.

“A 14-inch fish on Grand Lake is the minimum legal keeper and, on average, weighs 1.42 pounds,” Bardin explains. “Through the most recent data available, we found that 74 percent of the legal fish in the lake were over 2 pounds, with fish between 2 and 3 pounds accounting for 35 percent of the fish. The lake is very healthy and is a testament to the forage base and resiliency after two years of spring flooding. Those floods allowed for great recruitment of young bass after the spawn. There will be a huge influx of catchable bass in the coming years.”

Zack Birge is one of a handful of Oklahoma pros who expects Grand Lake to fish large during the late-March time frame of REDCREST.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

GRAND LAKE O' THE CHEROKEES



ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROMAN

REDCREST 2022 COMPETITORS*

- | | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Jacob Wheeler | 11. Skeet Reese | 21. Mark Rose | 31. Alton Jones |
| 2. Ott DeFoe | 12. Mark Davis | 22. Kevin VanDam | 32. Anthony Gagliardi |
| 3. Michael Neal | 13. Jesse Wiggins | 23. Luke Clausen | 33. Zack Birge |
| 4. Brent Ehrler | 14. Dustin Connell | 24. Takahiro Omori | 34. Brandon Coulter |
| 5. Justin Lucas | 15. Wesley Strader | 25. James Elam | 35. Russ Lane |
| 6. Stephen Browning | 16. Bryan Thrift | 26. John Cox | 36. Jordan Lee |
| 7. Alton Jones Jr. | 17. David Dudley | 27. Greg Vinson | 37. Edwin Evers |
| 8. Bobby Lane | 18. Fletcher Shryock | 28. Brent Chapman | 38. Andy Morgan |
| 9. Jeff Sprague | 19. Andy Montgomery | 29. Josh Bertrand | 39. Scott Suggs |
| 10. Gerald Spohrer | 20. Shin Fukae | 30. Adrian Avena | 40. Casey Ashley |
| | | | 41. Bradley Roy |

*Based on 2021 Bass Pro Tour qualification.

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Preparing For PRESPAWN

WINTER CHILL is yielding to spring warmth. A fresh season is upon us, and bass ambitions are high. Here's how pros prepare for the prespawn period on their home bodies of water.

By Mike Pehanich

PHOTO BY ENGBRETSON
UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHY
BY BRANDON ROWAN



he promise of prespawn sustains bass anglers during the winter doldrums. Dreams of a hot bite on a cold February day breed optimism and inspire the kind of preparation that is the secret ingredient in nearly every formula for success.

But preparation entails more than a rod tip repair and a freshly spooled reel. It calls for knowledge, a game plan...and more.

Here's how five pros from the Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit size up regional waters as they prepare for this period of wondrous awakening.

DUSTIN CONNELL

Clanton, Alabama

PRESPAWN WATERS: Coosa River and its chain of reservoirs

Dustin Connell honed his bass angling skills as a guide on Alabama's Coosa River impoundments, but his prespawn preparation stretches well beyond home waters.

KEY CONDITIONS/HABITAT

"In the Southeast, when I think 'prespawn,' I think of that three-week window before bass slide up from their wintertime haunts," Connell explains. "In a clear, deep reservoir, the haunts could be in 40- to 50-foot depths. In Georgia's Lake Lanier, it may be 35 to 40 feet, 25 feet in the Coosa River lakes, 22 feet in Lake Eufaula."

During the early prespawn, masses of bass migrate from deep holding areas up to bedding areas. Connell leans on his electronics to find promising flats adjacent to deep water.

"The key prespawn word for me is 'staging,'" he says. "Bass are getting ready to slide up to areas where they'll spawn. They stage near creek channel bends that meet spawning flats, the backs of pockets and creek arms, a flat with stumps or bluff ends that meet a flat or a run of docks. When I won REDCREST on Lake Eufaula last February, those fish were hardcore prespawn fish in the last week of prespawn. They were staging, getting ready to spawn, on 8- to 10-foot brush piles near deep water."

He looks for suspended fish as well as transition areas.

"A lot of times in clear water, bass suspend," he explains. "They just float around on points, waiting for conditions to stabilize so they can slide up."

With sub-50 water temperatures, a bass' metabolism is slow.



"THERE ARE TWO DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES OF BASS - SHAD EATERS AND BREAM EATERS."

catch a real big one."

TIPS & TRICKS:

"Often we get a ton of rain in February through April. When the water is really cold and muddy, a 3/4-ounce solid chartreuse spinnerbait with big No. 6 or No. 7 Colorado blades can be a life saver. You can cover water much better with a spinnerbait than a jig.

"On lakes like Eufaula or Florida waters, I target the outside grass edges, secondary points as well as the edges of step flats."

"When the temperature reaches 53 to 56 degrees, it's a wake-up call to bass," Connell says. "It presses their restart button. They're ready to slide up from the depths to those 12- or 15-foot areas, and they're more apt to bite. That's when your best fishing happens."

FAVORITE BAITS AND TECHNIQUES

Connell links lure selection to water color.

"If the water is clear, I'll fish a jerkbait or slow-roll a swimbait, keeping the bait above their heads," he says. "My boat will be sitting in deep water, but I'm making long casts into 8 to 10 feet of water, trying to get fish as they are moving up."

He prefers translucent and shad colors in clear water; white and white/chartreuse in darkened water.

When bass move up further into shallow dingy water, his go-to baits are a black/blue vibrating jig, trailed with a green pumpkin Googan Squad Saucy Swimmer, and a spinnerbait. He matches both of these to bluegill colors.

KEEP IN MIND THAT ...

"There are two different personalities of bass - shad eaters and bream eaters," Connell says. "Bream offer bass a bigger meal this time of year. Big prespawn bass are eating bluegill. I'm throwing bream-colored baits in (shallow) dingy water, trying to



DUSTIN'S DINGY WATER GO-TO :

Black/blue Googan Squad Clickbait paired with a Googan Squad Saucy Swimmer in green pumpkin blue. :

ALTON JONES, JR.

Waco, Texas

PRESPAWN WATERS: Lake Whitney, Texas

Lake Whitney is the home water and favorite lake of Alton Jones Jr. The 17,000-acre impoundment is a highland, clear-water fishery.

"It has a lot of rock, but not a lot of cover," he says. "It fishes similarly to Grand Lake."

KEY CONDITIONS/HABITAT

Large flats are likely to draw the most fish and carry the heaviest spawn.

"These are your major sanctuaries," Jones says. "I'm looking for large populations of fish, so I go to the biggest flat and start there. Flats are big nurseries. Grass grows best on them. They have bushes, stumps, lots of habitat. Flats make the world go round."

Prespawn strategy on any water hinges on several big factors, but water temperature leads the list.

"If the lake has a lot of backwater areas, a hot day isn't even necessary," Jones says. "All you need is sunshine to warm the fish. Even a nice sunny 50-degree day will heat them up."

On lakes without shallow backwaters for spawning, he looks for flats on a north bank open to a warming south wind.

"Across the country, those early season south winds blow winter out," Jones explains. "In Texas, south winds carrying warm air from the Gulf of Mexico are warming north banks, which may be 7 to 8 degrees warmer than areas on the south end of the lake. A large grassy flat open to a south wind is a recipe for a phenomenal day of fishing."

Jones looks for prime entry points to the flats, stair steps or pathways into prime spawning areas: "Small, subtle ditches are highways for these fish – if you can find them," he says.

KEEP IN MIND THAT ...

There will be a wave of fresh, unpressured early spawners before lake water reaches textbook spawning temperature.

"First, I'm looking for that initial group of fish coming up," Jones says. "These are usually your biggest fish – and your dumbest. They've been deep and inactive all throughout winter."



"FLATS MAKE THE WORLD GO ROUND."

.....
have the 3.8-inch version tied on. It's great for kicker fish."

TIPS & TRICKS:

The first wave of spawning fish gives you an opportunity for your day of a lifetime or your fish of a lifetime.

Best bites often come in the afternoon as water temperatures climb.

"I would rather have the water temperature trending upward. The trend is more important than the temperature itself."

FAVORITE BAITS AND TECHNIQUES

In the mid-50s, aggressive prespawn fish succumb to faster presentations with big spinnerbaits and bladed jigs or to jigs pitched to cover. As water warms, bass get moody and amorous and seem to lose interest in moving baits.

"Sixty degrees is the magic number," Jones posits. "At times it may be even 57 or 58. At that point, I think there is no such thing as a bait worked 'too slow.'"

His key "slow-down baits" are as follows: a 5- to 6-inch Senko-style worm fished with a light weight to ensure a quick drop and to keep the bait on the bed; a Geecrack Baobab Hog (a beaver-style bait with large twin tails) and the Geecrack Bellows Gill, a corrugated bluegill-shaped bait with a writhing, crawling action.

"The Bellows Gill is a big-bodied bait and a great bluegill imitator," says Jones, who Texas-rigs the bait with a 5/0 straight-shank hook. "I always



ALTON'S SUPERB SOFT PLASTICS :

Geecrack Yam Stick 5.8" in bug bomb, Geecrack Bellows Gill 3.8" in green pumpkin candy gill and Geecrack Baobab Hog EX in black/blue.

BRANDON MCMILLAN

Clewiston, Florida

PRESPAWN WATERS: Lake Okeechobee and South Florida waters

Bass spawn from October through May in the home waters of Floridian Brandon McMillan, who often finds bass in prespawn, spawn and postspawn stages concurrently over a six-month span.

"On Lake Okeechobee, you're not fishing typical prespawn patterns," he warns. "You can't tell by the moon phase whether they're going to be on or off the beds. Sometimes fishing is better on a new moon than a full moon. It seems to change week to week.

"That's why I concentrate on flipping mats."

KEY CONDITIONS/HABITAT

Florida waters like Okeechobee are famous for their aquatic plant life. They present seemingly endless expanses of bass-attracting greenery, including matted grass, pads and cattails, reeds and other forms of emergent vegetation.

"Bass group up on shell beds and other hard spots in the grass," he says. "You can catch fish on ChatterBaits, spinnerbaits or lipless crankbaits if you can find those spots. But those fish aren't usually the giants you're looking for here."

For the "giants," he takes a "bed fishing" approach, but that doesn't necessarily mean he's sight-fishing for spawning



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

"NOT ALL 'BASSY-LOOKING' SPOTS ARE EQUAL."

fish. Rather, he's targeting high-percent-age fish-holding areas, ideally with visible objects like laydowns, rocks, dock poles, brush piles and other cover with conspicuous bass appeal.

KEEP IN MIND THAT ...

Not all "bassy-looking" spots are equal.

"You might see 30 good-looking areas and find that 25 of them aren't so good," McMillan quips. "If you think you're going to catch 30 pounds in an area with nobody around, forget it.

"The rule of thumb on Okeechobee is that, as big as it is, only four to six areas hold the quality, tournament-winning fish. During a tournament, 10 guys are working each spot. When two come out, three come in. Boat traffic and fishing pressure can drive fish off the beds. They look for nearby cover to stick their heads under to feel a little more protected."

FAVORITE BAITS AND TECHNIQUES

McMillan designed the MacDaddy Craw for Bruiser Baits with thick mats in mind.

"It's a small, compact bait made with just the right amount of plastic," he says. "You want a streamlined bait with the right amount of plastic to hold a 4/0 hook but not so much as to risk a bad hookset."

He employs 3/4- to 2-ounce Flat Out Tungsten Flipping Weights pegged with a Flat Out Tungsten Bobber Stop to punch through the thick stuff.

"I use the lightest weight I can get away with, but I don't want to have to shake or jiggle to get the bait through the mat," he adds. "I want it to drop straight down."

Between prime pitching locations, McMillan will fish a swim jig, frog or toad.

For bass in the "more extreme prespawn," he likes a black-and-gold 5/8-ounce YoZuri Rattl'n Vibe, a lipless crankbait that he works over shell beds or hard spots in the grass or at the edge of cattails or reed heads.

"I grind the Vibe on the bottom like a crankbait," he says. "It stands up on the bottom when you pause your retrieve."

TIPS & TRICKS:

Use a straight-shank 4/0 Spearpoint flipping hook when pitching plastics. The Spearpoint's unconventional design increases hook-up and landing ratios. "It's not a traditional round-bend hook," McMillan says. "Once you get that hook point in, it's hard for the bass to roll out of it."

Secure your flipping hook with a snell knot.



BRANDON'S BEST BAITS

Yo-Zuri Rattl'n Vibe in gold-black and Bruiser Baits MacDaddy Craw in junebug.



NICK'S PRESPAWN FAVORITES

Bill Lewis Rat-L-Traps in red craw and chrome/black back.



COLD WATER HAMMER

The V&M Big LeBoom Spinnerbait in citrus. Nick LeBrun designed this bait to put tournament-winning fish in the boat.

NICK LEBRUN

Bossier City, Louisiana

PRESPAWN WATERS: Toledo Bend, Sam Rayburn

With fabled waters like Toledo Bend and Sam Rayburn close to home, Pro Circuit angler Nick LeBrun gears up for big fish in big numbers as winter fades.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

KEY CONDITIONS/HABITAT

"I always look for a form of vegetation on a spawning flat or bank," LeBrun says. "The fish pile up on the edges of hydrilla or milfoil in 4 to 7 feet of water."

In February, the bigger schools of "winning" fish gather in the middle or back ends of a creek arm.

"That main-lake bite won't last long," he warns. "When you find a school mid-creek or back, there will be more fish and the bigger females. And these areas will reload."

KEEP IN MIND THAT ...

There's a broad window to the bass spawn. "Over the years, guys have come to think that all the bass in Louisiana and Texas spawn on the first full moon of February, up shallow ... and it's over," LeBrun says. "A lot do spawn in mid-February, yet I'm often sight fishing on June 1. A lot of fish are still spawning on the main lake in May."

FAVORITE BAITS AND TECHNIQUES

LeBrun gets long mileage out of Bill Lewis Rat-L-Traps in the prespawn period. Preferred colors are chrome and red

crawfish. He changes out factory hooks with No. 4 Hayabusa TBL 930 trebles.

"The key is to make long casts, because every time you catch one bass, you move that school closer to the boat," says LeBrun, who registered a 29-pound, 2-ounce Day 1 total on a craw-colored 'Trap during the first event of the Pro Circuit season on Sam Rayburn in 2019 en route to a second-place finish. "If they're in 5 feet of water with 3-foot-high vegetation, I'm reeling the bait high. I just want to skirt the grass and make contact."

He cautions against ripping the bait too hard to free it from vegetation.

"The smaller the rip the better because the water is too cold for them to chase," he says. "A short 'power punch' of a rip will trigger them. It's almost like bringing that bait through a bear trap."

In cold-water conditions, he relies on the 3/4-ounce Big LeBoom Spinnerbait, a long-armed bait that he

designed for V&M Baits. Three years ago, a prototype LeBoom led him to that runner-up finish at Rayburn.

"That long arm gives the bait a little different wiggle and frequency with a single No. 6 Colorado blade," he says. "It helps me get fish positioned 8 to 12 feet deep or better."

TIPS & TRICKS:

A lot of bass in early spawning waves are night feeders. "You'll get them at daylight," he says. "I know they bite then."

In high-water conditions, he fishes sunken trees, bushes or docks. "The higher the water, the more bass move to the bank," LeBrun says. "Sometimes I'm fishing an inside grass line. If it's a dock-and-rock lake in Alabama, they'll set up on the first couple docks."

"A LOT OF FISH ARE STILL SPAWNING ON THE MAIN LAKE IN MAY. THAT'S A HIDDEN SECRET."

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JEFF'S JERKBAIT

Strike King KVD 300 Jerkbait in pro blue. Jeff Sprague utilizes the twitching motion of this bait to draw reaction strikes from suspended bass.



THE WORKHORSES

The 1/2-ounce Strike King Red Eye Shad is a staple bait for Jeff Sprague during the prespawn period. Colors pictured are chrome sexy shad and chili craw.

JEFF SPRAGUE

Wills Point, Texas

PRESPAWN WATERS: Lake Tawakoni, Lake Fork, Lake Cypress Springs, Lake Bob Sandlin in East Texas

BPT star Jeff Sprague prepares for prespawn activity on a wide range of waters east of Dallas. Here, spawning activity stretches from late February through May.

"All the bodies of water I fish in spring are different," Sprague says. "They all have grass, except for Tawakoni, but they're constantly changing. The grass will die off due to high water or low water or chemical spray. Fishing different lakes and conditions keeps my skills up to speed."

KEY CONDITIONS/HABITAT

During the early prespawn, bass like to slide up onto flats and absorb heat from grass or shallow rock. As each wave of bass transitions from prespawn to spawning mode, they move from steeper banks into shallow, flatter areas.

"They let the sun warm the grass or rock and translate that heat to their body to warm themselves up," Sprague explains.

Texas bass bed on a wide range of lake bottoms.

"Bass have so many places to spawn on a Texas lake - from gravel mix to hard clay to grass patches," he says. "They'll even spawn on top of logs and stumps. The key to bed selection is protection from the wind and enough sunlight to incubate the eggs."

KEEP IN MIND THAT ...

Water temperatures will vary from the surface to the bottom of the water column. "The fish want sun, but when the



"BASS ARE LETHARGIC WHEN IT'S COLD, BUT THEY WON'T PASS UP A CRAWFISH MEAL."

water is warming up, surface temperature may read 49 or 50 degrees while the water below is much colder," Sprague says. "Fish may sit high up in the water column."

FAVORITE BAITS AND TECHNIQUES

A 1/2-ounce Strike King Red Eye Shad is his workhorse in late winter and early spring. He fishes it over and around grass, gravel and shallow rock.

Chrome sexy shad and crawfish colors predominate.

"Crawfish are coming out of their holes at this time," he says. "They have dark colors. That's why your browns, dark blues and greens, dark reds, black and black-and-blue combinations are early spring colors.

When bass prefer "slow," he likes a football jig with a Strike King Rage Craw or Rage Menace trailer in black-and-red or black-and-blue colors.

"I drag the football jig extremely slowly in these conditions," he says. "Bass are

lethargic when it's cold, but they won't pass up a crawfish meal if you put that jig in front of them."

Another effective early-season tool is a Strike King KVD 300 suspending jerkbait.

"It goes deeper than the 200, and you can get it into their zone when you know how deep they're setting," Sprague says. "A jerkbait is also a reaction bait. When you twitch it, bass react to it."

TIPS & TRICKS:

"Conditions dictate my bait selection more than water temperature," he says. "If you have confidence in a bait and have it in your hands in the right conditions, you can manufacture bites and have a decent day."

"Spring fishing can change hour by hour. Cold fronts are your worst enemy. High pressure, followed by cold temperatures and north winds, can change fishing big time." ■

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DROP-SHOTTING

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

As told by John Murray

PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

The best advice I can give another angler trying to get better at drop-shotting is to use it in a lot of places that other anglers don't. I throw it in a foot of water or 125 feet of water. I throw it in clear water and dirty water. I throw it in timber and in grass, off points and on flats. If you think a bass is there, try a drop-shot.

If you put limits on when and where you use a tactic – like drop-shotting – you're just putting limits on yourself and on your knowledge and skills with that technique. There's no better way to learn and to catch a lot of fish than by realizing that there are no limits; just restrictions we put on ourselves as anglers.





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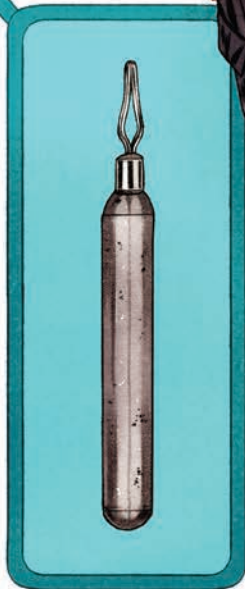
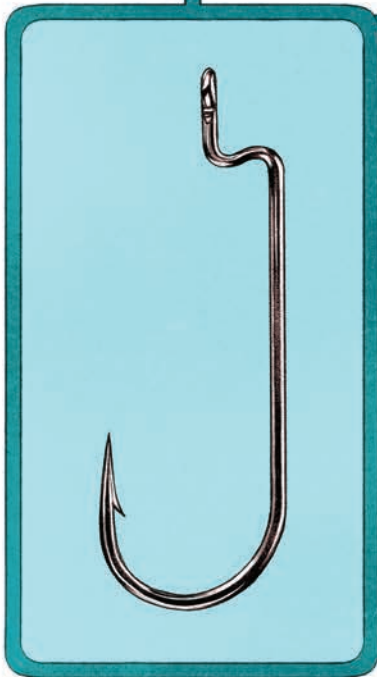
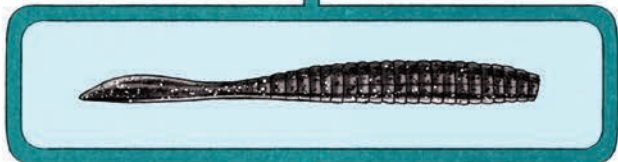
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HISTORY

I first heard about drop-shotting in the late 1990s, and I have to admit that I dismissed it at first. I thought it was a light-line, finesse technique that was only good for numbers – a small bass method. Of course, my goal in tournaments is to catch bigger-than-average bass, so I figured drop-shotting was something I could ignore.

Then, in 1999, I was fishing a tournament on Lake Oroville in California and Japanese angler Seiji Kato pulled up. I had caught a fish or two on a jig, but nothing special. Kato came in and caught a bass on every cast. I started to look at the technique very differently. A couple months later, on Lake Pleasant in Arizona, I was throwing a big jig with little success. Brett Hite pulled up and caught a limit practically under my boat. That's when I added drop-shotting to my arsenal.



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL HOEVELER

Brett had learned the technique from Aaron Martens at an earlier tournament. Brett showed me what Aaron showed him, and he took me shopping for the gear I'd need. I quickly realized that drop-shotting was not just a numbers technique – that you could catch big fish on it, too. I've been a drop-shotter ever since.

I think the primary virtue of drop-shotting is that it catches fish for you. With other soft plastics methods, you have to

provide all the action, detect the strike and set the hook. With a drop-shot, the fish does a lot of that for you. When you fish a drop-shot like I do, sharp hooks will almost set themselves.

HIGHLIGHTS

In 2003, I won the Bassmaster Open Championship on Toledo Bend Reservoir (Louisiana-Texas) and drop-shotting was a huge part of that win. You think of Toledo Bend as a power-fishing lake, but each morning I was able to get a good starting limit on a drop-shot. Without those fish, I never would have won the tournament.

WHEN

Drop-shotting is such a versatile technique that there really is no peak time to use it. It works all year long, every season on the calendar, and for every kind of bass. I absolutely always have a drop-shot rigged up and ready to go every time I launch my boat.

If you develop some good drop-shotting skills, you can catch bass virtually anytime, anywhere, from California to Florida and Washington to Maine. It's even a great method when you're fishing dirty water. It's always a viable technique, though it may not be the best technique under some conditions.

If I had to pick one area where the drop-shot shines the most, I'd say it's on northern smallmouth bass fisheries. As I said, I've always got at least one drop-shot rod rigged up in my boat, and it's usually going to be on my deck no matter where or when I'm fishing. In smallmouth waters, it's usually going to be in my hand all day.

TACKLE

My go-to drop-shot rod is a 7-foot, 2-inch Sixgill Scyth spinning rod (SCYTHS702M). It's rated as medium action, but it's very close to medium-heavy, and it allows me to get a good hook set on soft plastics that I'm rigging self-weedless rather than with an exposed hook.

My reel is a Sixgill Dreadnaught Series 2000 spinning reel with a 5.2:1 gear ratio. I spool it with 10- or 12-pound-test Berkley NanoFil as my main line and I use a surgeon's knot to connect it to a 4- or 5-foot length of 10-pound-test fluorocarbon. My leader – the length from my bait to the sinker – is usually 10 to 12 inches. This is the combo I use for about 80 percent of my drop-shotting. If I'm using an exposed hook rig, I'll go to a slightly lighter rod.

I use Ark Fishing No Chip Tungsten Tear Drop-Shot Weights and Ark Skinny Drop-Shot Weights (cylinder shaped for grass). About 75 percent of the time, I'm using a 1/4-ounce sinker, but I've gone as heavy as 1 1/2 ounces in deep water or heavy current.

My hook is an old school Gamakatsu offset worm hook that I've used a long time with a lot of continuous success. A lot of great drop-shotters – like Aaron Martens – prefer a straight-shank hook, but that offset hook has been really good for me.

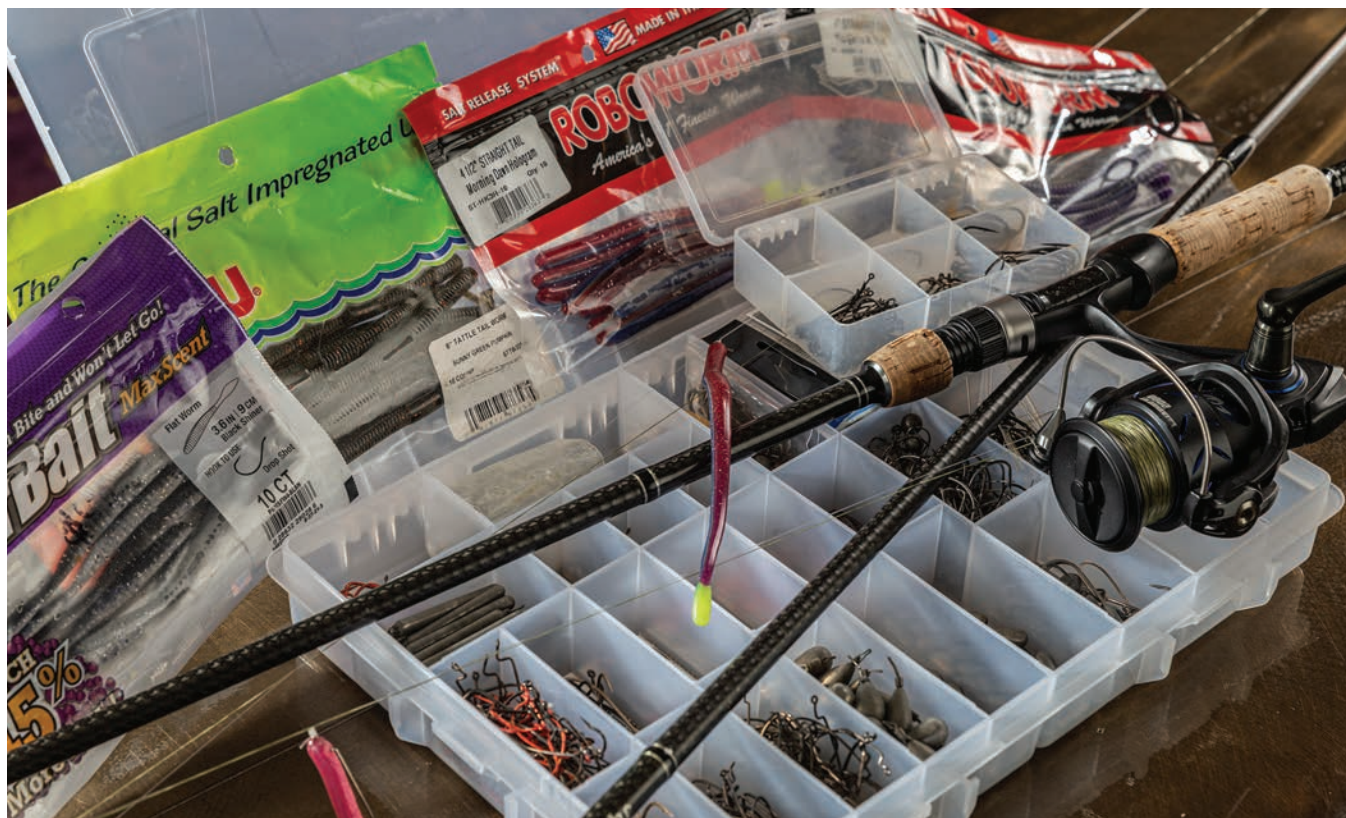


PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

LURES

I use three basic baits when drop-shotting: a Roboworm Straight Tail Worm (4 1/2 to 7 inches), a Berkley MaxScent Hit Worm or Flat Worm, and a 4-inch Keitech Easy Shiner. I generally like natural colors for all of them but will go to extremely gaudy colors in dirty water.

Straight-tail worms like the Roboworm are my bread and butter when drop-shotting. I like the MaxScent baits when the water's cold. I think the scent really helps in cold water. I use the Easy Shiner with a heavy sinker in deeper water and just reel it steadily back to the boat, almost like crankbait fishing.

If I'm in Florida or somewhere with a lot of shallow grass, I like a Zoom Finesse Worm or Trick Worm in june bug or red bug. It's done really well for me.

HOW

A lot of people think of drop-shotting as a vertical technique, but I rarely just drop the bait under my boat. With today's modern forward-facing sonar, I'm usually making a long cast out on a point or flat and letting the bait go to the bottom. From there, I like to drag it back to the boat. I shake the bait very little. Dragging it across the bottom gives it plenty of action and keeps it looking natural.

I've seen several times that the length of leader made a big difference. I generally stick with 10 to 12 inches, but there have been a couple of instances when another angler in my boat using a much longer or shorter leader caught a lot more fish than me until I matched their leader length. Nevertheless, I generally start at 10 to 12 inches and only change if that's not working. And I'm much more likely to experiment in tournament practice than I am on a competition day or when I'm out fun fishing. ■



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SHANGLIE



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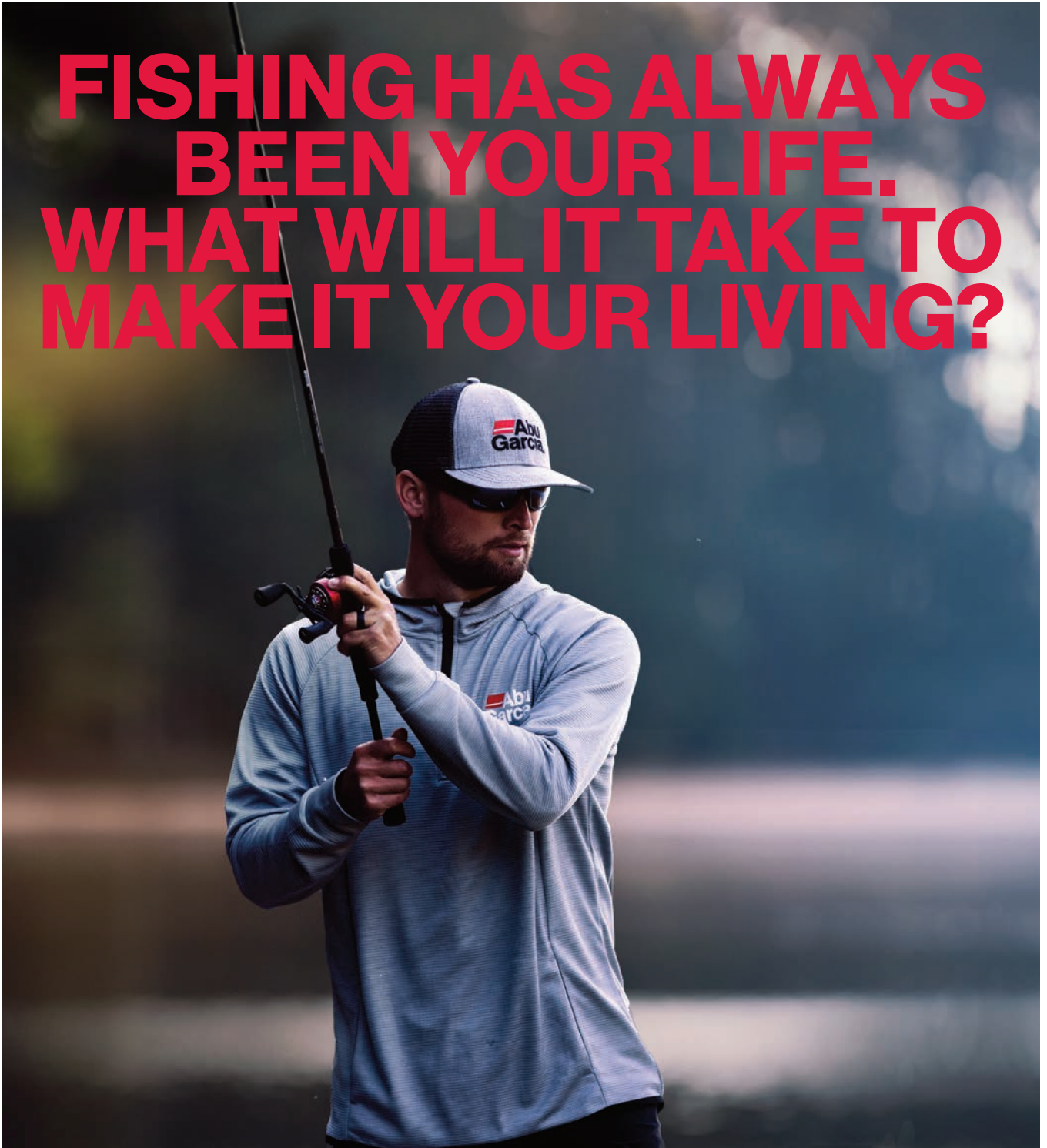
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THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES,
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PHOTO BY BOB MATSUURA



BERKLEY POWERBAIT GILLY

By Matt Williams
PHOTOS BY BRANDON ROWAN

If swimbaits were thought of as works of art, the Berkley PowerBait Gilly might be regarded as a Picasso. Designed with heavy input from bass pro Mike Iaconelli, the Gilly closely resembles the Japanese-made Gill Flat introduced a few years back. It has a wealth of innovation in its corner that lends to high performance and versatility.

Plenty of other folks think so, too. The tricked-out swimbait won Best of Show and Best Freshwater Soft Lure at ICAST 2021.

First Impressions

The longer I fooled around with the Gilly, the more I discovered small details to appreciate about the design. Plenty of thought went into this one. It has the profile of a small panfish and brims with functional features.

- The soft plastic head is molded with eyes, gill plates and pectoral fins that serve as rudders to help promote a fluid swimming action.
- There are two distinctive lines on each gill plate – one straight and one angled downward. The lines

represent guides to follow for rigging. Follow the downward angle when side-rigging using a weightless hook or weighted swimbait hook. The center line is for Texas rigging or weightless “flat” rigging over pads and other shallow cover.

- The upper half of the head is hollow, except for a solid section around the lips. The cavity makes the bait lighter on top and helps promote a vertical stance, even when the Gilly is falling or sitting idle on bottom.
- The hollow chamber is slitted so you can add material to enhance buoyancy or speed up the fall rate without hampering the action.
- The bait’s midsection is die cut with mushy scales that create a lifelike feel and fluid swimming action.
- Small side rudders compliment the authentic tail section and help give it an enticing swagger.
- You’ll notice a small indentation below the bottom lip. This is for inserting nail weights or line-thru tubes for use with a stinger hook in open-water situations.

In Action

With all the ICAST hype over the Gilly, I was excited to tie one on to see what all the hoopla was about. I learned pretty quickly that it’s a bona fide hot rod designed to go places and do things most other sunfish imitators can’t, mainly because it can be rigged and modified a variety of ways for optimum performance using multiple techniques in skinny water or deep, clear or slightly stained, and around dense cover.

Interestingly, most rigging methods require hooking the bait through the side. You wouldn’t think a swimbait would operate properly with an EWG jabbed through its rib cage, but this one will so long as the hook is at the proper angle.

Side-rigged weightless or with a weighted swimbait hook, the Gilly has the upright swagger of real forage when retrieved slow, fast or crawled/hopped across bottom. It’ll even turn on itself when you kill it. Use the angled line guide on the gill plate for these hooking methods.

HOLLOW POUCH:

The top portion of the back features a dual-purpose hollow pouch that helps keep the bait vertical in the water column while also providing a slitted cavity for inserting materials to add weight or buoyancy.



RUDDERS:

Pectoral, side and tail rudders help promote the lifelike swimming action.

GILL PLATE GUIDES:

Berkley incorporated lines into the mold along the gill plate to create a guide to follow when side-, flat- or Texas rigging. Instructions with explanatory diagrams are included in the packaging.



Follow the center line guide and the Gilly swims on its side. Called “flat rigging,” this is a fun way to wake it over pads and matted vegetation. Pump it off bottom and it simulates a wounded or dying bait fish. For deeper applications, fish it on a jig head with the hook facing up or add a slip sinker.

The options don't end there. The 90 or 110 model Gilly works great as a bladed jig trailer. If you really want to get nasty, rig the 90 model on a drop-shot and toss it in front of bedding fish.

Final Thoughts

If there's a more versatile soft swim-bait out there, I haven't seen it. My guess is the Gilly is going to be one of those baits anglers will become increasingly confident in the more they fish it. It's available in lifelike colors and three sizes (3.5, 4.2 and 5.2 inches) to simulate baitfish of various ages.

Performance Tips

- Proper hook style and size are key when rigging. Berkley recommends using EWG-style hooks for weightless side-rigging and Texas rigging, but I found that using a weightless swimbait hook with a spring keeper helped reduce slippage and fouling and prolonged the life of the bait.

- If you go with an EWG hook, try out VMC's ringed wide gap. The hook comes with a welded stainless steel eye ring that optimizes the bait's action while reducing hook leverage during the battle.
- Don't discard the bait right away if the nose tears. Bite off the damaged part and save those small- and medium-sized Gillies for use as a trailer on a bladed jig.
- Add weight or buoyancy by inserting material into the slitted cavity on the bait's back or insert a nail weight just below the bottom lip.
- Reference the fold-out instructions for rigging tips.

Applications

- A good choice when bass are feeding on bluegills, crappie, warmouth, tilapia or big gizzard shad.
- Should be killer around all phases of the spawn and when sight-fishing bedding bass.
- Fish it weightless in skinny water over shallow grass or pads.
- Wake through pads like a frog.
- Swim it shallow or mid-range using a weighted swimbait hook.
- Rig it line-thru using a pop rivet, swimbait tube and exposed treble hook for open water situations.

- Use it as a trailer to give bladed jigs some bulk.
- Fish the 90 series deep or around beds on a drop-shot.
- Swim it around bream beds.
- Target suspended fish rigged on a jig head.

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IS THIS NEW JAPANESE-INSPIRED RIG THE NEXT BIG THING IN TOURNAMENT BASS FISHING OR ANOTHER SOON-TO-BE-FORGOTTEN GIMMICK?

By Sean Ostruszka
PHOTOS BY JUSTIN ONSLOW

Matthew Stefan didn't need to even watch the video. The thumbnail was all he needed to see. Surfing YouTube back in October 2021, the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro had finished watching a video when something in the thumbnail collage of suggested videos caught his eye.

"I saw this worm in an 'S' shape with the line through it," Stefan recalls. "Immediately, I thought, 'Why has no one thought of this before?' I knew it was such a unique concept."

The video had been posted only a few days prior by the user HiroSans TV, and it only had a few thousand views. Stefan didn't care. He clicked it and realized two things: 1) He had absolutely no clue what the narrator was talking about while discussing this odd rig since it was spoken in Japanese; and 2) When he watched the underwater footage, he saw a worm move in a way he'd never seen before.

"It was potentially the most lifelike action from a lure I'd ever seen in the water," Stefan says.

A statement like that usually makes an angler pause.

On one hand, something new and more lifelike than any other lure or rig before it obviously means more fish in the boat, especially for an angler willing to be an early adopter of it. Just look at what Brent Ehrler did with the Neko rig, secretly being an early adopter before most had ever heard of it and using it to win multiple tournaments. Other offerings like the Alabama rig, drop-shot and ChatterBait come to mind, as well as so many other now-common rigs we use all the time. At one point in time, they were new, better and/or more lifelike than anything else before it.

On the other hand, it's almost cliché with how many lures and rigs in the past that have been touted as "the most lifelike," only to turn out to be gimmicks (Ahem, the Banjo Minnow, anyone?). That goes double for the odd rigs often pioneered in Japan. For every drop-shot, wacky rig and Neko, there are so many more that turn out to be all hype. And still others that turn out to be more niche, like the spybait, flick shake or giant glide baits.

Which begs the question: With the Inu rig suddenly blowing up all over YouTube and other video platforms, where does it fall? Is it a gimmick, niche or the next big thing set to take the tournament-fishing world by storm in 2022?

THE INU RIG



WHAT IS THE INU RIG?

Even in researching sources for this article, this was the question many top pros asked us, and it's probably the question you're asking, as well.

Basically, the Inu rig (often seen as "inurig" online) is a straight worm rigged so the line runs through the body in such a way that the worm can lie straight at rest but can be compacted it into an 'S' shape when twitched. Why is this important? Well, the rig is typically cast out and fished like you would a wacky rig, letting it sink slowly with its body straight and fluttering like any other straight worm (of course, due to various rigging options, there are other ways to fish it, too). However, because of how the worm is rigged, upon twitching your rod, the straight worm suddenly coils into an 'S' and then darts forward, creating the profile of something trying to escape a predator.

Because of its relative newness, how the worm is rigged continues to vary and be tinkered with. Even Stefan says he's still toying with all the different ways to rig it in order to maximize hook-up percentage, action, etc.

There are some standards, though.

Pieces of surgical tubing or even stirring straws are inserted into the worm three times at specific places and at 30-degree angles that will allow the line to run through the body of the worm so it can coil into the 'S' shape. Before the line is run through the tubes, you slide a single hook on the line, which will then sit on the nose of the worm when rigged.

Once the line is run through the three tubes, at the bottom needs to be a "stopper" – something on which to tie the line to stop it from going back through the worm. Some use an O-ring; others have toyed with a single or treble hook, and still others using swivels with blades for a whole different look and new presentation.

SET TO EXPLODE ... OR FIZZLE?

Timing can be everything, and in the case of the Inu rig, that seems especially true.

Fall seems a terrible time for a new rig to become widely known because it's the time anglers tend to fish the least – or are quite distracted by hunting.

However, in the digital age, it's also the perfect time to maximize the potential exposure from anglers wishing they could be fishing, trying to figure out the new tool to add to next season's arsenal or killing time waiting to get in a deer stand.

Hence why the initial video Stefan discovered went from just a few thousand views to more than 2.1 million only a couple months later at the time of writing this article. And it's by no means the only video now. A quick search yields dozens (if not hundreds) of videos, tutorials, underwater views and more.

In a matter of months, and despite little actual time to use and play with it, suddenly everyone is an expert wanting to share their knowledge on this new rig.

Stefan admittedly was among them, posting a video shortly thereafter on how to rig it on his YouTube channel. That said, he didn't try to proclaim being an expert – just someone who had tried it out and wanted to share. After watching the initial video, he says he rigged up a dozen of them and immediately went fishing at a gin-clear local lake to test them out. The results were by no means conclusive, but they were encouraging.

"I ended up catching some decent fish on it casting it up to fish I saw cruising the bank," Stefan says. "I can really see that (scenario) and bed fishing as the two times it could really excel.

"The thing that got me excited, though, was how the fish reacted to it. With a wacky rig, they either commit to eat it quickly or swim off when it hits the water. With the Inu rig, even if they started to swim off from it, when I'd twitch it, they'd turn around and come look at it. They wouldn't eat it, but they'd just watch it. Eventually, they'd watch it long enough they'd finally eat it."

Stefan has had numerous similar experiences since, but he says he's still very much toying with different setups to try to maximize hook-up percentage, action, etc.

Being that this rig takes a lot more effort than your typical wacky rig, though, it's probably more on par with setting up a Carolina rig. Plus, the fact the rig can burn through soft-plastics at a world-record pace, Stefan wonders if it will be too much for the average weekend angler to toy with for it to ever really catch on in the mainstream.

Then again, when you're a top-level pro, it's worth investing the time and energy into something that might be a pain but can pay off, literally, in tournament checks. He's even adapting the concept to other presentations.

"It's such a unique concept with the potential to excel in certain situations," Stefan adds. "I don't know if it will ever be a huge thing. You might see it have an underground following for a while before it really blows up, if it ever does.

"I'd be surprised if the concept doesn't spur new baits or techniques you'll see in the future."

HOW TO SET UP THE INU RIG



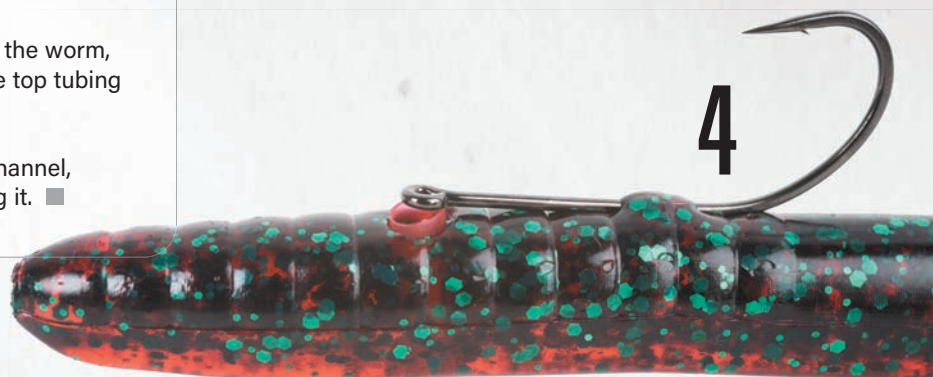
- 1** Gather materials, which include:
- Straight worm at least 6 inches long
 - Surgical tubing or stirring straws
 - Super glue
 - 1/0 single hook
 - O-ring

2 Find the midway point of the worm and pierce the tubing through it. Then bend the head and tail to pierce either end of the protruding tubing so it looks in the shape of an 'S'. Put some super glue on the tubing, and move the worm until the super glue is covered within the worm. Let dry for 30 seconds. Cut the tubing flush with the surface of the worm.

3 Run the 1/0 single hook, point up, up the line. Run the line through the top tube and then snake it down through the remaining two tubes without twisting the worm. Tie the O-ring to the tag end of the line.

4 Skin-hook the single hook in the top of the worm, making sure to align the eyelet with the top tubing so the line can flow freely.

You can also go to Stefan's YouTube channel, *Matt Stefan Fishing*, to watch how to rig it. ■





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FIRST LOOK

SPAWNING SEASON is close at hand for much of the country, and that means one very important thing for bass anglers: big fish, up shallow, waiting for a jig or soft plastic bait to fall in front of their faces. For that, we have you covered. Here's a look at a handful (mouthful?) of new jigs and soft plastics to make hawg-hunting season your best one yet.

1

EPIC BAITS JIGS

\$5.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

The folks at Epic Baits made a name for themselves with high-quality tungsten weights of all shapes and sizes. Their newest offerings - jigs - are just the next step in Epic Baits' expansion, and they certainly have the features to make a big splash in 2022.

Epic Baits jigs are made with quality in mind, designed around ultra-sharp Gamakatsu hooks and tough-as-nails skirts. Each jig is affixed with the perfect middle-ground weed guard (not too stiff and not too flexible) and a molded keeper, which sits directly below a jig head that sports lifelike 3-D eyes for an added element of realism.

Epic offers four jig models (compact swim, finesse, football and grass punch) in a handful of eye-popping color combos. Available in 1/4 to 1 1/4 ounces (depending on model).

2

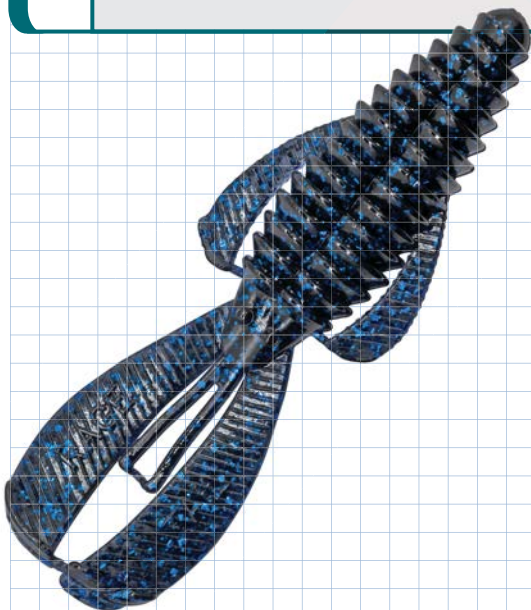
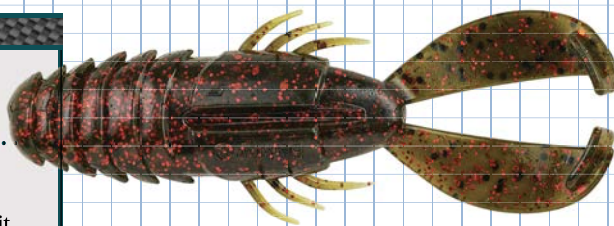
BERKLEY POWERBAIT CRASH CRAW

\$5.49 | berkley-fishing.com

A perfect pairing for any number of new Berkley PowerBait jigs (see next page), the new Crash Craw - designed by MLF pro Scott Suggs - is one you're likely to see in a lot of "Top 10 Baits" articles this season.

The Crash Craw is a bit of an enigma in that it has the general silhouette of a typical craw-style bait, but upon closer inspection, it's anything but typical. Heavy ribbing along the body serves as abundant shielding for your hook point and six short appendages along the back half of the midsection ooze natural crawfish vibes. Paired with Berkley's powerful PowerBait flavor, the Crash Craw is likely to be a fish-catching juggernaut in 2022.

Available in 12 enticing colors and two sizes (3 1/2 and 4 1/4 inches) in packs of six or eight.



3

STRIKE KING MID-SIZE RAGE BUG

\$6.99 | strikeking.com

Sometimes you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Sometimes you just need to make it a bit bigger. And a bit smaller.

Strike King's uber-popular Rage Bug already comes in three sizes (original, Baby and Magnum), and new for 2022, you can add the Mid-Size Rage Bug to your bait bags and choose a size that works for any application.

The 3.38-inch Mid-Size Rage Bug is the perfect middle ground in the lineup that offers incredible versatility for use as a jig trailer or standalone bait (for flipping, punching, dragging and even as a topwater wake bait). If you can only take one pack of Rage Bugs on your next fishing trip, this is the one to have.

Available in 13 colors in packs of eight.



4

BERKLEY POWERBAIT JIGS

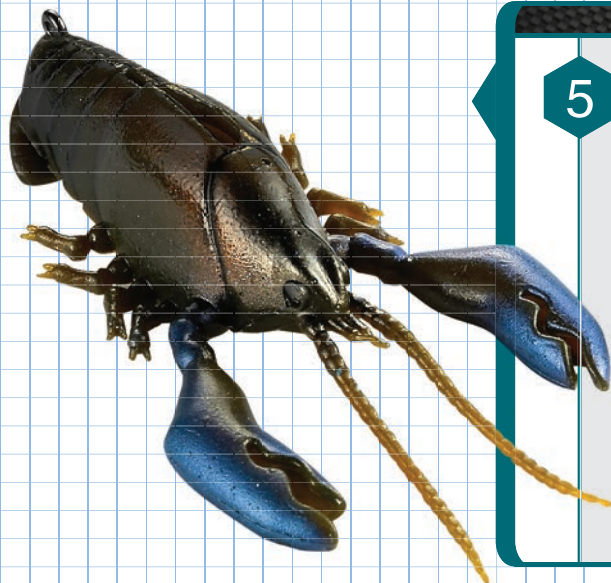
\$4.99 | berkley-fishing.com

There's no disputing the evidence: Berkley PowerBait works. Every soft plastic ever made that carries the PowerBait name is one that's been tested at the highest levels of tournament bass fishing - often with stellar results. If you need more convincing, look no further than the phenomenon that is the Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flat Worm.

It makes sense, then, that Berkley would eventually expand their potent PowerBait line into other staples of the bass fishing game. Enter the Berkley PowerBait jig lineup, packed to the gills with the flavor that "attracts more fish and keeps them holding on longer."

Berkley designed seven jig models for their new lineup (flippin', football, heavy cover, finesse, skippin', swim and finesse swim) with one goal in mind: to create a jig that will simply outfish every other jig on the market. Designed with PowerBait flavor packed into each silicone skirt and wrapped around a Fusion19 hook, Berkley PowerBait jigs offer the versatility and performance we've come to expect from every product Berkley brings to market.

The lineup offers a little something for everyone with models ranging from 1/4 to 1 ounce in more than a dozen tantalizing color options. Pair each one with any number of matching PowerBait soft plastic trailers and get to catchin'.



5

MEGABASS SLEEPER CRAW

\$8.99 | megabassusa.com

The Dark Sleeper from Megabass already has a cult following for its hyper-realistic goby-imitating style and stellar bass-catching performance. Now, Megabass is adding another favorite bass forage to the same lineup with the Sleeper Craw - and you can expect it to build up the same kind of die-hard following in the coming years thanks to a number of eye-catching features.

What makes the Sleeper Craw so unique is a hidden hook that's exposed when bit, keeping the bait weedless and ideal for bottom-contact applications. The Sleeper Craw is also impressively realistic in its design and color schemes, making this new 2022 offering perhaps the most realistic craw-style bait on the market and perhaps the next best thing to live bait.

Available in 3-inch, 5/8-ounce size. ■

A photograph of Jacob Wheeler on a fishing boat during a tournament. He is wearing a blue and white fishing jersey with "GOOGAN" and "Wiley X" logos. He is holding a fishing rod and a yellow fish. The boat is blue and white with various sponsor logos including "Academy" and "10100".

GO | CONFIDENTLY

Jacob Wheeler / Photo: MLF

Congratulations to Jacob Wheeler for winning the Bass Pro Tour 2021 Angler of the Year title, sealing the deal in the Knockout Round of Stage Seven. We're proud to support Jacob with the premium protection and superb visual clarity of our ANSI-rated, shatterproof frames and lenses.



WX OMEGA

Look for Jacob's signature model making its debut in 2022.



TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA





ON THE BEATEN PATH

The Upper Mississippi River – home of the 2021 Tackle Warehouse TITL Presented by Mercury back in August – is one of the most diverse and picturesque fisheries on any tournament schedule. It really says something, then, when an angler is able to catch fish in a spot that stands alone for its sheer uniqueness, despite not being the only fisherman to take advantage of it.

Adrian Avena earned his 10th-place finish at the TITL fishing some high-pressure areas, but the one that stood out most was his small section below the spillway separating Pools 7 and 8, where he found schools of quality fish that allowed him to hunker down and get down to business. Avena, keying in on fish chasing small shad, utilized an arsenal of swimbaits and soft jerkbaits and a handful of topwater offerings to fire up schools of big bass wrangling shad in the turbulent waters of the spillway.

While Avena wasn't able to seal the deal after skipping through to the Championship Round with his Group B Qualifying Round victory, he did provide us with a venue for some of the most compelling photos of the entire tournament.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE





THE BASS BEAR THAT JUST KEEPS ON WINNING

What do an oversized Teddy bear and four MLF pros have in common? They're winners, apparently.

Followers of tournament bass fishing and fans of Jacob Wheeler, Dustin Connell, Mark Daniels Jr. and Adrian Avena (who all room and travel together) have likely noticed the presence of a sizable stuffed bear occasionally perched on the back decks of their boats during Bass Pro Tour competition. The bear - "Little Marshall" - is the subject of a running bet among the four housemates that started as a booby prize but has evolved into a reward for excellent performance.

Little Marshall initially rode along on Day 2 with whichever of the four anglers performed the worst on Day 1 of a competition, but that changed in 2019 when the oversized bear started to ride along with whomever performed the best. And Little Marshall had a dandy season in 2021: He was on board Connell's boat when DC won REDCREST; he accompanied Wheeler on all three of the Tennessee pro's Bass Pro Tour wins; and he was in the middle of the action when Wheeler banked a \$50,000 big-bass check at Heavy Hitters.

That performance (and Little Marshall's apparent good-luck mojo) guaranteed the bear's return to the Bass Pro Tour in 2022.

"We typically go with a new bear every year, but we're not going to give Little Marshall away this year - we all agreed he's too good luck and we have to run him back out there (in 2022)," Wheeler laughed.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

EXPERIENCE TULSA



Tulsa, OK is a top destination to visit in 2022, and it's no secret why.

From award-winning attractions like the Gathering Place to our vibrant restaurant and nightlife scene, Tulsa has something for everyone. While you're here, explore the culture, history and flavor pumping through the city at world class destinations like Mother Road Market, the BOK Center, and the historic Greenwood district.

Discover more of T-Town and plan your trip today at [VisitTulsa.com](https://www.VisitTulsa.com).



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SAVE THE DATE! REDCREST 2022, MARCH 23-27

2022



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MARCH 23-27

Grand Lake O' the Cherokees

OUTDOOR SPORTS EXPO:
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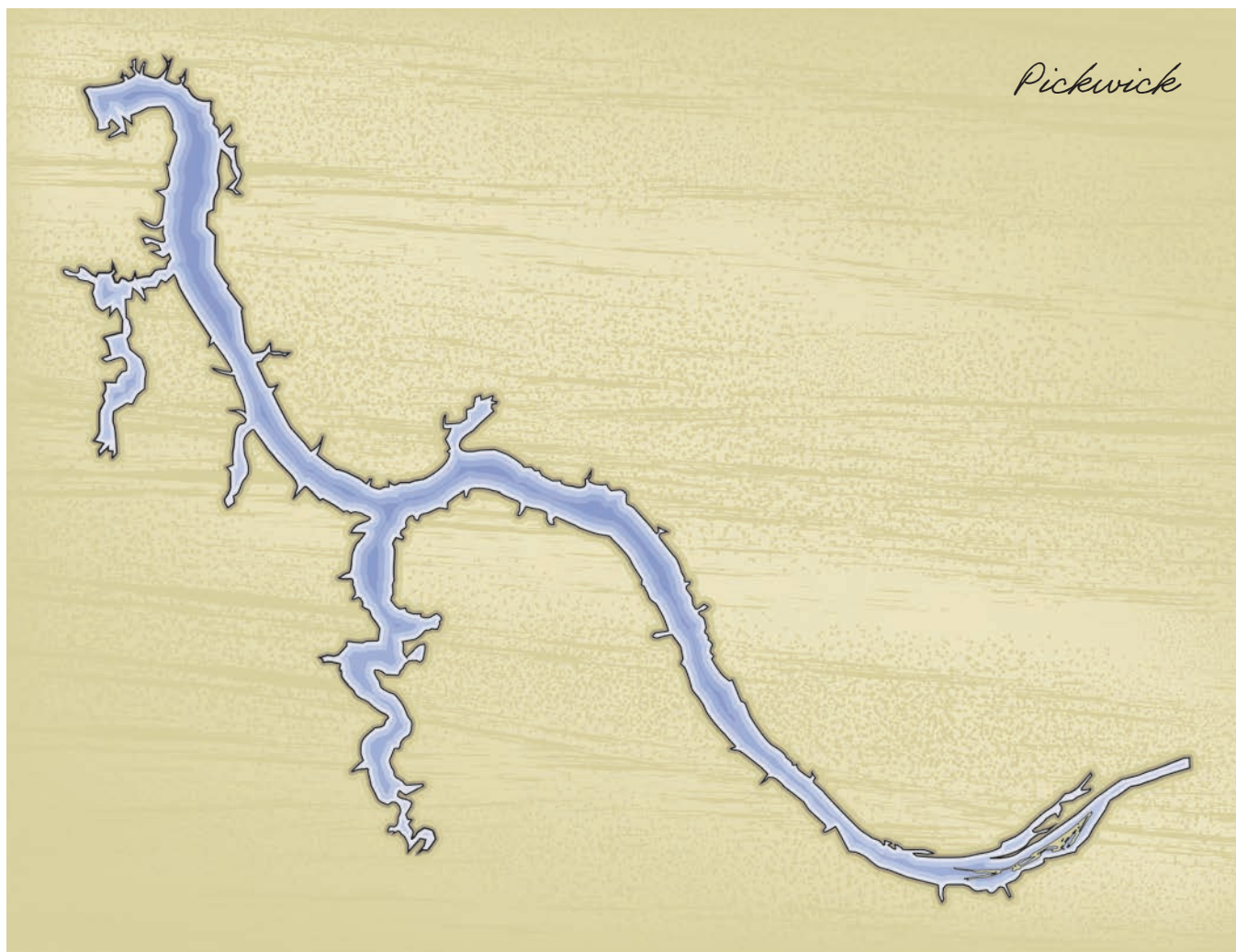


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ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRANDON ROWAN



By Joe Sills

PICKWICK, GUNTERSVILLE AND WATTS BAR

What to expect from these Tennessee River battlegrounds in 2022

The most storied lake in bass fishing, a perennial star and an underappreciated gem are on deck for Major League Fishing competitors this season, as Lake Gunterville, Pickwick Lake and Watts Bar Lake play host to full fields of anglers vying for serious cash. The Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit is set to visit Gunterville and Pickwick this year; meanwhile, Bass Pro Tour anglers are in for a showdown at Watts Bar, the oft-overlooked sibling to Chickamauga.

Few waterways in bass fishing can claim the legacy of the Tennessee River, but while it's been a tournament staple since the sport's early days, fishermen who know the river best say its waterways are beginning to present new challenges to tournament anglers.

PICKWICK LAKE

Last October, Brent Crow stepped to the front of the Toyota Series Championship stage at Pickwick Lake and hoisted a \$235,000 check. The Hartselle, Alabama guide climbed from 28th place on Day 1 to the pinnacle of the Toyota Series by the end of competition. In the process, Crow changed his life and cemented himself as a Pickwick expert.

Crow says Pickwick should be in postspawn by the time Stop 3 of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit blasts off April 21. However, he says the fishery is undergoing changes in the wake of new flood control strategies.

"I've fished Pickwick for a long time, and I've seen things in the last two years that I have never seen in my entire life," he says. "Most of

the time, they're running 50,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) from the dam. During floods, that number can be more like 110,000 or 180,000."

Crow says he's seen current around 500,000 cfs flowing through Pickwick once recently. That magnitude of current has an adverse effect on fishing.

"The thing with current, especially with smallmouth, is that they bite better in current," he adds. "But extreme current makes it hard to present your bait right. They will bite if you get your bait in front of them, but the more current there is the harder it is to do."

Otherwise, the fishery is "in awesome shape." Crow says the population is healthy, the average size is good and – depending on flood conditions – postspawn conditions at Pickwick could make for an exciting tournament.

LAKE GUNTERSVILLE

Alabama's Lake Guntersville needs little introduction to fishing fans. The legendary lake has hosted some of the biggest tournaments in the sport for decades. A claim can be made that Guntersville has lured more professional bass anglers to the state of Alabama than any other fishery. Case in point: Mark Daniels Jr., a California native, now calls the Yellowhammer State home.



"Guntersville is at the top of the list," Daniels says. "For many years, it was ranked as the No. 1 lake in the country, and people come from all over the world to fish there."

Stop 4 of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit heads to Guntersville on May 12, and Daniels says anglers fishing the event can look forward to a shootout.

"In May, you're going to have all sorts of stuff going on there," Daniels says. "You'll see postspawn, prespawn, guys catching fish off of beds, guys catching fish offshore, guys throwing topwater and guys punching mats. It should be a real fisherman's tournament."

Frequently listed among the world's best bass fishing lakes, Guntersville is well-known for big bags as well as big pressure.

"You're liable to go out on that lake on a Wednesday and see 500 boats," Daniels adds. "People know that if you come to Alabama, Guntersville is the lake you want to fish. Because of that, you need to be an off-the-beaten-path angler at times. But simultaneously, it's a fishery that is notorious for community holes where people catch the same fish over and over in the same exact spots."

Daniels says Guntersville has seen an influx of eel grass in recent years. That helps alleviate some of the pressure by putting bass in places that are more difficult to target.

WATTS BAR LAKE

Six years ago, Bass Pro Tour pro John Murray relocated from Arizona to Spring City, Tennessee. There, he settled into a home on Watts Bar Lake. Midway between Knoxville and Chattanooga, Watts Bar proved the perfect training ground to master the Tennessee River – one that has helped Murray reach new heights in his legendary career.

Stage Five of the Bass Pro Tour comes to Murray's home waters on June 4, and the King of the West says the competition could be a numbers game. Increased pressure and an influx of grass have changed the way Watts Bar fishes since Murray relocated to its shores.

"When I moved here, you would see 25 boats driving down the highway towards Chickamauga," he says. "There are more boats staying up here now. It seems to have a lot of numbers, and there are still bigger fish here. I just catch a lot more smaller fish than I did six years ago."

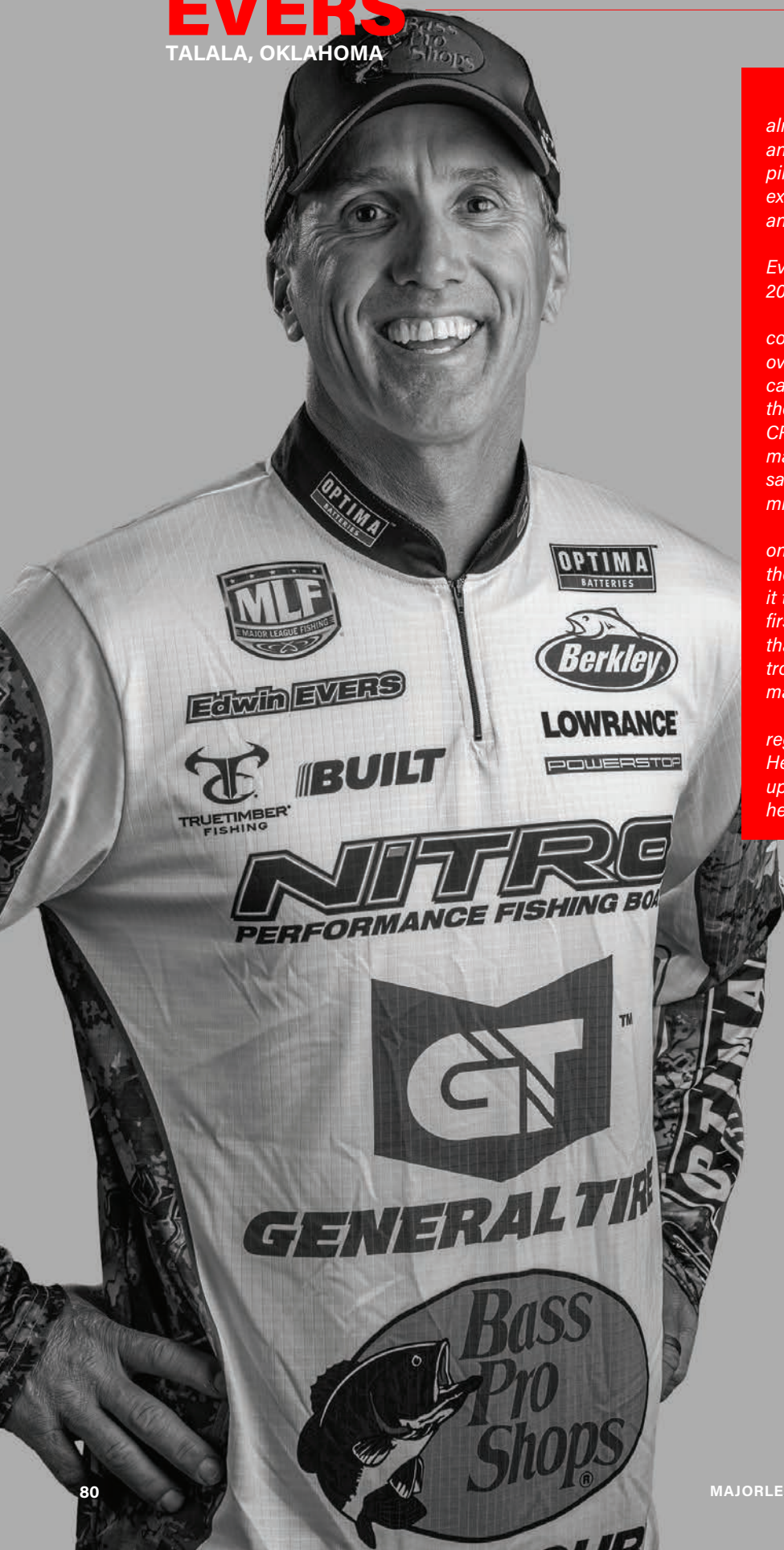
Murray says areas that once had an abundance of 3- to 5-pounders have given way to more fish below the 2-pound mark.

"In [BPT competition], it really depends on what size they go with," he says. "It could be great if you get into a bunch of 1 1/2-pound fish. On a five-fish limit, it really affects the way you fish because you have to figure out a way to find those bigger fish."

Murray attributes the changing fishery to the river's natural cycle. Grass levels fluctuate with rains, snow melt and ensuing floods. He says the grass at Watts Bar has been more widespread in recent years, though people are catching plenty of bass in the grass. ■



PROFILE: **EDWIN
EVERS**
TALALA, OKLAHOMA



Does a professional angler who's already collected two major championships, an Angler of the Year (AOY) title, and stock-piled 13 wins and 120-plus Top 20s still get excited when it's time to fish for big bucks and a championship?

If that angler is Oklahoma pro Edwin Evers and the championship is REDCREST 2022 on Grand Lake, you bet he does.

Evers is one of the all-time best to ever compete for bass money and titles. He's won over \$3.7 million in his 20-year professional career and has a good shot to close in on the \$4 million mark in 2022. And with REDCREST taking place on a fishery he's intimately familiar with, come March 23-27, it's a safe bet that Evers is itching to cross the \$4 million threshold in front of a home crowd.

Evers already has championship history on Grand - he won the Bassmaster Classic there in 2016 - and he already knows what it takes to win REDCREST (he won the very first of them, REDCREST 2019). Safe to say that a second red-and-silver REDCREST trophy would likely be welcomed on his mantle in Talala.

But Evers is a big fan of Grand Lake regardless of his accomplishments there. Here's what Edwin had to say about the upcoming REDCREST event and a lake that he holds near and dear to his heart.

Q&A

By Dave Landahl
PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

Bass fishing fans know you're an Oklahoma resident and a previous winner of the Bassmaster Classic on Grand Lake O' the Cherokees. What does fishing for the 2022 REDCREST championship mean to you on your home lake?

It amps everything up an awful lot more. Whether it's all the family or friends or the local media and industry media magnifying it, there's quite a bit of pressure. But anytime you can fish a tournament like this close to your house, it's really nice. I really want to win again on my home lake.

Does being the local pro who's expected to perform well on Grand Lake impact you in a positive or negative way?

Well, when I fished my first Classic on Grand in 2013, I let the local stuff negatively impact me. Fortunately, I turned that around in 2016. I stayed calm and had normal championship preparations for the tournament. I won that event. With REDCREST coming up, I'm feeling the pressure a bit again, but I think I'll be able to prepare for this just like I would the other championships I've fished. Sometimes preparing for a familiar body of water – in this case, my home lake – is harder than preparing for one I've never fished before.

Is there any special insight you have about Grand Lake that makes you a more formidable competitor than the others you'll be competing against?

Well, I basically live there, and that's an advantage. I have some history and background knowledge. I really know the lake very well, so I should be in the right place to catch fish at the right times, but you never know. If it's a normal year and water levels stay normal, I'm not sure I'll have any advantage. I know people believe I'll have an advantage, but the third week of March can be a tough time for me to have an advantage over this field. The fishing should be very good, and any one of the competitors can figure out the winning deal.

I know I'll need to narrow down my selection. I know so many places to fish on the lake, I won't be able to fish all of them. But with thorough preparation, I can narrow down the productive areas and I should be able to manage that. I just don't want to have too many thoughts and choices at the start of the tournament. If I have a few rods on deck and a couple of good patterns figured out, I think I'll do pretty well. If all goes well, I think I could be a real threat to win here and take home my second REDCREST win.

What are your dream fishing conditions for REDCREST on Grand?

Probably blown out and muddy. That sounds less than ideal for pre-spawn fishing, but for me, those conditions would be ideal – not because it

makes the fishing good, but it makes it tougher on the rest of the anglers, and my knowledge of Grand Lake can come into play then as more of an advantage. I'd be at the right spots to fish when the conditions are like that. A lot of the field won't have that knowledge.

With all of the fishing techniques available, which ones do you feel will prove the most productive on Grand during REDCREST? Is there a technique you prefer or feel you could dominate the field with?

I really think the fishing could be wide open that time of the year. Of course, you can never say for certain what the weather will do, so that can impact everything. But I think most pre-spawn fishing techniques will work.

The third week in March can be an incredible time to catch a lot of fish on Grand, so I'm not sure one fishing style will dominate the tournament. Until the tournament starts, I really can't guess what will be the best method for catching scorable bass. It's likely that many methods will work.

Why should anglers and fans visit Grand Lake? During REDCREST it's obviously for the show, but afterwards, why should they come to Grand to try their luck catching a few bass?

Grand Lake O' the Cherokees is a superb fishery. I don't say that just because I'm being biased to my home lake; it's really an excellent fishery. I've had the privilege of traveling all over the country, and I can honestly say this is one of the best bass fishing lakes anywhere. I have a YouTube series called PROJECT E. If I need to film a segment for the show or make an entire show, I know I can always go to Grand Lake and get it done. I can't say that about the other 10 to 15 lakes within a couple hours from my house. Those lakes are all good, but Grand is just that reliable.

For anglers visiting here to fish, you'll find fish deep, shallow, or anywhere in between. Big fish for REDCREST will likely be a 6- or 7-pounder. There aren't a lot of 10-pounders in Grand, but there are a lot of 3- to 5-pounders. It's really a superb fishery with a lot of quality fish to be caught.

If you don't win, will REDCREST be won by an Oklahoma pro?

That's hard to say. I'm not sure Grand is the type of a lake at that time of the year that totally favors locals. I'd say the percentages probably lean toward a local winning, but I certainly wouldn't say that for sure.

How do you think your prior athletic career can help you win REDCREST and maintain your standing as one of the best professional bass anglers currently in the sport?

Well, like in any sport – tennis, football, or bass fishing – or any professional endeavor, work ethic is key. I learned that early on as an athlete, and when I played college football. I do anything and everything I can, within the rules, to put myself in position to win. For REDCREST, that means extra preparation. Being extremely thorough, but not overthinking everything. Game-planning how I plan on practicing, studying everything I can to give myself an advantage. Just getting myself prepared and coming into the competition with the confidence of knowing I've done everything I could. It's all about putting in the time and the work. You have to be willing to work. All of the work and effort can really pay off big. ■



PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN



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READY TO CROWN A NEW TBF CHAMPION

2022 THE BASS FEDERATION NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP ARRIVES ON LAKE CONROE, TX

After nearly two years of working to reach their goal, 55 anglers and 55 co-anglers from across North America will descend on Lake Conroe, Texas, February 27 through March 4 for the 2022 The Bass Federation National Championship.

A journey that started for many anglers and co-anglers in 2020 will reach its final destination in southeast Texas, where one boater will take home the \$125,000 "Living Your Dream" prize package and one co-angler will walk away with \$35,000 in cash and prizes.

One hundred and 10 of the best grassroots anglers and co-anglers in the country will compete on Lake Conroe for a chance to turn a professional fishing dream into a 2022 reality.

The winning boater of the 2022 National Championship receives a \$125,000 prize package that includes a brand-new Ranger Z520 boat, \$20,000 cash and an automatic bid to fish in the 2022 Toyota Series Championship and the BFL All-American, as well as a reserved spot in the MLF Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit and \$5,000 of entry fees for whichever circuit they choose to fish.

The champion co-angler will receive \$30,000, a bid to the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American and a Toyota Series Championship berth, as well as \$2,500 in entry fees for whatever competition they choose to fish.



Mike Morris claimed the 2021 TBF National Championship on the Red River.

"Our goal is to support the grassroots anglers across the country," said TBF President Robert Cartlidge. "If you want to fish for a living, the TBF National Championship is the perfect springboard to work your way up toward the top. We're giving the National Champion the opportunity of a lifetime to see if they have what it takes to fish with the best in the world and to Live Their Dream. That's what it's all about."

THE CHAMPIONSHIP VENUE

Not only will the competitors in the National Championship be fishing for life-changing money and prizes, but also once-in-a-lifetime fish. Lake Conroe has a stout reputation as one of the best big-bass lakes in not only the Lone Star State but the entire country. By the time late February and early March rolls around, the largemouth living in Conroe could easily be new personal bests for some lucky anglers.

“Lake Conroe in March has in the past – and probably will for the championship – turn out 40-pound bags,” Cartlidge predicted. “A lot of the guys fishing in the National Championship will be fishing for the fish of a lifetime. The chances of catching a largemouth more than 10 pounds are pretty slim across the rest of the country that time of year, but not on Lake Conroe.”

The National Championship schedule allows three days of practice on Conroe before the anglers and co-anglers from 48 states and Canada begin their two days of competition. The field is then cut down to the seven division-champion boaters and seven division-champion co-anglers for the championship day on March 4, where national champions will be crowned.

All 14 division champs earn a spot in the 2022 BFL All-American if eligible.

You can follow the 2022 TBF National Championship at BassFederation.com throughout the tournament for the latest standings and live coverage.



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Courtesy of MLF | Photo By Justin Onslow

Q+A

WITH 2013 TBF NATIONAL CHAMPION MARK DANIELS JR.

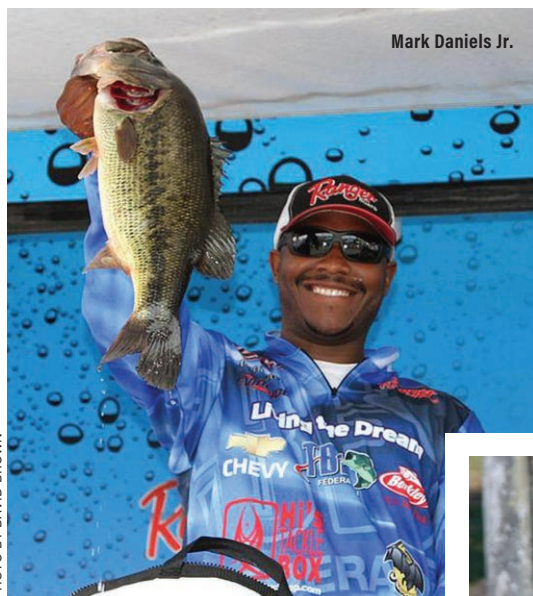


PHOTO BY DAVID BROWN

MLF Bass Pro Tour angler Mark Daniels Jr. epitomizes the “Living the Dream” potential of The Bass Federation National Championship. Daniels was an agriculture biologist and weekend bass angler fishing TBF tournaments near his home in Northern California when he qualified for the 2013 National Championship on Grand Lake, Oklahoma in 2013.

Little did Daniels know that that TBF tournament would change his life and start him down the path toward a new career as a tour-level bass pro.

Daniels won the 2013 TBF National Championship and then parlayed the “Living the Dream” prize package into a successful stint on the then-FLW Tour and eventually the MLF Bass Pro Tour. The Alabama pro has racked up nearly \$1 million in tournament winnings and collected three tour-level wins since that fateful day on Grand Lake in 2013, when he claimed the title of “National Champion.”

Q: What would be your biggest piece of advice to a grassroots angler looking to get involved in his local TBF chapter for the first time?

A: My advice is to look at your potential endgame. A lot of people don't want to fish TBF because they think so short-term. The end game that I always saw is that if you work your way up through the ranks, you could potentially qualify for the National Championship and have a chance at winning that “Living Your Dream” prize package. If you're looking to get on a path to becoming a pro – or even of if you just want to get involved in tournament fishing – TBF is a great way to get your feet wet.

Q: How long were you involved in TBF before you were able to win the National Championship in 2013?

A: I joined TBF when I was 16 and fished there until I was 20. Then I went to college and

took five years off from TBF. Then I got back into it at 26 and fished every year until I won the National Championship at 32. Out of all the tournaments I could enter, the TBF tournaments were the only ones I could afford, allowed me to travel outside of my state, compete against anglers from all over the nation and give me the opportunity to become a professional.

Q: You're now 40 years old, a full-time professional going into your ninth year. What would Mark Daniels Jr. of today say to 16-year-old MDJ just getting his TBF fishing career started?

A: Follow your dreams. That's my motto for life. It's such a simple and cliché statement, but it holds so much weight to me. You'll never work as hard as you will for something that you're passionate about. You'll never love something as much as something you're passionate about. If you have a dream, you're going to put hard work into it, and that's just part of chasing it. Don't quit, keep grinding and it will all pay off in the end.

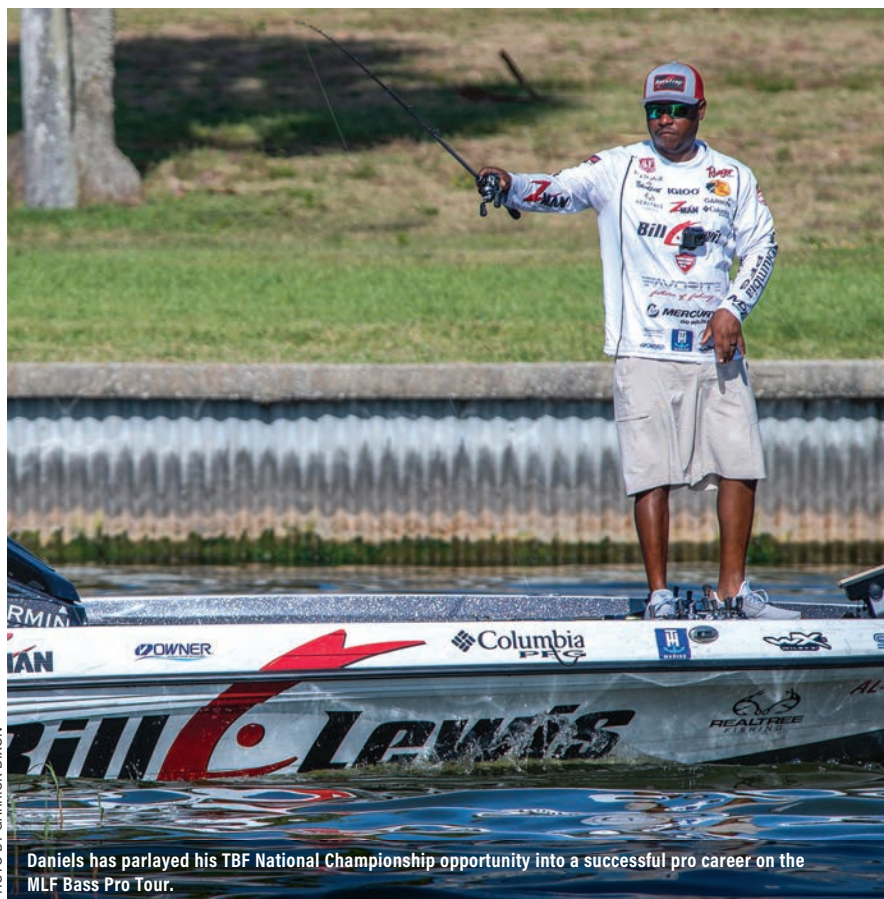


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Daniels has parlayed his TBF National Championship opportunity into a successful pro career on the MLF Bass Pro Tour.

2022 HIGH SCHOOL SPRING SCHEDULE GETS UNDERWAY

The spring tournament season has arrived throughout much of the country, and that means that the 2022 Student Angler Federation (SAF) season is about to kick off. Students competing in SAF tournaments pay a \$25 membership fee, which includes an MLF High School membership. That one-time fee allows high school anglers to enter any SAF-sanctioned tournament in their state without an entry fee.

For any state champion who is 16 years old or older, TBF will pay their entry fees, adult membership TBF fees and provide a co-angler spot in the TBF National Semi-Finals for their home state. The 48 state champions (47 states and one Canadian champion) all earn a trip to the High School Fishing World Finals and National Championship. In 2021, TBF awarded more than \$3 million in college scholarships and prizes to student anglers in the High School Fishing World Finals.

TBF SAF HIGH SCHOOL UPCOMING SCHEDULE:

ALABAMA

SAF State Championship

Feb. 5, Lake Mitchell

MLF High School Open

March 5, Lake Guntersville

ARIZONA

SAF State Championship

March 26, Colorado River

MLF High School Open

March 6, Lake Havasu

DELEWARE

Tri-State Championship

April 23, Potomac River

FLORIDA

SAF State Championship

Jan. 29, Kissimmee Chain

GEORGIA

SAF State Championship

Feb. 27, Lake Lanier

KANSAS

SAF State Championship

April 23, Lake Malvern

KENTUCKY

SAF State Championship

March 26, Lake Cumberland

LOUISIANA

SAF State Championship

March 13, Caddo Lake

MISSISSIPPI

SAF State Championship

March 20, Tenn-Tom Waterway

MISSOURI

MLF High School Open

April 9, Table Rock Lake

NEVADA

SAF State Championship

Feb. 26, Lake Mohave

NORTH CAROLINA

SAF State Championship

April 3, Jordan Lake

SOUTH CAROLINA

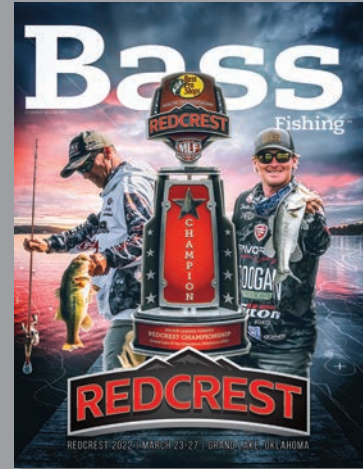
SAF State Championship

Feb. 5, Lake Hartwell

TEXAS

SAF State Championship

March 5, Lake Conroe



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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 or highschoolfishing.org and "LIKE US" on Facebook.

Contact TBF: Send us your club stories. If you have a question or want to know more about TBF, which is YOUR organization, drop us a line at FAQ@bassfederation.com. Above all else, thank you for being a member of The Bass Federation. ■

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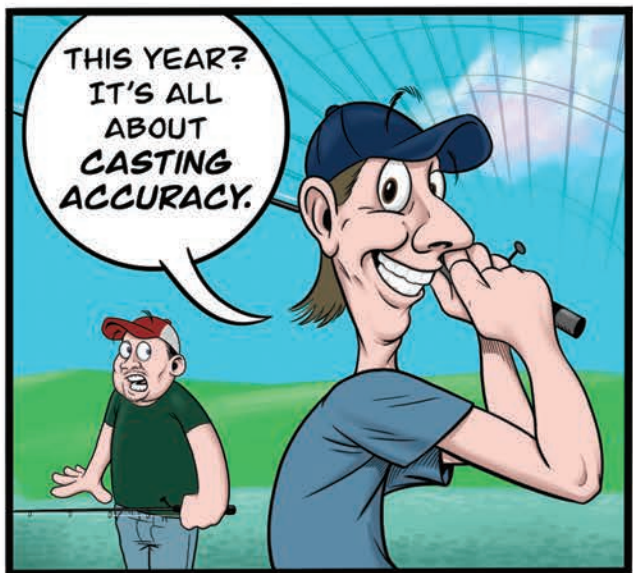
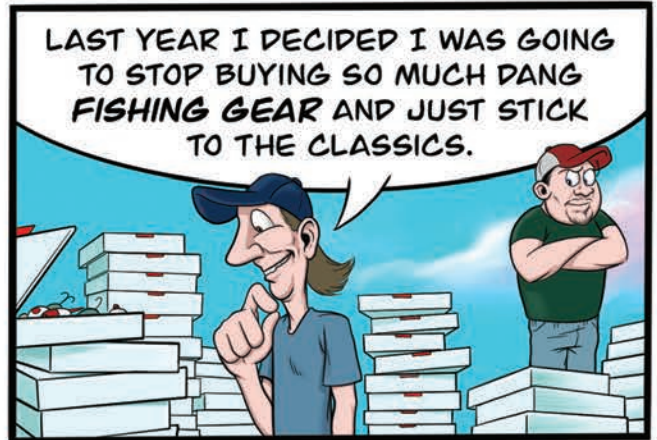
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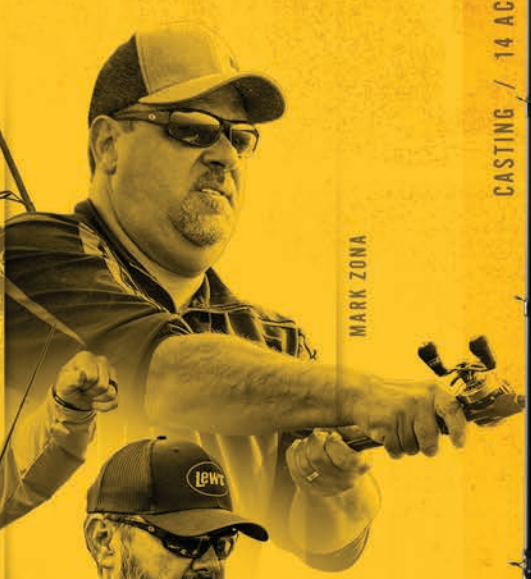
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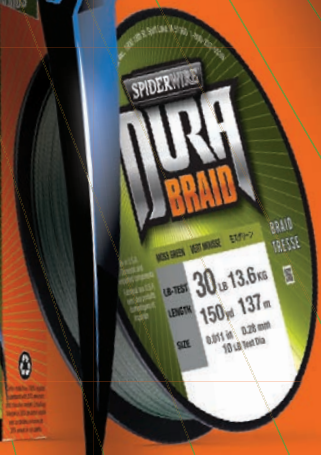
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