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NUMBERS TO MARVEL



You can probably blame former Kansas City Royals third baseman George Brett for this, but I picked up a fierce obsession with sports statistics somewhere in my pre-teen years, and I haven't been able to shake it since.

Brett – a Major League Baseball Hall-of-Famer, 13-time All-Star and three-time batting champ – made a ferocious run at hitting .400 in the summer of 1980, holding at .400 in early September with only 12 games remaining before faltering slightly and finishing at .390. It was big news at the time – Brett was the first to flirt seriously with .400 that late in an MLB season since Ted Williams hit .406 in 1941 – and I followed it voraciously through box scores in the daily newspaper (yes, I'm *that* old). Brett's numbers told an enchanting story and kick-started my interest in players of yore like Ty Cobb, Joe Jackson, George Sisler, etc., whom Brett was chasing into MLB history.

I brought this obsession with statistics into my former life as a sportswriter, and now – some 20 years later – I have one of the most interesting statistical anomalies I've ever seen happening before my eyes: 2022 Bally Bet Angler of the Year Jacob Wheeler.

You probably digested our live coverage of Wheeler's AOY victory as it happened at Bass Pro Tour Stage Seven at Mille Lacs Lake, Minnesota, and have read up on his dominating season at MajorLeagueFishing.com. Wheeler wrapped up a truly great season with a 70-point cushion over Jordan Lee to claim his second Bally Bet AOY trophy in a row, making him only the eighth angler in bass fishing history to earn major tour-level back-to-back AOYs.

But Wheeler's excellence extends beyond just the seven tournaments on the 2022 Bass Pro Tour season. The Tennessee pro has been on a 2 1/2-year tear that has produced the kind of statistics that even the Elias Sports Bureau would marvel at. To get a true appreciation for just how otherworldly Wheeler's performance has been in recent years, noodle with a few of these numbers:

76.7% - In his most recent 30 tour-level events (Bass Pro Tour and Pro Circuit), dating back to the middle of the 2019 season, Wheeler has finished in the Top 10 an astonishing 23 times. That's a Top 10 rate of 76.7%, which is frankly unheard of (Bill Dance had an impressive career Top 10 rate of 66.7%).

10 for 10 - If you're looking for a number that best explains Wheeler's back-to-back AOYs in 2021 and 2022, look no further than his most recent results: Until his 11th-place finish at Stage Seven at Mille Lacs, Wheeler had finished in the Top 10 in 10 consecutive events dating back to Stage Four in 2021.

94.3% - Wheeler has missed the cut only two times since the inception of the Bass Pro Tour in 2019. Counting REDCRESTs, Heavy Hitters and Pro Circuit Super Tournaments, he's advanced past the cut 33 times in 35 tour-level tournaments (94.3%). That's right up there with Jack Nicklaus' 39-for-40 PGA Majors cuts in the 1970s.

4-5-4 - In his last 23 events (dating back to the last half of the 2020 season), Wheeler has collected four wins, five second-place finishes and four third-place finishes. That means he's finished in the top 3 in 56.5% of the major tournaments he's fished in that time.

Wheeler's story is about more than numbers, of course. It's about desire and dedication and talent, as you'll see in Rob Newell's rundown of Wheeler's AOY season on pages 34–38. But from a numbers geek's perspective, Wheeler's two-year run has been fun to watch and assess … and he shows no sign of slowing down.

It's a short offseason, and I for one look forward to the start of the 2023 schedule – I have no doubt that Wheeler's numbers will continue to evolve, and there's a good possibility that we'll be discussing them again in this column at the same time next year!

JOEL SHANGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



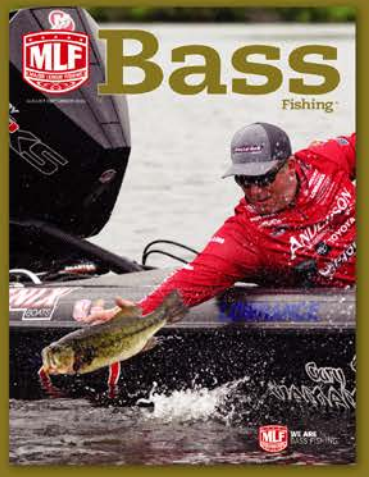


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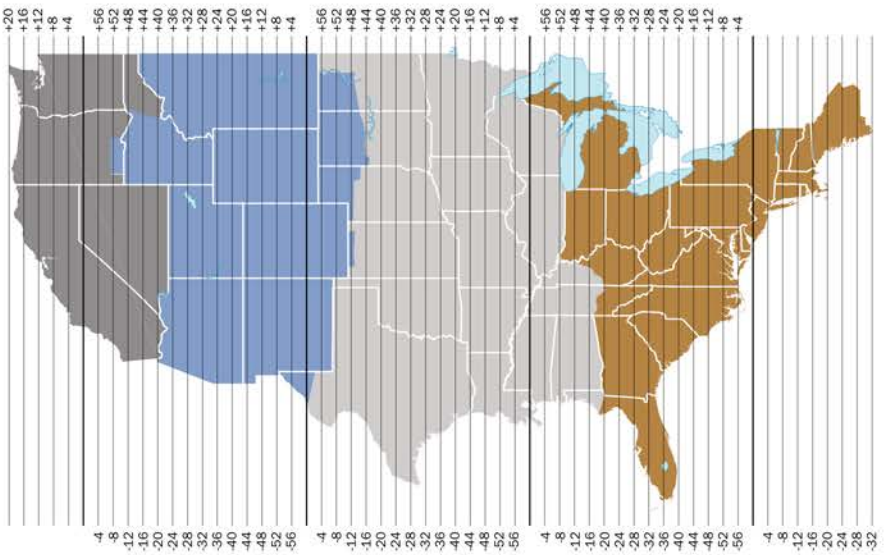
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SOLUNAR TABLES

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2022

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



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

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

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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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By Joel Shangle

2022 BALLY BET AOY AT A GLANCE

Wheeler, Lee, Jones, Ebare highlight exceptional Bass Pro Tour season

You can judge a good Angler of the Year competition by the number of interesting snapshots, factoids and standout moments that happen during a season. And during the course of the seven-tournament 2022 Bass Pro Tour race, the storylines were plentiful and extremely intriguing.

Bally Bet's participation in the Angler of the Year program was a monumental moment in the four-year history of the BPT. As eight-time AOY Kevin VanDam expressed when Bally Bet signed on as the title sponsor of the league's prestigious AOY award: "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."

Here are some highlights of the 2022 race.

"THE GUY" IN 2022: WHEELER x 2

Defending Bally Bet AOY Jacob Wheeler's 2022 season was nothing short of phenomenal. Wheeler's AOY-winning 2021 campaign was remarkable enough as he collected three Bass Pro Tour wins and 494 points, so most logical expectations for the Tennessee pro coming into the 2022 season opener in Monroe, Louisiana, were that he would certainly be a favorite, but he probably couldn't top 2021.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

Wheeler apparently missed that memo. Starting with a seventh-place finish at Stage One, he reeled off six Top 10s in a row, finishing the 2022 season with an astounding 94.5% of the maximum potential Bally Bet AOY points (529 of 570) in winning his second AOY trophy by 70 points.



PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

JORDAN LEE: ANY OTHER YEAR ...

The unfortunate winner of the "other" AOY title – "Any Other Year" – 2020 Angler of the Year Jordan Lee fished well enough in 2022 to win almost *any* other season-long points race. He held the Bally Bet AOY lead after Stage Three and never dipped lower than third all year, doggedly pursuing Wheeler through the final four tournaments before eventually finishing second.

The Alabama pro has finished in the AOY Top 10 six times in eight years as a tour-level pro – the highest current Top 10 AOY percentage in the sport.

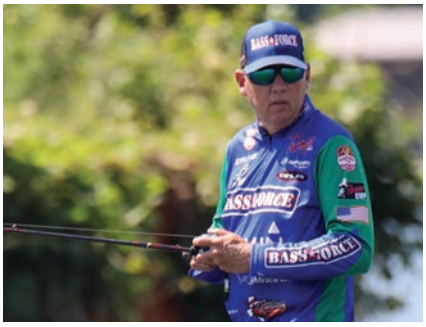


PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

CAREER RESURGED: ALTON JONES

Only two other anglers beside Wheeler and Lee held the No. 1 spot in the Bally Bet AOY rankings in 2022, and one of them was Alton Jones. The 2008 Bassmaster Classic champion and 2021 Heavy Hitters champion hit a groove in 2022, qualifying for five of seven Championship Rounds and finishing third behind Wheeler and Lee (the highest tour-level AOY finish in Jones' 32-year career).

At 59, Jones is a stark departure from the rest of the anglers who finished in the Top 10 in AOY points: The average age of the other nine anglers is 35.



PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

NO "ROOKIE" JITTERS: DAKOTA EBARE

Texas pro Dakota Ebare arrived on the Bass Pro Tour with three Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit/FLW Tour seasons under his belt, so he was far from a rookie. Nonetheless, Ebare's performance in his first go-around with the BPT format was impressive: He earned a Top 5 in AOY points and notched four Top 10s (including three in the row to end the season). ■



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COSTA CLEAN WATER MATTERS CLEANUPS WERE A GREAT SUCCESS IN 2022

MLF Fisheries Management Division's partnership with Costa helps keep our fisheries thriving

By Steven Bardin and Gary Klein

The first angler-led trash cleanup I can remember being a part of was in 2008 at Pickwick Lake. At the time, Timmy Horton was the president of the Professional Anglers Association. We thought it was a great way to give back to the community and show that the PAA anglers were forward-thinking when it came to conservation.

We had a dozen anglers show up the day of the cleanup. We all launched our boats and just started picking up everything we could find. At the end of the day, we had several hundred pounds of tires, fishing line, bottles and household trash. We were awarded the BoatUS Foundation Environmental Leadership Award for our efforts at Pickwick that year.

In the 14 years since that first cleanup, conservation awareness has increased, shoreline cleanups have become increasingly popular and several companies have developed rewards programs.

One company that has shown its commitment to reducing trash in our water bodies is Costa, which launched "Kick Plastic" – their own trash collection program – in 2015. "Kick Plastic" was aimed at reducing plastic waste through their manufacturing process, educational programs and beach cleanups. Since its inception, Costa's program has cleaned more than 180,000 pounds of trash from beaches and recycled 44,000 pounds of sunglass lenses.

Costa's efforts have helped reduce plastic bottle usage by 3 million bottles. They've also been instrumental in helping fishing guides understand the impact discarded line can have on the ocean. Costa's commitment to trash cleanup aligned with the Major League Fishing Fisheries Management Division in partnership with Berkley Labs' core pillars of education, fish care, fisheries enhancement and research.

FMD TEAMS UP WITH COSTA

At REDCREST in 2022, the FMD announced the Costa Clean Water Matters shoreline cleanup program and four sites for the 2022 season. Our focus was to collect trash at host ramps, parking lots, shoreline areas and, when available, use the revolutionary SeaArk Lake Clean Up Boat to clean floating debris from the fishery.



CLEANUP 1

PHOTO BY RACHEL DUBROVIN

CLEANUP 1 – LAKE OF THE OZARKS, MO.

A little over a month later, the first Costa Clean Water Matters cleanup was held at Lake of the Ozarks during Stage Four of the Bass Pro Tour. Costa anglers Casey Ashley and Kevin VanDam joined FMD, college anglers from the University of Missouri and local high school students to clean PB2 and Pa He Tsi boat launch areas. The SeaArk boat was on site to cover areas not accessible from the shoreline. After four hours, we collected over 300 pounds of trash, covered 4 miles of shoreline and another 2 miles from the SeaArk boat.

CLEANUP 2 – JAMES RIVER, VA.

Our second Costa Clean Water Matters cleanup was in June at the James River during Stop 5 of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit. Miles Burghoff, Randy Despino, Takayuki Koike, Terry Luedtke, Jimmy Reese and Skeet Reese joined FMD and MLF Marketing Promotions Manager Scott Ellison for the cleanup. We were able to start at the Osborne Landing Marina and cover 2 miles of shoreline as well as parking lots. The shoreline was mainly riprap



CLEANUP 2

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

and aquatic vegetation, which limited access – not to mention the James River has tidal currents, making access even more limited. Luckily, we had the SeaArk boat and were able to clean floating debris carried by the current for over 4 miles of river. This resulted in 500 pounds of trash being removed.

Jimmy Reese, Skeet Reese, Scott Towry and the FMD. We focused once again on the host marina's parking lots and shoreline. The park was already quite clean, and after a few hours, we had collected over 300 pounds of trash. More importantly, we planted the seed of conservation within the kids that joined us.



CLEANUP 3

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

CLEANUP 3 – LAKE CHAMPLAIN, N.Y.

The third and fourth Costa Clean Water Matters cleanup events took place in New York. The July cleanup was at Lake Champlain for Stop 6 of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit. This event had six local volunteers join Dakota Ebare, Cole Hewett, Robby Lefere, Terry Luedtke, Jeff McClain,



CLEANUP 4 – CAYUGA LAKE, N.Y.

The final cleanup was held at Cayuga Lake during Stage Six of the Bass Pro Tour. The days before the cleanup at Frontenac Park, MLF hosted a fan festival. Our volunteers worked to clean up that park along with the launch ramps and parking areas. FMD was joined by Dakota Ebare, Alton Jones, Michael Neal and Kevin VanDam. In all, the group of pros collected 200 pounds of trash over a 4-mile area.

Over these four events, we were able to clean 12 miles of shoreline, 6 miles of water and collect 1,300 pounds of trash. We did see some common themes at each site:

- The most commonly found trash item by far was cigarette butts.
- The most common fishing lure was a soft plastic stick bait, and at every ramp we found at least one bunk board.
- Other often-found items were, of course, plastic bottles.

You might be surprised at how quickly water bottles, ice bags, snacks, lures and lines add up to a full bag of trash. Many of the common trash items we found take a long time to biodegrade. A cigarette butt is estimated at 10 years; it's 20 years for a grocery bag, 450 years for a plastic bottle and 600 years for fishing line.

Following the successful cleanups, Costa now plans to provide every Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit angler with a reusable "Kick Plastic" bag for their boats. This will be important in helping all our anglers become personally responsible for any trash they might have on the boat each day.

WE'RE ALL IN THE CLEANUP TOGETHER

We as anglers have to be concerned about keeping our fisheries clean and put in the extra effort to clean up other people's trash, because it's the only way to keep our fisheries thriving. If you plan to do a trash cleanup at your local body of water, we recommend pre-walking the area to make sure your volunteers know what to prepare for. We used trash grabbers that we found on Amazon that turned out to be extremely useful. When on the boats, long-handled dip nets were a must-have.

You may also check before any cleanup with local marinas or tourism groups, as they often have supplies available to use and a dumpster that's easy to access.

You can see photos from the Costa Clean Water Matters shoreline cleanups at majorleaguefishing.com/fisheries-management. ■


CLEANUP 4

PHOTO BY MASON PRINCE

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WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

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

October 15: Bass Pro Tour: 2022 Stage Four Championship Round – Lake of the Ozarks
October 22: Bass Pro Tour: 2022 Stage Five Knockout Round – Watts Bar
October 29: Bass Pro Tour: 2022 Stage Five Championship Round – Watts Bar
November 5: Bass Pro Tour: 2022 Stage Six Championship Round – Cayuga Lake
November 12: Bass Pro Tour: 2022 Stage Seven Championship Round – Mille Lacs Lake



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

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

October 15: 2022 TITLE Qualifying Group B Day 1
October 22: 2022 TITLE Qualifying Group A Day 2
October 29: 2022 TITLE Qualifying Group B Day 2
November 5: 2022 TITLE Knockout Round
November 12: 2022 TITLE Championship Round

Sportsman Channel — Sundays 2–4 p.m. (ET)

October 16: 2022 TITLE Qualifying Group B Day 1
October 23: 2022 TITLE Qualifying Group A Day 2
October 30: 2022 TITLE Qualifying Group B Day 2
November 6: 2022 TITLE Knockout Round
November 13: 2022 TITLE Championship Round

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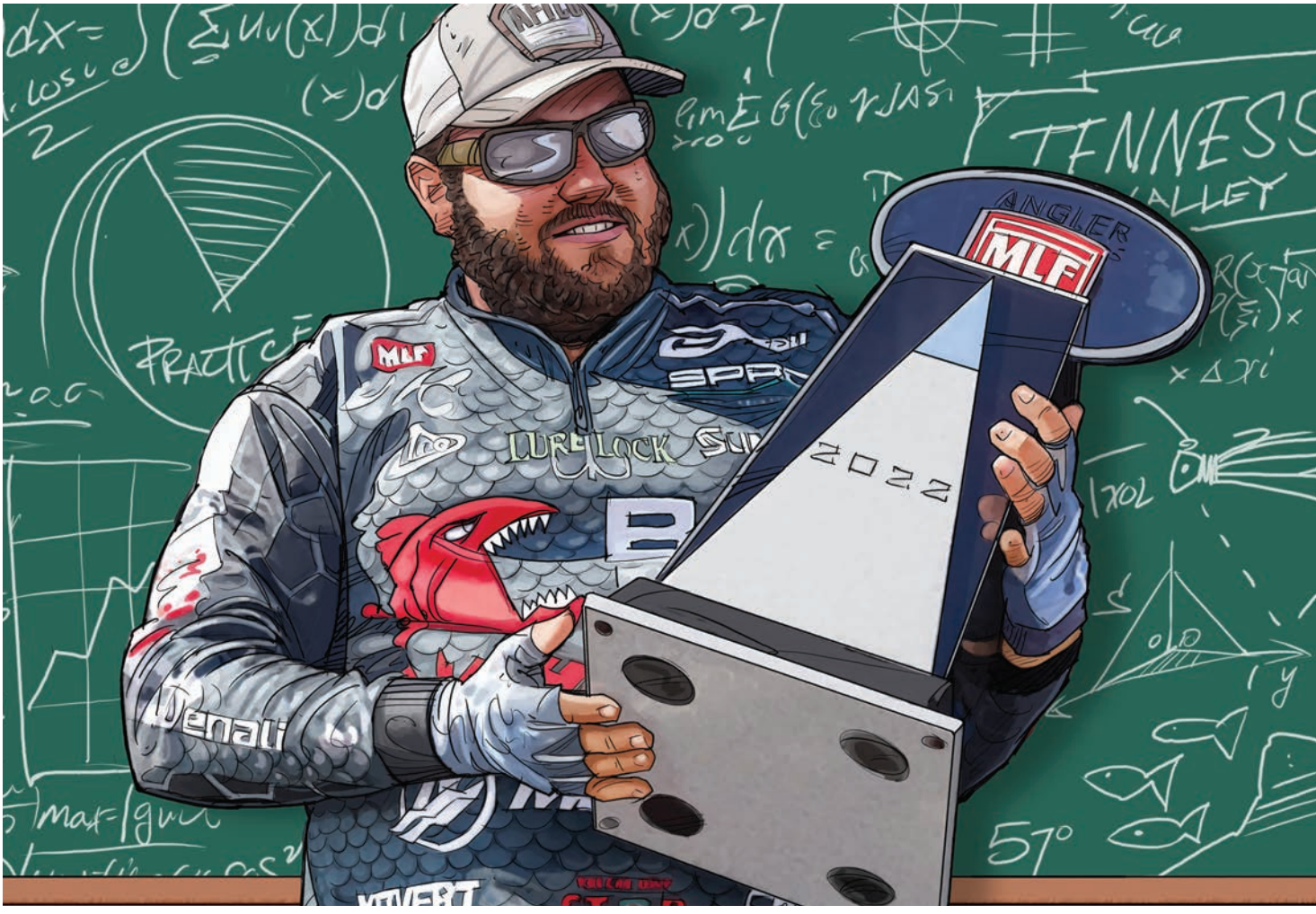




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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

COMMON DENOMINATORS OF DOMINANCE

What connects the two best bass anglers on the planet?

"What makes Jacob Wheeler so good?"

"How does Michael Neal make so many Top 10s?"

These are two of the common questions I hear from fishing fans. Wheeler and Neal are unequivocally the two best pros under the MLF umbrella right now. As proof, both anglers have just notched back-to-back Angler of the Year titles: Neal on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit and Wheeler on the Bass Pro Tour. That's an amazing feat given the competition these two face every tournament day. Yes, back-to-back AOYs have been accomplished before, but never by pros as young as Wheeler and Neal.

I've watched both of these anglers become bass fishing stars over the last 10 years, on and off the water. During that time, I've observed several common traits that make them both lethal tournament anglers. So, instead of rehashing their many accomplishments, I want to render my opinion of what makes them both so good.

THE TENNESSEE VALLEY AND ELECTRONICS

It's by no coincidence that Neal and Wheeler both live in the heart of the Tennessee Valley. The quality of the fisheries, the stout tournament competition, the diversity of the lakes and the

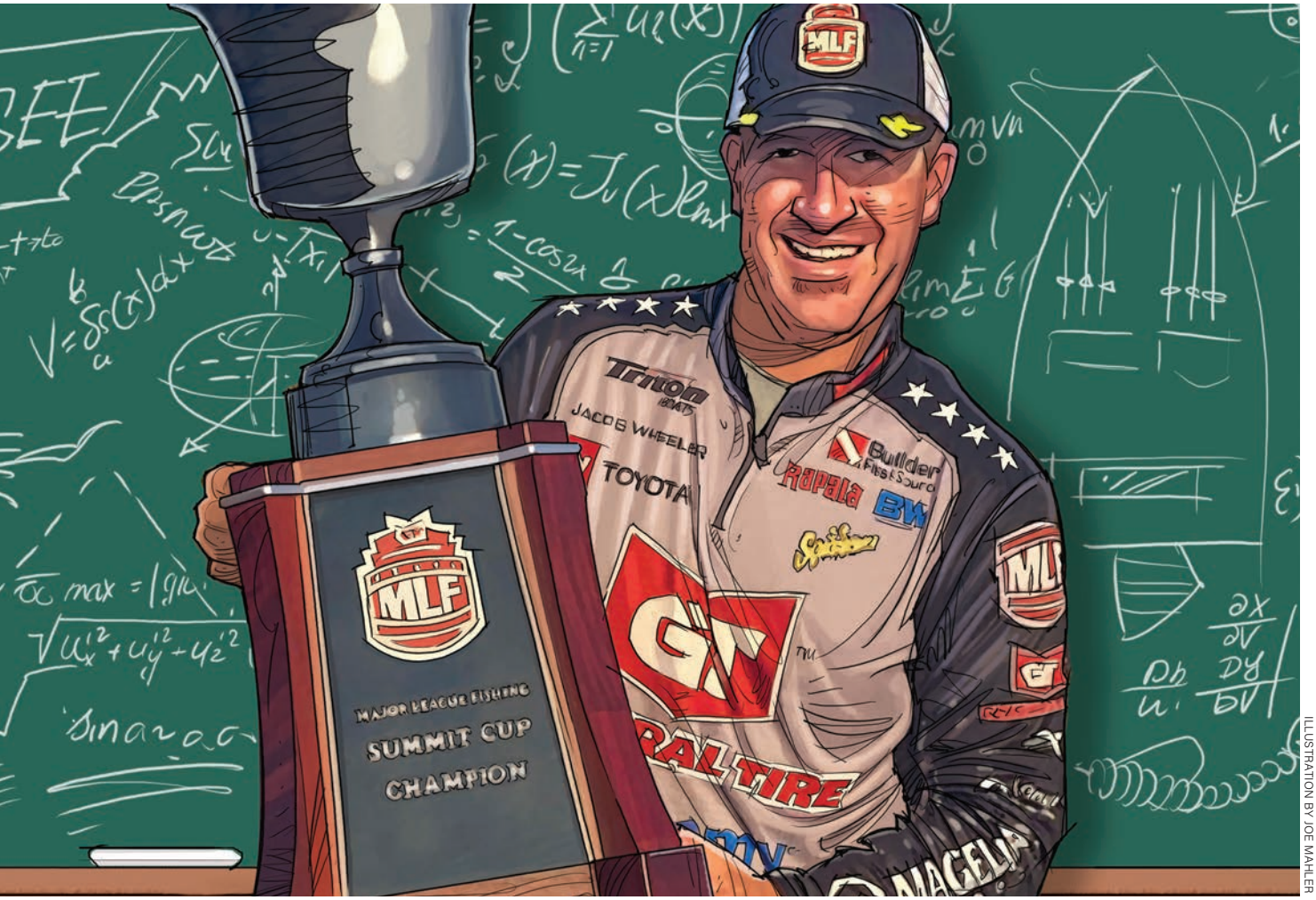


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

fishing innovation found in the 500-mile stretch of the Tennessee Valley provides a potent bass fishing education for those who live there.

Neal was born in the Tennessee Valley and his family eventually settled in Dayton, Tennessee, on the shores of Lake Chickamauga. There, he received a master's degree on the mysteries of Tennessee River bass from his uncle, Rogne Brown.

Wheeler was born in Indiana. After experiencing financial success in pro fishing, he intentionally moved south to Harrison, Tennessee, near Chickamauga, in 2017 to be in the heart of the Tennessee Valley. With that, both anglers have quick access to prominent bass fisheries to hone their skills and ultimately stay on top of their game.

One game, in particular, that both anglers have honed to perfection is the use of electronics to find pelagic groups of bass that live offshore. Wheeler and Neal are similar in age, separated by only a year. Just into their 30s, they grew up during an era of advanced electronics like laptops, tablets and smart phones providing a constant flow of information from portable screens. They simply have an inherent grasp on utilizing a screen to access information quickly. Hence, when the electronics boom hit tournament bass fishing in the first decade of the 2000s, they were naturals at harnessing the power of technological fish-finding with advanced transducers and electronics.

I believe both of these young anglers are at the very top of their class when it comes to reading electronics and catching bass using screens. Whether it's largemouths in Texas, spotted bass in the southeast or smallmouth up north, both have a remarkable knack for tapping populations of unpressured bass that roam open water like nomads.

That's not to say that all of their success comes solely from new technology. Both are incredible anglers in techniques that have nothing to do with electronics. They have multiple Top-10 finishes in places like Florida and Louisiana, on tidal fisheries and in shallow swamps where a transducer drags through the mud all day.

MULTITASKING AND SUPPORT

In addition to being of similar ages, Wheeler and Neal have an immense

capacity to multitask on both a micro and macro level. At any given moment, they're processing a multitude of things mentally.

During period breaks at Bass Pro Tour events, it's nothing for Neal to strip off his rain gear, eat a snack, retie a couple FG knots and do a live interview simultaneously. When a tournament day is over, Wheeler will be organizing tackle, doing a daily YouTube recap, eating dinner and playing cards – all while talking on the phone. The multifunctional pace these two anglers keep all day long in exceptional. I struggle to just keep up with carrying keys and a wallet at the same time.

Even on a larger scale, their multitasking abilities are amazing. In addition to tournament fishing, Wheeler is a husband and dedicated father of two, runs a successful YouTube channel, runs the Wheeler Fishing Foundation, is building a house, pre-practicing all over the country and still has time to attend social events with friends and family.

Outside of tournaments, Neal runs his Dayton Boat Dock and Grill establishment on Chickamauga, manages his Real Deal tackle shop and even farms, harvesting soybeans and corn in the offseason.

In addition, both pros are surrounded by a team of great people who help run their businesses. They rely on extensive support from family, friends and employees to hold down the fort so they can focus 100 percent on fishing.

Finally, both anglers are very fortunate to have parents who have provided unwavering moral support for their sons' careers, always believing they would be champions of the sport. This is a critical component to success in the rigors of this crazy business.

MASTER STRATEGISTS

No matter if it's a five-fish limit or an every-fish-counts format, both Neal and Wheeler are amazingly clairvoyant in strategizing for the entire tournament. Mentally, they're consumed with winning the event instead of just getting a check. They're always thinking two or three days ahead. They have a knack for calculating the attrition caused by conditions, weather and fishing pressure to weave themselves through the cut days and be in a position to win on the final day.

That requires a lot of goal shifting during each hour of the event and constant fish and area management. Instead of running right to their best spots the first morning, they often pick low-hanging fruit early on in more communal areas and then deploy sneaky spots and conditional bite windows later in the event.

Their audacity to practice during competition days is also impressive. When they get ahead of the cut, they begin investing their tournament time into practice time, running new water or checking changing conditions. While other anglers who are well above the cut line continue to wail on their best areas in a format that cuts back to zero, Wheeler and Neal immediately lay off their fish and search out new windows that could open up later in the event. They're both programmed to invest every extra minute in the end game.

PINPOINT PRACTICE

Speaking of practice, even on official practice days, Wheeler and Neal process water differently than other anglers. In the old days of tournament fishing, pros practiced a few days to see what the lake had to offer. That convention still exists today and works for some, but these two already know how they want to catch bass before putting their boats in the water.

It's an approach reminiscent of Kevin VanDam's practice discipline. VanDam pioneered the concept of looking for fish that are set up the way he wants to catch them, primarily in line with his strengths. Neal and Wheeler have taken a page out of VanDam's playbook in this respect. They always have a firm idea of how the fish should be set up given the lake type, time of year and conditions and match that to their strengths.

DEFINITIVE DECISIONS, EXCELLENT EFFICIENCY

Both Neal and Wheeler are in a league of their own when it comes to on-the-water moves. There is zero ambivalence in their decision making. I often see pros succumb to analysis paralysis when it comes to making a change in location. The indecision lull is like going OB on the golf course, costing them a stroke or two. They might verbalize the need to move, but 30 minutes later, they're still grinding in the same spot.

Neal's moves are absolutely definitive. There's never wondering or hesitation about moving. He pulls the trolling motor up with pure conviction.

Wheeler's moves are much the same. His sense of urgency on the water is like no other; he's always thinking two or three steps ahead. This is not as noticeable when he's giving a live update for the cameras, but when the camera is removed, the talking stops and Wheeler is all business. His moves are also definitive, made with intentionality and purpose.

Both pros also have an in-boat efficiency that is remarkable. From the order rods are laid out on the deck to the accessibility of tools and soft plastics, there's rarely any wasted movement or time lost looking for something. I've never seen Neal or Wheeler re-tie a line in competition. When they break off, they always have a duplicate rig already tied on and ready to go. This workflow intensifies when catching fish. It's all about shortening the time between hooking up and weighing (or culling) and getting a lure back in the water.

There's also no crying over spilled milk. Missed opportunities or lost fish are not drama stages for either angler. There's no stomping around or bellyaching; they simply check their lure, try to figure out what went wrong and get right back out there. This is especially true with Neal, who exhibits zero emotion over "what could have been." He knows generating the bite is half the battle and chooses to focus on that as victory instead of losing a fish as defeat. This, too, is reminiscent of VanDam: accepting it and putting it behind him as fast as possible. No angler in the sport has ever boated every single fish they've had on the line.

In all, that's a very brief list of what separates these two tremendous pros from the rest of the pack. Yes, many other pros have some (or most) of these same attributes, but Neal and Wheeler seem to have all the boxes checked simultaneously – and have for quite some time. ■


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

VERSATILITY IS IMPORTANT, BUT IT'S NOT EVERYTHING

Look no further than a couple standout MLF vets for proof

Stephen Browning is a numbers guy. With a career spanning over three decades, Browning's recent accolades include consistent placement near the top of the Bass Pro Tour standings in each of the last two seasons (sixth in 2021 and 21st in 2022). In fact, Browning was the only angler to qualify for every Knockout Round in 2021.

Surprisingly, despite success across a wide range of venues east and west, north and south, Browning did nearly all of his damage utilizing a single lure: the Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer. He's excelled by sticking to a principle refined by hours of study.

"On average, if you catch seven to nine scorable, keeper bass per day, you make it to the Knockout Round," Browning explains. "That's my goal at every single event."

Interestingly, Browning strives to master the BPT format as much as the fishing itself.

"I'm fishing for 20 bites a day, not five," he continues.

But why the bladed jig?

"It covers water, and it fits our format," Browning answers.

Further, the power of the bladed jig lies in its ability to cover a variety of water depths and cover types.

THE POWER OF THE BLADED JIG LIES IN ITS ABILITY TO COVER A VARIETY OF WATER DEPTHS AND COVER TYPES.

"From the bank to 20 feet deep," he says, "Grass, docks, rocks or wood."

Throughout his career, Browning has been known as a shallow-water fisherman. That hasn't changed.

"I'm rolling along looking for visible cover," he says. "The trolling motor is on 50 percent, and I rarely come off of it."

The Jack Hammer allows Browning to quickly read a body of water and develop a pattern – tasks imperative to succeeding in the BPT format. Speed and efficiency are key components of his system.

BROWNING'S KEY TOOLS

Browning often keeps four or more bladed jigs on deck at all times, relying exclusively on three weight sizes: 3/8, 1/2 and 3/4 ounce. Each is thrown on a St. Croix Legend Tournament rod ranging from 7-foot, 2-inches for target fishing to 7-foot-10 for "when I'm just bombing it out there." Lines are exclusively Gamma fluorocarbon in 16- to 20-pound tests. Why not braid?

"Missed strikes," he explains. "With [no-stretch] braid, that hook will flex and drag, I believe, instead of penetrating."

Using his current system, Browning estimates he lands 95 percent of the bass that bite his Jack Hammer.

Trailers and colors are fairly basic, but not without scrutiny. Green pumpkin, black-and-blue and white are the starting points. Trailers are all Z-Man ElaZtech products, including RaZor ShadZ swimmers, DieZel MinnowZ paddletails and the GOAT soft bait, a flat, twin-tail design Browning relies on for the thickest cover.

"That flat body will come up and over just about anything without snagging," he says, adding that the plastic acts as both a deflector and stabilizer for the ChatterBait's hook.

With such a simple system, Browning's most critical fundamental may lie in his mindset. Overall, he's totally unconcerned about hot local lures or the approach of his competitors. "Zero interest" is how he describes each, with "supreme confidence" summarizing his approach. But what about fisheries that don't seem to match his preferred method – many northern venues, for instance.

"Big smallmouth love it," Browning adds with a chuckle, citing a recent waylay on Lake St. Clair.

While there are exceptions to every rule in bass fishing, for the most part, Browning lets few circumstances stand in the way of his plan.

MORGAN'S FLIPPING/PITCHING CAREER

Andy Morgan is another competitor who doesn't sway easily. Fans of fishing recognize Morgan as one of the greatest competitors of all time, finding himself in the hunt for every Angler of the Year award for a large portion of his career. This season, Morgan was again in the hunt, thanks to a solid approach that's never let him down: flipping and pitching.

Since the beginning of his career, Morgan has sought out areas of the lake to apply the short-line technique. Even with the unique format of the BPT, Morgan finds little reason to change. But how can a flipper compete with the fast-paced approach of his competitors?

"You have to be efficient and keep your foot on the pedal," he says.

Morgan is a master at dissecting visible cover. While he rates docks as his favorite cover type, he's equally adept at picking apart laydowns and grass lines.

His goal is much like Browning's: establish a pattern that can be run throughout the lake, often regulated to certain cover types. Once he establishes a productive environment, Morgan can hop around, making dedicated pitches to the spots with the most potential.

While he relies most on his instincts and his eyes, Morgan has found the advent of forward-facing sonar to be an advantage, even to his type of fishing.

"The ends of laydowns and docks; those are two places I'm relying on that technology," he explains.

Morgan routinely now bypasses docks appearing void to his electronics' eyes, concentrating more on those revealing brush piles and individual fish.

A FLIPPING/PITCHING MASTER'S TOOLBOX

When it comes to equipment, Morgan continues to utilize the setups that have won him millions. Favorite Fishing rods measuring 7-foot-6 are paired with 16- to 20-pound-test Gamma fluorocarbon. Lately, Morgan has been utilizing braid with a fluorocarbon leader, and he sees line advancements as the most important factor in modern flipping.

"Fish are harder to get to bite," he says.

That fact has pushed him to smaller diameters for line as well as smaller baits.

Throughout his career, Morgan has likely gone through more Zoom plastics than anyone on earth. Still, today, he utilizes a Zoom Z-Craw and Z-Craw Jr. more than any other Texas rig bait, sometimes supplementing his selection with a new Strike King jig he helped designed, tipped with his dependable Zoom Super Chunk Jr. It should be noted that Morgan never "threads" his trailer, and still continues to simply pierce the chunk on his jig.

"No matter what, I'm always looking for a place to do what I want to do and trying to find a way to get more bites flipping," Morgan adds.

And, just like Browning, Morgan has found a way to excel in the most unlikely places.

Fans will remember Morgan and close buddy Wesley Strader nearly taking down 2021 Bass Pro Tour Stage Seven on Lake St. Clair. Both utilized flipping techniques around the Detroit River mouth to catch hundreds of quality largemouth. In the end, perhaps splitting the fish cost one of them the victory.

While most of today's pro bass fishing press centers on the young standouts and their masterful versatility, and on offshore wizards (thanks in part to advances in modern electronics), two cagey veterans continue to prove that mastering a single technique can – and will – get you paid. Don't give up on the one-trick ponies; they're continuing to validate the effectiveness of old-school bassin'.

MORGAN HAS FOUND THE ADVENT OF FORWARD-FACING SONAR TO BE AN ADVANTAGE, EVEN TO HIS TYPE OF FISHING.

WALK THE DOG



WALKING BAITS GEAR GUIDE

By TACKLE WAREHOUSE

ASK ANY ANGLER WHAT THEIR FAVORITE TECHNIQUE IS for catching bass, and you can bet that topwater is going to rank pretty high on the list. Known for catching big bass and producing explosive strikes, topwater walking baits are crucial any time you see fish feeding near the surface – and even when they're not visually feeding, they can be the key to unlocking big bites.

In this guide, we'll take a look at the best gear to use, cover some modifications and rigging techniques, and also provide some helpful tips and insight on color selection.

Suggested Baits:
Evergreen SB Topwater Plugs (pictured – 125mm Bone)
Heddon One Knocker Spook Walking Bait
Berkley Cane Walker

RETRIEVE TECHNIQUE

To walk the dog, make your cast and let the rings from the splash settle before you begin working the bait. With your rod pointed down, use your wrist to twitch the rod tip toward the water and move the bait side-to-side while simultaneously reeling the slack that has just been created. The amount of forward movement will depend on the reel, while the amount of side-to-side movement will depend on the rod. The key is finding the balance between the two to generate your ideal action.

REELS



There are a host of situations that require an angler to take up line quickly in order to successfully land a fish with a walking bait. A high-speed casting reel with a 7:1 to 9:1 gear ratio will have the speed to fish at a faster pace and cover water more efficiently. Every time you impart the 'walk-the-dog' action with your rod tip, you're introducing some slack into your line, so having more speed will help you work the bait faster and more aggressively.

Suggested Reels:
Abu Garcia REVO SX Rocket Casting Reel (pictured)
Lew's HyperSpeed LFS Casting Reel
Daiwa Zillion 10.0 TW Casting Reels

RODS

Topwater walking baits typically range from 3 to 8 inches in length, so the spectrum of applicable rods varies greatly depending on what lure you choose. For the most part, the range could encompass a graphite rod that is 6'8"to 7'6" in length with a medium to medium-heavy power and a moderate to moderate-fast taper. The ideal balance incorporates enough length for increased castability, a soft enough tip that won't rip out the treble hooks, and a shorter handle length for improved handling.

Suggested Rods:
Abu Garcia Vendetta Casting Rod 7' Medium Winch (pictured)
St. Croix Mojo Bass Casting Rod 7'1" Med Moderate
Shimano Poison Adrena Casting Rod 7'3" Med Heavy



LINE

Floating line is imperative to getting the right action out of your walking baits, so braided and monofilament fishing lines are preferred as they remain on top of the water during your retrieve. Many anglers will use a 30- to 50-pound-test braided main line for its exceptional castability and quick response when twitching the lure.



COLORS

Walking baits are great at imitating shad and baitfish, so the most common colors used throughout the year mimic these kinds of forage. Flashy chrome and translucent shad patterns are great for bluebird skies, high sun and clear water, while black, white, and bone colors that are less reflective produce a better silhouette with cloudy or overcast conditions. If you're fishing shallow water during the spring months near potential bluegill beds or fry-guarding bass, chartreuse- or bluegill-colored walking baits are fantastic choices when you know the fish are spawning.

MODIFICATIONS AND RIGGING

If you're having trouble getting the right walking action out of your lure, consider adding a split ring or a snap to your line tie to give it a wider range of motion. Using a snap also allows for swapping out lures quickly without having to retie every time. Tying a loop knot on your walking baits will also help you impart action by giving your lure a wider range of motion. Enhance appeal by adding a feathered treble on the back or try swapping out the front hook with a red treble to provide the fish with a more visible strike target and improve your hook-up ratio.



When the fish are short-striking or missing your lure, downsizing to a smaller size walking bait or switching colors can make a huge difference and help improve your hook-up ratio. On the flip side, fishing a bigger walking bait with more sound in windy conditions will allow a fish to track the lure better when there's a lot of surface disturbance.

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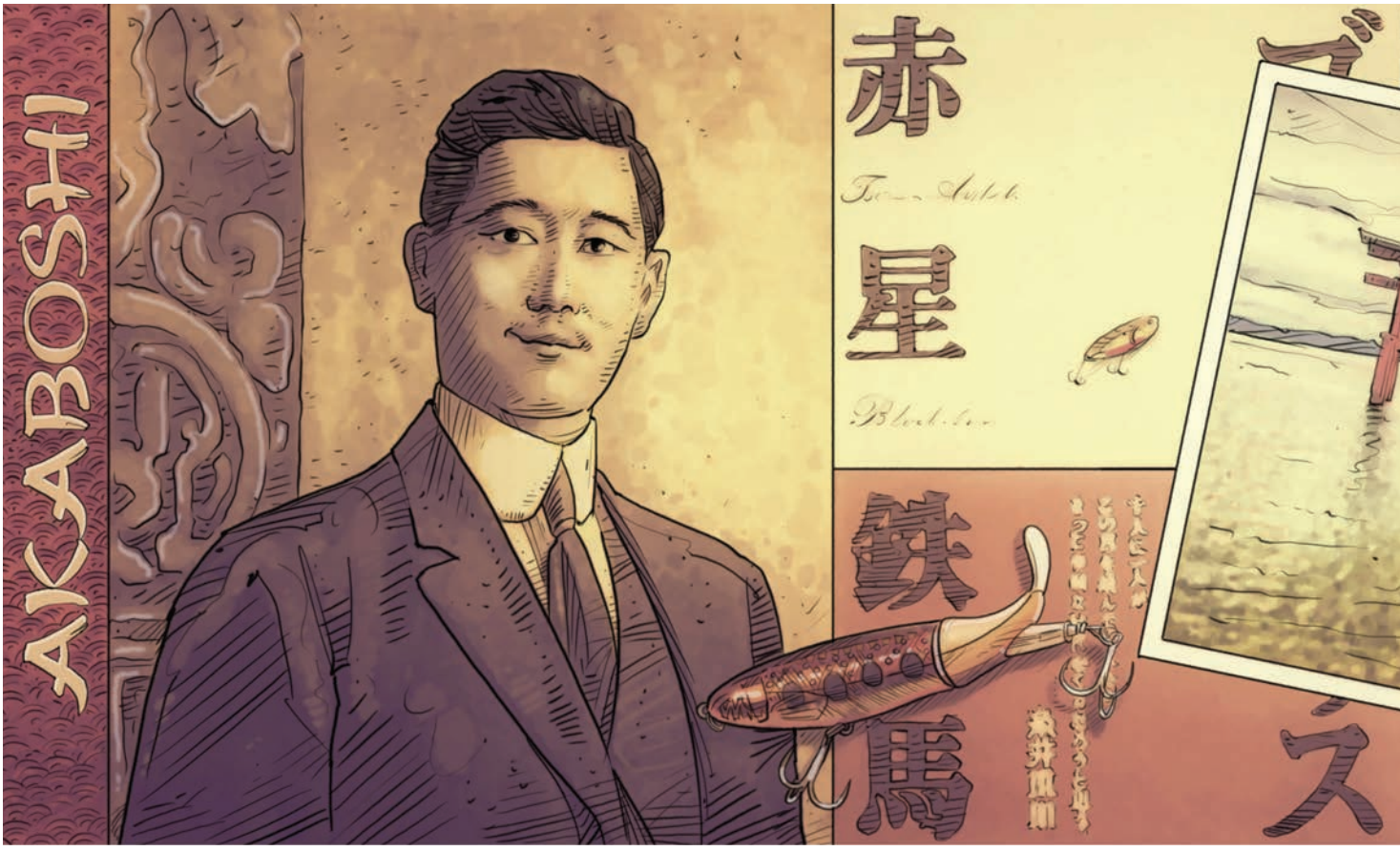
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BASS AND THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN

The introduction of largemouth to Japanese waters had a profound worldwide-impact

The largemouth bass is one of the great aquaculture and angling successes in world history. It's Earth's most widely distributed freshwater fish. Only the brown trout can claim nearly as much coverage.

There are largemouth in five of the seven continents. They're in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and South America. No matter where you live or visit, the odds are that largemouths are not far away.

Of course, it wasn't always like that. At the time of the founding of the United States, the range of the largemouth bass was mostly confined to the eastern half of North America. Subsequent stockings have spread the bass gospel, along with its genetics. And one of the most important and influential places where bass have taken hold is in Japan.

For anyone reading this – mostly diehard bass lovers – it's hard to imagine a world without Japanese bass tackle, without Japanese bass techniques, and without the world record largemouth bass, which came from Japan in 2009. But there was a time – not so very long ago – when there were no bass in Japan.

THE IRON HORSE

The history surrounding the introduction of largemouth bass to the Land of the Rising Sun is a bit hazy, but it's generally believed that 75 fingerlings and three adult bass were first stocked in Lake Ashinoko (southwest of Tokyo) in May of 1925 by a wealthy businessman named Tetsuma Akaboshi.

Akaboshi was born in 1882 to a wealthy family. He was the oldest of six sons and seven daughters. His father made a fortune building military supplies for the Japanese Navy. Being the eldest son, Tetsuma (the name translates to "Iron Horse") basically inherited everything and lived a privileged life. He attended



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.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

boarding school in New Jersey (the Lawrenceville School) and college at the University of Pennsylvania.

But how does a rich Japanese businessman with an Ivy League education decide to import largemouth bass halfway around the world? That's lost to history, but we can make some reasonable assumptions. We know that Akaboshi was an avid angler (his other hobbies were horseback riding and growing roses). He must have encountered bass while in boarding school or college. There's a pond on the campus of the boarding school, and Penn is walking distance from the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. Likely he discovered bass there.

What we know for certain is that Akaboshi brought bass to Lake Ashinoko in an effort to restore the ecological balance of the fishery and to help it recover from pollution, overfishing and dam construction issues. He wrote about it and offered that as his justification.

There are also some Japanese sources that maintain Akaboshi selected largemouth bass for the task "because they are delicious and fun to catch." Who could possibly argue with that?

And so, if anyone asks, tell them that Tetsuma Akaboshi is the father of Japanese bass fishing.

GEARING UP

Of course, a lot has changed in nearly 100 years. First, largemouth bass in Japan have spread far beyond little Lake Ashinoko (about 1,700 surface acres). Most notably, they are in Lake Biwa, which produced the world record in 2009, weighing 22 pounds, 4.97 ounces.

Second, the Japanese tackle industry has embraced the bass and the American bass market. No other foreign designers and innovators are nearly as important to us, and Japanese fishing products can be found in every serious bass angler's tackle box and rod locker.

Japan's initial foray into the American tackle market actually predates the introduction of bass to that country. By the late 19th century, Japanese bamboo fishing poles dominated the American market. A few years later, they claimed most of the silk gut fishing line industry. That dominance continued until nylon monofilament came along, but World War II devastated most of the civilized world as well as the Japanese economy. Japanese tackle manufacturers were among the first to recover because they focused their efforts on the great numbers of American GIs occupying their country. These servicemen had disposable income, and many liked to fish. The manufacturers were happy to equip them.

By the 1950s, the Japanese were focused on the American fishing market, flooding the U.S. with cheap knockoffs of American lures. The quality was woefully lacking, but with retail prices often just 15 percent of what the name brands were asking, anglers bought the discount options and a lot of American manufacturers suffered as a result.

It wasn't until the 1970s and '80s that the Japanese turned things around and began marketing top-quality products in the U.S. This resurgence was led by several companies, including Daiwa, Ryobi and Shimano. Today, it's hard to imagine walking into a tackle shop and not seeing brands like Gamakatsu, Megabass, Sunline and too many others to mention.

'ENEMY FISH'

Unfortunately, the status of bass in Japan has changed dramatically since their first stocking in 1925. What were once welcome additions to the aquaculture are now "enemy fish." Further stocking in Japanese waters is outlawed, and many support efforts aimed at eradicating the bass wherever possible.

In fact, at the government-run restaurant overlooking Lake Biwa, bass are on the menu, and anglers are required to keep and kill any bass they catch from most Japanese waters – though some of the slippery things get away. Oops! Only certain guides and fishing industry professionals have authorization to release bass back into the water alive.

Today, we're more aware and sensitive to the concept of invasive species. Bringing a nonnative or "alien" species into a new ecosystem can have unintended and undesirable effects. That's certainly been the case with bass in Japan and elsewhere. Had we been aware of such threats a century ago, it's unlikely there would be any bass in Japan today … or in a lot of other places for that matter.

While some might argue that the bass has been a mixed blessing to Japan, no one could reasonably say the reverse. Whether we're talking tackle, techniques or the world record largemouth, Japan has been a shining beacon in our sport, and the history of bass and bass fishing cannot be told without also telling of its Japanese influence. ■

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THE DUALITY OF FALL BASSIN'

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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



As the first cool nights of fall began arriving last month, bass started making their migration toward the backs of creeks in lakes across the country. They were drawn to these locations by huge schools of baitfish that were being corralled for the "fall feed." By that first cool morning when you realized you should have brought a hoodie to the ramp, the bite was already on fire.

At least that's what anglers like to tell each other…

In reality, the fall transition and fall bass fishing in general are much more complex than this. If you're one of the anglers who's left scratching your head wondering what the fuss is all about, you aren't alone. If you're tired of chasing after someone else's pattern and you really want to focus on catching bigger bass this fall, I have two simple recommendations.

CATCHING 'EM DEEP

First, forget all the traditional knowledge about fall. It's not that its wrong – it's that it's incomplete. Yes, bass feed on baitfish. Yes, they often corral them into coves. And yes, you can catch those bass on topwaters and other shallow-running reaction baits. But you can also fish deeper. You can fish the main lake. And you can definitely catch giant bass while other anglers are catching "schoolies."

By focusing on mainlake structure instead of creeks, you'll dramatically increase your odds of catching a giant bass. Big bass love quick access to deep water, and that's also true in the fall. Given the choice, bass will ambush prey from the comfort of their mainlake haunts rather than having to migrate up a creek or into the back of a shallow cove.

With that in mind, I recommend fishing very specific mainlake structures. Mainlake points that divide major creek arms, large mainlake points near a dam, offshore humps that top out in 10 to 20 feet of water, and anywhere a deep creek channel comes up against a steep bank or bluff wall are all great locations to find big bass in the fall.



Savage Gear 8-inch Pulse Tail Trout
Color: chartreuse blue



River2Sea Tactical DD 75
Color: hitch

TOOLS FOR THE TASK

Now that we've established where many big fish live in the fall, we come to the second point: Specifically targeting those fish requires very particular lures and presentations. There are two very different trains of thought on "big bass baits," and I advocate for trying both methods on your lake.

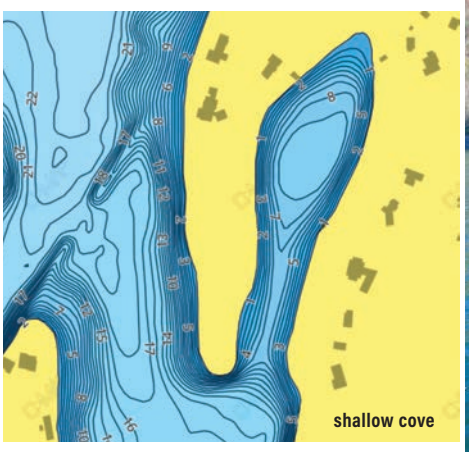
The first is presenting a slow-moving meal that a giant bass will deem worthy of eating. In other words, a large swimbait or a jig that represents either a slow-moving fish or a crawfish. These baits, when moved naturally, represent a sizable meal to a bass. The truly giant fish in your lake didn't get that way by constantly chasing every little minnow that swam into view. These fish are ambush feeders, and they wait for the right moment to attack the right meal.

The key with these natural-looking baits is moving them slowly. If a big bass can approach, inspect them, and inhale them whole, all without expending significant energy, you've got a big-bass bait. Some of our favorite swimbaits for this method include the Savage Gear 8-inch Pulse Tail RTF Trout, the Bull Shad 6-inch Bacca Burrito and the Megabass Magdraft Freestyle. For jigs, we rely on a 1/2-ounce Dirty Jigs Pitchin Jig with a NetBait 4-inch Paca Slim trailer and a 5/8-ounce Dirty Jigs Finesse Football Jig paired with a 5-inch Yamamoto Double Tail Grub.

The second method for catching giant fall bass is completely different and takes advantage of a bass' instinct rather than its desire to eat. For this, you're going to want to rely on extremely fast-moving crankbaits to trigger a feed response. The right baits, reeled at lightning-fast speeds with a stop-and-go retrieve, can trigger reaction strikes unlike any you've ever experienced. We're talking trophy bass chasing baits all the way to the surface, climbing over each other for their opportunity to eat it first. It can be truly incredible.

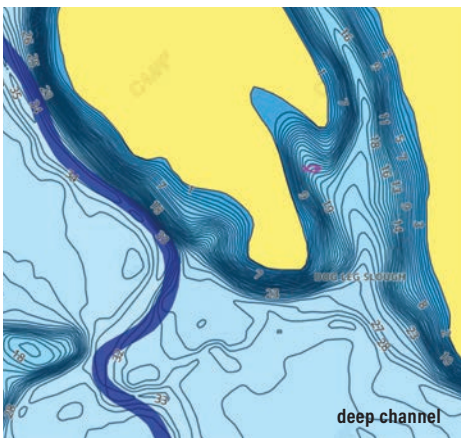
We designed the Tactical DD 75 Crankbait with River2Sea specifically for this purpose. The bait is at its best when burned on a reel with a 7:1 or 8:1 gear ratio in the fall and winter months. The Megabass DEEP-X 300 and DEEP-SIX are two additional baits that excel when applying this presentation. Between those three crankbaits, you can reach any depth with a variety of color options. With all these baits, though, we recommend natural or ghost colors that fish can't get a good look at as they pass by. The harder the bait is to see, the more likely it is they'll chase after it.

While these two methodologies are seemingly at odds, both have proved themselves countless times. One relies on a bass' desire to feed while the other triggers fierce reaction strikes. Both methods are incredibly effective, and if you put them to work for you this fall, you might find yourself holding the biggest bass of your life. ■



Bass often wrangle baitfish into the backs of shallow coves and creek arms this time of year, but sometimes it's easier to catch quality bass closer to deep water.





Banks and humps near deep channel swings can be goldmines for big bass looking to ambush bigger meals without having to travel deep into the backs of pockets.

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BRICK BY BRICK

THE ONLY WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE DOMINATING PERFORMER THAT IS JACOB WHEELER IS TO UNDERSTAND HOW HE WAS BUILT

By Rob Newell





PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Bring up the name Jacob Wheeler in any bass fishing crowd these days and the phrase, "hottest angler on the planet," is likely to follow. Going into the 2022 Bass Pro Tour season, Wheeler's list of fishing accolades at the age of 31 was already enough to put him in a league of his own. But it's what he accomplished during the 2022 season that has left his fans, pundits and fellow competitors scratching their heads in awe.

With a Bally Bet Angler of the Year trophy now secured, Wheeler becomes the first back-to-back winner of the prestigious award in Major League Fishing history. En route to winning the title a second time, Wheeler dominated a top-ranked field of pros with an astounding margin of victory of 70 points.

The spotlight once again has been cast on Wheeler's lures, equipment and electronics to find the secrets of why he's such a supreme competitor in the realm of tournament bass fishing.

While the mechanical and electronic tools certainly play a part in his success, Wheeler believes the more visceral reasons for his triumphs can be found in his upbringing.

In a sport where strong financial backing appears to increasingly bring competitive advantage for young anglers, Wheeler's modest childhood was devoid of such affluence. His ability to excel in intense situations comes from a road of adversity and perseverance. During his childhood, fishing opportunities didn't come easy. He grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, which is not even close to any water that resembles what some would consider a good bass fishery.

"My parents worked hard to provide the essentials," Wheeler recalls. "It's not like we did without, but luxuries like going to restaurants, wearing trendy clothes or going on vacations were out of the question. Needless to say, buying new bass boats and premium tackle or paying huge entry fees for bass tournaments weren't happening either.

"My sisters and I were homeschooled, and we learned a lot about chores and work at a very early age. If we didn't do what needed to be done around the house, no one else did it for us. Responsibility was a raw reality early on. I loved fishing and it was my escape, but the house rules were: I had to finish all my schoolwork and chores before I could go fishing. Every day I would hustle to get it all done just to make a few casts down at the river in the fading daylight – it was my reward. Fishing was my motivation to live up to my responsibilities and keep moving forward, and that has been a lesson that has served me well in this career."

HUSTLING UP LUCK

When Wheeler was a teenager, his father Curtis took him to the annual boating and sporting shows around Indianapolis where Wheeler was introduced to local "big-time" bass pros with fancy boats and shirts laden with patches. Those pros performed tank and casting demos for the crowds. Wheeler absorbed every bit of the atmosphere, plotting a way to become a part of it.

At those shows, the teenage Wheeler would brazenly challenge pros to casting contests – for money. His dad recalls stories of how his son earned money at the shows.

"I'd give Jacob five bucks to go bet pros that he could cast better than they could," the Wheeler patriarch remembers. "He would win five bucks off one guy and then go challenge another, and then another. Pretty soon he had a pocket full of money."

Curtis never had doubt in his son's ability to beat the pros.

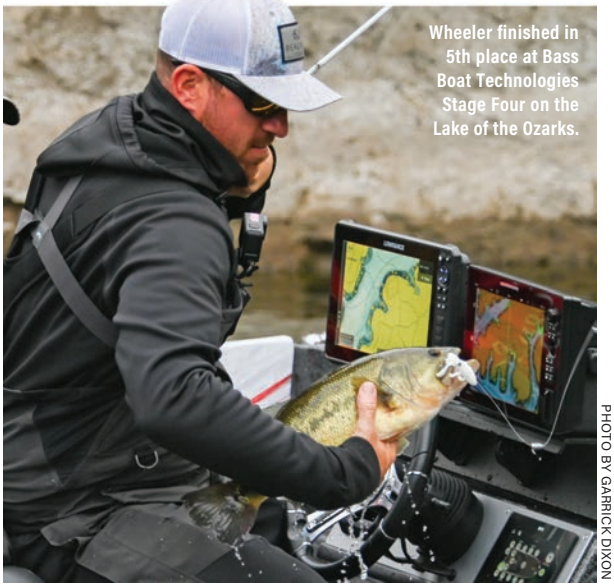
"As a kid, Jacob spent hours in the back yard casting, pitching and flipping a lure into a coffee cup," he recalls. "It didn't matter how cold it was outside, he would pile up a mound of snow, stand on it and cast for hours until he could ring that cup with any kind of lure."

In addition to hustling pros in casting contests, Wheeler also shoveled snow in the winters and mowed grass in the summers for money. He would use the money to buy lures to tie onto fishing rods he borrowed from his dad. Fishing opportunities were meager



Jacob Wheeler hoists a Texas tank, caught on Lake Fork during Toro Stage Two.

PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN



Wheeler finished in 5th place at Bass Boat Technologies Stage Four on the Lake of the Ozarks.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



Jacob Wheeler battles a big smallmouth at Bally Bet Stage Seven on Mille Lacs Lake.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

around Indianapolis, and the closest place to his house to catch a bass was the White River.

Wheeler didn't have a boat, but he did have a bike. Instead of bellyaching about not having a boat as an excuse not to fish, Wheeler relied on his bike to get where the fish were.

"I was determined to find a way to fish," Wheeler says. "The first step was to get to the water, and the only way I had to get to there was on my bike, so that's what I did."

Wheeler strengthened his work ethic and honed his problem-solving skills by pedaling his bike to the river every evening in the summer, after his daily chores were complete. While fishing from the bank, he became captivated with the evening team tournaments held on the river by groups of local anglers.

"I would hang around on the dock with my rods and tackle bag and beg the older guys to take me fishing," Wheeler remembers. "But they already had team partners, and no one wanted to take 'that kid on the dock' fishing."

One day, Wheeler got the break he had been waiting for: A local angler named Greg Moorhous had a partner who didn't show up on time.

"The tournament had already taken off," Wheeler says. "Greg needed a partner to fish with, and I was standing there ready to go. He said, 'Alright, kid, hop in the boat. Let's go.'"

"Greg and I won the tournament that night," Wheeler says. "That very experience had such a profound impact on my life. It allowed me to see possibilities, despite my limitations. If I could take my tackle bag, a few borrowed rods, ride my bike to a ramp, hitch a ride with a guy who had a boat and win a tournament – it's like my whole world opened up."

Wheeler and Moorhous became team partners for the rest of the season and won tournaments together. The next year, Wheeler teamed up with another local angler named Bryan Johnson, who also had a boat. When Wheeler could drive, Johnson eventually let him use his bass boat to go fish tournaments. Wheeler says both anglers were instrumental in his career being what it is today.

> *"WHEN IT'S GAME TIME, WHEELER EMBODIES AN EFFICIENCY AND SENSE OF URGENCY ON THE WATER THAT'S SECOND TO NONE."*

"Greg and Bryan taught me a lot about fishing," he says. "But they also let me do my own fishing, which was critical. They let me try new lures and techniques and different areas without any judgment. They were super important in providing me a platform to fish from and the freedom to develop as an angler on my own."

Some might say Wheeler was 'just lucky' to have found such great people to take him fishing as kid, but Wheeler was the one who diligently did his chores to create time for fishing. He pedaled his own bike to the river. He took the initiative to hound guys he didn't even know to take him on the water so he could try lures he purchased with money he made from hustling. From there, Wednesday night derbies on the White River rewarded Wheeler with endless possibilities of what could be.

*WHEELER'S 2022 TRAIL OF DOMINATION

JACOB WHEELER WON the Bally Bet Angler of the Year Award with a grand total of 529 points. With that, he made history in several ways. First, he's now the first Bass Pro Tour pro to win back-to-back titles and own multiple AOY trophies. Also, he earned the highest point total ever recorded in Bass Pro Tour history in just seven events. Edwin Evers won AOY in 2019 with 510 points and that was with eight events. Finally, Wheeler walloped the field with a winning margin of 70 points. In order to rack up such an impressive margin, he scored a stunning six out of seven Championship Round Top 10s. To get a better idea of his dominant year, here's a look at his finishes for the season.

- Monroe, West Monroe, La., (D'arbonne, Caney, Bussey Brake): 7th
- Lake Fork: 3rd
- Smith Lake: 8th
- Lake of the Ozarks: 5th
- Watts Bar: 2nd
- Cayuga: 2nd
- Mille Lacs: 11th



Jacob Wheeler carefully rigs a bait at General Tire Stage Five on Watts Bar Lake, an event he nearly won.

PHOTO BY JOEL SHANGLE

EFFICIENT INFLUENCES

Wheeler's childhood provided the intangible foundations of resourcefulness, work ethic, self-reliance, perseverance and pragmatic problem-solving. On top of that, he has designed a highly effective strategy of speed and efficiency on the water. As a kid, he was a dedicated student of the tournament fishing game. His early pro influences were Aaron Martens, Kevin VanDam and Edwin Evers.

"Aaron was the master at finding exactly what fish wanted to eat in order to make them bite, and Kevin was a master at making fish eat exactly what he wanted them to bite," Wheeler posits. "It was like opposite approaches, but they both had so much success doing it their ways. Aaron was super creative in coming up with new ways to fool fish. He made me a huge believer in showing bass something different to get them fired up."

"Kevin's intensity on the water is unmatched. His game is to cover more water, make more presentations and catch more fish than anyone else on any given day. His efficiency allows him to sample new water during the tournament, which I see as a huge advantage in keeping up with changing conditions."

Wheeler has tooled VanDam's blitzkrieg blueprint to his own liking and refined covering new water during tournaments into straight practicing during them. He has mastered the strategy of catching fish during tournament hours while simultaneously dissecting new water and new conditions for upcoming days. He's somehow able to calculate cut weights in his head, get ahead of the cut line, then invest his extra time in exploring new options for the rest of the tournament. It seems to be a strategy that few others can duplicate, especially in the every-fish-counts format.

SERENDIPITY AT WORK

Wheeler's career path's timing has merged seamlessly with some of the sport's biggest changes over the last decade. For example, Major League Fishing's unconventional tournament concepts of every-fish-counts, SCORETRACKER®, smaller fields and longer events (six days) have fallen right into Wheeler's wheelhouse of efficient fish catching and strategizing for the long game. He's been the quickest to adapt to these format changes, dating back to his first MLF Cup and Select wins.

In addition, sonar technology has progressed faster in the last 10 years than at any time in professional bass fishing's history. With every iteration and advancement, Wheeler has embraced the improvements and spent days learning how to maximize them to make his up-tempo offense click even faster. This is especially true in his pre-tournament practices where he invests a lot of time exploring Bass Pro Tour venues before the cutoff period. Electronics are a vital component to quickly breaking down huge bodies of water by just idling them for hours to find unmapped treasure. This year, he made early season trips to Lake Fork, Watts Bar, Cayuga and Mille Lacs.

When it's game time, Wheeler embodies an efficiency and sense of urgency on the water that's second to none. His decisions on the water are made with intention and purpose and



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

rarely saddled by hesitation or ambivalence. He is always thinking two or three (or more) steps ahead. His brain is always processing mental calculations that factor in variables such as fishing pressure, impending conditions, cut weights and where he is on SCORETRACKER®.

Wheeler's in-boat workflow and organization are impeccable. There's very little stumbling over stuff or fumbling around for tools or a piece of tackle or draining the game clock tying on lures. Duplicity is built into every system on the boat for backup. He has multiple rigs of the same lures in the rod box. If something breaks off, there's another duplicate rigged and ready. When he gets a school fired up, it's like watching a fish-processing machine stack weight by volume. His intensity of process only grows with the urgency of the situation, and he makes its all look so effortless.

THE SAFE SPACES IN BETWEEN

Another critical facet to Wheeler's success is creating a positive work environment on tour and at home. Given the gritty challenges of professional fishing, pro tours can be overwrought with a degree of despondency that's fueled by everything from bad weather to stingy fishing conditions to industry politics. Stew in it long enough and bad attitudes can envelope anglers, sealing them into a permanent funk.

"I'm lucky to have a great group of guys that I travel with," Wheeler says. "Early in my career, I ran across Adrian Avena, Mark Daniels Jr. and Dustin Connell; we were all just some dudes trying to make it in this crazy fishing business. Over time, we all became great friends. We stay together at tournaments to make a home away from home. Our primary goal is to keep things positive, upbeat and fun in the house every night."

Wheeler adds that his wife, Alicia, and his media producer, Brody McWilliams, are also part of the team that keeps a supportive environment intact.

"In the evenings, after dinner, we always find something different to compete in for fun," Wheeler says. "Whether it's ping pong or bags or basketball or foosball or cards – whatever the rental house has, we'll play it. The idea is to get fishing off our minds for a while, cheer each other up and get everyone in a positive mindset."

FROM 'CHAMP' TO CHAMPION

When asked what amazes him most about his domination of the professional fishing world at his age, Wheeler's response centers on defying the odds based on his background.

"I grew up on the corner of 52nd Street and Broadway in Indianapolis, in a modest, hard-working household with two sisters," he says. "We didn't have a lot in terms of material things, and fishing opportunities were pretty slim. I had to borrow boats and rods and sleep in my truck in motel parking lots the first year I fished BFLs. I was working on the thinnest of margins at all times. I mean, if you look at the odds of me getting to where I am today… it's just crazy."

In retrospect, Wheeler says he simply didn't know any better at the time. He wasn't intimidated, nor envious, of all the high-end gear strapped to his competitors' boats that supposedly constituted an advantage. He was somehow immune to the concept of other anglers having better equipment and more experience and refused to let that be an impediment to his progress. If anything, 'being without' only drove him harder.

"I remember going to my first BFL and seeing all these new bass boats with fancy electronics and 20 new rods on the decks and it never fazed me," he admits. "I was in a borrowed, older-model boat with a repowered motor, basic electronics and five rod and reel combos that I borrowed from my dad – and I never felt disadvantaged."

"Why is that?" he questions to himself. "I honestly don't know. All I knew was I had to make the best of what I had right then and there. I had no time to dwell on disadvantages. Besides, it's a complete waste of time to do that anyway. In the time and energy it takes to complain about not having something, I could just fish harder."

Maybe Curtis knows the answer. To hear him tell it, he used to always call his son, "Champ."

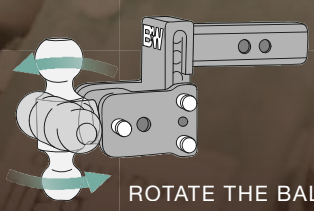
"Even before he won anything, I called him Champ," his father says. "It used to make him mad when he did poorly in a tournament and I still called him Champ. One day he asked me, 'Dad, why do you call me Champ? I haven't won anything, and you walk around here calling me Champ; I don't deserve to be called a champ.'"

"And I would tell him, it's not the boat that catches the fish. It's not the new rod and reel that catches the fish. It's the fisherman that catches the fish, and you understand that in your heart. I call you Champ because someday you will be a champ – a true champion, many times over." ■

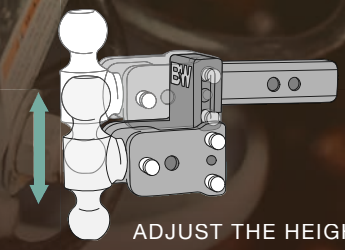
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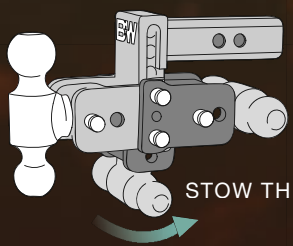
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A MATTER OF TIME

SHUFFIELD SHINES IN TITLE WIN

IT SEEMED LIKE a long time coming, but Spencer Shuffield is now a tour-level winner after capturing the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE on New York's St. Lawrence River

By Tyler Brinks

Arkansas pro Spencer Shuffield's ascension through the ranks of tour-level tournament bass fishing has been well documented. The son of legendary pro Ron Shuffield and a standout co-angler on the FLW Tour from the minute he stepped onto the back deck at age 18, Shuffield seemed born to catch and weigh bass for a living.

Shuffield racked up Top 5s all five years he fished the FLW Tour as a co-angler, claiming Co-Angler of the Year honors in 2011 before moving to the front deck in 2012. He again succeeded almost immediately, finishing second in his second-ever tour-level event as a pro and racking up Top-20 finishes in Tour AOY races in 2013 and 2014.

... and then, after the 2015 season, Shuffield just disappeared.

Still in his 20s and in need of a "reset," Shuffield spent four seasons (from 2016 through 2019) focusing on his personal life and quietly working to become a better all-around angler. The time away ate at him, but he spent it fishing every local tournament he could, amassing victories, knowledge and new skills along the way.

The reset worked like a charm: Shuffield reappeared on the national tournament scene in 2020 and immediately established himself as an AOY contender, stacking up three Top 10s, finishing second in AOY (and sixth in the inaugural TITLE event) and cashing a career-high $107,000 in checks.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

Shuffield's special spot on the St. Lawrence produced high-quality smallmouth bass.

> *"A WIN OF THIS MAGNITUDE IS LIKE WINNING FIVE EVENTS, IN MY OPINION."*

Two more successful seasons later, Shuffield is now on top of the world with the 2022 Tackle Warehouse TITLE belt in his possession and an invitation to fish the 2023 Bass Pro Tour awaiting following his third-place finish in the 2022 Pro Circuit AOY.

Shuffield's comeback story – and how he was eventually able to win the biggest tournament of his life – are both the result of trusting his instincts and testimony to his incredible dedication to a fishing career that's just getting re-started.

NOTCHING HIS FIRST WIN

Shuffield's first major win – at the 2022 Tackle Warehouse TITLE on New York's St. Lawrence River in early August – came after multiple Top 5s as both a pro and co-angler and a handful of close calls where he seemed to be on the winning fish, only to have something go slightly awry on the final day. Shuffield readily admits that, despite his overall success, doubt had begun to creep into his mind that he might never claim a major win.

"So many people were telling me that my time was coming, but I was starting to believe that it wasn't in the cards for me to win one," Shuffield admits. "I was so close, so many times,



Spencer Shuffield found big smallmouth on the St. Lawrence River, and weighed bags over 20 pounds each day he fished at the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE.

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

and in many of those, I had the winning fish on and lost it. There were usually dumb mistakes, like not retying. All of those memories haunted me."

Shuffield has taken home winner trophies aplenty in his MLF career – three Phoenix Bass Fishing League victories around his home in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and a co-angler triumph on the Pro Circuit in 2010 on Ft. Loudoun/Tellico Lakes, Tennessee – but the TITLE win was by far the biggest win of his career.

And a massive weight lifted off his shoulders.

"To get my first tour-level win (at the TITLE) was so incredible," Shuffield says. "I can check it off my list. A win of this magnitude is like winning five events, in my opinion. Championship wins and AOY titles are the wins that boost your career."

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

Heading into the August TITLE on the St. Lawrence, Shuffield readily admits that he didn't see it as an event he could win, based solely on the demands of the fishery. He was content with showing up, catching what he could and taking the guaranteed $10,000 check that all competitors received. But a fateful decision during practice was the key to his big win.

"I love smallmouth, but the St. Lawrence River is a place where you have to wreck them every day to compete," Shuffield explains. "I thought there was no way I could keep up, because knowledge of the fishery is so important, and I don't know the river as well as many of the guys.

"To be honest, I planned to stay close to the ramp and save the $350 a day of fuel it takes to run way down the river. But I had just finished third at the Toyota Series on Champlain, so I had some momentum and extra money after cashing a good check."

Shuffield started closer to Lake Ontario on the first day of practice, launching out of Clayton.

"I felt like I could figure something out and caught some good fish, but still planned to fish closer to the ramp in Massena," he says. "I planned to launch out of Ogdensburg the second day, dropped a pin on a ramp, got in my truck, and headed there. I got 20 minutes down the road toward that ramp and decided to turn around and give it another day out of Clayton."

That decision led Shuffield to the eventual TITLE-winning area, a stretch on the Canadian side of the river that featured two massive flats with isolated boulders.

THE WINNING AREA

Shuffield scoured two large flats on his second practice day and caught a handful of quality bass, but what he noticed in the shallow water was what keyed him into what would eventually produce his winning fish.

"These two flats were ginormous, and I started seeing tons of empty beds," he explains. "I could tell that they were old beds and knew the fish had to move somewhere from there, so I moved out deeper. There was a 35-foot chute between the two flats that boats could run through and grass ran out to 18 feet of water."

Once he reached the end of the grass, Shuffield turned to his Garmin LiveScope forward-facing sonar and

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began to see big fish swimming in the area. His primary depth was the 25- to 35-foot zone.

"There were some isolated high spots with boulders, and I started catching some quality fish," he says. "The biggest I caught was 4.2 pounds and the smallest was 3.63 pounds. I thought it was a good place to catch 20 pounds, but really didn't think I could catch enough to win."

Shuffield's primary area was 90 minutes from tournament takeoff in Massena and required a stop for gas on the way back. That left him with just four and a half hours of fishing time, so he had to catch his fish quickly and not make any significant mistakes.

He landed 21 pounds, 5 ounces on Day 1 and found himself in fifth. Shuffield's bigger fish showed up and Day 2 – he weighed in 23-3 and won his group, advancing straight to the Championship Round.

"The second day, when I pulled up, I caught some heavy 3-pounders and then back-to-back 5-pound fish," he says. "That's when I realized I could win the tournament from that spot."

Winning Group A (and earning a bye to the Championship Round), Shuffield was awarded two days off, which he spent with his wife, visiting Niagara Falls and trying not to think about the fishing.

"I typically like to fish on all my off days, but my wife came up with me and we went to Niagara for two nights," he says. "I just tried to enjoy it and not think about the fishing."

On the final day, Shuffield landed 22-12 to take the win by 12 ounces over second-place angler Dakota Ebare. Shuffield believes his spot would have held up even if he hadn't gotten to skip the Knockout Round.

"To be honest, the area was so full of fish that I could have fished it every day I was off and still caught good bags," Suffield says. "We filmed 'Day 5' after the tournament and caught them immediately. It was an incredible spot."

HOW SHUFFIELD CAUGHT 'EM

Shuffield had located what he called nine "money spots" inside his winning area, which was roughly three-quarters-of-a-mile long and a quarter-mile wide. He identified isolated boulders with his forward-facing sonar and focused almost exclusively on them.

Among the 15 bass that Shuffield brought to the scales during the tournament, 12 were fish he saw on his forward-facing sonar; the other three were caught blind-casting as he moved between key spots.

The drop-shot was Shuffield's primary weapon, with a Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flat Worm in brown back, gobyashi or green pumpkin party. He rigged the bait on a size 2 Gamakatsu Split Shot/Drop Shot Hook and employed a 1/2- and 3/4-ounce Ark Fishing No Chip Tungsten Tear Drop Shot Weight. Shuffield fished his drop-shot on a 7-foot, 4-inch medium Phenix M1 spinning rod and a 2500-size Daiwa Ballistic reel spooled with 15-pound-test Yo-Zuri Superbraid in the high vis yellow color with a leader of 8-pound-test Yo-Zuri T7 Fluorocarbon.

His other tool was a Ned rig, which accounted for an estimated four of the fish he weighed. Shuffield fished a green pumpkin Z-Man Finesse TRD on a 3/8-ounce WOO! Tungsten Ned Head jig on the same reel and line setup, but opted for a 7-foot, 2-inch medium Phenix M1 rod.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

Victorious at last, Spencer Shuffield hoists a check worth $200,000 at the final weigh-in of the TITLE.

"I WANT TO BE FISHING EVERY WEEK. I FISH EVERYTHING I CAN."

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2023

Riding the success that concluded his 2022 season, Shuffield eagerly awaits his chance to fish the Bass Pro Tour full time, for which got a taste during the 2021 season when he qualified for two BPT events based on his success on the Pro Circuit.

"I can't wait for next year. The Bass Pro Tour format is my jam," he says. "I approach every tournament, no matter the format, by catching every fish I can. I've always tried to specialize in catching numbers, knowing that the big fish will come with that. I always try to catch as many fish as possible in a day because that's more fun. I'm really looking forward to next season."

Shuffield is also planning to fish the MLF Invitationals next year and will mix in as many other events as possible.

"I would fish every tour if they let me; I'd be like [MLF pro] John Cox in 2021 if all of the schedules worked out," he says. "I want to be fishing every week. I fish everything I can, from local events to BFLs and up. I don't care if the top prize is $100 or $200,000 – I fish the same and want to enter everything I can. I make my money catching bass." ■

FAVORITE ARMY





PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

BACK TO BACK!

Michael Neal claims second straight Angler of the Year title

Tennessee pro banks another Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit AOY title, continuing a career surge that puts him in rare company

By Chad Gay

When you're 20 years old and seated behind the wheel of a bass boat as you're idling toward takeoff – one hand on the throttle, just waiting to throw it forward to kick off a hopeful professional fishing career – lots of things might go through your mind.

Remember to breathe. Trust your instincts. Have fun. Fish what you know. Remember what you learned in practice. And just don't overthink.

You probably don't think about three career tour-level wins, 40 Top 20s and 36 Top 10s. You likely don't think about an Angler of the Year title. And you certainly don't think about back-to-back AOY trophies.

But in 2012, 20-year-old Michael Neal of Dayton, Tennessee, heard his takeoff number called and pushed the throttle forward on his professional fishing debut at the FLW Tour season opener at Lake Hartwell, South Carolina. He hasn't looked back since.

In late July, after finishing 15th at Covercraft Stop 6 Presented by Wiley X at Lake Champlain, Neal claimed his second AOY title in back-to-back fashion, becoming only the third pro in the history of the Pro Circuit/FLW Tour to claim AOY titles in consecutive years (and the sixth pro to win multiple AOY titles). The other two anglers to win back-to-back AOY trophies are among the greats of the sport: fellow Dayton native Andy Morgan (2013, 2014) and David Dudley (2011, 2012).

NEAL'S FISHING UPBRINGING

Neal comes from a fishing family, and it seemed his grandfather Alan Brown, uncle Rogne Brown or his dad Mike Neal – who serves as Rhea County sheriff in Dayton – always had young Michael in tow when they headed to the water. Uncle Rogne was a tournament fisherman and served as Michel's doorway to his first tournaments.

Morgan, who has been Neal's roommate on the road since 2018, describes Neal as "a good dude – fun-loving, a good character" and has witnessed the 31-year-old's transformation from rookie pro to back-to-back AOY.

"I knew he fished as a kid, but I didn't know he was super serious about it until he started fishing with his uncle," Morgan said. "Rogne was one of the pioneers of side imaging and mapping and finding offshore hotspots. Rogne was really coming around bigtime with the Alabama rig and the side imaging and catching those great big stringers of fish when Chickamauga was getting real, real hot.

"So, Michael and Rogne were fishing some local tournaments and whipping everybody pretty good, and Michael got on the road and fished FLW early on. He fished for a couple of years as a co-angler and traveled with me a little bit then."

Morgan started paying close attention to Neal and noticed how fast the youngster was picking up the nuances of competitive fishing.

"His uncle Rogne was a really good teacher, and Michael learned a lot real fast from him, and he's really incorporated everything he learned from Rogne into his style now," Morgan said. "Michael has a computer science degree, so offshore fishing and the electronics involved really appealed to him."

Finesse fishing wasn't how Neal fished early on, but he quickly learned that, in order to cash checks in the professional ranks, he had better broaden his horizons.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

"MICHAEL HAS A COMPUTER SCIENCE DEGREE, SO OFFSHORE FISHING AND THE ELECTRONICS INVOLVED REALLY APPEALED TO HIM."

"Growing up on Chickamauga, I never finesse fished, but when I started fishing the FLW Tour and going different places and trying to earn checks, finesse fishing was something you pretty much had to do," Neal admitted. "I just started from there: picking it up and trying to throw a shaky-head rig, drop-shotting and using a Neko rig."

Morgan, for one, was not surprised by Neal's adeptness at new techniques.

"Michael played baseball growing up – he pitched – and he was very competitive," Morgan said. "It's no different in fishing. He's gotten better every day and every year. He's excelled at it since day one. We're only talking about 10 years he's been doing this. He's on the right path at a young age."

2021: THINGS WENT RIGHT FOR NEAL

Neal's AOY-winning campaign in 2021 was a case study in remaining consistent throughout a season – and finishing with a flourish. He began the season with a 22nd-place showing at Lake Okeechobee, finished 33rd at the second event of the year at Lewis Smith Lake and then finished the season with was an incredible string of finishes: third at Lake Murray, 11th at Lake Eufaula, second on the Potomac River and 11th on the St. Lawrence River.

"There's something from every single tournament that I can look at and say, 'Wow, that was lucky,'" he said. "At Murray, for one, I went up the river in practice for about three hours and had one bite and it was a 2-pounder. Then, the first day I had an OK bag skipping docks, the second day I had to find something else to do – I went up the river and started catching them. The fourth day, that's where I caught almost all my fish.

"At the Potomac, I didn't fish down south all tournament, then I ran back to Aquia (Creek) the last day and caught some fish that were really key to coming in second. Every tournament, there's something that happened that just helped things go right."

Even at the St. Lawrence, on his last day of fishing in 2021, Neal had some things just go right.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

"I was re-tying and I had individual rock piles marked, and I set my trolling motor to go towards the next one and it actually put me up on top of a grass flat," Neal said. "As soon as I got done re-tying, I realized where I was, stood up, picked up a drop-shot, flipped to the edge of the grass and caught a 4-pounder right there.

"Lake Murray sticks out to me as one of my high points in 2021," he added. "That was one where I didn't really have a good practice and wound up just totally scrapping everything I had and going and doing something totally different – skipping docks and stuff – and I just kind of figured it out as the tournament went along. I think I did that quite a bit the last two years, so that's really been a big factor in my success."

BACKING IT UP IN 2022

Neal's momentum apparently carried through the offseason, as he started the 2022 season with a win on Sam Rayburn Reservoir and a 10th-place finish at the Harris Chain of Lakes to take the No. 1 spot in the AOY standings.

Then came Pickwick Lake. Neal weighed only one bass on Day 2 of the event, finishing 105th on a fishery where he expected to excel.

"One of my favorite lakes was the one that let me down so bad," he said. "That was the one time in the last two years I can remember doing something that I knew I shouldn't do, or that I don't do. I ran up the river on Pickwick and fished the bank. On the Tennessee River, they live offshore, they spawn offshore, everything.

"For some reason, I gave up on it and it bit me. I didn't give it enough time; I could have put the trolling motor down at the ramp and caught more than I did that day. In Angler of the Year stuff, typically you're not going to have a chance if you don't weigh a limit one of the days, let alone catch one fish."

Neal shook off the Pickwick experience and rebounded on a tear to post finishes of third (Guntersville), fourth (James River) and 15th (Lake Champlain) to surge back up the AOY standings and eventually claim his second AOY trophy in a row.

"After Pickwick, I thought my shot at AOY was done," Neal said. "I went from leading the points to 14th, I think, and I thought I had no shot at the title. But then after Guntersville, I jumped back into fourth in the standings and thought I had at least an outside shot at it.

"Back-to-back titles – that's not something when I started my career that I thought I'd even have a shot at doing," Neal admitted. "To be able to do that and to do it against guys I started out fishing against and still fish against today. Andy's from home and he's the one I've always looked up to, and he's very consistent and a very good angler and kind of flew under the radar for a long time like I have. To be my age and close to what he's accomplished, it's just very humbling."

Morgan said Neal's back-to-back title accomplishment should come as no surprise to those who really know him.

"There for the first couple of years it was like he knew he could catch them, but he wasn't super confident," Morgan said. "He didn't have an edge, so to speak. But as the electronics have gotten better, Michael has gotten better. Michael has fallen into his niche. Everything is lining up and syncing for him good now. Now he's got that edge. I can see it vividly.

"His skills have always been there. I don't think Michael's gotten any better with a rod and reel – he's always been able to do what he needs to do with that. But it's the edge thing. The confidence. The gameplan. What he's got laid out in his mind. And nobody ever really knows what that plan is – even the angler that's using that plan sometimes really doesn't know how to bring that plan into words. But that plan, he's figured that out, and he's making it work. Jacob (Wheeler) gets a lot of the recognition right now, but Michael is really close to Jacob in that regard. Michael is really throwing some punches that are legendary."

CONFIDENCE BREEDS CONFIDENCE

Both Neal and Morgan admit that, without confidence, an angler is just making casts hoping for the best. Both recognize it as a weapon in their tournament arsenal, and Neal readily admits that it's become a much more powerful arrow in his quiver in recent years.

"Confidence is knowing that you can make the right decision without any reason to make that decision," Neal explained. "Being able to trust your gut even though that's not what the textbook says should be done for that point in time. If you don't have confidence, you're not going to do well. And I've made it a point the last two years to go out and fish the way I know how and the way I enjoy – whether that's finesse fishing for smallmouth or throwing a ChatterBait in grass. Just being able to go out and do that and feel like I can make it work."

ADJUSTING GOALS ACCORDING TO SUCCESS

When Neal first arrived on the professional fishing scene, his goal was to make the championship at the end of the season.

"You hear some motivational speakers talk about how if you have a smaller goal you don't try to overshoot that goal," Neal said. "My goal became to try to make the top 10 in the points. Then later in the season, my goal would be to try to win the AOY. But this past year my goal straight out of the gate from day one was to win Angler of the Year. Winning a tournament is a bonus to me. If you can do it, great. They pay great. But the guy that has the most consistent year - I'd rather have that than one tournament win any day of the week.

"So next year I'm looking for Angler of the Year and to win the championship," Neal said. "I've won both Pro Circuit and Bass Pro Tour regular-season tournaments, and I haven't won a championship. So that's my goal."

Lofty goals for sure, but Neal sees them as reality waiting to happen. The sentiment is echoed by Morgan, who said Neal is just hitting his stride and will be competitive and productive at the highest level for years to come.

"He's very competitive, and he puts in a tremendous amount of effort," Morgan said. "Practice days, tournament days … it's all the same to him. He goes, goes, goes. He's up early and out late. He doesn't like to go somewhere and get defeated; that doesn't sit well with him. I see Michael ending up in the top 10 of all time by the time he's done. Absolutely. He's got too much drive. Too much savvy. He works too hard. He's never going to be a slouch. I mean, he'll have a rough patch here and there, but yeah, he'll be top 10 of all time, for sure." ■

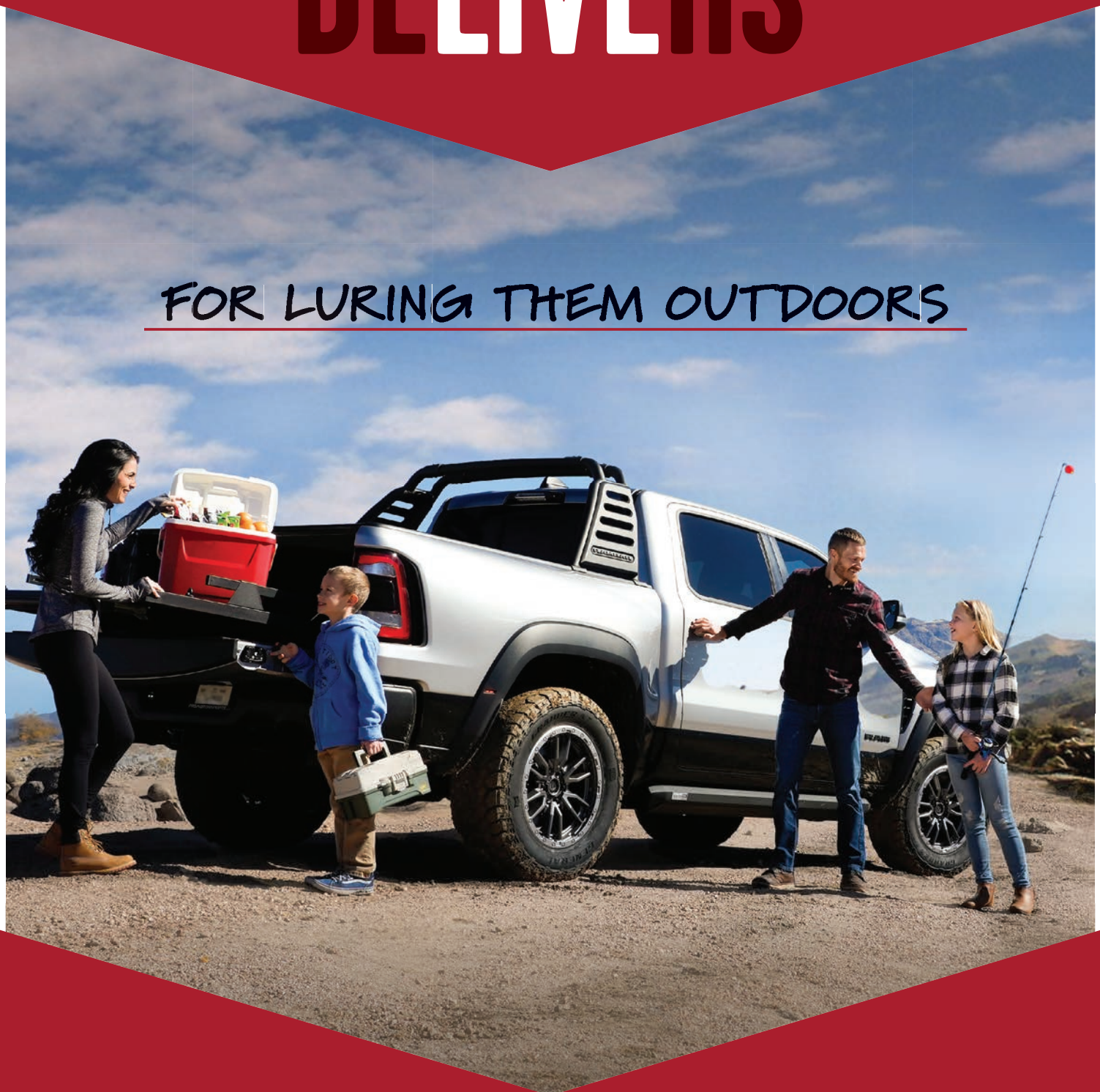


"HE'S VERY COMPETITIVE AND PUTS IN A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF EFFORT."

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

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SPINNERBAITS

As told by Jimmy Houston

PHOTOS BY PHOENIX MOORE

I've thrown spinnerbaits for as long as I can remember. In fact, when I was a kid back in the 1950s and '60s, I would build my own spinnerbaits out of big safety pins, bending one arm to hold the hook and skirt and the other to hold a swivel and blade.


O'Reilly
AUTO PARTS





HIGHLIGHTS

A lot of my tournament success has come on a spinnerbait. I was Bassmaster Angler of the Year in 1976 and 1986, and both times the spinnerbait was a big part of that. I've won two national bass tournaments – in 1976 and 1985 – in South Carolina and New York, and each time, a spinnerbait was the key lure. I've been to 15 Bassmaster Classics and a Forrest Wood Cup, and those were largely due to the spinnerbait.

I even caught the biggest bass of the 1975 Classic on a spinnerbait. Over the years, I'd estimate that 70 percent of the bass I've caught and kissed came on a spinnerbait, so it's a lure that I really know and appreciate.

WHEN

There's no wrong time to fish a spinnerbait. It's that versatile. By changing weights, blade sizes, colors and retrieve speeds, you can catch bass any time of year in any water that hasn't iced over.

Probably the very best time to throw a spinnerbait is in the spring – especially the prespawn. Some of my favorite times to fish a spinnerbait are when it's dark and cloudy and the wind's blowing. Bass can get very aggressive under those conditions, and there's no better way to catch a lot of big fish than by throwing a spinnerbait around shallow cover.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

"THERE'S NO WRONG TIME TO FISH A SPINNERBAIT. IT'S THAT VERSATILE. BY CHANGING WEIGHTS, BLADE SIZES, COLORS, AND RETRIEVE SPEEDS, YOU CAN CATCH BASS ANY TIME OF YEAR IN ANY WATER."

WHERE

Spinnerbaits are a viable choice just about anywhere you can use any other lure. You can't punch one through heavy vegetation, and it may not be the most efficient choice in extremely deep water where you need to fish vertically, but almost everywhere else, a spinnerbait will work. You just have to figure out the right model and presentation for the conditions.

Spinnerbaits really excel around wood and vegetation because they come through cover well and don't get hung up easily. Those are places where bass feed and live. If you can put your lure in those spots, hang on.

Very few lures cover water as quickly or as well as a spinnerbait. If fish are shallow and even a little bit aggressive, the spinnerbait is often the best choice.

TACKLE

My go-to line for most spinnerbait fishing is 14- or 15-pound-test copolymer or monofilament. I know that sounds strange in these days of fluorocarbon and braid, but for me, fluorocarbon is just too stiff and doesn't cast as well as copolymer or monofilament lines. I'll gladly put up with a little stretch if it means I can be more accurate with my casts. In extremely heavy cover, I'll bump up my line size to 20-pound test.

My spinnerbait rod is a 6-foot-9 medium-heavy Hi-Tech Jimmy Houston Blaze Pro DX casting model. It's short enough that I can make super-accurate underhanded roll casts tight to cover, but long enough that I can make a long cast when I need to.

I pair up the rod and line with a Team Lew's Pro-Ti SLP Series casting reel. It has a 7.5:1 gear ratio that's really versatile. The 7.5:1 is ideal for how I fish a spinnerbait.

One key with the reel is making sure that it's fully spooled with line. Your gear ratio doesn't mean a lot if your spool is only half full. It also cuts down on your casting distance if the spool is not full. I see a lot of anglers with reels that are not properly spooled, and it's costing them performance on the water.

LURES

My favorite all-around spinnerbait is the Jimmy Houston Redman Spinnerbait from Luck-E-Strike. It's the same spinnerbait I was making in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Back then, I was manufacturing it and selling it in Walmart. I negotiated those deals with Sam Walton himself. When it got so popular that I couldn't keep up with demand, I sold the design and earned a royalty on the baits.

The Redman spinnerbait is a 3/8-ounce short-arm single-spin, and it has a unique vibration. It has a living rubber skirt instead of a silicone skirt, so the colors are more muted and subtle. It comes in eight colors and has a No. 4 1/2 Colorado blade. It's a retro bait that still catches bass. In fact, since it was off the market for so long, it's like nothing the bass have seen in more than 40 years, so no living fish have had a chance to become conditioned to it like they may have become conditioned to other lures.

The Redman spinnerbait only comes in one size – 3/8-ounce – but I believe it's the most versatile size possible. It's still made from the very same mold that I created over 50 years ago.

Back in the mid 2000s, the spinnerbait lost some of its popularity when the bladed jig came along, and as squarebill crankbaits grew in popularity. Even before that, tandem blades had replaced single blades for most anglers, but bass never stopped eating single-blade spinnerbaits, and the single spin is the most versatile spinnerbait there is. You can fish it fast or slow. You can bulge it just under the surface or crawl it along the bottom. You can lift and drop it like a jig, and you can kill it near cover so that that blade will "helicopter" down. It's probably the most versatile lure there is, and it's certainly under-fished these days.



When I want more lift from my spinnerbait, I'll switch to a tandem bladed model like the Luck-E-Strike Jimmy Houston Legend Spinnerbait. It comes in two sizes (3/8 and 1/2 ounce) and four colors. It's often the right choice when bass are aggressive and want a fast-moving bait near the surface.

BASICS

Part of the beauty of the spinnerbait is that there's really no wrong way to fish it. You have to let the bass tell you how they want it, not just every day on the water, but every hour on the water, and you have to be aware of how conditions may be changing over the course of the day.

Spinnerbaits are at their best when fished around cover, so I like to make casts that will put my lure in and around cover like stumps, brush, grass or rocks. A lot of times, close just isn't good enough. You need your spinnerbait to bump into cover and ricochet off. That will often trigger a strike from a bass that would otherwise ignore it.

Another good retrieve involves bringing the bait up to a stump or a hole in the grass and "killing" it so that the lure falls right next to the cover. You want it to fall straight down, and you need to watch your line. If it jumps or moves to one side, set the hook!

Those kinds of directional changes – ricochets and drops – are a big key to successful spinnerbait fishing, but also to just about any other kind of bass fishing. They trigger strikes. A bass can be a really curious creature. If your bait is nearby, the bass knows it. And when it does something out of the ordinary – like change direction – the bass' only way to react is to get out of the way or take it in its mouth. Because a spinnerbait is so effective at triggering strikes, you're not just relying on the bass' need to feed to catch them. You're also able to get a reaction strike, and that really increases your productivity.

A lot of times I'll fish a spinnerbait just within or just out of sight. That's often the right depth, and it depends almost entirely on the color of the water and light conditions.

But I'm also watching weather conditions as I'm fishing. If the wind starts to blow or it gets cloudy and dark, that can be a cue that bass are going to start feeding more aggressively. I'll pick up the pace and start to fish faster. Usually, it gets me more bites, but if it doesn't, I can always go back to what was working.

BONUS

Back in the early 1960s, when I was in high school, an event called the World Series of Sportfishing came to Oklahoma where I lived, and I got to fish with some of the legends of that time – Virgil Ward, Glen Andrews, Jim Rogers. They were the best anglers of their era, and I learned a lot from them. At the time, I was fishing with Zebco push-button reels, and they were using conventional baitcasters. I was amazed at how well they could cast – much better than me. So, I made it my goal to fix that.

There are few shortcuts in fishing. You can get advice on where to fish and what to throw, but there's no shortcut or substitute for casting ability. If you can't put a lure where it needs to be, you won't catch that fish, and the angler who can put his or her lure in the right place time after time is going to out-fish the angler who can't.

You don't have to be on the water to work on your casting. You can do that in your backyard or an open field or most anywhere else. Don't be satisfied with hitting your target half the time or even most of the time. Work at it until you hit the target every time … or almost every time. It'll make you a better angler, and it will definitely make you a better spinnerbait angler. ■

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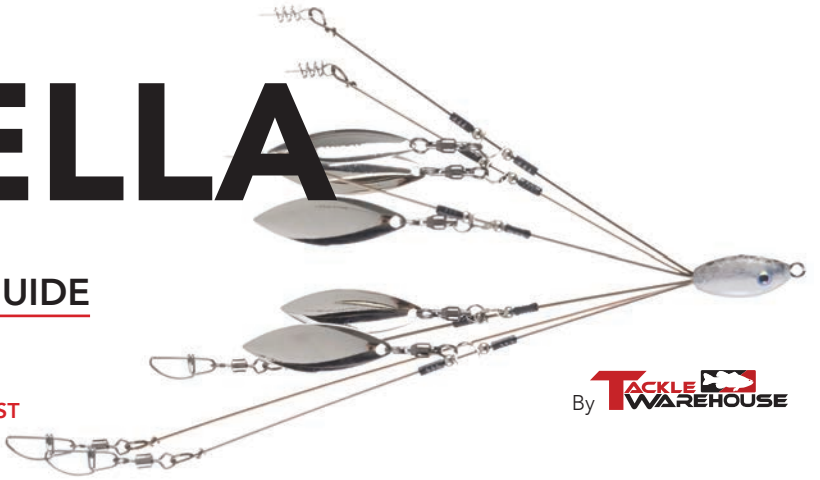


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UMBRELLA RIGS

GEAR GUIDE



By Tackle Warehouse

THE UMBRELLA RIG HAS BECOME ONE OF THE BEST techniques to trigger bites from bass any time of year. Composed of wires, jig heads, swimbaits and a host of terminal tackle, the umbrella rig accurately mimics a school of baitfish or smaller forage and represents a substantial meal for opportunistic predators.

In this guide, we'll go over the best setup for throwing an umbrella rig, provide modification and rigging methods, and share some tips and tricks to improve success on the water.

Suggested Rigs:
HogFarmer Baits Tactical Bassin Flex Rig 5 Blade (pictured)
Yumbrella Flash Mob Jr
G Funk Baits Bama Rig Bladed

REELS

A 200- or 300-size baitcasting or round reel will provide enough capacity to hold plenty of fishing line and ensure you aren't dumping the whole spool on a long cast. Any gear ratio between 6:1 and 7:1 allows anglers to pick up line efficiently. From the spring through the fall, faster retrieve speeds are generally more effective, while in the colder winter months, it's best to slow down and dredge the bottom when the fish are lethargic.



Suggested Reels:
Daiwa Tatula 200 Casting Reel (pictured)
Shimano Curado 300K Casting Reel
Daiwa Lexa TWS 300 Casting Reel

LINE

With so many swimbaits, blades and other components coming through the water, fish are less likely to focus on your line, so if you can get away with using heavier line, do it. Typically, most anglers prefer 20- to 25-pound-test fluorocarbon, with some even opting for straight braid, especially around shallow vegetation. However, if you're struggling to get bites when you think you should or have a lighter rig tied up, don't hesitate to drop down to 12- to 17-pound-test fluorocarbon.

RODS

If you don't want to spend the money to buy a specialized rod for umbrella rigs, some anglers will simply use a lighter-powered swimbait rod with lure ratings that meet or exceed the size of the rig they want to throw. Umbrella rigs come in dramatically different shapes, weights and sizes, but for most situations, a 7'6" to 8' heavy-power rod with moderate to fast action will get the job done.

Suggested Rods:
13 Fishing Defy Black Swimbait Casting Rod 8' Heavy (pictured)
Abu Garcia Veritas PLX TE Casting 7'6" Heavy
Dobyns Champion XP Full Cast Rod 7'6" Heavy 764

MODIFICATIONS AND RIGGING

When you consider all of the wires, hardware and swimbaits on an umbrella rig, weight can add up very quickly, so if you use heavier jig heads or big swimbaits, just be mindful that a heavy rig can wear you out over a long day of fishing. For most presentations, any 1/8- to 1/2-ounce jig head with a 30- or 60-degree line tie is a great place to start. Always be sure to check your local regulations regarding how many hooks you can have on your umbrella rig, as regulations vary from state to state, and you may need to use a couple of unrigged dummy heads or teasers in order to remain compliant.

TIPS AND TRICKS

During the warmer months, don't be afraid to go shallow and throw it around cover. In the cold months, be mindful of your retrieve speed, as you may need to slow things way down to motivate lethargic fish to chase it down. Try incorporating a few sharp pumps of the reel handle during the retrieve; this flexes the wire and causes the rig to "breathe," creating the illusion of an evading school of baitfish that can trigger bass into biting.

Umbrella rigs are bulky, loaded with hooks, and known for being difficult to store, so try using a wacky worm O-ring behind the head of an umbrella rig to collapse and store them more efficiently when they are not in use.

SWIMBAIT COLORS

Natural shad patterns and small forage imitations dominate the spectrum of popular color choices, as the umbrella rig is specifically designed to mimic a small school of unsuspecting baitfish. When fishing bright bluebird skies or gin-clear water, realistic and translucent shad colors excel when the water column floods with light, visibility improves and the fish become more discerning.

Alternatively, low-light conditions, overcast skies and stained or dirty water may call for the use of solid color patterns that create a more defined silhouette underwater. Utilizing an assortment of similar, but not exactly the same color baits or heads, can also help break up the uniformity of the rig and provide a more natural look. Also, keep a chartreuse scent marker handy so you can add a pop of color to the tails or body of your swimbaits and help fish locate your umbrella rig.

Scan QR code and shop all suggested gear



THE JUICE

TECHNIQUES, TACKLE & TIPS



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



STRIKE KING
TUNGSTEN THUNDER CRICKET

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY BRANDON ROWAN

Strike King's new Tungsten Thunder Cricket gives fish a junior-sized look at a senior bait well known for fooling the big ones time and time again. Designed with a dense tungsten head, premium hook, durable powder coat finish and other top-notch components, Strike King's new bladed jig delivers a signature subtle thump and enticing action in a smaller package without sacrificing a sliver of casting weight provided by the original model.

First Impression

Noticeably smaller in size than the original Thunder Cricket, the tungsten version is equipped with a stout 4/0 flipping hook, downsized blade, hand-tied silicone skirt and a wire trailer keeper that gets some help from a ribbed shank at the base of the head. The line connects to sturdy blade snap, while the blade itself pivots on an eye pin that shifts up and down in the grooved head. Finishes are above average and some blades are powder coated to match color schemes.

In Action

So, how does the smaller Tungsten Thunder Cricket perform in comparison to its lead-headed bigger brother? To find out, I tied a pair 3/8-ounce baits – one tungsten and one lead – to identical rod/reel/line setups and went fishing. Both baits were outfitted with 3 1/2-inch Lake Fork Magic Shad trailers to keep things even.

The first thing I noticed is how well the tungsten model casts. With minimal effort, it reached or surpassed the distance achieved with the original. It did particularly well when launched into big wind.

Secondly, the Tungsten Thunder Cricket felt super sensitive when it bumped into stuff. It also tended to ride a little deeper the water column at the same retrieve speed. It almost seemed like I was throwing something heavier than 3/8 ounce.

What gives? The tungsten model is physically smaller than the original, yet it weighs the same. The smaller head, blade and hook means less resistance as the bait cuts the wind and slices the water column, thus resulting in easy casting and increased depth.

The junior model comes though grass pretty well. As is the case with most bladed jigs, it's a good idea to pay attention when throwing it around wood. Adding a bigger, bulkier trailer will help the bait run a little higher in the water column; smaller or more streamlined trailers allow it to run deeper.

The Thunder Cricket isn't known for overly obnoxious vibration and wobble, mainly because of its unique blade shape. It's a little more subtle than other leading models, and that's not a bad thing. Strike King maintained the same blade shape on the tungsten model but shaved off a little size to keep things in proportion. The result is a nifty little bait that brings its own style of finesse to the bladed jig arena.





HEAD:

The head is made from high-density tungsten, a heavy metal that allows for a smaller profile bait with improved sensitivity without sacrificing critical casting weight. Heads are powder coated to optimize durability and reduce chipping.

FLIPPING HOOK:

Equipped with a nasty 4/0 flipping hook for keeping fish pegged and a wire keeper system to help hold trailers nice and snug.

Final Thoughts

Strike King's Tungsten Thunder Cricket isn't snake oil. Its smaller profile coupled with its unique vibration and action may be just what the doctor ordered for triggering a few extra bites in heavy pressure, gin-clear water or other situations when your favorite bladed jig just isn't cutting it. Factor in the bait's premium components combined with its trick performance and consummate anglers looking for an edge will probably have no problem in justifying the $17.99 cost in today's market.

Performance Advice

One of the best ways to enhance the performance and alter the look of any bladed jig is to add a trailer. A trailer gives the bait a larger profile and adds some buoyancy to help it ride up the water column on slower retrieves. Depending on the style, a trailer can really beef up the bait's swagger or add just a little.

Swimbait trailers like the Strike King Rage Swimmer or Lake Fork Magic Shad provide lots of action. Strike King recommends the Rage Menace for a more subtle approach. You can also alter the action and reduce buoyancy by trimming the skirt or removing it altogether.

Applications

- Use around scattered grass or docks
- Heavy pressure or clear water situations
- When fish want something small
- Catches shallow fish year-round

>> GOLD-PLATED MODEL

Strike King is also expanding its original Thunder Cricket lineup for 2023 to include a new gold-bladed model touted as great choice for use in off-color water, under cloudy skies or in other low-visibility situations. The gold model is offered in three sizes – 3/8, 1/2 and 5/8 ounces – in eight great colors. MSRP is $13.99.

HITS & MISSES

- \+ Compact profile less intimidating to pressured fish
- \+ Subtle thumping blade
- \+ Unique vibration and sound
- \+ Same weight as lead in a smaller package
- \+ Excellent castability
- \+ Premium hook
- \+ Sturdy trailer keeper
- \+ Durable powder coat finishes
- — Pricey

DETAILS

Sizes: 3/8 and 1/2 ounce
Construction: Tungsten head
Colors: 12
Skirts: Hand-tied silicone
Hook: Long shank silver, 4/0 flipping
Keeper: Yes
Eyes: 3D
MSRP: $17.99
Contact: strikeking.com ■

EVERYTHING YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW ABOUT BASS FISHING...IS WRONG?

Thanks to forward-facing sonar, bass anglers are discovering what's myth and what's truth about how fish behave

By Mike Pehanich



PHOTO BY ROB MANSCUSY

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



Hardly a season passes without claims of a bass-fishing breakthrough – some new lure, technique or piece of equipment to raise eyebrows, fuel a trend and stoke industry sales.

But advances in forward-facing sonar (FFS) technology over the past few seasons have turned the industry – and the sport of bass fishing itself – on its ear.

FFS is rewriting the textbooks on bass behavior. It's shaken the grip of tightly held tenets, throwing exception and nuance into our understanding of bass' use of structure and cover. It has awakened us to the wanderlust of fish once largely believed to be homebodies, demonstrating that they move more and roam further than we ever believed.

Perhaps its most exciting impact has been in the angler-bass confrontation, the head-to-head play of predator and prey. It's an underwater reality show in a realm once hidden from the fisherman's eyes.

Whether used to win a major tournament or satisfy an angler's bottomless curiosity, FFS is paving the way to discovery, teaching us, humbling us, revealing new techniques and refining old ones, opening avenues to new lures and manners of presentation.

Nowhere has the impact of FFS been more profound than in the professional circles. Rare is the MLF tournament today in which forward-facing sonar is not a major factor. Many MLF anglers have already become accomplished students (if not acknowledged experts) in its usage.

THE NEW SPACE RACE

For bass fishing legend Kevin VanDam, watching fish react to a lure in real time truly is angling's version of Neil Armstrong's "One giant leap for mankind."

"There's definitely a space race in technology going on now," VanDam says, citing Humminbird's announcement of MEGA Live TargetLock, an advancement that frees transducer focus from trolling motor direction. "I've been on pro bass tours for 32 years now, but in the last few years, technology has made the biggest difference in our game. It's been one of the most impactful things I've seen in my career."

*VANDAM'S TIPS AND OBSERVATIONS

Drop-shot and Damiki rigs are two follow-up baits VanDam employs in conjunction with FFS.

"A 1/8- or 1/16-ounce weight slows the sink rate of my drop-shot," he says. "You can watch the fish follow it down."

Weighted crankbaits play a bigger role today, too. Carefully weighted Strike King 5XD and 6XD crankbaits deliver a tantalizing slow rise when paused and enable him to keep his bait in the strike zone of bass positioned at 15 to 20 feet.

"I can stop it, twitch it, fish it almost like a jerkbait," he says.

VanDam hails Humminbird's MEGA Live TargetLock as a major advancement in the category. The transducer rests on a turret that operates independently of trolling motor position. It allows him to hold a reading on a targeted fish while adjusting boat position.

VanDam rattles off a litany of advances from improved color-image 2D sonar, side imaging, downscan capability and MEGA 360 through map downloads and auto-chart capabilities. Each has added an incremental layer of knowledge, awareness and capability to his game.

"Not one guy on tour has fewer than four graphs on his boat today," VanDam says. "And most have five, because you have to. A year ago, some guys on tour were still fishing without forward-facing sonar. Now it's an absolute must. It's that valuable."



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

*WHEELER'S TIPS AND OBSERVATIONS

An Alabama rig generates a large image. It makes for a good practice bait when first learning to distinguish a specific object on the screen and how bass react to it.

Fishing for small, plentiful fish like white bass and crappie with small jigs can help hone your FFS skills, too. Big schools of fish that are easy to trigger will give your confidence a quick boost.

No prior generation of electronics advancement has proven quite as illuminating – or as humbling – as forward-facing sonar.

"It's taught me that a lot of things that I thought were true about bass are false," VanDam admits. "I used to think bass pretty much always relate to cover or structure, but they randomly move around more in open water than I ever believed."

The value of FFS varies with lake and situation, but most anglers agree that it shines on lakes in which bass suspend. And "shine" is an apt metaphor for how he employs his sonar beam.

"We call it 'flashlighting' because you're shooting a beam around just looking for fish," he says, describing how he's beamed in on prespawn bass on Table Rock Lake smallmouth bass on the massive flats of Lake St. Clair. "You're hunting a needle in a hay field normally when working open water. With MEGA Live, I can go in the center of a creek and cast to pods of shad or schools of bass as I see them."

FFS is dictating lure selection with the biggest beneficiary being the jerkbait category.

"The jerkbait has been the most effective tool for forward-facing sonar because it fishes within the water column and you can draw fish in with it," VanDam explains.

FFS has forced him to broaden his range of presentation as well.

"One of my faults has been my lack of patience," he says. "I always want to cover water. But forward-facing sonar has taught me to settle down. It's taught me the importance of cadence change. Sometimes they want it a certain way. Sometimes they want it dead-sticked.

"You see fish. You see bait. And you see the two connect. That's what's so cool and rewarding. It allows you to sight fish where you can't really see."

KNOWING WHAT YOU SEE

Two-time defending Bass Pro Tour Angler of the Year Jacob Wheeler is one of the most ardent fans of forward-facing sonar.

"YOU CAN ACTUALLY SEE HOW THEY SWIM INSIDE A BAIT BALL. BAIT IS THEIR LIFE."

It's a learning tool, first and foremost. Among its teachings:

- Those winter bass he thought were suspended are rising to his jerkbait.
- Bass relate not just to structure but to baitfish, too.

Rotating through a series of baits and studying how fish react to each has been part of his lab study. He notes that a simple change in bait color can make "some difference" in fish response, but not the big difference that fall rate or changing the profile of the bait can make.

On one outing, Wheeler noted that fish would either eat his drop-shot on the fall or follow it to the bottom when he used a 1/2-ounce dropper weight. With an 1/8-ounce weight, 90 percent would eat it on the fall.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

*NEAL'S TIPS AND OBSERVATIONS

Bass seem to roam more freely in clean, clear water.

"In dirtier water, they want to see something to reference," Neal notes.

Ideal sonar settings will vary from lake to lake and with varying conditions. The "auto" feature of his Lowrance LiveTarget gives him a head start. He fine tunes from there.

"Don't get too spread out on your distance settings," he advises. "I like to keep my setting at 80 feet or less."

"As it was dropping, it triggered a bite," Wheeler says. "I caught four times the number of fish I was getting with the 1/2-ounce weight."

Wheeler marvels at how much bass move and the fact that a well-chosen area is devoid of bass now does not mean it won't host a hot bite later.

"I might fish an area in the morning without getting a bite at all, then come back three hours later and catch them on every cast," he explains.

The FFS screen can be dangerously seductive, as addictive to anglers as a smart phone is to a tech-addled teen. Even Wheeler has had trouble pulling his eyes from a faint fish image.

"If you use it as your only tool, it can negatively impact your fishing," he warns.

Learning to use his Lowrance ActiveTarget has been more than a matter of menus and adjustments. The key is to understand what you see – and what you aren't seeing.

"Part of the predator's role is staying concealed," Wheeler says, using the example of a smallmouth positioned behind a forward-positioned rock. "If you wait to see a fish before you cast, you'll miss out on that fish."

Wheeler believes fishermen have barely scratched the surface of what FFS has to offer. Its use as a shallow-water tool remains a frontier.

The biggest thing FFS has done for Wheeler is improve his efficiencies.

"I have better practices and make better decisions," he says. "That's because I can see what's going on."

BAIT IS LIFE

When Lowrance ActiveTarget showed largemouth bass suspended over creek channels and draws at the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit opener on Sam Rayburn Reservoir this past January, Michael Neal had a chance to cherry-pick. He watched enough bass bite a SPRO McStick jerkbait to secure a win and a check for $100,000.

During Bass Pro Tour Stage Three on Alabama's Smith Lake in March, forward-facing sonar alerted Neal to roaming schools of spotted bass feeding on blue herring. He lassoed enough nomadic spots with a Damiki-rigged Big Bite Baits Jointed Jerk Minnow and a drop-shot to earn a third-place finish.

"Forward-facing sonar has opened up avenues to bass we knew existed but didn't know how to catch because they don't relate to anything but bait," the two-time defending Pro Circuit AOY says. "On Smith Lake, I caught them 5 feet down over 80 feet of water, just cruising and looking for bait."

Witnessing large schools of bass trailing even bigger schools of baitfish with his electronics has been eye-opening. FFS gives him the confidence to tackle suspended fish – bass he would otherwise have had slim chance of reaching.

"You see how centered these fish are on bait," Neal says of restless schools of smallmouth and spotted bass. "You can actually see how they swim inside a bait ball. Bait is their life."

Swimbait-style baits presented with long casts and steady retrieves above the heads of bass comprise one approach to these bait-oriented suspended fish. Jerkbaits offer another.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

"The window is just opening" for the development of baits made to maximize FFS advantage, according to Neal, who helped develop the Hybrid Swimmer, a swimbait-style bait with a forked tail on top and a small paddle tail below, for Big Bite Baits.

AN INSTANT LEARNING CURVE

Winner of MLF's first cup event on Lake Amistad, Brent Ehrler got his first taste of "live" fishing with Garmin Panoptix Livescope on Lake Perris near his California home.

"I could see fish swimming through a brushpile, scurrying right to left," he says. "It was right there, plain as day. My learning curve was instant."

Looking at the activity of bass in their digitally simulated environment has elevated Ehrler's awareness of bass behavior.

"The biggest thing I've learned is that there are way more fish down there than we think," he says, noting that Livescope accounts for all of his catches in at least two or three tournaments per season. "Lots of nomadic fish are simply moving with schools of bait. It's also shown me how many fish don't want to bite. When conditions aren't right, they simply won't bite."

Ehrler has a simplified approach to target fish.

"I usually throw two different styles of lure: a fast bait and a slow bait. If they don't hit one of those, they're usually very hard to get to bite."

For bottom-hugging fish, burning a crankbait is often his first choice, and his best chance of firing up the school. After that, he'll throw a change-up – a drop-shot, a Neko rig or a jig.

Suspended fish offer opportunities to see bass track lures and react to any nuance in a retrieve, but there's no guarantee that what turns them on at one location will work at the next.

"At one spot, fish may want it dead," Ehrler says. "At the next, they want it faster."

*EHRLER'S TIPS AND OBSERVATIONS

Ehrler invariably sets his FFS at a fixed depth range, rarely using the "auto" setting. If he's working 20 feet of water, he'll set it for 30 or 35 feet. A deeper fixed range setting yields more detail and is particularly helpful in shallow-water applications.

Ehrler prefers Garmin's black emerald palette for clearer viewing, but he warns that eyes and screen preferences differ. Find what's best for you.

And don't expect fish to be right on your waypoint. But they may well be close.

"They may have moved a hundred yards on a ledge," he says. "With Panoptix, I can follow along the ledge, track them and catch them as they're moving."

*READING BASS BODY LANGUAGE

TALK ABOUT the fish-finding advantages of forward-facing sonar, but what's made forward-facing sonar the buzz of the bass world is how it has heightened the bass-fishing experience.

"For me, live-scoping is an addiction," says Spencer Shuffield, winner of the Tackle Warehouse TITLE in mid-August. "And not because it's an easy way to catch them. It's the anticipation of knowing. I've gotten to where I can read the fish's body language on the graph. I see it perk up, see that it's ready to eat, see it all come together."

It's the excitement of a frog bite – only better.

"Livescope is so prolonged," Shuffield says. "It's like seeing that blow-up for five or 10 seconds. You know it's going to happen."



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

And the experience extends to a much wider range of settings – rocky flats, brushpiles, ledges, grass edges and open water with bass on the move.

"With forward-facing sonar, I'm able to just go hunting, especially if they're in pockets or big bays or moving over big flats," Shuffield adds. "I can kick the trolling motor on 100, scan left and right and just hunt them down."

With FFS comes a heightened awareness that links a twitch, a pop, a cadence or any other bait maneuver with an immediate, real-time response from the fish. That imprints subtleties of presentation on mind and muscle memory in a manner never experienced before.

"You see that when you do something different, it makes that fish bite," Shuffield says. "I just love it."

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*EFFECTIVE BAITS FOR FFS

1. CRANKBAIT
2. JERKBAIT
3. DAMIKI RIG
4. DROP-SHOT RIG

DIALING IN FORWARD-FACING SONAR



PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

FOR SCOTT DOBSON, MLF PRO from Clarkston, Michigan, the smallmouth-rich waters of Lake St. Clair, Lake Erie and the Detroit River have proven to be the perfect training grounds for learning the finer features of forward-facing sonar.

After three seasons of experience with Lowrance ActiveTarget, Dobson has become intimate with this game-changing technology.

He offers these few tips to get the most out of FFS.

*WHAT YOU SEE IS

Learn to decipher screen images. Learn to distinguish what a fish looks like and how to distinguish it from a stick or aquatic plant. Experiment with noise reduction and gain settings to optimize images for given conditions.

"You have to know the angle at which you're picking up that fish, too," Dobson says. "If you're seeing the side of its body, that mark is different because it is a kind of blob on the screen. If the fish is in line with you, parallel with you, it'll look like a hash mark."

*THE RIGHT STUFF

The biggest revelation in Dobson's FFS learning experience was "having the right battery to run the power box." His Lowrance ActiveTarget (Garmin's FFS unit as well) has a separate amplifier box to power the transducer.

"Having lithium power going direct to the power box is critical," Dobson says. "You want a constant 13 volts or more going all day. A standard lead battery or an AGM battery will lose voltage during the course of the day and degrade your image."

Use the highest-voltage lithium battery you can use per manufacturer's specifications.

*A SENSE OF DISTANCE

Your screen grid will indicate the distance of a given fish from your transducer, but do you have an accurate sense of what a 45- or 60-foot cast really is? Learn to accommodate for depth, too, so the bait reaches your target after the fall.

*IN THE SHALLOWS

Although FFS "truly shines offshore" don't dismiss it as a shallow-water tool as well.

"You're not always seeing fish unless you're over a flat bottom of, say, sand, gravel, chunk rock," Dobson says. "You're seeing what the fish live on, too – cabbage beds, stumps, boulders. If you don't think there's a fish on the other side of that object, you'll be fooled."

*IN THE DEEP

Select a depth setting greater than the depth you're fishing.

"If you're fishing in 6 feet of water, set it at 10 feet," he says. "If fishing 20 feet of water, set it at 30 feet."

*DON'T LOSE SENSE OF YOUR NATURAL SURROUNDINGS

It's easy to get so caught up with the images on your sonar screen that you miss signs otherwise obvious to your senses – bass breaking the surface, birds hovering over baitfish, the backs of schooling bluegill.

"Remember: it's just another tool," Dobson says. ■

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1 ARK FISHING GRAVITY 7 CASTING REEL

$239.99 | arkrods.com

The flagship of the new series of reels from Ark Fishing, the Gravity 7 (big brother to the Gravity 3 and Gravity 5) is a high-end offering at a middle-of-the-road price point. Packed with features you'd expect to find in reels hundreds of dollars up the ladder, the 11-bearing Gravity 7 jams massive quality in a comfortable, durable, lightweight design.



What makes the Gravity 7 shine is its versatility. It's perfect for applications from light finesse to heavy-cover flipping, thanks in large part to unparalleled adjustability – with 60 different adjustment settings via a Gravity Control Braking System – and comes in four different gear ratios (5.4:1, 6.4:1, 7.1:1 and 8.1:1) in both left- and right-hand retrieve.

2 DAIWA TATULA XT CASTING ROD

$99.99 | daiwa.us

Redesigned from the ground up, Daiwa created the new Tatula XT rod lineup with strength, durability and affordability in mind. Its Braiding X technology uses a low-resin carbon weave for extreme resiliency (while sacrificing nothing in sensitivity and responsiveness) and an X45 wrap to eliminate rod twist.

At $99.99, there are few better values on the market, especially when you consider the premium components (including Fuji guides) and versatility of the lineup (seven models available from 7-foot medium to 7-foot, 6-inch extra-heavy).

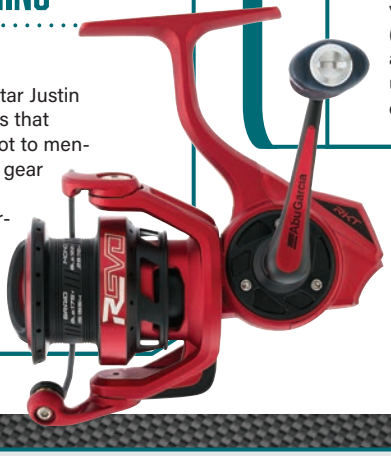


3 ABU GARCIA REVO RKT SP SPINNING

$199.95 | abugarcia.com

The new Revo RKT from Abu Garcia is MLF star Justin Lucas' top choice for bottom-contact finesse baits that require precise control of how his bait moves – not to mention the kind of quick retrieves only a high-speed gear ratio (in this case, 7.6:1) allow.

The RKT is a buttery smooth reel with 10 bearings and an aluminum frame that makes it as lightweight as it is eye-popping with a fire engine red finish that screams "fast, fast, fast." Available in three sizes (200, 300 and 400).



4 ST. CROIX LEGEND TOURNAMENT BASS SWIMBAIT

$350–$395 | stcroixrods.com

Innovation is the calling card of the new Legend Tournament swimbait rods from St. Croix. One look at the reel seat and upper handle area tells you all you need to know about what St. Croix was aiming for with the winner of the "Best Freshwater Rod" category at ICAST 2022: all-day comfort while throwing big baits for big bass. Instead of small tweaks to improve on the status quo, St. Croix nuked the status quo entirely.

The originality of the pistol-grip rod grasp makes this rod series one to check out, but the features don't stop there. St. Croix's product description is full of technical jargon (Super High Modulus Carbon Fiber SCIV+ blank, Fortified Resin System, Advanced Reinforcing Technology), but you don't have to know what any of that means. The bottom line is this: St. Croix designed an innovative new product with gobs of sensitivity and strength that's worth trying out.



5 RAPALA OG ROCCO 5



$11.99 | rapala.com

Unlike the previous "Ott's Garage" iterations (designed by MLF star Ott DeFoe), the OG Rocco 5 is a rounded balsa crankbait with a square bill for a more traditional squarebill crankbait feel designed to deflect off the nastiest cover to generate reaction bites from bass tucked up behind rocks, brush, laydowns, grass – you name it.

The Rocco 5 runs about the same depth as the OG Slim and OG Tiny (roughly 5 feet depending on line size and retrieve speed) and comes stock with excellent VMC hybrid trebles that are ready to go right out of the package. A medium wobble gives the Rocco 5 versatility for fishing year-round and was designed to cast as well as (or better than) any other balsa crankbait on the market. Available in 15 seductive colors at Tackle Warehouse.

6 BILL LEWIS ATV SQUAREBILL

$7.99–9.99 | rat-l-trap.com

Bill Lewis crankbaits need no introduction, but perhaps the ATV Squarebill warrants one. Designed for ultimate versatility when fishing around any kind of structure, this silent all-terrain vehicle of a plug excels at enticing, catching and winching fish from gnarly cover where many other crankbaits can't safely reach.

With three sizes (1.0, 1.5 and 2.5) in 12 superb colors, you get the Bill Lewis name (and quality) at a great price. Where the SB-57 was designed to fish around hard structure and the Echo for grass, the ATV is meant to do it all, from docks to rock, grass to flats and everywhere else you can make a cast.

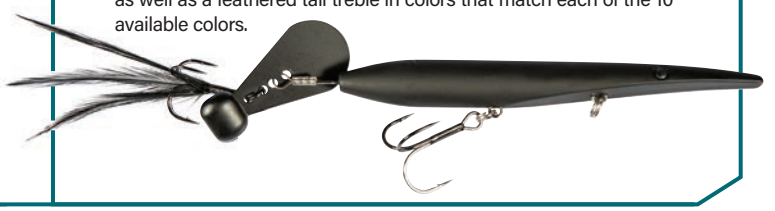


7 Z-MAN HELLRAIZER

$14.99 | zmanfishing.com

Truly an innovative new product, the HellraiZer from Z-Man is a "self-walking topwater" equipped with a weighted blade on the tail end that requires little finesse to make it do its thing. A straight retrieve brings the HellraiZer to the surface where it makes hay (and big blow-ups) with a "crazed fleeing action" at nearly any speed and gives bass something they've never seen before.

The HellraiZer was designed by ChatterBait mastermind Ron Davis, who knows how to make a blade work for the angler. In addition to the inventive tail blade, the HellraiZer also boasts quality components, including a single sticky sharp treble mounted to the body as well as a feathered tail treble in colors that match each of the 10 available colors.



8 BERKLEY POWERBAIT SLOBBERKNOCKER

$13.99

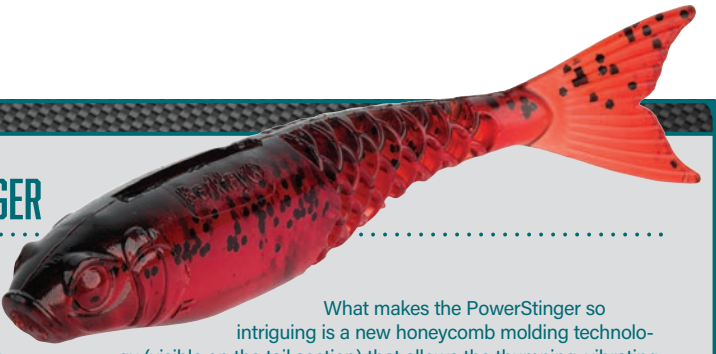
berkley-fishing.com

Berkley really got down to brass tacks with the new Slobberknocker bladed jig. When it comes to a bladed jig, anglers just want performance, and what they're getting with the Slobberknocker is a bevy of features that check that box: A stout Fusion19 hook. A PowerBait-infused silicone skirt. A unique head-to-blade connection no one else has done. To top it off, Berkley is offering the Slobberknocker in the two most commonly used sizes (3/8 and 1/2 ounce) and 12 awesome colors with blades painted to match.

With plenty of quality options now on the bladed jig market, Berkley needed their new offering to be a darn good option. The Slobberknocker certainly is that.



9 BERKLEY POWERBAIT POWERSTINGER



$8.99–$9.99 | berkley-fishing.com

The unquestioned popularity of bladed jigs has created a hole in the market for dedicated trailers designed specifically for their hard-thumping action. While the new Berkley PowerBait PowerStinger (winner of Best Freshwater Soft Lure at ICAST 2022) can certainly be used for more than just trailering applications, the folks at Berkley had bladed jigs in mind with this new product – which should come as no surprise considering they also just rolled out their new bladed jig, the Slobberknocker.

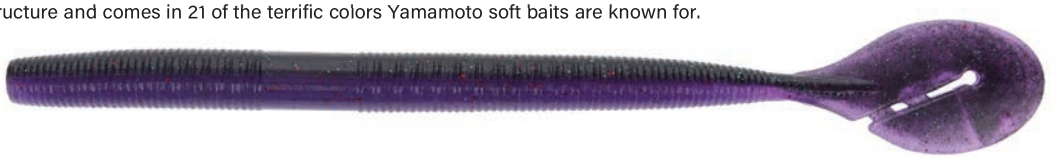
What makes the PowerStinger so intriguing is a new honeycomb molding technology (visible on the tail section) that allows the thumping, vibrating action of the bladed jig to resonate through the entire trailer, giving the PowerStinger an action fish haven't seen yet from a bladed jig trailer. Pair that with the tried-and-true PowerBait scent and some really attractive color schemes and you have a bait that might soon set the standard for bladed jig trailers. Available in 14 colors and two sizes (3 1/2 inches and 4 1/4 inches). Packs of seven for the smaller version and five for the larger size.

10 YAMAMOTO 7-INCH SPEED SENKO

$8.99–$9.99 | baits.com

The New Speed Senko from Yamamoto Baits feels familiar yet exciting. It's the same Senko anglers rely on time and again for their stickbait needs but with a large, hooked tail for displacing water, adding thump and covering water.

The Speed Senko (which comes in packs of seven baits) is perfect for swimming through and around any type of cover or structure and comes in 21 of the terrific colors Yamamoto soft baits are known for.



11 YUM SCOTTSBORO SWIMBAIT

$5.99 | tacklewarehouse.com

It's long been known that Scottsboro swimbaits catch a ton of big bass. The hand-poured baits are always in high demand, and Scottsboro recently partnered with YUM to give anglers even more baits at a great price.

YUM's new Scottsboro swimbaits are injection-molded, but don't be fooled: These new boot-tail baits are every bit as good as their hand-poured counterparts, right down to the hard kicking action and rugged durability. Scottsboro owner Tim Evans helped throughout the design process to ensure the product YUM has produced lives up to the Scottsboro reputation.



Designed in part to be paired with the YUM Flash Mob Jr. umbrella rig, YUM Scottsboro swimbaits are perfect for umbrella rig applications or as standalone offerings on a swimbait head or underspin. Available in four sizes (3, 3 1/2, 4 and 4 1/2 inches) with six baits per pack.

12 PERFECTION LURES DAVID DUDLEY WACKY WORM

$6.99 | profishiency.com

If you're going to buy wacky worms from anyone, it should probably be MLF star David Dudley, a man who knows as much as anyone about how to finesse finnicky bass using a stick worm and a hook. Dudley's new design, the Perfection Lures Wacky Worm, is exactly what you need it to be: a soft stickbait-style worm designed to be wacky-rigged and fished just about anywhere.

The Perfection Wacky Worm is lightly ribbed from end to end for a realistic look with heads at each end to impart a little extra action on the fall. You can buy Perfection Wacky Worms in a pack of eight for $6.99 or spring for pre-rigged packs of six (which include O-rings already threaded on) for $7.99.



13 PLANO EDGE FROG BOX



$54.99 | planomolding.com

Adding to their already popular EDGE lineup, Plano recently released a new EDGE frog box to do exactly what it sounds like: store your frog collection. Each box has room to hang 50 frogs by their line ties for excellent organization and easy access.

All Plano EDGE boxes (this one included) are made with the company's Rustrictor rust-prevention technology as well as a Dri-Loc O-ring seal and included reusable WaterWick packets.

14 GRUNDÉNS DEVIATION 6" ANKLE BOOT



$139.99 | grundens.com

Grundéns' Deviation 6" Ankle Boots do everything you need from a great pair of deck boots. Lightweight, comfortable and waterproof, they keep your feet dry and provide ample cushion for long days on the water. It's the right combination at a price easily justified by the features.

The Deviation line features a thick insole (for added comfort) as well as an "anti-odor" cooling liner, along with quality siping to ensure the best traction you can get on a wet deck. Grundéns offers the Deviation in six attractive colors and sizes 8 to 14 for plenty of options for most anglers.

15 FRABILL WITNESS WEIGH NET $149.99 | frabill.com



Frabill earned the crown at ICAST this year with a net-scale combo that may very well be the future direction of the entire category.

The WITNESS Weigh Net's best feature is an integrated 30-pound scale (to use, simply hold the net vertically and press a button), which makes the weighing process quick and hassle-free. The aluminum handle also features a 30-inch scale for measuring your catches and comes standard with all the other great features and components Frabill is known for.

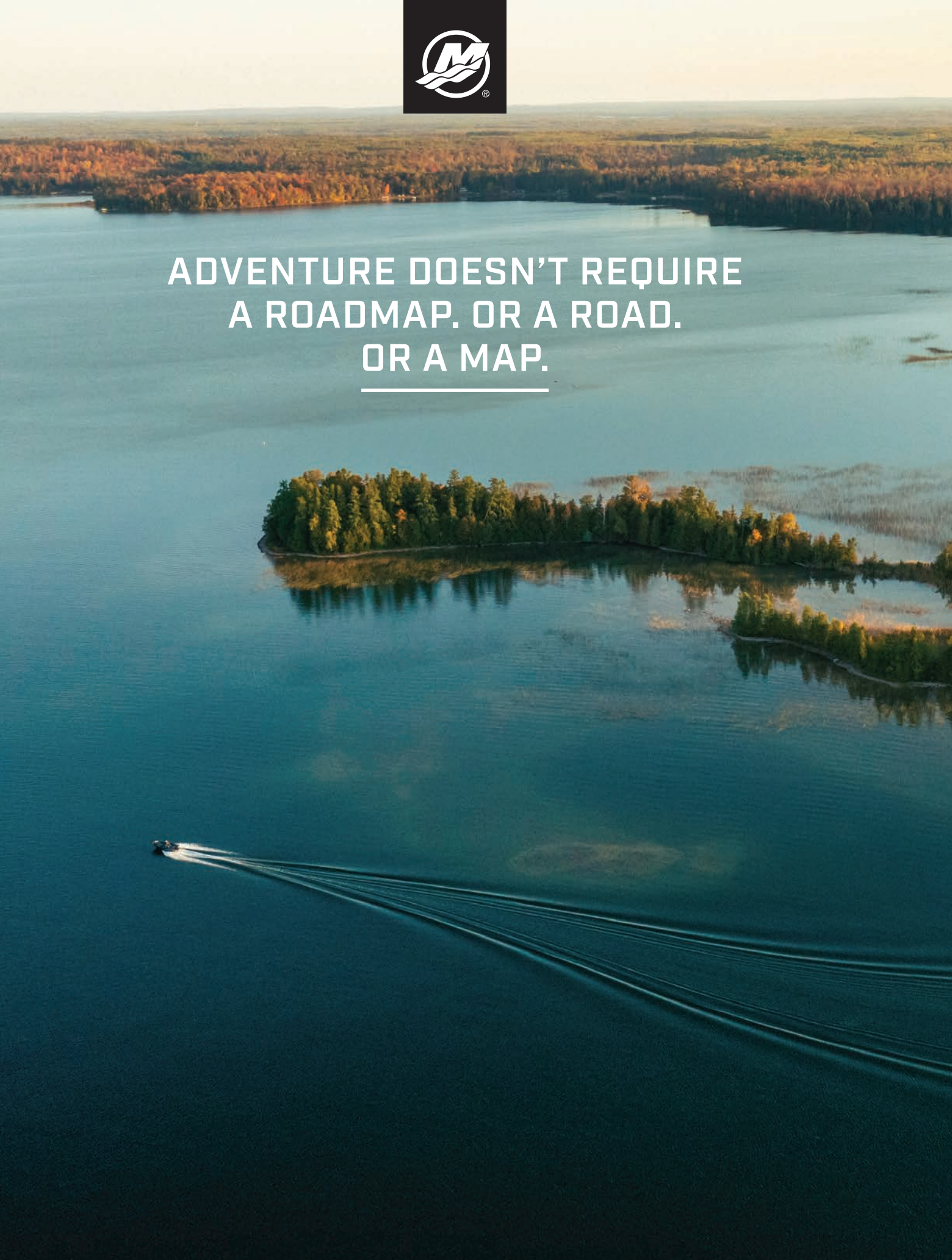
16 HUMMINBIRD MEGA LIVE TARGETLOCK



$2,999.99 | humminbird.com

If you're familiar at all with the electronics revolution, you probably already know about Humminbird's Mega Live TargetLock, winner of the Best Electronics category at ICAST 2022. It's a brilliant and necessary next step in the forward-facing sonar game.

TargetLock takes using FFS to the next level with a dedicated, independent shaft that takes the transducer off the trolling motor shaft and onto its own platform so anglers can scope around without ever touching the trolling motor, which is especially helpful when used in conjunction with trolling motor anchoring features like SpotLock. In addition, TargetLock allows users to lock their FFS beam in a given direction to account for boat movement.


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THE REEL DEAL

QUICK MAINTENANCE TIPS TO KEEP YOUR REELS PERFORMING AT THEIR BEST



By Sean Ostruszka
PHOTOS BY ROB MATSUURA

Three minutes. That's how long it took MLF pro Alex Davis to realize the importance of taking care of his reels.

A few years back, the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit veteran was doing a video shoot with some people from one of his sponsor companies. During the shoot, one of his reels was making some noise, which would've been no big deal on most days. He really didn't even truly notice the noise, as he – like the majority of us – just assumed it was an older reel and older reels eventually make a little noise or don't work as smoothly as they did fresh out of the box.

Well, fortunately or unfortunately, that day's sponsor was Shimano, and one of the guys on the trip was Dan Thorborn, who heads up quality control for Shimano reels.

"Dan mentioned the noise and said that when we get back to my house he'd fix it," Davis says. "I just thought, 'Ok. He must have a bunch of new parts and stuff.' Nope. He just taught me how to clean it.

"It took him three minutes, and after he did it, that reel was like new money."

A FINELY TUNED MACHINE

Like everything else, reels have come a long way over the years.

What once was a clunky casing of metal with a knob and spool is now a precision instrument. That allows for better performance than ever before – longer casts, more cranking power, the ability to skip or flip with ease – but it can also have its drawbacks.

With modern reels being built with such strict tolerances to maximize performance, the littlest thing can throw off those tolerances. That's where nois-



es and roughness start to happen, which eventually leads to the reel not holding up.

And if you think you take care of your reels and surely they're clean on the inside, guess again.

"You don't realize how much stuff gets in your reel," Davis says. "Pollen in the spring. Grime from water. Driving down a dirt road to get to a ramp is horrible for your reel because all of the dust in the air. Even grass gets in. How, I have no idea, but it does. They've taken mine apart and found pieces of hydrilla on the inside. That's obviously a big problem, but even the littlest piece of dirt or grime can be hell on a reel."

That's where regular maintenance is huge for keeping your reels working properly and allowing them to last for years and years.

How often you need to perform said maintenance depends on the brand of reels you buy and your style of fishing and amount you fish. Davis says if you're a hardcore angler, performing reel maintenance at least once (if not twice) a year is imperative. As for the more casual angler, once every two years should be fine. And, of course, pay attention to the little signs (like odd noises or grinding) that may signal that a cleaning is needed.

"I'm talking about doing things that take out small roughness and noise," Davis says. "If it's clanking, it's something major. Send that back. A good rule of thumb is if you have to start taking screws out, send it back. Never do it on your own, ever. You don't know what you're doing. There are so many gears, washers and springs. Then a spring goes flying and you have to find it and then don't know where to put it back. Don't bother with that."







THE CLEANING PROCESS

How does this miraculous three-minute reel tune-up work?

First, start by assembling the essentials – Q-tips, isopropyl alcohol, reel grease and reel oil.

From there, take the side plate off your baitcasting reel and remove the spool. Put some alcohol on a Q-tip and use the Q-tip to clean the spool shaft. After that, use a Q-tip to clean each edge of the spool.

Next, try to clean every tight place you can without taking the reel apart. The goal is to get any dirt and grime out of the reel, while also removing old oil and grease.

Move to the worm gear (the grooved part that allows the line guide to go back and forth) and use a little bit of alcohol on a Q-tip to get all the old grease off. Once that's done, give it all a second for any remaining alcohol to evaporate.

While still working on the worm gear, hit that with just a little grease (see sidebar), then put one drop of oil on the spool shaft, using the Q-tip to rub it around. Another drop can go on the edges of the spool. Again, rub it around with a Q-tip so there's an even, light coating.

And after that, you're done. Seriously, that's it.

"It's pretty much night and day," Davis says of his reels before and after this quick maintenance routine. "As long as there's no internal issue like a gear or bearing, this simple cleaning makes your reel work brand new again."







SPINNING REELS

You might have noticed that this article is focused solely on baitcasting reels, which is helpful, but it also neglects half the reel population – spinning reels.

Well, the reality is a lot of what applies to baitcasting reels does as well for their spinning brethren in terms of taking off the spool and cleaning the edges and spool shaft. However, as intricate as baitcasting reels are, spinning reels are even more so – which is why Davis has some advice.

"Don't touch spinning reels," Davis warns. "Send them back to the manufacturer, pay your $30 and wait two weeks. They're just too finicky."

Still, it's important to understand that if you take care of your gear, it'll take care of you. Even a little TLC can go a long way toward keeping your reels – and everything else – working for you for a long time.

JUST A DAB

If a little oil or grease can do wonders to smooth a reel, surely a lot can make it even better, right? Actually, no – it's the opposite.

Davis learned that the hard way the first time he tried to oil and grease a reel himself.

"I probably used the entire bottle of reel oil," Davis admits. "I went out the next day and that thing would not cast at all. I mean, it was just locked up. I sent it in, and when I got it back, the bill showed everything they did, but someone had also written, 'Next time don't use so much oil and grease!'

"I found out later that over-greasing or over-oiling a reel is almost worse than dirt. If you use too much, it won't let the reel be free and the tolerances will be too tight for the reel to function." ■

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TOURNAMENTS



PHOTO BY JOE SILLS

FISHING EXPOSED

PLATTSBURGH, NY — JULY 29, 2022





NORTHERN PRESSURE COOKER

It takes a lot of poise to tussle with acrobatic smallmouth, even when there isn't hundreds of thousands of dollars (and a Polaris Rookie of the Year award) on the line. When the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit heads north to finish out the season each year, the pressure is on, and there's nothing that can make or break an angler quite like the result of a heart-stopping battle with a fish that just won't quit.

When the Pro Circuit headed to Lake Champlain to close out the 2022 regular season, Nick Hatfield had one thing on his mind: winning ROY honors. He did just that with a 17th-place finish, thanks in no small part to tenacious fish like the one pictured here, and in doing so, also locked up a berth in the Tackle Warehouse TITLE at the St. Lawrence River (in which he finished seventh).

Hatfield, a Tennessee native who knows a thing or two about catching southern smallmouth, proved "a bass is a bass," green or brown, north or south, in his recent northern exploits, punctuating a tremendous rookie season with $29,000 in winnings between the final two events and adding his name to an impressive list of anglers who hit the ground running in their first season on the big stage.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

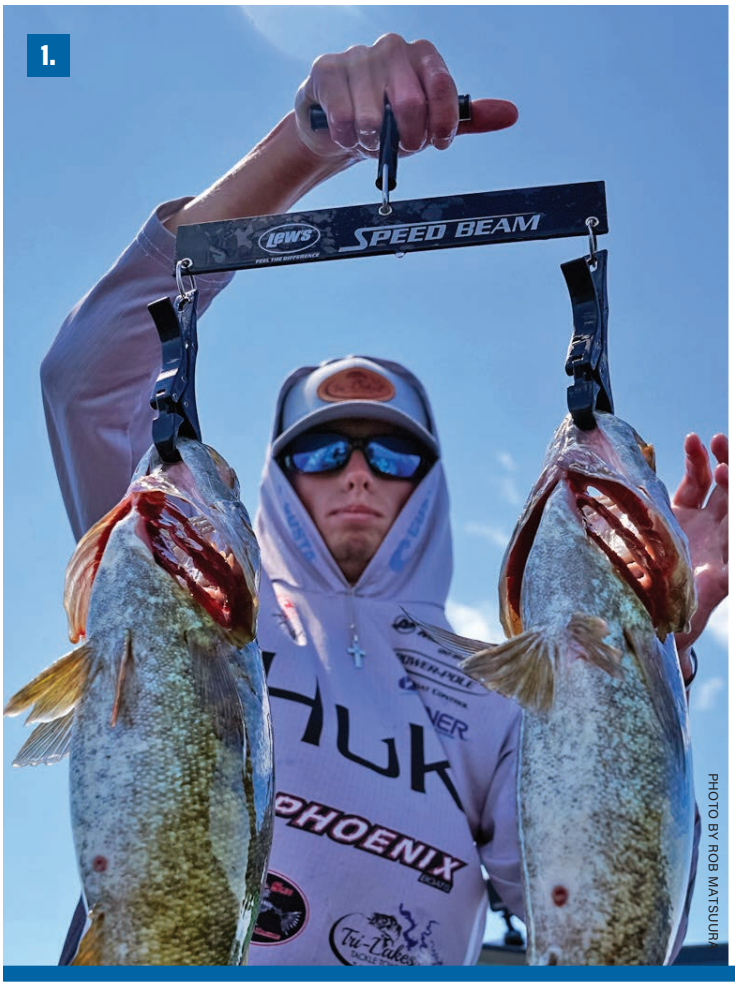


PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA





PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

1. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT PRESENTED BY FUEL ME

COVERCRAFT STOP 6 PRESENTED BY WILEY X

Lake Champlain

July 29–Aug. 1

The Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Polaris Rookie of the Year in 2020, Kyle Hall long ago established himself as a rising star among the pro ranks. Though young (he's 25), Hall isn't exactly inexperienced, having fished the Toyota Series as early as 2017 and the Phoenix Bass Fishing League Presented by T-H Marine for a year prior.

It should come as no surprise to anyone then to see the young phenom notch his first Pro Circuit victory on Lake Champlain in the final regular-season event of 2022 – especially when you consider how much time he put in figuring out the enormous northern bass fishing playground with longtime roommate and good friend Dakota Ebare in their formative years fishing various circuits in their pursuit of pro aspirations.

Fittingly, Hall found himself beside Ebare onstage as the final weights were tallied, Hall edging out his buddy by just one ounce to notch the victory at Champlain thanks to a massive 21-pound, 6-ounce bag. What's more, Hall led after Day 1 and Day 3 (he fell to second on Day 2) and then finished the job after weights zeroed for the final day of competition. In other words, he was dominant from start to finish.

2. ABU GARCIA COLLEGE FISHING PRESENTED BY YETI

WILEY X COLLEGE FACEOFF

Mississippi River

July 30

Though McKendree University won the second Wiley X College Faceoff of the 2022 Abu Garcia College Fishing Presented by YETI season by nearly 9 pounds, it wasn't exactly smooth sailing for the team of Kyle Hopping, Evan Sutton, Jaxson Freeman and Harmon Marien. After jumping out to an early lead, which they were able to maintain into the afternoon, Purdue University (who went on the finish second) overtook McKendree late in the day to grab a 2-pound lead.

Freeman and Marien (the only sophomore on an otherwise all-freshman team) decided to lock down late in the day – a decision that paid off to the tune of 10 pounds to give McKendree the boost it needed to reclaim the lead from Purdue. Similarly, Hopping and Sutton tacked on some insurance weight with just minutes remaining to up their total to 17 pounds. Paired with the 22-9 from Freeman and Marien, McKendree's combined weight gave them ample breathing room to edge out Purdue's Mason Bohland and Brady Metzger (22-5) and William Bruin and Ross Carter (8-8).

3. BASS PRO TOUR

FOX RENT A CAR STAGE SIX PRESENTED BY GOOGAN BAITS

Cayuga Lake

Aug. 6–11

To say that Bass Pro Tour pro Dustin Connell has had a prolific couple of years would be an understatement. The Alabama pro claimed the REDCREST title in March of 2021 at Lake Eufaula, won BPT Stage Three this past March on Smith Lake, and then backed that up with a smallmouth beatdown on Cayuga Lake in early August to capture the Stage Six trophy as well. Oh, and he joined the Million Dollar Club in career earnings along the way.

Connell's win at Cayuga was testimony to the powers of an open mind and forward-facing sonar. Heading into practice for the event, Connell believed that his tournament hinged on largemouth in the weedy north end of Cayuga. But after a fruitless half day of practice with exactly



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

one largemouth bite, Connell turned his attention to smallmouth – a savvy change, as his first stop produced a 6-pound brown fish and another five or six fish on his Lowrance ActiveTarget screen.

Connell went all in on smallies to the tune of 88-5 his first day of competition, 82-2 in the Knockout Round and 96-12 in the Championship Round, which gave him a whopping 16-pound win over Jacob Wheeler. Connell's smallie gear was straightforward: a Googan Baits Drag N Drop in green pumpkin and another small shad-colored bait on a drop-shot.

4. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E.

NORTHERN DIVISION
PRESENTED BY BOATLOGIX

Lake Champlain

Aug. 9–11

Local hammer Bryan Labelle is a well-known smallie smasher on Champlain, though he's been hunting down a Toyota Series trophy on his home lake for the past 10-plus years (since moving to the front of the boat in 2012), always making a point to fish the pinnacle of the Northern Series Division schedule. Prior to this year, his best finish was a runner-up in 2012, tacking on a third-place showing last year.

This time around, Labelle thought he might be headed for another good-but-not-good-enough finish, admitting he didn't think he was on the right quality to make a hard charge. Instead, the Hinesburg, Vermont, stick rallied from eighth to first with a final-day bag of 21 pounds, 10 ounces – the largest stringer of the event – to edge out Pro Circuit pro Kyle Hall (who had just won on Champlain a week prior) by just 2 ounces. Even more fitting: The third-place finisher of the event, Spencer Shuffield, would go on to win the Tackle Warehouse TITLE little more than a week later, surely making Labelle's victory all the more special.

What makes Labelle's success on Champlain so impressive is what his vast knowledge and experience on the fishery provides. Despite running very little in the way of advanced electronics – a pair of 9-inch screens – Labelle outgunned anglers wielding arsenals of giant forward-facing sonar-enabled graphs to put together mixed bags all three days (weighing in eight largemouth throughout the event) fishing grass and deep rock.

5. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT

TACKLE WAREHOUSE TITLE
PRESENTED BY MERCURY

St. Lawrence River

Aug. 16–21

Though he hails from Hot Springs, Arkansas, Spencer Shuffield may as well go ahead and consider himself an expert on northern fisheries. When the Pro Circuit heads north and smallies are on the docket, few pros are more lethal with a spinning rod in hand and a forward-facing sonar in view.

Since returning to the pro ranks in 2020 (after a five-year hiatus), Shuffield has amassed five Top 10s in regular-season Pro Circuit competition and three more on the Toyota Series, not to mention his sixth-place finish at Sturgeon Bay in the inaugural Tackle Warehouse TITLE in 2020. He's been an absolute force, finishing second, 29th and third, respectively, in the AOY points race since returning in 2020.

It wasn't a matter of "if" but "when" for Shuffield, and he answered the question with aplomb at the St. Lawrence, finishing Group A Qualifying Round Day 1 in fifth. From there, all he did was sack up 23-3 to finish the Qualifying Round in first two days later to punch his ticket to the Championship Round and finish the final frame with 22-12 to seal the deal by 12 ounces over Dakota Ebare to claim the $200,000 top prize and the Tackle Warehouse TITLE belt.



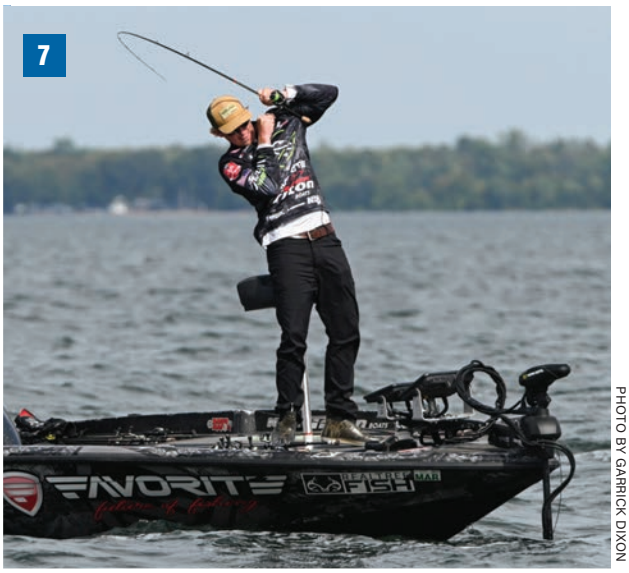


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN

6. ABU GARCIA COLLEGE FISHING PRESENTED BY YETI
WILEY X COLLEGE FACEOFF

Lake Erie

Sept. 10

In the third Wiley X Faceoff event of the 2022 Abu Garcia College Fishing Presented by YETI season, Penn State University got a small measure of revenge after coming in second to Adrian College (by virtue of a tiebreaker) in Lake Erie a day earlier. The Nittany Lions team of Stephen Botek, Anthony Riello, Dylan Crystaloski and Jason Zubris tallied nine bass for 24-11, edging out Kentucky Christian University by 1-14 in MLF's catch, weigh, immediate-release format that pitted the top two teams (four anglers) from the top five schools from the Northern Conference showdown the day prior.

Trailing Kentucky Christian was Adrian College (21-4), Western Michigan University (10-4) and Ohio State University (5-3), respectively.

7. BASS PRO TOUR
STAGE SEVEN PRESENTED BY MINN KOTA

Mille Lacs Lake

Sept. 10–15

If his 2022 Bass Pro Tour season is a hint at things to come, Dustin Connell should get to work on a "BPT only" trophy room at his home in central Alabama. Putting an exclamation point on a season in which he had already earned two Bass Pro Tour wins – Stage Three at Smith Lake and Stage Six at Cayuga Lake – Connell held off David Walker on a wind-blown final day on Mille Lacs to claim the season finale by a scant 4 ounces.

Connell finished the Championship Round with 82 pounds, 9 ounces to Walker's 82-5, catching a 2-1 with nine minutes left and holding on for dear life as Walker piled on 15 pounds of smallmouth over the final 13 minutes.

Connell, who has rapidly exerted himself as a wizard with Lowrance ActiveTarget live sonar, spent the entire event plinking away at boulders and other pieces of isolated cover with a drop-shot armed with a Googan Baits Rattlin' Ned and a Googan Baits Lunker Log. In winning his third red-and-silver trophy of the season, Connell became only the fourth angler in contemporary bass-fishing history (1980s to present) to win four majors in a single season (Jacob Wheeler, Kevin Van Dam and Denny Brauer being the other three).

8. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E.
PLAINS DIVISION

Lake Truman

Sept. 15–17

Having never been to Truman Lake before his few days of practice leading up to the Plains Division finale, Hunter Baughman of Judsonia, Arkansas, leaned heavily on his 100-plus waypoints that marked offshore brush and rock piles to pick off individual fish throughout the event en route to 48 pounds, 10 ounces and a $33,929 payday. He edged out Brad Jelinek by 1-10 to get the job done, thanks in no small part to the largest bag of the tournament – 19 pounds, 1 ounce – on the final day.

Baughman primarily used a 3/4-ounce football jig and 5/16-ounce finesse jig he helped design with Brazalo Custom Lures to do most of his damage, regularly spotting individual fish on brush and rock using his forward-facing sonar and picking them off one by one. Luck was on his side, as well, on multiple occasions boating kicker fish that got hung up in brush or catching fish he'd broken off earlier in the tournament (with his jig still in their mouth). Baughman summed up his week quite well at the conclusion of the tournament.

"There were a lot of things that shouldn't have went the way they did," he said. "Especially with fish I should've lost. Sometimes, when it's meant to be, it's meant to be."

MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING PRESENTS



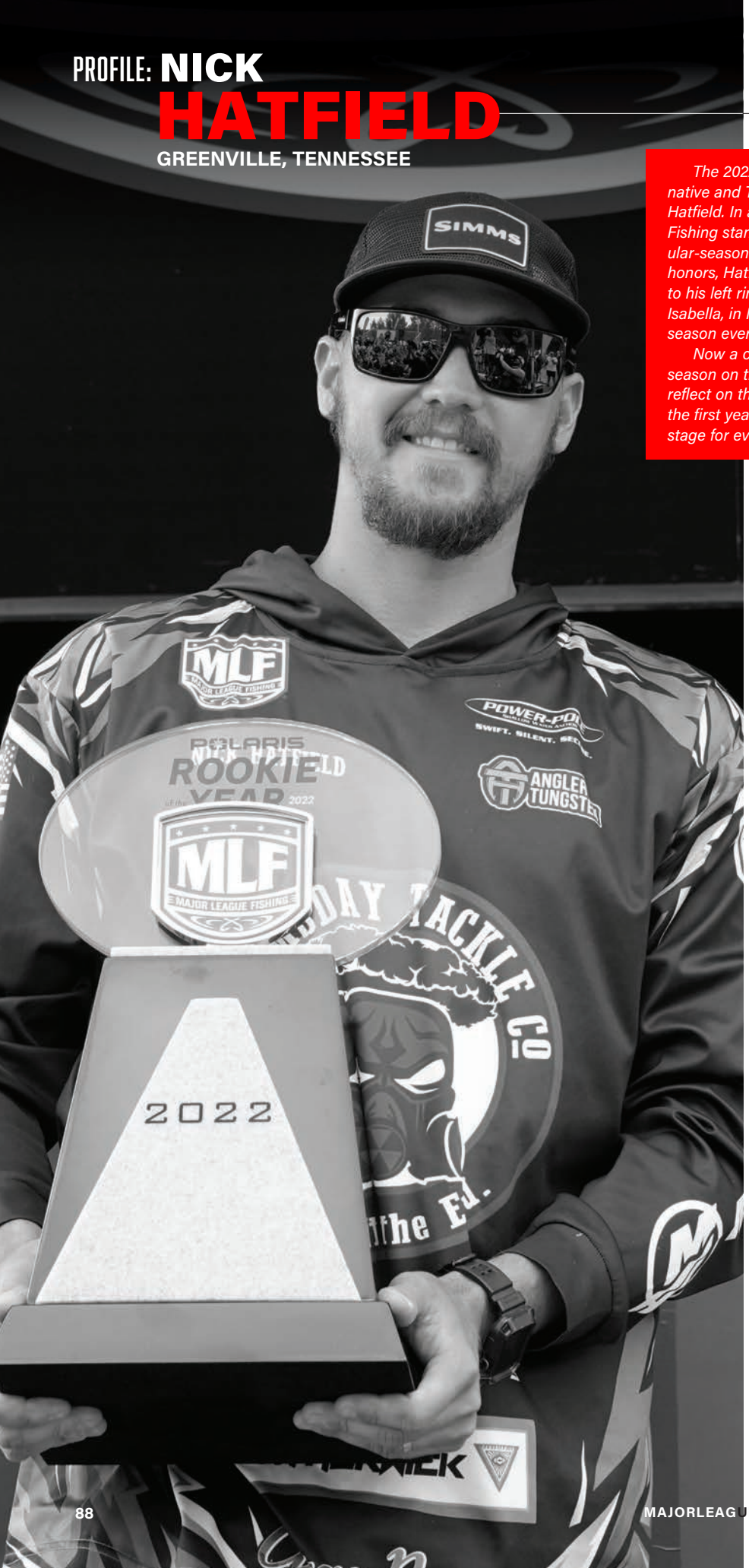
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PROFILE: NICK HATFIELD

GREENVILLE, TENNESSEE



The 2022 season was one to remember for Tennessee native and Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit rookie Nick Hatfield. In addition to the former Abu Garcia College Fishing standout turning in four Top-20 finishes in six regular-season events en route to Polaris Angler of the Year honors, Hatfield added the most important hardware of all to his left ring finger, marrying his college sweetheart, Isabella, in May ahead of the stretch run of his biggest season ever.

Now a couple months removed from a tremendous season on the Pro Circuit, Hatfield has had some time to reflect on the big moments – good and bad – that defined the first year of his professional fishing career and set the stage for everything to come.

Q&A

By Justin Onslow

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

Let's forget a minute about this being a Rookie of the Year season for you. Even for a 10-year vet, the season you had in 2022 was pretty stellar. Five Top 20s including a couple Top 5s. A TITLE berth. Seventh-place finish in the TITLE. Could you have expected anything better?

No. That's as good as I could have expected. I had an awesome year.

The Tennessee River swing in the middle of the season, knowing you had Pickwick and Guntersville coming up at that point in the season, how much did that give you confidence?

When I first saw the schedule and I saw those were on there that time of year, I had normally fished Pickwick later in the year, hadn't really fished it in the spring that much, but I had been on the Tennessee River so much, seeing those on the schedule was a huge confidence booster for me and was a big reason I wanted to make this my first year at it.

Then you finished fifth and second, respectively. That had to be a pretty massive confidence boost for your pursuit of Rookie of the Year.

I had just come off a terrible finish at the Harris Chain. That was one of the tournaments I was looking forward to and thought I could really do good.

I even had a really good practice. I thought I was going to catch them no problem. The first day, I caught a big one first cast, and then it was like I couldn't do anything right. I just had one of those days. To have a bad tournament and then turn around and the next two Top 5 both of them, it was huge for my year for sure.

How different are each of the steps up the ladder to the pro ranks? You started out with an awesome College Fishing career that included a win at Guntersville. You fished BFLs even before that and some Toyota Series since. Did you ever feel out of your comfort zone as you moved up that ladder?

No, not really. Once I started seeing a little success where I could consistently finish Top 10, Top 5 here at home – we have a bunch of good fishermen in East Tennessee. It's hard to win a local tournament here. Once I started seeing some high finishes and some success, I knew I could compete at the next level. We had already had some success in college, and I'd seen some of those guys go on and do good. I saw some success in the BFLs and the Toyotas and the Opens I fished.

I think beginning this year on the Pro Circuit, I definitely saw some of the big-name guys that I'd been watching on TV forever and I thought *do I have any business being here*? Then I got 18th on Rayburn first tournament and I was like, ok I know what I'm doing good enough to compete with them. I think that was huge.

Momentum is a big part of this sport. Obviously the financial part of it is something a lot of anglers worry about. It takes a lot of money and sponsors and a great support system to shell out the entry fees, the pre-fish, to travel all over the country and just spend so much time fishing.

For sure. That's why I quit fishing bigger tournaments there for a couple years to try to start a business of my own. I've always wanted to fish, and I want to make that my Plan A, but just something else going on on the backburner.

I was really blessed to have Doomsday [Tackle Co.] come on board and help me out this year. I'm just super blessed to know some of the people I know and have some of the friends I have. I definitely have a really good group of supporters, that's for sure.

Speaking of your biggest supporter, how's married life? It's only been, what, five months since you and Isabella tied the knot?

Everything is good.

Did you guys get to take a honeymoon with the wedding in the middle of the Pro Circuit season?

We didn't. She had just started a new job for the state. She was in training and everything, so we didn't get to, but we're planning on it in January depending on what we see for the schedule next year.

Marriage and fishing aren't the only things you have to juggle. How's the gutter business going?

It's good. I'm lucky to have some of the guys I have – my dad and Corey and Jimmy Neece – they're the ones who initially got me into it. They have a killer roofing business, and they provide a lot of work for me and a lot of tips. Jimmy's been good as gold to me.

Is there anything you do for fun that isn't fishing? A lot of times touring pros have just enough time to catch bass, shoot some deer and spend time with family when they're not working their day job.

I love to deer hunt and turkey hunt, but I haven't got to do that as much. I haven't got to turkey hunt at all the last few years, but I normally try to deer hunt a little in the fall and I play a lot of golf in my off time. I'm no good at it, but I do play.

You and me both. You told me when we talked after you won ROY that it's not about the techniques and the casting accuracy and the electronics expertise for you – it's about what's between your ears. What do you do to re-center yourself when that part of it goes haywire?

There's definitely been days on the water where I don't feel like I've made good decisions. Sometimes it's because you gamble and it doesn't pay off. I think staying on the water, staying fishing tournaments, doing things like playing golf and living life and not really worrying about it too much – I think you can definitely overthink it. Staying in touch with the fishing game and just trying fish as much as you can, that's mainly the biggest part for me and trying to be the best I can at it.

What do you listen to when you're on the road or just out fun fishing or running errands or whatever?

I listen to all kinds of music. I listen to country, rap, rock 'n' roll, electronic music. I listen to whatever.

Do you have a bass fishing idol?

I did before I started doing this, but now I just see them as competition. Probably BP, Brandon Palaniuk, if I had to pick someone.

What's the biggest five-bass limit you've ever caught?

I had like 30.20 one day on Chickamauga. I caught 'em off the ledges in like 10 or 15 minutes. I had an 8-pounder and two over 7 and two over 6.

If you could fish any lake on the planet, what would it be?

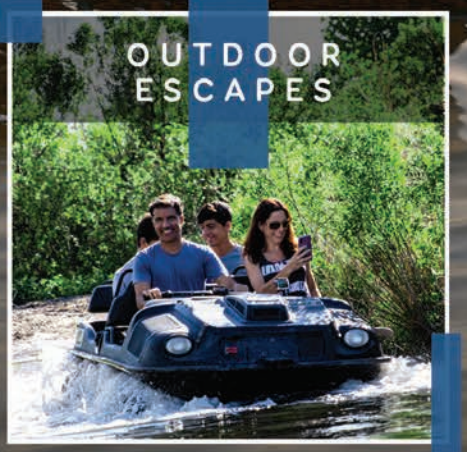
I'd probably go somewhere I've never been before. Somewhere out West where they catch those big spots or Clear Lake or something. The St. Lawrence and Champlain are my two favorites, they're awesome, and I love Guntersville, but I'd go somewhere I'd never gone before.

What's the bigger highlight for your 2022 season: getting married or winning Rookie of the Year?

Getting married for sure. Fishing is a big unknown. I'm proud of my accomplishment of Rookie of the Year and I hope I can continue that dream and chase after it. It's been awesome. I had a blast this year. I think it's a great year to build off of.

Somebody like Isabella, though, I met her five years ago, and I knew pretty quick she's the one I want to be with. I love her to death. That's something that's going to last hopefully a long time versus a fishing career. Getting married was the best thing that happened to me this year. ■

Plan on Real Florida



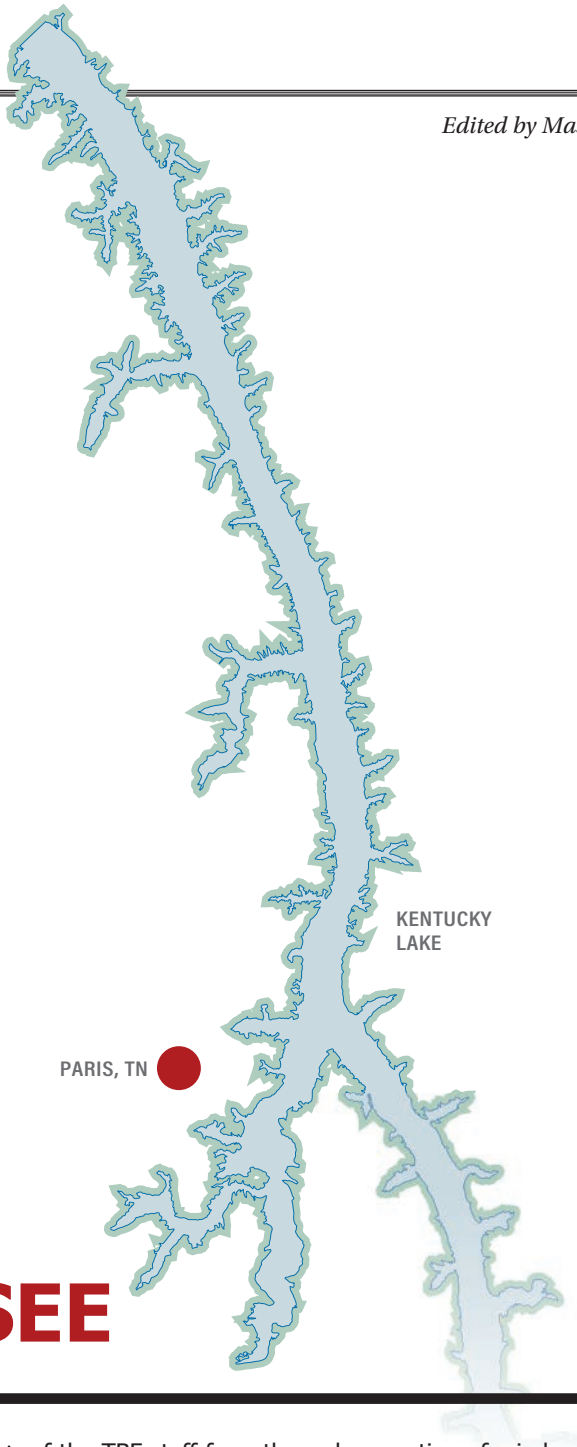


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Edited by Mason Prince



TBF STATE LEADERSHIP MEETINGS COVER A LOT OF GROUND IN PARIS, TENNESSEE

As the largest grassroots fishing organization in the country, there's an institutional expectation of the leadership of The Bass Federation (TBF) to keep things running smoothly while also continuing to grow its base of participating anglers. TBF is a 100-percent member-owned company, with each state affiliation owning one voting share of stock. That's why the annual state leadership meetings – this year held in Paris, Tennessee – are so important to the livelihood of TBF.

At this meeting, the state affiliates and TBF leadership review formats for tournaments, rules, membership details and events, and discuss the long-term goals of the federation and its membership. This year, more than 50 state leaders from across the nation joined sponsor representatives, the majority of the TBF National Board members and much of the TBF staff for a three-day meeting of minds at the 2022 Junior World Championship in late July.

Many important steps are taken at these yearly meetings, this year with state tournament directors and presidents. TBF performs corporate governance functions, participates in team-building sessions and shares best practices for both business and tournaments. Networks are built between states, and training/continuous improvement workshops are held on a variety of subjects.

"These meeting are critical to TBF's long-term health, as they have been for 50 years," says TBF President and CEO Robert Cartlidge. "When you can get 40 or 50 state leaders in a room, that's a lot of knowledge, brain power and diversity to solve problems and make decisions by consensus. After that, we usually come out with a solid product."

IDEAS ARE KEYS TO TBF SUCCESS

Since its creation in 1968, TBF has drastically grown in size, allowing the organization to continue to support bass fishing at a broader scope at the youth, high school and adult levels.

The 2022 meeting focused on tournament director workshops, discussions on possible future adjustments to TBF's adult program, qualifying format and much more. Thorough discussion and votes were held on multiple items that will surely improve the already thriving federation. Creative new ideas were presented on possible improvements to the very popular TBF National Semi-finals, as well as other growth opportunities and sponsorship programs.

There was also a hearty, productive discussion about the continued success of state organizations that have consistently grown their memberships year-over-year. The other state representatives were able to listen and learn from their peers, so they could take important learnings back to their respective state federations to continue to grow.

To keep that growth and improvement going, Cartlidge says all feedback from members is welcome.

"What I would say to each and every TBF member is to get your feedback and ideas to your state leadership so they can bring it to these meetings," Cartlidge explains. "Many of our success stories over the years started with an idea from a member or a state federation. Member feedback helps us to gauge where our membership wants to go, stay on top of new trends and member needs as well as head off issues before they get too big."

If you're interested in joining your local TBF affiliate, visit BassFederation.com for more information about how to get started.

2022 JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONS MAKE TBF HISTORY ON KENTUCKY LAKE

The TBF Junior World Championship has been an annual tournament since 1994 and is the longest-running youth program TBF has to offer. Forty-six teams of anglers grade eight or younger descended on Kentucky Lake in late July to compete for the top spot as well as thousands of dollars in scholarships and prizes.

Madison Robertshaw and Ryan Steinhoff of the Southern Colorado Junior Bass Club walked away with the win on Kentucky Lake after catching five bass for 12 pounds, 5 ounces on Championship Day, outlasting 12 other teams.

In doing so, Robertshaw and Steinhoff made TBF history: They were the first-ever co-ed team to win the Junior World Championship. Robertshaw and Steinhoff are also the second team from the state of Colorado to win the event, making Colorado the first state with two winning teams since 1994 (Steinhoff also won with then-teammate Cody Miller in 2020).



Ryan Steinhoff | Madison Robertshaw

"I think what this win for Madison and Ryan showed is that we're the most inclusive fishing organization in the nation," Cartlidge says. "We had a co-ed team win the High School National Championship this year. We have Madison and Ryan win the Junior World Championship as the first co-ed team ever to do that. We had the first-ever all-girl team win a state championship in Louisiana this year as well. What it tells us is that the fish don't know who's on the other end of the line. Anyone who wants to fish in TBF can, and they can succeed at it."

Robertshaw and Steinhoff started off with two bass for 4-2 on Day 1, good enough to put them in ninth overall and first in the Western

Division standings. Cuts were made after Day 2, and the Colorado teammates were fortunate enough to move on thanks to 9-11 the second day. Their 13-13 two-day weight total put them in sixth in the overall standings, but remained first place in their Western Division. Because of that, they moved on to the final day to join the top-two ranked teams from the Central, Southern, Northern and Eastern divisions.

Weights were reset to zero on the final day. Robertshaw and Steinhoff took advantage of the reset, beating the second-place North Carolina team of Nolan Clark and Jackson Eakes by 5-4 to claim the win.

Robertshaw and Steinhoff earned a shiny new trophy and bragging rights, and were also each awarded a $6,000 scholarship to go to any school of their choosing.



2022 TBF Junior World Championship teams



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SAF STATE CHAMPIONS

IDAHO | LAKE CASCADE
Ryker Memmott & Kyle Luis
14 pounds, 15 ounces


Ryker Memmott and Kyle Luis

MAINE | CRESCENT LAKE
Zachary Morris & Chas Elston
15 pounds

MICHIGAN | LAKE ST. CLAIR
Jack Swihart & Rylan Hamlin
27 pounds, 13 ounces

MINNESOTA | MILLE LACS LAKE
Aiden Holm & Reid McCalla
9 pounds, 15 ounces

PENNSYLVANIA | LAKE ONEIDA
Josh Kauffman & Trent Carey
16 pounds, 14 ounces

VERMONT | LAKE CHAMPLAIN
Eric Dessureau & Jordan Farr
19 pounds, 5 ounces



Eric Dessureau and Jordan Farr

WISCONSIN | LAKE WAUBESA
Hayden Fry & Griffin Geiss
12 pounds, 15 ounces



Hayden Fry and Griffin Geiss

TBF NATIONAL SEMI-FINAL DISTRICT WINNERS

ARKANSAS – DISTRICT 6
Jaret Rushing – Boater; Ray Dotson – Co-Angler

OKLAHOMA – DISTRICT 6
Bradley Sullivan – Boater; Jered Grooms – Co-Angler



Jaret Rushing, Ray Dotson, Jered Grooms and Bradley Sullivan

NEVADA – DISTRICT 22
Steven Heck – Boater; Robert Schoessler – Co-Angler


Steven Heck | Rob Schoessler | Rick Taylor | Mandy Myers

UTAH – DISTRICT 22
Rick Taylor – Boater; Mandy Myers – Co-Angler


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by Jay Chuppe



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