

Bass

DECEMBER-JANUARY 2021

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Bradley Roy

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**Abu
Garcia**
FISH TO WIN

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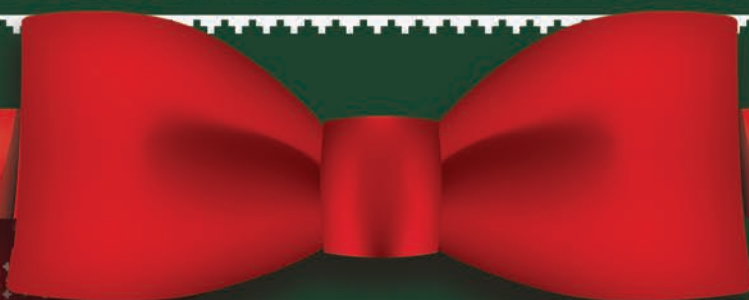
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VEINS OF BRIGHTNESS

It seems especially appropriate that the December/January issue of *Bass Fishing* magazine that you're holding in your hands straddles the fence between two years. Most of you will agree that every turn of the calendar year can be significant – who doesn't appreciate the optimism of a fresh, new year? But it's pretty safe to say that you, me, and just about everybody else on God's green Earth is looking forward to the start of 2021.

For good reason: Beyond the obvious desire to separate from a cantankerous, challenging, COVID-altered 2020, there's a lot to look forward to in the first month of the New Year. If you're a Phoenix Bass Fishing League presented by T-H Marine angler who competes in the Cowboy, Gator, Volunteer or Bama divisions, get your tackle in

order; your season will be under way almost as soon as you finish reading this magazine. If you're a fan of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit presented by Bad Boy Mowers, the professional bass-fishing "hot stove league" will start cooking on high as the offseason winds toward the February season opener.

But let's not be so fast to forget all of 2020. Amid the anxiety and fear and sorrow of a global pandemic that severely affected most of us, the previous 11 months struck a few veins of brightness in the fishing and outdoor worlds.

Many of you rediscovered or amplified your love for the outdoors – more importantly, you rediscovered that love with your children, parents, cousins and friends as the simple acts of fishing, driving a boat and interacting with Mother Nature became among the limited outlets for recreation and stress release during the COVID quarantine months. While your tournaments were postponed and your days of organized competition were limited during those months, most of you simply backed the boat in the water with your families when it was safe to do so and started casting – you partook in as much "fun fishing" as you had in years.

Yes, some of you (myself included) were taken off the water during state-mandated, COVID-driven fishing restrictions, but in totality, Americans fished and recreated outdoors in 2020 more than any of us can remember.

You bought tackle and supported one another. And when the time came to restart your tournament schedules, you were respectful of each other's space, and of the requests made by tournament directors and league managers to social distance and follow safety protocols (even if you didn't 100 percent agree with them). You demonstrated that this crowd of bass-loving fish heads is made up of good, simple, genuine people.

You bet, 2020 was uncomfortable and unnerving, and I'm as hopeful and anxious to kick off 2021 as the rest of you who already have your tournament calendars filled. Before we do that, though, let's remember briefly that there were some exemplary performances and performers in 2020, and a few good reasons to be proud that you're a member of this bass-fishing family.

Here's to a healthy and happy 2021.



JOEL SHANGLE, EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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THE GOLD AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

For many a weekend angler, the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American represents the pinnacle of the tournament fishing experience. Big dreams, big checks and a small field. And at the end of the proverbial rainbow? A \$100,000 top prize and the satisfaction of besting thousands of the best grass-roots anglers in the country.

Of course, the end of the rainbow pictured here probably doesn't have a pot of gold at either end, but it sure makes for a pretty photo. We're sure MLF photographer Rob Matsuura would agree. He snapped this shot of Michael Miller setting the hook on one of his day-one fish with some gorgeous autumn views of Lake Hartwell in the background, shrouded by some magnificent colors.

There are many colors in this photo that stand out, but the one that mattered most at Hartwell was green: the color of spotted and largemouth bass and the color of cold, hard cash. Chris Macy might tell you that's his favorite color right now after weighing in 34-10 of the former and taking home \$100,000 of the latter.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA





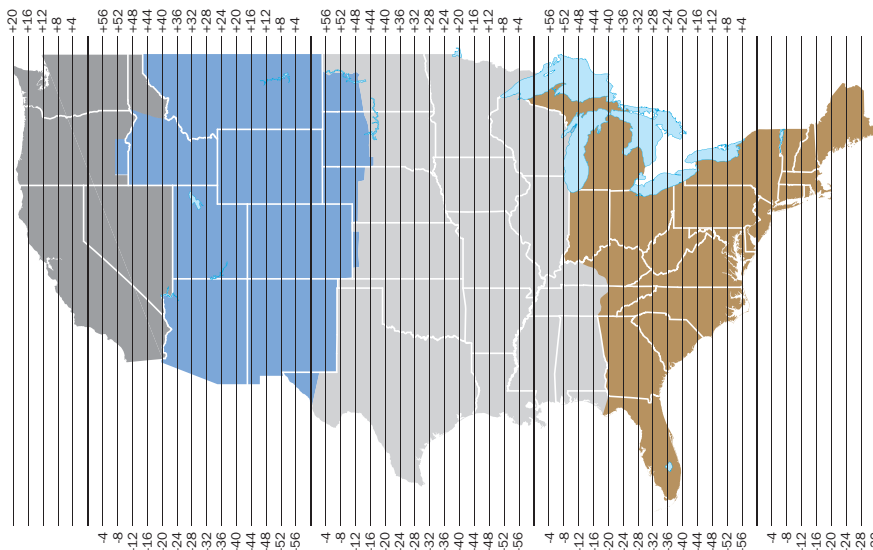
THE THRILL OF VICTORY

“I hate losing more than I like winning.”

Those are words you may often hear from the competitive type, and in many cases, it’s probably true. But for some, the thrill of victory is truly what makes it all worth it. The disappointments – lost fish and busted props, close calls and zeroes – fade away in comparison to the elation of holding a massive cardboard check above your head.

For Chris Macy, that winning feeling is all that mattered at Lake Hartwell, when the dust had settled and he was crowned champion of the 2020 Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American. As the sun set over the shores of Hartwell, Macy stood triumphant at the center of the weigh-in stage, taking in the thrill of the moment and finding out for himself that, sometimes, when everything lines up just perfectly, there’s nothing quite like that winning feeling.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



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

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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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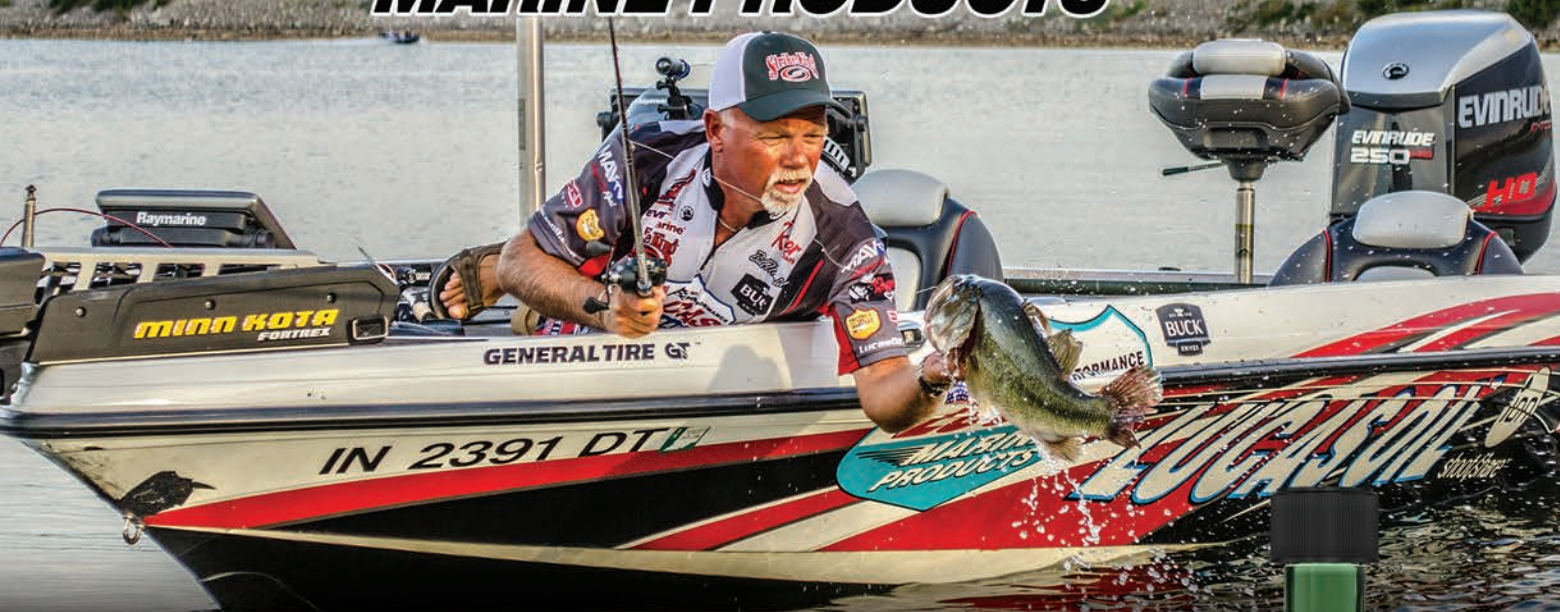
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COX, PRO CIRCUIT TOP PERFORMERS TO FISH 2021 BASS PRO TOUR



> **MLF FANS** and **BASS PRO TOUR** competitors will see some new faces filling the field during the 2021 Bass Pro Tour regular season.

Top performers in the 2021 MLF Pro Circuit will join perennial MLF BIG5 Angler of the Year contender John Cox during the seven-tournament 2021 Bass Pro Tour season, under a one-year agreement announced by MLF and the Professional Bass Tour Anglers Association (PBTAA).

Cox and four different Pro Circuit anglers per event will replace five departing Bass Pro Tour anglers to compose the 80-man roster for each of the seven Bass Pro Tour events, starting with the regular-season opener at Sam Rayburn Reservoir in Texas in mid-March.

COX GUNNING FOR MORE TOP 10S

A perennial Angler of the Year contender during a 10-year FLW Tour/Pro Circuit career and the winner of the 2016 Forrest Wood Cup, Cox was an original invitee when the Bass Pro Tour roster was filled in 2018. He opted not to accept that invitation, but still fished the FLW Tour and Pro Circuit in 2019 and 2020, respectively. He plans to fish both the Bass Pro Tour and the Pro Circuit in 2021, setting the table to fish upwards of 20 tour-level events if he qualifies for MLF Cups.

"I like the lakes, I like the payouts, and I like that I can fish a lot of tourna-

ments," Cox said. "I don't know exactly how I'll do in the MLF format for a full season, but even if I don't do great, I feel good about my chances to make a few top 10s and cash checks. There are a few places on that 2021 schedule where I think to myself 'Hmmm, I know a spot or two here or there, I think I might do quite well in that one.' I'm excited about it."

The Florida pro started his career in 2004 as a co-angler in the Gator Division of the Phoenix Bass Fishing League, and has racked up seven wins, 35 top 10s and nearly \$1.5 million in winnings in 133 BIG5 tournaments.

PRO CIRCUIT TOP PERFORMERS QUALIFY UP

The four remaining roster spots at the seven regular-season Bass Pro Tour events will be filled by the top finishers from each Pro Circuit event in 2021. The top four finishers from each individual Pro Circuit event will receive automatic invitations to compete in the Bass Pro Tour event that follows, opening the door for the Pro Circuit's top performers to compete in the MLF

catch, weigh, immediate-release format for a \$100,000 first-place check.

The four roster spots for the first Bass Pro Tour event in Texas will be filled based on 2020 Pro Circuit Angler of the Year standings; Pro Circuit event number one - Feb. 11-13 at Lake Okeechobee, Florida - will then feed Bass Pro Tour Stage Two at Lake Travis, and so on.

"We're all fishing to try to make the Bass Pro Tour circuit, and this will be a really good opportunity for a guy to get his feet wet in that format," said Pro Circuit angler Bill McDonald, who got his first taste of the MLF format at the 2020 TITLE event at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. "It's a very positive thing to get that exposure. You can tell yourself that the Bass Pro Tour format isn't really that much more pressure, but I can tell you from experience that it takes a strong mental game. It's the highest of highs to hear your name at the top (of SCORETRACKER®), but your brain goes crazy when you drop rapidly. It'll be valuable experience to qualify for one of those (Bass Pro Tour) events."

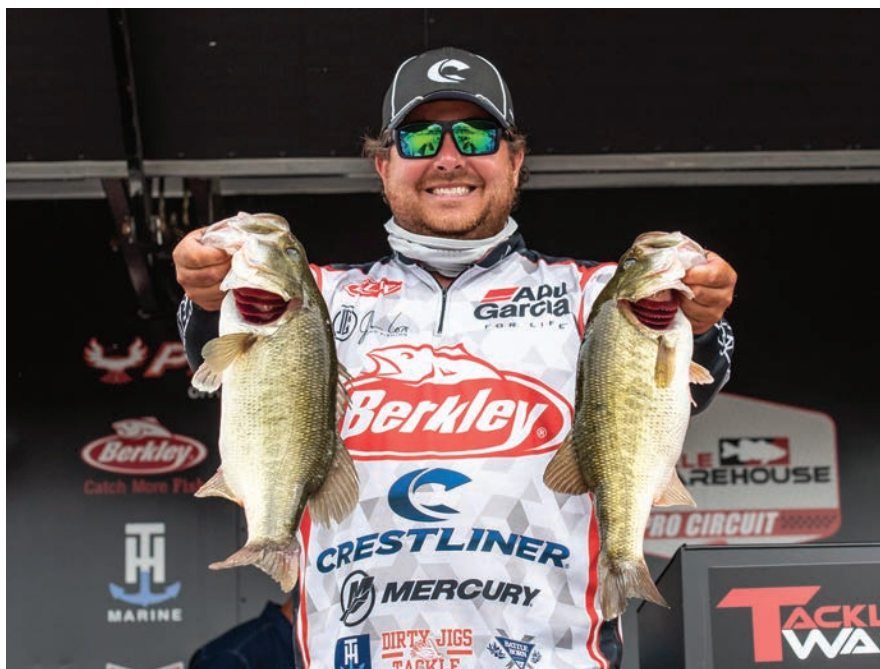


PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

REDCREST 2021 Expo Canceled, Tournament Moved



In late November, MLF announced the cancellation of the REDCREST 2021 Outdoors Sports Show and Expo scheduled for Feb. 26-28, 2021 in Tulsa. While the expo is canceled, the tournament will proceed at a new location that has not been announced as of press time for this issue. One thing is certain, however, and that is the Bass Pro Tour's 40 REDCREST-qualifying anglers will be catching big bass in late February for their shot at a \$300,000 top prize and the champion's trophy.

Citing mounting uncertainty and safety considerations due to the COVID-19 pandemic - combined with potential travel restrictions and a guest capacity reduction at the event site at Tulsa's River Spirit Expo Square - MLF opted to cancel the 2021 Expo, but simultaneously announced that Tulsa and the River Spirit Expo Square will host the REDCREST 2022 Outdoor Sports Show and Expo, March 25-27, 2022.

"The decision to cancel the Expo is a tough one, but we believe it's the right one," said Michael Mulone, MLF Senior Director of Events and Partnerships. "Every week we had to expand the show floor plan because of demand, and we expected to sell out the entire facility. Now, with more than a year of lead time, we're already looking ahead to REDCREST 2022."

BIG EXPECTATIONS FOR REDCREST 2021

With the cancellation of the 2021 Expo, anglers are afforded the opportunity to fish a different, big-bass factory in a made-for-television event with less concern about unpredictable weather. Fans can also catch the action on the *MLF NOW!* live stream, which will carry the five-day competition in its entirety. Check majorleaguefishing.com for the 2021 REDCREST location announcement.

TOYOTA SERIES WILD CARD DIVISION

A NEW WAY TO FISH FOR UP TO \$235,000

> **NEW FOR 2021**, Toyota Series anglers will now have a second chance at earning a Toyota Series Championship berth. With the Wild Card Division, anglers (both pros and co-anglers) can qualify for the no-entry-fee championship for a chance at the \$235,000 top prize, simply by fishing four or more Toyota Series events in any combination of divisions and keeping the three highest finishes of those events.

At the end of the season, the 12 pros and 12 co-anglers with the most points from those three combined events will qualify for the Toyota Series Championship, with tiebreakers determined by the highest finish.

That means you can fish individual events across multiple divisions and still have a shot at qualifying for the Championship. It also means one bad event won't necessarily sink your season - just fish one more from another division and throw out your lowest finish. If your best three finishes are good enough, you're in. It's that simple.

That all adds up to three ways of making the biggest tournament in Triple-A bass fishing: winning any Toyota Series event, finishing in the top 25 in points in any one division or being one of the top 12 Wild Card finishers.

With a chance to win up to \$100,000 per event (for pros) or a brand-new Phoenix 518 Pro (for co-anglers), Angler of the Year cash prizes and now even more ways to make the no-entry-free championship, there's never been a better time to sign up for one (or more) of the six divisions and 18 tournaments on the Toyota Series schedule. ■

2021 TOYOTA SERIES SCHEDULE

CENTRAL DIVISION

Feb. 16-18* Lake Guntersville
March 31-April 2** Dale Hollow Lake
May 20-22 Lake Chickamauga

SOUTHERN DIVISION

Feb. 4-6 Lake Toho
March 16-18* Harris Chain of Lakes
May 6-8 Lake Seminole

NORTHERN DIVISION

July 15-17 Lake Champlain
Aug. 26-28 St. Lawrence River
Sept. 16-18 Potomac River

SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION

Jan. 28-30 Sam Rayburn Reservoir
March 25-27 Lake Texoma
April 28-30** Sam Rayburn Reservoir

PLAINS DIVISION

March 4-6 Lake of the Ozarks
April 8-10 Grand Lake
May 6-8 Lake Dardanelle

WESTERN DIVISION

Jan. 28-30 Lake Shasta
May 13-15 California Delta
Sept. 23-25 Clear Lake

TOYOTA SERIES CHAMPIONSHIP

Oct. 28-30 Pickwick Lake

* Tuesday - Thursday event

** Wednesday - Friday event



TOYOTA: THE TOW VEHICLE THAT PAYS YOU TO FISH

Since 2008, the Toyota Bonus Bucks program is the only tow vehicle contingency program in fishing that rewards tournament anglers who own or lease a truck. Free to register, the program sends checks to participants who perform well at their respective tournaments.

Perhaps the best part of the program is you don't have to win your Toyota Bonus Bucks-supported event to cash in. You simply have to be the highest-finishing eligible participant in your event, which includes trails ranging from the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit to the Phoenix Bass Fishing League, plus many top-level team trails, TBF and walleye events, too.

Toledo Bend's Darold Gleason is now a full-time pro on the Pro Circuit, but he came through the ranks the hard way, beginning at the BFL level while still a schoolteacher and basketball coach the very same year Toyota Bonus Bucks was launched. Twelve years later he remains grateful for the Program's accessibility to anglers of all levels.

"My dad had a Toyota truck when I was a kid, so I understood Toyota's quality and longevity from way back," Gleason says. "But as I got older and started fishing local tournaments, I remember thinking it was pretty cool that Toyota was the only brand of tow vehicle offering guys like me, not just pros, a chance to win real money through the brand-new Bonus Bucks program at the time."

Gleason is now towing with his fourth Tundra in 12 years. He says he's never had a major mechanical issue with a single one of them.

Major League Fishing pro Edwin Evers is quick to support Gleason's claims about Toyota's reliability and quality. Evers says he's lost count of the number of Toyota Tundras he's purchased over the years. He thinks it's five or six, but whatever the case, aside from all the Bonus Bucks money he's won over the years, he's also grateful for the horsepower, safety and stopping power his Tundras have provided.

"What I love most about a Toyota Tundra is what I call 'the go and the stop.' That 381-hp engine has a ton of towing power, but a Tundra also has huge oversized brakes to stop 4,000 pounds of boat and motor – not to mention how much weight in fishing tackle and other equipment I'm carrying," Evers says.

"Everybody thinks about towing power when they're buying a truck," he adds, "but you really need to think about whether the truck you're buying has the braking system necessary to stop what you're towing in a safe way."

Gleason and Evers were both excited to hear about the new special Trail Edition Tundra, Tacoma and 4Runner now available as well. Trail Edition models feature lockable bed storage compartments to keep your gear safe and dry, refined front grilles, unique dark gray TRD Off Road wheels, and more, ready to handle any tournament or outdoor adventure you're headed to. Plus, they're Toyota Bonus Bucks eligible vehicles.

To make sure you're eligible to participate in the program and possibly win Toyota Bonus Bucks, simply own or lease a 2016 or newer Toyota truck, sign up for free and be the highest-finishing registered participant in one of the hundreds of tournaments supported by the program. To learn more and see program details, visit toyotafishing.com. If you have questions or need help getting registered, email bonusbucks@dynamicssponsorships.com, or call 918.742.6424 and ask for Kendell or Chip. They will help you get signed up.



Darold Gleason
Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Pro and
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LOOKING FORWARD

Forward-facing sonar is a true game changer if you really want to catch fish



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.

In the modern era of professional bass fishing, pros now use sonar to “see” in every direction from their boat. For many years there was traditional 2-D sonar, which looked straight down below the boat. About 15 years ago, the advent of 3-D imaging, or side scanning, allowed anglers to see out either side of the boat.

In the last several years, however, the ability to see out in front of the boat has become a reality thanks to “forward-facing sonar,” which has become the hottest new buzzword in professional fishing.

Forward-facing sonar has actually been around for quite a few years, but improvements in this technology over the last three years have made it a major player in tournaments today. With each new iteration of this forward-looking technology have come the benefits of being able to see fish, bait and cover from a perspective anglers have never been able to experience before.

Over this past season, I had the opportunity to view several different versions of forward-facing sonar with my own eyes, and the forward angle combined with enhanced clarity is

truly mindboggling. Compared to traditional down and out sonar angles, the forward-facing point of view brings unprecedented advantages.

With traditional down sonar, the boat has to be over-top of the fish, intruding on the fish’s territory in order to obtain the image. It could be argued that with side scan, you don’t necessarily have to encroach on the fishes’ habitat to see them, but you eventually have to circle back around and line up on the fish and/or cover in order to make a presentation, which takes time.

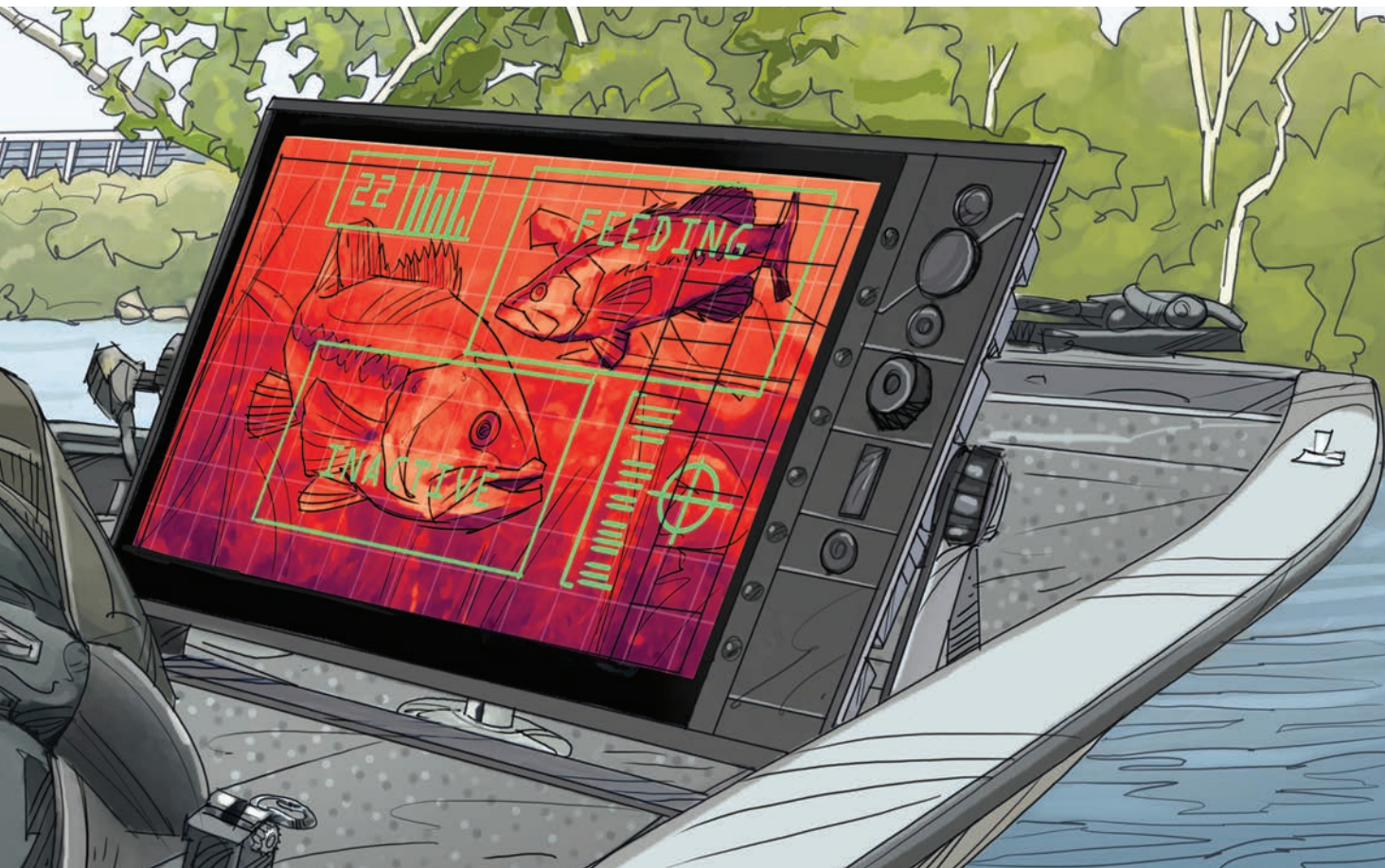


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

These forward-looking units, though, can literally “see” some 50 to 80 feet in front of the boat, meaning anglers can present a bait to the fish or cover well before the pressure footprint of the boat and without wasting time to pull around and set back up for a cast. This alone is a huge advantage. Any time you can present a lure to fish before they know you’re there, the chances of getting bit go up.

The other capability that makes this new breed of electronics a game changer is being able to monitor fish behavior in real time. I’m not claiming it’s a front-row seat at Sea World, but fish behavior can be observed and the implications of this are enormous.

As Shaw Grigsby taught us back in the early 1990s, the key to sight fishing is reading a visible fish’s behavior, attitude and reaction. As long as you can see a fish, you can better judge the aggressiveness, contentment or spookiness of the quarry. But now, instead of seeing just a

fish or two when sight fishing in shallow water, it’s possible to see multiple fish – or even an entire school – to observe their overall demeanor in real time.

The “video gamers” in the sport have been able to do this with 2-D to some degree for years. But the sonar cone below the boat was limited to maybe 30 to 35 feet in diameter. Now, forward-facing sonar allows them to see so much more, much farther out in front of the boat. And to the trained eye, they can literally read the fish’s attitude and see how they react to different baits, actions and colors, just like Grigsby did with visible fish 30 years ago.

Those who are most proficient with this new technology can watch both the fish and their lure on screen in real time, and can sometimes tell if the fish is going to bite or not. The way fish approach and attend the lure give away their intentions.

These finer points of reading forward-facing sonar images are still being learned

every day. Determining how aggressive, neutral or negative a group of fish is within a few minutes pushes fishing efficiency to a whole new level. Now, instead of fishing a point, hump or brush pile for a half hour to determine if it’s “active,” an angler can simply dip his or her “eyes” into the water to confirm the presence of fish and to determine their demeanor without even picking up a rod.

Some might argue that this extreme efficiency is actually too much of an advantage for anglers. Over the years, I’ve heard the same thing about other potent fishing innovations like shallow-water anchors, side scan, digital mapping and GPS trolling motors. All of these technologies are still being utilized by anglers of all sorts today: from top pros in high-end bass boats to weekend anglers in aluminum rigs to kayakers.

With that, I’m thinking forward-facing sonar is going to be around for quite a while, and personally, I’m “looking forward” to using it. ■



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

THE HITE EFFECT

One pro has done more than any other to put a new bait category on the map



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.

Bass fishing lures are frequently compared to tools in a mechanic's box. Spinnerbaits, cranks, plastics and topwaters all fill a specific niche, much the way a hammer pounds a nail, while a wrench turns a nut. Occasionally, a situation arises where no one lure is a perfect fit, forcing anglers to do their best with what's available.

Enter the ChatterBait. Categorized as a bladed swim jig, the ChatterBait burst onto the pro fishing scene over a decade ago, quickly taking down the sport's top titles. The reason was simple: The ChatterBait provided a better tool for the job, allowing anglers to fish a reaction-style lure in thick cover.

The original Rad Lures ChatterBait was first credited for a win when Bryan Thrift dominated the Stren Series event on Lake Okeechobee in 2006. Two years later, Brett Hite scored the first tour-level win for a bladed jig, setting an FLW Tour record for the largest winning margin at Lake Toho.

Today, Hite is the pro angler most synonymous with the ChatterBait – and for good reason. Not only was Hite the first angler to win a tour-level event on a bladed jig, but he's built much of his career around the bait, constantly refining his equipment and methods to achieve maximum results. His ChatterBait ideas are unique and enlightening.

IT STARTS WITH LOCATION

Hite's prowess with a ChatterBait can be credited to his open mind and revision of nearly every aspect of fishing one. And it all starts with location.

"Originally, I thought it was a lure just for fishing vegetation, like everybody did," Hite admits. "But then I tried a ChatterBait on Lake Mead and they throttled it. That was my lightbulb moment."

Hite immediately began using the lure in places other anglers never considered, like around laydowns, docks and rocks. Success in such scenarios gave Hite a different feel for the technique as a whole.

"The ChatterBait vibrates like a [lipless crankbait] and hunts like a squarebill," he explains. "It's got a profile like a swimbait, especially with the trailers I use, and it fishes in weeds better than any other reaction bait. It also skips like a rock."

"I learned quickly that a bladed jig allows me to get a reaction bait in places where no one else does, and it simply catches a bigger grade of fish"

He was sold.

IT FITS THE PROFILE

Hite was one of the first to bring swimbait realism to the game. After trying several other swimbait trailer options on the market, he helped design the Yamamoto Zako, specifically for use with bladed jigs and, more specifically, his favorite ChatterBaits.

"It's a big profile; it looks like a bluegill or a shiner," Hite explains. "One key is that the Zako folds up in the mouth of the fish, kind of accordion-style, because of the segments in the lure."

According to Hite, that part is crucial to allow for maximum hook penetration.

It should be noted here that Hite has spent considerable time attacking the Achilles heel of fishing a bladed jig.

"Early on, everybody lost fish on a ChatterBait because they thought it was a jig and they fished it with jig tackle," Hite opines. "Really, it fishes like a crankbait, so I pair it with similar gear."

THE RIGHT ROD FOR THE JOB

Hite's ChatterBait rod of choice is a heavy-power fiberglass Combat Series rod by Evergreen International, measuring just over 7 feet in length.

"It's a combination of parabolic bend and power" Hite says. "It's got a soft tip for fish that grab the lure at the boat and a rubber band feel for fish that hit and run at me."

In that scenario, "the rod loads up and doesn't allow slack to develop in the line. There's always tension in that rod."

Hite's line choice is also the result of treating the bait more like he would a crankbait. "I use 20-pound Sunline fluorocarbon and never braid," he explains. "If you use braid, there's no stretch, and something has to give."

The result, according to Hite, is frequently lost fish. With his system, however, Hite reports a 97 percent strike-to-land ratio.

Through real-world testing, Hite also discovered the best method for hooking fish that hit his lure.

"It's best to use a side-sweep hookset," he says. "Attempting to hook fish on a ChatterBait with an upward set is a recipe for failure. The blade hits the mouth of the fish."

THE BAIT CONTINUES TO EVOLVE

Since its release in 2004, the ChatterBait has indeed bolstered the tools at anglers' disposal. While early copycats flooded the market, today, Z-Man owns the lion's share, thanks to a

strict patent on the original design. Still, additional lures with slight tweaks to design continue to expand the marketplace, exemplifying the need for bladed swim jigs to be a category all their own.

Through further innovation, Z-Man has expanded its ChatterBait lineup to include baits up to and over an ounce in weight, weedless versions, wobble-head styles, and those with pro modifications made by Hite himself.

Foremost in this category is the Jack Hammer, the product of a partnership between Z-Man and Evergreen International. Hite was a primary developer and tester of the Jack Hammer and demanded a lure with the utmost attention to detail.

Modifications from the original ChatterBait include a slightly different blade to tweak vibration, a hand-tied skirt and a new Gamakatsu hook. Hite's intimate relationship with bladed jigs was paramount in the design.

"I knew what the bait needed to do to make it better," he states plainly.

Hite's latest input helped launch the Jack Hammer Stealth Blade, a lure featuring a clear, polycarbonate blade. The result is a lure with less flash and a tighter, more subdued wobble, intended for tough fisheries or high-pressure conditions. Hite also believes the Stealth Blade will be a smallmouth killer.

Frequently inhabiting clear waters with high fishing pressure, smallmouth are notorious for being picky, and forcing finesse techniques. However, when savvy anglers ignite a school of smallies using power fishing techniques, the results are often stellar. The Stealth Blade may prove to be crucial in these situations.

MORE AHEAD ON THE CHATTERBAIT FRONTIER?

With a full lineup of bladed jigs to choose from, Hite continues to expand the technique to non-traditional scenarios. Fishing deep ledges immediately comes to mind, where an unorthodox retrieve that Hite refers to as "pulling the bait sideways" is yielding big results.

A trip to Lake St. Clair also opened Hite's eyes to further ChatterBait potential. There, big smallmouth cruising deep grass flats were suckers for a swift moving bait. The result was a 20-pound bag in mere minutes.

The ChatterBait has proven to be more than a trend - it's a staple. Thanks to Hite, we're learning more about this unique tool each day, and all benefiting from the results. The bladed jig category is now a tool in every bass angler's belt.

Additional insight by Hite and others will continue to advance the technique, much the way it has with all other staple baits. Opportunities for expansion are endless. As more anglers reach for a ChatterBait more often, we're learning more about the appeal of this strange lure, how bass react to it, and how we just can't live without it. ■



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AN INCONVENIENT CONVERSATION

When it comes to catching bass, climate change isn't a partisan issue



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TJ Maglio is a tournament angler and outdoor writer based in Minnesota. He has a degree in wildlife ecology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has also worked professionally as a wildlife biologist and environmental consultant.

Climate change is one of the hottest (no pun intended) issues our country faces on a daily basis. Since 2020 has already been filled with plenty of controversy, now would be a good time for an honest, apolitical look at the science behind how climate change may (or may not) impact bass fishing.

To have that conversation, though, it's important to clarify the purpose of the discussion. This isn't about standing on one side of the aisle or the other. In reality, the climate change debate is about how much ability and responsibility the human race has to address it.

The fact is, thousands of scientists agree our climate is

changing on a global scale. It's getting warmer in some places, wetter in others, and severe weather events are becoming more frequent.

As a magazine dedicated to helping anglers catch more and bigger bass, it seems appropriate to take a deeper look at what the science indicates, and discuss how those changes may impact us (as well as future generations of bass anglers) in the coming years.

WINNERS OR LOSERS

One of the most important steps to de-coupling politics from the idea of climate change is to refrain from placing a value judgement on the process. Climate change is not

inherently good or bad – it just is. What that means is that depending on your perspective and worldview, the same climate impact could be seen as negative or positive.

A good bass-centric example is the spread of hydrilla throughout the southeastern U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s. For bass fishermen, it was heaven. Largemouth thrive in hydrilla, and spectacular fishing spread right along with it – a clear benefit to the bass fishing community. On the flip side, hydrilla clogs power generating turbines, negatively impacts recreational boating, and reduces tourism from non-anglers – a definite negative for many non-anglers.

Based on a detailed review of the current science on climate change, the following is a list of ways that bass fishing will be impacted by climate change in the coming generations.

ALTERED FISH ASSEMBLAGES

As many studies have shown, average annual temperatures have been increasing consistently over the last 50 years across much of North America. Concurrently, average ice cover and snowpack data have also trended down across much of that time. This warming alters – and will continue to alter – the fish communities throughout the country. Areas that were once predominantly cold-water fisheries (trout/cisco/burbot), like the Northeast and vast swaths of the West, are expected to transition to cool-water fisheries (think small-mouth/walleye/pike). These are ecosystem-level changes, affecting not just game fish but also baitfish, aquatic invertebrates and vegetation. Since bass are both cool- and warm-water species, though, these changes are likely to offer minimal improvements in the state of bass fishing overall.

RANGE EXPANSION

A recent comprehensive study of Ontario by biologists considered 120 possible climate change scenarios and

led them to estimate a 300-percent increase in small-mouth bass occurrence rates across Ontario by 2070 – a great thing for Canadian bass anglers. On the other hand, similar expansions are predicted for the Asian carp, which have already altered much of the Tennessee River and its famed impoundments. For cold-water species like trout and salmon, the future may not look so rosy. Many climate models predict upticks in average stream and river temperatures, which will push them out of areas they were historically found. For bass anglers, this is positive news, as expanding range means more places to catch bass.

INCREASED SEASON LENGTH

The effects of climate change reach past the direct impacts on fish and fisheries. In the North, reductions in duration of ice cover will increase the length of fishing seasons and corresponding changes in management. In 2015, the state of Michigan removed its closed season for bass, which had traditionally been April 15 in the lower portion of the state and May 15 in the Upper Peninsula – and instead opened a catch-and-release-only season for bass year-round. Look for more regulatory organizations to adopt longer fishing

seasons in coming years as regulators adapt to shorter and warmer winters.

PUBLIC ACCESS ISSUES

One of the biggest unknowns about climate change is the observed increase in extreme weather events. Fires, floods, droughts and even blizzards have increased and will continue to increase in frequency in the coming years. These extreme events are costly and impact angler access and success rates. Record floods can negatively impact fisheries for years, as can periods of extreme low water.

A recent survey found that over one half of the marina owners on the Canadian side of the Great Lakes have had to conduct dredging operations since they purchased their facility. Out West, water has always been a commodity, but as drinking and irrigation water becomes more and more valuable, there have been increasing legislative and regulatory efforts that directly affect public fishing opportunities. One example: recent federal legislation approving increased water withdrawals from the famed Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta, which would most likely negatively impact its spectacular bass fishery.

Anglers will need to remain vigilant and organized to ensure public access remains a priority for elected officials.

If you had to use one word to describe how climate change is likely to impact bass fishing, the word “complicated” would probably be most accurate. Both largemouth and smallmouth bass are extremely versatile, effective predators, and they do well in both

cool- and warm-water fisheries. By many direct measures, climate change impacts should lead to more and expanded fishing opportunities for bass. However, increasingly volatile weather and resulting regulatory changes may threaten access, as well as create areas of localized negative impact on populations and recruitment. ■

BIG MONEY'S AT STAKE

It's easy to look at a problem like climate change as a problem only in far-away places, or to see it only as a meteorological or biological problem. However, it's going to be a huge financial problem as well.

Take the concept of species assemblage changes. The Southern Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina are considered the natural southern limit of trout habitat in the eastern United States. Increasing average water temperatures are predicted to impact 82 percent of the 148 streams in North Carolina that are home to brook trout. As of 2017, the trout fishery contributed an economic impact of \$383 million and over 3,000 jobs to the mountain region of the Tarheel State.

In another example, lodges in northern Ontario were found to have a decrease in revenue of 8.5 percent when smallmouth bass were introduced into their lakes. The recreational fishing industry contributes \$2.5 billion to Ontario's economy, so even a small reduction in revenue becomes a significant sum of money.

It's not all bad news, though. Other reports have estimated that additional open-water fishing days, along with regulatory changes, will create thousands more jobs and millions in additional revenue. ■

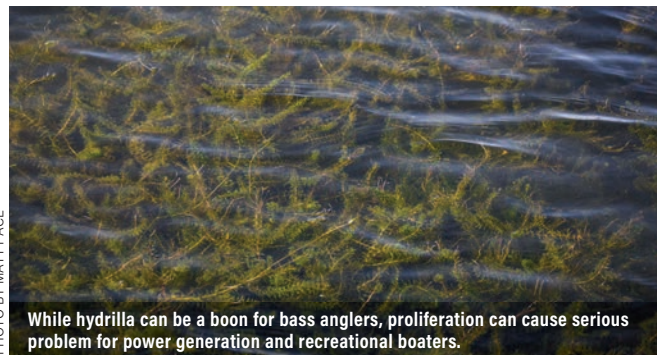


PHOTO BY MATT PACE

While hydrilla can be a boon for bass anglers, proliferation can cause serious problem for power generation and recreational boaters.



PHOTOS BY TACTICAL BASSIN



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



FISH FAST FOR BIG WINTER BASS

Conventional wisdom says to slow down. You don't have to.

With the pleasure boats off the water for winter, anglers get to experience the lake in ways that no one else does. The peaceful solitude is only broken when battling a bass to the boat. Sure, it can be cold, but that's the tradeoff that comes with hunting the biggest bass of the year on a lake with no one else on it.

Layer up on the clothing and outerwear, but you'll be surprised how quickly you warm up when a big one bites. This is the time to rig some rods and head to the lake.

If you're in parts of the country where your lakes don't freeze or ice over, you have an opportunity to have

great success chasing giant bass. Although some of our bait choices might surprise you, the tactics below have worked really well for us over the years and have produced wintertime bass up to 13 pounds.

GO AGAINST THE GRAIN

When most anglers think about fishing in winter, they typically think about finesse fishing with slower presentations. While that approach works, we typically take a totally different path.

In the cold-weather months, some of the biggest bass in the lake are vulnerable. With less boat traffic and fishing pressure, big bass are not as wary

and are more susceptible to artificial lures. Here are two of our favorite power fishing techniques to catch them without picking up a spinning rod.

SPEED CRANKING

Our favorite technique to target big wintertime bass is a technique we like to call "speed cranking." Contrary to popular belief, bass will chase down fast-moving baits - even in very, very cold water. We've found that a crankbait is the best bait to take advantage of a bass' true predatory instinct and make them bite even when they don't want to.

To better understand this, think about an object being moved quickly past a lazy cat.

Although the cat may not want to chase, its predatory instinct and reaction is to chase and pounce. The same is true with bass. In water temperatures as low as the 30s, we have successfully caught bass on crankbaits fished as fast as we could turn the handle.

To utilize this technique, you need very specific gear. First and foremost, you need a crankbait that has a very tight wobble. As water temperature drops, life underwater slows down. A crankbait with a tight wobble better imitates the movement of real baitfish and crawfish. There are a lot of really good crankbaits on the market, but many have a really wide wobble that doesn't quite imitate wintertime forage.

Three baits that work very well for cold water speed cranking are the River2Sea Tactical Crank, Megabass Deep X 300 and the SPRO RkCrawler. Pair these baits up with a high-speed reel (7:1 or 8:1 gear ratio) and crank them as quickly as you can turn the reel handle. The key with this technique is to pause your retrieve for a split second any time your crankbait hits or deflects off of a piece of structure, or cover. That's when 90 percent of your bites will happen.

Again, bass are top predators, and they're born to kill. Kill them with speed cranking the next time you're out on the water this winter.

ALABAMA RIG

The Alabama rig is a proven technique for catching big bass in the dead of winter. It's a technique that works great year-round, but it works especially well in cold water when bass are looking for a big, easy meal.

Mimicking a small school of baitfish, the A-rig can produce when other techniques won't. Fishing an A-Rig can be as simple as casting it out and reeling it back, but just like the crankbait, we like to fish it a little differently: fast and aggressive.

We fish it with lots of quick handle turns on the reel or rod twitches to mimic a frantic bait ball. With the correct A-rig, every quick handle turn or rod twitch compresses and expands the rig to look like a real school of bait fish. To get the correct movement and action from your A-rig, you need to be throwing a rig with light enough wire to allow the rig to compress and expand with the turns and twitches.

Two A-rigs that have light enough wire and have worked really well for us in winter are the Hogfarmer BFL Flex Rig and the G Funk Baits Bama Rig.

When fishing the A-Rig around hard cover like dock pilings or standing timber, make sure to add twitches as the A-rig passes the ambush points. Most of the time, just after the added twitch, that's when you'll get bit.



River2Sea
Tactical DD Crank 75



SPRO
RkCrawler 55



Megabass
DEEP-X 300

If you're fishing an A-rig in open water, make sure to add the twitches about every six or seven turns of your reel handle. Many times, bass will follow the ball of baits, staying a couple feet behind the bait as it pursues. As soon as you add the movement to your rig, it makes the bass feel like it has been spotted by the bait ball. The bass now needs to commit and eat or miss out on the easy meal.

Remember to check your state's regulations on the number of hooks you can have on your Alabama rig. Some states allow five hooks and some only allow two or three. If you're in a state that doesn't allow five baits with hooks, make sure your teaser baits (dummy baits without hooks) are smaller than the baits with hooks. We've found that even on rigs limited to only two baits with hooks, placement and size dictate which baits get eaten more the majority of the time.

Remember to have your larger baits be the baits with hooks and have them rigged lower and further back than the teaser baits, and you won't have any issue with the bass eating the wrong one.

Many traditional baits like jigs, finesse worms, and blade baits also work well this time of year, but triggering a bass' core instinct to chase down and eat in cold water takes it to a different level. This style of fishing is exciting and can lead to some of the biggest catches of the year – if not the biggest bass of your life. Next time you're out on the lake, try speed cranking or winding an Alabama rig to get those big, sluggish fish moving. ■



Hog Farmer
BFL Flex Rig



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PERFORMANCES, PERFORMERS AND SHINING MOMENTS THAT DEFINED THE CRAZIEST TOURNAMENT SEASON TO DATE

By Joel Shangle and Justin Onslow

In tournament bass fishing, as in life, December is a time to reflect back on the year that was. This year, especially, that practice is particularly important, thanks in large part to a pandemic that shattered lives and upended norms, impacting everyone and everything in some way.

The impact COVID-19 has had on the bass fishing world is substantial, highlighted by perhaps the most unusual and eventful tournament season to date. But in spite of everything that changed, many things did not. People still fished. Checks were won and records were smashed. The world, in defiance of a virus that continues to change the way we go about our lives, kept on spinning.

And so, to fully appreciate the year that was, we want to turn attention to the performers, performances and shining moments that brought normalcy back to a year fraught with anything but.



JACOB WHEELER

If Tennessee pro Jacob Wheeler has taught us one thing in the past nine years as he's rampaged through the highest levels of bass fishing, it's how to use the thesaurus – excellent, exemplary, exceptional, outstanding, and on and on. But in choosing one superlative to describe Wheeler's 2020 tournament campaign, it's simply this: dominant.

Wheeler started the year by crushing the Championship Round field by 28 pounds at the Bass Pro Tour season opener at Lake Eufaula in February, and then picked up a Toyota Series champion's trophy at Pickwick in May, and yet another \$125,000 winner's check at the first-ever Pro Circuit Super Tournament in June on Chickamauga.

Oh, yeah: Wheeler also finished second at the other two Super Tournaments – losing to Tom Monsoor by less than 3 pounds on the Mississippi River and to Justin Lucas by a single ounce on Lake Erie – third at the Bass Pro Tour event on Lake Okeechobee and 10th at the first-ever Heavy Hitters. His final tally for the season: seven top 10s and almost \$380,000 in tournament winnings.

Wheeler finishes 2020 in the number one position in Bassfan's World Rankings by nearly 40 points (a position he's held since July of 2019).

Yep, dominant.



RON NELSON

Ron Nelson's rise to stardom (and an AOY title on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit in 2020) seemingly happened over a two-year period. After all, Nelson's 2019 was highlighted by earning Polaris Rookie of the Year honors on the Pro Circuit, and before that, only the most hardcore of bass fishing fans knew his name, despite his dominance on Northern fisheries in the Toyota Series.

Now, Nelson's is a name every bass fishing fan knows, and rightly so considering how impressive he was in 2020. Starting with a fifth-place finish on Sam Rayburn to start the Pro Circuit season, Nelson went on to total two top 10s and four top 20s on the year (including a second-place finish at Lake Martin). Nelson would tell you he had some disappointing finishes, but fishing an entire tour-level schedule and never finishing below 41st place in any event is far from a letdown.

At 44 years old, Nelson proved that age really is only a number last season when he locked up ROY. This season, a year older, wiser and more experienced, he proved that, amidst a youth movement in the sport, there's still plenty of room for talent – regardless of how it got there.



JORDAN LEE

He's been a full-time bass pro for seven years now, so it's no longer accurate to describe Alabama pro Jordan Lee as simply a "wunderkind". Yes, he's still in his 20s, but after an astoundingly successful 2020 season, it's entirely accurate to ditch "wunderkind" and start to whisper "one of the best of all time" in the same sentence as the low-key Jo Lee.

Lee's 2020 season included a slew of "firsts." He was the winner of the first-ever MLF Heavy Hitters event in June, and caught the first \$100,000 bass in MLF history when he boated a 7-4 big fish in the final round of that big-fish-focused special event. He claimed the Bass Pro Tour Angler of the Year award in July, his first tour-level AOY; a week later, he claimed his first General Tire World Championship (although the rest of the world didn't know it until that event was shown on Discovery in November).

And he was a virtual lock to fish the final day in each Bass Pro Tour competition: Lee was the only angler to earn four Top 10s in the five-event regular season in a field of all-time greats.

Over \$360,000 in tournament winnings later, the former *wunderkind* can look back on one of the most *wunderbar* seasons of an already legendary career.



KYLE HALL

At just 23 years old, Kyle Hall is what many people think of when they picture a Polaris Rookie of the Year award winner – youthful, unassuming and talented beyond his years. The youth movement in professional bass fishing is alive and well.

Hall, who hails from Granbury, Texas, finished 10th in AOY standings on the Pro Circuit in 2020, which is impressive in its own right, to say nothing of the fact that the rookie phenom bombed in his first tournament of his professional career with a 142nd-place showing on Sam Rayburn in January. Recovering from that start is really what defined Hall's season and proved he was worthy of ROY honors.

After that abysmal start, Hall picked himself up, brushed himself off and went on to never finish lower than 45th in any event that followed. He finished 12th on Lake Martin, turned in a top 10 at the Mississippi River in July and followed that up with a 26th-place finish to close out the season on Lake Erie, amid a stacked Super Tournament field of both Pro Circuit and Bass Pro Tour pros.

Add a fifth-place showing at the TITLE a couple weeks later and Hall announced his arrival on the big stage with authority in 2020.



JUSTIN LUCAS

You'll have to look long and hard to identify a more prolific stretch of small-mouth-bass-catching productivity than the seven days that Alabama pro Justin Lucas posted in mid-July on the MLF Bass Pro Tour, and mid-August at the final Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Super Tournament of the season.

Lucas – who has proved in recent years to be a stout competitor in smallmouth-centric tournaments – arrived for practice for Bass Pro Tour Stage Five fresh off a top five at Heavy Hitters in Kissimmee. After two days of poking around Green Bay, he admitted to wife Bree that he had found the fish in practice to win the event. Day one of the competition proved him right: Lucas waylaid 50 smallmouth for 141 pounds, 9 ounces, shattering MLF records for single-day and single-period weights. He followed that up with 38 smallmouth for 110-5 on the final day, securing his first MLF win and Lucas' first major win since 2016.

He was back at it a month later, weighing in 21-7 on day one of the Pro Circuit tournament on Lake Erie, following that up with 19-14, 18-3 and 19-10 to eke out a 1-ounce margin over Jacob Wheeler for Lucas' first FLW win since 2008.

Lucas' stat line for seven days of competition: 108 smallmouth for 331 pounds, and two championship trophies.



RUSTY SALEWSKE

The year 2020 will be defined differently for everyone, but for Rusty Salewske, there's really one word that describes it most accurately: vindication. The Alpine, California pro last fished the Pro Circuit in 2011, just a couple years removed from a fifth-place finish in the Forrest Wood Cup on Three Rivers. It was a tournament Salewske says he should have won, were it not from some bad decision-making on the final day.

Fast-forward 11 years and Salewske found himself face-to-face with an opportunity for redemption after a nine-year hiatus from the tour-level bass fishing world. In his triumphant return, Salewske made the TITLE, fished his way to the final day and then leaned on some sound decision-making, fortitude and self-confidence to land a pair of winning fish in the last 42 minutes of the event – the second of which was a 4-14 with 12 minutes left to overtake Bradford Beavers for the win.

After rejoining the Pro Circuit with plans to reevaluate his financial situation in a couple years, a \$200,000 payday and the prestige that comes with it means Salewske isn't going anywhere any time soon. Vindication indeed.



OTT DEFOE

Viewed as a whole, the 2020 season was one of Ott DeFoe's best in his 13-year tour-level career. The Tennessee pro doggedly battled Jordan Lee and Jacob Wheeler down to the wire for Bass Pro Tour Angler of the Year honors, registering his fourth AOY Top 10 finish in five years.

But one 66-minute sliver of DeFoe's 2020 season – during the Championship Round of the mid-March Bass Pro Tour event on Lake Athens – might just go down as the most impressive hour-plus of the entire MLF tournament calendar.

DeFoe had struggled through two periods of the final day, and trailed leader Mark Daniels Jr. by more than 19 pounds with an hour and 15 minutes left in the final period. At 4:45 p.m., DeFoe pulled up near a bridge causeway within a stone's throw of the ramp and caught a 2-3, his sixth fish of the day. And then he caught his seventh. And his eighth, ninth and 10th, all in under 10 minutes. At 5:28, DeFoe's Rapala DT-10 dug its trebles into his 14th fish of the day, a 9-6 that vaulted him into the lead.

He never looked back, finishing the day with 69-12 (28 pounds ahead of Alton Jones Jr. in second). DeFoe's magical 66-minute run resulted in 18 fish for 57-4 – which alone would have won him the Stage Three trophy.



SPENCER SHUFFIELD

If the Pro Circuit awarded Comeback Angler of the Year honors, it'd be a toss-up between Salewske and Spencer Shuffield, the latter of whom also left the professional bass fishing world for a time. Shuffield, dealing with some financial hardships that made him give up that life for a few years, clawed his way back to the Pro Circuit by winning just about everything he could win in the Arkansas area.

It was a dark period for Shuffield, followed by the brightest of lights, as he rediscovered his passion for bass fishing and his desire to make it back to the big stage. And make it he did.

In his first year back on the Pro Circuit since 2015, Shuffield finish second in AOY points after a third-place finish on Lake Martin and a fifth on Lake Erie. Pepper in two more top-30 finishes and sixth place in the TITLE and it's easy to see why Shuffield's return was truly a rebirth for the 31-year-old Hot Springs, Arkansas pro.

Making Shuffield's 2020 revival all the more impressive, he missed out on getting to fish his home lake of Dardanelle when the Pro Circuit schedule was reshuffled due to the COVID-19 pandemic – a tournament he undoubtedly would have done well in. If you told Shuffield before the season that he'd be the runner-up to AOY without fishing his home pond, well, I think he'd probably have taken that.



JOSH BERTRAND

While Justin Lucas claims the No. 1 ranking for professional smallmouth anglers in 2020, a case could be made for Arizona pro Josh Bertrand to occupy the 1b spot. Bertrand had a solid season – Top 20 in AOY standings, qualified for Heavy Hitters and RED-CREST – but as has been the case ever since the Berkley pro earned a tour-level top 10 on the St. Lawrence River his rookie year, he shone when brown fish were the focus.

Bertrand dogged Lucas throughout Lucas' Sturgeon Bay victory, nearly matching the Alabama pro's record-shattering 141-pound pace on day one with 40 fish for 123-3 of his own. Bertrand would eventually finish third in that event behind Lucas and Mark Daniels Jr., but with a mind-boggling event total of 93 smallmouth for 287-3.

Bertrand similarly duked it out with Lucas and Wheeler during the Lake Erie Pro Circuit Super Tournament, claiming the lead on day one with 22-7 of smallmouth and reclaiming it on day three with 22-14 before a tough final day dropped him to third.

Although he didn't claim a first-place trophy in 2020, Bertrand's eight-day smallmouth tally – 113 smallmouth for 361 pounds, 13 ounces – was the highest in memory and worthy of a Best of 2020 nod.



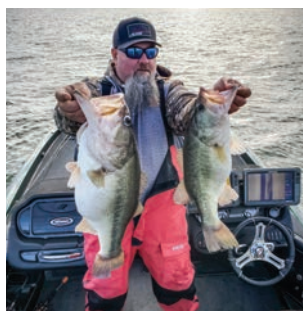
KURT MITCHELL

When the tournament schedule invariably shifts to Northern waters later in the year, there tends to be a sense of excitement from just about everyone who gets to turn their attention from largemouth-heavy derbies to smallmouth slugfests.

Kurt Mitchell is the perfect example of what can happen when the focus shifts from green to brown. In 2020, the Milford, Delaware pro wasn't having a bad season before the Northern swing (he finished lower than 75th just once), but there was a two-week period in August that made the professional bass fishing world perk up its collective ear and take notice of Mitchell and his propensity for smashing smallmouth up North.

Just a week ahead of the TITLE on Sturgeon Bay, Mitchell went to Lake Erie for the Toyota Series Northern Division's second event of the season and won it (thanks to a massive 24-11 bag on day two). He immediately hit to road for the TITLE and, still red-hot from the week prior, lit up SCORETRACKER® to the tune of 119-10 on day one, eviscerating the rest of Group A by almost double (Grae Buck finished day one in second with 63 pounds).

Mitchell went on to finish fourth in the event for a \$25,000 payday and a place in our 2020 retrospective for his smallmouth heroics.



ANTHONY SHARP

While the tour-level trails of MLF get the lion's share of the national spotlight, we'd be remiss to not give some love to the rest of the BIG5 and some of the best performances of the grassroots levels of MLF in 2020. Enter Anthony Sharp and one of the most impressive one-day showings we've ever seen in Phoenix Bass Fishing League competition.

Back in February – what feels like years ago – Sharp cemented himself as a local legend with an absolutely mammoth bag of Sam Rayburn largemouth. Cast after cast, the Village Mills, Texas angler wrangled up giant after giant, eventually tipping the scales at 40 pounds, 6 ounces for a 21-pound, 5-ounce margin of victory – the largest ever in BFL competition. His 40-6 was just 8 ounces shy of the BFL record set by Rogne Brown on Chickamauga in 2011.

Eye-popping numbers aside, what's even more impressive is how quickly Sharp caught his fish. Less than an hour and a half after takeoff, he was calling tournament director Brad Callahan to ask if he could use his co-angler's livewell in addition to his own. The rest of the day was spent trying to get his co-angler on some fish, as Sharp says he made only 50 casts after sacking up his 40-6.



MELINDA HAYS

Those who have been around the bass fishing tournament world for any amount of time have probably heard Melinda Hays' name. She's worked in the industry for years, and in 2020, some unfortunate circumstance led to one of the most noteworthy wins of the entire tournament season.

Hays, who was laid off from her job in April, decided to use it as an opportunity to turn her attention to fishing the Phoenix Bass Fishing League and really just enjoy being out on the water more often. What resulted was a Strike King Co-Angler of the Year award in the Arkie Division and an historic win.

In October, on Table Rock, Hays became the first woman to win a BFL Regional. She did so in pretty dominant fashion, too, taking the top spot by more than 4 pounds with 10 fish over three days for 22-4 total.

A mother of two daughters, Hays has made it a point to show her girls that, in bass fishing, it doesn't matter to the fish who's holding the rod at the other end of the lure.

"They watch every single thing that we do," she said. "And I think that it has to do with being a positive role model for them, and showing them that they can dream absolutely any dream they want."



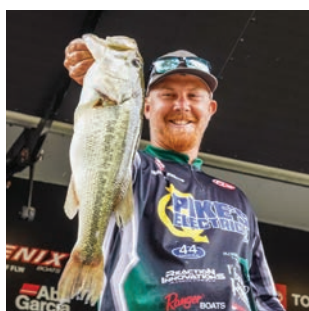
BRIAN MORGAN

No matter what tournament trail you're fishing – from the Bass Pro Tour all the way down to a local weekend derby – three wins in a season is damn impressive. Just ask Brian Morgan, who tallied three victories in the Phoenix Bass Fishing League North Carolina Division in 2020.

Morgan fished all five tournaments in the division, finishing 38th and 17th in his two non-wins. Unsurprisingly, he won AOY honors in the North Carolina Division and pocketed more than \$16,000 as a result.

"To be honest, I kind of want to cry right now," Morgan said after securing his third win of the season. "I can't even think straight. To win three in a year ... unbelievable."

We couldn't have said it any better than that.



LARAMY STRICKLAND

While Kyle Hall ultimately took home ROY honors on the Pro Circuit, Laramy Strickland certainly stood out as the frontrunner through the first few events of the season. Like Hall, Strickland bombed at Rayburn to start the year (119th place), but the tournament that followed put Strickland on the map in the tour-level tournament world and confirmed for everyone in the Leesburg, Florida area what they already knew: Strickland is a hammer.

The 23-year-old Bushnell, Florida rookie won that event in February on his home waters of the Harris Chain of Lakes with the help of the largest five-fish limit in Pro Circuit competition in 2020 – a 31-pound, 6-ounce sack on day two of the event. With day three cancelled due to high winds, Strickland was able to regroup a couple days after that mega-bag and back it up with enough (15-4) to edge out fellow rookie Jimmy Washam by more than 4 pounds.

The very next event in March, Strickland added a fifth-place showing on Lake Martin to prove he can catch fish outside of Florida and to put the fishing world on notice: Strickland is ready for the big stage and the bright lights.



DREW BOGGS

Nine, six, one, four, two, one, eight. That's not a phone number. That's the list of top-10 finishes Drew Boggs turned in across multiple levels of MLF BIG5 competition in 2020.

Boggs, a home builder from Lebanon, Tennessee, started his magical run back in June on Dale Hollow in the Phoenix Bass Fishing League Mountain Division. A month later, in the Music City Division, Boggs finished sixth, followed by a win on Kentucky Lake a week later in the LBL Division. He tacked on a couple more top-fives before winning the BFL Regional on Chickamauga in October and then turning in a top-10 on Dale Hollow in the Toyota Series Central Division.

Talk about a heater.

And as great as Boggs was in 2020, it wasn't a fluke year for the 42-year-old angler, who already has 51 top-10s in MLF BIG5 competition and \$174,402 in winnings to his name.

OTHER STANDOUTS FROM 2020

Lake Fork, Texas produced two 10-pounders on back-to-back competition days on the Bass Pro Tour. Jason Christie landed MLF's first-ever 10 when he corralled a 10-4 on the first day of Bass Pro Tour Stage Three; that record stood less than 24 hours as Justin Atkins landed a 10-8 a day later.

Clabion Johns deserves the award for "Ironman of the Year" or "Road Warrior of the Year." Johns, a resident of Social Circle, Georgia, claimed the BFL Bulldog Division's Angler of the Year title in 2020, but also jumped into the Southeastern, Southern, All-American, Bama and Music City divisions. The All-American was Johns' 23rd BFL tournament of the year, the most of any angler on the MLF rosters (Dakota Ebare was second with 21).

John Cox kick-started 2020 by winning the Pro Circuit season opener on Sam Rayburn Reservoir, and book-ended that with a third-place finish in the Pro Circuit TITLE. Notable results on their own...but the "how" is what lands Cox on this list.

The Florida shallow-water savant won the Sam Rayburn event on a crankbait – a bait most keen observers of the sport had never even seen him throw before. Cox finished his 2020 campaign by arriving at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin the night before his first competition day, putting his tin boat in the water the next morning with no practice and no experience on the fishery, and then nearly pulling off a win. Cox caught the most weight in his group's first Qualifying Round (66-5) on the very first day he had laid eyes on Sturgeon Bay.

THE WILD CARDS OF 2020

“Notable” in 2020 was not defined purely by trophies and individual performances. In addition to the 15 anglers above, here are five wild cards that helped define the 2020 season:

LIVE-SCANNING SONAR AND ELECTRONICS GROUPING

Sonar technology has developed at warp speed in the past decade, but it's safe to say that 2020 was a watershed year for electronics in the game of bass fishing. Starting with the first Bass Pro Tour event of the season on Lake Eufaula – where Jacob Wheeler defied 50 years of bass-fishing wisdom by dominating a muddy-water tournament while relying on his graphs to find fish offshore – and ending in the aforementioned Great Lake smallmouth slugfests won by anglers cherry-picking fish with live-scanning sonar, the screens on the bow of the boat played a historically enormous role in winning tournaments.

Keen observers quickly noticed that Wheeler's electronics array included units from three different manufacturers – Lowrance, Humminbird and Garmin – characteristics of which he utilizes for various fish-locating functions.

“Jacob is one of the best athletes in the sport, and any those three companies would love to sponsor him,” said MLF analyst JT Kenney. “But he decided to forgo that, because in his mind, each of them does one thing better than the others.”

If you look at other bass boats around you, you'll see that pros and everyday anglers alike are following suit with electronics groupings.

THE FLAT WORM PHENOMENON

Officially, the Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flat Worm was not a new product in 2020 (it was originally on tackle-store pegs in 2018). But come July 10, when three Berkley anglers (Lucas, Bertrand and Scott Suggs) caught a combined 384 pounds of Green Bay smallmouth on the Flat Worm, this 3.6-inch stick of smallmouth-catching dynamite was reintroduced to the bass-fishing world in spectacular fashion.

All 10 colors of the Flat Worm were out of stock at online retailers by the end of the week as smallmouth anglers hustled to get their hands on the MaxScent-juiced bait. When the Pro Circuit season wrapped up in Sandusky, Ohio a month later, the Flat Worm's purple packaging was visible in virtually every boat, regardless of bait sponsorship.

“I've been saying since we first started producing the Flat Worm that it was the best smallmouth bait ever, but we hadn't had the opportunity to really show it off (before Sturgeon Bay),” Lucas said.

THE TOURNAMENT DIRECTORS

The March announcement of tournament postponements throughout the six MLF circuits was an important safety precaution to combat the spread of COVID-19. And while Bass Pro Tour,

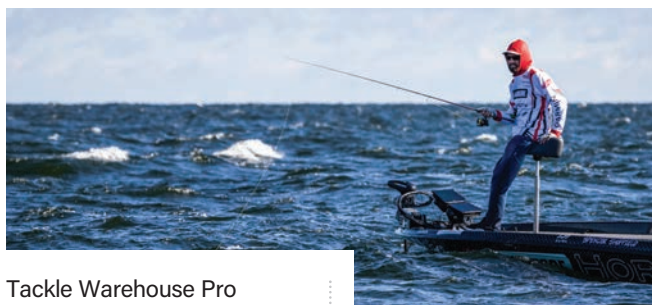


PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit, Toyota Series, Phoenix Bass Fishing League, College and High School anglers began the task of waiting out the quarantine, tournament directors and managers around the country went to work. Hard work.

By the end of June, upwards of 80 tournaments originally scheduled for spring and early summer had been reorganized to run into the fall, swelling the June, July, August, September and October tournament schedules to cover all levels of competition. Schedulers called, local communities flexed and bent to accommodate, and with very few exceptions, anglers throughout the country fished full circuits.

None of that would have been possible without the hard work and dedication of the tournament directors of each of those circuits.

STURGEON BAY SHOWS OUT

When putting together the list of “top performers” for 2020, there was some spirited debate among *Bass Fishing Magazine* staff that a fishery, not an angler, deserved the nod for the number one spot. That fishery: Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin.

The town of Sturgeon Bay and waters surrounding

it in Green Bay and Lake Michigan are no strangers to the bass-tournament crowd (including many MLF anglers, who have competed in tour-level events there). The Sturgeon Bay Open – a spring tournament that has been contested since 1991 – produced an astounding 6.5-pound average for its best five smallmouth in 2019. Suffice it to say that Sturgeon Bay is a bucket-list smallmouth destination.

Still, very few people outside of Door County, Wisconsin, had a clue exactly how abundant the smallmouth fishery was until Stage Five of the Bass Pro Tour and the FLW TITLE were redirected to Sturgeon Bay. The July Bass Pro Tour numbers were staggering: 2,981 smallies over 2 pounds made it onto SCORE-TRACKER® for a total weight of 8,866-11 for the 80-man field. The TITLE numbers were astounding as well: 1,171 smallmouth for 3,864-12 for the 50-anglers field.

That's 4,152 2-plus-pound smallmouth for 12,731 pounds, 7 ounces over 12 days of competition – an average just a shade over 3 pounds, 1 ounce. Fishery of the year? Definitely. Performer of the year? Sturgeon Bay has my vote. ■



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WHY PROS

BOMB

... AND THE IMPORTANT LESSONS THEY LEARN FROM IT

By Sean Ostruszka

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

There's no sugarcoating it. It sucks to fail.

Sure, there are thousands of quotes about the importance of failure ("Failure is not the opposite of success; it's part of success.") and learning from failure ("Why do we fall? So we can learn to pick ourselves up."). But in the end, falling short is falling short.

Still, failure is one of life's greatest teachers, and that's no different in fishing tournaments.

"I wouldn't change getting my teeth getting kicked in one bit," says Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Jeremy Lawyer. "I learned a lot from those events where I bombed. Bombing a tournament is like sticking your finger in a light socket. You do it once and you're going to learn quick so you don't do it again."

Lawyer isn't the only pro who knows what it's like to come up short from time to time. We talked with a handful of pros on some of the lessons they learned from their worst tournaments so hopefully you won't make the same mistakes.





PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

JAMES NIGGEMEYER

TOURNAMENT AND FINISH: 2019 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit on Lake Toho, 137th place
LESSON LEARNED: If it looks good, explore it.

When you do well on a fishery multiple times running the same pattern, it's easy to put on the blinders. That's exactly what happened with James Niggemeyer at Toho in 2019.

"I have a decent track record at Toho, especially that time of year," Niggemeyer says. "It's almost always spawn-related, whether it's fishing shallow for pre-, spawning or post-spawn fish. So that's what I focused on, and I totally missed the offshore grass bite."

What really gets Niggemeyer is that he noticed the lush offshore hydrilla flats while driving back and forth to the ramp during practice. It looked as good as anything he'd seen, but he figured the timing was wrong.

"I remember thinking, 'They couldn't possibly be out in that. They just spawned,'" Niggemeyer recounts. "I forgot the spawn is so long in Florida, and I was so wrong."

Buddy Gross ended up winning the tournament off a one-cast spot in the offshore grass. Meanwhile, Niggemeyer says he stayed up shallow and simply never got any quality bites.

"I caught plenty of fish, and I just kept thinking what usually happens in Florida would: that you catch a bunch of small fish and eventually you get one or two big bites," Niggemeyer says. "I never did. All the big fish had moved out to that grass."

"Since then, if I come across anything that looks good – even if it's the wrong time of year – I at least investigate it."



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

TERRY BOLTON

TOURNAMENT AND FINISH: 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit on the Mississippi River, 172nd place
LESSON LEARNED: Pay attention to changing conditions.

After 26 years of fishing professionally, you might think something like watching conditions would be a given for a pro. Even successful veterans like Terry Bolton can miss out on things, though, especially when they're subtle.

"There were a couple things I missed in that tournament, but the biggest was the water levels," Bolton says.

Bolton had a poor practice, as the water levels in the river were dropping, but he found a spot he figured he could catch a small limit come the start of the event. The problem was that, by the first day of the tournament, the water had started to come back up, and he failed to notice.

"I drew an early number and got to my area first, but the fish were gone," Bolton recalls. "The rising water had moved my fish, but I didn't realize the water had come up until late in the day."

He then compounded the problem on day two when he "chose the wrong area."

"I decided to fish this massive grass flat, figuring the fish would move up in it," Bolton continues. "Well, they did, but water had risen so much the fish had gone up so shallow I couldn't reach them, and it took me so long to get in the flat that I was basically stuck there."

Adding insult to injury, Bolton remembers idling around the Black River the last day of practice and noticing some offshore structure that "looked really good" – something right in his wheelhouse, being that he calls Kentucky Lake home. Because it was late in practice, he didn't explore it.

"I come to find that's where Tom Monsoor won the tournament, on that offshore stuff," Bolton laments. "I remember seeing that and just thinking, 'Well, you were right, you dummy.'"



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

TOMMY DICKERSON

TOURNAMENT AND FINISH: 2019 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit on Cherokee Lake, 130th place

LESSON LEARNED: Listen to what the fish are telling you.

He may hail from Texas, but Tommy Dickerson is quite the fan of catching smallmouth. It's too bad that, for at least one tournament, he didn't pay attention to what they were telling him to do.

"I figured out what the fish were doing the first day of practice, but I didn't realize it," Dickerson says.

While throwing a swimbait in and around the huge boulders lining the shoreline of Cherokee, Dickerson got a backlash that required him to spend a minute picking it out. When he finally went to reel in, he had a 4-pound smallmouth on the other end of his line. That prompted him to not put the swimbait down for the rest of the day, and he never got another bite.

"I never stopped to think about that one fish," Dickerson adds. "I should've thought about why I never got another bite. Why did that fish bite when my bait was on the bottom and not moving? If I had, I'd have realized the bass wouldn't eat anything unless it was sitting on the bottom because it was in their beds."

Dickerson ended up chasing largemouth the first day of the tournament, and while everyone else was catching upwards of 50 fish a day, he only brought in three fish. The second day, he went back to the pattern he missed from practice, fishing for smallmouth. The results were dramatically different.

"I brought in almost 16 pounds – one of the largest bags of the day," Dickerson recalls. "It was so simple, and it was right in front of me if I'd just listened."

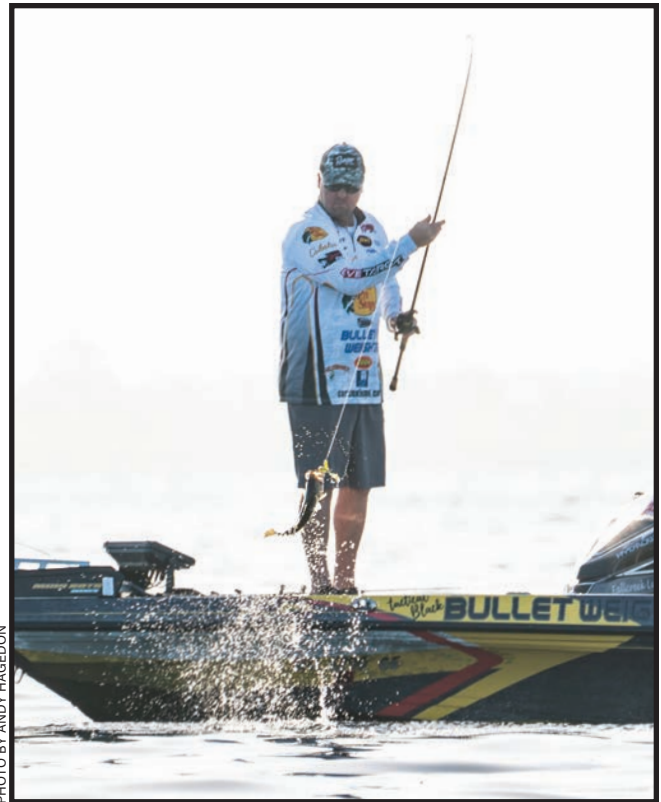


PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

JEREMY LAWYER

TOURNAMENT AND FINISH: 2018 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit on the Harris Chain, 171st place

LESSON LEARNED: Know when to abandon ship.

Change can be scary, especially during a tournament when time is limited. Yet, having the confidence to abandon a dying pattern would've saved Lawyer from one of the worst tournaments of his career.

"I had an awesome practice," Lawyer says. "I'm talking almost 30 pounds a day, and it just sucked me in."

Unfortunately, as tends to often be the case, the conditions changed by the start of the tournament, and Lawyer knew his pattern would die as the winds picked up and messed up the area of grass he was fishing. He admits he just "couldn't make himself leave," as he was scared about the idea of making such a drastic change during the day.

"You know, it's scary to just abandon ship and scrap what you were doing – that had been working – and to go do something else," Lawyer admits. "It's a big risk where you have to weigh trying to survive versus the possibility of crashing and burning."

Obviously, in this case, Lawyer went the safe route and still crashed and burned, but it taught him a lesson he later used for success.

"I learned you can't second-guess your gut, because that's the kiss of death," Lawyer says. "You have to have the confidence to trust it, even if it means scrapping everything. Now, that's easy to say and hard to do, but for years I wouldn't do it and I'd go down with the ship. I don't do that anymore."



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

LUKE CLAUSEN

TOURNAMENT AND FINISH: 2019 Bass Pro Tour on Lake Winnebago, 75th place

LESSON LEARNED: Don't outsmart yourself.

Just because it's simple or obvious doesn't mean it's wrong. Just ask Luke Clausen, especially after his experience on Lake Winnebago in 2019

"That one was right in my wheelhouse," Clausen says. "It's a Northern fishery with smallmouth and largemouth. I love those, and I just out-thought myself and made it more complicated than it was."

Clausen went into the event focused on smallmouth, and he found plenty of them in five small bays on one side of the lake. The problem was that most every other pro found them, too. Clausen figured if he was going to do well in the tournament, he'd have to find something all to himself.

"I ended up fishing where nobody was around me, but that's because there were no fish there," Clausen says.

Meanwhile, those five bays got pounded by pros every day of the event and never stopped producing. In fact, once the tournament was over, Clausen went back out there just to see what he had missed.

"I caught a ton of fish, and every single one of them had hook marks in their faces," Clausen admits. "I didn't realize how resilient those fish were, and I think a big part is our format where they can go right back down and get comfortable enough to bite again.

"I just thought the pattern was too obvious and too pressured, and I was definitely wrong." ■



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WINTERTIME STRATEGIES FOR CATCHING BIG SPOTTED BASS

NOW'S THE TIME TO CATCH A TROPHY SPOT.
HERE'S HOW TO DO IT.

By Tyler Brinks

PHOTO COURTESY CODY MEYER

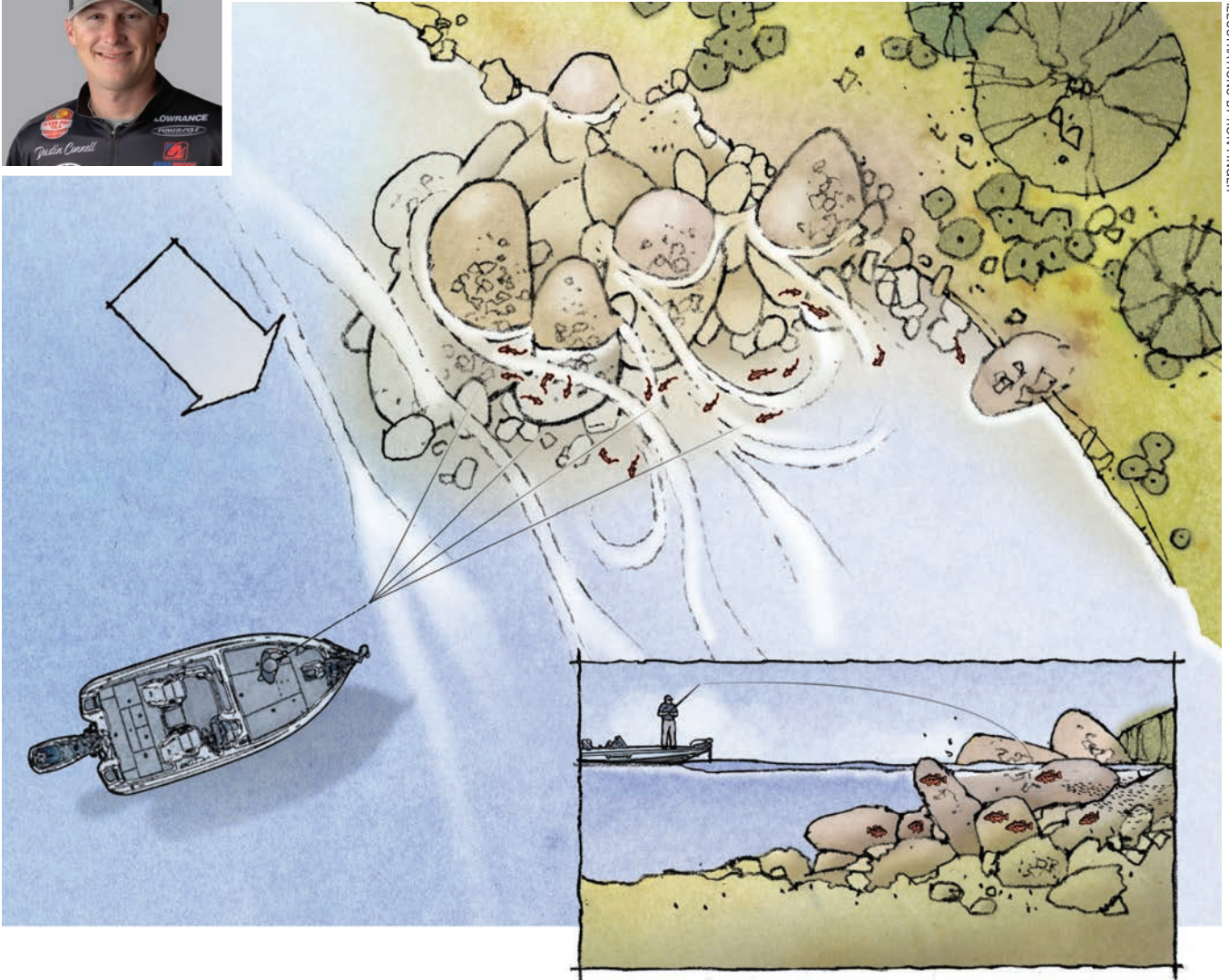
The spotted bass is a unique species that simultaneously excites and mystifies most bass anglers. They act much differently than their largemouth and smallmouth cousins, and although they don't generally grow as big, spots have a contingent of hardcore fans, including MLF Bass Pro Tour pros Cody Meyer and Dustin Connell.

Both Meyer and Connell quickly point to spotted bass as their favorite bass species to target. Although they live far apart and fish for spotted bass that chase vastly different forage, their approaches for big wintertime bass share many similarities.



DUSTIN CONNELL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RON FINGER



WINTERTIME IS PRIMETIME

During the colder months of the year, big spotted bass start to show up. Both Meyer and Connell count December and January as their best two months for catching a trophy fish.

"The reason it's so good during the winter in California is that it's the first time the big spotted bass will move up [shallow]," Meyer explains. "The main forage is trout and kokanee salmon, and the spots are out in deep water chasing them all summer and fall and suspending in deep water. They finally get to where they're accessible during the winter because the food moves shallower and to more predictable areas."

Aside from the forage moving within range, Meyer believes the winter weather greatly helps the bite. His biggest spotted bass weighed 10.80 pounds and was caught in December, as were most of the other trophy-caliber spotted bass he's landed.

"Spots are unique, and they seem to bite the colder it gets," Meyer says. "Most all of my biggest fish came in December or January. Those winter rain and snowstorms get them going. The runoff from those storms is another big trigger to get them to bite."

Connell, who hails from Alabama, is an ace on the Coosa River Chain and likes the winter months as well. He

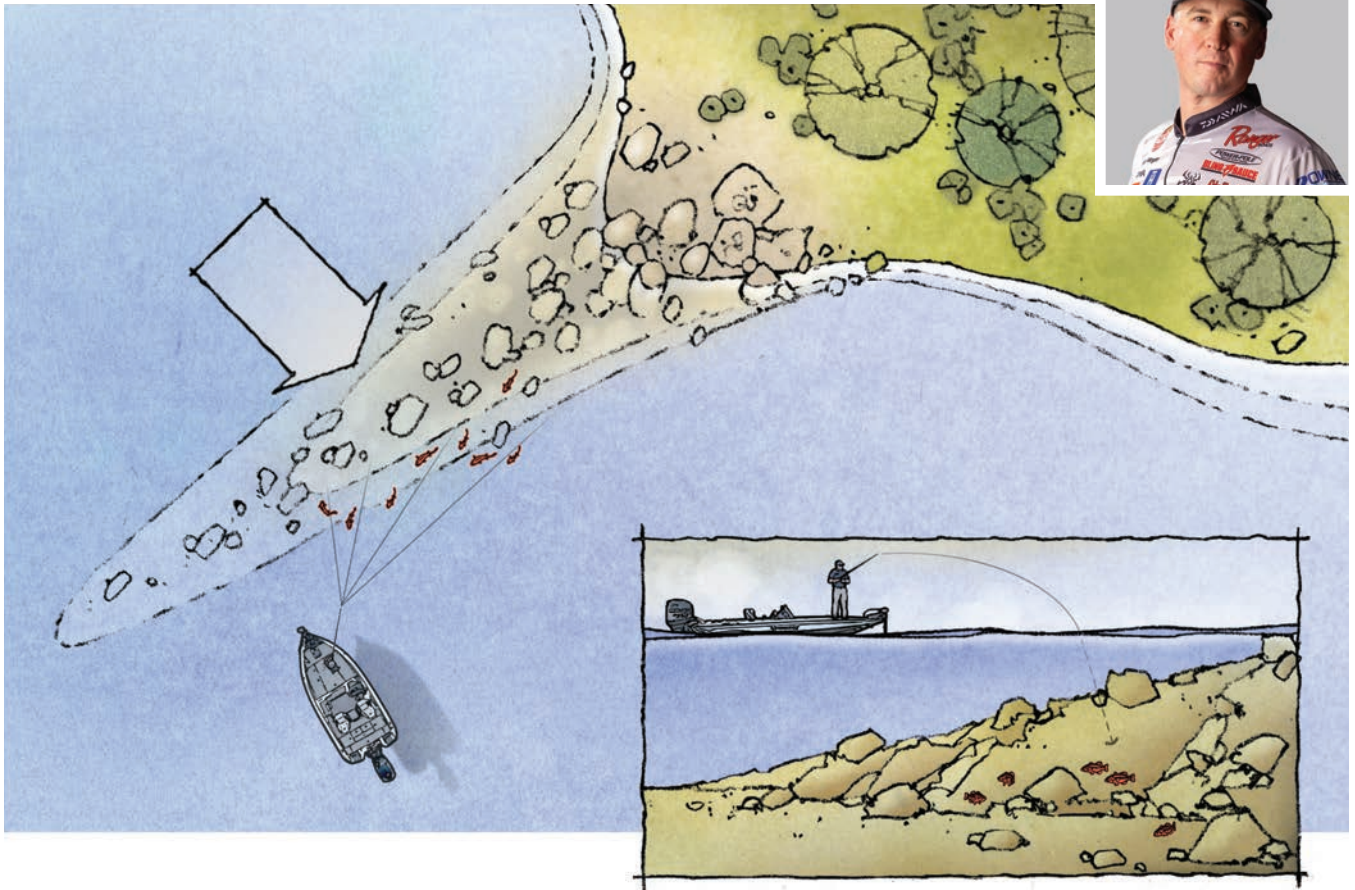
waits for clues in the bite before turning to his winter methods.

"The fall transition will start with cooler nights and rain with low-pressure systems coming through," he says. "Usually, in November, they'll stop biting topwater, and that tells me the fall bite is pretty much done and to change to a winter pattern and different locations."

Once this happens, Connell starts to slow down.

"That's when they want to get out of the current and they won't chase as much," Connell adds. "Then, it's going to be two deals: You want to imitate the shad or the crawfish."

CODY MEYER



KEY LOCATIONS

Even though Connell says spotted bass want to get out of the current during the colder months, having water flow is still vital.

"Current is a huge deal all year long, and really, the most important thing for spotted bass," Connell explains. "How fast the water is flowing changes everything in how the baitfish move and how the spotted bass position themselves."

That means looking for eddies and rock banks and ledges during the winter months, as they create a perfect ambush point for spotted bass.

"They want something they can hide behind and get a break from the current," Connell adds. "It has to allow them to rise and eat if they need to. That's what makes eddies so important, but not all eddies are created equal, and they have to have all of the right ingredients. You want the right

water color that's not too dirty, and there has to be baitfish around."

Generally, Connell sticks to water shallower than 20 feet for spots around his home, but believes the mid-depth range is best this time of year.

"Most of the eddies, shoals and rocks that I target are between 8 and 12 feet of water," he says. "These places are also the same places they'll be when they start thinking of spawning in February and March. This is how it is on all of the lakes in the Coosa River system."

Meyer's favorite fisheries in Northern California are vastly deeper, but his approach is similar.

"The bass will use long points that run way out in the lake as ambush points," Meyer says. "Even though the water may be 100 feet deep, those big tapering points are still structure they can relate to and follow. The key is to find out what depth the bass and forage are in, because it may be down 20 feet, or it could be much deeper."

To determine this, Meyer relies heavily on his electronics, including the Garmin Panoptix LiveScope system, and works to create a milk run of points to fish in a day.

"You can do it with standard 2-D sonar and see how far down you're marking them to give you a clue, but it's so much easier with forward-looking sonar," Meyer adds. "Fishing for big spotted bass is all about timing, and you may have a few sweet spots where they could be and might have to rotate through them several times until they're there and feeding."

While targeting bass feeding on trout and salmon may be foreign to some anglers, Meyer uses a similar approach when fishing some Southern fisheries like Lake Lanier.

"Lakes with blueback herring are basically the same thing," Meyer says. "There will be a lot of suspended fish and they are going to use points and brush piles the same way and ambush the herring."

LURE SELECTION

So far, Meyer's and Connell's approaches can be considered similar with some subtle differences, but when it comes to lure selection, they're polar opposites in how they approach winter spotted bass. Meyer goes with finesse and Connell sticks with power fishing.

"Everyone thinks spotted bass and light line with spinning gear, but that's now how it is on the Coosa," Connell says. "I'm either using a jig or spinnerbait with 20-pound test or fishing a jerkbait with 15-pound test during the winter months."

Connell goes with a 1/2-ounce jig to target crawfish eaters and switches to a big spinnerbait or jerkbait when he's after bass eating shad.

"You can also throw swimbaits for them, or an Alabama rig is always good when it gets cold," he says. "If I had to pick, I'd say a jig and a jerkbait or spinnerbait are the best ways to catch big spotted bass during the winter in Alabama."

Meyer goes with finesse and soft plastics this time of year.

"It doesn't even match what they're eating, but it's the best way to target the fish," he says. "I'll use a small finesse swimbait or a wacky-rigged soft plastic because you can fish it through the water column where the fish are. They'll rarely go to the bottom to feed, and spend most of their time suspended."

While Meyer typically uses light line and a spinning rod, he does have a trick up his sleeve that has to do with a giant swimbait.


"I'll fish a really big swimbait just to locate the fish," Meyer explains. "You'll rarely get one to bite it, but since they're so curious, they'll follow the bait in. Once you know where they are, it makes it easier to come back with a finesse bait and catch them."

Catching a big spotted bass in the winter can be boiled down to finding the right location and making sure baitfish are present. Those two keys are the biggest pieces of the puzzle, no matter where you live, from California to Alabama and everywhere in between. ■



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10

MISTAKES YOU'RE PROBABLY MAKING

... AND HOW TO FIX THEM



I have good news, and I have bad news.

By Ken Duke

PHOTO BY JESSE SCHULTZ

First, the bad news. The biggest difference between top professional bass anglers and the rest of us is very simple: time on the water. They have it, and we — most of us, anyway — do not. Worse yet, there really are no great substitutes for time on the water. We can read all we like, we can watch television programs and web videos, we can even talk to the pros at their public appearances, but unless we quit our day jobs and hit the road as bass fishing gypsies, we probably won't close that gap completely.

Now, for the good news. There are plenty of things we can do to be better bass anglers. The first step is to identify some of the mistakes we're making and work to correct them. To that end, we've assembled an expert panel of top anglers, asked them about the mistakes they commonly see from weekend anglers and gained their insights on how to fix them.

It's a 10-step program to becoming a better bass angler.

According to MLF pro Jared Lintner, fishing the same patterns and areas year-round is the kiss of death when it comes to chasing bass.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

1

“YOU DON’T FISH THE SEASONAL PATTERNS.”

By far, this was the most common mistake identified by the pros, and several admitted that they fall prey to it at times. It usually happens like this: We visit your favorite lake in April and absolutely whack ‘em on a chartreuse-and-white spinnerbait in a shallow creek. Nothing wrong with that, but when we go back in July or August and hit the same creek with the same spinnerbait and have nothing to show for it, we have only ourselves to blame.

The bass that made the creek an April mother lode are long gone by summer, and no amount of chunking and winding will conjure them up again until next spring.

“You have to adapt and pay attention to the seasonal patterns,” says Bass Pro Tour pro Jared Lintner. “Things are always changing week to week, and usually day to day or even hour to hour. Learn the habits of bass and focus your efforts on where they’re most likely to be found at the time of year and under the current conditions.”

2

“YOU WON’T GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONES.”

This is closely related to No. 1, but 34-year tournament veteran Mark Davis has a few key refinements that will make us all better. In addition to the nostalgia error — fishing the same spots with the same methods but at the wrong time of year — Davis has seen a lot of weekend anglers hesitate to get away from their comfort zone when it comes to baits and techniques.

“Don’t hesitate to try something new or to make a change,” he recommends. “That’s how you get better. And pay close attention to how conditions may have changed since you last had success on the water.”

Davis pays close attention to the weather and how it’s changed in the last 48 hours before he fishes. Are the skies clear or cloudy? What’s the water temperature and the water color? Has the lake level changed recently? And what’s the

moon phase? The moon phase might not tell us what bait to throw, but it’s often a great clue to determine when the bite will be best.

Changing conditions demand a change of approach ... even if it’s out of our comfort zone.

3

“YOU FISH SPOTS INSTEAD OF PATTERNS.”

South Carolina MLF pro Andy Montgomery has a saying you’ve probably heard on a Major League Fishing telecast: “One is luck; two is a pattern.”

He’s referring to what can be learned about catching fish by catching fish. The first bass of the day typically comes from some educated guesses about bass location and feeding preferences. But we can go to school on that fish — and every subsequent bite — and turn it into a great day on the water. All we have to do is pay attention.

“ONE IS LUCK; TWO IS A PATTERN.”

“After you catch that first bass, try to figure out why it bit and try to duplicate it,” Montgomery advises. “Every subsequent bite should tell you something. Maybe you can narrow things down a little. Maybe they’re not everywhere on the dock. Maybe it’s just the deepest posts. Maybe you can refine the retrieve.”

Deep posts on docks might be the big-picture pattern, but a black-and-blue jig and a certain retrieve is the pattern within the pattern that pros like Montgomery use to succeed not just in one spot, but in spots like it all over the lake.

Simply put, patterns produce more fish than spots.



PHOTO BY JESSE SCHULTZ

4

“YOU DON’T SPEND ENOUGH TIME LEARNING YOUR FISHERY.”

We’ve all fallen victim to this one. We head to our local lake, put the boat in the water, fish for a few hours and put it back on the trailer without having learned much about the fishery itself. Sure, we can tell you where there’s a brush pile on a main-lake point, but do we really know where the water changes color or when the thermocline sets up? That lake is a living thing that’s constantly evolving. Are we keeping up with it?

“A basketball court is always the same,” says Jacob Wheeler. “Your lake is not. It changes from week to week or month to month. A river can change from day to day. Most weekend anglers never take the time to run the fishery, watching the water and their electronics to see what it has to offer.”

When he has the opportunity, Wheeler will often idle for hours on a body of water, watching his electronics and establishing waypoints. He considers it time well spent because it will pay dividends in bass.

*“A BASKETBALL COURT IS ALWAYS THE SAME.
YOUR LAKE IS NOT.”*

And while most of us have a few dozen waypoints on our favorite fisheries, Wheeler admits to having more than 10,000 on Lake Chickamauga alone. Of course, he hasn’t fished them all, but they’re there — saved on his electronics for when the time may be right.

5

“YOU LACK FOCUS.”

Perennial Angler of the Year contender Ott DeFoe is quick to admit that his many hours on the water have made him especially adept at picking up the clues nature offers. He sees more, hears more and connects the dots better than weekend anglers who lack his experience. That’s why it’s critical for us to make the extra effort and to be more aware.

“I try to tune everything else out when I’m on the water,” DeFoe says. “I want to focus on each cast and to make the most of my minutes on the water each day.”

Though it can be tough to forget about job hassles or personal issues when out fishing, it can certainly help our catch rates. DeFoe has another recommendation, too.

“When you feel like your attention is waning, stop, take a break, move to another spot, have something to eat or drink and reassess your situation. When you start fishing again, you’ll be recharged and more focused.”



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

6

“YOU IGNORE LITTLE THINGS UNTIL THEY BECOME BIG PROBLEMS.”

Over the course of a day on the water, a million little things can pop up to affect your experience and your fishing. Being aware of them can help you have a better time and catch more bass.

“A lot of casual anglers won’t retie after catching a good bass. Then their line breaks on a big fish. Or they get a loop in the spool of their baitcaster and don’t take care of it right away. Then, when they need to make a long cast to a feeding fish, they can’t get the extra distance they need, or they backlash the reel. These are tiny little things, but they become a much bigger problem if you don’t fix them immediately.”

Those are the words of inaugural MLF REDCREST champion Edwin Evers, who is also quick to point out that the devil in these details extends beyond the water. It goes to every factor you can control but choose not to, from lubing the hubs on your trailer to checking your prop for tangled fishing line.

“If you manage the factors you can control, those little things don’t become big problems, and you’ll fish a lot better,” Evers says.

MLF pro Josh Bertrand's best advice: Make sure all your gear is compatible and matches exactly what you're trying to accomplish.

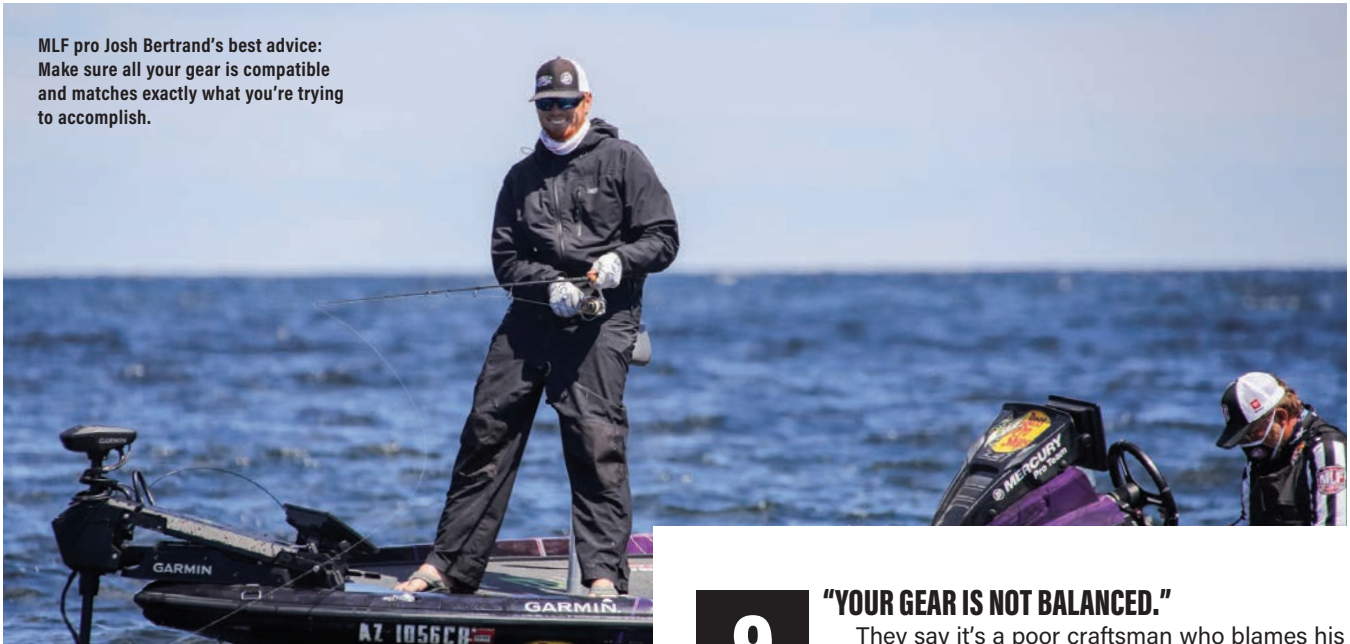


PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

7

"YOU NEED TO PAY MORE ATTENTION TO YOUR PRESENTATION."

"Some weekend anglers fail to pay close attention to where their casts are going and whether they're approaching from the best angle to bring their lure through the target area," says legendary Florida pro Shaw Grigsby. "It could be because they're not concentrating, or simply don't understand what it takes to trigger a strike."

We need to focus on that "something different" within cover or structure because that's what's usually holding the bass. Targets that present ambush points should always be approached seriously and with an eye to bringing our lures through the zone in the way a predatory bass would expect from its prey.

"Don't be in a hurry," advises Grigsby. "Be thorough. Pick the cover and structure apart as you go, and always think about how the fish are likely to be positioned."

8

"YOU DON'T FISH THE HEART OF THE COVER."

Lures are expensive. Losing them is painful — emotionally and financially. But we buy them to do a job: to catch fish. If we're not using them to their fullest, we're cheating ourselves.

"There's just something about throwing into the thickest, gnarliest cover, whether it's vegetation or wood or rocks," says Toyota pro Mike Iaconelli. "That's where the most and the biggest fish live — in the heart of the cover — and a lot of weekend anglers are hesitant to go there."

Ike is not recommending that we put our treasured baits right in the briar patch on the first cast. If conditions are ideal and the bass are chasing, they might hit a lure presented on the edge. But before we leave that prime cover, we should try to make what he calls "the impossible cast." Sure, it might result in a hang-up and a lost lure, but it's also our best bet to catch the fish of the day or to catch fish behind other anglers fishing the same waters.

9

"YOUR GEAR IS NOT BALANCED."

They say it's a poor craftsman who blames his tools, but MLF pro Josh Bertrand is a master craftsman who's seen many weekend anglers mismatch their rods, reels, lines and baits, leading to lost fish and frustration.

"I see it all the time," Bertrand says. "A guy's fishing 12-pound line on a heavy rod and he breaks the line on a hook-set close to the boat. Or he's making long casts with light monofilament and wondering why his medium-light rod isn't giving him good hook penetration."

The fix takes time, but it's attainable. The Arizona pro recommends that we really get to know our gear. Experiment with combos, rod actions, reel speeds, line types and sizes. Make note of any failures and adjust accordingly.

Generally, Bertrand believes that weekenders use line and rod actions that are a bit too light for the job. But since that may not describe you, keep changing the recipe until you're dialed in and suffer fewer equipment-based letdowns.

10

"YOU GET INTO A RETRIEVE RUT."

Have you ever paid attention to your basic lure retrieves — the way you crank a bladed jig or hop a worm or twitch a jerkbait? Odds are you do it pretty much the same way every time. You've developed muscle memory that's become the default in your angling repertoire, and it's limiting your ability to trigger strikes.

James Niggemeyer of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit believes that fighting this tendency can take your fishing to the next level.

"Triggering a strike is a challenge we face every day on the water," he says. "I'm constantly reminding myself to vary my retrieve, to try something a little different until I figure out exactly what's working that day. Sliding back to muscle memory is an easy trap to fall into, but if you can be truly engaged on every cast, you'll catch more fish."

Niggemeyer guides in his spare time and says that his most common instruction to clients is to "slow down." Most have a default retrieve or presentation style that's too fast for conditions. It's something all of us should be thinking about. ■



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HOLD TRUE

Fletcher Shryock

It takes a lot of courage to ride in a professional motocross race. It takes even more to do what Fletcher Shryock did and chase a second pro sports career in tournament fishing after leaving the track. Clearly, Shryock's not scared of much. Except maybe failure. Or listening to the doubters. He's competing on the MLF Bass Pro Tour today because he had the courage to chase his dreams and follow his own best advice. "Play your game. Do your thing," Shryock said. "You have to work hard, but the bottom line is it has to be fun."

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1.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

2.



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5.

1. TOYOTA SERIES WESTERN DIVISION Clear Lake

September 24-26, 2020

Tai Au bookended his Strike King Angler of the Year season in the Toyota Series Western Division with wins on both Havasu and Clear Lake – the latter of which required the largest bag of the tournament on Championship Saturday to vault the West Coast hammer from fourth to first.

Au intends to potentially give up the Western Division in 2021 in favor of fishing the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit, which made winning on his home waters all the more special. It also helped that the Glendale, Arizona pro weighed in progressively larger bags each day of the event, thanks in large part to one special area that featured clear water and grass – which he describes as a rounded point inside a pocket adjacent to a long flat.

To seal his win, Au relied on a Neko-rigged Yamamoto Senko and a Lucky Craft LV 500 lipless crankbait.

2. TOYOTA SERIES EASTERN DIVISION Lake Norman

October 1-3, 2020

Longtime Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit and Phoenix Bass Fishing

League standout Troy Morrow finally got his first win in Toyota Series competition, and he did so on Lake Norman by the skin of his teeth (winning by just 4 ounces), doing what Morrow does best.

Targeting spotted bass offshore in as much as 40 feet of water, the Eastanollee, Georgia pro leaned on his electronics to put together limits of 10-6, 12-6 and 9-7, respectively, drawing from his experience on Lake Keowee in South Carolina, which he says sets up pretty similarly to how Norman was fishing during the event.

Morrow weeded through about 200 waypoints using his LiveScope to pinpoint and target his fish, which he caught off of humps, shoals and deep docks with a Gambler Giggy Head shaky head tipped with a Zoom Finesse Worm. He also employed an underspin with a Zoom Boot Tail Fluke for some key catches.

3. TOYOTA SERIES PLAINS DIVISION Lake of the Ozarks

October 8-10, 2020

Corey Cook may not be a household name on the national stage, but locals of Lake of the Ozarks sure know the 20-year-old phenom, who has earned more than his fair share of money in local derbies on the

famed fishery. It came as no surprise, then, when Cook brought a massive 23-pound, 9-ounce limit to the weigh-in stage on day one and never looked back.

While Cook faltered to the tune of just 11 pounds on day three, it was more than enough to hold off the rest of the top 10 en route to a \$33,619 payday. He took home the win by just under 3 pounds over Ozarks legend Jeremy Lawyer.

Cook didn't do anything special to catch his fish – just running brush piles he'd sunk throughout the year with homemade green pumpkin football jigs tipped with Zoom Super Speed Craw trailers.

4. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE REGIONAL Lake Chickamauga

October 8-10, 2020

You'd be hard-pressed to find an angler on a hotter streak than Drew Boggs over the last several months. The Lebanon, Tennessee angler has tallied seven top-10 finishes across Phoenix Bass Fishing League and Toyota Series competition since June, including wins on both Kentucky Lake (in July) and Chickamauga in the first of six BFL Regionals of the season.

During a tricky transitional time with falling water, Boggs opted to stay shallow to catch his fish, wielding an arsenal of swimbaits, buzzbaits and squarebill crankbaits. Over three days, he tallied 40-11 (including 18-4 on day one) to earn the victory by 3 pounds, 2 ounces over Blake Tomlin.

For the win, Boggs earned \$61,000, which included a brand-new Phoenix 819 Pro boat with a 200-hp Mercury outboard. He also punched his ticket to his third All-American, which will be held on Douglas Lake in 2021.

5. PHOENIX BASS FISHING LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H MARINE REGIONAL James River

October 8-10, 2020

Three of Chris Daves' five FLW wins have come on the James River – his home waters that have paid out more than \$120,000 to the Spring Grove, Virginia angler over the last several years. Daves was able to lean on his local experience to catch his limit each day of the event, eventually tallying 50-1 total for a 4-pound, 6-ounce margin of victory.

Low tides throughout the tournament pulled fish off the bank and right where Daves says he likes to



6.

PHOTO BY KORY SAVAGE



7.

PHOTO BY JACOB FINE



9.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



8.



10.

fish. He spent his time plying small drops at the lower end of the James River in the mouth of the Chickahominy River in 4 to 5 feet of water. For the task, Daves turned to a chartreuse squarebill crankbait and a ribbontail worm.

**6. TOYOTA SERIES
SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION
Sam Rayburn Reservoir**

October 15-17, 2020

One bait is all Aaron Johnson needed to weigh in 54-14 over three days on Sam Rayburn and edge out Blake Schroeder by just 11 ounces: a modified squarebill crankbait, which he fished around clumpy sections of hydrilla in 3 to 6 feet of water.

Johnson fished the crankbait over top of and around the grass, twitching and popping the bait to elicit reaction bites from his winning fish. His squarebill of choice is a discontinued bait with a filed-down bill that he applied a red treble hook to in the front position. Every time he opted to switch to a ChatterBait instead, Johnson quickly cut it off in favor of the standby plug.

After zeroing in a BFL on Rayburn prior to the Toyota Series victory – a BFL in which he found all the same fish but couldn't get them to bite – Johnson ran multiple grassy

areas in the mid-lake and northern areas of the fishery with vastly different results and a win to show for it.

**7. PHOENIX BASS FISHING
LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H
MARINE REGIONAL
Mississippi River**

October 15-17, 2020

To earn his seventh FLW win, former college standout Cade Laufenberg used his prior experience on the Mighty Miss to run a successful three-day program that involved fishing sections of all the available pools (7, 8 and 9). All were equally important for Laufenberg, who bounced around between each to weigh in 15-5, 15-10 and 18-8, respectively, over the three days of competition.

The Onalaska, Wisconsin angler weighed in mixed bags of small-mouth and largemouth, which he says is crucial in multi-day events on the fishery. With heavy winds, the smallmouth were a little less predictable, but the largemouth were more consistent and ultimately anchored his winning bags.

On the final day, which he spent in Pool 8, Laufenberg relied on a SPRO McStick to catch 10 pounds in the final 45 minutes of fishing to seal the deal.

**8. PHOENIX BASS FISHING
LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H
MARINE REGIONAL
Cherokee Lake**

October 16-18, 2020

Despite weighing in just two keepers for 5-2 on day one, Josh Butler rebounded in a big way to ultimately weigh in 29-3 for the tournament and top second-place finisher Timmy Thompkins by 12 ounces.

To do so, Butler plied brush piles that he graphed throughout practice, totaling 35 to 40 piles he considered the most productive. They varied in depth, but most of his fish came from 25 to 28 feet. To catch those fish, he leaned on a drop-shot tipped with a morning dawn 6-inch Roboworm.

For the win, Butler earned \$60,000, including a brand-new Phoenix 819 Pro with a 200-hp Mercury outboard, and a trip to the 2021 Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American.

**9. PHOENIX BASS FISHING
LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H
MARINE REGIONAL
Table Rock Lake**

October 22-24, 2020

Four ounces is all that separated Roger Fitzpatrick from second-place finisher Shane Long when the dust

settled on Table Rock, and he had a 13-pound, 10-ounce bag to thank for it – his largest limit of the event.

Fitzpatrick was fishing a fairly nondescript area of the lake, which he says featured little to no rock or wood. To catch those fish, the Eldon, Missouri angler relied on a 1-ounce Omega football jig, which provided him a limit within the first 30 minutes on day one.

On days two and three – with an All-American berth already locked up – Fitzpatrick opted to abandon that spot in favor of chasing after some larger fish up shallow. He switched to a 1/2-ounce jig of the same make and began flipping docks on day three, landing a 4-pounder and 3-pounder to bolster his bag for the win.

**10. PHOENIX BASS FISHING
LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H
MARINE REGIONAL
Lake Lanier**

October 22-24, 2020

Timing is often everything in bass fishing, and that proved to be true for Chris Nelson in his BFL Regional win on Lake Lanier. Rotating between eight to 10 different spots throughout the tournament, Nelson would often have to hit the same brush piles multiple times a day to catch his keepers.



PHOTO BY CRAIG GENTRY

11.



PHOTO BY JACOB HINE

12.

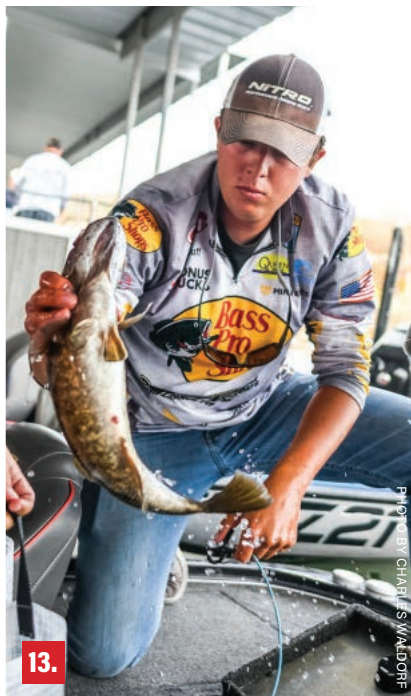


PHOTO BY CHARL SWALDORF

13.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

14.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

14.

Those brush piles were mostly on offshore humps in 25 to 30 feet of water from the mid-lake area all the way to the dam, which he plied with a Zoom Magnum Swamp Crawler on a 1/2-ounce shaky head.

When the sun was out, Nelson had his most productive windows on those brush piles, weighing 17-13 and 17-1 on days one and two, respectively. Day three was cloudier, which resulted in a smaller 15-15 limit, but it was enough to secure the victory over Randy Dover by just 7 ounces.

**11. TOYOTA SERIES
CENTRAL DIVISION
Dale Hollow Lake**

October 29-31, 2020

Local hammer Adam Wagner credits sheer happenstance for finding the massive school of big largemouth that ensured his victory on Dale Hollow. On day two, as he was idling between spots, the Cookeville, Tennessee pro says his graph "lit up." He was able to catch a few keepers from that school to close out the day and make the top 10, and from there, it was game on.

On day three, Wagner returned to that school, which was hanging out in 50 feet of water at the intersection of two long, flat points, and put on a clinic, weighing in the

largest bag of the tournament (16-1) with a local staple: a 5/8-ounce Silver Buddy blade bait.

Between days two and three, the shad around that school had grouped up better, and the bass followed suit. As the day wore on, Wagner wore them out and managed to add enough weight to his livewell to overtake fellow Dale Hollow local Blake Smith by just 5 ounces for the win.

**12. TOYOTA SERIES
SOUTHERN DIVISION
Lake Seminole**

November 5-7, 2020

MLF Bass Pro Tour pro Keith Poche got to break out his 17-foot aluminum rig for the Southern Division finale on Lake Seminole, which is really one of the main reasons he fished the event in the first place. Undecided on fishing it until Tuesday leading up to the event, Poche ultimately opted for what he considered some fun-fishing and an opportunity to run up the Flint River to target some shoal bass.

Run up the river he did, and Poche had 17-14 to show for it on day one. He drifted the strong current pitching a Berkley PowerBait Pit Boss to current breaks and random cover for his bites. That fizzled a bit

on day two, but Poche went back to work on day three to tally 15-6 up the river for the win.

When Poche went a few hours without a bite on the creature bait on day two, he switched over to a Humdinger spinnerbait for a couple keeper shoal bass to keep his tournament hopes alive.

**13. TOYOTA SERIES
PLAINS DIVISION
Table Rock Lake**

November 5-7, 2020

Cody Huff has two FLW wins and both came in 2020 in Toyota Series competition. The second of those wins - to close out the Plains Division season on Table Rock - almost didn't happen. Huff, living just 45 minutes from the lake, already filled out his deer tag and figured he may as well fish the event after initially planning on missing it.

What followed was an impressive victory that began with a day-one-leading bag of 16-15 and ended with 15-6 for a winning margin of 3 pounds, 2 ounces.

With limited practice, Huff settled on a pattern he expected many other anglers wouldn't find: targeting suspended fish in the middle of creeks. Huff looked for creeks with deep ditches and plenty of bait and then

went to work with a blue No. 9 Rapala Jigging Rap, catching fish he suspects were following the bait from the backs of creeks back out into the main lake.

**14. PHOENIX BASS FISHING
LEAGUE PRESENTED BY T-H
MARINE ALL-AMERICAN
PRESENTED BY TINCUP
Lake Hartwell**

November 11-13, 2020

With a 13-pound, 1-ounce limit on the final day of competition at Hartwell, Chris Macy jumped from fifth to first and found himself holding the All-American trophy and a \$100,000 check. Macy, who qualified out of the Ozark Division and fishes team tournaments with Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Jeremy Lawyer back home in Missouri, was in unfamiliar territory on Hartwell. To level the playing field, he leaned on his electronics to identify spotted bass suspended over brush piles and got them in the boat with either a drop-shot or a 2.8-inch Keitech Swing Impact FAT swimbait on jig heads from 1/4 to 3/8 ounce.

On the final day, Macy had to coax his fish out of their heavy cover to attack his swimbait, but once he did that - winding and killing the bait just past the piles - he put a lot of weight in the boat in a hurry. ■

Strike King
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WWW.STRIKEKING.COM

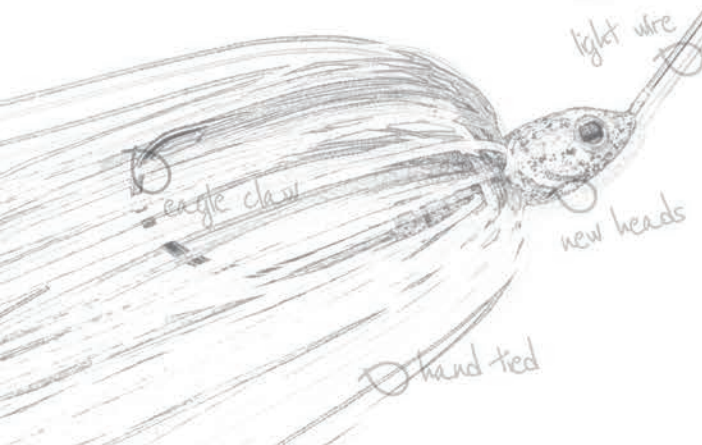
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“THE MOST COMPLETE SPINNERBAIT
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All new head design
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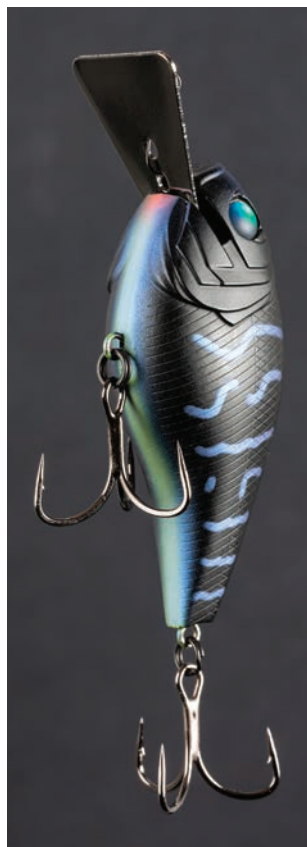
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- Nickel and Gold plated blades for ultimate flash
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- Eagle Claw O’Shaughnessy Hook
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6th SENSE AXIS METAL 2.0

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY MATT PACE



Nearly four years and close to 50 prototypes in the making, the 6th Sense Axis is a hybrid hard-body bait that bridges the gap between a shallow squarebill and a bladed jig. Radical in action and raucous on sound and vibration, the bait is engineered to perform like no other before it.

First Impression

At first glance, the Axis looks like a large-profile, flat-sided squarebill with a top-shelf paint job, but it's way more than that.

What makes the 1/2-ounce crankbait truly unique is a patent-pending bill design.

Fashioned from polished stainless steel, the wide bill pivots on a metal pin strategically countersunk in a nose slit, allowing for a wide range of lateral movement that significantly enhances

the action, sound and vibration compared to most squarebills.

The No. 2 trebles are premium, so there's no need to replace them. The Axis has a built-in rattle chamber and a custom snap swivel line tie to free up the movement even more. Lifelike body carvings and color schemes don't get any prettier than those from 6th Sense.

In Action

Most squarebills wobble in a relatively straight line until they collide with something, but this one operates more like a bull in a china shop. It's just that radical.

Put the bait in play and the free-ranging bill swings back and forth, sort of like the blade on a ChatterBait. This causes the bait to rock, roll, dart and wobble in an erratic S-motion like a frantic forage fish fleeing from a

predator. Sudden pauses or snapping the rod tip changes up the action even more.

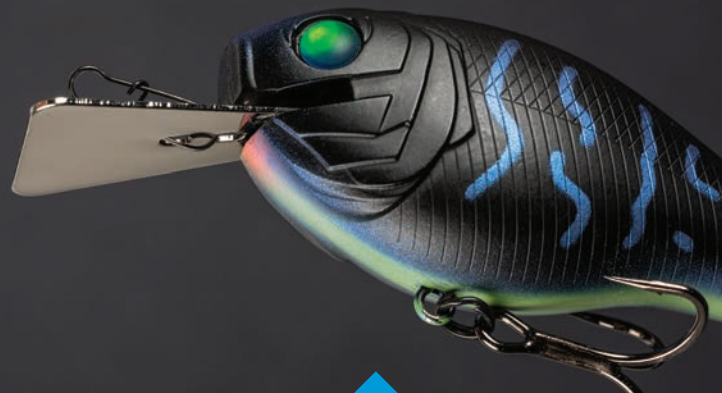
I was quite impressed with the Axis' ability to traverse and back out of cover, whether it was feathered through shallow hydrilla or bumped and banged around stumps or rock. It worked well in combination with the medium and medium-heavy rods I typically use with other squarebills, but you do need to be careful when casting it into a big wind on a baitcaster. It doesn't do very well in that respect.

Final Thoughts

It's always refreshing when someone comes up with a brand-new concept that's truly in a league of its own. The Axis is just that. The bait's unconventional action combined with the acoustics of the vibrating lip and rattle chamber create a

WIDE, STAINLESS STEEL BILL:

The wide, stainless steel bill is countersunk in a nose slit and pivots on a metal pin. The pivot point allows the bill to move freely side-to-side as the bait comes through the water column, delivering an erratic S-motion wobble and a rocking, rolling hunting action that becomes increasingly radical when the bait deflects off grass or crashes into hard objects. Pausing the retrieve or snapping the tip alters the action even more.



METAL LIP:

The metal lip creates a distinctive “thud” as it rotates on its axis and meets with hard plastic on either side.

POLISHED BILL:

The polished bill comes in three colors – silver, gold and gun metal black. The bills are coordinated to match the high-quality paint schemes

wicked mixture of characteristics I’ve never seen in a crankbait before – nor have the bass.

Whether it’s used to ply grass flats, laydowns, stump fields, shore rock or boulders, the Axis is destined to give ‘em a different look and some serious fits along the way. In today’s market, it’s well worth the \$14.99 price point.

Performance Tips

Vary the retrieve by twitching the rod tip, changing the speed or pausing it to alter the erratic action even more.

In windy conditions, you might try throwing it on a quality spinning rod like the St. Croix Legend Series. The 7-foot, 2-inch S-Glass rod is powered just right for slinging lightweight, elongated lures that can cause line management issues in windy conditions on baitcasting gear.

Applications

- Water depths of 2-5 feet
- Should be great around bluegill beds
- Stained or off-color water
- Aggressive fish

DETAILS

Length: 2 1/2 inches

Weight: 1/2 ounce

Diving Depth: 2-5 feet

Colors: 28

MSRP: \$14.99

Contact: 6thsensefishing.com

HITS & MISSES

- + Radical S-motion wobble
- + Erratic hunting action
- + Lots of vibration and sound
- + Custom trebles
- + Premium paint and color schemes
- + Large profile
- + Buoyancy
- + Comes through covers well
- Tends to cartwheel when cast into big wind

>> LOOKING FORWARD

It’s still too early in the process to release much detail, but 6th Sense claims the Axis is only the start of more innovative applications to come. The company is toying with the idea of incorporating the pivoting bill into other styles of crankbaits, including shallow, medium and deep divers, possibly using some different materials.

As much advancement as there’s been in the crankbait world over the last several years, the pivoting bill on the Axis represents an entirely new dimension of design innovation that may prove to be the next step in how manufacturers think about changing the game. ■

BEN FRANKLIN HAS NOTHING ON US



The Power-Pole CHARGE Marine Power Management Station replaces a traditional jump start system by giving you the ability to move power to your cranking battery when needed. Plus, it's easier than waiting on a bolt of lightning. To learn more about the smartest three-in-one charger available, go to Power-Pole.com

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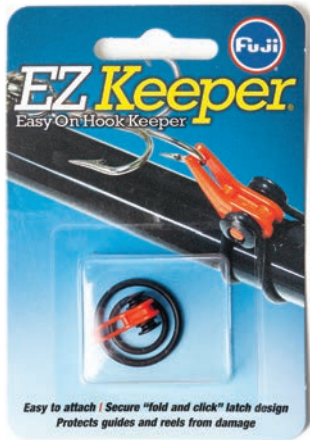
\$TOCKING UP

Whether it's for the holidays or in preparation for another fishing season, here's *Bass Fishing Magazine's* top recommendations for what to buy right now

There's no bad time to head out in search of bass, but some times are certainly colder than others. For those of us who like to avoid frozen rod guides and fingertips, mid-winter is often a time to repair, regroup and restock for the months ahead, when the days start getting longer, the weather warmer and the fishing a little more productive.

With that in mind, we've compiled a list of some great gear to get you ready for the ice to melt or the water levels to rise or the bass to start moving into pre-spawn patterns (we're looking at you - longingly - Florida). Whether you're shopping for friends and family for the holidays or taking care of your own fishing arsenal, you'll find something worth buying on this list.

STOCKING UP UNDER \$25



a. Livingston Lures Howeller DMC Jr.

Cold-weather fishing sometimes means downsizing, and the new Howeller DMC Jr. from Livingston is a bait perfectly suited to the task. Modeled after the full-size Howeller Dream Master Classic (made famous by MLF Bass Pro Tour pro Randy Howell), this downsized version has all the flair of its larger sibling, including the Electronic Baitfish Sound (EBS) technology that makes it stand out from the crowd. Coming in at 2.17 inches and .55 ounces, the Howeller DMC Jr. is the perfect crankbait for enticing big bites in 4 to 9 feet of water. It retails for \$12.99 and comes in 13 unique colors. livingstonlures.com

b. Fuji EZ Keepers

Optimizing your hook organization means keeping sharp hooks sharp and out of the way of rod sleeves, truck upholstery and everything else they tend to tear up. Fuji EZ Keepers do just that, providing a simple, easy way to keep hook points out of the way. Even for rods that already have a hook keeper, Fuji EZ Keepers can add a layer of redundancy for baits with multiple hooks. Installation is as easy as placing the keeper on the rod and securing it with the included O-ring. Tackle Warehouse offers Fuji EZ Keepers at \$3.09 apiece. fujitackle.eu

c. 13 Fishing Pathfinder

Make your New Year's resolution a good one and branch out a little bit in 2021 – and start with the Pathfinder from 13 Fishing. A hybrid walking bait with the body shape of a typical shad-profile topwater, the Pathfinder features a free-swinging weedless hook and a soft, collapsible rear section for optimal hook penetration. Designed to be fished in heavy cover (and anywhere else, really), this bait from 13 Fishing gives fish a new look in a unique package that blends plenty of features in one versatile offering at a great price. It comes in at 4 1/4 inches and 3/4 ounce with 16 available colors at \$17.99 a pop. 13fishing.com

d. Strike King KVD 15-in-1 Multi-Tool

Sure, having pliers and scissors and line cutters protruding from your spare cup holder shows you mean business, but so does keeping an organized boat with every tool you need at arm's length. In this case, every tool is just one: the Strike King KVD Multi-Tool, with 15 different tools in one compact package (including needle-nose pliers, regular pliers, a knife and a cutter) that cuts down on the clutter and keeps what you really need handy at all times. And for \$14.99 at Tackle Warehouse, you won't feel guilty filling up that cup holder with more than one. strikeking.com



d.



e.



f.



g.

e. Tackle Warehouse Money Bag

Not recommended for storing actual money, the Tackle Warehouse Money Bag is worth its weight in gold when it comes to storing valuable baits and terminal tackle. Perfect for soft plastics, packs of hooks or even your wallet, keys and cell phone, the waterproof Money Bag is up to 20 times stronger than regular zip bags and offers the durability every angler needs for his or her storage demands. The 13x16 transparent bag will only set you back \$9.99 at Tackle Warehouse.

tacklewarehouse.com

f. Black Label Cliff Pace Hickster

Catching fish in cool winter water isn't always about slowing down. Quickly earning a reputation as a wintertime staple, shallow cranking can produce some big bags of big bass that reside shallow all year long. Enter the Black Label Cliff Pace Hickster, a balsa crankbait designed by legendary cranker and MLF Bass Pro Tour champion Cliff Pace. It's made to excel in cold, clear water, with a slender body and tight wobble that boasts two Mustad Ultra Point trebles for hooking and keeping pinned those hungry wintertime bass. The Hickster is a 2 1/4-inch, 5/16-ounce bait that dives 3 to 5 feet and retails for \$17.99.

blacklabeltackle.com

g. Pro-Tec Water Screen Cleaner

Everyone wants clean and clear screens on their graphs, sunglasses free of smudges and water spots, and phone screens without grape jelly and fish slime fingerprints. For all those needs, there's Pro-Tec's non-streak screen cleaner, which also boasts some antibacterial properties and a formula free of acid, ammonia and abrasives. For a spotless view of what's under and in front of your boat, give Pro-Tec a shot. The 8-ounce spray bottle retails for \$13.95.

protecproducts.com

STOCKING UP UNDER \$50



b.



a.



c.



d.

a. Durasafe E-Lock

Don't invest in top-of-the-line electronics without a way to keep them safe and secure. Durasafe E-Locks do just that, giving boat owners peace of mind at a great price (\$39.95 for one lock or \$74.49 for a pack of two at Tackle Warehouse). Installation is as easy as removing the factory knobs and replacing them with the screw-in E-Lock, each of which use a key to ensure no one is going to walk away with one of your most valuable investments. Each E-Lock is keyed alike so one key can operate up to four E-Locks in a set.

durasafelocks.com

b. Plano EDGE Flex

Building off the hugely successful line of Plano EDGE boxes, the new Flex series gives anglers the ability to customize their tackle storage boxes to fit their exact needs. Each Flex box, which comes in two sizes (3600 and 3700), features the same Rustrictor technology and Dri-Loc watertight seals as their predecessors, with the added benefit of having pre-cut and vented dividers with which to arrange and customize configurations as desired. Complete with steel pin hinges and a clear lid for easy lure identification, the Flex is the new gold standard of hard bait and terminal tackle organization. The 3600-size box comes in at \$29.99 and costs an extra \$10 for the larger 3700 size.

planomolding.com

c. Abu Garcia Reel Maintenance Kit

Few items in an angler's arsenal take more of a beating than his or her reels. Maintenance is important. It can also be a hassle, not to mention expensive (though not as expensive as shipping reels back to manufacturers or replacing them entirely). Enter the Abu Garcia reel maintenance kit, which includes a wrench and screwdriver, oil, grease, a brush and a cloth in a compact, organized case. You can use it on all reel types and makes and it won't break the bank at \$30.99.

abugarcia.com

d. Do-It Soft Plastic Molds

Give the gift of savings this holiday season (or gift yourself countless hours of tinkering) with Do-It soft plastic molds. Soft plastics are expensive, and making your own can significantly decrease the cost of all those worms, swimbaits, tubes and creature baits you use, not to mention the added value of being able to fully customize each and every soft plastic in your arsenal. Do-It molds are made from bar stock aluminum and come in 24 different variations of all the most popular bait styles, compatible with the Do-It line of soft plastics, injectors and accessories. Soft plastic molds vary in number of cavities from one to eight and range in price from \$34.99 to \$68.99.

do-itmolds.com

STOCKING UP UNDER \$100



a.

a. Brecknell ElectroSamson Scale

The official scale of MLF, tournament officials rely on the Brecknell ElectroSamson scale to give unquestionably precise weights for every bass caught on the Bass Pro Tour. For everyone else, the ElectroSamson could mean the difference between winning and losing. It's precise to within .4 percent of the total applied load with a large, easy-to-read LCD display equipped with a memory tare function that saves tare weight even after its been turned off. The ElectroSamson runs \$85.99 for the 22-pound-max model and \$95.99 for the 55-pound-max version.

brecknellscales.com



b.

b. Z-Man Bait LockerZ Tackle Bag

Soft plastics storage can be a headache, especially when you need so many different variations and colors of dozens of bait styles. With the Z-Man Bait LockerZ bag, organizing all those plastics doesn't have to be so aggravating. Each bag fits 50 to 75 packs of soft plastics (depending on size) and comes with dividers to separate different bait styles, sizes and colors. The Bait LockerZ features 600-denier waterproof material, rubberized bottom and magnetic closures to keep moisture out and your baits securely inside for just \$59.99.

zmanfishing.com

c.



c. Graph Glass Anti-Glare Screen Protectors

Modern bass fishing is all about using the best tools available to find more fish. As valuable as your electronics are, it's important to keep them protected from the elements and in perfect working order. Graph Glass screen protectors are made from tempered glass that's both durable and almost 100 percent transparent for protecting your graphs from weather and hard impacts, as well as typical wear and tear. They're easy to clean, they block reflective sunlight for better visibility, and they come in variations to fit nearly every modern electronics unit from all the major brands. Prices range from \$54.99 to \$59.99 depending on screen size.

precisionsonar.com



d.

d. Grundens Deck Boss Ankle Boot

As much time as you spend standing on the deck of a boat, it makes sense to have a pair of boots that are as comfortable as they are functional. Grundens created just that with the Deck Boss Ankle Boot, an ankle-length, rubber boot with a thick insole for shock resistance. They're also designed with an antimicrobial, temperature regulating interior liner to eliminate the odor that comes with long days on the water. Colors vary from black to blue to brown and come in men's sizes 8-14 and women's sizes 5-11 for \$99.99 per pair.

grundens.com

STOCKING UP UNDER \$250



a. Huk Gunwale Camo Jacket

Form meets function with the Huk Gunwale Jacket. Read some reviews and you'll see the phrase "works as advertised" pop up quite a bit. What more can you ask for in a rain jacket? Toss in a price tag of just \$120 (\$110 for the black version) and you really can't go wrong with this attractive offering that comes in sizes from small to XXXL and features all the waterproof technology you demand from your rain gear. Purchase in tandem with a pair of Huk Gunwale Rain Pants for \$110 and you have a rugged, dependable set for half the price of some competitors' comparable rain gear.

hukgear.com

b. Wiley X Contend Sunglasses

Founded by U.S. veteran Myles Freeman Sr., Wiley X began as a company dedicated to providing the best eye protection possible to our country's best and bravest. In the years that followed, that mission expanded to law enforcement and any number of demanding outdoor activities with an entire lineup of sunglasses that exceeds occupational safety standards. All anglers can appreciate that fact, especially when they're running 60 mph down the lake in 40-degree weather or while getting pelted by whatever Mother Nature has in mind. At \$160, the Contend model is in the upper echelon of Wiley X's lineup – because they're worth it. And so are your eyes.

wileyx.com

c. Onyx A/M-24 Deluxe Inflatable Life Jacket

Safety has to come first, but there's nothing wrong with throwing in comfort and design to match. The Onyx A/M-24 Deluxe is everything you want in a dependable inflatable life jacket, offering a neoprene neckline for comfort, tear- and puncture-resistant fabric and a low-profile design that provides comfort and peace of mind during a long day on the water. The U.S. Coast Guard-approved A/M-24 Deluxe is designed for both automatic and manual inflation and comes with a CO2 cylinder to make it ready to rock out of the box. \$209.99.

onyxoutdoor.com

d. Favorite Fishing Soleus XCS Casting Reel

Lightweight? Check. Smooth, dependable and durable? Check, check and check. The Favorite Soleus XCS was two years in the making, and the result is a reel you can pair with any rod for any technique and feel good about it. Made from lightweight aluminum (6.4 ounces for all models), the 10+1 bearing Soleus XCS features two Spool High-Speed bearings for massive casting distance and 20 pounds of drag for fighting the biggest bass in your lake. It comes standard with a 105mm handle and EVA knobs for comfortable, smooth reeling all day long. The Soleus XCS comes in right- and left-hand retrieve models in 6.6:1, 7.3:1 and 8.1:1 gear ratios for \$179.99

favoriteUSA.com

STOCKING UP MORE TO CONSIDER



a.

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a. Bass Fishing Magazine Subscription

You're reading this, so you probably already have one. For everyone else, a subscription to *Bass Fishing* is the perfect gift for anyone interested in the best bass fishing content on the planet. For just \$10, you can sign up for a subscriber membership that includes six issues of *Bass Fishing* Magazine with instant access to our digital archives as well as a 25 percent discount at shopMLF.com, eligibility for the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Marshal program and more.

flwfishing.com

b. Tackle Warehouse Gift Card

Buying for other people is hard. Give them what they really want with a Tackle Warehouse gift card. Available in denominations from \$25 to \$500 and deliverable by conventional methods or email, there's really no reason to not give the angler in your life exactly what they want for the holidays.

tacklewarehouse.com

b.



c.



c. Black Rifle Coffee Club Membership

Veteran owned and operated, Black Rifle Coffee aims to deliver the highest-quality coffee at the best prices without any of the hassle. Join the Black Rifle Coffee Club and sign up to have some of the best coffee you can buy delivered straight to your door, every time you need it. The membership has several options available from grounds to beans to single-use rounds, from "Gunship" and "AK-47" light roasts to "Beyond Black" and "Murdered Out" dark and everything in between. Select your number of packages and frequency of delivery and never worry about being out of coffee when you head to the boat ramp.

blackriflecoffee.com. ■



FROM BLANK TO BUTT, **BASS ROD** DESIGN CONTINUES TO EVOLVE

By Tyler Brinks

If there's a single category in the fishing space that captures a gearhead bass angler's imagination, it's rods (and rod technology). Rod components have evolved at warp speed since the early 2000s, and bass rods have become longer, lighter and more sensitive and specialized as each year goes by.

At the same time – seemingly defying logic – the average bass rod has become stronger and more durable.

And we shouldn't expect the rod-tech revolution to slow down anytime soon.

"Rods are like everything we do in life: Everybody wants something that'll increase their performance by having a tool that makes (them) more effective," surmises Al Noraker of Kast King, who left his fingerprints on the bass-rod industry when he developed Skeet Reese's unmistakable yellow rods for Wright-McGill in 2008-2009.

"Components and materials come into play, just as they do for golf clubs or skis.

We're doing things with rods that weren't possible even 10 years ago because of those materials."

A Blank Slate

A finished bass rod is an amalgam of multiple components that play a role in how the rod looks, feels, and performs; however, none of those puzzle pieces influence the performance of a rod more than the blank, which dictates everything from weight to power to action to sensitivity.

It's not just skin deep. Thanks to the ever-evolving palette of materials that are available to the rod geeks of the 2020s, when a designer begins to visualize the cross-section of a new rod, it can be with an inside-out approach that wasn't possible as recently as 10 years ago.

"The first rod I ever built back in the early 1990s was a simple Chinese IM6 graphite – as basic as you can get," Noraker says. "That rod was strong, but it wasn't particular light, and it wasn't particularly sensitive. Now we're dealing with

much higher-carbon materials in IM9s, and nano-silica resins that have only been around for 10 years. It's really a whole new world."

The advent of nano-silica – developed by 3M as "Matrix Resin" and first seen in production bass rods made by St. Croix and G. Loomis – filled in the gaps between lightness/sensitivity and durability of top-of-the-line graphite rods for all species.

Literally.

"The higher (modulus) you go, the more sensitive the blank, but the material is also more brittle – that's where resin technology plays such an important role," Noraker says. "The resins we use to bond the material together allow us to maintain strength, but with a much lighter rod that's still significantly stronger.

"The old resins were like syrup. The newer resins are more like a solvent. They're tiny little particles that you can force deeper into the materials to bond all the micro-cracks and imperfections to increase strength

and sensitivity and reduce weight. The carbon content is extremely important, but I think resin tech has played a more important role in the process."

Technique-Specific Details

Technique-specific bass rods have been around for decades, but Andrew Wheeler, Director of Global Brands at Pure Fishing, says that rods are becoming even more dialed in, with specialties inside of specialties.

"We see the need for new segments and styles within different lure types," Wheeler confirms. "The crankbait rod is a good example of rods being built for different types of crankbaits, and even lures like ChatterBaits that many anglers prefer to use a 'cranking-style' rod. Then you have highly specialized rods built for lures like spybaits, big swimbaits, or Alabama rigs."

It's simply a case of form following function – having a sand wedge with



a 58-degree loft in your bag instead of making do with a pitching wedge with a 44-degree loft.

“Long gone are the days where everybody just wants a simple, 7-foot medium-heavy bass rod,” Noraker says. “I look at the salmon/steelhead arena and Hot Shot rods as an example. If you build it correctly, a Hot Shot rod has a different component make-up and action in the tip section that can drastically improve the performance of the plug because it allows it to work better. It has to do with the materials and the speed of the rod, and even something as simple as the color of the tip to enhance

the visibility of what the rod is doing.

“A crankbait rod is very similar. Fish are eating a crankbait from behind, so if you’re using a rod that’s too fast and stiff – all the responsiveness that happens so quickly on a high-carbon rod – you pull the bait right out of a fish’s mouth. That’s where a slower action and fiberglass or composite blank excels and high-carbon graphite works against you. Sometimes lower-tech is actually better.”

Let Me Be Your (Rod) Guide

One of the most critical components of a bass rod is the guides, which can sig-

nificantly affect a rod’s weight and balance, and influence casting distance and accuracy.

The upper echelon of rod guides is the Fuji Torzite, which is both incredibly strong and extremely lightweight. Most of the rods on the market that use these guides are top-of-the-line models such as the St. Croix Legend X, Dobyns Xtasy, and Phenix K2, all rods that retail in the ballpark of \$500 (with the Torzite guide set making up a significant chunk of the manufacturing cost).

The theme among contemporary bass rods is guides with some sort of ceramic insert, which are durable, smooth, and readily

available. They also vary greatly in pricing, with Silicon Carbide (SiC) and Alconite making up a large percentage of the guide inserts on rods you’ll find at your tackle store.

There was a time when rod guides couldn’t stand up to the abuses of braided line and heavy use, but that’s no longer the case: Nearly every rod available to purchase now has quality guides with ceramic inserts, at much lower retail price points than ever before.

“The reality is that even the cheapest rods out there have some type of ceramic guide that can last a lifetime,” says David Brinkerhoff, Senior Planning Manager for



Often overlooked, rod guides have perhaps the biggest impact on the functionality and overall effectiveness of a rod.

G. Loomis. "They can withstand 40 to 80 years of normal use, and by that time, the rod will be obsolete."

As rod guide materials have evolved, so have the weights of rods due to reduction in weight and size of the guides, including the use of micro guides.

"Micro guides can offer a nice weight reduction, but many times that's offset because you're forced to add more guides and the wrapping for each of those additional guides," Brinkerhoff says. "Many micro guides are so small

that the rod wrap is heavier than the guide itself."

Current industry standards rate a micro guide as a size 4.5 or 5 guide.

"Twenty years ago, the standard guide was a size 7 for a runner guide and then it shifted to a size 6 and we're now using a 5.5," Brinkerhoff shared. "Going to smaller guides helps to increase sensitivity since more of the line mass is on the guide ring itself."

Comfort in Mind

To make rods more comfortable, manufacturers

began to use alternative rod grips instead of the traditional cork or EVA foam grips. Both of those materials are still widely used, but more options have become available in the past several years and have now moved into mass production.

One current trend in rod building is the use of grips similar to those used on golf clubs.

"Many anglers also golf, and I think that's part of why these grips have become so popular: because they're familiar with the texture and feel," Wheeler says.

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Matt Stefan is a fan of new grip options, and now includes Winn-Grips on all of the rods he builds with his own two hands.

"I feel like I have a better feel of the rod and have more control than I did with cork-handled rods," Stefan says. "It is almost like a basketball material – it's not slippery at all even when you're fishing in the rain and snow. They also seem to be a little warmer to me and that's important when I am fishing in cold-weather conditions."

MATT STEFAN: FULL-TIME ANGLER, PART-TIME ROD BUILDER

As a full-time pro who builds his own rods, Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit veteran Matt Stefan has a matter-of-fact view of the rod-building process (and its final outcome).

"The rods I build are utility rods and tools," says the Wisconsin pro. "They don't have all fancy wraps, but they're designed for a specific purpose. Instead of using something that a rod brand labels a 'frog rod,' I build my own based on how I fish. Everyone's idea of what a frog rod is varies, and it also depends on where you're fishing."



PHOTO BY COBI PELLERITO

FIRST THINGS FIRST: STEFAN'S BLANK

Because the composition of the blank has a profound impact on the finished product, it all comes down to choosing the right blank material, and matching it to the power and action of the rod.

Stefan begins the rod-building process with a simple question before embarking on a build: "How sensitive do I need this rod to be?"

"The blank material is a big part of it," Stefan admits. "I use graphite (blanks) for all of my spinning rods, and for baitcasting techniques like flipping, fishing jigs and plastics, and frogging where sensitivity is more important. I

prefer composite blends for crankbaits, ChatterBaits, and swimbaits, as they give you a more parabolic bend and, I believe, help you land more fish. You don't need as sensitive a rod for these techniques, and fishing them effectively is more important."

Taking it a step further, Stefan pairs a rod blank with the right action for each technique. The established "big four" are extra-fast, fast, moderate, and slow, but there are even more precise variations within the rod building world, and among different blank manufacturers.

"The extra-fast action is something that I don't use, even for techniques like flipping," Stefan says. "A moderate-fast action is a good choice if you can find it. The faster the action, the more likely you are to have fish throw your hooks because you don't get that 'elastic bend' when fighting fish."

For moving baits, a moderate action is Stefan's choice, as he feels it has enough give to prevent him from pulling hooks from the mouth of fish.

MICRO GUIDES: YAY OR NAY?

Stefan finds himself somewhere in the middle on the subject of guide size, using guides that are considered "semi-micro", (smaller than traditional rod guides, while not being small enough to be considered micro guides). He sees many benefits in using them and pays close attention to how they're spaced on the blank.

"You get better distance and control with a smaller guide because there's less line slapping the guides during the cast, and you can narrow down the cone of flight," Stefan says. "A micro guide has good casting distance, but you can run into issues with knots not going through guides or line wrapping around them during the cast or retrieve."

Stefan sticks with a mid-priced Fuji Alconite guide, a popular industry choice. When it comes to spacing them, he utilizes both the guidelines on rod building websites like Mud Hole Custom Tackle and uses a specialized spreadsheet that accounts for reel size, rod length, and more.

"Where you place each guide and how many guides you use can have a big impact on the performance of a rod," Stefan believes. "The standard guidelines are a good place to start, but the spreadsheet I use gives me the best flight patterns for each rod I build. I generally use at least one additional guide on a rod longer than 7 feet long than the guidelines recommend on rod building sites. This adds to the expense and labor in building the rod, but I'm convinced that it is worth it because you make the rod more sensitive and increase casting distance." ■

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LOWRANCE ActiveTarget™ Live Sonar Packs a Real-Time Punch

By Joel Shangle

PHOTOS COURTESY LOWRANCE

Edwin Evers' reaction to what he's seeing on the screen of the Lowrance HDS Live unit mounted on the front of his Nitro is almost as instantaneous as the movement of the high-definition electronic marks themselves: "That's just incredible," Evers says as he watches the electronic streak of his 1/16-ounce jig descend into the depths of Table Rock Lake, to a brush pile that shows up on screen in crystal-clear detail.





Evers continues to comment as he watches one of the electronic marks hovering around the brush pile – one of roughly a dozen fish – move to meet his jig.

“Here he comes. Here he comes. Here he comes. Got him!” He sets the hook and is shortly pulling his jig out of the lip of a 2 1/2-pound Table Rock spotted bass.

It’s the Oklahoma pro’s first on-the-water experience with Lowrance’s new ActiveTarget™ Live Sonar System, and as he sends the jig back down to the brush pile and the fishy marks around it, his first-blush summary of the new high-resolution, real-time view showing up on his HDS Live unit is to the point: “How long did that take to see and catch that fish? Two minutes? Pretty hard to argue with those results.”

A few short months after Evers, Randy Howell, Skeet Reese and a team of Lowrance pros got their first hands-on experience with Lowrance’s ActiveTarget™ Live Sonar system – a high-resolution sonar that provides anglers real-time/live-action views of fish movement in and around structure – the Tulsa-based electronics juggernaut made it available for retail sale.



A powerful new tool

The Dec. 4 release of ActiveTarget™ Live Sonar provides bass anglers with a powerful enhancement to their lineup of HDS Live/Carbon and Elite FS fishfinder units, and is positioned as a complement to Lowrance Active

Imaging™ 3-in-1 sonar (which includes extreme high-resolution SideScan and DownScan Imaging™ views for finding structure), and Lowrance CHIRP Sonar.

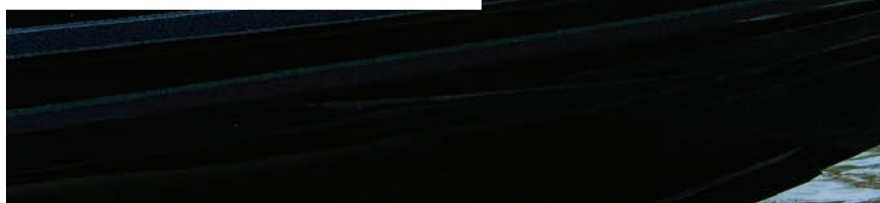
"This is a piece of technology that we've been so excited to get our hands on," Howell admits as he fishes his way along a long, rocky Table Rock ledge, his eyes following the movement of bass on the ActiveTarget™ Forward display. "There are a lot of us who have gotten really good at sight fishing – watching fish visibly has taught us how they react to baits, and this ActiveTarget™ view is the same thing, but playing out in deeper water. I'm watching the bait and the fish on screen, hopping the bait, making it react just like I would a bedding fish. Watching fish and understanding how to trigger them to strike is just as important in this 'virtual' sight as watching them visibly."

ActiveTarget™ provides three viewing modes in one transducer: ActiveTarget™ Forward, ActiveTarget™ Down and ActiveTarget™ Scout. Three transducer mounts for the trolling motor (shaft, side and top) come in the box.



ActiveTarget™ Forward

Forward mode displays the water column 18 degrees side-to-side and 135 degrees top to bottom, providing a live, HD view of fish and structure directly in front of the transducer.



"Being able to see fish in real time at a distance is a big deal," Howell says as watches a mark follow a crankbait in front of the boat. "Watching those fish in brush or suspended in open water at a distance means you can effectively fish those targets before you get close to them."

ActiveTarget™ Down

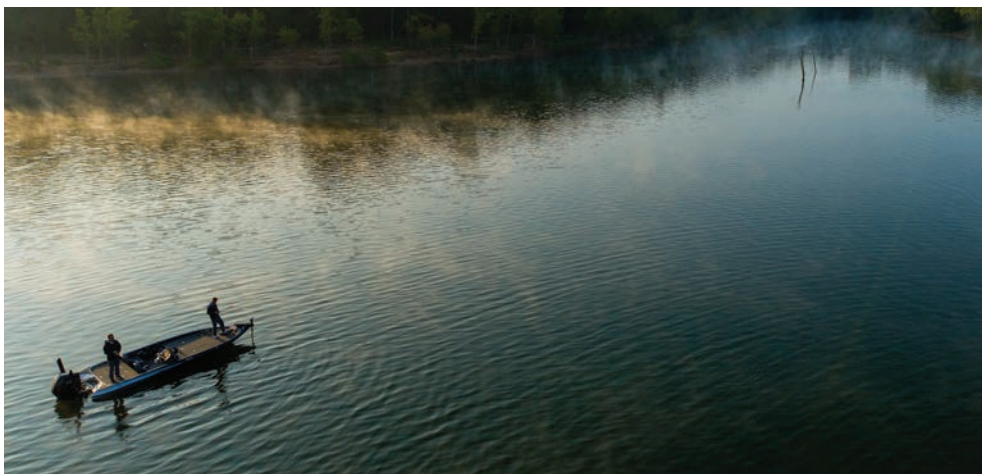
Down mode provides the same 18-degree side-to-side view, with a 135-degree front-to-back view pointed toward the bottom. To Howell, it's the perfect definition of "video game fishing"

"Down mode will be key for fishing a drop-shot, when you're fishing close to cover and over schools of fish," he says. "You're watching the fish move to your bait in real time while you're fishing brush and cover under the boat. I think you can learn the personality and mood the fish are in by watching ActiveTarget™ Down. Right now, I'm seeing that the ones roaming up off the bottom will follow a drop-shot down, but won't bite. Anytime I'm seeing them right on the bottom, they seem more aggressive. That's going to be a big factor."

ActiveTarget™ Scout

Scout mode provides a 135-degree side-to-side view and 18 degrees top to bottom, supplying an ultra-wide overhead view of fish structure and fish activity in front of the boat. The name says it all.

"Scout mode is going to help you be so much more efficient at finding schools of fish and cover," Howell says. "One quick adjustment puts you into a mode where you can cover a whole lot of underwater real estate without having to zig-zag back and forth. You can see a good distance around you and spot something quickly while you're moving fast. Then you can slow down and home in with Forward and Down mode once you've located something you want to fish." ■



WHAT: Lowrance ActiveTarget Live Sonar
MODES: ActiveTarget Forward, ActiveTarget Down, ActiveTarget Scout

PRICE: Lowrance ActiveTarget Live Sonar with black box module, transducer and mounts is available now for \$1,499.99
INFORMATION: lowrance.com

PROFILE: **TROY**
MORROW

EASTANOLLEE, GA



If ever there was a career stat line that begs for a deeper dive into the numbers, it's that of Georgia-based Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit angler Troy Morrow.

Over the course of his 10-year tour-level career, the good-natured pro from the tiny little hamlet of Eastanollee – a town of 2,500 tucked up just inside the northeastern sliver of Georgia, on the Savannah River – has registered some impressive highs (a BFL All-American title, three top 10 finishes in the Forrest Wood Cup). He's also survived an equally impressive low (a season where his cash earnings were \$1,482).

We caught up with Morrow shortly after he completed his first career FLW back-to-back wins to end the 2020 season – he won a Toyota Series event on Lake Norman and picked up his fifth career BFL win on Lake Hartwell just nine days later – to dig into some of his career numbers. Here's what he had to say:

QA

By Joel Shangle
PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

You're just finishing out a pretty successful season: you had one of your highest-earning seasons in five years, made the TITLE event and picked up two straight winner's checks on Lake Norman and Lake Hartwell. You must be feeling pretty good.

Yessir, I got me a little run going. Two (wins) in a row is pretty fun. I wouldn't mind doing this every year.

You're pretty dependable, though, even though you're quiet about it: (MLF Managing Editor) Jody White clued me in that winning a BFL is almost an annual thing for you. Even during a couple of down years.

(laughing) I've grabbed onto that life-line a couple of times, for sure. The BFLs are great – they're a learning tool or stepping stone for guys coming up, but in my case, they've also helped me survive some times when I really needed something good to happen. I've been fishing the (Savannah River) BFLs for almost 20 years; I love those tournaments.

It was a steady progression for me in the BFLs: I started fishing them when they were still the Red Mans, and just kind of stuck with it. I was always in it for the end game. A lot of guys are in it for a single tournament or maybe for one season, but I always had a bigger goal in mind. When I made my first All-American on the Connecticut River (in 2006), that was a whole different deal for me. I got to see a different side of tournament bass fishing: We dressed up for a big, fancy dinner, stayed in a big hotel, had all the hoopla around the event. You don't do that at club events.

Jumping to 2010, you ended up winning a BFL Regional and the All-American. It seems like you got used to the 'hoopla.'

Driving home from practice for that All-American, I called Boyd Duckett and asked him "Can I get some rods? I think I can win this thing." It just clicked – it fit what I like to do the best, which is deep cranking and fishing deep, offshore brush piles. You only have one day of practice for that event, and you practice with your day one partner, so you have to be real sparing with what you show him. We spent half the day parked over schooling fish. I checked one single brush pile and caught one over 3 pounds on the first cast, so I knew it was what I needed to be doing. But still, being from the local BFL/club format, I showed up to that big tournament not fully prepared.

How so? It sounds like you were pretty ready to go.

I showed up with exactly two crankbaits of the proper color: two SPRO Little John DDs in clear chartreuse. Those baits didn't make it through the first day, so I had to go looking for them. The problem was that all the locals had bought out every clear chartreuse crankbait for 100 miles, and I couldn't find one to save my life. I found one guy who was willing to sell me some at an exorbitant price, but somebody else got to him before I could pay him. I had a couple more Little Johns in the wrong color, so I ended up getting ahold of a guy I knew in Little Rock who had an airbrush – I scraped those two baits down and repainted them, so I had two more good baits for day two. Those baits didn't make it through the day, either.

It just so happened that Scott Suggs had an FLW Tour event on Lake Ouachita that week, so both tournaments were based out of Hot Springs (Arkansas). I started asking around, and Scott was good enough to give me two crankbaits that weren't exactly the right color, but close enough. I caught enough to win that All-American on Scott's two crankbaits. I realized then how unprepared I was for those big multi-boat tournaments. Now, when I go anywhere, I have like 10 of every crankbait color I might need.

You finished fifth in your first Forrest Wood Cup just two months later, and then went on a roll where you had top-10 finishes in your next two FWCs in 2012 and 2013, and averaged just over \$115,000 a year in winnings. Were you conscious of how well you were fishing back then?

No. That's the beauty of being on a hot streak; you don't think about it at all. Everything just kind of leaves your head and you just fish. At that time, it was just me doing what I do best, just doing my own thing. You don't start to think about things until your streak is busted.

... which leads us to a couple of years where the streak was replaced by a slump, and you started to struggle to cash checks. Dig into your 2017 and 2018 seasons, if you don't mind. What were all the conditions that busted your streak?

I think I just got caught up in it, for lack of a better term. I found myself doing things that you're "supposed" to do, instead of just doing my own thing and going fishing. Everybody knows that there are a few set conditions that happen on every lake in every season, and sometimes you get locked into those "set" things and forget to just go fishing. I also had some flat-out bad luck, lost some key fish, and made some really poor decisions – when you start making poor decisions and put yourself behind the eight ball and get into a slump, sometimes it's hard to get out of it. You don't fish well. In the middle of all that, it's hard on you – money-wise, mental-wise and health-wise.

Was it bad enough that you thought you might have to find a new line of work?

Oh yeah, I was really close. For a couple of years there, I'd start the season knowing that I had to get a check in the first or second tournaments, or I wouldn't be going to the third. I got a BFL Regional win on the St. Johns River (in 2018) that carried me through, and I had some people lend me some money at key times that really helped me – they don't even know how much they helped me.

Heading into the 2021 season, how do you feel about your chances to keep your current streak going?

(laughing again) You know, I'm not a schedule guy anymore. I learned my lesson there. I think it helps me to just show up and fish the way I know how to fish. You tell me where to go, and let's go fish. My attitude now is that I'll take (the schedule) for what it is, and just go with it. ■

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HIGH SCHOOL STATE CHAMPIONSHIP WINNERS

New York State Championship

Great Sacandaga Lake
Sept. 13
Caleb Hildenbrand and
Taylor Marcel
Legacy Jr. Bass
(10 pounds, 11 ounces)

Colorado State Championship

Lake Pueblo
Sept. 27
Dominic Spengler and
Angelo Valentine
So. Colorado Junior Bass Club
(7 pounds, 5 ounces)



New Hampshire State Championship

Lake Winnepesaukee, Oct. 4
Griffin Beede and
Noah Bartlett
Monadnock/Huskies
(11 pounds, 9 ounces)

The 2021 High School Fishing national schedule is posted to highschoolfishing.org, and registration is currently open.

TBF NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS

Earning a spot in the 2021 TBF Federation Championship in Shreveport, Louisiana on the Red River, March 11-13, 2021



THE TBF NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS, are close-to-home events, with a semi-final event held within a roughly 500-mile circle from just about every corner of the United States. And because they're scheduled for alternating states every year, anglers only need to travel as far as a neighboring state every other year.

The National Semi-Finals feature low entry fees and 100-percent payback, and are held on weekends, which allows anglers who work during the week to attend for their opportunity to advance to some of the biggest events (with the largest prize purses) in fishing. These events are understandably very popular with TBF membership.

SEMI-FINALS ANGLERS SECURE SPOTS IN THE 2021 TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

THE BASS FEDERATION'S NATIONAL SEMI-FINAL EVENTS send the top boaters and co-anglers from each state to the National Championship. Below is a list of 2021 advancing anglers from recent TBF National Semi-Finals:

DISTRICT 1 – FL/GA was held on the St. Johns River Oct 24-25. The Boaters advancing will be Robert Stumpe (FL) and Michael Deen (GA) while the top co-anglers are Brad McCarthy (GA) and Dawson Wiles (FL).

DISTRICT 2 – NC/SC was conducted on Oct. 10-11 on the Roanoke River. Advancing as boaters will be David Kneee (SC) and Mark Lamb (NC) as well as co-anglers Rob Griswold (NC) and Scott Peavy (SC).

DISTRICT 3 – KY/TN held their event on Green River Lake, Kentucky Oct. 17-18. Membership size allowed Kentucky to advance two boats. Therefore, the boaters advancing will be current reigning TBF National Champion Lance Freeman (KY), Ted Milby (KY) and Matthew Wilson (TN). On the co-angler side, Mark Day and Scott Neiheisel will represent Kentucky and former TBF National Champion Preston Craig will represent Tennessee.



Lance Freeman and Mark Day

DISTRICT 4 – The AL/MS district was decided Oct. 17-18 on Pickwick Lake in Alabama. The boaters moving on are Scott Whitehead (MS) and Keith Glasgow (AL), and co-anglers Sonny Woodward (AL) and Kyle Hill (MS).

DISTRICT 5 – LA/TX was held Sept 26-27 on Sam Rayburn, where boaters Colt Farris (TX) and Eric Gilchrist (LA) advanced to the Championship. The best of the co-angler side were Mike Pace (TX) and Joshua Moore (LA).



Eric Gilchrist



Mike Pace

DISTRICT 6 – The MO/KS TBF National Semi-Finals were held on Sept. 19-20 on Truman Lake, Missouri. Advancing as boaters are Robert Hime (MO) and Jeremy Montgomery (KS). On the co-angler side, winners were Jeff Tripe (KS) and Greg Lampton (MO).



Greg Lampton and Robert Hime



Jeff Tripe and Jeremy Montgomery

DISTRICT 8 – This district is home to Nebraska and South Dakota. Hosted by Nebraska on Sept 19-20 on Lake McConaughy, boaters Kent Priel (NE) and Troy Diede (SD) will advance, as well as co-anglers Ronald Dillon (SD) and Michael Hansen (NE).

DISTRICT 9 – MN/WI also took place on Sept 26-27, at Leech Lake, Minnesota. Ron Mehr took top boater honors for Minnesota and Brad Knight will represent Wisconsin. On the co-angler side, Minnesota's Tyler Bahr topped that list and Wisconsin's Max Stawinoga will represent his home state.



Ron Mehr and Tyler Bahr

DISTRICT 10 – Due to the large membership in the IL/IN district, Indiana earned two boats in the upcoming championship. Lake Wawasee, Indiana, was the site of the Oct. 10-11 competition. Boaters advancing from Indiana will be Jon Ruffier and Travis Edgar, while Tim Lewis will represent Illinois. Co-anglers advancing for Indiana are Dewayne Wilda and Bob Kuykendall with Jake Vanmeter from Illinois.

DISTRICT 12 – VA/WV was hosted on Kerr Lake, Virginia, Sept. 19-20. The District Champion boaters advancing are Chris Fiore (VA) and Josh Balsler (WV). Co-anglers are Craig Ferguson (VA) and William E. Posey (WV).



Josh Balsler, William E. Posey, Chris Fiore and Craig Ferguson

DISTRICT 13 – Washington, DC/DE/MD was held Sept. 26-27 on the Upper Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. The boaters advancing will be Mike Morris (DE), Peter Yanni (DC) and Martin Osborne (MD). Co-anglers will be Matt Felty (MD), Joshua Torres (DC) and Ronnie Littleton (DE).

DISTRICT 14 – The PA/NY/Ontario, Canada district had to be split up this year due to COVID-19 restrictions on the U.S. border. On Sept. 19-20, District 14 Ontario was held at Port Colborne, which lies just west of Buffalo, New York, on the Canadian side of the shores of Lake Erie. The boater advancing is Ontario's Matt Pezzetta. Representing Canada as the top co-angler will be Dylan Blair.

On the same days, District 14 PA and NY anglers fished Lake Wallenpaupack, Pennsylvania. Because of its large TBF membership base, PA is allowed to qualify two boaters and two co-anglers to the championship this year. The top boaters were Joe Pacholec, Sr. (PA), who bested the 74-boat field,



Joe Pacholec



Matt Japchen

along with Kevin Gergel (PA) and Robert Stock (NY). The co-angler champs were Matt Japchen (PA) and Jared Burrows (PA), while Lloyd Raheem will carry the New York flag.

DISTRICT 15 – District 15 CT/NJ/RI had to be split due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. Held on the Hudson River Oct. 10-11, the boaters advancing from that event are Mike Czaplinski (NJ) and Keith Cleary (CT). The top co-anglers were Joseph Casale (NJ) and Josh Escobar (CT). Rhode Island held its contest on Webster Lake, with boater Jeremy Sadowski and co-angler Guiseppe Andreoli advancing.

DISTRICT 17 – The ME/NH National Semi-Final was held Sept. 26-27 on Damariscotta Lake, Maine. Advancing from Maine on the boater side will be Mark Lodge, while New Hampshire's top boater will be Edward Lapierre. Co-anglers on their way to the Championship are Maine's Toby Cross and New Hampshire's Chris Perry.

DISTRICT 18 – WA/OR was held on Roosevelt Lake, Washington on Oct. 3-4, where John Branch (WA) and Kory Ray (OR) earned the boater titles. The co-anglers champions were Michael Free (WA) and Glen Hancuff (OR).

DISTRICT 19 – The ID/MT tournament was on CJ Strike Reservoir in Idaho Oct. 10-11. District Champion boaters were Charley McMurdie (ID) and Jason Crone (MT). Top co-anglers were Torrey Tucker (ID) and Cher Moua (MT).

DISTRICT 21 – Advancing from Colorado, boater Sam Heckman and co-angler Scott Hoendervoogt took home the top spots on Lake Pueblo this year on Oct. 3-4.

DISTRICT 22 – NV/UT was rescheduled from its original summer date due to COVID-19 and held on Oct. 24-25 on Lake Mohave, Arizona. Advancing as boaters will be David Malone (UT) and David Hudson (NV) along with co-anglers Hunter Loveless (UT) and Adam Cacal (NV).

DISTRICT 23 – AZ/CA was held Nov. 14-15 on Lake Shasta, California. District champion boaters were Steve Lund (AZ) and Mark Corrente (CA), while the co-angler winners Advancing to the 2021 Federation National championship as boaters were Steve Lund (AZ) and Mark Corrente (CA); co-angler winners were Cameron Millholen (AZ) and Jeff Green (CA).

IT'S TBF MEMBERSHIP UPDATE TIME

IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR TO RENEW YOUR 2021

The Bass Federation membership, and get a head start on the new fishing season.

The \$50 2021 TBF national adult membership includes full TBF member benefits such as member and club insurance, multiple advancement opportunities through your local TBF affiliated club, State Federation and more. To fish your home-state events, you must be a member of a local TBF-affiliated fishing club.

Also included in the yearly fee is a subscription to the digital version of MLF *Bass Fishing Magazine*, plus all listed subscriber benefits as an active TBF member. Those benefits include the industry's best and guaranteed lowest discounted rates on an MLF competitor membership if you choose to upgrade your MLF membership to a competitor's level.

The TBF Junior membership is only \$25 a year for national dues. The Junior Membership gives the opportunity to kids in eighth grade and under to fish the junior programs in their state federation. The membership includes the insurance benefits, but most importantly the advancement opportunity to qualify from their state's junior programs to the TBF Junior World Championship. In those competitions, junior anglers can compete for college scholarship funds and the Championship title.

The TBF Student Angler Federation membership is \$25. The membership includes a full competitor membership (member and club insurance) and the digital MLF *Bass Fishing Magazine*, as well as an MLF High School membership. The High School (TBF/SAF) membership gives you many opportunities to fish your High School State Championship and any SAF or MLF Open or Challenge tournament event, with no entry fees.

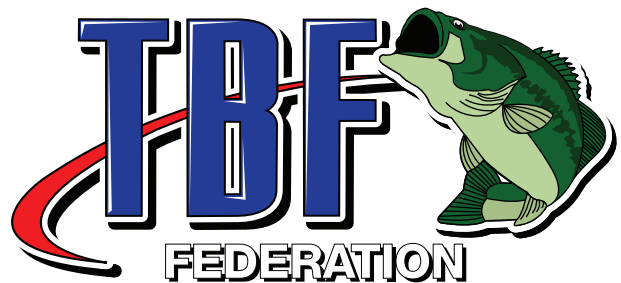
The most exciting tournament of the year is the High School Fishing World Finals – combined with the High School National Championship – and the opportunity to claim some of the many college scholarships available. In 2020, there was a record \$3.2 million in scholarships up for grabs.

All members are eligible for the TBF Federation Angler rod promotion: Adult members can receive the 2021 TBF adult national membership plus two Federation Angler rods for the low price of \$100 plus shipping (your choice of two spinning, two baitcasting rods or one of each). TBF/SAF or TBF/Junior members have the choice of one Federation Angler Rod (spinning or baitcaster) for \$50 plus shipping, with that price also including their national membership.

Go to fedanglerstore.com to take advantage of the rod promotion.

New members joining in December receive the remaining weeks of 2020 included in their 2021 membership at no additional cost.

Call The Bass Federation at 580.765.9031 for more details.



ABOUT THE BASS FEDERATION

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

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

T'was the day before Christmas
and out on the lake
the big bass were biting
for the anglers to take...



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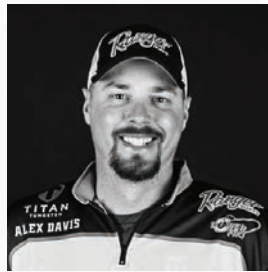
JOHN COX

Most likely to roll out of bed 20 minutes before takeoff and catch 22 pounds



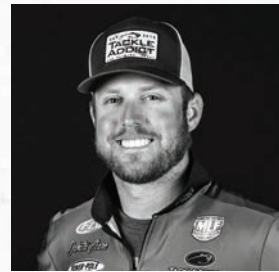
BRETT HITE

Most likely to catch a world-record tarpon on a Jack Hammer



ALEX DAVIS

Most likely to empty the Mountain Dew shelf at the gas station closest to takeoff



DAKOTA EBARE

Most likely to need new tires and a spinal adjustment every two months



JACOB WHEELER

Most likely to locate Atlantis with his electronics



COLE FLOYD

Most likely to make you feel old and bad at fishing at the same time



JOEY CIFUENTES

Most likely to order a sarsaparilla and a new set of shoes for his horse



ADRIAN AVENA

Most likely to beat you 21-0 at ping-pong (trust us on this one)



DAROLD GLEASON

Most likely to make you say "What did he just say?"



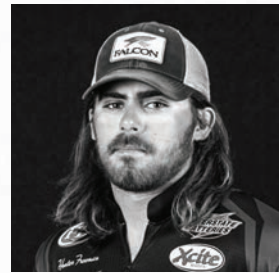
BRAD KNIGHT

Most likely to abandon his best spot to find out where that turkey call was coming from



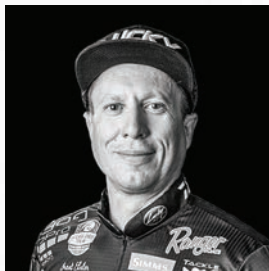
ZACK BIRGE

Most likely to sign up first if a "Major League Duck Hunting" league is formed



HUNTER FREEMAN

Most likely to have had a cameo on Sons of Anarchy



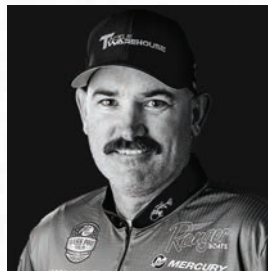
BRENT EHLER

Most likely to be mistaken for Tony Hawk



BRITT MYERS

Most likely to fix your truck when it breaks down



JARED LINTNER

Most likely to host a BBQ you really want to be invited to



CASEY ASHLEY

Most likely to sing the National Anthem at the Super Bowl



TOYOTA

GEAR UP AND GET OUT.



THE 2021 TOYOTA TRAIL SPECIAL EDITIONS. Answer the call of the wild with the 2021 Trail Special Editions available for Tacoma, Tundra and 4Runner. Each comes standard with added storage to keep your gear safe, cool and dry. Also, every Trail Special Edition is available in four colors: Cement, Army Green, Midnight Black Metallic and Super White. So, whether you're going fishing, camping, hiking or all the above, these rigs are ready to gear up and take on any adventure. See all three now at [Toyota.com](https://www.toyota.com)

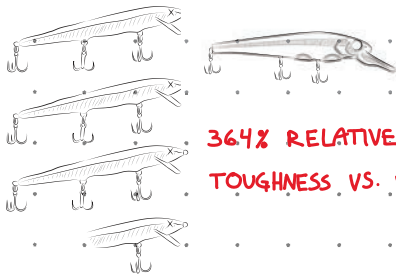
Vehicles shown with options. ©2020 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A. Inc.



HIT STICK

YOUR FISH. OUR SCIENCE.

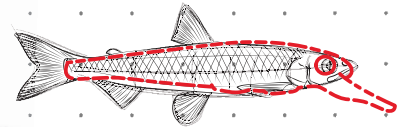
DELIVERS Balsa ACTION THROUGH NEW FLASHDISC TECHNOLOGY



364% RELATIVE TOUGHNESS VS. Balsa

CASTS 60% FARTHER VS. Balsa

MIMICS NATURAL BAITFISH PITCH AND PROFILE

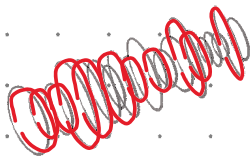


50 FT

TUNED TO ATTRACT FISH FROM FAR AWAY

AVAILABLE IN 7 FISH CATCHING SIZES

SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN ACTIONS:
- ROLL
- TAIL SWING
- YAW
- FLAT PITCH



CREATES SOUND AND VIBRATION FOR ADDITIONAL ATTRACTION



OUTFISH. OUTCAST. OUTLAST.

Balsa stickbaits have always caught fish. But baits made from that natural material can be tough to cast and inconsistent when it comes to action. They're also a bit too delicate for toothy critters and rocky environments.

Berkley® scientists have been working to replicate the proven fish-catching action of balsa in a more reliable, durable and heavier material.

A scientific breakthrough was achieved with the invention of FlashDisc™ technology, allowing our Berkley designers to add weight to the bait while preserving the critical elements of a stickbait action.

The result is the new Berkley Hit Stick, delivering a proven fish-catching action and built to cast further, last longer and swim more consistently than any bait of its kind.

The all-new Hit Stick, from Berkley.

We've done the science. Now you catch the fish.

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