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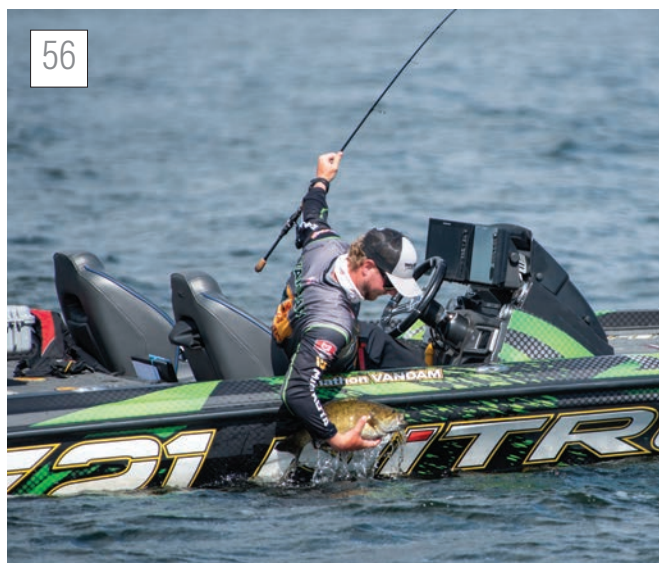


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## THE BRILLIANCE OF BRONZE

I spent the first 28 years of my life in Ohio — a state fairly synonymous with smallmouth bass fishing as long as you're actually talking about Lake Erie. I went to college in Northwest Ohio, not far from those famed waters, and spent a little time even further north visiting friends in Wisconsin. On one such trip, I opted to do a little fishing for musky, walleye and, yes, smallmouth.

But even given the region of the country in which I grew up and spent my formative adult years, my first love was always chasing big green fish, thanks in no small part to my grandfather, who had been taking his boat to the same small lake in eastern Ohio for three decades and who introduced me to the thrill of hunting largemouth. I much preferred the smaller inland lakes in Ohio and the chance to catch a 5- or 6-pound largemouth to an opportunity to catch a 6-pound smallie out on a flat in the middle of Lake Erie. Ah, the naivety of youth...

It wasn't until I moved to Tennessee some five years ago and got a taste of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers and the many additional rivers, streams and creeks in the state that house smallmouth bass that I began to appreciate brown fish in much the same way. These days, I'd almost rather go to Dale Hollow in search of a 6-plus-pound bronzeback than anywhere else to hunt a double-digit bucketmouth. Almost.

You hear it a lot from Southern touring pros who get a chance to chase smallies when the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit turns north in the summer months: Once you get that itch, there's almost nothing that can scratch it.

This issue is dedicated to those anglers, and to the anglers who haven't had a chance to catch the smallie bug yet. It's a tribute to the big brown fish we love to catch from Alabama to Wisconsin to California. As you turn each page, may the sounds of screaming drag and the splashing of acrobatic smallmouth fill your ears and your imaginations.

From the cover shot by Eric Engbretson to Ken Duke's masterful storytelling in the Last Cast, this issue is packed with enough information to make your next smallmouth excursion the best one yet. Sean Ostruszka walks you through the wonderful world of spybaits. Tyler Brinks gives you the skinny on skinny-ish water tributary fishing up North. And if down South is more your flavor, Joe Sills breaks down the best ways to catch monster smallies in the great tailraces of some famed Southern reservoirs. To top it off, a true master of his craft, Kevin VanDam, provides decades of knowledge fishing jerkbaits in our recurring Masters Series on page 62.

You often hear a familiar refrain from pros fishing unfamiliar waters: A bass is a bass. To some degree, that's painfully accurate. But if you've ever hooked into a smallmouth on a spinning rod and light line, felt the pull and the head shakes, experienced the heart-stopping moment that bronze beauty breaches the surface in a fit of fury, you know that to be only half true. A bass is a bass, but a smallmouth is a smallmouth. And there's nothing quite like a smallmouth.



JUSTIN ONSLOW, MANAGING EDITOR

# GET OUT WHAT YOU PUT IN

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## THE THRILL AND THE AGONY

**W**ho remembers the old Wide World of Sports intro: the old “thrill of victory, and agony of defeat” mantra? Bass Pro Tour’s Ish Monroe experienced both the thrill and the agony in the space of a few short seconds on the final day of the 2021 General Tire Heavy Hitters on Shearon Harris Reservoir near Raleigh/Durham, North Carolina.

The unique big-money-for-big-bass format of Heavy Hitters rewards the angler who catches the biggest bass of the Championship Round with a cool \$100,000. Monroe, who is notoriously adept at catching giant bass, located a big female largemouth on a bed the day before during the Knockout Round, and when he returned to that spot on the final day, lo and behold, that big female was still there.

So Monroe went all-in. He aimed squarely at the \$100,000 big-bass award, dedicating his entire final day to coaxing that big female to bite.

After two full periods with no action, and with the last hour of the Championship Round winding down, Monroe’s doggedness finally paid off: the big girl bit. Unfortunately, Monroe’s perch – with one foot on his trolling-motor bracket and the other lodged behind his electronics – made for an awkward hook set, and as he scrambled to regain his footing on his front deck, Monroe let the line go slack for a nanosecond.

Exactly enough time for the potential \$100,000 fish to throw the hook.

Monroe’s response was as you’d expect: agony. He remained prone on his front deck for a good five minutes as his \$100,000 fish swam back to her bed.

I can hear Jim McKay’s call now: “Spanning the globe ...”

PHOTOS BY JOSH GASSMANN







## IN THE KISSER

**I**f you've ever wanted a "fisheye" view of what the pros are throwing, it'll be pretty hard to beat this in-the-kisser closeup glimpse of a Berkley J-Walker wielded by MLF pro Adrian Avena at the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit event on Lake Murray. The "Jersey Boy" was working his way around Murray, flinging the classic topwater for the lake's herring-hungry bass, when he was buzzed by MLF photographer Rob Matsuura. Avena's chrome J-Walker proved to be the goods, too: He finished fourth in the event, cashing a big check and climbing into the Top 10 in the Angler of the Year standings.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA





## BROTHERLY FISH LOVE

**I**n the annals of professional bass fishing, you'll often see many of the same surnames in the field lists at the top levels of competition. Names like VanDam, Jones, Lane, Reese, Lee, McMillan — the list goes on and on. In just about every bass fishing tournament at any level, it's common to find fathers and sons, brothers, husbands and wives and any number of other familial connections in the final standings.

Often, those brothers and sons and fathers and whatever else are fishing against one another, sparring for the title of "Best Lane This Week" or "Top McMillan Until Next Tournament." One goes home happy. Another looks for a chance at some friendly revenge.

In rare cases, though, there's enough to go around for everybody in the family. Look no further than the Huntze brothers, Logan and Colby, who each got a win in the Toyota Series Western Division opener on the California Delta in mid-May — Logan from the front of the boat and Colby from the back, though they never actually fished from the same boat during the event.

The Huntze brothers both jumped out to Day 1 leads on the Delta, faltered on Day 2 and came roaring back on the final day, perhaps playing off some shared energy and the inherent desire to show one another up. After all, what are brothers for?

Whatever the case, the result was a \$24,293 check for Logan, a new boat for Colby and a stalemate in the ongoing battle for bragging rights between two brothers with a shared passion for catching fish.

PHOTO BY JOSH DUKE

JUNE 2021

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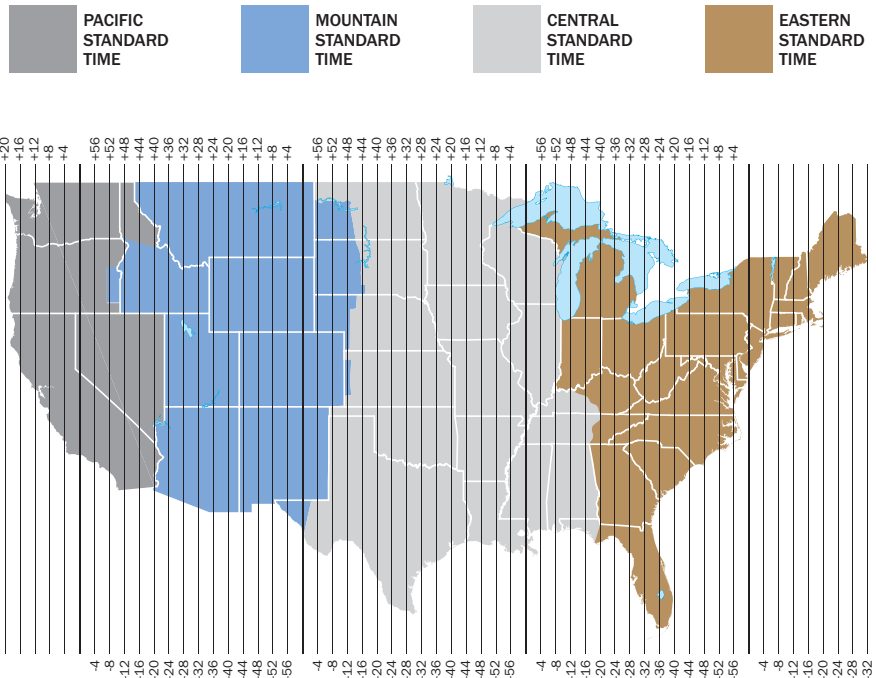
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SOLUNAR TABLES

JUNE-JULY 2021



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

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

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# HABITAT ENHANCEMENT IS A PILLAR OF MLF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIVISION

It's safe to assume that many of your favorite bass lakes are 50-plus years old. The peak of reservoir construction in the United States was 1950 through about 1970. Since then, there's been a steep decline in construction of new reservoirs in the U.S.

Reservoirs are designed to control downstream flooding, sometimes for power generation, and always to provide water to growing urban populations. But regardless of the purpose of a reservoir, fisheries managers have learned that they all age through very similar processes.

Most reservoirs start out with deep channels, hard-bottom areas, flooded standing timber and fish populations that seem to grow exponentially. Through time, they constantly accumulate both sediment and nutrients from the surrounding watershed. Woody habitat is lost to decay, shorelines erode, hard bottom is covered in soft silt and algal blooms become more prevalent. This process is a significant challenge for fisheries managers as they strive to turn back the hands of time and restore or slow the results of aging.

This is one of many reasons the Major League Fishing Fisheries Management Division (FMD) has made fisheries enhancement one of the main pillars that guide the scope of our work.

"Fisheries enhancement" encompasses everything from restoring fish habitat to improving angler access to quality fisheries, but for this article, we're going to focus specifically on the habitat components.

## ALL ABOUT HABITAT

Fish habitat refers to just about any physical component of a waterbody that attracts fish to a specific location and provides them a benefit (increasing their survival, improving reproductive success or maximizing feeding opportunities). One of our first steps in creating a habitat project is to try to define the presence and abundance of ambush, escape, reproductive and recovery habitat within our targeted reservoir. This is done via time on the water, both with our anglers and collaboration with state agencies. Once we define what is present, we can then make decisions on what habitat types need to be improved or replaced.

**Ambush habitats:** These habitats primarily benefit predators. They're typically individual structures placed in relatively shallow water that provide shade lines, hard edges and color breaks. Laydowns or boulders are good examples. The purpose of these habitats is simply to allow a predator to quickly target unsuspecting food items. These are often obvious targets for anglers to catch one or two fish quickly.

**Escape habitats:** These are high-density structures that can be placed in just about any depth. As the name implies, these habitats provide areas to escape predation. Examples are brushpiles and submerged vegetation. For anglers, the benefit is typically around the perimeter of these habitats, as the edges will hold fish that are roaming and looking for an easy meal.



Restoration projects like the one accomplished during Heavy Hitters in North Carolina are part of the overall habitat plan of the MLF Fisheries Management Division.

**Reproductive habitats:** Reproductive habitat is very species specific. For most black bass and sunfish species, these are shallow, hard-bottom gravel areas near some sort of alternative cover. For shad species, reproductive habitat is vegetation or riprap rock that allows them to stick eggs to as they quickly swim past. Most anglers are really familiar with how to catch fish during the spawn or around forage fish that are spawning.

**Recovery habitat:** The final category is recovery habitat, which is a much broader category that really incorporates components of both ambush and escape habitats in very specific areas of a reservoir. These habitats' function is to allow fish to recover after being released during a weigh-in tournament. Fisheries managers have found that most fish when released after a weigh-in stay within a small geographic area for up to six months. Maximizing those fish's ability to immediately find suitable habitat and successful forage is fundamental to the longevity of tournament bass fishing.

## PLANNING OUR HABITAT PROJECTS

When we're creating our habitat projects, the MLF Fisheries Management Division continuously keeps in mind the location, density, abundance, material type and expected longevity of the project to try to provide the habitat type that's most needed for a specific body of water. We then get to work organizing with the local state agencies, collecting the needed materials, filing permits with the water authorities, and defining how we will assess success for each project.

You may have already seen earlier in 2021 that MLF announced a partnership with the leading artificial fish habitat

manufacturer, MossBack Fish Habitat. MossBack's products utilize recycled materials that are compressed into a unique V-shaped "limb." Those limbs are then incorporated into PVC tubing that combine to make the complexity needed to provide both ambush and escape habitats. The lifespan of these materials is basically endless, as they do not degrade.

During the 2021 Heavy Hitters event in North Carolina, MLF Bass Pro Tour angler Greg Vinson (a MossBack pro), North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission staff and local high school anglers showcased some of the MossBack products on a project at Lake Mackintosh near the Raleigh-Durham area. This project incorporated several of the current MossBack products and a couple prototype products placed in two primary locations on the reservoir.

Within four days of adding the habitat to the lake, Vinson and the high school anglers returned to the habitat areas and were able to catch multiple largemouth bass that were already using the structures.

A second such project will happen during Bass Pro Tour Stage Four in Dayton, Tennessee. FMD will once again collaborate with Bass Pro Tour pros, high school students and local biologists from the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency to place habitat in two areas and assess how quickly the habitat attracts fish.

The MossBack partnership allows us to incorporate artificial habitat as well as natural materials into our habitat projects and represents the first of many steps we're taking to assume a leading role in ensuring that Major League Fishing continues to extend the life of the sport of bass fishing.

We'll continue to develop more projects using aquatic vegetation restoration, artificial habitat, natural laydowns and brushpiles to improve aging reservoirs and then use our catch-weigh-release data in subsequent years to determine the impact our projects have on a fishery. This is a revolutionary approach that allows the MLF Fisheries Management Division to both improve fisheries and assess success — of course, we cannot accomplish this all alone and look forward to incorporating new partnerships as well as providing opportunities for local anglers to volunteer on future projects. ■



# MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING MEMBERSHIP OPTIONS

> **OVER THE COURSE OF THE PAST HALF YEAR**, Major League Fishing has dramatically broadened the menu of opportunities for bass anglers of all skill and experience levels to participate in a broad-based membership program. The goal: to provide something of value to every angler, be they tournament sharpies or new entrants into the sport.

Champions Club members, for example, receive a box of carefully chosen, premium tackle delivered to their mailboxes every month (including baits hand-picked by Bass Pro Tour pros); Premium Bass Fishing Memberships, meanwhile, come with a checklist of nearly a dozen benefits; and ALL levels of Bass Fishing Membership (from a free membership to the \$75 Premium level) provide access to SCORETRACKER® Insider, the MLF newsletter and the digital version of *Bass Fishing* magazine.

Below is a handy reference guide to the benefits and options available via MLF memberships, followed by highlights of the coming summer's membership news:



## > CHAMPIONS CLUB: JONES, WHEELER ON TAP FOR JUNE/JULY WEBINARS

June and July will deliver the fourth and fifth Champions Club boxes to members' mailboxes. As was the case with the boxes curated for March, April and May, the baits in the summer Champions Club boxes will contain gear that's tailored to the season (for example, frogs, jigs, etc.).

The average box value for the \$29.99 monthly membership has been \$45 to \$46 (along with some deep factory discounts exclusive to Club members).

Part of the benefit of the Champions Club is members-only webinars with winners of Bass Pro Tour events. Members experienced live Q&A with RED-CREST winner Dustin Connell and Stage One winner Ott DeFoe; June and July webinars include Heavy Hitters winner Alton Jones and Stage Two winner Jacob Wheeler. August and September webinars will include the winners of the Harris Chain and Lake Chickamauga tournaments.

	MLF Fan Pass	Subscriber	High School	Premium
<b>Annual Membership Price</b>	<b>FREE</b>	<b>\$10</b>	<b>\$25</b>	<b>\$75</b>
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MLF Tournament Eligibility				X
Bass Federation Tournament Eligibility			X	
One Free Champions Club Box				X
20% Off Custom Jerseys				X
Free MLFAA Membership*				X

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June 4-9: Bass Pro Tour B&W Trailer Hitches Stage Four @ Lake Chickamauga

June 25-30: Bass Pro Tour General Tire Stage Five @ St. Lawrence River

June 17-20: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Federal Ammunition Stop 5 @ Potomac River

Jul 29-Aug 1: Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Stop 6 @ St. Lawrence River

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## TV BROADCASTS

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

June 5: Summit Cup Sudden Death Round 1

June 12: Summit Cup Sudden Death Round 2

June 19: Summit Cup Championship Round

June 26: Patriot/Summit Cup Major League Lessons

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

July 3: REDCREST Knockout Rounds

July 10: REDCREST Championship Round

July 17: Heavy Hitters 2021 — Qualifying Round 1, Group A

July 24: Heavy Hitters 2021 — Qualifying Round 1, Group B

July 31: Heavy Hitters 2021 — Qualifying Round 2, Group B



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

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

Highly likeable MLF Bass Pro Tour angler Mark Daniels Jr. has long exemplified an angler's ability to capitalize on the cash payouts of Toyota Bonus Bucks, while fully believing in his Tundra's towing and safety qualities.


"I've bought three Tundras and I can't imagine why a hardcore tournament angler would buy any other brand. It's a pulling machine that's super safe and reliable too, and Toyota does so much for our sport that I've always wanted to show mutual support," says Daniels. "Plus, it's the only truck that pays you a cash bonus if you do well in your tournament. Man, Toyota Bonus Bucks is just an awesome program for anglers!"

MLF pro Edwin Evers says he's lost count of the number of Toyota Tundras he's purchased over the years. He thinks it's six or seven, 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 provide.

"What I love most about a Toyota Tundra is what I call 'the go and the stop' — that 381-horsepower 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, 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," Evers adds.

MDJ and Evers are both excited about the special Trail Edition Tundras, Tacomas and 4Runners that are currently available. They feature lockable bed storage compartments to keep your gear safe and dry, plus refined front grilles and unique dark gray TRD Off Road wheels for a true look of authenticity no matter what tournament or outdoor adventure you're headed to.

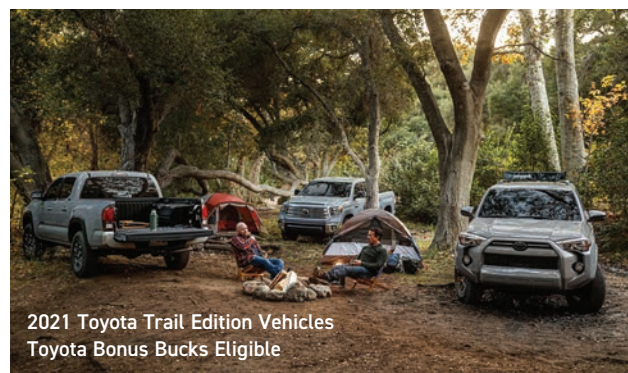
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Mark Daniels Jr.  
MLF Pro/Toyota Bonus Bucks Participant



Edwin Evers  
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## PROVING GROUNDS

If you want to fish professionally, you're going to have to get to know these fisheries



### 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.

**W**hile traveling the country reporting on tournaments, I occasionally get asked by young anglers about things they can do to better prepare themselves to become professional anglers. One suggestion I always include is to make trips to well-known tournament lakes across the country to learn them before there's money on the line.

Regional- and national-level bass tournaments go to the same competition waters year after year: Gunterville, Okeechobee, Champlain, Potomac River, Pickwick, Hartwell, St. Clair, etc. I'm always surprised at the num-

ber of young anglers who front large entry fees to fish these lakes for the first time during a tournament. For just the cost of the entry fee alone, one can hook up a boat and fish any of those lakes for a week or more, learning the unique bass footprints for each region of the country. Bass have their own quirks in each part of the country, and learning those differences in behavior across regions is critical.

With that in mind, I've assembled a short list of must-know bass lakes — a sort of professional fishing training course. It's by no means a complete list, and it's admittedly biased to the eastern half

of the country where most tournaments take place. But the fact is, if you want to be a professional angler, you'll have to perform on these lakes at some point, and an investment in learning them is time and money well spent.

The added bonus, of course, is that lessons learned on each of these fisheries can and do translate to other bodies of water as well. It's all a matter of experience.

### TENNESSEE RIVER REQUIREMENTS

It's been said that the Tennessee River is the lifeblood of professional bass



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

fishing. Some of the best tournament anglers in the world live in the Tennessee Valley (and for good reason). Lakes like Pickwick, Guntersville, Chickamauga, Wheeler and Kentucky and Barkley lakes are great tournament lakes, which is why tournament organizations of all sizes frequent them. The list of essential fishing lessons taught by TVA lakes is endless: current, water fluctuation, grass, bushes, rock, docks, tailraces, creeks, flats, Southern smallmouth, fishing pressure — there's some of all of it along the Tennessee River. Guntersville is the crash course for TVA Lakes. In my opinion, Guntersville can teach you more about tournament bass fishing techniques in the shortest time than any other lake in the country.

## FLORIDA FREAKS

If you want to be a professional angler, learning Florida is a must. Florida-strain bass are very quirky, yet many circuits and tours include a trip to Florida at least once a season.

The two best options for a Florida bass fishing education are the Kissimmee Chain and Lake Okeechobee. The Big O is the mecca for Florida bass fishing, but Toho and Kissimmee are also prudent in teaching correct water clarities, bottom compositions and key vegetation varieties. Florida bass are notoriously area-oriented, and it usually takes a slower fishing pace to get in tune with them.

An added benefit of training on the Kissimmee Chain is the influence of the Kissimmee River in terms of current, channels and the formation of offshore shell bars. That knowledge gained on offshore fishing in Florida can also be applied to places like the Harris Chain and the St. Johns River.

## LONE STAR LESSONS

If you can only go to one Texas lake to learn the Lone Star ways of bass fishing, make it Sam Rayburn Reservoir. Rayburn serves as Texas Bass Fishing 101 for the critical role “drains” play in the migration and orientation of Texas bass. Reading and translating drains as a language is the key to unlocking other Texas lakes. Every drain is unique in terms of contours, turns, bends, points and source. In addition, Big Sam also sports acres of flooded bushes (depending on the water level), which makes it a great place to hone that game as well.

## LOWLAND LOWDOWN

When it comes to learning lowland impoundments, Lake Eufaula in Alabama, Santee Cooper in South Carolina and Ross Barnett in Mississippi are all good candidates. Eufaula and Santee get more tournament traffic, making them more attractive. The skill that must be acquired for lowland success is breaking down huge expanses of shallow-water flats fairly quickly. Developing an eye for tiny contour changes and fish-attracting wrinkles like small depressions, subtle ditches, old sloughs and backwater ponds in vast flats is imperative. Water level fluctuation on lowland lakes is critical too.

## BLUEBACK BASICS

The blueback invasions in highland impoundments in the Southeast have altered bass behavior, especially in spotted bass. Visiting either Lanier in Georgia,

Hartwell in South Carolina or Smith Lake in Alabama is a way to earn double credits: one in blueback behavior and the other in spotted bass behavior. This type of fishing is technical and demands extensive use of electronics over deep timber and brushpiles. The lure set is pretty specialized too, with detailed jerkbaits, topwaters, wakebaits, glide baits, small swim baits, underspins and dropshots all being key players.

## TIDAL TIME

The Potomac and James rivers are two fantastic tidal-water teachers that are frequented by circuits and tours; therefore, understanding tides and the effect they have on bass is required learning for the pro level. Due to their daily fluctuations, tidal rivers are very dynamic; fish are always on the move. Knowing how to “run with the tide” and when to fish “hard” versus “soft” cover is all part of the tidal curriculum.

## OZARK IMPOUNDMENTS

There are eight major impoundments across the Ozark Mountain range that regularly host tournaments. If you need a go-to lake to learn this area, Table Rock Lake is as good as any — much of what can be learned at the Rock can be translated to other Ozark lakes as well. Many of these lakes are deep and clear and feature a healthy mix of all three species of bass. Ozark lakes are long and twisty and tend to pattern very well with the weather. Important Ozark themes are transition banks, channel swings, bluff ends and chasing the wind. Reading “slugs” of colored water that are pulled through the systems with each heavy rain is critical, too.

## SUMMER SMALLMOUTH, NORTHERN LARGEMOUTH

During the peak of summer, many tours turn to the cooler waters of the Midwest and the Northeast, where smallmouth are predominant players. St. Clair, Lake Champlain, and the St. Lawrence River are all fantastic fisheries to learn all about smallmouth bass. Champlain and St. Lawrence offer the benefit of getting a healthy dose of Northern largemouth fishing, too, which is in my opinion is some of the best bass fishing in the world. ■



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

# TAKING THE GREAT LAKES TO FLORIDA

The more things change, the more they stay the same



## 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.

**A** bass is a bass, right? Well, maybe. Growing up and learning to fish around the Great Lakes, moving to Florida rated with the most drastic change of surroundings I could make. But a lifelong passion for giant largemouth became overwhelming, forcing me to leave the smallies behind.

I took a few things with me. There would be methods from the mega-lakes of the North that could be applied to the placid waters of the Sunshine State.

Early in my angling history, bass fishing underwent a transformation from a shoreline-based pursuit to one focused offshore. Tournaments were being won deeper, and larger bodies of water were opening up with the advent of better boats and equipment. For over 20 years, I made a living fishing so far from shore that land was often a fleeting glimpse.

Those years spent offshore taught me valuable lessons that still apply today — everywhere I fish.

## THE UNIVERSAL INFLUENCER: CURRENT

First, it's important to consider the factor that current plays in bass behavior, specifically in their

feeding habits. The more fishing experience I compile, the more I'm convinced that almost nothing trumps current.

The big brown bass of the Great Lakes realize this, but, in their case, the flow comes as a result of wind. It took little time on the Great Lakes to realize that the windiest days were often the best for fishing, given the ability to still be able to make it to productive waters. I (and my peers) adapted my methods to meet the demanding conditions of big, rough waters, utilizing long-shaft trolling motors and heavy drop-shot rigs to put lures in front of feeding bass.

That same circumstance — wind-induced current — is a factor nearly every day in Florida. Here, bass both offshore and around the bank take advantage of the afternoon breezes that make sub-tropical Florida so balmy. In fact, late-day periods are frequently the best times to fish, blazing sun or not.

Here again, current is the driving factor. It's important to take a step back while fishing and get the big picture. How is the wind affecting the area? First and foremost, watch as the wind funnels through shoreline vegetation; Florida is famous for this. Cattails, bullrushes and maiden



cane (Kissimmee Grass) make up the dominant species of shoreline cover. Anywhere the wind flows in between banks of grass, or around islands or “reed heads,” current sets up, often bringing with it a feeding frenzy. These “lanes” of activity are always key when the wind blows and activates otherwise lethargic fish to feed on the cover’s edge.

Trial and error has shown that the above scenario calls for a moving bait. ChatterBaits and spinnerbaits are staples, as they come through grass well and feature a single, strong hook capable of controlling a big fish. A swimbait could work, as could a buzzbait if the ripple’s not too overwhelming.

The current scenario also plays offshore in Florida, just as it does up North. When targeting smallies, the leading edge of a structure where the wind is hitting the feature is often the best. The leading edge of a drop-off or the leading edge of a rise or hump bring the most active fish front and center for a feeding spree. In Florida, the same applies with offshore grass or wood on flats. Where the wind is coming into the structures often harbors the best fishing. Follow offshore grass like hydrilla upwind until it empties into a basin or move across a stumpy flat to the upwind side. Big offshore largemouth seem to appear out of nowhere and set up shop.

Recently, a trip to Rodman Reservoir proved this, as a school of heavyweights held in an area where a timbered flat dumped into deep water. Numerous fish up to 8 pounds were the result. However, the following day, under calm skies, not a fish was to be found. When it’s good, it’s good.

This, again, can be moving-bait territory, but never overlook a worm. There is simply no better lure offshore in Florida than a Texas rig. And, try as I may, I’ve never disproven the rule that dark colors work best in Florida; stick to juniebug or black.

## PATIENCE PAYS OFF

Another similarity between fishing way up north and way down south is apparent in the offshore game: Don’t run and gun. As offshore smallmouth fishing became more popular, the fish got tougher to catch. My ace in the hole was often to present baits from different angles, even upwind. In any case, it was best to overwork an area with a number of choices.

The same holds true in Florida. We’ve all heard the adage about moving slow down here, and I can confirm that approach can work well. Florida bass see relentless pressure 365 days a year. For that reason, it’s often necessary to show them a unique look.

Lighter worm sinkers are the first options, but changing a retrieve angle can be more effective. I’ve found that retrieving my bait across current — fishing on a 45-degree angle — is best. This angled approach allows the current to sweep the bait into the cover or structure and provides a look Florida bass love.

Here’s how I set it up in my head: Pick out the spot the bass are likely holding and cast at an angle that allows the worm to tumble into the spot. Match weights to allow this bottom-bumping roll as well. It should feel like the worm is coming into the cover on its own. It’s like a drift-and-drag without the drift.

A final thought on northern tactics in the South: Find the juice. At this point, I can’t imagine fishing without a GPS-enabled trolling motor that allows me to hold still and duplicate casts. The same goes for an Aqua-Vu camera; the technology is imperative to get dialed into exact spots. Regardless, offshore fish hold on specific areas for a reason, and often dozens of casts are necessary to figure things out. The key then becomes precise repetition, just as it so often does on the Great Lakes. The only difference is the color of the fish. ■

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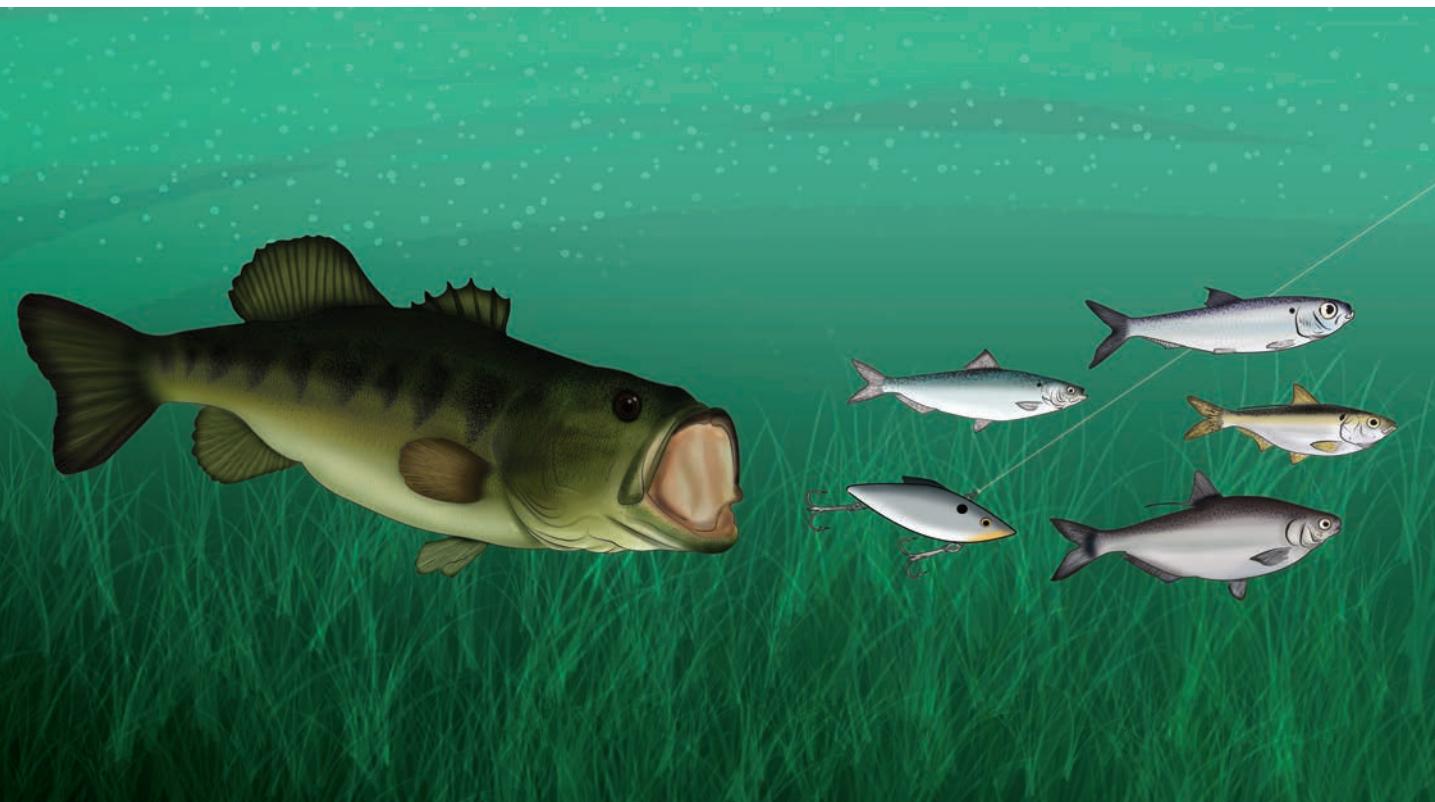


ILLUSTRATION BY BRANDON ROMAN

## THE SCIENCE OF “SHADS”

Better baitfish knowledge will help find more bass



### 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.

**W**ant to know a quick way to find out if someone is a bass addict? Show them a picture of a school of tiny fish and ask them what they see. If it’s “minnows” or “a school of fish,” they’re probably not a basser. If they use the words “shad” or “bait,” you know you’re in the right crowd.

The shad’s impact on bass-fishing culture is such that we’ve developed our own little code-switch where pretty much any silvery little minnow rolls up under the moniker “shad.”

But how much does the average angler know about the “shad” that they see, and that their bass are chasing around? Not only is better shad knowledge excellent fodder for summer barbecue discussions, it can also help you catch more and bigger bass.

By learning as much as you can about shad, you can better predict where they are and when, which is pretty much the same as finding the bass — because we all know where there’s a group of “shad,” there are likely a few bass as well.

The following is a roundup of the four predominant “shads” we see across the country, their habits, descriptions, and life histories — along with some tips on how to use that knowledge to get a few more bites next time you’re out on the water.

### THREADFIN SHAD

*(Dorosoma petenense)*

**Description:** Threadfin shad are bright silver on both sides and have a characteristic cheek spot as well as a thread trailing off their dorsal fin. Some anglers call them “yellow tails,” because the main distinguishing characteristic is their yellow fins. Unlike the larger gizzard shad, the threadfin shad also has speckles on its mouth and chin.

**Size:** Threadfin shad become sexually mature around 3 inches in length; mature adults are seldom longer than 5 inches.

**Range:** Historically only native to the rivers, lakes, and estuaries of the Gulf of Mexico,

threadfins have been relocated by conservation agencies and fishermen and are now common throughout much of the South and Mid-Atlantic. There are also established populations out west in the Colorado River system as well as in the California Delta. They don't do well in cold water, and as such, are very seldom found north of Illinois.

**Behavior:** Threadfins are pelagic and filter-feed on both zooplankton and phytoplankton. They've also been observed feeding on detritus (decomposing material in the bottom silty layer). They're commonly found relating to current and do fine in a wide variety of water clarities. Threadfin shad spawn at night and in low-light conditions in late May and June (between 65- and 70-degree water temperatures).

**How to emulate:** Lipless crank or jerkbait. Schools of gizzards often hang around current breaks in shallower water than their larger cousins. Winding a lipless crankbait around river bars, shell beds and around points and eddies is a great way to fool bass feeding on threadfins. A jerkbait is another great cold-water substitute. Threadfins spawn in very shallow water, sometimes right on the bank, and bass will follow them.

## GIZZARD SHAD

(*Dorosoma cepedianum*)

**Description:** Gizzard shad are the top dog of shads when it comes to bass fishing. They closely resemble the threadfin shad but can be easily identified by their large size, slightly deeper body shape and overbite, as well as the lack of yellow fins and speckles.

**Size:** Adult gizzard shad typically range between 9 and 11 inches, but they've been recorded up to 20 inches and 3 pounds.

**Range:** Found in most of the major river systems of the eastern United States and all their associated reservoirs. They have also been found in the Great Lakes and their drainages.

**Behavior:** Like threadfin shad, gizzards are also primarily planktivores. They can tolerate a wide depth range as well as a wide range of habitats, and are more willing than threadfins to inhabit areas with low flow, including swamps and river oxbows. They also spawn from early June through July; usually when water temperatures are around 68 degrees. Gizzards spawn during low-light conditions in and around hard surfaces close to shore, often in 5 to 10 feet of water. Hard cover like boat docks, marinas, bridge pilings and riprap are excellent places to look for gizzard shad spawning activity. Gizzard shad have sticky eggs, so sometimes you can see them stuck to ropes, docks or other cover in the water.

**How to emulate:** A big crankbait, swimbait or flutter spoon. Big bass love gizzard shad. Over the last 8 to 10 years, a whole tackle industry has spawned around emulating the biggest of the freshwater shads. Banging big crankbaits, slow winding swimbaits or stroking a big flutter spoon can do an excellent job of emulating a dying gizzard. Electronics are key — not only for finding areas with gizzards present but also for efficiently finding groups of fish. Try looking on points, ledges or any high spot or rocks located near an area that gizzard shad may frequent.

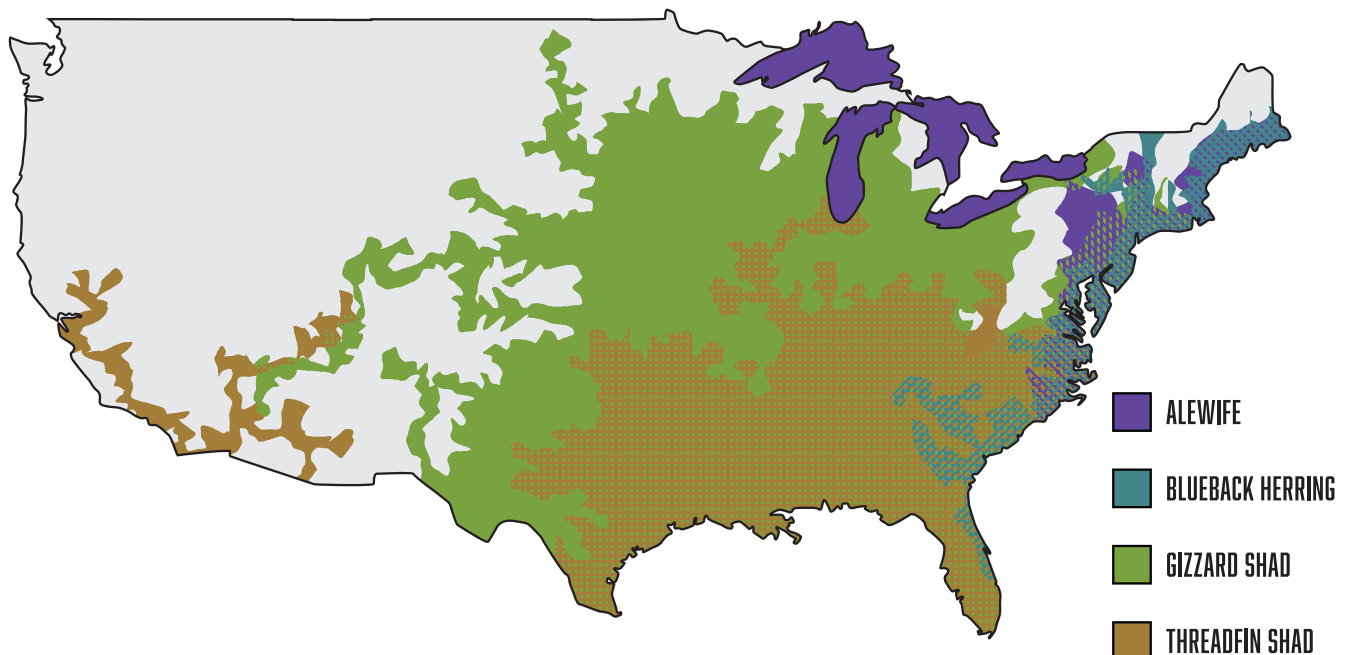
## BLUEBACK HERRING

(*Alosa aestivalis*)

**Description:** Similar in many ways to gizzard and threadfin shad, the blueback herring lacks the whiplike end to its dorsal fin. Their name comes from their characteristic blue-green back, as well as their slightly more slender body shape compared to the gizzard and threadfin shad.

**Size:** Bluebacks are typically 5 to 8 inches long but can grow to 12 inches or more.

**Range:** Native to the Atlantic Ocean and its tidal estuaries, the blueback has unintentionally established a thriving population



throughout the Carolinas, Georgia and into Alabama. They've even been found as far north as New York's Oneida Lake.

**Behavior:** A true "open water" species, bluebacks typically suspend over deep water and feed prodigiously on plankton and other small aquatic insects and even larval fishes. They spawn on long-sloping flat points when the water temperature hits 72 degrees, one of the only times of the year you can find them in shallow water.

**How to emulate:** Topwater pencil popper. When conditions are right, blueback herring can dramatically impact the behavior of bass in a fishery. Because of their pelagic nature and tendency to relate to the top quarter of the water column, bass in blueback lakes are perpetually looking up and tend to roam more than in lakes without bluebacks. For that reason, a topwater is the deal, and bigger is better — and it's not just for big ones. Bluebacks are known as one of the fastest of the shads, and there's nothing that combines surface commotion with speed like a pencil popper. Work one over points, submerged timber or anywhere else a bass can hang out near deep water waiting for a school of bluebacks to swim by. Keep your eyes on a swivel, too — bass will come up schooling on blueback lakes at any time of day.

## ALEWIFE

*(Alosa pseudoharengus)*

**Description:** Alewives are similar in shape to a blueback herring, but with their width pushed slightly forward, so the

widest part of the body is closer to the head. They also lack the distinct blue coloration of the blueback.

**Size:** Typically 4 to 7 inches; in some places even larger.

**Range:** Also originally found in the Atlantic ocean, the alewife was able to infiltrate the Great Lakes after the construction of the Welland Canal in the 1930s. Nutrient-rich waters and lack of native predators made alewife populations explode through the 1970s, when pacific salmon were introduced to help control the population. They're still the predominant bait-fish throughout much of the Great Lakes.

**Behavior:** Alewives are planktivores but also actively feed on small invertebrates on the bottom. They can congregate in huge schools that move daily, often up to the top of the water column at night and then back down deep during the day.

**How to emulate:** Alabama rig or paddle-tail swimbait. Smallmouth anglers around the Great Lakes have seen firsthand as the controversial rig has quickly cemented its place as a top-notch mimic for a pod of alewives. Pay attention to wind forecasts, as periods of consistent wind push plankton around (which in turn attracts schools of alewives). Smallmouth are roamers, so if you find areas where you mark or visually see lots of alewives around, there will likely be smallmouth. In places where an umbrella rig isn't legal, a single swimbait can also be deadly. Focus on points, boulders or anything else a smallmouth can hide behind. ■

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Conventional wisdom says to use natural colors in clear water, but these smallies — which bit chartreuse-and-blue swimbaits — proved otherwise.



**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.



# FISHING BY THE BOOK

Sometimes rules are just meant to be broken

PHOTOS COURTESY  
 TACTICAL BASSIN

**W**hat if the “book on bass fishing” is wrong?

Bass fishermen are full of superstitions, stigmas and preconceived notions. From what they wear to what foods can come on the boat (leave the bananas at home) to what it takes to catch a bass, the “rules” are endless. Ironically, many of these notions are built on fallacy.

While brainstorming a list of common misconceptions for this column, I was shocked at how many came to mind without any effort. The few that really stood out involved widely held truths we’ve probably all heard time and again: about when to throw natural-looking baits, when not to

throw topwaters, and so on. While each of these topics certainly has merit in very specific instances, there are countless examples that disprove them as broad commandments. From our own personal experience and countless hours on the water across every corner of the continent, here are a handful of chapters from the book on bassin’ that aren’t always so cut and dried.

## CLEAR WATER = NATURAL COLORS

The idea that you should be throwing natural-colored baits in clear water is generally accurate. It’s a great idea to throw green pumpkin Senkos or watermelon worms when the bite is tough. No one is

going to argue that these staple colors haven’t earned their place in your tackle box. Many anglers, though, overlook the merits of bright, bold colors in these same scenarios.

While a natural-colored worm might fool a bass into biting, a bright pink or chartreuse worm may pique their curiosity and tempt them when nothing else is working.

A natural-colored swimbait may get bit consistently in clear water, but I can recall a very specific instance where Tim and I caught dozens of 3- to 6-pound smallmouth on a chartreuse-and-blue Keitech swimbait in crystal-clear water. The fish were staging before the spawn and feeding on small baitfish. The water

temperature was in the low 40s and the fish seemed lethargic. We were getting an occasional bite bottom-bouncing natural-looking swimbaits, but when one of us picked up the chartreuse-and-blue, it was like a light switch flipped. We immediately began catching fish on nearly every cast, sometimes doubling up, and the flurry went on for over an hour.

What did those fish think that bright chartreuse swimbait was? Why did they attack it so aggressively when they could see 20-plus feet in all directions? I have no idea. But what I do know is it's happened like this for us countless times since then. Bass are curious by nature and will often eat something just to see what it is. Next time you're on the water, use this behavioral pattern to your advantage and don't be afraid to eschew what's "correct" in favor of what works.

### TOPWATERS ARE FOR EARLY AND LATE IN THE DAY

I'll be the first to admit that I've been on a few fisheries where this rule seemed to apply almost universally. It seemed like the topwater bite was decent early in the morning, but once the sun came up, the topwater bite vanished. I'm sure you've experienced this as well, and again, there are solid reasons why anglers live by many of these rules of thumb.

During my years on the water, I've noticed something very interesting about the summer topwater bite. Yes, it seems to shut off as the sun hits the water. Yes, the fish seem to back out deeper and disappear. Yes, it seems like the bite is over. But then something interesting happens between 10 a.m. and noon: The bite starts again.

As the sun gets overhead, baitfish start pulling up against cover. They gather along the edges of shoreline vegetation, around dock pilings and even in off-shore grass beds. As soon as the baitfish gather, the bass begin to attack.

Without exception, all of our best topwater bites have come in the middle of hot summer afternoons. When everyone else has either headed for the dock or started fishing deep, we're catching big bass on topwaters in the shallows. We've seen this pattern work with frogs, buzzbaits, walking baits and even big wakebaits. The next time your bite shuts off, give it a couple hours and try again. Focus your attention on cover or structure that provides shade for the bass and get ready to learn the easy way that some rules are meant to be broken.

### BASS SUSPEND WHEN THEY DON'T WANT TO BITE

Much like the other bass fishing rules on this list, the idea that bass suspend because they aren't feeding has some merit. When cold fronts blow through, bass will often lift off the bottom and suspend off the edges of structure. These fish are generally very difficult to catch.

There are also a lot of other reasons bass suspend, though, most of which have to do with hunting prey.

Spotted bass are notorious for suspending in clear reservoirs. The fish can be found anywhere from 5 to 50 feet down in the water column out over 30 to 200-plus

feet of water. Most anglers consider these fish uncatchable, but that's far from the truth. These fish position this way because many of the fish they feed on prefer open water. We could be talking about trout, kokanee, blueback herring, alewives or shad; they all exhibit similar traits during certain times of year.

One of the best ways to target suspending fish is calling them to the surface with a large topwater. Another option is to count down a lipless crankbait or underspin and slowly swim it mid-column. An often-overlooked option is to cast out a paddle-tail swimbait on a drop-shot and simply let it pendulum through the fish in a slow swing back to the boat. Regardless of your preferred method, make no mistake — these fish can be caught. While most of the fishing we do for suspending fish is oriented toward spotted bass, keep in mind that the same information applies to smallmouth and largemouth as well. If the food is in the open, the bass will adapt.

### BRAIDED LINE AND TREBLE HOOKS DON'T MIX

This is probably my favorite bass fishing topic to debate. I'm a huge advocate for using braided line, especially when it comes to reaction baits. Most anglers today accept that braided line is the superior option for main line on spinning tackle. They also accept it for flipping, punching and frog fishing. After that, the rules get blurry. Some anglers want to throw monofilament for topwater or fluorocarbon for a crankbait. While that certainly works, the advantages of braided line as a main line for both of these methods far exceeds the disadvantages.

Although morning and evening are thought to be prime topwater windows, this largemouth was very willing to eat a frog in the middle of the day.



Here are a couple examples from my own fishing that have convinced me that braid is the superior option with treble hook baits.

When bass are eating the crankbait, it seems like you can do no wrong. As long as that handle is turning, you're going to get bit. When the bite begins to slow, you start noticing that pausing your bait after bumping into structure can elicit a strike. We can all agree that a stop-and-go retrieve will get more bites than a steady retrieve when the bite is tough. Now, let's consider the stretch in fluorocarbon and how that affects your crankbait.

You're burning the crankbait just as hard as you can, and you feel the bait make contact. You pause. As you do this, the rod begins to unload and the stretch in the line starts rebounding and pulls the bait forward. As this process is slowing and the bait is beginning to stop, you're back to cranking. The result is not a stop-and-go at all; it's more of a fast, then slower, then fast, then slower, retrieve. Repeat that same scenario with braided line and you'll get a very different result. As quickly as your rod can return to straight, the bait pauses in the water. The braided line has far less stretch so when you stop, the bait stops, and when you reel, the bait moves.

I've had countless days that I've caught crankbait fish on fluorocarbon and I suddenly realize the fish want a stop-and-go retrieve. I set the rod down, pick up my "braid to leader"

crankbait combo and start catching more fish immediately.

The second scenario has to do with topwaters. I'm not going to argue the virtues of braid after the hookset. Let's just focus on the retrieve.

When you're walking a large topwater on monofilament, it can be a full-arm workout. It takes serious work to keep that bait walking side to side, but switch over to braid and it's a different story. The same bait that requires movement from the elbow down on mono can be walked with the flick of the wrist on braid. Again, the low-stretch characteristic of braid makes it very user-friendly.

Keep in mind when switching from monofilament or fluorocarbon to braided line that you should drop your rod by one power. Meaning, if you throw your crankbait on a medium-heavy crankbait rod and mono, you may be better off with a medium crankbait rod and braided line. Something has to give when you're fighting a big fish. Adapt your rods and your drag accordingly so you don't bend out your hooks the next time you hook a big one.

Bass fishing is full of misconceptions. This column barely scratches the surface of the rules and theories we choose to accept as fact every time we go fishing (except the banana thing; that's true). Keep an open mind when you're on the water and you might find you're the one catching fish when the book on bass fishing is leading others astray. ■

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# THE SPY GAME

Shrouded in mystery and intrigue, the spybait is perhaps the most misunderstood lure on the planet

By Sean Ostruszka

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

Once something gets stereotyped, it can be tough to break free of those preconceptions. Fishing lures are no exception.

Underspinnings? Those are for spotted bass. Jerkbait? Only for the cold months. Lipless crankbaits? Throw them around grass or don't throw them at all.

Is there some reality to these truisms? Certainly, but underspins have caught plenty of largemouth and smallmouth all over the country, jerkbaits excel all year (especially with new forward-facing sonar) and lipless crankbaits can be deadly in lakes without a sprig of vegetation.

The point is, don't let a stereotype stop you from trying something different.

Typecast as ultra-finesse lures only for smallmouth, clear water and when the fishing is especially tough, most anglers outside the Great Lakes hardly

give spybaits much thought. Yet pros like the Bass Pro Tour's Josh Bertrand and Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit's Chase Serafin have found these lures have plenty more applications than anglers give them credit for. It's just a matter of understanding one of the most misunderstood lures out there.

## THE BASICS

Before breaking molds, it's best to understand the simple facts.

Yes, spybaits are incredible in clear water. Yes, smallmouth love them. And yes, they work best under tough conditions. That's how Bertrand and Serafin were initially introduced to the lures, being that Bertrand's home waters are the gin-clear variety out West and Serafin lives in the heart of the Great Lakes.

Really, that all makes sense considering there's not much to spybaits to

begin with. They're tiny, minnow-profile baits with correspondingly tiny props on each end with an action that is, at best, an extremely subtle shimmy.

Fishing them is equally simple. Both pros cast it out, count it down to a desired depth (with both saying half the bites come as the bait is sinking and shimmying like a wacky rig), and then very slowly reel it back. That's it.

As such, both Bertrand and Serafin typecast the spybait for a time. Slowly but surely, though, small incidents happened that helped them realize there's a lot more to the spybait that meets the eye.

For Serafin, it was he and a buddy crushing smallmouth along a rocky, chocolate-milk-colored shoreline. Bertrand began unlocking the secrets by tossing a spybait out of desperation to a school of ledge fish that wouldn't eat anything else.



Bass Pro Tour's Josh Bertrand thinks outside the box and uses spybaits in more situations than tradition dictates, for smallmouth and largemouth bass.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

### CLEAR WATER KILLERS ANY WATER, ANY TIME

With such a subtle action, clear water seems to be mandatory for the spybait to be effective. While it helps, what an angler actually needs is not necessarily clear water but water in which you know there are fish.

"With how slow you have to fish this lure, it's not a search bait," says Bertrand, who helped design the Berkley SPY Spinbait. "You have to know the fish are there to begin with. If they're there, though, so long as I have a couple feet of visibility, I'll throw it."

Serafin will go even dingier after that one fateful muddy-water experience.

"The props may be tiny, but they put off enough vibration for the fish to find it — even in really muddy water," Serafin explains. "You just need to get it close to them, but they'll definitely eat it."

Both pros say they've used the lures with remarkable success all over the country in all water types — even the

### "ANY LURE THAT CAN GET YOU AHEAD BY GETTING YOU EXTRA BITES WHEN NOTHING ELSE CAN IS ONE WORTH TRYING."

greenish tints of Tennessee River lakes and even in the tannic waters of Florida. The key is simply knowing exactly where the fish are and then letting the subtle action and vibration call them in.

### SMALLMOUTH OR BUST A THREE-SPECIES JUGGERNAUT

If the clear-water stereotype is out, suddenly the one-species-only stereotype is, too. Then again, this isn't news to many anglers who frequent spotted bass fisheries like Lewis Smith Lake in Alabama and Lake Lanier in Georgia, and who have long known their effectiveness.

At a recent Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit event at Lewis Smith, Serafin

says a spybait was a killer all through practice, but come tournament time, the spotted bass were suspending so deep and far under docks that the spybait couldn't reach them.

"It's awful for skipping so you had to go with a swimbait," Serafin says. Still, he utilizes a spybait alongside docks all the time, routinely getting bass to come out and show themselves.

While there are smallmouth out in Arizona where he lives, Bertrand typically fishes for largemouth, so it stands to reason that spybaits work on largemouth, too. In fact, Bertrand says that under the right conditions, a spybait has become a go-to bait for him when fishing for largemouth.

"I can't tell you how many times it's put a smile on my face because it caught fish I didn't think were catchable," he admits. "Those schools of largemouth that won't look at anything, and suddenly I'm able to catch a few with a spybait."



Bertrand has even added it to his ledge-fishing rotation. He may fire them up with a big crankbait, then switch to the worm to catch a few more and then a drop-shot to milk a couple more. He'll finish with the spybait, though, which often adds a couple more bites that most anglers never would've gotten.

### TOUGH CONDITIONS ONLY MOSTLY JUST FOR TOUGH CONDITIONS

Will a spybait work when it's blowing 15 mph and cloudy? Sure. But plenty of other more efficient lures will work then, too. So why throw a spybait?

No, if either pro is breaking out a spybait, it's usually on a day when the fishing is brutally tough.

"When it's slick calm, bluebird skies, high pressure and the fish aren't reacting to anything — that's when a spybait really shines," Serafin says.

Again, both pros already know the fish are in the area when they reach for a spybait. It's a matter of getting them to bite when they truly don't feel like it, but a lazy minnow slowly swimming around barely making any vibration is so subtle that it's hard for even the most put-off bass to resist.

So, if there is one stereotype that does hold true, this one is it.

### TROUBLE WITH TREBLES IT'S ALL ABOUT THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

While it's good to identify and evaluate the most prevalent stereotypes when it comes to the spybait game, we'd be remiss if we didn't touch on two other things anglers may often hear about spybaits: that they're bad around cover and that you lose a lot of fish on them.

Unfortunately, both are true... kind of.

While Bertrand says a spybait is "the least weedless lure ever made," Serafin actually uses it a lot around the sparse weeds of lakes like St. Clair. He just makes sure to rip it up after letting his lure sink to the bottom to clear it from any potential weeds it may be collecting. The same thing holds true with rocks, as it's definitely a snaggy lure, but Bertrand also likes throwing it on shallow weed flats so long as he knows he can reel it above them while still reeling extra slow.

As for losing fish: It's going to happen. Spybaits are typically equipped with tiny hooks, which is almost always a recipe for disaster. But both pros say the right gear helps a ton.

Serafin likes a 7-foot medium- or medium-light-power rod, which helps with long casts. As for line, he spools

up 15-pound-test Seaguar Smackdown Braid to a 6- or 8-pound-test Seaguar Tatsu fluorocarbon leader. Bertrand uses a 7-foot, 2-inch medium-light-power Abu Garcia Winch spinning rod and Abu Garcia Winch spinning reel for the slower gear ratio to ensure he reels extra slow. He also forgoes the braid for 8-pound-test Berkley Nanofil main line tied to an 8-pound-test Berkley 100% Fluorocarbon leader. With either combo, the emphasis is on long casts, no stretch in the line and a rod strong enough to set the hook yet light enough to not rip the hooks out.

Still, losing fish is going to happen. Serafin just keeps it all in perspective.

"It's not like you're losing 50 percent of your fish," he quips. "It's maybe 20 percent, which is still a lot, but considering I probably get 50 percent more bites with it than some other pro who is not throwing it, I more than end up ahead."

And any lure that can get you ahead by getting you extra bites when nothing else can is one worth trying. Sadly (or perhaps happily if you're already a spybait user), the narrative surrounding spybaits means there are a lot of anglers missing out on a truly productive — though misunderstood — bait. ■



Northern smallmouth ace Chase Serafin utilizes spybaits to generate bites in scenarios where other patterns fall flat.

PHOTO BY COBI PELLERITO

# FAVORITE

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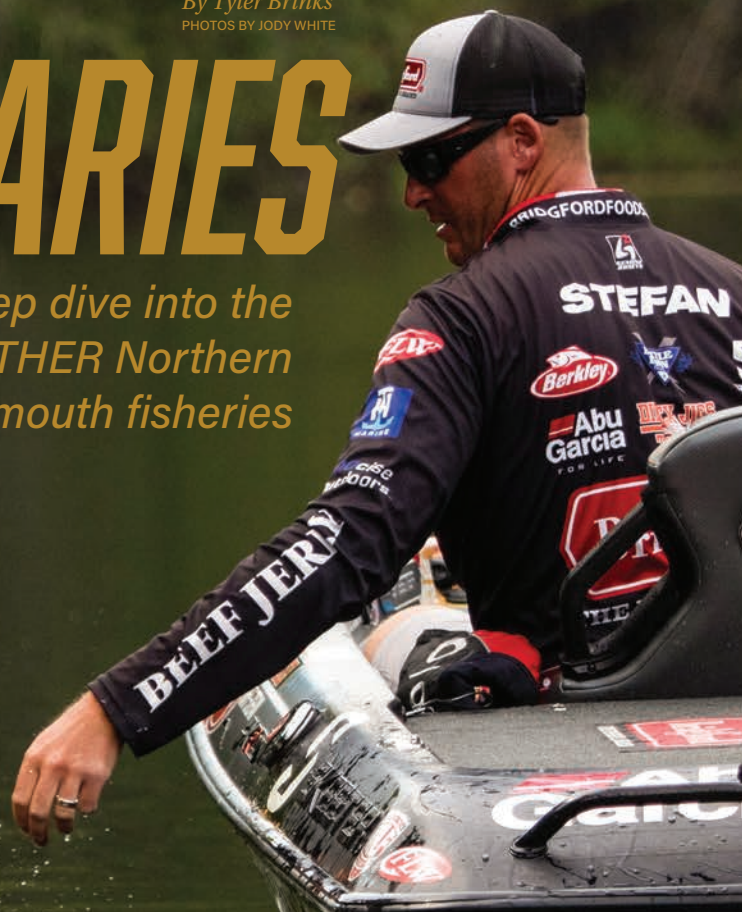
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# A TRIBUTE TO TRIBUTARIES

By Tyler Brinks

PHOTOS BY JODY WHITE

*A deep dive into the  
OTHER Northern  
smallmouth fisheries*



**N**orthern smallmouth fishing in the electronics-heavy era is often predicated on roaming expansive open-lake areas with eyes glued to a bow-mounted screen — usually equipped with forward-facing sonar. As the game has evolved, it's become clear that there really are few better ways to catch lots of big brown fish.

But for those who don't want to run with the crowd or spend countless hours bobbing around offshore, there are other options. If your speed is fishing targets on a river system or forgoing electronics and drop-shots in favor of a good pair of sunglasses and some power-fishing tackle, you don't have to miss out on all the fun.

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit veteran Matt Stefan is a huge fan of what you might call "alternative" smallmouth fishing, opting for tributaries off the main lake to catch smallmouth relating to current. At the 2020 Tackle Warehouse TITLE on Sturgeon Bay, he opened eyes by finding great success targeting smallies in three tributaries off the Bay, just like he fished growing up.



### TIMING THE BITE

Each of the four seasons provides different fishing opportunities in tributaries, and it's something you can do just about any time of year.

"There's usually a migration of fish that head up the river to spawn early in the year, and some fish stay there to feed all summer long," Stefan says.

"There will still be fish living there in the fall, and I think some fish are just river fish and will find the deepest holes they can find and stay there all winter."

Stefan says this migration to the rivers and tributaries is a common occurrence on all northern fisheries, from the tributaries flowing into all of the Great Lakes, Lake Champlain, the Upper Mississippi River and the Chippewa Flowage closer to his home in Junction City, Wisconsin.

"The best tributaries are going to be closest to the biggest populations of smallmouth in the lakes," Stefan explains. "Anything on the east or west ends of Erie or the upper sections of Lake Michigan, those areas have some excellent ones."

Stefan believes there are always some tributary smallmouths to target, but how he fishes for them changes with the seasons.

"In the spring, I'm focused on fish relating to spawning areas, and they usually want to be out of the current completely," he says. "If you can't find that, you want the lightest current you can find. I look for any slack water they can use to spawn."

As the seasons move along, things change completely: the faster the current the better.

"It's the opposite of spring as the strongest water is the best," he adds. "I don't think you can find water that's too fast for a river smallmouth in the summer, but you can find water that's too fast for your trolling motor to keep up."

Once fall arrives, Stefan focuses on some of the same summer areas but starts moving his way back out toward the lake.

"I start to look for the deeper holes closer to the lake as some of the fish migrate out," he says. "This can be some of the best fishing all year as the fish get grouped up. You also get some

fish that have been untouched all year because they run so far up the rivers and were inaccessible to most fishermen all summer long."

### TARGET-RICH ENVIRONMENTS

Moving quickly, casting reaction baits and targeting shallow cover is the norm for Stefan when targeting smallmouth in tributaries. Current is also understandably a crucial part of his plan.

"It's always current-based," Stefan says. "It varies by the season, but you're usually looking for the deeper pools and current breaks and eddies. The depth varies a lot by where you're fishing. In some tributaries, a deeper section is 3 or 4 feet deep and some it could be 10."

In addition to deeper pools, Stefan pays special attention to how the current is moving and how it changes after contacting the bank or a piece of cover.

"I watch to see where the current hits and releases off of the bank," Stefan explains. "The places where the current is strongest are what you want

to look for, either up or downstream of a river bend. You can also use your side imaging to find rocks and laydowns that create underwater eddies and breaks."

In river fishing, current breaks in any form are always likely places to hold fish, and Stefan treats each equally.

"One small isolated rock or log is just as important as a huge current break because they'll still hold a fish," he says. "I'll also watch for little cut banks where fish can scoot under and get a break from the current. These can be easy to see because it's usually darker water right on the bank."

Moving quickly and hitting as many targets as possible is his priority due to his theories on river smallmouth bass.

"I believe a lot of these fish are loners and claim a rock or log for themselves," Stefan adds. "It seems like you're targeting individual fish, so I like to cover as much water as I can. The exception is in the fall when the fish stack up in areas and you can camp out and fish those deeper holes and catch multiple fish."



Smallmouth fishing in tributaries is all about casting reaction baits and hitting targets influenced by currents.



# TRIBUTARY TACKLE



Dirty Jigs  
Luke Clausen  
Finesse Jig



Berkley PowerBait The General



Berkley PowerBait  
The Deal



Berkley Warpig



Berkley PowerBait Pit Boss

Because so many tributaries are shallow (and often narrow), Stefan fishes them like he's fishing for largemouth elsewhere — a swim jig being his favorite weapon. He adjusts his bait selection by the season, but it's always power fishing with casting gear and heavy line.

In the spring, Stefan slows down and tends to drag baits through likely spawning areas.

"Northern smallmouth in the rivers set up just like largemouth, so I'll use a lot of slow-moving stuff early in the year," he says. "A 3/8-ounce green pumpkin **Dirty Jigs Luke Clausen Finesse Jig** or a 5-inch **Berkley PowerBait The General** with a 1/4-ounce weight are two of my favorites."

Stefan picks up the pace with lipless crankbaits, swim jigs and spinnerbaits for summer and fall fishing. He'll also mix in some flipping and pitching presentations to isolated cover.

"The 3/8-ounce **Dirty Jigs Swim Jig** with a **Berkley PowerBait The Deal** as a trailer is my absolute favorite bait for river smallmouth," Stefan says. "In my opinion, the only color jig you need is white-and-chartreuse, and I'll add a white trailer."

Stefan likes to cast the swim jig to isolated targets and not retrieve the bait all the way back to the boat.

"I'll only reel it about a quarter of the way back to me," Stefan adds. "You're going to do better with it by just casting to the isolated logs, laydowns and rocks. It's the same thing with a spinnerbait where you're trying to pull fish from their home."

Stefan also likes using a Texas rig with a **Berkley PowerBait Pit Boss** with a 1/2-ounce to 1-ounce weight to pitch to thick wooden cover.

"It depends how thick to the logjams are," he says. "I'll target the cover with a swim jig, spinnerbait or pitching and then throw a **Berkley Warpig** lipless between targets. I'll use the lipless on the shallow ripples of water and small rocks as I go from one piece of cover to the next."

Fishing for tributary smallmouth up North is much like shallow-water largemouth fishing just about anywhere else. Stefan knows how fun it can be to catch them this way and get a chance to target bass that many anglers overlook. Next time you're up north chasing smallies, you'd do well to not be one of those anglers. ■



# ***THE GREAT*** ***TAILRACES***

*By Joe Sills*  
PHOTO BY JOSEPH ROMANS

**POUND FOR POUND,  
NORTHERN ALABAMA  
MIGHT HAVE SOME OF  
THE BEST SMALLMOUTH  
FISHING IN THE WORLD**

**Y**ou can find him in the current beneath the full moon. On hot summer nights when fireflies and mosquitos swarm the southern skies, Tennessee River guide and former Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit competitor Cameron Gautney will be hard at work on the water. He'll have a trio of black spinnerbaits on deck and, almost certainly, a passenger from parts unknown.

"They've come from Australia and Italy to be here," Gautney says. "These two tailraces are world famous."

The tailraces Gautney calls home are located below Wilson Dam and Wheeler Dam near Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Here, amidst the rhythmic footsteps of The Rolling Stones, Wilson Pickett and Bob Seger, who all recorded hits beside the river, the whirring turbines of two dams produce music to fishermen's ears. The tune? The sound of splashing smallmouth in raging river currents.

"I've fished tournaments on the Great Lakes," Gautney says. "They have the numbers, there's no question, but when you catch a 6-pound smallmouth in 100,000 CFMs, that's one of the hardest fights you'll ever have in your entire life."

### THE NEXT WORLD RECORD?

The unique conditions surrounding these tail waters are nothing new. For decades, those in the know have pined over tales of bronzeback battles that are now the stuff of legend — like Owen Smith's Alabama state-record smallmouth, a 1950 catch below Wheeler that tipped the scales at 10 pounds, 8 ounces.

Though it's been more than 70 years since Smith's record catch, Gautney believes another state or world record could still be lurking in the area.

"Every year, we see or hear of a few 8-pound smallmouth being caught down here, so I would say it's possible," he posits. "Another unique thing about our genetic lot is that the ones you catch are 'mean mouth' bass, which is a hybrid between smallmouth and spotted bass."

Gautney is a Shoals-area local. He's lived on both Wheeler and Wilson and has at times spent 300 days a year on the water. All that time topside equates to a wealth of knowledge on these special fisheries whose only equal in terms of top weight lies several hours north on the Tennessee-Kentucky border at Dale Hollow.

"In my opinion, this area offers more habitable water than most tailraces," Gautney explains. "If you look at other tailraces, they're usually narrow and have straight banks. Wheeler and Wilson both have large slack-water areas that have good smallmouth-depth spawning flats.

The reason we get so many quality fish is either that or simply the size of the area enabling them to hold larger populations of fish."

Mix that population with highly oxygenated, cool water coming from TVA dams and you have a recipe for fun. But targeting those fish requires both deftness and patience.

### INTO THE DARKNESS

For Gautney, that sometimes means idling out into the darkness on perfect full-moon nights when the turbines slow down and the full playing field of these tailraces is laid before him.

"They call it night blading," he explains. "It's a great way to catch big smallmouth around a full moon in July. It can work in June also. Depending on the current you're fishing in, you'll want to throw a 1/2-, 3/4- or 1-ounce spinnerbait with a single Colorado blade. If a client calls me and says they want to go night blading, I tell them that we're throwing one bait — because it's one of the best bites you'll ever get on."



Tennessee River system veteran Cameron Gautney points to a handful of tailrace spots as some of the best smallmouth fishing in the world.

PHOTO BY ROB NEWELL



Beginning in the current just before dark, Gautney bides his time, making his way out to slack water as the turbines wind down. There, he searches for boulders or brush piles on the bottom while following the remnants of 100-year-old roads created when the dams were made. Those roads, he says, were built on rock beds that were then covered in gravel.

Indeed, historical photos from the 1910s and 1920s, when Wilson and Wheeler dams were under construction, show a labyrinth of roadbeds and heavy industrial-era machinery snaking their way through the Tennessee River Valley.

*IN THE SUMMER, I MIGHT GET 25 PERCENT OF CUSTOMERS THAT WANT TO FISH FOR SMALLMOUTH ONLY. IN THE SPRING AND FALL, IT'S AT LEAST 95 PERCENT OF THEM.*

On average, Gautney says fish hooked over these ruins average 3 pounds or better. They can grow past 6 pounds, biting from just before sunset into the night. Generally, he uses a 7-foot, 3-inch medium-heavy rod with 15-pound-test fluorocarbon and a 6:3:1 reel to do the damage. The combo keeps his spinnerbait slowly rolling along, "just fast enough to keep the blade spinning," while the relatively narrow line helps keep his bait in the strike zone while reducing additional drag created by the current.

Typically, the strike is ferocious, and the battle is intense. With 15-pound line, he encourages customers to use a little more care than they might with 17- or 20-pound-test line on the main lake.

"Be as gentle as you can with them," he says. "You can horse a smallmouth until it gets close to the boat. Once they see the boat, they go all crazy. If you're in very strong current, try to work that fish towards the back of the boat and bring it out in the slack water beside the motor."

"It's not the only deal this time of year," Gautney adds, "But when you get bit on a spinnerbait at night, you aren't going to catch a small one."

**OPPORTUNITIES AND OPTIONS**

A handful of incredible nights each year does not make a world-famous fishery. They certainly don't sustain a guiding business full-time. Therein lies the joy of the shoals. Gautney says they produce year-round.

"During the summer, I might get 25 percent of customers that want to fish for smallmouth only," he says. "In the spring and fall, it's at least 95 percent of them."

Gautney says the same rock piles, roads and brushpiles that sustain him at night are productive throughout the year. The catch is having the determination and patience to find the bite.

"If you grew up down here around Wilson Dam, it's what you grow up doing; we chase smallmouth year-round," he says.

"One good thing about it is, if you know how to fish current, you can come here any time of year with a spinnerbait, swim-bait, crankbait and a jig. You can fish the same areas pretty much all year, besides the spawn, with minor adjustments."

Still, the two tailraces do fish differently. Though they both offer large spawning areas and ample fish habitat, fishing at Wilson usually involves drifting along current seams and searching for eddies. On Wheeler, the fish are more likely to gravitate to structure.

In either case, ambitious anglers hoping to take on the tailraces on their own should heed his advice: Wear a life jacket, know the current schedules to see which units will be on at what time and use your trolling motor when the water is low — the shoals have a treacherous history for a reason. Many of their rock piles are not marked on charts. Above all, he says, be patient.

"We see it all the time on guide trips," Gautney adds. "In the morning, there are 100 boats below the dam and by 8 a.m. or 9 a.m., they start driving out. Fishing below the dam is not an all-day deal. It happens in very small windows, so if you're set on fishing there for smallmouth, be patient with it. Put a few rods in your hands and stay up there all day." ■





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MLF Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Angler Brian Latimer / Photo: MLF

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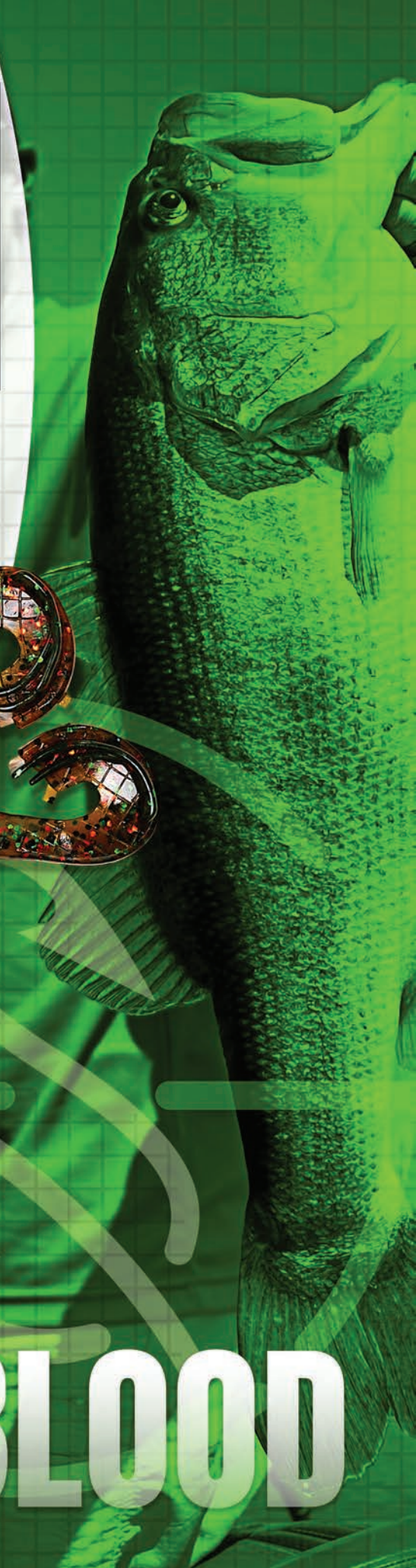
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GOOGAN BAIT'S  
NEW BLOOD



# MYTH

# BUSTERS



WITH CONTEMPORARY  
FISHING KAYAKS, THE  
ONLY LIMITATIONS  
ARE IN YOUR HEAD

## I hear it all the time.

*Man, look at all the stuff you got on that kayak. I'd lose all my gear if I tried to get out there in that thing.*

*Those kayaks are pretty neat, but I'm just too old and out of shape to spend the day fishing out of a piece of plastic.*

The list goes on and on.

These are comments I routinely hear as I take my kayak to some of the most popular bass fishing lakes across the country. Kayaks are everywhere you go these days, yet many anglers fail to realize the endless opportunities to make these little plastic boats full-blown bass fishing machines.

There isn't much that you can't do with a contemporary fishing kayak, from going simple on a small pond or stream to launching a fully rigged bass fishing platform with motors and electronics on the biggest lakes in the country. The sky really is the limit for today's kayak angler.

If you happen to be one of those anglers who thinks kayaks are a young man's game or are simply too ill-equipped for your bass fishing needs — or maybe you're interested in dipping your toes in new waters and aren't sure where to start — stick around. I'd love to change your mind.

By Matt Ball

PHOTO BY BOGDAN KOROSTETSKYI



Hull design and weight capacity are major factors in determining a kayak's stability.

**MYTH #1**

**“KAYAKS JUST AREN'T STABLE ENOUGH FOR ME.”**

As is the case with just about anything else you purchase, it's all about the fit. Correct kayak selection is the key to disproving this common misconception.

To be fair, many kayaks are not that stable. The design of the hull and the weight capacity can make all the difference in how stable your kayak is going to be. Generally, the wider the kayak the more stable it is; and the larger you are, the bigger kayak you probably need for a comfortable experience on the water.

There are so many variables that factor into this issue that it could be an entire article on its own, but the bottom line is this: If you're going to load your kayak with batteries, electronics, multiple rods and large amounts of tackle and other gear, you need a kayak with a large weight capacity and a fairly wide hull. If you have a narrow kayak with a weight capacity that barely exceeds your body weight with a few tackle items and gear, you'll probably end up getting wet at some point.

Consequently, testing out various boats is invaluable in making the right decision about what kind of kayak you need. Set up a time at a local kayak dealership to test out different models to get a feel for the stability and space available in the different models. Even if a brand-new kayak isn't in your budget, you can see what best fits your needs before buying a used one. Once you have the right kayak, standing up to sight-fish beds or punch thick grass mats is no problem at all.

**MYTH #2**

**“I JUST CAN'T COVER MUCH WATER IN A KAYAK.”**

With the advent of pedal drives and motors designed for kayaks, the issue of being confined to a small area of a fishery is a thing of the past. Most every kayak manufacturer has developed a pedal drive system of their own, which can greatly increase your fishing range.

A pedal drive also makes fishing much more efficient, too, as you're able to cover water and cast at the same time, eliminating the need to put your rod down while paddling from spot to spot.

If you typically fish from a bass boat, an electric motor might be more your speed. Manufacturers have begun developing boats that are designed to easily add a motor — and many companies have products designed to adapt a motor to just about any kayak. Whether you want a stern-mounted electric outboard like the Torqeedo Ultralight 1103 (a 3-horsepower equivalent motor with GPS-enabled battery), or a bow-mounted trolling motor using a lightweight lithium battery like the Dakota 100ah, the options are endless to get you away from the launch ramp and back safely.

The size of water you're able to fish increases as well, thanks to pedal drives and motors. With the right safety gear, kayaks allow an angler to fish offshore on big fisheries. In the fall, one of my favorite places to fish offshore is on Lake Erie, chasing after big smallmouth. I'll often go 2 miles offshore to get to productive areas, and having a motor and pedals gives me peace of mind that I can get back quickly if the conditions change, as they so often do out on big open waters.



### MYTH #3

**“I USE TOO MUCH GEAR TO FISH FROM A KAYAK.”**

While it's true that you'll never be able to carry the amount of gear in a kayak that you can in a 19- or 20-foot bass boat, with the right kayak and storage system, you shouldn't have to leave much behind. Gear tracks and accessories mounted strategically around your kayak can easily allow you to safely carry as many rods as you need. On a normal day of fishing, I often carry six to eight rods with me.

The key to taking this many rods is having rod holders to store them in when not in use so you have plenty of room to cast and land fish. Rod holders from companies like YakAttack enable you to secure rods and stow them out of the way and safe from potentially falling overboard.

As far as tackle, a kayak's main storage usually comes in the form of a crate behind the seat. The simple crate is the heart of the kayak fishing craft. You want a crate that will hold multiple tackle boxes and gear that you may need to quickly access.

Many people prefer to make their own crate, but you can also buy one that's designed specifically for kayak fishing.

Kayak anglers don't need to sacrifice when it comes to electronics, either. With some simple rigging and lightweight lithium batteries, you can run the same high-tech electronics you might run on a bass boat (such as standard sonar, forward-facing sonar and Power-Poles).

Ultimately, the options are available to give you all the technology a bass boat has, but in a smaller, less expensive package.

***TRUST ME, IF YOU'RE ABLE TO CLIMB INTO A BASS BOAT AT THE RAMP, YOU'RE ABLE TO GET IN AND OUT OF A FISHING KAYAK.***

### MYTH #4

**“I'M TOO OLD AND OUT OF SHAPE FOR KAYAK FISHING”**

Many people's first experience on a kayak is in a low-end big box store sit-inside kayak. While these are great platforms for getting people out enjoying the water, the difference in comfort between those kayaks and well-designed fishing kayaks is night and day.

With the increased stability of contemporary fishing kayaks comes the added benefit of a raised seat, which makes sitting more comfortable and standing much easier. The raised seat takes stress off your lower back as well as allowing you to easily stand and stretch your legs throughout the day. I often go well over eight hours in my kayak without ever getting out or standing up. Another benefit of having a stable kayak with a raised seat is the ease of getting in and out. Simply twisting sideways in the seat and stepping out onto the bank makes it easy — no matter your age or skill level.

Trust me, if you're able to climb into a bass boat at the ramp, you're able to get in and out of a fishing kayak.

Fishing kayaks can be outfitted with just about every bell and whistle that you'd put on a bass boat.



PHOTO BY MATT BALL



Beginning kayak anglers can get into the game relatively inexpensively before they commit to a big-ticket purchase of a fully outfitted kayak.

**MYTH #5**

**“I’D HAVE TO SPEND THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS TO GET A NICE FISHING KAYAK.”**

It’s true that if you want to go all-out and get the newest top-of-the-line kayak and deck it out with fish finders, motors and all the other bells and whistles, the price tag can climb quite quickly. There are many pre-rigged fishing kayaks on the market that can cost well north of the \$5,000 mark.

The beauty of kayak fishing, though, is that you don’t have to go to that extreme to get a high-quality kayak that will check all the boxes. Buying a used kayak from the online marketplace can save you hundreds. Just be sure to choose one that will handle all the gear that you plan to put on it.

Look for models from major kayak manufacturers like Jackson, Hobie, NuCanoe, Wilderness Systems, Native Kayak, Bonafide, Feel Free, Old Town and Crescent (among many others in the ever-growing industry). Each of these companies have kayaks that will handle the load that rigging out a fishing kayak will require.

As for motors, many people have done amazing DIY conversions for regular trolling motors that will get you farther from the ramp on a much tighter budget. YouTube is full of amazing DIY ideas for tackle crates, rod holders, motor modifications and more to make your kayak an amazing fishing

machine on a budget. The important thing is to have a safe and stable kayak that enables you to get out and chase fish on whatever water you chose.

There truly is a kayak for every style of fishing. The heart of kayak fishing will always be the simplicity of throwing a kayak in the back of the truck or on top of the car, grabbing a rod and a few baits and getting away from it all. That’s what got most of us into kayak fishing in the first place.

Still, if you want to turn your kayak into your own mini bass boat, the technology and resources are available, and with them you can build yourself a kayak that truly has the ability to go where all the bass boats go — and where they can’t. ■

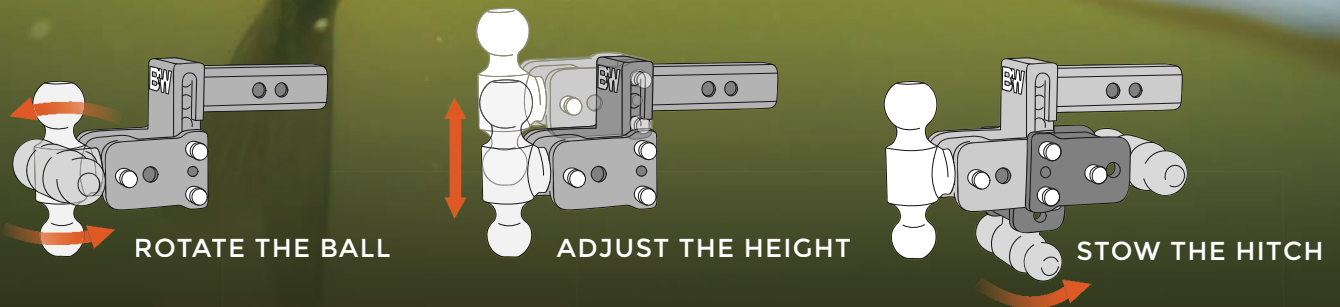
*EDITOR’S NOTE: Matt Ball is a professional kayak angler from Little Hocking, Ohio. He was the first-ever Kayak Bass Fishing National Champion in 2016, and has since been ranked among the top kayak anglers across the country while fishing the Kayak Bass Fishing Trail, Hobie Bass Open Series and BASS Nation Kayak Series. Ball supports the local kayak clubs in his home state of West Virginia and Ohio, where in 2020, he won the first West Virginia State Championship for WV BASS Nation kayak series.*



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# A NEW RENAISSANCE

## Smallmouth Fishing on the Great Lakes Has Always Been Great — *It's Just Getting Better*

By Joe Balog

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Some 30 years have passed since major bass tournaments first visited the Great Lakes. During that period, gigantic catches at scores of events made headlines, celebrating these big lakes as the premier smallmouth destinations in the country.

Early on, Great Lakes staple techniques were pretty basic: Heavy lead-headed lures were drifted over prime structures, immortalizing the phrase “drift-and-drag.” It wasn’t long before these methods were replaced by more precise structure-fishing systems borrowed from Western finesse techniques. In more recent years, savvy anglers have expanded further, pushing the envelope to catch more and bigger bass all across the North.

Prior to 1990, most bass tournaments on the Great Lakes were shallow-water affairs, as anglers stayed close to the shoreline, fishing rocks and weeds for largemouth and smallmouth alike. In the early 90s, though, a renaissance was occurring across the North, as anglers ventured further offshore and began fishing deeper. They were quickly rewarded.

Huge catches (by the day’s standards) were the result, as gigantic schools of unpressured smallmouth roamed vast basins previously rarely explored. At the time, it wasn’t uncommon to catch 50 or more fish a day, most of them being in the 2- to 3-pound range.

Jonathon VanDam scoops up a chunky Great Lakes smallmouth.



Author Joe Balog is no stranger to trophy smallmouth and has witnessed the evolution of tactics on the Great Lakes over the past 30 years.

PHOTO BY MILLENNIUM PROMOTIONS, INC.

### EARLY OFFSHORE TECHNIQUES

The primary method for targeting those offshore fish was drifting with the wind and dragging grubs on a lead head, along with Carolina-rigged plastics. The tube would soon replace both with its inception in the early 90s, offering uncanny appeal to smallmouth bass. Throughout the period, myself and others like me would design extra-fat tubes and custom lead heads to appeal to bigger fish and prevent snagging on the bottom.

A few traditional smallmouth lures were still being used during that period: Blade baits — like the original Silver Buddy — jiggling spoons and bucktail jigs all played a role (but rarely delivered wins), as they were primarily used during cold-water periods outside of tournament season.

In addition to these old-school tactics, smallmouth anglers were expanding their approach across the north by using Southern techniques. Legendary pro Rick Clunn popularized waking a spinnerbait with a victory at the Thousand Islands in 1992 and Kevin VanDam further solidified the technique with high finishes all across the North. Gaudy chartreuse baits with painted blades caught quick limits of 3-pounders, and fisheries from New York to Wisconsin exposed their substantial smallmouth populations.

**“THERE’S NO PLACE YOU CAN HAVE A BETTER SHOT AT A TROPHY SMALLMOUTH.”**

While the drift-and-drag method received unparalleled tournament attention, its effectiveness was quickly questioned. Electronics were advancing, and GPS technology was becoming a staple among serious bass anglers. In addition, Lake Erie gurus like Steve Clapper and Dan Devera were using long-shaft trolling motors to hold their boats precisely over structure, regardless of weather conditions. Fishing pressure was increasing, and bass numbers appeared to be reducing, requiring a more specialized approach.

“It just made sense” remembers Clapper, who is regarded as a pioneer of Great Lakes structure fishing. “We were drifting, but the fish were holding on specific spots. I just decided to keep my boat over them and avoid the down time.”



PHOTO BY MILLENNIUM PROMOTIONS, INC.



Ron Nelson has been chasing, and catching, smallmouth bass on the Great Lakes and other northern fisheries for decades.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



The rough waters of the Great Lakes, however, required specialized tackle to get down to the fish. While targeted depths were now approaching 30 feet, heavier lead heads were required to get down and stay down. Manufacturers began producing specialized tackle. Ohio Pro Lure, an early provider of jig heads around Lake Erie, expanded their lineup to include 1/2- and 3/4-ounce models. Newly introduced fluorocarbon fishing lines sank, helping the cause.

Bass fishing continued to progress across the North, and tactics were refined to better fish isolated deep structure. While specialized tackle made anglers more effective, one technique would change the game forever.

## THE [DROP-] SHOT HEARD ROUND THE WORLD

I first remember drop-shot fishing on Lake Erie around 2001. While tube jigs continued to produce great catches, they also caught loads of freshwater drum, a nuisance fish with no predators and growing numbers. Drop-shot fishing was all the rage at the time out West, and it quickly spread east along with the crowd favorite Roboworm.

For me, there seemed to be no logic in using a worm. For some time, it was well known that smallmouth across the Great Lakes primarily feed on gobies. Based on the knowledge to “match the hatch,” I designed the first-ever goby-imitating lure (with the help of Clapper and Erie ace Dave Hayward). Over the course of three years, that bait won every major bass tournament held on Lake Erie, and many across other sections of the Great Lakes.

Over time, drop-shot lures further evolved. Berkley’s Gulp! line was incredibly effective for a while. Soft Japanese-inspired baits were tops, the Jackall Crosstail Shad and Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm being among the best. Finally, super-plastics saturated the scene, with the Strike King Z2 being fondly regarded as a local secret during the early 2000s.

Drop-shot, drop-shot, drop-shot. For years, that seemed to be the only game in town across the Great Lakes, and certainly the only lure capable of winning a tournament. But within the last decade, there’s been a notable change. Leading professionals will help me explain.

## ZERO TO 60 IN 2.0 DECADES

Ron Nelson won Polaris Rookie of the Year on the then-FLW Tour in 2019. A year later he won Angler of the Year.

While you might think Nelson came out of nowhere to establish himself as a dominant force on the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit, he was long making a name for himself up North on the Great Lakes and other fisheries.

“Twenty years ago, I was dragging tubes like everyone else,” he says. “But there’s not a strong bite for that now.”

Nelson explains that a combination of increased water clarity and more advanced anglers across the region made his home waters in Michigan more difficult fisheries.

“It used to be that a small percentage of anglers knew how to catch them,” he adds. “Now, with advanced mapping and better electronics, everybody gets right on the fish.”

Nelson’s method to outpace the competition can be summed up by two words: electronics precision.

“Shallow-water sight fishing was always my specialty,” he says. “I’d watch the reactions of the fish to different baits and different casts. Now, I do the same thing on structure”



**“OFTEN, THE BEST PORTION OF THE WATER COLUMN IS FAR FROM THE BOTTOM.”**



Jonathon VanDam targets suspended smallmouth bass with finesse baits. These often overlooked fish are positioned high off the bottom.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Nelson insists that to excel in today's advanced age of ultra-precise electronics, an angler must be equally precise.

Utilizing forward-facing sonar, he picks out specific fish on targets and keeps his distance. Long casts are the name of the game, and often with a multitude of lures.

“I use a lot of jerkbaits and spinnerbaits,” he continues. “And then there's tubes and drop-shots and jigs. I use Silver Buddys, big swimbaits, spybaits, and glide baits as search lures, and a bunch of different Ned rigs. Topwaters when it's calm can be a big deal. You better have a boatload of lures.”

By staying back and diversifying his offerings, Nelson shows multiple options to pressured fish, resulting in more bites. He also notes that both larger and smaller lures seem to be producing better than the standard smallmouth offerings coming in around 4 inches.

Jonathon VanDam follows the same theme — but for different reasons.

“The fish have gotten bigger” he posits. “It's taking 25 pounds or more to win tournaments.”

For that reason, according to VanDam, top anglers often swing for the fences right from the start.

The Michigan pro rattled off some of his favorite mega-mouthfuls.

“Googan's 5-inch Saucy Swimmer. [Strike King] KVD 300 jerkbaits. The 10XD crankbait; all of these are real players for me,” he says.

The big fish VanDam targets are regularly eating large forage, including meaty gobies and perch. His big lures simply cull out the smaller fish that are unnecessary to place well in tournaments.

But it's not all big all the time.

“There's more pressure than ever, too,” he says. “More fishermen are traveling to the Great Lakes, and rightfully so. There's no place you can have a better shot at a trophy smallmouth.”

Legions of anglers have created wary bass, occasionally resulting in a need for further finesse.

“Small swimbaits — the 2.75- to 3.3-inch models — are ideal,” VanDam adds. “And I use a black marabou hair jig in 1/16 ounce.”

Often, the best portion of the water column is far from the bottom.

“Suspended fish get missed a lot,” he says. “I pay close attention to my depth finders and fish finesse baits way up off the bottom.”

If Nelson and VanDam and all the others are to be believed (and they certainly are), bass fishing on the Great Lakes is again undergoing a renaissance period. Anglers are targeting fish with a far larger array of methods than they did just a decade ago, often focusing high in the water column rather than strictly near the bottom. Immediately, I'm reminded of the way ledge fishing techniques expanded in the early 2000s.

The old guard is finding it necessary to adapt as well. Steve Clapper now credits many of his catches to a variety of swimbaits fished at various water depths and speeds.

What a stark contrast to the times when a single rod did all the damage. But with this expansion comes the chance for discovery, always the allure of big-water bass fishing. ■

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# MASTERS

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## JERKBAITS FOR SMALLMOUTH

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

*As told by Kevin VanDam*  
PHOTOS BY PHOENIX MOORE

**I**'ve been fishing jerkbaits for smallmouth bass for as long as I can remember. I started with the original Rapala Floating Minnow, the Bomber Long A and the Smithwick Rogue. Since then, jerkbaits have come a long, long way. I've even designed a few myself for Strike King that are at the core of my jerkbait fishing.

What hasn't changed over the years is the fact that smallmouths absolutely love the erratic action of a jerkbait. It's a terrific lure that can cover water and trigger strikes. That will never change, and it's why I almost always have a jerkbait or two tied on when I'm fishing smallmouth waters.



## HIGHLIGHTS

I've won three national bass tournaments on the St. Lawrence River, and jerkbaits played a key role in two of those wins. But when I think of my personal highlights of jerkbait fishing for smallmouths, I remember lots and lots of really big fish — over 6 pounds — that I've caught on these lures. I love smallmouth bass, and when conditions are right, there's no better way to catch them than on a jerkbait. In fact, conditions are usually good for a jerkbait bite on most smallmouth waters.

## WHEN

There's really no "best time" for jerkbait fishing when you're targeting smallmouths. I start fishing jerkbaits in the early spring, after the water has warmed into the low 40s, and I keep fishing them until it cools below that level in the fall. As long as you have good water clarity, the jerkbait is a strong choice, and it can be effective when bass are up near the surface all the way down to 20 feet or even more. It has that kind of "pull."

Smallmouths will come a long way to eat a jerkbait, especially when the water's warm in the summer to mid-fall when they're most active.

## WHERE

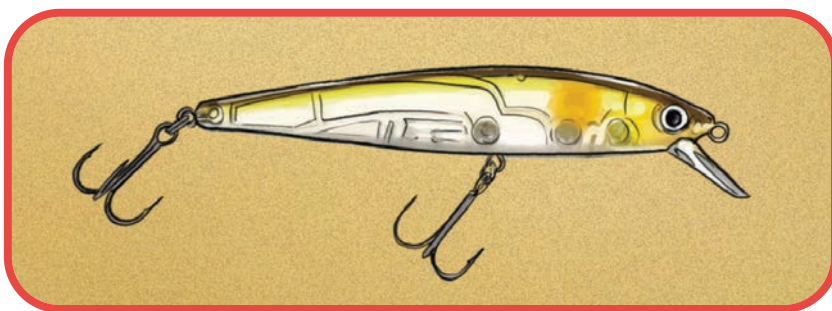
A jerkbait is best near some kind of edge. My favorite cover for jerkbait fishing is scattered rock or grass. Transition areas are great, too. Where you find a boulder in the middle of smaller rock is almost a sure thing. The very best situation is probably when you find scattered grass and rock together. Some of my very best days of smallmouth fishing with jerkbaits came from those kinds of places.

## TACKLE

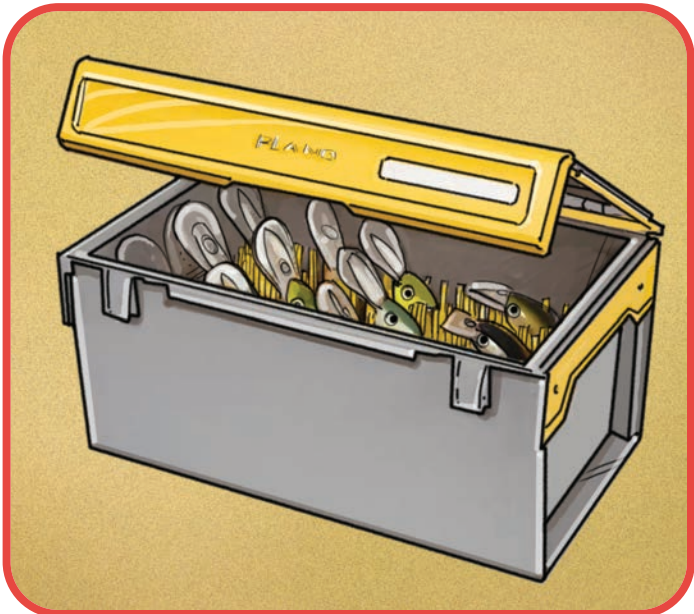
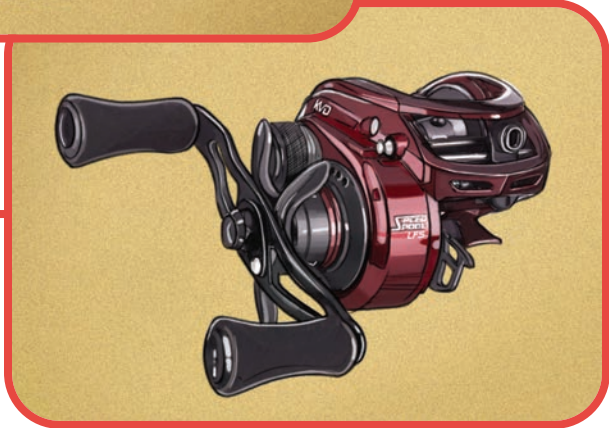
My go-to jerkbait combo starts with 12-pound-test Bass Pros XPS 100% Fluorocarbon line spooled onto a Lew's KVD LFS casting reel with a 7.5:1 gear ratio on a medium-heavy 6-foot-10 Lew's KVD GC2 casting rod. It's a setup I designed and one that's perfectly adapted for the way I fish a jerkbait.

I'm pretty tall, so I like the 6-foot-10 rod, but Lew's also makes a 6-foot-8 version that's just right for shorter anglers or anyone who's more comfortable with a little bit shorter rod. The reel is fast, but not too fast. I move the jerkbait with the rod tip and only use the reel to take up slack. If I use a faster reel, I tend to pull the bait with the reel. It's a personal thing, and the 7.5:1 gear ratio allows me to fish a jerkbait at a comfortable cadence.

**I WORKED REALLY HARD WITH STRIKE KING TO DEVELOP A LINEUP OF JERKBAITS THAT COVERS ALL THE BASES. IT'S CALLED THE KVD JERKBAIT, AND IT COMES IN FOUR MODELS.**



I do most of my jerkbait fishing with 12-pound line. If I want to go a little shallower, I'll switch to 14 pound, and if I want a little more depth, I can drop to 10 or even 8. But 12 is a good starting point for most of my jerkbait fishing. It allows me to make a long cast, and it has the strength and responsiveness to deal with most cover situations.



## LURES

I worked really hard with Strike King to develop a lineup of jerkbaits that covers all the bases. It's called the KVD Jerkbait, and it comes in four models.

The 100 is 3.5 inches long and is an ultra-finesse jerkbait with just two treble hooks that's perfect for shallow water and

when conditions are tough. The 200 is 4 inches long, also has two trebles and gets down to 3 or 4 feet. The 300 is probably my workhorse jerkbait. It's 4.5 inches in length and is my choice about 60 or 70 percent of the time. It has three trebles and dives to about 6 feet. Then there's the 300 Deep, which has the same body as the 300 but dives about twice as deep and suspends with its nose down, which can be important at times.



All the jerkbaits I've designed have a weight-transfer system so they cast really well and they suspend. You can also work them really aggressively, which suits my fishing style.

When it comes to colors, I generally lean toward the most natural patterns that match the forage in the water I'm fishing. My all-time favorite is probably clear ayu because I think it's a great match for the perch that are usually common in smallmouth waters. I go to brighter — beacon-type — colors during the spawn and postspawn when I think I may need to pull the bass toward my lure from greater distances. That's when I tie on a color like pro citrus shad or something bright that they can see from 20 feet away or more. It can make a big difference at times, but I generally believe that the action of a jerkbait is more important than its color.

## THE BASICS

Because a lot of smallmouth water is very clear and a jerkbait is generally better in clear water, I like to make long casts. Once the lure hits the water, I'll start jerking right away. It's important to keep some slack in the line. I generally have about 2 feet of slack, which means that I have to move my rod tip 2 feet before I feel the line tighten on the lure and it starts to move.

I generally snap the rod tip pretty hard when fishing a jerkbait. I want it to move sharply and erratically. That's what triggers the strikes. A slow pull or drag is rarely effective. My retrieve is so aggressive that you can actually hear and see the line slapping the water in front of me, and the momentum of the rod movement is enough for the tip to sort of rebound back into position for the next jerk.

Of course, every situation is different, and some days the fish want a more or less aggressive retrieve. You'll know you've got it right when you go to twitch the bait and it feels like you've hit a brick wall. Then it's time to set the hook. I do that by pulling into the fish from the side and letting the rod load. Sharp hooks will do the rest. I use Mustad KVD Short Triple Grip Trebles in size 4 for most of my jerkbaiting. They're sharp and strong and — because they're short — they reduce the leverage a fish has when trying to throw the bait.

## BONUS

A lot of anglers lose jerkbait fish at the boat because they've only got one hook in them or the hook is in an awkward position. To avoid that, I do a couple of things. First, a lot of anglers use a medium-action rod for jerkbait fishing, but my medium-heavy rod allows me to get a better hookset. I also tighten my drag so that it won't slip on the hookset, even with a big fish.

Second — and this can be critical — when I get the fish near the boat, I'm always watching to see how it's hooked. If it's a good fish or not hooked very well, I'll punch the free spool button and use my thumb as the drag for any sudden pulls on a short line. I feel like I can be a lot more responsive than the drag in that situation.

If the fish is not well hooked, I'll take things slow and look for an opportunity to pull another hook into the fish as it changes direction or by changing the direction of the pressure I put on it. Doing these things near the boat often means the difference between boating your trophy and watching it swim away. ■

*Kevin VanDam*  
MOSSY OAK FISHING  
TEAM LEADER



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# THE JUICE

TACKLE, TOURNAMENTS & TIPS



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



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PHOTO BY JEAN OSTRUSZKA



**1. USAA PATRIOT CUP PRESENTED BY BERKLEY**  
**Kissimmee, Florida**  
**John's Lake, Lake Toho, Lake Bellalago**

Nov. 6-11, 2020/Aired April & May

No matter the competition format, the state or the time of year, whenever there's a tournament to be won on a crankbait, it's foolish to bet against Takahiro Omori. The Japanese pro has made a nifty living ("nifty" meaning just shy of \$3 million in career winnings) thanks to his fondness for power fishing, and specifically, his ability to catch fish on a plug.

So it came as no surprise when Omori pulled out the Daiwa cranking rod and went to work with a squarebill in the Championship Round of the USAA Patriot Cup presented by Berkley. Fishing Lake Bellalago, Omori connected with 16 largemouth for 35 pounds, 11 ounces to claim his second MLF Cup trophy in a year (he also won the 2020 Summit Cup on Lake of the Ozarks).

But it didn't come easy. Omori picked his way through a seemingly endless series of grassy banks, docks and manmade cover surrounding Ballalago, jousting with Jared Lintner

throughout the day and landing a pair of fish — a 3-2 and a 3-6 — in the final 30 minutes to overcome a 4-pound deficit that Lintner had built on his own crankbait pattern.

**2. BASS PRO TOUR TORO STAGE ONE PRESENTED BY POWER-POLE**

**Sam Rayburn Reservoir, Texas**  
 March 19-26

As if Ott DeFoe hadn't already claimed the state of Texas as his personal tour-level tournament playground with a pair of Bass Pro Tour and MLF Cup wins in 2020, the Tennessee pro planted a proverbial Volunteers flag deep in the heart of Texas again in late March — specifically on the north end of Sam Rayburn.

Relying on what he described as "more of a rotation than a pattern" in the timber-loaded Angelina River arm, DeFoe put 13 fish on SCORETRACKER® in the Championship Round on Rayburn for 30-2, narrowly squeezing past Washington pro Luke Clausen (27-5) in the final five minutes of the final period. DeFoe pulled to within 1 ounce of Clausen with three minutes left in the competition, and then

snatched his second Bass Pro Tour trophy with a 2-13 just seconds before the official end of fishing time.

DeFoe's rotation included a chartreuse-and-white bladed jig with Bass Pro Shops Super Shad swimbait trailer; a Rapala DT4 crankbait; a Texas-rigged Bass Pro Shops Fin-Eke Worm; and a wacky-rigged Bass Pro Shops Stik-O worm in black and blue.

DeFoe has now won the last three major events he's fished in Texas: Stage One on Rayburn, the 2021 Heritage Cup on various lakes around Waco, and 2020 Bass Pro Tour Stage Three at Lake Fork.

**3. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION**  
**Lake Texoma Presented by Abu Garcia**

March 25-27

Evan Barnes didn't have a single keeper at 1 o'clock on the final day of competition at Texoma. After pulling up to a point and catching a 2-pounder — and preparing to leave shortly thereafter — Barnes decided to fire off a few more casts. And then

a few more. By the time the dust had settled and there was about 10 minutes left to check in, the Hot Springs, Arkansas pro had a box full of winning fish, as did his co-angler (winning Strike King co-angler Bill Bean).

Barnes won wire to wire, but it wasn't all smooth sailing for the Pro Circuit pro. After 16-11 on Day 1, Barnes managed just four fish for 12-15 on Day 2. He caught his miraculous late-day limit on Day 3 but barely improved his weight from the day prior (13 pounds even). Still, it was enough to get the job done for the \$40,906 winner's check.

To catch his fish, Barnes focused his efforts on brushpiles and a pair of points, for which he employed a Duo Realis Apex Vibe and a Black's Custom Lures Widow Maker umbrella rig tipped with 3.3-inch Keitech Swing Impact FATs.

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

**Lake Chickamauga**  
 March 30-31

The East Texas Baptist University duo of Cannon Bird and Jacob Keith



PHOTO BY JUSTIN ONSLOW



PHOTO BY MATT BROWN



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

vaulted from fifth to first on the second day of competition at Lake Chickamauga to earn a brand-new Phoenix boat and a spot in the 2022 National Championship.

Bird and Keith both wielded Z-Man Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammers in marinas near Harrison Bay to catch most of their fish, a pattern they chose deliberately to offset fishing pressure and find some fish others weren't getting to.

After weighing in 18-1 on Day 1, the duo knew they needed more on the final day, which they got in the form of 20-12 bag that included a 7 1/2-pounder from Keith. They edged out Conner DiMauro and Cole Sands of Bryan College by just 3 ounces.

**5. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. CENTRAL DIVISION Dale Hollow Lake Presented by Neat Companies**

March 31-April 2

There's little that can be said about Adam Wagner that hasn't been said already. He's perhaps the best angler around when it comes to Dale Hollow — an opinion he backed

up with his win there in the second event of the season after having won on Dale Hollow to close out the Central Division season in 2020.

How Wagner won those two events on Dale Hollow was something else entirely, though. Wagner caught his winning fish out deep in 2020. This time around, with unseasonably cold weather and massive rains that left Dale Hollow's water muddy and several feet into the bushes, the local ace went shallow and flipped his way to a wire-to-wire victory and \$86,575 in cash.

Wagner knew the right program to run to get the job done and best a massive 200-plus-boat field. All it took was a flipping stick, some Big Bite Baits Craw Tubes and a little bit of patience.

**6. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. PLAINS DIVISION Grand Lake Presented by Fenwick**

April 8-10

After spending some time trying to find something a little different, Andy Newcomb decided that some-

times it's the tried-and-true tactics that get the job done best. As is often the case at Grand Lake, that staple was a BOOYAH Covert Spinnerbait, which, paired with a jig, did all the heavy lifting for the local stick.

Bagging 17-13 on Day 1, Newcomb focused on chunky gravel halfway back in various pockets. That pattern fizzled on day 2, though, and it was a matter of chance (and needing to take a bathroom break) that Newcomb found a bluff wall pattern that resulted in a 19-pound, 5-ounce limit. Those bluff walls again got the call on the final day (some new ones with a final stop on the "honey hole" from Day 2) to put the finishing touches on the victory and a \$76,500 payday.

**7. GENERAL TIRE HEAVY HITTERS PRESENTED BY BASS PRO SHOPS RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA Shearon Harris Reservoir**

April 9-14

There's been a lot said and written about the sight-fishing prowess of a handful of anglers in recent

years, but if you ask Alton Jones Jr. who the best sight-fisherman in the world is, he'll answer simply: "My Dad." And that's not based on Jones family pride, but Alton Sr.'s long-standing success in shallow-water tournaments where the competitors are looking at fish.

After a runaway performance on the final day of General Tire Heavy Hitters presented by Bass Pro Shops on Shearon Harris Reservoir in North Carolina — a day that was tailor-made for sight fishing — we can all confirm that Senior's name indeed belongs on the list of the world's best sight fishermen. Jones connected with 12 fish for 45 pounds, 9 ounces on the final day of the six-day event, easily outdistancing Jeff Sprague (30-4) and Jacob Wheeler (26-8) for the Heavy Hitters belt and \$100,000 payday.

Jones flipped and pitched a tandem of baits, including a 3.5-inch Canyon Plastics tube and a wacky-rigged Zoom Trick Worm.

Sprague went home \$100,000 richer after landing the biggest bass of the Championship Round, part of an astounding \$200,000 big-fish purse for the event.

**8. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT PRESENTED BY BAD BOY MOWERS**

GOOGAN BAITS STOP 3

Lake Murray Presented by Favorite Fishing

April 22-25

Sometimes going for broke just happens to be the right decision, as it was for Matt Becker in securing his first Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit victory in April at Lake Murray.

Becker fully intended to sight fish and run a dock pattern throughout the tournament, but a planned detour on Day 1 turned the Finleyville, Pennsylvania pro onto a high-risk, high-reward strategy that involved exploiting a herring-spawn pattern predicated almost entirely on timing. Too early or too late and a \$137,500 check turns to dust.

Fortunately for Becker, his timing was impeccable throughout the event, and he hit point after point (many housing big schools of bass feeding up on herring) with various plastics, including a Googan Baits Dart that did most of the heavy lifting.

The result: 76-5 over four days and a cushy 2-pound, 8-ounce margin of victory over second-place finisher Anthony Gagliardi.

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

WILEY X COLLEGE FACEOFF

Lake Gunterville

April 24

After coming up just short in the Open on Chickamauga a few weeks prior, Conner DiMauro and Cole Sands got their redemption in the Wiley X College Faceoff by virtue of six fish for 16 pounds, 15 ounces in the MLF catch, weigh, immediate-release format. That included a 2-1 with just three minutes left that sealed the deal and gave them the top spot ahead of Aaron Cherry and Chandler Holt of Montevallo University (13-15), who won the Southern Division regional event the day prior.

**10. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION**

Sam Rayburn Reservoir Presented by Berkley

April 28-30

"Wire to wire" was a theme of the spring Toyota Series contests, and the event on Sam Rayburn was no exception. The beneficiary this time was Keith Combs, who put a total of 63-3 on the scales to bring home the \$36,764 winner's check.

Combs ran away with the victory (winning by 8 pounds, 10 ounces), but you might not have guessed that result based on his day-by-day totals. He weighed in just 10-15 on the final day, though it doesn't take much when you've already weighed in 22-9 and 29-11 on Days 1 and 2, respectively.

On Days 1 and 2, Combs did what he does best: He fished deep. A crankbait, spinnerbait and swimbait got the call until, with a weather-shortened Day 3 and a 17-plus-pound cushion, he opted for schooling fish on a gravel bar to fill out his limit and guarantee the victory.

**11. BASS PRO TOUR BERKLEY STAGE TWO PRESENTED BY MERCURY**

Lake Travis, Texas

April 30-May 5

Jacob Wheeler added yet another champion's trophy to his rapidly expanding collection in early May with a dominating performance on Lake Travis, an impoundment of the Colorado River. Even though the Tennessee pro's margin of victory was a scant 2 ounces over Bobby Lane, Wheeler seemed in control from the minute he caught his first fish.

Starting the six-day derby with a 4-pound, 15-ounce largemouth,

Wheeler consistently landed a higher grade of bass than the rest of the 80-man field, finishing his first qualifying day with a 3-5 average. He maintained the bigger-fish mojo in the Knockout Round, catching a 4-2 and a 5-4 in the first hour and averaging 3-9 per fish.

Wheeler focused his time on a series of docks in an 8-mile stretch of the river, casting and pitching a bladed jig, swim jig and popper-style topwater to precise spots around the docks and focusing on just the top 5 to 7 feet of the water column.

The win was Wheeler's third on the Bass Pro Tour in 15 regular-season events.

**12. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. SOUTHERN DIVISION**

Lake Seminole

May 6-8

Nick Thliveros officially stepped out of his father's shadow in 2019, as the son of the great "Peter T" locked up his first Toyota Series victory on Lake Okeechobee. Since then, Nick cashed just one check in seven events until early May on Lake Seminole.

Weighing in the largest bag of Day 3 with 21-13, Nick surged from third to first to lock up a \$37,809 payday proving once again that he has



8.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



9.



10.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



11.

PHOTO BY JOE SULLS

most definitely inherited his father's skill for catching big Southern bass.

Nick needed just a couple baits (a Strike King Cut-R worm and a Strike King Anaconda worm) and one 50-yard stretch in Spring Creek to catch all his fish.

### 13. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. PLAINS DIVISION

Lake Dardanelle presented by Fenwick

May 6-8

Kirk Smith was so confident in his pattern at Dardanelle that he was able to lay off his fish for the first two days of the event and still carry a 1-ounce lead into the final day of competition. On that final day, the kid gloves came off and Smith went to work.

Smith, who spent time in practice trying to find a secluded backwater full of shallow fish, stumbled upon something even better when he found grass pretty far off the bank on a point, further out than many were fishing and not nearly as far out as everyone else.

In Shoal Bay and Thompson Creek, Smith ran his pattern to perfection, eventually dropping 19-15 on the scales on Day 3 to run away with the victory and a \$36,104 check. To do his damage, Smith relied on a 1/2-ounce

BOOYAH swim jig with a Zoom Super Chunk trailer, both in black and blue.

### 14. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT PRESENTED BY BAD BOY MOWERS GRUNDENS STOP 4

Lake Eufaula Presented by A.R.E.

May 13-16

For the second time in less than two full seasons, Jason Abram is a Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit winner. The Piney Flats, Tennessee pro took home the victory and \$100,000 at Eufaula in mid-May with 66-4 over four days after spending each of the first three tournament days in second place. Trevor Fitzgerald grabbed the lead from Bobby Lane heading into the final round, but Fitzgerald weighed in just four fish while Abram put 14-1 on the scales to seal the deal.

Abram's program was pretty simple, but it did involve a couple unique twists. Taking his cues from the shad spawn, Abram relied on a 5/8-ounce white swim jig throughout the week, pitching it to cover near channel swings in the Chattahoochee River. The heavier-than-usual jig, Abram says, was better for keeping his offering in the strike zone while it combatted the river current.

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

California Delta

May 13-15

Call it fate or luck or coincidence or whatever else you want, but clearly talent runs in the Huntze family. At the California Delta, brothers Logan and Colby Huntze proved it by each getting a win — Logan from the front of the boat and Colby from the back.

Logan, a Delta local who hails from Discovery Bay, California, finished eighth at the Delta last season. This year, by virtue of punching a Missile Baits D Bomb and working a Snag Proof Bobby's Perfect Frog, Logan overcame Day 1 motor issues to sack up 64-12 over three days for the \$24,293 check and the win.

### 16. TOYOTA SERIES PRESENTED BY A.R.E. CENTRAL DIVISION

Lake Chickamauga presented by Googan Baits

May 20-22

Jordan Hartman is a fine example of the type of savvy angler the electronics golden age is producing. The Murray State grad from Benton, Kentucky is just 24 and

already has a masterful grasp of — and affinity for — using his graphs to locate schools and structure offshore. In fact, it's his favorite way to fish.

It comes as no surprise then that Hartman was able to edge out Seth Davis by 12 ounces to notch the win in the Toyota Series Central Division finale on Chickamauga and take home the \$51,500 top prize.

Hartman keyed on Chickamauga's many ledges throughout the event after having graphed "every hour of practice" in preparation. While he was able to locate about 30 schools, only five of them consistently produced bites, including one that produced almost all the fish he weighed in — an offshore high spot with shells on it that was basically a one-cast location.

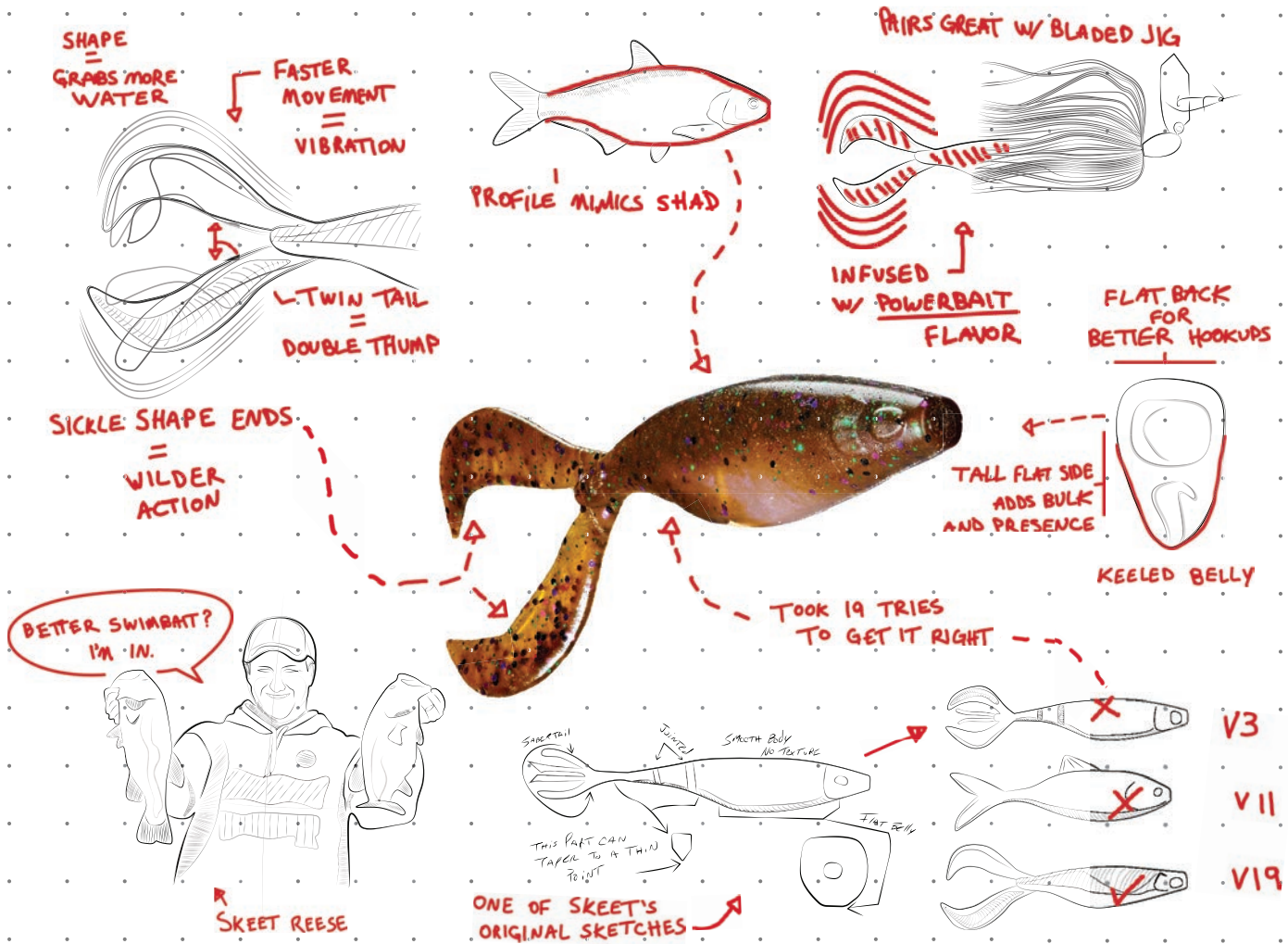
Lining up with his waypoints and a shoreline dock, Hartman made repeated casts to bring his baits in front of the fish hanging out on the back side of the drop. For the task, he employed a Strike King 5XD crankbait and a True Bass Shuttlecock hair jig. For the schools he targeted deeper (in up to 28 feet of water), Hartman turned to a Strike King 10XD and managed to catch one key keeper on a Strike King Sexy Spoon. ■





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PHOTO BY CHRIS SHANGLE

## GRUNDÉNS SEAKNIT BOAT SHOE

By Matt Williams

**W**ashington-based fishing apparel specialists Grundéns has been keeping recreational anglers and commercial fishermen dry and comfortable for nearly a century with a wide range of top-notch apparel. The company recently stepped into the boat shoe market with a stylish slip-on-and-lace-up-style sneaker designed to stand up to the rigors of all-day fishing while providing a nifty look well suited for casual outings on or off the boat.

### First Impression

Fashionable but not gaudy, the SeaKnit Boat Shoe is clearly engineered from the ground up with peak performance in mind. Here's my take:

\* **OUTSOLE:** The bottom side is non-marking with multiple channels to drain water and razor-cut siping that improves traction on docks, rock, gel-coat and other slick surfaces.

\* **MIDSOLE:** The midsole is built from a cushiony copolymer EVA. The footbed begins with a roomy toe box and gets progressively wider (and thicker) toward the heel to maximize

support. Fitted with a removable insole anatomically designed for optimum comfort.

\* **UPPER:** The seamless knit nylon upper has no tongue, dries quickly and is extremely breathable to help keep you cool on sultry summer days. The synthetic fabric stretches, so the shoe slides on and off easily and provides a snug, comfortable fit without cinching the laces down too tight.

\* **COLORS:** Two attractive colors:

**Metal:** A light grey with orange laces and white midsole.

**Anchor:** A gunmetal grey with matching laces and midsole. Both have the Grundéns logo stamped on the side and on the finger tab.

### In Action

I put these shoes to the test for a solid month, and they were truly a pleasure to wear, not to mention a huge step up in the support department from the trusty clogs I've been donning for years — and also way more appealing to the eye. I especially like the easy slip-on/slip-off design and the way the knit nylon breathes and con-

forms to your foot without snugging the laces too tight. Low-cut sock fans will appreciate the fact that the supple material won't chafe below the ankles, even when wet.

### Final Thoughts

Stylish and moderately priced in comparison to some of the top name-brand sneakers, these tennies will treat you right anytime you're on the casting deck in fresh or saltwater. You have to love the fact that they're produced by an industry icon that has been supporting and supplying fishermen with top-notch goods for nearly 100 years.

### Performance Advice: Maintenance

Grundéns says the shoes can be machine-washed in cold water, preferably with laces and insoles removed. The shoes can be tumble-dried with heat or air-dried. Regular cleaning with a damp rag, soft brush and a mild detergent/water mix will help keep the shoes looking good for a long time.



## COMFORT:

The upper portion of the shoe is fashioned from seamless nylon knit that is soft to the touch, won't chafe with low-cut socks and has no tongue. The material stretches so the shoes can be slipped on and off easily while providing a snug fit across the instep without cinching the laces.

## EXTRA PROTECTION: ▲

A narrow, polyurethane strip divides the midsole and upper to provide some extra protection when navigating wet surfaces.

## TRACTION:

The natural gum outsole on each shoe has 20 divided pods of varied dimensions and razor-cut siping to improve traction on wet or icy surfaces.

## >> WEATHERING THE ELEMENTS

The folks at Grundéns have been helping recreational anglers and commercial fishermen weather the elements for decades. In addition to their high-quality footwear, the company offers a wide range of apparel like bibs, jackets, hoodies, performance shirts, shorts, mid-layer tops and bottoms, gaiters and headwear for guys and gals. They also make some products for youth anglers, duffles, dry bags, backpacks and other accessories. ■



PHOTO BY CHRIS SHANGLE

## HITS & MISSES

- + Comfortable
- + Easy slip-on/slip-off design
- + Good traction
- + Lightweight
- + Non-marking outsole won't scuff or mark gelcoat
- + Stain resistant
- + Won't chafe with low-cut socks
- No half sizes
- No women's sizes

## DETAILS

Colors: 2

Men's Sizes: 8-14

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Stain Resistant: Yes

Waterproof: No

MSRP: \$109.99

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**1. BERKLEY POWERBAIT GILLY**

In Scottish and Irish vernacular, a gilly is an individual that locates fish (i.e. a guide). Judging by its appearance, the new Berkley PowerBait Gilly is true to its fish-finding name. The PowerBait-infused Gilly delivers an extremely natural presentation thanks to its realistic shape, swimming action and 12 fishy colors (including Berkley's hyper-realistic HD Tru palette). The bait's hollow head allows the angler to maintain a natural, head-up swimming action, and collapses easily when a fish strikes to allow for better hook-ups. The Gilly is available in three sizes (90mm, 110mm and 130mm), and can be rigged multiple creative ways (weightless, Texas-rigged, on a jighead, on a line-through stinger hook, on a weighted swimbait hook, etc.). Available for \$6.49 and \$7.49 at [berkleyfishing.com](http://berkleyfishing.com)

**2. BERKLEY POWERBAIT MAXSCENT TUBE**

This being the "smallmouth spectacular" issue of *Bass Fishing* magazine, we'd be remiss if we didn't assess Berkley's update to one of the most effective smallmouth shapes in history. The Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Tube is a turbo-charged version of the classic smallie-catcher that delivers MaxScent attraction in 2 1/2- and 3 1/2-inch tube form. The MaxScent Tube is made of new material that offers an exceptionally realistic (yet durable) texture, which is accented by 10 natural-looking matte colors. The PowerBait MaxScent Tube is available for \$6.99 at [berkleyfishing.com](http://berkleyfishing.com)

**3. LEW'S SIGNATURE SERIES RODS**

The Lew's Signature Series of rods expands this summer with the addition of four new actions designed in conjunction with MLF pro Mark Rose: Deep Cranking, Swimbait, Carolina Rig and Jig/Worm rods that run from 7-foot, 2-inch heavy to 7-11 medium heavy. All of the Rose Signature Series rods are built on Lew's proprietary multi-layered graphite blank with FOCAS® Blank Technology, which provides 75 percent greater tip strength and extreme durability while maintaining sensitivity. They all sport Winn® Dri-Tac Ultra split grips for pinpoint casting control and comfort. The Jig/Worm rod runs \$169.99 while the Deep Cranking, Swimbait and Carolina Rig rods are \$179.99 at [lews.com](http://lews.com)

**4. FRABILL ULTRALIGHT CONSERVATION NET**

Heading into the hottest part of the summer, when fish care is critical, the Frabill Ultralight Conservation Net is a smart addition to your boat. All Conservation Series nets feature fish-friendly knotless mesh netting that protects the slime coat and flat, linear bottoms that reduce fish rolling and support the weight of the entire fish. The new Ultralight version features a low-resistance net and handle that slices in and out of the water easily, making those one-handed scoops easier and quicker than ever. The 18-by-21-inch will run \$129.99, while the 21-by-24-inch comes in at \$139.99 at [frabill.com](http://frabill.com)

**5. PLANO EDGE LINE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

Plano has elevated the tackle-management category in the past two years with the development of the EDGE series of tackle boxes for everything from vibrating jigs to terminal tackle. With the EDGE Line Management System, the 70-year-old tackle box manufacturer provides a new level of organization for the variety of mainline and leaders that bass anglers inevitably spool through during a weekend tournament. The waterproof Line Management box features a one-handed latch and spool separators that allow for handy respooling of reels straight from the box. Available at [planomolding.com](http://planomolding.com)



## 6. BERKLEY JIGS

There'll be a PowerBait-infused Berkley jig for virtually every flipping/pitching/swimming application later this year as the new Berkley Finesse, Swim, Flipping, Heavy Cover, Skippin' and Football jigs arrive on tackle-store pegs. This entire lineup of Berkley jigs starts with pro-designed head styles in 1/4- to 1-ounce weights, and 3/0, 4/0 and 5/0 Fusion 19 jig hooks that supply the strength and sharpness to fish through a variety of cover. The big punch, though, comes from the proprietary PowerBait-loaded silicone skirts, with color palettes specific to each jig style (Swim Jig colors, for example, include Bama Bream and Shad). Jigs will retail for \$4.99 a pack at [berkleyfishing.com](http://berkleyfishing.com). ■



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# DOGGIN' IT

THE ON-AGAIN,  
OFF-AGAIN LIFE  
OF WALKING  
TOPWATERS

*By Sean Ostruszka*

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

S

ome relationships are just destined to be unstable. You know the ones.

One minute, the pair is madly in love. Then, almost as suddenly, they're done. Sure, there's always some half-hearted reason, but really, there's no real reason at all. You just go on with your life like nothing happened.

That is until another spark and the candle flares again.

Sounds familiar, right? It should. More likely than not you're in a relationship just like this ... with walking topwaters.

It's almost guaranteed you own some. The Heddon Zara Spook popularized the lure almost 100 years ago. There's even a good chance you own a bunch of different walking topwaters in different colors, sizes and rattle configurations.

But how often do you throw them? If you're like most anglers — even the pros — you get on a kick with walking topwaters, only to ditch them when the next hot lure comes along. In the last decade or so, lures like the Lucky Craft Gunfish, original Reaction Innovations Vixen and several other walking topwaters all became the "it" lure to throw on top. The old discontinued Vixens were selling for hundreds of dollars online because they were in such demand.

Then, just as quickly, it seemed like everyone stopped throwing them.

Why?

We asked a pair of anglers — Bass Pro Tour's Bryan Thrift and noted topwater hammer Brent Anderson — this very question, and how, at least for them, they've created a stable relationship with this on-again, off-again lure.

## RELATIONSHIP STATUS?

In order to understand the situation, you first have to establish a baseline. In other words, what's your relationship status with these lures? Hot and heavy? Lukewarm? On life support?

No matter which one it is, it's ok. Both pros have experienced the same ups and downs.



"Fish will obviously still bite a walking topwater," Thrift says. "I think anglers are always looking for the next cool topwater. The buzzbait is popular again, and I think a big reason is ease of use. Walking topwaters are not as user-friendly to cover water as something you can just reel in like a buzzbait or a plopper-style lure."

Anderson agrees.

"The Whopper Plopper really hurt me in tournaments," says Anderson, who has utilized a walking topwater to win multiple Phoenix Bass Fishing League events. "I used to be able to walk a topwater fast to cover water better than other guys. Now, they have

topwaters they can just reel. They can fish as fast or faster than I did with a walking topwater."

Therein lies what used to be the most attractive part of a walking topwater: how much water you could cover with one relatively quickly. Yet, as anyone who has tried to walk a topwater all day can attest, it can put a major strain on one's forearms and wrists. Plenty of anglers struggle to even walk topwaters, or to do it fast enough to garner the reaction bites they're known to draw.

If your relationship's fire has begun to simmer, it's ok. Forgive yourself. It's not entirely your fault.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN ONSLOW

Walking topwater baits come in all shapes and sizes, but their job is the same: provide year-round fish-catching functionality while other topwater baits come and go by the season.

## **“TRULY, THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF COLOR, SIZE AND SOUND COMBINATIONS TO MATCH ANY SITUATION.”**

cadence and sounds to try to draw reaction strikes. Both pros start off walking them as fast as possible, but if the fish are missing or simply following, they'll begin slowing down to better match the mood of the fish in any situation. Plus, most everyone sees walking topwaters as ideal for schooling fish, as few baits look more like a fleeing baitfish.

### **GREAT FOR OPEN AND TIGHT SPACES**

Every topwater has its niche. Poppers are usually for fishing around cover. Frogs for the hard-to-reach places. Buzzbaits, too. Poppers are also great for covering water. Walking baits are the only topwaters that can nearly do it all.

While you're not going to be able to throw them around emergent vegetation, they excel in open water over grass flats, bare flats or over deep water, as well as being walked tightly around cover like you would a popper. After all, the tail-weighted design means you can bomb them (Anderson and a friend once measured it on a football field and could cast 75 yards with the right topwater and tackle setup) just as easily as you can pitch them into tiny places. Or, say you're covering a flat and there's a lone piece of cover on it. Thrift will walk it fast up to the cover and then slow down and almost walk it in place to tease any bass sitting there — something you can't do with a buzzbait or popper-style lure.

### **WAVE DESTROYERS**

Have you ever tried tossing a topwater in anything more than a light chop? Anderson sure has, and the only ones that work are walking baits,

## **REIGNITING THE SPARK**

While the flame can go out in any relationship, with a little work and understanding, it can also be relit. So, let's help you do that by focusing on some of the most attractive traits of walking topwaters.

### **NEAR YEAR-ROUND VERSATILITY**

Buzzbaits? They're typically a spring and late-fall deal. Poppers? Fall. But walking topwaters? As long as the water is above 55 degrees, both Thrift and Anderson will throw them.

The reason is simple: You have so much versatility to change up action,

## **WALKING SETUPS**

**TO GET THE MOST** out of a walking topwater means using the right gear. Here's a look at these two pro's walking-topwater tackle.

**THRIFT:** 7'2" Fitzgerald Bryan Thrift Signature Series Frog rod, Abu Garcia Revo STX 7.3:1, 15- to 20-pound-test P-Line High Performance Copolymer Topwater Line

**ANDERSON:** 7' Redemption medium-heavy rod, Lew's Custom Lite SLP Speed Spool 7.5:1 reel, 65-pound-test braid with no leader



## FEATHERED TREBLE HOOKS



**EVER NOTICE** how some walking topwaters come with feathered rear treble hooks and others don't? Well, if you look in Thrift's topwater box, you won't find a single walking topwater without a feathered treble. In fact, he thinks that little feather is one of the biggest keys to the lure.

"The action and sound of a walking bait gets a bass' attention, but the feather is what gets him to bite it," he says.

Thrift will actually change the color and length of the feather to match conditions, with black and yellow getting the call around bluegill and silver and white (with a bit of chrome mylar) around shad. What this does is allows him to cat-and-mouse any bass that follows it, which happens a lot post-spawn. He can change the cadence up when he sees one and let the feather add the extra spice to get it to strike.

as the waves kill the action of most anything else.

"A walking topwater in bigger waves can be deadly," Anderson explains. "Most people don't think to do it, but if you get a topwater that's really heavy — sits tail down, almost vertical — it'll walk great in waves. I like ones that make a ton of noise to really help fish find it."

### **SO MANY OPTIONS!**

There are many buzzbaits on the market, but they usually either just make a squealing noise or a clacking noise. Ploppers pretty much have one noise that varies in volume based on size. That's not the case with walking topwaters.

If he's fishing shallow, clear water, Thrift can go with a smaller, translucent walking bait with no rattle. Deeper water around shad trying to call fish up from 15 feet down? A larger profile with BBs. And if he's around bluegill or really trying to elicit a reaction, Anderson loves a one-knocker.

Truly, there is no shortage of colors, sizes and sound combinations to match any situation, which is something both pros stress. Just like crankbaits, no one walking topwater fits every situation. While he Anderson enjoys the Evergreen Shower Blows because of how fast he can walk it, he'll go with a Heddon Chugging Spook when there's a bit more chop, or a pencil popper like the ima Little Stick to make extra-long casts or fight bigger waves. Likewise, Thrift has developed a ton of confidence in the Damiki Rambler, but even he understands there are times where a more subtle walker like an ima Skimmer is a better choice, or maybe something even louder or with a different noise.

"You can really match the lure to the conditions," Thrift says. "Sometimes they're keying on smaller shad or they're getting a ton of fishing pressure and you need to get more of a reaction or the water is super dirty or clear.

"There's no doubt they'll still catch fish. At some point, they'll become the hot topwater again. You watch." ■

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*Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit rookie Tai Au rode a wave of momentum into his first season as a touring professional, fresh off a 2020 season that saw the Glendale, Arizona Hammer run away with Angler of the Year honors in the Toyota Series Western Division by virtue of a pair of wins and another Top 10 in three events. Now, with nothing left to prove on the West Coast, Au finds himself proving time and again that a bass is a bass and fishing is just fishing.*

*Through four events in 2021, Au sits in the Top 40 of the Pro Circuit Angler of the Year race with a pair of sixth-place finishes to his name. Not bad for a guy who's still figuring out what it truly takes to turn a passion into a career.*

## Q&A

By Kyle Wood

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

**Last year's Toyota Series season was pretty incredible. You've had a lot of time to look back on it now. Does it still feel surreal what you did last year?**

That was actually one of the reasons I came out on the [Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit] this year. I did everything on the West Coast that I wanted to do. I wanted to get a win in the Toyota Series and won two of them and Angler of the Year. Without that, I wouldn't have had the confidence to come out on the Pro Circuit this year.

**You have a few Pro Circuit events under your belt right now. How are things going so far?**

I got an 'F' at Okeechobee. I was at an all-time low after that one. I was questioning my life decisions, but I rebounded at Smith. After the third day of that one I was in second behind John Cox and wound up finishing sixth overall. But I was really happy with that finish.

**Speaking of Smith, what was it like catching them in a way you're comfortable with there in throwing a glide bait?**

Whenever you can catch them on a big bait and on a bait that a lot of competitors weren't throwing, it was pretty cool. I didn't really find that in practice, but I just adapted to the conditions and I found that bite about three hours into the first day and just ran away with it. Unfortunately, the last day it unraveled a little, but it was still really fun.

**You kind of hinted at it already, but coming off that finish at Smith, how do you feel about the last few tournaments you have ahead?**

I'm starting to realize that fishing is fishing. Even though I'm on the West Coast, a lot of the lakes we fish are pretty far away from my house. I'm obviously going to lakes I've never been to on the Pro Circuit, but fishing is still just fishing. We have to take our experience and try to figure out what the fish are going to be doing, and most of what I learned back home applies anywhere in the country. I'm trying to take it one tournament at a time, though.

**On the travel side of things, when it comes to you driving around, what do you like to do to kill time in the truck? You a music guy? A podcast guy?**

Everything. Anything to keep me entertained. Sometimes I'll even drive without any music just to take it all in and think. Sometimes I feel like listening to country, so I tune into country music. Sometimes I feel like rap, so I listen to rap or even rock 'n roll. I'll do some podcasts or even comedy stuff on Netflix — I don't watch the screen by the way — but I just do everything and anything I feel like.

**What about road snacks? Are there things you need to have?**

While I'm driving, I'm not a snacker. I'll drive to the next rest stop and eat some junk food or maybe some nachos. I like to save up for a few big meals a day and get the drive done, so I don't really snack on the road. Just lots of coffee.

**That's pretty relaxed. Well, being you spend a lot of time driving to tournaments, how many miles are on your truck?**

325,000 miles. I'm bragging about it. Ram or Toyota, call me.

**What's the weirdest, craziest or scariest thing you've experienced in those 325,000 miles?**

Well, I actually almost didn't make it to Okeechobee. I remember driving through Louisiana and thinking to myself that the roads were worse than the ones I've seen in California, and I've seen some pretty bad roads. I rolled through Louisiana and saw the sign for Alabama and thought *Louisiana needs to take care of their roads*. Well, then I went over a bridge and felt a tug, and I looked in my rearview mirror and saw my boat doing figure eights getting airborne back and forth. It was fishtailing my truck all over the freeway going 70 miles per hour. Luckily I was smart enough to let off the gas and steer towards the side of the road. Thank God there was no cars around.

**Dang, dude! That's crazy. What caused it?**

Well, the nut underneath my ball came loose and fell off, and when I went over that bridge the ball bounced off the hitch. By some miracle I didn't have any damage to anything, other than two tiny dents in my bumper, and that was it. I unhooked the boat, ran to an auto parts store to get another hitch. I popped it in and drove from Alabama to Florida with a smile on my face.

**Competing at the Pro Circuit level and managing your time is important to make life easier. Have you always been good at planning ahead?**

I've really had to step my game up. It's still a logistical nightmare for me. My brain hurts and I've walked away from the task of booking hotels or flights. I'm starting to get the feel for getting in town a few days earlier. I think I have flights booked out until the last two events, but I'm still trying to figure out where to stay. I've been begging as many guys as I can as I make friends out here to see if they have any extra room for a West Coaster.

**We talked about this on the [MLF Bass Fishing] Podcast that if you go all-in on the Pro Circuit, your job may work with you for travel, otherwise you'd have to step away. Are you working right now?**

I am working, but I did quit my job as a lead sales rep of 10 years and that was one of the most scary things I've ever done. On the one hand you have job security and an awesome retirement package, but I gave it up to chase my dream. That's why Okeechobee hurt so bad. Not making any money at Okeechobee was a real eye opener. But, you do what you can. I started my own insurance business on the side and I can work my own hours. I'm really busy with that off the water, and a lot of my clients are my fellow fishermen, so they have been supportive.

**From a fishing/technique standpoint, is there anything you realized after competing at this level that you think you really need to dial in more?**

Ah, yup. I went to pre-practice for Eufaula and that's when realized I need to figure out dirty water. I'm used to being able to see 25 feet down, or at least 10 feet. If we can only see 3 to 5 feet down, we call that stained water. I was pretty upset at Smith because I heard it was going to be a clear fishery. I did my research and when I got there I ran to the dam and called that stained water. So, if that's the clearest water we got, I'm pretty much in trouble.

**Making the Top 10 on Smith and spending time on MLF NOW! has given the fishing community a sense of who Tai Au is. But what is something you'd want people to take away about who you are as a person?**

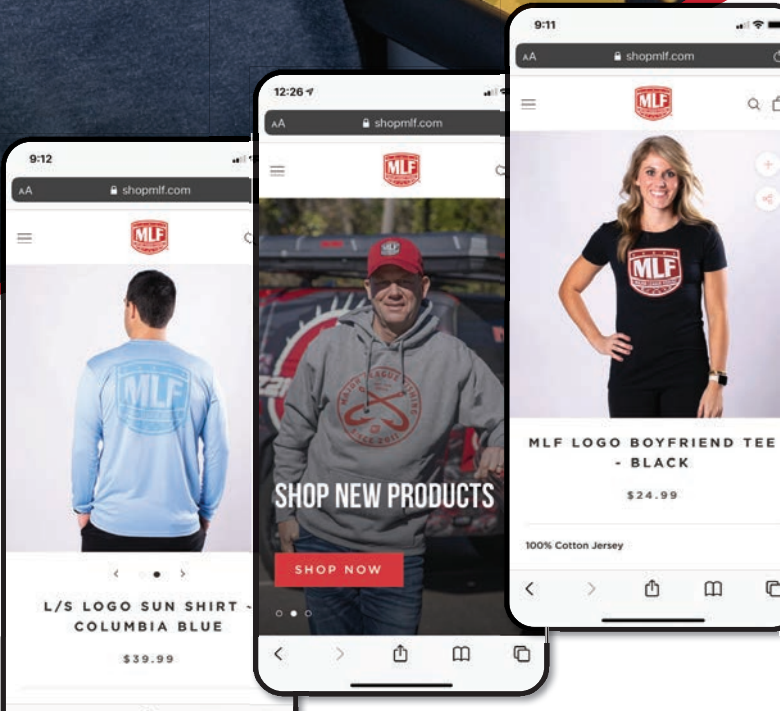
You know, I'm just a dude that likes to fish. My passion for the sport stems pretty deep. Eleven years ago I gave up on fishing and one day my brother (Vu) dragged me out of the house to go fish a tournament. I fell back in love with the sport after almost winning that event (as a co-angler) so I do the best to promote the sport because if someone can find fishing like I did and possibly save them, that would mean the world to me. I'm where I want to be and where I feel like I belong. ■

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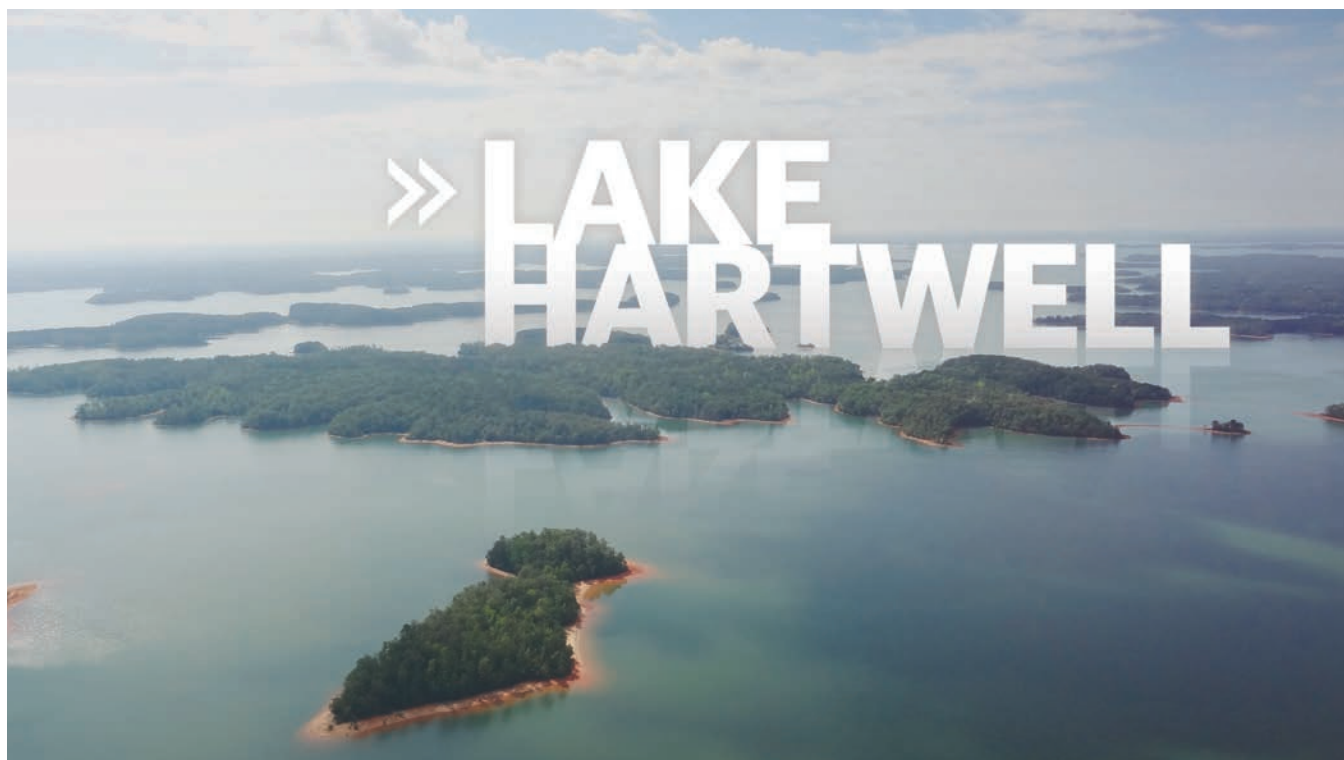
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## 12TH ANNUAL HIGH SCHOOL FISHING WORLD FINALS & NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS HEAD TO LAKE HARTWELL



**W**hat started as a small tournament in 2007 has now grown to one of the biggest student-angler events in the country. The 12<sup>th</sup> Annual High School Fishing World Finals & National Championship kicks off on Lake Hartwell, South Carolina, on June 30. There will be over \$3 million in college scholarships handed out at the event, and The Bass Federation (TBF) expects roughly 400 registered boats to compete.

As the event continues to get bigger every year, TBF President Robert Cartlidge believes Lake Hartwell was the perfect choice to host the 2021 event.

"Lake Hartwell is going to be a great venue for us," Cartlidge said. "It's one of the best tournament venues in the country and (local facilities managers) have been working to make it better over the past few months. They're building us an amphitheater

and other amenities to make this year's event the best one yet."

Student anglers who won their SAF State Championship or an MLF U.S. Army High School Fishing Open automatically qualified for the National Championship. However, only one team can win the National Championship and walk away with a \$10,000 scholarship. The World Finals pool consists of any SAF member from anywhere in the world who registers through TBF.

## LAKE HARTWELL RUNDOWN

Here's how the schedule breaks down at the 2021 World Finals and National Championship:

During the first two days of competition, all competitors will fish on Lake Hartwell. The weights of the teams in the running for the National Championship are kept separately. At the end of Day 2, the top two anglers from each state in the World Finals pool advance to the HSFWF Semi-Finals, while the remaining anglers head to the Second Chance round. The Top 10 anglers in the National Championship standings advance to the National Championship Semi-Finals on Day 3.

On Day 3 of competition, the World Finals pool battles for a spot in the Top 20 as their weights reset back to zero. The Top 20 move on to Saturday's finals.

As for the High School National Championship, Day 3 is the final day of the event. The team with the highest three-day total weight wins the \$10,000 scholarship. All 10 finalists from the National Championship advance to the World Finals Day 4.

For the final day, all weights start back at zero. While there can only be one winner, there are still plenty of opportunities for each team to return home with a reward: More than \$3 million in scholarships, electronics, prizes and fishing gear will be handed out at the conclusion of the event.

"It really is a great event for the kids, and I'm looking forward to seeing it come together again this year," Cartlidge said. "These kids work hard to get better at this sport, and it's really great to see their joy when they succeed." ■


## JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP SET FOR MISSISSIPPI RIVER BATTLE

It's going to be toasty in Quad Cities, Illinois at the end of the July for the 2021 Junior World Championship, but the bite might be even hotter on the Mississippi River. The Junior World Championship will run from July 28 through July 30. The two-person team event continues to grow each year, and in 2021 TBF is introducing a new format for its younger participants.

"We're getting more kids involved this year by switching to a new format," Cartlidge explained. "We're taking the top 10 percent of the participants in each state this year instead of just two kids from each state. It'll be a three-day event instead of the two-day event it's been in the past, but the entire tournament — including practice and travel — should only take up one full week of the calendar, to make it easier on families to travel."

TBF has active junior programs in almost every state across the country and Cartlidge encourages the more kids that sign up the better. In the past, only one team of two would advance to the JWC, but if there are 30 teams that sign up in a given state, the top three advance. Forty in a given state means the top four advance, and so on.


The participants fish out of their own boats with their own boat captains. The first two days of competition, the full field competes with their qualified teammate. The field is cut to the top team from each combined TBF division for Friday's final championship round. The winning team of the JWC will receive \$10,000 in college scholarships. ■



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# 2021 HIGH SCHOOL STATE EVENT RESULTS

## Delaware Tri-State Championship

May 1 — Lake Anna  
 Trey Richardson, Beau Richardson  
 and Wayne Pupa  
 Tri State Bass  
 10 pounds, 4 ounces



## Georgia GHSA State Finals

May 8 — Lake Lanier  
 Jayden Faulkner and David Madden  
 Evans High School Knights  
 20 pounds, 3 ounces

## Kansas State Championship

April 24 — Melvern Lake  
 Ryder Mains, Mason Chapman  
 and Randy Mains  
 Legacy Christian Academy  
 14 pounds, 12 ounces



## Illinois State Championship

May 16 — Carlyle Lake  
 Blake Beckmann and Hunter Beckmann  
 Breese Central High School Cougars  
 6 pounds, 13 ounces

## Kentucky State Finals

May 7-8 — Kentucky Lake  
 Lane Tooley and Camden Harris  
 Muhlenberg County High School  
 30 pounds, 8 ounces



## Missouri State Championship

May 8 — Truman Lake  
 Tucker Stute and Dalton Love  
 Kearney Bulldogs  
 15 pounds, 5 ounces



## North Carolina State Championship

April 17 — High Rock Lake  
 Carson Palmer and Harrison McCall  
 Badin Bandits  
 18 pounds, 6 ounces



## Oklahoma State Championship

May 2 — Lake Texoma  
 Kollin Crawford and Jace Anderson  
 Hochatown Bass Club  
 14 pounds, 10 ounces



## South Carolina State Championship

April 11 — Lake Hartwell  
 Max Heaton and Tallis Morrison  
 Hart County High School  
 17 pounds, 14 ounces

## Tennessee State Championship

April 3 — Lake Chickamauga  
 Caleb Griffin and Bryson Bailey  
 W. Tenn. Home School Activities Assoc.  
 16 pounds, 13 ounces



## Texas State Championship

April 11 — Lake Belton  
 Gage White and Zach White  
 All Around Anglers  
 13 pounds, 4 ounces



## Virginia State Championship

April 17 — South Holston  
 Brenton Powers, Thai Tatum  
 and Todd Tatum  
 Southwest Select  
 8 pounds, 15 ounces. ■

## MLF PRO MARK DAVIS RECALLS SON FISHER'S JWC WIN IN 2016

One professional angler who's seen firsthand just how positive these tournaments can be for young anglers is Bass Fishing Hall-of-Famer Mark Davis. The Bass Pro Tour angler's son, Fisher Davis, won the Junior World Championship as a 14-year-old in 2016 on Lake Guntersville.

"I remember how impressed I was that he was able to handle a pressure-filled situation with great poise," Mark said of his son's win. "I was gone for a tournament on the East Coast, so I couldn't be there to help him out or talk him through stuff. Instead, he was forced to rely on himself and his instincts and they came through in a big way. It was really great to see."

Fisher caught a five-fish limit on both days of the tournament, using mainly a Texas-rigged worm. His father recalled just how hot it was when he dropped him off at Guntersville, and how tough the fishing was during practice.

"I really think that win and that event in particular got him hooked on tournament bass fishing and launched him into the angler he is today," the elder Davis said. "He's now fishing in college at East Texas Baptist University and he won more tournaments and AOY titles than I can remember to count. That kid lives and breathes bass fishing, and I think that JWC win is to thank for that."

Fisher's twin brother, Hunter, also won the 2017 High School National Championship.

After a 38-year career, Mark is still hungry for more on the Bass Pro Tour. He has six wins in his illustrious career and three AOY titles and firmly believes young anglers should all take advantage of every opportunity they can to compete in a tournament setting like those provided by events like the Junior World Championship.

"When I was a kid, we didn't have anything like the JWC, and I really think kids who are interested in bass fishing should take advantage of this," Mark said. "I'm so proud of my son for not just winning but taking advantage of the opportunity that the JWC provided." ■



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## UPCOMING HIGH SCHOOL EVENTS

Here's a look at the High School Championship events in June and July:

- COLORADO** — SAF Dual State Championship, June 27 at Lake Pueblo
- INDIANA** — SAF State Championship, June 5 at Brookville Lake
- MARYLAND** — MLF HS Maryland Open, June 5 at Potomac River
- MAINE** — SAF State Championship, July 10 at Thompson Lake
- MICHIGAN** — SAF State Championship, July 25 at Hubbard Lake
- MINNESOTA** — SAF State Championship, July 13 at Lake Waconia
- NEBRASKA** — SAF State Championship, June 5 at Red Willow Reservoir
- NEW MEXICO** — SAF Dual State Championship, June 27 at Lake Pueblo
- PENNSYLVANIA** — SAF State Championship, July 11 at Lake Oneida
- SOUTH DAKOTA** — SAF State Championship, June 6 at Big Stone Lake
- VERMONT** — SAF State Championship, July 18 at Lake Champlain
- WISCONSIN** — MLF High School Wisconsin Open, July 31 at Mississippi River ■



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# THE WORLD'S GREATEST SMALLMOUTH ANGLER

Having been born and raised in Florida, I naturally cut my bass-fishing teeth on largemouths. After all, there are no smallmouth bass in the Sunshine State (despite several stocking efforts nearly a hundred years ago).

But that didn't stop me from admiring the brown bass in print or on television. As a kid, I read about them and was fascinated by the kinds of places they lived: swift streams and rocky reservoirs, deep water and glacial lakes — places that a Florida kid could only imagine. Smallmouths and smallmouth habitat certainly didn't exist in the Miami canals I fished.

As I got older and had chances to travel north, I looked for opportunities to chase brown bass. And I fell in love with them.

My favorite place to chase smallmouths is Dale Hollow Lake on the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Not only is it the home of the world record and the place where I caught my biggest smallmouth, but it's a gorgeous body of water and steeped in bass fishing history.

Dale Hollow looks like a postcard that one smallmouth bass would send to another.

"Having a great time. Wish you were here."

Another special thing about Dale Hollow is that it produced the greatest smallmouth bass fisherman of all time: Billy Westmoreland. You may hear people mention other names when discussing the greatest smallmouth angler ever, but if they don't finally settle on Westmoreland, you can be confident they are wrong.

## The Legend of Billy Westmoreland

Westmoreland was born in Celina, near the dam that impounds the Obey River to create Dale Hollow. He grew up fishing the lake, started guiding there when he was just 13 years old, and lived in a house that looked down upon its shores. He caught two smallmouths weighing more than 10 pounds and was certainly the only angler who ever caught smallmouth and largemouth weighing double digits. He also saved Johnny Morris' life once.

Around Dale Hollow, if you said, "Legend of the Lake" or just "Legend," everyone knew you were talking about Westmoreland.

I count myself as extremely lucky to have met Westmoreland, though I would not claim to truly know him. I interviewed him over the phone several times, but never met him in person until around 2000, when I was in Celina to fish with friends. We ran into him in a little tackle shop. He was holding court before a couple tourists and telling them exactly what they needed to catch the big bronzebacks in "the Hollow."

"You want to start with a Hot Lips Express in Creek Craw and work those points near Horse Creek," he told them as he glanced at his watch. "At 10:27 in the morning, you'll need to switch to an aspirin head jig with a small pork trailer."

The anglers began reaching for the pegs that held the baits Westmoreland referenced. They eagerly grabbed every such lure available as the Legend turned to the shop proprietor and winked.

After the tourists left, the shop owner reached behind the counter and grabbed enough crankbaits and jigs to replenish the pegs. The locals and I had a good chuckle. I had gotten an up-close look at Legend's sense of humor.

Westmoreland died unexpectedly in the fall of 2002. I continued to make annual pilgrimages to the Hollow, mostly in winter to fish the float and fly technique.

Every time I was there, I'd find myself in conversations about Westmoreland. He had a lot of friends in the local fishing community and was the kind of guy who made everyone feel special.

One of the stories Westmoreland must have told at least a thousand times was about hooking into an enormous Dale Hollow smallmouth on a Christmas Day in the early 1970s. He lost the fish he believed would have set a new world record, and he told the story in a lot of detail... but without revealing the exact location.

After he passed, I would sometimes talk with his fishing buddies about the lake's chances of producing another record and about that fish specifically.

"Where do you think he hooked that bass?" I'd ask.

Invariably — every single time — these many friends of Westmoreland would tell me that their bond with the Legend was special that he had truly shared the location with them and only with them. So, I'd pull out map of the lake and ask them to put an X on the mythical spot. All of them did.

But no two put their X in the same spot. ■

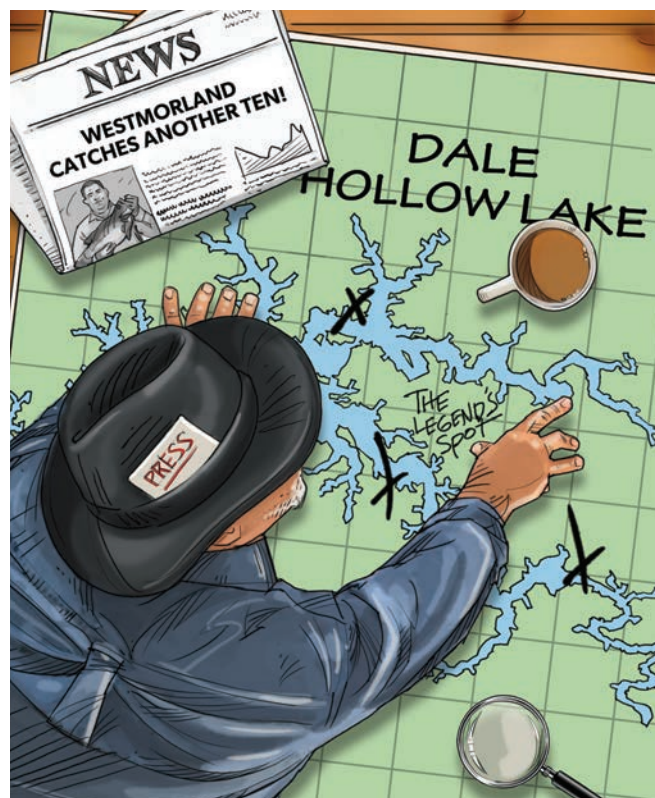


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