

2020 MLF POINTS CHAMPION | JORDAN LEE

Bass

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2020

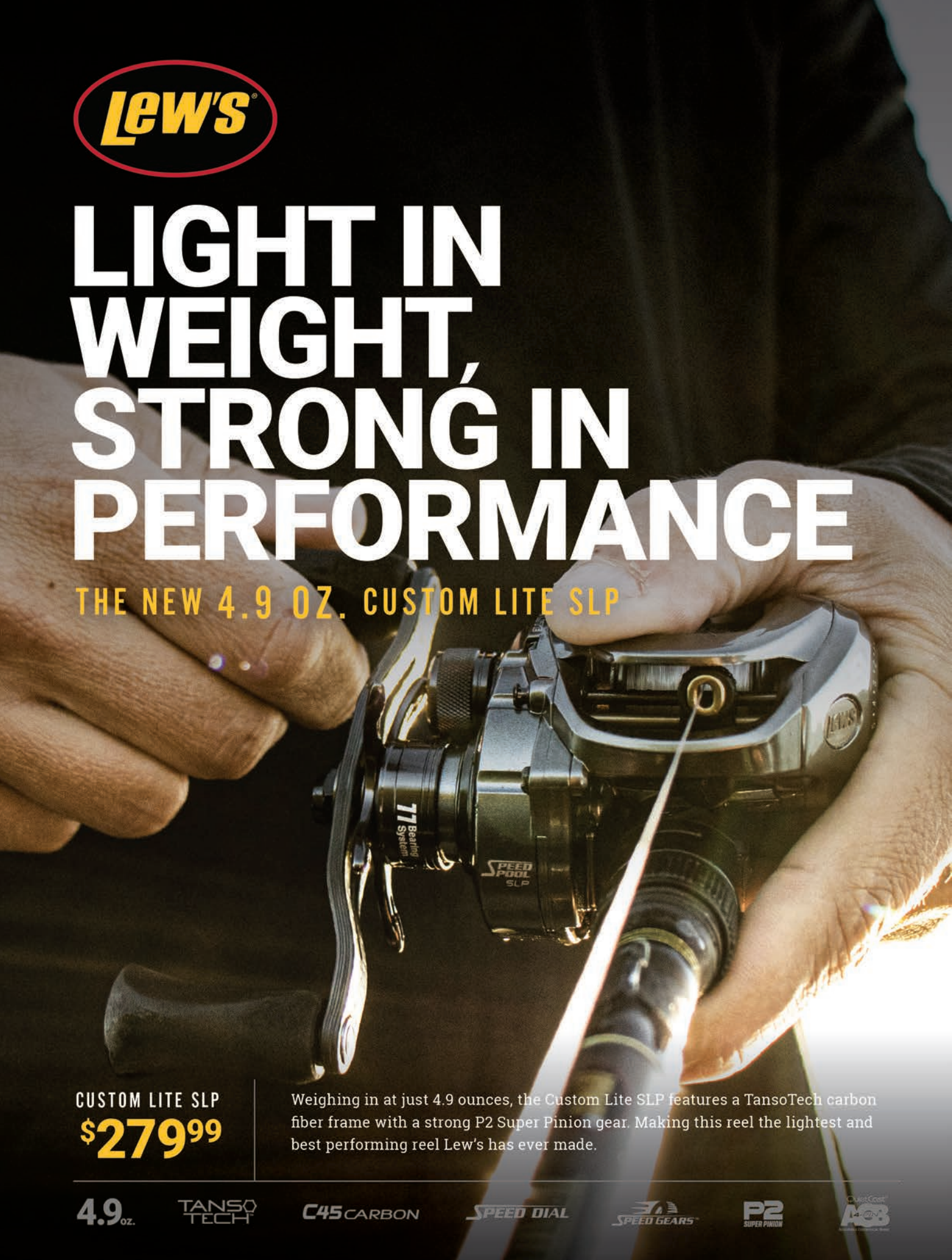
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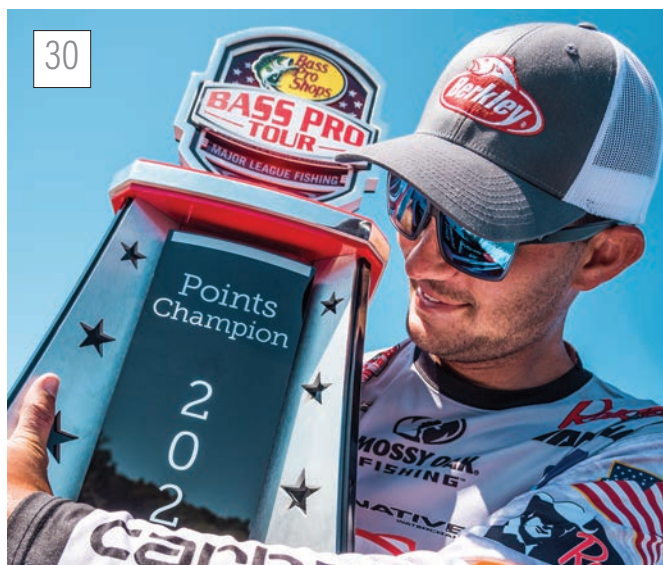


PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



PHOTO BY JUSTIN ONSLOW

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ON THE COVER: JORDAN LEE — PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

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FIRST CAST: CURTIS NIEDERMIER

TIMING IS EVERYTHING



In 2007, I was about to graduate from college, and I was debating taking a job at a non-profit management company in St. Louis or an entry-level gig at the non-profit where I was interning while at school in Columbus, Ohio. People told me how great it was to have options right out of school, but the reality was that both jobs were real snoozers. What I really wanted was to be an outdoor writer and to travel the country hunting and fishing.

As part of my internship, one of my assignments was to track press mentions for the organization where I was working. One day, a few weeks before graduation, I was scanning for our press releases on The Outdoor Wire when I noticed a job posting for an associate editor with FLW Outdoors in Benton, Ky. "Located near the banks of beautiful Kentucky Lake," it said. I sent off a resume that night.

A week or so later I was on a plane headed for an interview. At that point, I hadn't even researched how far Benton was from the little town of Republic, Ohio, where I grew up. I just knew the job had it all - fishing, writing, travel.

For the record, it takes about nine hours to drive from Republic to Benton, which, after accepting a job offer from FLW, I found out on the day I made the trip down to launch an adventure that has lasted 13 years.

Had I not had that internship, and had I not checked The Outdoor Wire that afternoon, I might never have seen the job posting that led to this opportunity. Timing was everything.

And now, the timing is right for me to go in a new direction. In mid-July, just a couple weeks before the editorial staff put the finishing touches on this issue of *Bass Fishing*, I started a new job as senior writer and copy-editor at Mercury Marine, where I'm now working remotely from my hometown in Ohio.

The couple months leading up to this transition were hectic for my family. We sold our house. My wife left her job to stay home with our kids. We moved out of state. And we did it all during a pandemic. But somehow, it all worked out.

The way it went reminds me a lot of something I often hear professional anglers talk about. They say, when it's your time, good things happen. I know that's true because that's how it worked for me and FLW in 2007, and that's how it worked for me and Mercury this summer.

But there's more to it. "Your time" never comes if you don't work hard, and, in many cases, if other people don't support you and give you a chance in the first place.

That's why I'm so thankful for FLW and all the opportunities the company has given me. I've worked with great people and learned from great mentors. I've traveled to all corners of the country and fished with some of the greatest anglers in the world. It's been one heck of a good time.

I owe a lot to FLW, its anglers, the staff and the readers. But mostly, I owe them this: Thank you.

CURTIS NIEDERMIER, FORMER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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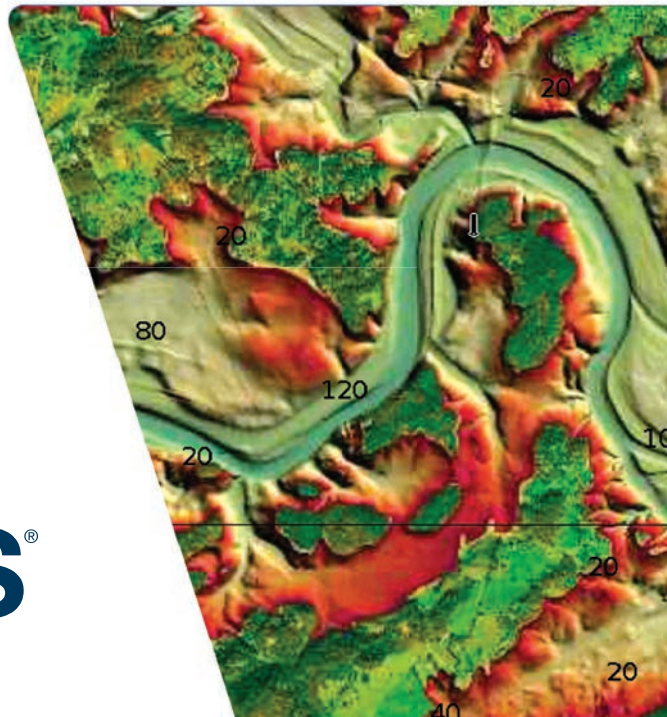
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HOME COOKIN'

There's very little that still needs to be said about the immense talent of Major League Fishing pro Jacob Wheeler. The No. 1 bass angler in the world, Wheeler (at just 29 years old) has just about done it all when it comes to tournament bass fishing, from winning a Forrest Wood Cup to owning multiple wins on the Bassmaster Elite Series, a pair of wins on the Bass Pro Tour and an MLF General Tire World Championship. He also took home a Toyota Series Central Division win on Pickwick Lake back in May.

In June, Wheeler added another trophy to the mantle with his first regular-season Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit win, though there was nothing "regular" about the stacked field featured in the Super Tournament on the east Tennessee waters of Lake Chickamauga – a fishery Wheeler now calls home. The best in the business hammered his way to a 93-12 four-day total with an assist from some giant largemouths like the one pictured here.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE





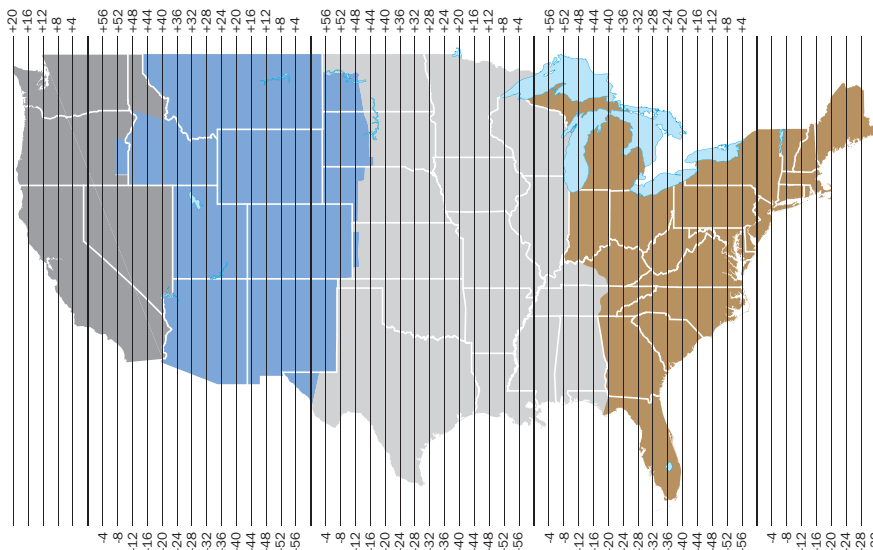
ALL ABOUT ANGLES

Sometimes landing bass, like taking photos, is all about achieving the right angle of attack. Like in this image, which was captured at Toyota Heavy Hitters presented by Venmo in Florida. Photographer Garrick Dixon climbed in the boat so he could get up close with pro Adrian Avena in a narrow channel, giving Dixon the chance to capture an angle we don't normally see from tournament photography.

Avena, likewise, worked his way into the back of the boat to shorten the distance while fighting the bass, which he expertly controlled with the rod bowed overhead so he could angle the fish home.

Angling, photography and angles – sometimes they all come together quite nicely.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON



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

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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WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

LIVE TOURNAMENT STREAMS

August 11-14 - 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Super Tournament @ Lake Erie

FLW Live at FLWFishing.com

August 24-29 - 2020 Tackle Warehouse TITLE Pro Circuit Championship Presented by Toyota @ Sturgeon Bay

FLW Live at FLWFishing.com

TV BROADCASTS

The following schedules are for episode premieres. Most shows will re-air on the Outdoor Channel and/or Sportsman Channel. Complete schedules are available online.

Saturday, Aug. 8 - 2020 Bass Pro Tour General Tire Stage Three Presented by TrueTimber Championship Round

7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

Friday, Aug. 14 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit at Lake Chickamauga - Days 1 & 2

7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

Friday, Aug. 21 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit at Lake Chickamauga - Days 3 & 4

7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

Friday, Aug. 21 - Abu Garcia College Fishing Presented by YETI National Championship

9-9:30 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

Saturday, Aug. 22 - 2020 Toyota Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo Qualifying Day 1

7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

Saturday, Aug. 29 - 2020 Toyota Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo Qualifying Day 2

7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

Saturday, Sept. 5 - 2020 Toyota Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo Qualifying Day 3

7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

Friday, Sept. 11 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit at Mississippi River

7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

Saturday, Sept. 12 - 2020 Toyota Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo Qualifying Day 4

7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

Saturday, Sept. 19 - 2020 Toyota Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo Knockout Round

7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

Friday, Sept. 25 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit at Detroit River

7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

Saturday, Sept. 26 - 2020 Toyota Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo Championship Round

7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

DID YOU SEE: A WHOLE LOTTA WHEELER

Jacob Wheeler has been red hot lately, including winning the Toyota Series event on Pickwick Lake in May and the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Super Tournament on Lake Chickamauga in June.

The Chickamauga tournament, in particular, produced some pretty amazing footage of the world's No. 1 angler in action. First, there was the video of Wheeler's day-three kicker, called "Wheeler's Chickamauga 10-Pounder," which lit up Facebook and YouTube. The next day, it was "Wheeler's Final Day 8-Pounder" that gained traction online. A few days after the tournament, FLW rolled out its *Day 5 presented by Tackle Warehouse* video with Wheeler, in which he and FLW Senior Editor Kyle Wood absolutely torched the Chickamauga bass on Rapala DT crankbaits while breaking down how Wheeler got the W.

You can see all three videos, as well as other great content from Chickamauga, at FLWFishing.com/media-gallery/videos or YouTube.com/FLWFishing.



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

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Bar Harbor, Maine

PHOTO BY MATT PAGE

A LEGACY OF KINDNESS

> **SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS** sometimes involve really big fish.

In May, staff at Honolulu's Straub Medical Center and The Queen's Medical Center got their fill of a group of strangers' kindness in the form of 220 pounds of fresh-caught yellowfin tuna.

The group of five fishermen, which included the executive producer of the diving show Hawaii Skin Diver TV, Kyle Nakamoto, managed to land a pair of yellowfins that totaled 220 pounds. They sent the fish to a distributor for preparation

and delivery to the medical professionals on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As reported by Alaa Elassar of CNN, Nakamoto and his team were inspired to undertake their act of kindness by a 104-year-old local fisherman named Setsuo Todoroki, who often donated fish he'd caught to those in need.

Todoroki passed away recently, and Nakamoto and his crew wanted to carry on his legacy. They're certainly doing a fine job of that.



The Great American Outdoors Act

On June 17, the U.S. Senate voted 73-25 to pass the Great American Outdoors Act, which made its way to the House of Representatives on July 22 and passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, 310-107.

The legislation will make permanent \$900 million per year in funding already in place for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as allocate another \$9.5 billion over five years for repairs in national parks and other public land. It also establishes the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Fund.

The funding outlined in the Great American Outdoors Act serves as much-needed support for more than 400 national parks sites, with \$6.5 billion earmarked specifically for those lands.

A study announced by a bipartisan group of U.S. senators that included Ohio Republican Rob Portman, Virginia Democrat Mark Warner, Tennessee Republican Lamar Alexander and Maine independent Angus King suggests the Great American Outdoors Act could also support an average of 40,300 direct jobs and more than 100,000 total direct and indirect jobs over the next five years and help to alleviate the \$20 billion backlog of maintenance projects already on tap for the National Parks Service.

Long expected to pass in the House after receiving ample support in the Senate, the Great American Outdoors Act is a lifeline for some of the country's most important and treasured natural resources and a positive step forward for the future of our public lands.

ALLIGATOR FOUND IN KENTUCKY LAKE

On May 23, a Kentucky couple alerted Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources officials to the presence of an alligator near the Kentucky Dam Marina. According to reports, officials found the approximately 3-foot-long alligator dead when they arrived, likely due to wounds sustained from a boat propeller.



Alligators aren't native to any Kentucky or Tennessee waters (Kentucky Lake spans into both states), and officials believe the specimen was formerly an illegal pet that was released into Kentucky Lake, as reptiles are unable to survive water temperatures colder than 40 degrees – to say nothing of how an alligator could have navigated into Kentucky Lake otherwise.

This isn't the first time an alligator has been found in Kentucky waters. In 2015, a live alligator was spotted in Skaggs Creek (near Barren River Lake in southern Kentucky), and in January 2018, a frozen alligator was pulled from the waters of the Cumberland River in Harlan County. In both cases, officials believe the reptiles were illegal pets that escaped captivity or were set free by their owners.

2020 State-Fish Art Contest Winners

The 2020 State-Fish Art Contest, hosted by Wildlife Forever and sponsored by Bass Pro Shops, featured more than 5,000 entries from 47 states and 32 countries. A panel of judges from around the world selected the winners, which included:

National Winners

Grades 10-12: David Hong, Virginia

Grades 7-9: Amber Li, Texas

Grades 4-6: Eva Averin, Utah

Grades K-3: Allison Bu, Maryland

Art of Conservation Award

Hoonsuk (Alex) Yoon, New Jersey

Seth Thomas Spradlin Best of Show Award

David Hong, Virginia

Guy Harvey Award

Hyeri Chun, New Jersey

Fish Migration Award

Age 5-12: Kelly Zhong, Georgia

Age 13-18: Elizabeth Hwang, Washington



ARTWORK BY DAVID HONG



ARTWORK BY AMBER LI



ARTWORK BY EVA AVERIN



ARTWORK BY ALLISON BU

"This year's artwork was outstanding. We had a record year of growth providing evidence that art has an unparalleled power to connect and teach," says Pat Conzemius, president and CEO of Wildlife Forever. "I'm grateful for our members and sponsors who invest in building stewardship and for the dedicated teachers, state hosts and parents who encourage young people all over the world to learn and experience the power of nature."



PHOTO BY CHRIS INGRAM

A WISH COME TRUE

On June 27, Noah Crogan's big wish came true at the Apple Island Marina on Lake Champlain in South Hero, Vt.

Crogan, a 16-year-old who has primary immune deficiency, bilateral bronchiectasis and tracheomalacia (which means he

suffers from a compromised immune system along with two diseases that affect his airway and lungs), has been part of the Make-A-Wish Foundation for about a year. He's also an avid angler who now owns his very own bass boat and a ton of gear to go with it.

Make-A-Wish Vermont, the Vermont Fish and

Wildlife Department, and local anglers – including Phoenix Bass Fishing League and Toyota Series angler Cole Harris – surprised Crogan with a brand-new Tracker aluminum bass boat, along with rods and tackle, when he arrived at Apple Island Marina – a visit he was told was to simply check out a friend's boat.

When Crogan arrived, he was met with a convoy of bass boats led by two Fish and Wildlife wardens, sirens blaring, at the dock. That's when he got the news.

Harris, along with several other local anglers, gave Crogan an opportunity to break in his brand new boat and tackle with a "mini-tournament."

"He had a blast," says Harris. "He broke the boat in well. And the best part is that he's been talking to us ever since then. You'd have thought we've known him our whole lives."

"This was just really cool because getting youth in this sport is important, and it's important that we as anglers stick together. This story is a perfect combination of all of that. Who knows, this kid could be the next Kevin VanDam one day."



Tackle Warehouse TITLE Presented by Toyota Moves to Sturgeon Bay

For the first time, FLW's premier championship tournament will adopt the MLF-style catch/weigh/release format and feature the top 50 pros from the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit in a six-day showdown on one of the best small-mouth bass fisheries on the planet.

The Tackle Warehouse TITLE presented by Toyota was originally slated for the St. Lawrence River with takeoff from Massena, New York. Due to travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the championship event of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit will now be held at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin still scheduled for Aug. 24-29.

Unlike traditional Pro Circuit events, the TITLE will feature MLF-style format and rules with the 50 qualifying anglers being split into two groups for the first four days of competition. Group A will compete on days one and three of the Qualifying Round and Elimination Round, with Group B fishing days two and four. From there, the top 10 anglers from each group (based on cumulative weight of the first two rounds) advance to the Knockout Round, which takes place on the fifth day of competition.

With weights zeroed for the Knockout Round, all 20 pros will have a chance to be one of the final 10 atop SCORE-TRACKER® and make the Championship Round on day six to fish for the \$235,000 top prize.

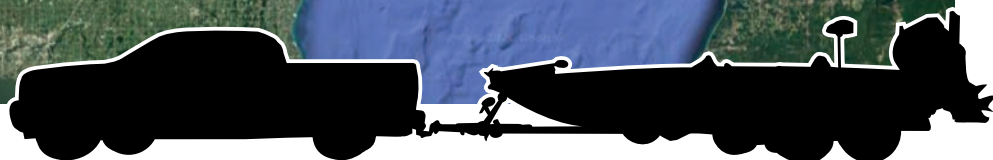


PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

THE BIG TWIST

Instead of a traditional takeoff from one ramp, anglers will be allowed to trailer to and launch from the public ramp of their choosing, and it's a safe bet that TITTLE anglers will spread out from one end of Door Peninsula to the other. It's a caveat that will afford anglers more (or sometimes less) fishing time due to not having to run the not sometimes-rough water the Great Lakes are known for.

While some anglers may still choose to use the main ramp at Sawyer Park, others like Sister Bay, Olde Stone Quarry Park and the Fish Creek Ramp in Egg Harbor are all in play as well.



WHAT TO EXPECT

Sturgeon Bay is a legendary smallmouth fishery that as recently as mid-July showed exactly what it's capable of with the Bass Pro Tour's fifth and final stop of the season. In that event, eventual winner Justin Lucas set records in the Qualifying Round by hauling in 141 pounds, 9 ounces on day one and 78-12 in the first period alone. All told, eight Bass Pro Tour anglers eclipsed the century mark 10 total times – a feat that had only been accomplished twice prior to the event.

Easily one of the top smallmouth destinations in the U.S., Sturgeon Bay has all the makings of one of the most exciting championship tournament venues in the history of FLW. Big smallmouth sometimes pushing the 6-pound mark aren't uncommon, and a 3-pound average for the Bass Pro Tour's fifth stop tells you everything you need to know about the sheer volume of quality fish that swim around in Sturgeon Bay.

In addition to big numbers, fans can also expect unparalleled coverage of the TITTLE, with 10 live cameras capturing all the action during the Knockout Round and Championship Round.

MAKING THE TITLE

The top 50 anglers in the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit points standings after the final 2020 regular season event earn a trip to the TITTLE. Despite the final three events of the season being Super Tournaments that also feature Bass Pro Tour pros, only anglers who started the year on the Pro Circuit are eligible to make the TITTLE.

With one Super Tournament left on the Pro Circuit schedule, the TITTLE field is not yet set, meaning there's a lot at stake as the Pro Circuit heads to Lake Erie Aug. 11-14 for the final stop of the 2020 regular season. ■

FWC Celebrates 10,000 Trophy Bass

> THE TROPHYCATCH PROGRAM

created by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 2012 needed less than eight years to record its 10,000th submission of trophy-worthy bass.

As of early July, the FWC has record of over 10,500 largemouths caught from Florida's waters that meet the requirements of being called a true lunker. As outlined by the program, any bass caught, photographed on a scale and released alive that weighs 8 pounds or better is eligible for submission to the TrophyCatch program, which rewards anglers with prizes (with help from partners like Bass Pro Shops) and chances to win a brand-new Phoenix boat powered by a Mercury, a Minn Kota trolling motor and Power-Poles.

The goal of the program is to get people fishing, to teach those same people good conservation practices and to help provide valuable data to the FWC. Clearly, it's working.

"If Florida is to remain the big bass capital of the world, Florida anglers need to be part of our research team," says FWC commissioner Gary Lester. "The FWC receives valuable data from TrophyCatch anglers, and this information will continue playing a crucial role in management decisions. Their participation is vital in keeping bass fishing in Florida great."

"Great" only begins to describe it. Since 2012, TrophyCatch has amassed over 85,600 active participants who have collectively caught and released over 91,531 pounds of trophy largemouths. Of those catches:

- > 2,005 were 10 pounds or larger
- > 82 were 13 pounds or larger - 17 of which came from Kingsley Lake
- > 8.4 percent came from Lake Kissimmee (7.2 percent from Rodman Reservoir)

"It is truly a unique collaboration between anglers, partners and the FWC to ensure that future generations will experience the same excitement that these anglers did when they reeled in their trophy bass," says Jon Fury, FWC's Director of the Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management.

To learn more about the program, visit TrophyCatchFlorida.com.



2020 ICAST Cup Winners

The ICAST Cup presented by FLW, a popular part of the ICAST tradeshow for the last five years, kicked off ICAST Online as a fish, photograph and release tournament July 11-12 with 50 anglers across the country fishing their local waters to raise money for Keep America Fishing.

The \$20-per-angler entry fee goes directly to Keep America Fishing and its efforts to preserve every angler's right to sustainably fish on our nation's waterways. Since its inception, the ICAST Cup has raised more than \$50,000.

The ICAST Cup featured five geographic divisions this year with anglers competing over two days to tally the most inches for their five longest large-mouth, smallmouth and spotted bass.

Central Division:

- 1st: Mark Balbinot - 85.75 inches
- 2nd: Russ Chargualaf - 82.00 inches

Northern Division:

- 1st: Michael Ovaska - 82.50 inches
- 2nd: Casey Reed - 77.50 inches

Southeastern Division:

- 1st: Doug Wilson - 103.25 inches
- 2nd: Ronan - 99.00 inches

Southern Division:

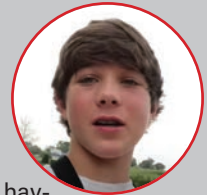
- 1st: Zack Holt - 71.75 inches
- 2nd: Jason McDonner - 63.75 inches

Western Division:

- 1st: Chayston Bastian - 83.50 inches
- 2nd: Zachary Espinosa - 58.00 inches

Complete results and photos are available on the FishDonkey app and ICASTCup.com. To learn more about Keep America Fishing, visit KeepAmericaFishing.org.

THE CATCH OF A SHORT LIFETIME

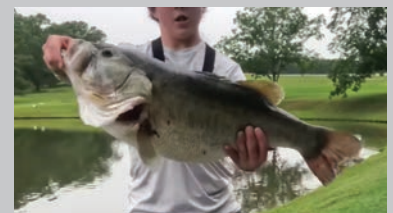


Most bass anglers will go their entire lives having never caught a bass weighing double digits, and it's a virtual certainty almost none of those same anglers will ever land one that tips the scale at more than 15 pounds. It's all the more impressive, then, when a 13-year-old angler can count himself among the few who get to experience that thrill.

Emory Carver was fishing a pond owned by a family friend on June 26, not far from Lake Eufaula - where big fish are common - when he got a bite few will ever be able to say they experienced. After a fight Carver says lasted about a minute with a fish he knew was going to prove to be close to double digits, he finally managed to hoist the 15-pound, 6-ounce behemoth up onto dry land and into his hands. Carver documented the entire sequence with a GoPro and posted the video (titled "15 POUND BASS Caught by KID!!") to his YouTube channel.

When the dust settled, Carver used a scale to weigh his incredible catch, then returned the fish to the pond before reality really set in. He spent the next few minutes telling everyone about his fish of a lifetime. Carver caught the fish using a right-handed reel (he normally winds with his left) and a Yamamoto Senko.

Carver's catch came up 1 pound, 2 ounces shy of the Alabama state record set by Thomas Burgin in 1987, but you probably won't hear him lamenting that fact. After all, there's plenty of time to work on landing a new personal best. ■





GO | CONFIDENTLY

Congratulations to Jacob Wheeler for winning the FLW Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Super Tournament on Chickamauga Lake. We couldn't be prouder to be a sponsor and supporter, providing Jacob with premium protection and superb visual clarity of our ANSI-rated, shatterproof lenses.



WX OMEGA
PART OF THE ACTIVE SERIES





PATENTED POSTURES

Some pros are clearly recognizable by their body language and style on the water



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.

To some people, all the casting and reeling that professional anglers do looks the same. But after you've watch thousands of hours of pros casting and reeling on the water over the course of 20 years, you realize every pro has his own fishing posture, body language and unique quirks. Some pros' patented postures are so identifiable, I thought I'd share some of my favorites.

I'll start with one of the more pronounced fishing postures in pro fishing: **Andy Morgan**. Morgan is such a tall fellow that when he holds a flipping stick in his hand, it looks more like a conductor's

baton. As he pitches and then catches the bait in his other hand in rhythm, Morgan looks like a band conductor orchestrating a symphony. During an FLW event on Chickamauga years ago, Morgan tried to hide from his competitors by borrowing a non-wrapped boat instead of using his own wrapped boat. But once I spied the "Incognito Conductor" leading the symphony in the back of a flooded pocket, I knew exactly who it was.

From one tall Andy to another, **Andy Montgomery** also possesses a very unique signature cast: the skip-cast. Yes, I know, a lot of top pros are proficient at skipping lures

into hard-to-reach areas. But Montgomery's version of the skip-cast is on another level, which makes him readily identifiable. He fishes so fast that the boat is usually moving at 3 to 4 mph as he skims lures like flat rocks into dock crevices the size of mouseholes. Imagine being 6 feet, 4 inches tall and trying to make a 20-foot putt from a moving golf cart. Montgomery does it hundreds of times a day with a fishing lure.

After covering many of **Mark Rose's** wins on the FLW Tour over the years, I found that his posture reminded me of a Major League Baseball pitcher. Before the windup,



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

Rose stares down his target on his electronics. Then, he intently scans the horizons, head rotating side-to-side, peering over his shoulder as if making sure no one is going to steal a base – or move in on his ledge. Rose then lightly lifts his cap up, twice, and sets it back perfectly on his head. He delivers a slider with his 6XD, right down the middle of a ledge, and those Tennessee River bass swing for it every time.

I have covered **Ott DeFoe** on the professional circuits since his first year on the FLW Tour, and his on-the-water demeanor has always been the same: extremely relaxed while maintaining acute focus. His fishing presence reminds me of a rhythm guitar player in a band. While the singer screams and the drummer smashes cymbals, DeFoe is barefoot, laid back, keeping time on a six string and always in the groove.

Given today's young guns who make the run-and-gun style of fishing look cool, I still respect the old-school ways and enjoy watching veterans of our sport at work. Two originals I have

taken a lot of notes on through the years are **Mark Davis** and **Larry Nixon**. Both of these decorated pros remind me of great blue herons in how they still truly stalk fish. In the way a heron exhibits the principles of patience while wading a bank for dinner, both Nixon and Davis have a way of hunting bass – waiting them out and forcing them to surrender. While the youngsters blitz the banks and the graphing wizards idle for mega-schools, both Nixon and Davis can be found lurking in between, slowly but surely closing in on their quarry.

Due to **Jacob Powroznik's** recent phenomenal success on the Bass Pro Tour and in the MLF Cups, I have grown to enjoy watching him fish. When Powroznik goes toe-to-toe with a bedding bass, it reminds me of a barroom brawl. It's as if the bedding bass made some kind of insulting gesture at Powroznik. He then shakes his head in disgust, picks up a rod and bows up to the fish. The fish taunts him one too many times, and the gloves come off. A

few chaotic moments later, P-Roz has the fish pinned to a Brecknell scale. SCORETRACKER® update: Jacob, that 6-pound, 10-ounce bass will put you in the lead.

Aaron Martens is by far one of the most entertaining pros to watch fish. Martens is a dynamo, and his ability to multitask while fishing is his signature. He probably covers more ground running back and forth in his boat than most people walk in a day. He once had the nickname "Spin" for his boundless energy. While fishing, Martens can also neaten the rods on the deck, clean his sunglasses, investigate a "weird funk" in the rod locker, straighten out his toe socks, closely examine some kind of bug that just landed in his boat (Whoa, stink bug, bro!), clean water spots off his gunwale and count the number of flakes in a plastic worm. It always leaves me wondering how he even has time to reel in so many fish.

Aaron, you are truly one of a kind. You've got a lot of people out here praying for you, bro. ■



PHOTO BY MILLENNIUM PROMOTIONS, INC.

DEAN ROJAS: FROG MASTER

The Arizona pro's career trajectory has mirrored the path of a lure type he helped put on the fishing map



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

In the olden days of tournament bass fishing, pros often specialized in certain techniques, sometimes becoming closely associated with those techniques as their signature systems. Denny Brauer was a noted flipper; David Fritts a cranker. When conditions weren't right for the techniques of specialists, they often struggled, but when things lined up, those guys cleaned house.

Fast-forward a few decades, and we're seeing fewer specialists in professional fishing. To remain competitive and stay afloat, an angler has to be good at just about everything. There are, however, a few pros still synonymous with a skill set (even if that's not their only skill set), and in some cases responsible for the popularity of a method of fishing. I can think of none more apparent than Dean Rojas and frog fishing.

For years, I wanted to climb in a boat and watch Rojas fish his beloved lure. I also wanted to learn the concept behind it, and what influenced

Rojas to expand his thinking – and then all of ours – on the ways a floating frog can be fished. Recently, I got my chance.

THE DISCOVERY

The story must start at the beginning, as Rojas makes no claims that he created modern frog fishing. He says an anonymous fishing friend stumbled on the technique, which Rojas then took much, much further.

It started in 2000, at which point Rojas had been out in the world for a few years, competing around the country and trying to make ends meet. Coming from a Western background, the fisheries of the Southeast were a whole new ballgame. Results were less than stellar.

During some time off, Rojas joined his buddy, who was on a hot bite on the Colorado River.

"There were flooded trees everywhere, and my friend is skipping the old Snag Proof Frog – the bait with the legs and everything – up through the

limbs,” Rojas recalls. “I remember the lure was just kind of meandering around; it didn’t walk or anything. He missed a giant blow-up right away, but then he caught one.

“Immediately, a light bulb went off in my head. I remembered all those lakes and rivers I had visited [on tour] and thought of hundreds of places where the technique would work.”

Therein lies the Rojas epiphany. While nearly every angler at the time equated a hollow frog with fishing scum and lily pads, Rojas saw it as a deadly weapon for shoreline cover of any type.

He quickly acquired what frog lures were available at the time and began expanding on the technique with a new Japanese model called the Sumo Frog. Results were immediate.

“It was totally different,” Rojas says. “I could go behind anybody, anywhere, and catch fish on it.”

Rojas’ first competitive breakthrough came with a top-10 finish on the Alabama River. More importantly, it was the first time Rojas’ frog technique was captured on camera.

“The commentators were like, ‘Oh, my gosh. Look what he’s doing.’”

Soon thereafter, Rojas found himself leading the Bassmaster Classic using a frog. Attention for the technique was unparalleled, but the lure wasn’t perfect.

CREATING THE BRONZEYE FROG

Rojas recognized the time was right for development of something new.

“The industry wanted something like that,” he says. “It was topwater, so it was fun, and it was one of the only things [lure categories] left that hadn’t been refined or developed.”

By this time, Rojas had been contacted by several lure companies for an endorsement, but his passion lay in making something better.

“I wanted to challenge the notion that frogs had a poor hook-up ratio,” he explains. “Gamakatsu had a premier double hook, so I designed the bait around that hook.”

There was a lot more to building a perfect frog lure than just sculpting a look-alike around a big hook, as Rojas found out. The material had to be a blend that was both rugged and collapsible. Weighting needed to be considered, and a keel was necessary to encourage proper action.

“I knew it had to walk side-to-side in a very small spot, almost never moving forward. I was building a lure for target fishing and skipping,” he says.

Fifteen months later, the SPRO Dean Rojas Bronze Eye Frog was introduced and won Best Soft Bait at the 2005 ICAST show.

FINE-TUNING THE FROG

Though the SPRO frog was a hit, Rojas was still experimenting with frog fishing as a tournament strategy. As he fished the lure in competition coast to coast, the Arizona pro experienced the pros and cons of his addiction.

“I couldn’t win on it,” he admits. “It’s very difficult to catch fish for four days on a frog. I’d just run out of water.”

Despite the highs and lows of his early days with the new creation, Rojas says he wouldn’t change a thing. He was, after all, still learning the scope of the frog’s capabilities

“I had to go to the far end of it to see the limitations of the bait.”

Today, Rojas is more calculated in terms of his lure choices. While a frog lure still accounts for a large percentage of his casts, Rojas now looks for bite windows. It’s “more of a tool in the arsenal” than his only weapon. Working it into his game plan – instead of making it his only game plan – has paid off with major wins, including the 2008 Bassmaster Elite Series event on Oneida Lake and the 2019 Major League Fishing Bass Pro Tour Phoenix Boats Stage Five presented by Mercury on Smith Lake.

PUTTING THE TOOL TO WORK

Rojas confirms the best times to frog fish are late in the day during a spring warming trend and early in the morning throughout the summer.

“The best time,” he claims, “is when it’s windy with a dropping barometer.”

More than simply recognizing the right scenario is the ability to put the frog in places few others can, in perfect ambush zones.

“I’m always looking for the hardest place to get it in there,” he says. “It’s almost like a game to me. You need to get it up against a hard edge, like a shoreline or seawall – a place where a bass has the frog pinned – and that creates their instinct to hit it.”

Finally, Rojas will often use the frog as a search lure to reveal the whereabouts of fish that might miss the bait under less-than-ideal conditions but crush it when the time is right. This is common during the spawn.

In the end, Rojas has gone farther with a single fishing lure than most anglers would ever dream. Sure, the frog burned him a time or two, but it’s also helped to forge his rock-star career at the same time. He regrets none of it and stays enthusiastic about the longevity of the technique that he forged more than two decades ago. ■

“I KNEW IT HAD TO WALK SIDE-TO-SIDE IN A VERY SMALL SPOT, ALMOST NEVER MOVING FORWARD. I WAS BUILDING A LURE FOR TARGET FISHING AND SKIPPING.”





ROGER PETERSON/ENGBRETSON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

FINDING BASS PART 3: COMPETITION

Weighing the odds of various patterns based on resource availability



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.

When anglers think about where and why a bass might be in a specific area in a waterbody, a whole host of factors need to be considered, including seasonality, water temperature, water clarity or quality, and even the presence or absence of cover and structure. Understanding and unlocking those factors goes a long way toward finding and catching more bass. For the purposes of this discussion, let's call those **primary factors**.

In prior installments in this series, we explored additional or **secondary factors** that can help further unlock the bass location puzzle. Secondary factors are more nuanced, like

how to understand local and regional habitat, as well as studying forage type and abundance to better predict location and hone presentation.

The last of the secondary factors to consider is competition – not in the sense of anglers competing in a tournament, but rather how bass compete with other bass and other species for the limited resources available in any given fishery.

Studying competition between and among species is one of the pillars of fisheries science, and although it's hard to tangibly apply the understanding of competition directly to catching more or

bigger bass, having baseline knowledge of how animals compete for limited resources can improve an angler's ability to critically think. It also explains many of the conundrums encountered on the water.

BASS ECONOMICS 101

Believe it or not, to help understand competition in bass, it helps to quickly review a little economic theory.

The first concept to understand is that resources are scarce, meaning there's a finite supply of forage species, ideal habitat, etc. available in any waterbody. All the bass (and other species that share

or otherwise utilize the same resources) in the system might want to be in one place or eat the same thing. If there's not enough to go around, either the number of bass needs to decrease or some bass need to change their priorities.

This understanding of scarcity sets up the second economic concept to understand: supply and demand. The supply side is the list of resources bass use (habitat, forage, shallow cover, etc.), and the bass are the demand side because they all intrinsically want to use the best and most of the limited resources available.

COMPETITION ON THE WATER

Supply and demand of scarce resources intersect in almost every on-the-water situation an angler can encounter. Take the best boat dock on a lake, for example. That dock might be the best because it has the most shade or deep-water access, or because it's chockful of bluegills or crawfish. But will those resources support five bass? How about 20?

The bottom line is that as good as the dock is, it can only hold so many bass. The benefits of being under that dock will be reduced incrementally by each subsequent bass that decides to live under it. So, at a certain point, if another bass were to join the party, the dock might no longer be the best one on the lake (from that bass' perspective). Maybe that next bass decides to hang out on a laydown instead because, despite having access to fewer bluegills, less shade or the like, it's the only bass there utilizing the laydown.

The above example deals with habitat, but this supply-demand battle also occurs with forage abundance. This

is why, even on some of the most dominant pattern lakes, there will always be bass doing something a little different.

For this example, consider the famed Tennessee River lakes. Everyone knows that once bass come off beds, many will head out to the ledges to chase after shad for the summer. Well, every time a major tournament heads to one of those lakes, inevitably someone finishes in the top 10 fishing the bank. Sure, maybe the bulk of the bass are offshore chasing shad, but if you're a bass and decide to stay up shallow,

you have the run of the place. Finding these fish capitalizing on a different supply of forage can mean pay dirt for a tournament angler.

COMPETITION FOR BAITS

On those Tennessee River lakes, anglers fishing for shad-chasing schools of bass talk about a concept called "firing up the school." Essentially, the bass don't feed all the time, but if you can get one to go, it often sets off a feeding frenzy that can get you right in a hurry.

Although there's no way to scientifically test this, competition theory suggests

that the behavior could be an impact of competition. Once one bass sees its neighbor feed, it's likely to think there is food present and become more likely to feed when your crankbait or swimbait comes by on the next cast.

The concept of competition is not at all straightforward, but it plays a major role in one of the most confounding bass questions of all time: Why are all the bass in any given system not doing the same thing at the same time?

The answer is in part due to competition.

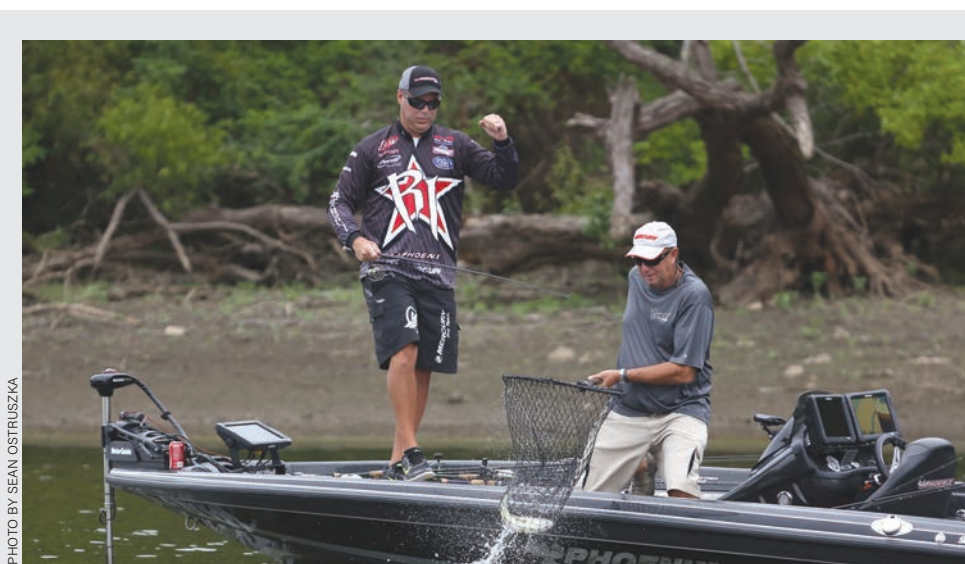


PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

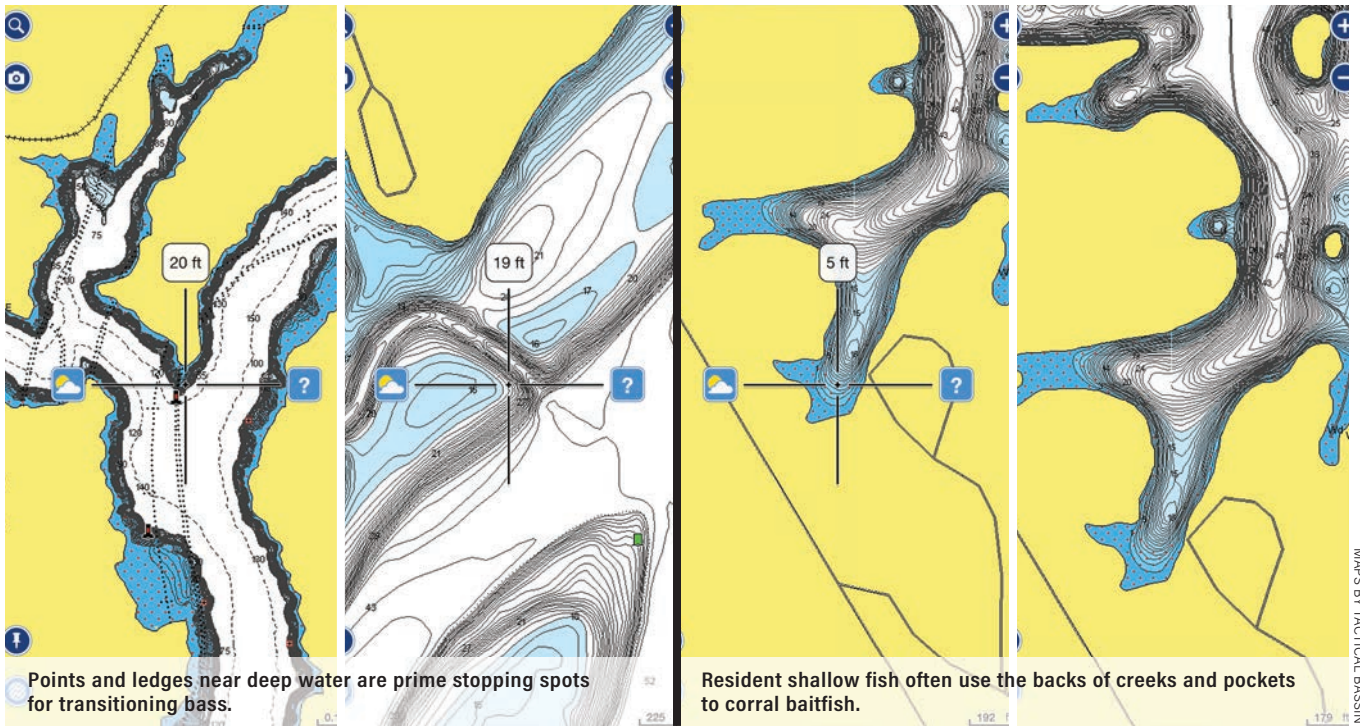
ON-THE-WATER APPLICATION

Tournament anglers use this concept of competition all the time, possibly without even knowing it. How many times have you seen an angler have a good finish on a body of water that person has never before visited? When this happens, sometimes it's not accomplished by using the predominant pattern the locals are all fishing. When interviewed, the out-of-towner might say something like, "I like to fish *X technique*, so I went and found some fish that I could catch doing that."

Either knowingly or unknowingly, the angler likely uncovered a secondary or even tertiary pattern that was overlooked by other anglers focusing on what was actually the predominant bass pattern. The "oddball" had the secondary pattern to himself.

Take the 2015 FLW Cup, for example. Winner Brad Knight threw a drop-shot around wood up a creek in relatively shallow water, forsaking the Ouachita summer standbys of brush piles, deep structure and topwater that drew the focus of so many of the other competitors. The water temperatures on Ouachita that week were in the 90s, yet Knight caught many of his bass in visible wood less than 8 feet deep. Why were those bass there? Likely because the resources around the lake are scarce in mid-summer, and there was less competition for those scarce resources around that shallow wood.

The next time you're practicing for a tournament, if you're struggling with the "normal" patterns and locations, don't be afraid to do some exploring. Competition theory suggests that there is likely another pattern or location out there with which you can succeed. ■



Points and ledges near deep water are prime stopping spots for transitioning bass.

Resident shallow fish often use the backs of creeks and pockets to corral baitfish.

MAPS BY TACTICAL BASSIN



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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



TAKE ADVANTAGE OF FALL TRANSITION

The dog days are ending, but the action doesn't have to stop

The dog days of summer are quickly coming to an end, and with the change comes the end of summer fishing patterns. Switching gears and effectively patterning bass during the summer-to-fall transition could mean the difference between holding up a first-place trophy or an empty weigh bag.

As the days get shorter and the nights get cooler, bass will be on the move. One day you might be on an awesome top-water bite, and the next you might not be able to find fish. Overnight, the bass, along with the summer bite, can disappear and leave many anglers scratching their heads.

If this has ever happened to you, the tips below will give you some insight on where bass go and how you can catch them through the tricky transition.

UNDERSTANDING TRANSITION

The fall transition is not a slow transition. It comes much earlier and happens a lot quicker than most anglers realize. Transition movements can happen seemingly overnight with the falling temperatures. To figure out and locate a school of fish, you need to ask yourself one question: Where are the baitfish?

Bass movements are highly motivated by their food source.

As the baitfish school up, so will the bass. The offshore or ledge fish that you have targeted all summer will begin to congregate into larger schools. The shallow fish you were flippin' and froggin' in the grass will vacate their summer vegetation in search of new locations.

How the transition occurs depends on the type of fishery and the cover or structure bass frequent.

Deeper offshore fish begin gathering on the best structure and ambush points. They congregate on the corners of ledges that are close to deep water and long tapering points that extend out to deep

water. Later, you can expect them to transition toward the backs of deeper coves for the sole purpose of corralling big balls of bait. If you can find a ledge or point that is located on or near a current break or bend in the river, the spot can be very special.

Reservoir fishermen should look for main-lake points that separate the different arms of the lake. Main-lake and secondary points with relatively easy deep-water access and narrow bays close by tend to be the most productive.

Shallow fish will begin abandoning the sparse, dying weedbeds that you've been catching them in all summer. They move to remaining thick weed clumps or hard structure such as rock piles and chunk rock. We've found that the biggest fish tend to be on either the deepest weedbeds or, as the weedbeds eventually die, on hard structure such as rock piles and wood. This is where side-viewing sonar and a good topographic map chip can really help with finding the key locations.

As the fall season progresses, bass will begin bunching up along ambush points and pockets. The shallow fish will use the backs of bays or cuts to corral schooled-up baitfish. Early morning and later in the evening are the best times to target big fish up in the shallow water because larger, wary fish tend to get a little skittish once the sun gets up.

Once you find the bass, fall fishing is as good a time to catch a personal best as in spring, especially once you understand how to ignite the school.

FIRING UP THE SCHOOL

When bass school up in the fall, our most productive way to catch big fish is to "trigger" them with reaction baits. Triggering a bass or school of bass is best achieved when fishing reaction baits quickly. The key is to not give the fish ample time to be picky or indecisive about eating the lure.

Bass are natural predators and impressive killing machines. When you can tap into a bass' natural instinct to feed, the results can be amazing. All you have to do is convince one of the many fish in the school to eat, which

kicks in a giant bass' predatory instincts, and it won't want to miss out on an opportunity to feed.

It doesn't even matter if you catch the smallest fish in the school first. The result is often that the entire school will trigger into a feeding frenzy for a short period of time. At that point, you no longer have to try to fool a giant bass into eating. The biggest fish, which are usually very wary and skeptical, become easier to catch because they get caught up in the moment with the school going crazy around them. Believe me, it works. On more than one occasion, I've caught a double-digit bass only because I caught a small bass the cast before. You can literally catch a 10-incher and a 10-pounder on consecutive casts.

Once you get the first bite, it's very important to make quick follow-up casts to keep the school fired up to capitalize on the flurry of activity.

TECHNIQUES FOR THE TRANSITION

My two favorite techniques to take advantage of schooled-up bass during the fall transition are cranking and topwater. For shallow cranking, I turn to a squarebill. A little flash goes a long way when trying to stand out from thou-

sands of real shad, and Lucky Craft's American shad color is where I start when I need that extra flash. A skirtless buzzbait is a good realistic presentation, too. I find that a 1/2-ounce buzzbait tracks better than other weights. When paired with a River2Sea D Walker swimbait, you get great action and durability that will last through countless fish.

For the deeper fish, I typically start with a deep-diving crankbait. The flash fades away in the deeper water, so I prefer bold colors such as sexy shad. My favorite deep-diving crankbait for fall largemouth bass is the Strike King 10XD, but for smallmouth and spotted bass it's the River2Sea Tactical DD.

This season, if you find yourself wondering how your epic summer topwater bite vanished, remember that the fall transition happens quickly. Pay attention to the length of days and the overnight temperatures. As soon as the days get shorter and the overnight temps start to drop, start thinking about these tips. Follow the baitfish to shallow bays or deep ledges to find the mega-schools. Tie on a quick-moving crankbait or topwater to ignite the school. Then hang on, because you just might catch the fish of a lifetime. ■

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JORDAN LEE HAS THE “IT” FACTOR

By Rob Newell

PHOTOS BY GARRICK DIXON

In the modern age of professional fishing’s top names, only a handful are considered to be pure naturals – anglers who have an uncanny sixth sense to be at the right place and time far too often to be considered just lucky. Names like Aaron Martens, David Dudley, Greg Hackney and Andy Morgan are often in that “pure natural” conversation.

Over the last few years, Jordan Lee has become an undeniable part of that discussion – and for good reason. While back-to-back to Bassmaster Classic wins in 2017 and 2018 quickly proved Lee operated at another level, it’s his continued success on the Major League Fishing Bass Pro Tour – including two wins in just two years – that’s proved he is a natural-born fish-catcher, no matter what format you put him in. Add to that he’s now a 2020 Bass Pro Tour Points Champion and people are starting to wonder just which planet this young man came from.

Given his age (29) and success, it would be easy for Lee to be flashy and flamboyant, but there is not a shred of brashness in his nature. In person, Lee is quiet, reserved and always carries a collected composure given the emotionally charged sport he excels in. Tangled lines, lost fish and bad days are not cause for tantrums or tirades. Such sidetracks and distractions never derail Lee. Instead, they roll off him, sometimes even bringing a bashful grin to his face as he finds the ironic humor in picking out a backlash. His sense of humor helps him keep perspective, but behind that self-effacing smile is a purposeful poise and steely demeanor that is always focused on the goal.

When reminded of his achievements, Lee displays a genuine humility. He is quick to point out the dominant runs of his fellow competitors like Jacob Wheeler, Bryan Thrift, Ott DeFoe and Edwin Evers in recent years. It’s certainly a fair claim; their performances have been superhuman as well. Those pros have a healthy dose of inborn fishing talent, too, but it could be argued that their approach is more strategic and premeditated. They design their days around specific patterns or exceptionally efficient rotations. In contrast, Lee’s approach is more spontaneous and visceral, needing to “feel out” the day’s current conditions before executing his opening salvo.



DEFINING THE "FEEL"

When Lee talks about how he discerns productive water from unproductive water, he often uses the word "feel." When asked to define that feel, he speculates that it has something to do with an inherent ability to assess water and weather conditions immediately, and to make a very definitive decision about what's good and what's bad. It's something he discovered in 2009 while fishing his first tournament season as a boater. At the age of 18, Lee fished the Bassmaster Weekend Series, won the last event of the season and won the points race in the North Alabama Division, which featured some of the best tournament sticks in Southeast.

"When I first started fishing tournaments, I just felt like I had a knack for it," Lee says. "I somehow recognize productive water quickly. Even when I went to lakes I had never been to before, I knew what kind of water I wanted to find based on that day's conditions. On tournament days, I kept looking until I found something that had the right look or the right feel.

"I wish I could explain it better. I can make two dozen stops to try places and they just don't look or feel right to me. Then, on the 25th stop, it's like, this is it, this is exactly what I'm looking for. For some reason it just feels perfect."

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

As he traveled around fishing various circuits early in his career, Lee knew his approach to tournament fishing was a little different from the norm. He often heard other anglers talk about finding fish in practice and hoping their fish would stay put for the tournament. He heard them discuss staying in one area all day to "dial in the pattern," and to "find where the fish moved to." For Lee, the talk was a bit foreign because his approach to the game was somewhat different, especially in multi-day tournaments.

"So many of my best events have come from finding fish on the fly in the tournament," Lee says. "I've never really found a productive place in practice and said to myself 'Man, I hope these fish are still here in the tournament.' In my mind, it's a given that those fish won't still be there in the tournament. There's too much changing day to day."



"SO MANY OF MY BEST EVENTS HAVE COME FROM FINDING FISH ON THE FLY IN THE TOURNAMENT."

If he stops to fish a spot and the bass don't cooperate, Lee moves on and doesn't get caught up in trying to "reconnect" with the fish.

"I try not to get married to any one place or technique," Lee explains. "If it doesn't feel right in the first 15 or 20 minutes, I keep moving; I don't want to get bogged down trying to figure out what happened. Some guys are really good at figuring out where fish moved to. Their fish change and they keep sniffing around for hours until they find out how they have repositioned. I've been beaten by that approach plenty, but it's not me."

Lee uses practice solely to cover water and assess the paying field. He fishes only briefly to judge the water clarity, bottom composition or fishing pressure in an area.

"I want to see and sample as much of a lake as possible," he explains. "When the tournament starts, I don't care about having a starting spot. I just want plenty of options to match the variables for that day."

WINDOW SHOPPING

Lee prefers finding windows, which are more timing-based, as opposed to patterns, which are based more on location. Windows are more illusive and everchanging, which makes them more pressure-proof.

"Conditions are always changing," Lee says. "Clouds, wind, water color, fishing pressure, forage spawns. They are variables that intermingle constantly. One of my favorite things is finding when these variables line up in certain

Jordan Lee doesn't ever like to play it safe. Some of his best decisions on the water fly in the face of conventional wisdom and separate him from what the rest of the field is doing.



ways to create feeding opportunities for bass. That's what I want to find – not so much a place, but a situation that's occurring at a certain time." With that, Lee says he would rather string together three or four different windows during a tournament day than to have one or two permanent locations to grind. It's an approach that requires a lot of running and gunning. In a day's time, he may fish riprap during the morning clouds, several isolated lay-downs in mid-morning, floating docks when the wind dies and the sun gets high and then shaded pockets in the afternoon. Instead of a single pattern, it's more like sewing together several different "positioning windows" based on timing. How long he dedicates to each segment is totally defined by success and feel.

"If I'm not getting bit or I'm not feeling it, I'm gone," he says. "Even if I caught a bunch right there the day

before, I won't become attached to it, but if it still looks right and I'm seeing the right conditions, I'm going to stay with it longer."

Lee admits that being a touch more patient this year and not bailing out so soon is something that may have helped in his points title quest.

"I've been burned by leaving too soon several times," he says. "I would later find out guys lit them up on places where I initially stopped, after I left. I've tried to be mindful of that and give places a few more minutes to feel right."

THE GAMBLER

Given Lee's penchant for wanting to find windows during tournament hours, it's no surprise big gambles are a part of his game.

"I'm not really a play-it-safe kind of guy during the event," Lee admits. "If there is a high-risk, high-reward option

available to keep from me from running the same ruts, I'm probably going to take it."

Indeed, Lee took some big gambles that paid off handsomely en route to his points title this season.

At the season opener on Lake Eufaula, Lee found himself lingering in 19th place after two days of competition. Once in the Knockout Round, he knew he needed to do something drastic to make big moves on the SCORE-TRACKER®.

"I was done with the main lake; I wanted to get away from it," Lee says. "I knew if I went back, I would just be beating my head against the same walls, which is not a good feeling for me. At that point, the unknown is a better option."

With that, Lee recalled a backwater pond way up the Chattahoochee River that he fished as a co-angler several years before. He couldn't remember



A true student of the game, Jordan Lee spends as much time on the water as any of his peers and has learned some valuable lessons as a result.



exactly how to get into it, but he did remember that the water needed to be higher than normal to get into it, which it was.

Once in the pond, Lee hit a window of big female bass staging up to spawn. He caught six big bass weighing 36 pounds to rocket to second in the Knockout Round and into the Championship Round.

At Stage Two at Okeechobee, Lee zeroed on day one. Once in the hole, he decided he needed new water with new potential to make something happen.

"The main lake was so beat up from big wind and fishing pressure," he recalls. "I had fished the Taylor Creek canals back in college, and the more I thought about them, the more they fit the bill for something different: They

were off the beaten path, protected from the wind and stable. It seemed like the perfect gamble to take."

Once he locked into the canal system, Lee said it "felt right" - better than anywhere else he had fished on the main lake. He proceeded to go from the bottom of the SCORETRACKER® to the very top, catching 32 pounds and winning his Elimination Round for an automatic bid into the Championship Round.

"What's weird about this sport is sometimes your biggest personal victories are not necessarily wins on paper," he says. "I didn't win Eufaula or Okeechobee, but when the chips were down, I trusted my gut, and when I got to those gamble spots, it felt so right. I made huge comebacks in both events; experiences like that are what forge confidence."

Lee's gambles continued at Sturgeon Bay, when he led the points race by just seven points going into the final event. On the first day, Lee trailered all the way to Rowley's Bay to

begin his homestretch to the points title. After putting in, Lee immediately knew he had a problem. "Within minutes, it just didn't feel right at all," he says. "Things had completely changed. The water looked different, the wind was different. I knew the fish were still there somewhere. I had to decide between committing my day to finding out how they repositioned or taking out and trailering to the Green Bay side and starting over."

The cost of starting over was an hour of no-fishing trailer time. Of course, Lee took the gamble of relocating. After an hour and a half without a bite on the first day, Lee finally found the window he was looking for and wrestled up 71 pounds, 12 ounces of smallmouth to be on his way to claiming the 2020 Bass Pro Tour points title.

Ironically, the one event that didn't involve taking big risks and fishing new water was Lee's win at Stage Four on Lake Toho. He spent some of his practice idling around in the middle of Toho marking brushpiles. He didn't fish the piles because most of them were in the lake's main thoroughfare traveled heavily by his competition.

"That's the only tournament this year where I fished only the stuff I found in practice," Lee says. "I really didn't know how much potential the piles had until I started fishing them on my first tournament day. The more I fished them, the more I learned which ones to hit at what time of the day. Each pile had its own sort of window. Once I figured out the best order for the rotation, it felt right."

A STUDENT OF THE GAME

Being self-taught and a student of the game are the most prominent cornerstones of Lee's success.

"I never had one certain person take me out and show me all the ropes to tournament fishing," he says. "Instead, I fished with a lot of different anglers, trying to learn about different techniques. From there, I fished as much as I could on my own to develop my own approach."

Lee intentionally fished on rainy days, hot days, freezing days, in high water, in low water – you name a condition and he wanted to fish in it. He wore trails in the water on Alabama

lakes, devouring as much time on the water as he could get. Locals from both Guntersville and Smith Lake say his truck and trailer became a permanent landmark at ramps on those lakes.

When it came time to learn smallmouth fishing, Lee made a month-long pilgrimage to Lake Champlain and fished every day for several weeks to learn the idiosyncrasies of smallmouth.

To this day, Lee's appetite for fishing knowledge is still insatiable. He admits that when he can't fish, he consumes large quantities of fishing content in the form of tournament results and reports from all over the country, as well as countless fishing shows and YouTube videos.

"I might watch a random video of a guy catching bass on a frog up north and see just one thing that intrigued me about the way a fish was caught on a crazy color and I will remember it," he says. "Before going to Sturgeon Bay, I watched videos on Great Lakes smallmouth fishing to remind myself how they set up and what kinds of things they bite and how hard they fight – it all helps me sort of visualize what I want to find when I get there."

In his early years, Lee tried the route of getting firsthand fishing information and locations for tournaments, but it was a formula that didn't work for him.

"It wasn't very rewarding because I tried to stick to what I was told would work, even when it didn't feel right," he says.

Along those same lines, Lee believes the MLF rules of not being able to talk to your fellow competitors about fishing has been a plus for him on the Bass Pro Tour.

"It's only natural to talk about fishing at a tournament," he explains. "And even though I have my own ideas, hearing another guy's thoughts about what's going on clouds my head. So the fact that we can't talk with each other about what's happening out on the water in these events is actually a relief."

"I like to do things my way," he adds. "The most gratifying thing for me about fishing is taking the set of conditions I am dealt on any given day, going out and playing my ideas and hunches on those variables to see if they work. When something hits and it works, it's very fulfilling, which builds



SOMETHING SPECIAL

FLW Tour pro Alex Davis of Albertville, Ala., was one of the many anglers Jordan Lee fished with when learning the ropes during his teenage years. Davis fished with Lee on several occasions and distinctly remembers that there was something special about him.

"As a guide, I take a lot of people fishing who want to learn advanced techniques," Davis says. "It usually takes most people a day or so to get the gist of how to work certain lures. When I took Jordan fishing – I want to say he was probably 16 or 17 – no matter what lure I put in his hand, he just got it immediately. Within minutes, he knew when to reel, when to pause, when to jerk, when to set the hook. It was all very natural for him. I remember showing him how to crank a squarebill through grass, which takes some time to learn – not with him – it looked like he had been threading a squarebill through grass all his life."

One of the days Davis took Lee fishing was in July when daytime temperatures soared past the 100-degree mark.

"It was dead slick, broiling hot and we were inhaling hydrilla gnats by the thousands," Davis recalls. "We fished like 12 or 13 hours that day. I figured there was no way a teenage kid would come back for another dose. That night, just for kicks, I texted him and asked him if he wanted to go again the next day. You can only imagine my surprise when he texted back, 'Just tell me what time to be there.' We went again the next day and he wore them out on nearly every lure I had in the boat."

Davis says Lee's love of fishing is beyond explanation.

"For a few years here at Guntersville, his truck and trailer could be found at Seibold Creek ramp seven days a week, no matter the weather," Davis adds. "Every day I saw it, I remember thinking, 'there is a guy that wants it bad.' He absolutely loves being on the water learning about fish."

self-confidence and that leads to believing in yourself even more. This year, it just so happened a lot of my ideas worked and that process kept building upon itself to put me on top at the end of the season." ■

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By Sean Ostruszka

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

LESSONS FROM PROS WHO SPEND ALMOST TWO-THIRDS OF THEIR YEAR ON THE WATER

Water makes up 60 percent of the human body. When it comes to the life of some humans, though, the percentage is much higher.

Take someone like Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Alex Davis. Conservatively, he spends more than 200 days a year on the water, and, realistically, it's more like 250-plus. Fellow Pro Circuit pro Josh Douglas is in the same boat (figuratively, anyway).

It makes sense that, as professional tournament anglers, they'd be on the water religiously. But the tournaments and practice days are just a fraction of their staggering yearly allotment. The reason these two rack up as much time on water as on dry land is because when they're not catching fish in tournaments, they're helping others catch fish as full-time fishing guides.

They're not just guides on run-of-the-mill lakes, either. They guide on two of the best bass fisheries in the country – Davis on Lake Guntersville and Douglas on Mille Lacs.

That got us to thinking: Is the old adage true that there really is no substitute for time on the water to become a better angler? And since these two put in more days fishing in one year than most "avid" fishermen do in five, on two of the best fisheries in the country, it then stands to reason that they might be privy to some insight others aren't when it comes to tournament fishing and fishing in general.

Sure enough, they are, and they're willing to share some of the things they've learned on the water over the years.





200 DAYS



“IF GUIDING HAS TAUGHT ME ANYTHING TO MAKE ME A BETTER FISHERMAN, IT’S YOU HAVE TO HAVE MULTIPLE GAME PLANS. BECAUSE SOMETIMES PLANS A, B AND C DON’T WORK, BUT D DOES.”

– ALEX DAVIS



Alex Davis' experience has taught him how to put clients like Kenji Yoshida, pictured above, on some truly giant fish.

TRY NEW THINGS

Davis is a power fisherman who guides on a lake ideally suited for power fishing, but he pushes himself to try new techniques and lures whenever and wherever he can.

“If my clients are happy catching fish, I’ll start experimenting,” he says. “Hands down, the best thing to come of that has been the drop-shot. I don’t like spinning rods or finesse, but I forced myself to try and learn it.

“The thing is, I had to learn it fishing whatever my clients were fishing. So, I threw it in grass, out deep, on riprap, on bluffs – places most people would never think to try it. Because of that, I learned how deadly it can be – and not just on small fish. I’ve had a lot of guide trips that ended with big smiles because of that technique.”

THE TAKEAWAY: Never be afraid to try something new, even if it takes you off the beaten path.

FISH MOVE A LOT, AND IT CAN HAPPEN FAST

If there’s one thing Davis and Douglas agree on most when it comes to spending more time on the water, it’s that experience can teach a lot about fish movements.

“You get a feel for them,” says Douglas. “I realize even a couple days off or a week, you get out of rhythm and get rusty. It really is a rhythm you get into to think like a fish and move with them.

“Wolves and coyotes get good at tracking their prey because they do it every day. Same thing with fishermen and bass.”

Those movements can happen much faster than most anglers think. Time and again, Davis has found areas where “it’s like every fish in the lake has swam right there.”

Two days later, they’re all gone. “So many times, I’ll fish a pocket and catch four one day,” Davis

explains. “The next day, I’ll catch 10, and immediately I know they’re coming. For the next few days, that pocket is phenomenal. But five days later, they’re gone. And sometimes it’s not that long. Sometimes it’s two days and they’re all gone. You wouldn’t believe it unless you saw it.”

Davis got a reminder of that fact at the Chickamauga Super Tournament. He located a massive school at 1 p.m. the final day of practice. He checked them at 10 a.m. the very next day in the tournament.

“They were gone,” he says. “Like, not moved a little or anything. I searched all over. I never found them.”

THE TAKEAWAY: Always be moving and anticipate where fish might go. Anglers get into habits of hitting the same spots at the same times of year on their favorite fisheries. Just because we think the fish should be somewhere doesn’t mean the fish think they should be there, too.

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JACOB VITTI



WHEELER'S 5 FAVES

THE MLF PRO REVEALS
THE HANDFUL OF BASS BAITS
HE DEEMS AS ESSENTIAL,
EVERYDAY TOOLS

By Tyler Brinks

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

Major League Fishing pro Jacob Wheeler is widely recognized as one of the top bass anglers in the world. Some (including the BassFan World Rankings) would argue he's the best. Since he turned pro, Wheeler's been a consistent winner at each organization he's been a part of and in every tournament format in which he's competed.

Wheeler's success is due in part to his natural abilities and extreme efficiency on the water. MLF's every-fish-counts format has further showcased just how quickly he can find and catch piles of bass.

But to catch those fish, Wheeler has also dialed in a key kit of lures that fit his style and approach, and that consistently produce for him. They're the baits he doesn't leave home without; the key clubs in his bag. They've helped make him one of the most successful professional bass anglers in the game.



When it comes to covering water, few baits are more effective in Jacob Wheeler's book than a buzzbait.

PHOTO BY BRODY MCWILLIAMS



1. BUZZIN' TO COVER WATER

The five lures Wheeler discussed for this article aren't ranked, but if they were, chances are the buzzbait would take one of the top couple spots.

"The buzzbait is high, high on my list," he says. "It's the most efficient way for me to cover water, and it's something that I have so much confidence in."

Wheeler is so fond of the buzzbait because he can fish it quickly, making it one of his top lures for covering water in search of active fish.

"I always have one tied on anytime the water is above 52 degrees," he adds. "It generates bites and will also catch big ones. It's also one of my best tools for practice when I'm trying to locate groups of fish because I can go down the bank with my trolling motor on high and still fish it right."

The pro never fishes a buzzbait with a standard skirt and will always either modify the skirt – trimming it way back so it doesn't reach the hook point – or remove it entirely and replace it with a soft plastic.

"If you have a soft plastic on the buzzbait, the bass will hold it much longer, almost like a jig," he says. "I've seen fish come up and grab it by the boat and hold onto it, and they don't do that without a soft plastic on it. That makes it much easier to get a good hookset."

"I'll adjust the plastics to get a different look, and I'll either use a toad, craw or swimbait," Wheeler adds. "I use the craw trailers on river systems when the bait is small and the toad may be too big for the caliber of fish in those waters."

If he goes with a trimmed skirt, Wheeler will often use contrasting colors for the skirt and soft plastic.

"I may have a white craw on a black buzzbait just to change the look," he says. "I also sometimes use a translucent skirt with a black or chartreuse soft plastic."

Not surprisingly, Wheeler's favorite buzzbait is his signature series from Accent Fishing Products because all the details have been thought out to make the buzzbait exactly how he wants it.

"The key to a good buzzbait is having the right blade, hook and a crimped rivet," Wheeler says. "Accent is a small company, so they can pay attention to the little details and get the best sound from a buzzbait. The blades are specially anodized, and they sand down each rivet to create a unique sound."



2. JIGS FOR BIGS

"You always have to have a jig tied on, no matter where you go," says Wheeler, echoing pretty common sentiment among top professional anglers.

There are countless head designs for jigs, but for Wheeler, who has no sponsor connection with a jig company, the best all-around jig (which he buys just like everyone else) is the ER Lures Flipping jig, a modified version of the old-standard Arky head.

"They're hand-tied, and you can do it all with them, from flipping cover to skipping docks or fishing offshore," explains Wheeler. "That head design is the most versatile for me, and it goes through cover great.

"I've had great tournaments flipping it into bushes and laydowns, and it can also be fished offshore. I've started to go away from the football head offshore and started to drag this jig away from the bank, and it does a great job."

Color selection is pretty simple, too.

"I use a green pumpkin, black and blue, brown, and a green pumpkin with blue. Those four will cover all of the different water clarities," Wheeler says.



3. CREATURE COMFORTS

Another versatile bait in Wheeler's arsenal is a creature bait. His current pick is the Googan Baits Bandito Bug, which he uses in a variety of ways.

"That is my favorite jig trailer, but it's also an excellent flipping bait," he says. "I'll also fish it on a Tokyo Rig.

Rapala DT crankbaits are Jacob Wheeler's go-to plugs for just about any depth.



PHOTO BY BRODY MCWILLIAMS

"There are a lot of scenarios where I use the Bandito Bug, and it just gets bit."

The advantage of the creature bait is its ability to be fished anywhere from deep brush to shallow cover. Really, nothing is off limits due to Wheeler's extreme confidence in this style of bait.

"If I need to get a bite or two, I know I can do it with a Bandito Bug, no matter where I am in the country," he adds.

Though he rotates through six or seven colors, Wheeler says blue baby is his top pick for its versatility.

"My next favorite would be Bama bug, and I'll use Alabama craw when I want to add an orange flair to my jigs."



PHOTO BY BRODY MCWILLIAMS



4. CRANK IT UP

Wheeler can't go anywhere without a crankbait, and because of the depth ranges he encounters, there isn't just one he'd use for any given situation. He does have it narrowed down to one popular family of crankbaits.

"The whole Rapala DT family are baits that I use everywhere in all seasons," he says. "The DT6 and DT10 are two that I know most people know well. They're tried-and-true, but the whole DT series covers water from 4 to 20 feet and can do so much for you.

"Two of my favorites are probably the two least popular in the lineup," Wheeler adds. "The DT20 is a Tennessee River ledge sleeper, and I think it's the best deep-diver out there. The DT14 has a bigger profile and will get down to that 14- to 16-foot range."

Each bait serves a specific purpose based on the depth and desired action.

"The DT4 has a wide wobble, and the DT6 and DT10 are much more subtle," he says. "I like the DT14 and DT16 because they have the bigger profile, and I use the DT20 when I need to get down deep."

The key to the effectiveness of the DT series, according to Wheeler, is the build.

"The No. 1 best thing about the Rapala DT crankbaits is they run true right out of the package, and you don't have to tune them to get them dialed in," he explains. "And, even though they're balsa, they still cast great.

"There's also something about that balsa action. They aren't as durable as a plastic bait, and you have to take care of them a little more and not slap them on the water to remove grass on the trebles, but they have a much more natural look in the water."



5. IMITATION SHAD

The final of the five baits Wheeler often relies on more than most is a soft-plastic swimbait called the Storm 360GT Largo Shad. Wheeler says he's found himself using it more and more in the past few seasons, as have others who've discovered (and tried to keep it hush) that the Largo Shad, which was originally marketed for saltwater, is actually an effective bass bait. It was part of Wheeler's arsenal when he won the 2019 MLF Bass Pro Tour Bad Boy Mowers Stage Seven presented by Covercraft at Table Rock Lake.

"It has a unique profile, and it's very durable," he says. "It's pretty affordable compared to other swimbaits, and you can catch a bunch of fish on the same bait."

That event on Table Rock was tailor-made for a swimbait bite with clear water and groups of spotted bass offshore, but Wheeler says a swimbait is much more versatile than that.

"A swimbait works great when the water is clear, but it's not just for clear water," Wheeler says. "I'll fish a white bait in more stained water, and the fish can still see it just fine."

Wheeler fishes his Largo Shad on a standard ball-head jig, but will also add it to a bladed swimbait hook, an under-spin and on the back of a vibrating jig, and mixes it up between the 3- and 4-inch versions based on the baitfish size and body of water he's fishing.

"Looking back, I caught fish with it in about half of the events last year," he adds. "It is a must during the prespawn and also anytime the bass are offshore." ■

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Popper 101 With a Master

ONE OF BASS FISHING'S MOST FAMOUS TOPWATER SPECIALISTS BREAKS DOWN HIS TRADEMARK TACTICS

By Matt Williams

PHOTO BY JUSTIN ONSLOW

Anyone who has followed professional bass fishing through the years knows that Zell Rowland of Montgomery, Texas, is a topwater junkie from way back. What they might not know is how far back the obsession actually goes, or how the seed got planted.

Rowland fished his first B.A.S.S. event in 1970 on Table Rock Lake at age 13, but he caught his first topwater fish in 1965. Only 8 years old at the time, Rowland was fishing with his dad, Bill, on a cool spring day on Sardis Lake in Mississippi. Their small aluminum boat was drifting across a shallow flat when he lofted a Smithwick Devil's Horse toward a flooded bush. He gave the prop bait a twitch or two. Moments later, the lure disappeared in a violent explosion that left a permanent imprint on an innocent mind.

"I can still see and hear it like it was yesterday," Rowland says. "A 4-pounder came up and crushed it. I'll never forget it. It ruined me."

A flame was lit to fuel a passion in a youngster whose name has since become legendary in the sport. Though his skill sets and versatility are far-reaching, Rowland, now 63, is best known in pro bass fishing circles for his prowess with a topwater – in particular, a popper – and his ability to turn a common popper into a veritable hot rod with a piece of sandpaper.

Considering Rowland's rich and extensive history with popper fishing, we decided to delve into his process to learn more about how the popper fits into his tournament game, what he looks for when choosing one and the unique way he modifies a Rebel Pop-R to get the most out of it.

Lessons Master





Prime Time

Rowland always has a popper tied on, regardless of the season, but he's more likely to reach for it at certain times of the year than others.

"If I suspect there are fish in shallow water, it's going to be on the deck at all times," he says. "I won't say I'll use it all the time, but I'll definitely use it a lot, especially from late spring right on through the fall."

Prime windows are when postspawn bass are guarding fry, patrolling bream beds or gorging their bellies around the shad spawn. Rowland says the popper also can pay off any time schooling bass are active or during the sweltering heat of summer, particularly when much of the tournament field might head offshore to play the ledge game with crankbaits and Carolina rigs.

"There are always going to be fish shallow in summer provided there's cover, and those fish may not be near as pressured," Rowland adds.

Another factor he considers is wind velocity.

"The popper isn't a good choice in really rough water," he says. "I've had some success when the surface is slick, but where it really tends to shine is when there is a little ripple to break up the surface, especially in clear water. The ripple prevents the fish from getting too good of a look at the bait."

Different mouth shapes produce different results. Rowland's go-to BOOYAH Boss Pop spits and walks while his Pop-R with its deep, cupped beak is more of a chugger.

Types of Poppers

Rowland divides "factory" poppers into three basic categories: baits that chug, baits that spit, and baits that spit and walk.

Flat-faced poppers like the BOOYAH Boss Pop – a bait he helped design – are meant to spit or walk with the proper rod cadence. It has a shallow cup for a mouth. The standard Rebel Pop-R is a true chugger as dictated by its deeper cupped beak.

It's a good idea to have a mix of poppers in your tackle box. More importantly, always be willing to experiment. If one bait style isn't cutting it, try something different.

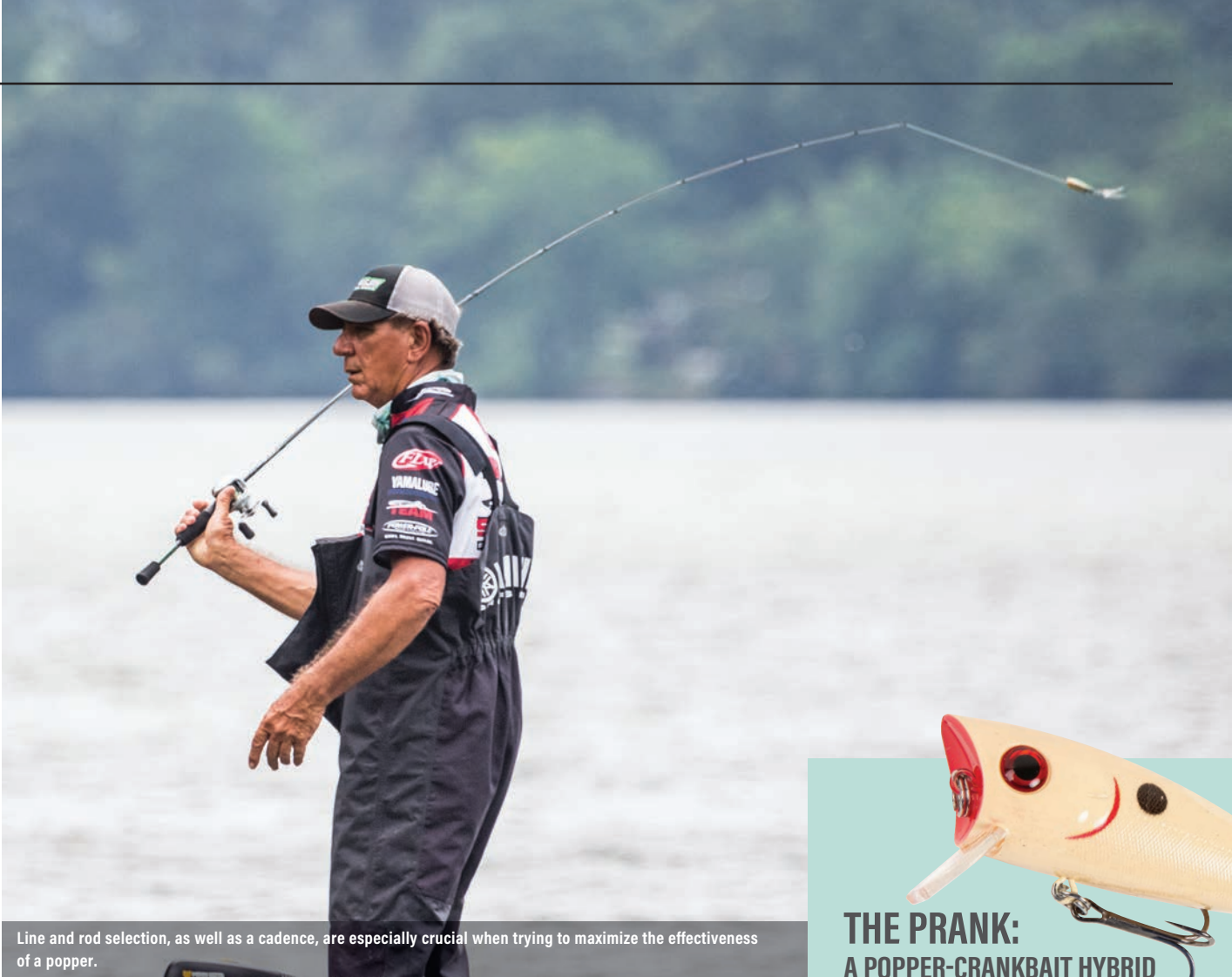
"There are a lot of variables that go into making those decisions on which popper to throw," Rowland adds. "Sound is important, but so is the action. That's why you see a lot of pros with 15 different rods on the deck instead of six. They'll have different baits rigged on different line sizes. Lighter lines give the bait more action than heavy lines. We'd fish with 20-

pound line all the time if we could get away with it, but with topwaters, you can't do that."

Once he settles on the desired style of popper, Rowland chooses the size based on two factors: the size of the baitfish and the size class of the bass the lake is known for producing. He points to the 2 1/2- and 3-inch Rebel Pop-R models to explain.

"Right after the bass spawn, there are a lot of small fry in the water," he says. "That's when I'll throw the 2 1/2-inch model to match the hatch. Once the fry grow a little and move off the bank is when I'll go to the 3 inch. I'll stick with it all summer long. You can continue catching fish on the smaller bait, but the bigger bait will typically produce the bigger bites you want in a tournament situation. You definitely want to throw the bigger bait if a lake has a bunch of 3-plus-pounders."

He sticks with basic colors. Chrome/black, bone and baby bass are his favorites in most situations. Black gets the call in muddy or stained water.



Line and rod selection, as well as a cadence, are especially crucial when trying to maximize the effectiveness of a popper.

Change It Up

Rowland says it's equally important to experiment with retrieve speeds and cadences. One day the fish might prefer a fast *plop-plop-pause* retrieve. Other times, they might want a slow walk or fast walk with an occasional *spit-spit* mixed in.

"The fish are going to tell you what kind of sound and action they want," he says. "You just have to listen."

Rowland says water clarity tells him a lot about how fast or slow he should work a popper, and how much action he should give the bait.

On a gin-clear reservoir such as Lake Mead, where bass will crush a surface plug over 30 feet of water, he'll work the bait considerably faster than on a lake like Sam Rayburn, where visibility might be 3 feet in "clear" conditions. In dirty water, an even slower cadence rules.

"As a rule of thumb, the clearer the water, the faster I'll work it and the more action I want the bait to have,"

Rowland says. "If I want to maximize the action, I'll go with 10- to 12-pound test, and 14- to 17-pound test for less action. I'll always use monofilament, because it floats. Fluorocarbon sinks and takes away from the action."

Custom Delivery

Rowland says the best rod for topwater fishing is one that marries the proper blend of parabolic action with strength. It starts with a lightweight blank with a forgiving tip and stouter middle and butt sections. The light tip helps keep bass hooked on small trebles and helps with achieving the proper action.

"It helps feed slack back to a topwater while you're working it, which enhances the action," Rowland explains.

Not surprisingly, he uses a Zell Rowland Signature Series topwater rod he helped design for Impulse Fishing Rods in Magnolia, Texas. It's a 6-foot, 8-inch model that features an 8 3/4-inch handle and extra-light tip.



THE PRANK: A POPPER-CRANKBAIT HYBRID

Rowland says his signature-series BOOYAH Prank allows for throwing the bass an even more radical change-up. The popper is made from the same mold as the BOOYAH Boss Pop, except it's fitted with a small squarebill lip that allows the bait to dive just beneath the surface and swim side to side.

"There are a lot of different things you can do with it," Rowland adds. "It'll spit and chug, or you can fish it just under the surface like a crankbait or twitch it like a jerkbait. The bill helps it deflect off cover really well."

The bait's versatility can be particularly effective after a bass short-strikes on top.

"Cast it back out and pop it a few times to the spot where the fish missed it and make a medium rod sweep," Rowland says. "The nose digs in and causes the bait to dive about 12 to 18 inches. Twitch it like a jerkbait and stop. Nine out of 10 times that fish will choke on it before it floats to the surface. You can't do that with any other topwater."

Custom Tips

Rowland, a longtime tackle designer, can't shake his insatiable itch for tinkering. He's a master of modification. In his mind, it seems like there should always be a better way.

"It's in my blood," he says. "I love fishing a topwater, and I've always been intrigued by all the baits that different companies make. When I see a good bait, I automatically start thinking of ways that it could be made into a great bait."

It's been the same way with the Rebel Pop-R, which Rowland has thrown – and modified – for decades with great success. He's particularly fond of his customized Pop-R. He proudly refers to it as "the bait that's never been made."

"There aren't any others like it other than the ones I've shared with a few close friends," he says. "Hopefully, I'll get the chance to see it in production someday. I've got ideas for some other topwater baits that the industry hasn't seen yet."

The tweaks change the way the bait slides through the water and the way it positions when at rest – tail down, instead of flatter on the surface. As a result, Rowland can make his modified Pop-R chug, spit or walk by merely altering the rod angle and cadence.

"I can hold my rod tip up at about a 45-degree angle and speed the retrieve up and make it spit and make a sound like a shad, hold it down to make it chug or walk it like a Zara Spook," he says. "It's like having three different poppers in one. If I'm practicing, I can constantly change the cadence, action and sound without having to change baits to see what the fish prefer."

Rowland accomplishes the custom action through an intricate sanding process that involves shaving the bait down to a uniform smoothness all the way around.

"Once the concave eyes are smooth, you're there," he says. "It changes the shape of the entire bait from round to oval. All I'll do to the lip is use fine sandpaper to give it a sharp edge like a boat prop. I've seen a lot of poppers, and there aren't many you can do all that to. The Pop-R is the perfect shape body."

It takes Rowland about an hour to get a bait ready for paint, which he does with an airbrush using a quality oil-based product. Paint jobs can take up to 30 minutes to complete, depending on how intricate he wants it.

"I won't fish one without a feather on the rear treble," he adds. "That feather pulsates in the water. If a bass hits and misses, it doesn't run 30 feet away. He's probably just sitting there looking at it. Barely move the bait, and that feather will open and close. It's like turning a light bulb on. They can't stand it."

There's a passel of ways to catch a bass, and Rowland has made a stellar career out of fooling them using a tactic that is often regarded as the most exciting of all.

Topwater fishing – especially with poppers – is his passion. It has been ever since he launched that memorable cast into a still-water cove on Sardis Lake way back in 1965. ■



PHOTOS BY MATT PAGE






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

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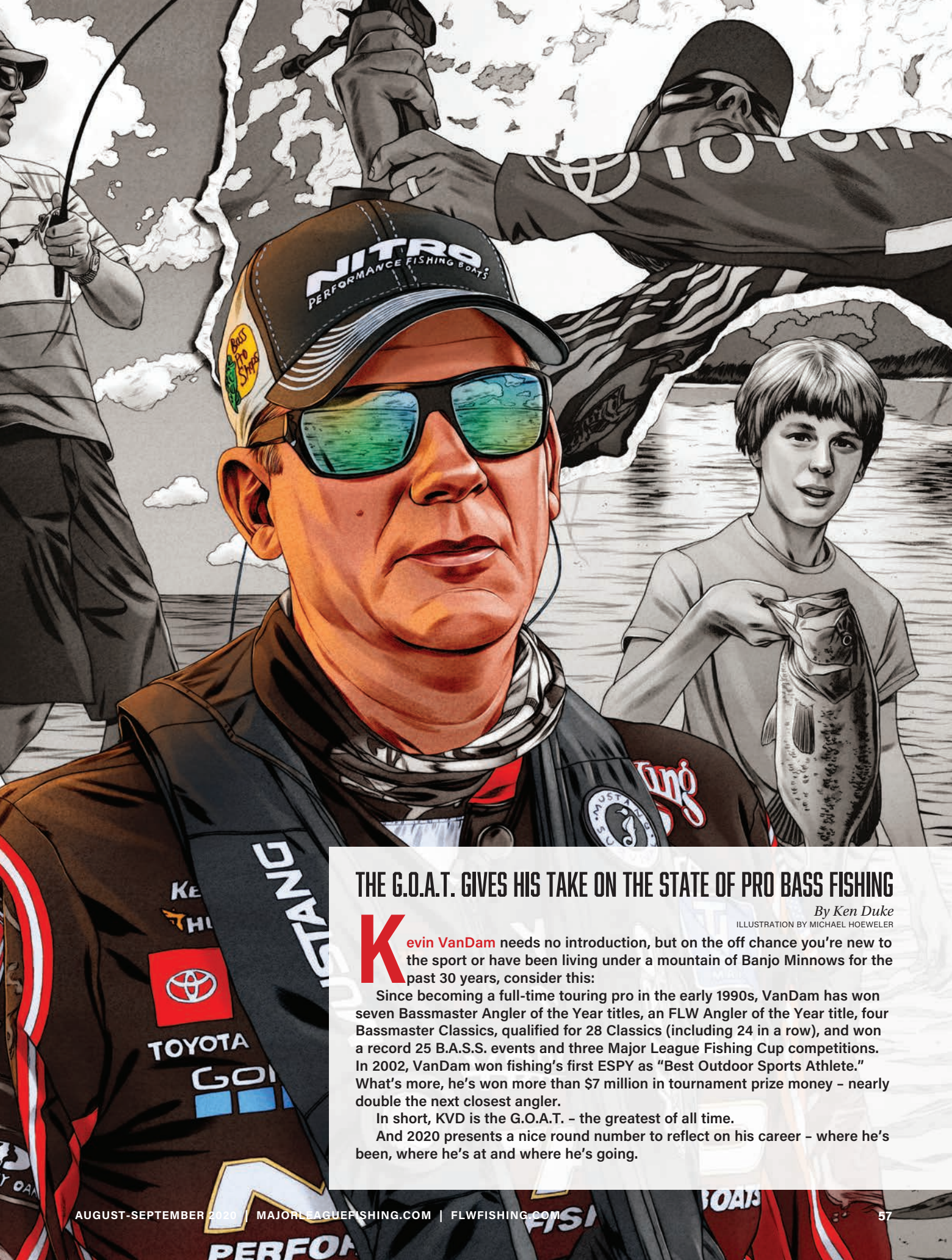
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KVD

PAST | PRESENT | FUTURE





THE G.O.A.T. GIVES HIS TAKE ON THE STATE OF PRO BASS FISHING

By Ken Duke

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL HOEWELER

Kevin VanDam needs no introduction, but on the off chance you're new to the sport or have been living under a mountain of Banjo Minnows for the past 30 years, consider this:

Since becoming a full-time touring pro in the early 1990s, VanDam has won seven Bassmaster Angler of the Year titles, an FLW Angler of the Year title, four Bassmaster Classics, qualified for 28 Classics (including 24 in a row), and won a record 25 B.A.S.S. events and three Major League Fishing Cup competitions. In 2002, VanDam won fishing's first ESPY as "Best Outdoor Sports Athlete." What's more, he's won more than \$7 million in tournament prize money - nearly double the next closest angler.

In short, KVD is the G.O.A.T. - the greatest of all time.

And 2020 presents a nice round number to reflect on his career - where he's been, where he's at and where he's going.

PAST

Q: What were your career goals when you were starting out 30 years ago?

KVD: I considered professional bass fishing as a career, but didn't know how practical that might be. I just loved the competition and idolized some of the greats of that era – Rick Clunn, Denny Brauer, Hank Parker, Larry Nixon, Guido Hibdon, Roland Martin, Bill Dance, Jimmy Houston. I wanted to find out if I could compete at that level. After I had some early success, I developed confidence in my ability and decided to go after it as a career.

I had saved some money from working odd jobs and selling boats in my brother's dealership. I was living at home with my parents at that time, and I knew I could bankroll my first season even if I didn't win any money. That was 1991, but my decision to pursue professional fishing as a career was a gradual one that happened over a period of several years.

Q: What were your biggest obstacles to getting into the sport back then?

KVD: When I was getting started, things were so different than they are today. Back then, it was hard to find the right people to talk with about sponsorship. It was all about relationships back then, which is still true today, but it was much harder to find the right people, to meet the right people and to get yourself in front of them so you could even talk about opportunities. So, then, just like now, it was tough to get sponsorship support, but it was even harder because we didn't have all the communication channels we have today.

Q: What was the best career advice you ever received, and who gave it to you?

KVD: Very early in my career, I got a lot of great advice from Tommy Martin, Larry Nixon and Denny Brauer. They helped me a lot on the business side of the sport. We talked a lot about sponsorships, about the value that a professional angler can bring to a company,



about working consumer and industry shows. They warned me against underselling myself and told me not to wear a patch for free. This can be tough advice for a young angler to follow, especially when there are so many aspiring pros out there.

Too many young anglers will jump at any offer that comes along without considering the true value they bring to the table. Early on, most of what they have to offer is their time, but that has value, too. Because I was able to bankroll my fishing early on, I didn't have to do that. I was able to establish myself before being approached by sponsors and didn't need to take the first offer that came along. The advice I got then is still great advice today.

Q: What part of being KVD was easier 30 years ago?

KVD: Well, for starters, there was no "KVD" 30 years ago. The KVD thing was started by the late Tim Tucker at a Bassmaster Classic press conference. He started calling me KVD, and it caught on. Before that, no one ever called me KVD. Today, it's a big part of my branding and public identity.

As far as what was easier about being me in those early days compared to now, it would have to be the demands on my time. Back then, I was just another young angler trying to win bass tournaments, make some money on tour and get the attention of some sponsors. I stayed busy, but it was nothing like the day-to-day schedule I have

now. I truly appreciate the sponsors and opportunities I have today. They're what makes a career in the sport possible, but it's also very demanding.

PRESENT

Q: What part of being KVD is easier today?

KVD: I don't have to explain who I am or what I do. I've worked really hard to build this KVD brand. My wife, Sherry, has been there every step of the way and works just as hard as I do. It couldn't have happened without her. It's a complete team effort, and it's never truly easy because it's a lot of work and very demanding, but once I got established and had some success, we saw opportunities we really never dreamed of through sponsorships, product endorsements, television and more.

Q: Did you have any goals 30 years ago that you haven't accomplished?

KVD: No, but that's because I really didn't have any particular goals or specific aspirations back then. Even after I won my first AOY title (in 1992), I wasn't sure that I was on a career path with professional fishing. There was less money in the sport back then. I was still working as the sales manager in the boat department at my brother's dealership, and I thought of that as my job. Big picture, career-type goals came later for me.

Q: What have been your greatest challenges?

KVD: Popularity can be a double-edged sword. The support I've received from the fans through the years has been incredible, and I truly appreciate every fan. They've made my career possible. With that support comes a lot of work and a lot of responsibility. There are more demands on my time today than when I was getting started; more opportunities. Those are wonderful, but they come with a cost – the time spent away from family and friends, times I missed big milestones in the lives of my children.

Having notoriety also presents some challenges on the water. I can't tell you how exciting it is to have 50 or 100 boats following you as you launch in competition. It'll send chills up your spine. But it can also make it tough to compete when you have to maneuver through those same boats to get to another spot or to create a game plan or even to relieve yourself on the water.

Q: What's your greatest accomplishment in the sport?

KVD: That I've been competitive at the highest level of the sport for 30 years. I'm still competitive today; still have the drive to win. I know how hard it is to win or even to be in contention. I still feel like I'm making the right decisions on the water, though I don't always execute them perfectly.

Q: What's been the greatest lesson you've learned?

KVD: Regardless of what other people say, if you believe in yourself, you can accomplish anything.

Q: What have been the most important advancements in the sport during your career?

KVD: Technology has changed the sport immensely. Today's equipment is much better than when I started, and it gets better every year. Boats are bigger, faster and safer. A lot of that came about when B.A.S.S.

removed the 150-hp limit. Trolling motors, sonar, GPS, batteries, fluorocarbon line, braid – everything is better, and it's changed the way we fish.

Then there's the internet. It's changed the way we research and learn; even the way we buy tackle. And social media has changed the way we interact and build brands. A lot of this stuff was unimaginable 30 years ago.

Q: For an aspiring pro, what do you see as the biggest barriers to entry today?

KVD: They're very different than when I was starting out 30 years ago. With the explosion of high school and college fishing programs, young anglers are a lot better informed and educated than I was back then. The endemic fishing companies are swamped with applications to join the pro staff and requests for free or discounted equipment. The big challenge today is to find ways to set yourself apart from the rest of the field that wants the same thing you want. It's still important to have and to make good personal connections, but if you can't stand out among the crowd, you won't get noticed.

Q: How is Major League Fishing and its Bass Pro Tour changing the game?

KVD: It's happening in a couple of ways. For one, tournament anglers and organizations have always put fish care and conservation as a top priority. Catch, weigh and immediate release takes it one step further. If our sport is going to grow, conservation has to be at the forefront.

For another, real-time scoring through SCORETRACKER® is a huge advancement. For decades, tournament fishing was the only sport where the competitors had no idea what the score was while they were competing. That would be unimaginable in baseball, football or basketball. Real-time scoring adds an element of strategy that's never existed in tournament fishing before. Because we know where we stand, we can make adjustments that impact the standings and add excitement for the fans.

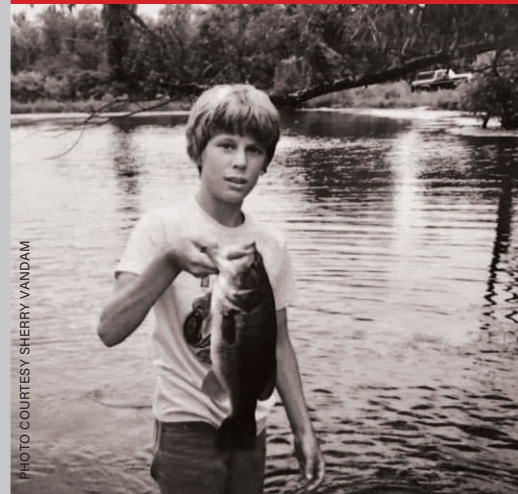


PHOTO COURTESY SHERRY VANDAM

A FAN BECOMES AN ICON AND REMEMBERS A LESSON

As a teen, Kevin VanDam loved fishing, but he dreamed of a career as a major league baseball player. He pitched and played a couple of infield positions but was less than a speed demon on the base paths. Ultimately, his passion for fishing overshadowed and ultimately eclipsed his dreams of playing in "The Show," but not before learning a valuable lesson of what makes a true sports idol.

"As a kid growing up in Michigan, I was a huge Detroit Tigers fan," says VanDam. "One day, my dad took me to Tiger Stadium to watch a doubleheader. We got there early, and I was trying to get some autographs. While the teams were loosening up, I got close to the rail near where a couple of players were throwing and stretching. I called out to them to ask for their autographs, but they completely ignored me."

VanDam never forgot the snub and does his best to sign every autograph and pose for every photo fans might request. Occasionally, he must defer because of scheduling demands or other issues, but that's rare. And in a sport that's known to be fan-friendly, VanDam likely signs as many autographs as any angler on the planet.

FUTURE

Q: Looking ahead, where do you see the greatest opportunities in the sport?

KVD: For aspiring pros, I think the opportunities are as good as ever. It's extremely competitive out there, but it's always been tough. The cost to compete is high, but that's always been true, too.

The greatest opportunities for a young pro are probably through social media. When I was starting out, tournaments were really the only platform to get noticed. If you won, you could get covered in a magazine, newspaper, TV show or radio program. Today, you don't have to wait for the media to come to you. You can create your own content.

When B.A.S.S. was purchased by ESPN in the early 2000s, it put the sport in the mainstream media. The platforms have grown and changed over time, and anglers now have more control than ever.

Q: What advice do you have for a young tournament pro?

KVD: You'd better be willing to put the work in. It's an incredibly demanding career choice. You absolutely must have the support of your family. Early on, I benefited tremendously from the support of my dad and the rest of my family. He traveled with me to some events and even practiced with me some. Although my parents never paid an entry fee for me, my dad would often pick up the dinner bill on the road, and I was able to borrow the family boat. All that was big at the time. After we got married, Sherry took on a lot of the day-to-day business responsibilities so I could focus on competition.

The other thing I'd tell someone just getting started is that you'd better have a real appreciation for the fans because they make our careers possible. Without them, there is no professional bass fishing.

Q: What are you most optimistic about moving forward?

KVD: I'm excited about the level of overall interest and involvement in the



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

sport of bass fishing today. One of the great things about our sport is that you can enjoy it so many ways and in so many places. High school and college programs, the growth of kayak bass fishing, and the level of investment I see in the sport have me very optimistic.

Q: What are you most concerned about?

KVD: The fact that we're not building many new reservoirs since the 1960s or '70s means that we have to take great care not only in managing what we have but in ensuring that we continue to have access to those waters. Asian carp and some other invasive species pose a real threat to fishing and to enjoying our lakes and rivers.

I really believe that bass fishing today is better than it's ever been, and that anglers are the best stewards of our resources. We all have a responsibility to make sure that we protect those resources and that we choose leaders who will help us do that.

Q: Where do you see yourself in the next 10 years?

KVD: I'm not 100 percent sure, but I know I love to fish. Even when I'm not competing, I still want to fish. I'd like to find a way to communicate with other anglers and to teach fishing. I'm proud of the videos I've made through the years and the information I've shared. When my competitive fishing career is over, I'll still find a way to have fun with fishing.

As for my tournament career, I still love the camaraderie and going to new lakes, but the schedule can be really demanding, and it's caused me to miss some important things in the lives of my family. It seems like every ICAST falls on Sherry's birthday, and for many years we had to celebrate our boys' (Jackson and Nicholas) birthday at the Bassmaster Classic.

The coronavirus pandemic has had a silver lining for us in that we've been able to spend a lot of time together as a family. That's been nice, and it makes me think about what retirement might be like. ■

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TACKLE, TOURNAMENTS & TIPS



PHOTO BY BOB WATSUURA

BASS FISHING 101: HOW TO SAVE MONEY ON FISHING LINE

5 easy tips for stretching your dollar while stretching your line

By Tyler Brinks

Fishing lines have continued to evolve and get better over the years. But along with the added performance, in many cases, has come an increase in cost. That's why it makes sense that bass anglers are always looking for ways to extend the life of their fishing line and get more out of each spool.

That in mind, here are a few tips from the pros on how to save money on fishing line.

1. The Sock Trick

Bass anglers have found many ways to protect extra line from the sun and from damage – from storage bins and coolers to specialty boxes and more.

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro **Billy McDonald** has a different (but interesting) approach: He stores bulk spools of line inside old socks, for a few reasons.

"I cut the top off my old socks and wrap them on the spools, and that keeps the line from taking a beating," McDonald says. "With the spools banging around inside of your boat or truck, it's easy for something to damage your line. You don't want any unseen nicks causing you to lose fish down the road."



PHOTO BY JUSTIN ONSLOW

2. Flip It Back

A pretty common way to extend the life of braided line is to wind it off one reel and directly onto another, which puts the portion of the line that's seen the most use on the bottom

of the new reel, and the part that was previously protected winds up on the top.

McDonald likes that trick, too, but he'll also do it with fluorocarbon or monofilament.

"If you're looking at cutting some costs, it's a great way to double the life of your line. That back half of the spool has never been used," he says. "If you're using fluorocarbon or monofilament and there's a little memory after being down inside the reel, don't be afraid to tie it to something and pull on it to stretch it out a little. Not too much, but just enough to straighten it out."

This trick also works well if you want to replace relatively new line with a different type – for instance, if you want to put braid on a reel currently spooled with fluoro that's not ready to be tossed. Just wind it onto another reel or an empty spool and save it.

3. Use Line Conditioners

Another tip to prolong the life of your line is to use specialized line treatments. There are several on the market, but McDonald prefers the **Lew's Speed Cast Line Treatment and Conditioner**. The product coats your line to reduce friction, which cuts down on wear.

"It gives your line better castability, and it will help your line last longer," he says.



PHOTO BY MATT PAGE



4. Less Line, More Efficient

Simply using less line at a time is one easy way to save money, and the way to do it is with more backing. Major League Fishing pro **Cliff Crochet** says this trick not only saves money, but makes him more efficient when it's time for new line.

"On a flipping reel, you don't ever need more than 30 yards or so at a time," he says. "I use a cheap mono backing and then add my flipping line, which is either braid or fluorocarbon. Heavy cover is always hard on your line, and you need to replace it more often. It's easy to pull 30 yards off and put new line on quickly, even while on the water."

5. Braid for Backing

For casting applications, California pro **Brent Ehrler** also uses backing, but he prefers it to be braided line.

"Good fluorocarbon isn't cheap, and using backing can make each spool of line last longer," he says. "You can get a few more reels from each spool of line if you use plenty of backing because no matter what lure you're using, you're never going to cast all of the line off of the spool."

The side benefit to braid is better casting distance, according to Ehrler.

"I like to use braid for my backing because it's lighter and will help you get longer casts because your spool performs much better with a lighter material as your backing." ■





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NEKO RIG TIPS FROM BRENT EHRLER

Good advice from one of the first pros to unlock the potential of a **pretty simple rig**

By Sean Ostruszka

Brent Ehrler is what marketing circles call an “early adopter.” While the vast majority of people wait for something to become popular before adopting it into their lifestyles, early adopters are the first to try most anything. Sometimes those things flame out (ask anyone who thought the Segway or Google Glass were the future), but other times they catch on.

Back when he was first starting out in the pro fishing world, Ehrler hit gold in the form of the Neko rig, which, back then, was still a “secret” rig, and he used it to help launch his career.

“I was fishing with these co-anglers from Japan, and they were throwing it,” says Ehrler. “They were catching so many fish I had to try it. Now, remember, this was back in 2005; around the same time the drop-shot caught fire.”

While everyone was figuring out the drop-shot, Ehrler got to have the Neko rig almost all to himself. Of course, it’s no longer a secret, but it still flies under the radar for some reason. According to Ehrler, it shouldn’t.

“The Neko rig has completely replaced the shaky head for me, and even a drop-shot many times,” explains Ehrler. “Basically, it takes everything great about a wacky rig and makes it applicable to deeper or even vertical presentations.”

The Basics

A Neko rig is pretty simple. It’s a modified wacky rig with a nail weight in one end. Deciding when to throw it over other finesse baits is pretty simple, too.

“If I’m fishing up shallow, I’ll go with a wacky rig, but if it’s out deeper – like 5 feet down to 50 feet – I’ll throw a Neko rig,” says Ehrler.

If you think that's simple enough to follow, Ehrler uses the same setup for both rigs: a medium-power, 7-foot, 1-inch Daiwa Tatula Elite Dropshot rod, Daiwa Tatula reel and 12-pound-test Sunline Xplasma Asegai braid with an 8-pound-test Sunline FC Sniper leader.

He'll even use the same worms for both – either a 5-inch Yamamoto Senko or a Daiwa Yamamoto Neko Straight Worm. He connects to either using a rubber O-ring. The Senko gets either a No. 1 or 1/0 Gamakatsu G-Finesse Stinger Weedless Wacky Hook, and the Straight Worm gets a No. 1 or 2 size of the same hook.

From there, there are only two differences in rigging between the wacky rig and Neko rig: 1) The Neko gets a 3/32-ounce Ark Tungsten nail weight in the fat part of whichever worm he's using, and 2) Ehrler slides the O-ring down closer to the nail weight – “near the egg sack” – for the Neko, as opposed to rigging in the center of the worm like he does on the wacky rig.

On Bottom ... but Not

Why Neko over other weighted finesse rigs? That's simple, too: “It out-fishes a shaky head almost every time.”

Wacky rigs have an action that is almost irresistible to bass. The Neko rig imitates that same action – just on the bottom.

“With the hook being near the center, you get that same wiggling action of a wacky rig. It stands up off the bottom so fish can really see it, too, whereas a shaky head is more just a dragging action.”

— Brent Ehrler

“With the hook being near the center, you get that same wiggling action of a wacky rig,” says Ehrler. “It stands up off the bottom so fish can really see it, too, whereas a shaky head is more just a dragging action.”

Plus, according to Ehrler, with such a light weight and very little to actually grab hold of anything, the rig is far less prone to snagging on rocks or other obstructions on the bottom.

Vertical Fishing from Afar

Vertical fishing for suspended fish an angler sees on his or her electronics has always been just that – vertical. The goal is to watch for fish beneath the boat to drop a bait straight down. However, with the drastic improvements in electronics, Ehrler says he's now able to “vertically” fish for bass he sees on his graphs that are 50 feet away. And when he does, nothing beats a Neko rig.

“If you'd told me 10 years ago, or even five years ago, I

could do this, I'd have said you were crazy,” he says.

Using forward-looking sonar, he can search around and spot a fish or a school in front of the boat, then make a cast before ever getting close.

“Now, you can use a drop-shot for this like you would normally when vertical fishing, but it falls too fast,” he says. “The Neko is perfect because it can fall fast enough to get down deep but still slow enough for them to see it, swim over and eat it before falling past them.”

For this technique, Ehrler typically prefers the Straight Worm over the Senko.

“The Straight Worm falls slower on the Neko,” he says. “So, if the fish are suspended, I'll usually use that to allow it to hang in their face longer, and he'll usually eat in on the sink. The only time I use the Senko is if the fish I see out in front of me are on the bottom. Then I'll go with the Senko because it will fall a little faster.” ■



Daiwa Yamamoto
Neko Straight Worm

5-inch Yamamoto Senko

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1. TOYOTA HEAVY HITTERS
PRESENTED BY VENMO
Kissimmee Chain

June 7-12, 2020

The final day of Heavy Hitters was a mammoth one for Jordan Lee, who not only bagged \$100,000 for winning the event, but also caught the biggest fish of the day – a 7-pound, 4-ounce bass – which paid him another \$100K. It was Lee's second win with Major League Fishing in as many seasons and pushed his career earnings past \$1.6 million.

Lee's winning pattern was all about getting away from the crowds, most of which were congregating on off-shore grass beds. He countered by using Lowrance StructureScan to dial in a series of about 20 brush piles in 5 to 7 feet of water.

Several baits accounted for fish he weighed in during the week, including a 2.5-sized squarebill crankbait, a plum-colored 10-inch Berkley PowerBait Power Worm, a 6-inch Scottsboro Tackle Co. Swimbait and a hair jig.



2. MLF BASS PRO TOUR COVERCRAFT STAGE FIVE
PRESENTED BY ABU GARCIA
Sturgeon Bay

July 10-15, 2020

Justin Lucas, Mark Daniels Jr. and Josh Bertrand spent much of the Championship Round on Sturgeon Bay trading body blows and leaping one another on SCORETRACKER®, but it was Lucas who ultimately threw the haymaker in the form of 38 scoreable fish for 110 pounds, 5 ounces to edge out Daniels by a little less than 8 pounds.

Lucas didn't luck his way into that position, either. The Berkley pro set records en route to his first Stage trophy, hauling in 50 scoreable fish during the Qualifying Round for 141-9 – 78-12 coming in the first period alone.

Lucas' winning pattern was predicated on fishing isolated grass in deep water outside the biggest spawning flat he could find. He relied on a drop-shot throughout the tournament,



using a variety of Abu Garcia reels on 7-foot medium Abu Garcia Fantasista rods to sling his Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flat Worm in a bunch of different colors.

3. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT SUPER TOURNAMENT

Lake Chickamauga
June 23-26, 2020

Halfway through FLW's first Super Tournament, it became pretty clear that catching Jacob Wheeler might be an impossible task. The Chickamauga transplant put on a ledge-fishing clinic on his adopted home lake by catching a four-day total of 93 pounds, 12 ounces. He won by almost 12 pounds.

A 10-pounder on day three and an 8-pounder on day four certainly helped Wheeler's cause. He fished a variety of baits, but a hair jig, Rapala DT20 and DT16 crankbaits, a Scrounger-style head with a soft jerk-bait, and a worm did most of the damage. Wheeler's big

ones came on the DT20 and the worm.

There wasn't a key depth range for Wheeler. He says each of his spots was different. It was his ability to read each school, line up right and present multiple options that ultimately set him apart from the competition.

4. TOYOTA SERIES CENTRAL DIVISION

Pickwick Lake
May 28-30, 2020

Jacob Wheeler roared back into action following the postponement of FLW tournaments due to the COVID-19 pandemic by earning his first Toyota Series victory. By practicing for the event on a crowded Memorial Day weekend, Wheeler learned that most of the locals focus their ledge-fishing search in the 15- to 22-foot-deep zone. By shifting his search to shallower and deeper ledges, he was able to locate bass that hadn't been so heavily pressured. Many of the schools only had a few fish in practice,



PHOTO BY JACOB FINE



PHOTO BY COBI PELERITTO



PHOTO BY DAVID A. ROSE

but that was a sign to Wheeler that they were fresh schools that might fill up during the tournament.

In competition, Wheeler needed a day or so to nail down the best timing and rotation to run his schools. Eventually, he was able to catch 56 pounds, 8 ounces in three days by throwing a Rapala DT20 in Caribbean shad, a 1-ounce Accent Ole Big spinnerbait and a Texas-rigged Googan Baits Luncker Log.

5. TOYOTA SERIES SOUTHEASTERN DIVISION Lake Eufaula

June 4-6, 2020

Early on at Eufaula, it looked like both deep and shallow patterns had the potential to win thanks to a hot mayfly bite and plenty of active bluegill beds. After two days, however, only one angler made the top 10 fishing shallow. The rest fished a mix of brush piles, deep timber and ledges.

Josh Stracner, the tournament champ, spent most of the first two days on

deep ledges. By noon on Saturday's final round, fishing pressure had taken its toll, and he had just 13 to 14 pounds in the livewell. Stracner made the key move and slid up to fish brush piles in 12 to 15 feet, which led to a 22-3 limit and a 64-15 tournament total.

Stracner fished ledges with a Strike King 10XD and 6-inch Scottsboro Tackle Co. Swimbait on a Scottsboro Recon Head. He fished brush with a Reaction Innovations Fat Flirt Worm and a Z-Man ChatterBait.

6. TOYOTA SERIES NORTHERN DIVISION Lake Erie

July 9-11, 2020

High winds on day three restricted the top 10 boaters and co-anglers to Sandusky Bay to decide a winner, and Lee Rogers took full advantage of the limited waters by targeting rock piles to wrangle up a 15-pound, 10-ounce limit of largemouth to surge from eighth to first.

Like most of the field, Rogers spent his first two days of competition fishing primarily for smallmouth, starting out deep and systematically working his way shallower around Kelleys Island and the Bass Islands until he found the right depth to get consistent bites – about 15 feet, give or take. He couldn't get those fish to eat a spy bait or a spinnerbait, but the drop-shot tipped with a Strike King Half Shell did the trick.

On the final day, it took a tube, a spinnerbait and a Texas-rigged Eco Pro Swing Shad to coerce the right five Sandusky Bay largemouth into a getting a free ride to weigh-in.

7. STUDENT ANGLER FEDERATION HIGH SCHOOL FISHING NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP Mississippi River

June 24-26, 2020

Lawson Losee and Kooper Tweite carried the lead into the final day of the SAF High School National

Championship on Pools 7, 8 and 9 of the Mississippi River in La Crosse, Wis., and never relinquished it.

The pair of Riceville, Iowa anglers brought an 11-pound, 2-ounce three-fish limit to the weigh-in stage to seal the deal, anchored by a 5-8 kicker, to tally 30-4 for the three-day event.

Consistency was the name of the game for Losee and Tweite, who locked down to Pool 9 all three days in search of unpressured fish. The duo weighed in 8-12 on day one and 10-6 on day two before weighing in the second-largest bag of the event on the final day.

With the win, Losee and Tweite automatically advanced to the final day of the SAF High School Fishing World Finals, which ran concurrently with the National Championship. They weighed in 7-8 to claim 13th place in that event, which Landon Gramling and Tucker Veronee of Lexington, S.C., won with a three-fish limit of 9-6 the final day. ■



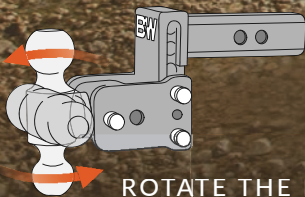
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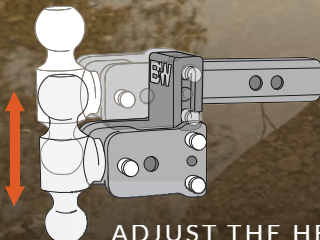
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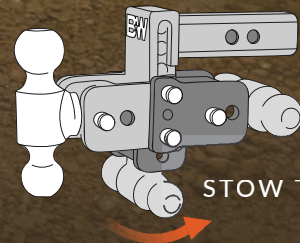
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STRIKE KING RAGE PUNCH BUG

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

Sometimes you can just look at a new bait and tell right off the bat it's gonna catch 'em. As punch baits go, Strike King's Rage Punch Bug has "money" written all over it.

First Impression

The Rage Punch Bug packs all the goodies you might expect to find in a high-performance punch bait, and they're put together in a nice streamlined package designed to slip in and out of heavy cover without fouling.

At 3 1/2 inches, it's a compact creature with a chubby body profile and two flappers that create the unique swimming action for which the Rage family is famous. Like all Rage baits, the claws perform thanks to a patented cup or flange on their edge that causes the

appendages to flail and disperse water when moved.

Another cool design trait is a series of 26 soft ribs that swaddle the bait's much firmer inner core. The squishy ribs increase the profile and give the fish something soft to "chew on," while providing just enough extra meat for hiding the point of a flipping hook but without so much bulk that they affect the hook-up percentage.

It's available in eight fish-catching colors.

In Action

I'm no expert at heavy-cover combat, but I've done it enough to know the difference in a bait that's suited for the task and one that's likely to be trouble. In punching plastic arenas, it's all about finding one that penetrates thick slop easily without snagging, gets bit while

it's in there and will hold up to a beating.

I put the Rage Punch Bug to the test around some of the roughest stuff east Texas lakes can muster, including matted hydrilla, reeds, torpedo grass and flooded bushes. The bait didn't disappoint. There weren't any giants caught, but it did produce several fish up to 4 pounds, and the hook-up percentage was excellent. I paired it with several straight-shank flipping hook models, and because of the length of the body, it fit nicely with most in the 4/0 and 5/0 size range.

Three features I really like about the bait are the soft ribs, durable core and its action. Fish seemed to hold on to the textured body really well, and the rounded head held up for multiple fish before getting torn up badly

enough it would no longer securely hold the hook. The claw action varies from subtle to intense, depending on whether the bait is hopped near bottom or racing through the water column under the pull of a heavy tungsten weight.

Final Thoughts

There is plenty to like about the Rage Punch Bug, but I was particularly impressed by how easily it sneaks in and out of thick blankets of muck that shield the shady caverns where big bass like to seek refuge. It's a dapper little bait that also gets high marks for durability and fish appeal.

Whether you're punching hyacinth mats in Florida, hydrilla mats in Texas or tules on the Cal Delta, this is a bait you can have confidence bringing to a fight.

CLOSE-FIT APPENDAGES:

Keeping with the bait's compact design, the Rage claw flappers and small tentacles are positioned tight to the body to help it slip in and out of thick cover easily.



A FIRM, ROUND DOME:

There's plenty of durable meat in the rounded head for holding the aggressive keeper styles found on many heavy-wire flipping hooks.



BIG RIBS:

The body ribs displace water and enhance the bait's profile without adding so much extra meat that the hook can't penetrate easily. The body is also long enough to hold hooks up to 5/0.



Performance Advice

Break out the heavy artillery. You'll need it for getting the Rage Punch Bug to the fish efficiently and for muscling fat takers out of places where the sun doesn't shine. That means:

Heavy tungsten — Tungsten bullet weights upward of 1 ounce are frequently used for crashing through thick canopies. In really thick slop, some anglers might go as heavy as 2 ounces. Peg the sinker to make the bait and sinker fall as one, which improves efficiency.

Stiff stick, big line and quality reel — Pair a stout rod with strong line spooled on a gutsy reel that gathers line fast and you'll optimize leverage for turning big fish quickly and horsing them from the muck. Slick braided line, 65-pound test or larger, is heavily favored in punching arenas because it has zero stretch and cuts through most greenery like a knife.

Heavy-duty hook — Punching means close-quarters combat with large fish in settings clogged with dense cover. A heavy-wire, straight-shank flipping hook is essential to hold up under the shock of a violent hookset with no-stretch braid and a stiff rod.

Applications

- Punching through dense grass mats
- Pitching around bushes or reeds
- Dragging on a Carolina rig
- As a trailer on various types of jigs

DETAILS

Length: 3 1/2 inches

Colors: 8

Price: \$6.99 for seven ■

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



HITS & MISSES

- + Small and compact
- + Penetrates dense mats and other heavy cover extremely well
- + Chubby, oval-shaped body that pairs nicely with 4/0 to 5/0 heavy-wire flipping hooks
- + Built-in Rage Tail action
- + Durable
- + Clam shell packaging to prevent warping
- + Premium colors
- None



1. RAPALA RAP-V BLADE

The Rap-V Blade is sort of a blade bait, sort of a lipless crankbait and sort of a jigging bait, and that's the point. It was designed for everything – vertical ripping and jigging presentations, casting and hopping, burning or slow-rolling. However you work it, the bait maintains its wobble and vibration, while a “BB rattle system” provides additional attraction. At 2 1/2 inches long and 1/2 ounce, the Rap-V's most noticeable design features are the oversized “angry eyes” and elongated metal top fin, which sports two connection points. Connecting to the front point provides a slower, lazier fall, while the rear hole is best for a faster, head-down action. \$9.99 rapala.com

2. Z-MAN CHATTERBAIT JACKHAMMER STEALTHBLADE

The JackHammer StealthBlade is the Pippin to the original JackHammer's Jordan: quieter, more subdued, a role player capable of scoring when it counts. Z-Man and EverGreen collaborated on the new premium vibrating jig to create something more subtle, with a tighter, higher-pitched frequency. It's the tool to use on pressured fisheries and in clear water, or as a cleanup bait behind the original JackHammer. Designers reduced the flash with a clear, polycarbonate blade. They selected a thinner, hand-tied skirt and redesigned the hook with a lighter wire and shorter shank, but with the same size gap. A special coating enhances the hook's strength. The goal was a hook that could still penetrate when fished on lighter line in stealth situations. The StealthBlade comes in 3/8 and 1/2 ounce in six colors. \$15.99 zmanfishing.com

3. MEGABASS ONETEN MAX LBO

The term “Linear Bearing Oscillator Second Type,” or LBO II, is a mouthful to say, but it's also going to be responsible for giving a lot of bass a mouthful of the new Megabass ONETEN MAX LBO jerkbait. The LBO II system is an ultra-responsive, sliding weight-transfer system. Rather than relying on loose ball bearings, the LBO II weight-transfer system consists of a cylindrical weight with three sets of micro ball bearings inset into oval tracks around its perimeter. The micro bearings reduce friction so the weight snaps sharply to the rear when cast, providing the inertia to really bomb the bait out there. As soon as line tension is applied, the weight zips back toward a magnet in the front – into the action position. At that point, the ONETEN MAX LBO can perform its designed action right from the first twitch. The system allows the MAX LBO, which is about an inch longer and 1/4 ounce heavier than the original VISION 110, to fish and perform with the agility of a smaller jerkbait. \$26.99 megabassusa.com

4. 6TH SENSE SPEED WAKE

A lot of wake baits rely on a slow side-to-side wobble to antagonize bass into biting. The Speed Wake can do that, too, but its best attribute is its ability to cover water and trigger strikes with a much more aggressive presentation. 6th Sense designed it for maximum retrieve speed without blowing out, which makes it sort of like the squarebill of the topwater world. Sling it around shallow cover, or wake it over schools of bait anytime bass are looking up. At just shy of 4 inches long, the Speed Wake is the right size for mimicking most baitfish forage species. \$13.99 6thsensefishing.com



5. ABU GARCIA ZATA SPINNING

Fishing reels have to look the part, too, which is why the Zata sports a military-like OD green finish. Like a soldier, the new model from Abu Garcia promises to be a reliable, resilient performer, wherever it's put to work. Abu Garcia chose strong, lightweight aluminum for the frame and the spool, which is machined to be ready for braided line. The guts consist of a premium machined gear, 11 ball bearings, a stainless-steel shaft and a 14-pound carbon fiber drag. Little touches such as a carbon fiber handle and Abu's rocket spool design, which helps line flow smoothly on and off the reel, improve performance but look good, too. The reel comes in three sizes. The midsize 30 model can handle the bulk of the duties for bass anglers. It weighs 8 1/2 ounces. \$174.95

abugarcia.com ■

Z-Man Leap FrogZ Walking Frog

\$7.99 ▪ zmanfishing.com



- 2 1/4- and 2 3/4-inch versions
- Tough PVC material for durability
- Soft, crushable body
- Slightly "open" hooks
- Sealed nose
- Rear drain hole

+ Coolest feature: The pronounced "deep-V" belly keel makes it easy to walk the bait side to side.



Z-Man Leap FrogZ Popping Frog

\$7.99 ▪ zmanfishing.com



- 2 1/4- and 2 3/4-inch versions
- Tough PVC material for durability
- Soft, crushable body
- Slightly "open" hooks
- Sealed nose
- Rear drain hole

+ Coolest feature: An oversized, wide-mouth can chug with big "bloops," but the bait can still walk side to side.



A QUARTET OF NEW FROGS

Here's a quick look at new surface baits you'll have fun testing out this summer and fall

By Curtis Niedermier

Frog fishing is so dadgum fun that even though new frogs hit the market every season, no bass angler alive will ever complain about having too many hollow-body frogs to choose from. Rejoice, then, because several new options are available from Z-Man, which only recently joined the frogging club, and long-time frog factory Scum Frog. Here's a quick look at a quartet of new croakers.

Scum Frog Painted Trophy Series

\$6.99 ▪ americanbaitworks.com

- Flat silicone skirt strands
- 1/2- and 5/8-ounce versions
- Soft, crushable body
- Solid brass tail weight



+ Coolest feature: Ten new color patterns created by a custom lure painter are applied using "a proprietary system that digitally patterns onto the frog." Translation: The color patterns are high resolution and highly durable.



Scum Frog Launch Frog

\$8.49 ▪ americanbaitworks.com

- 5/0 hooks
- Broad body for enhanced buoyancy
- Flat silicone skirt strands
- Soft, crushable body
- Same digital printing technology as on the Painted Trophy Series



+ Coolest feature: The tungsten "parasite" weight that clings to the hook shank inside the body plus a brass butt weight bring the frog in at somewhere between 5/8 and 3/4 ounce, which allows it to be bombed long distances. ■



TOYOTA: THE TOW VEHICLE THAT PAYS YOU TO FISH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Darold Gleason
FLW Pro/Toyota Bonus Bucks Participant



Edwin Evers
MLF Pro/Toyota Bonus Bucks Participant



2021 Toyota Trail Edition Vehicles
Coming Late Summer 2020/Bonus Bucks Eligible



TOYOTA



Official Vehicle

PROFILE: **MARK**
DAVIS

MOUNT IDA, AR



Mark Davis is well-deserving of his membership in the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame. He's been fishing professionally on the national trails since his early 20s, but really broke out in 1995, when Davis won the Bassmaster Classic and B.A.S.S. AOY (his first of three) in the same season.

Since then, he's enjoyed a consistent, successful career in which he's more recently transitioned into the role of mentor for his son, Fisher, an aspiring tournament pro.

Here's what the Mount Ida, Ark., pro had to say about where he's been, and what's coming next.

QA

By Curtis Niedermier

PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

Thirteen years ago, I called you for a preview of the 2007 Forrest Wood Cup on Lake Ouachita, and I totally butchered the pronunciation of "Ouachita." You were polite and corrected me. That was one of my first assignments with FLW. I was thinking about that, and I got to wondering if you made any major gaffs when you first started your career.

I can't even remember it, buddy, but you're not the first one that's had a hard time pronouncing Ouachita. Or spelling it.

I've made every kind of screw-up you can make. I remember when I started, I think the first big event I fished was up in New York. What a nightmare that was driving to the tournament. I was 22 years old, I think. I went and bought a new truck, but I bought one of those little, small V8s, and I was trying to run with (George) Cochran and some of those guys. They all run off and left me. My truck wouldn't keep up with them.

When I got up there, they said we were going to the Hudson River, and I was wanting to find a boat ramp. So, I drive down to this boat ramp, and I can't see across the thing. I thought, *Well, I went the wrong way. This can't be a river.* But it was. I'd never seen a river that big.

How different is it today for young anglers coming up?

It's night-and-day different, with the internet and the wealth of information that's readily available. You can find out anything you want to know. In those days, it wasn't like that. There wasn't anyone really to ask. You couldn't Google anything. There wasn't any such thing as a waypoint. All we had was a paper map and some flashers, and you had to get out there and figure it all out.

Nowadays, I've got a son (Fisher) that's going on to college. He's going to fish for East Texas Baptist University, and he's going there because of the fishing team. When he goes to a lake, he researches it and does it all on his phone. And he'll have a pretty good idea of what the lake's going to be like, what to expect, seasonal patterns, water level, water clarity. He'll have all that figured out before he goes. It's so different nowadays than it was 45 years ago.

Are all three of your sons competitive anglers?

No. Only one is. I have twins that are 18, and one of the twins is named Fisher. He's a competitive angler. Now, Hunter, the other twin, actually was. In fact, Hunter won the (High School Fishing) National Championship just a few years ago; he and his partner. And he has not fished a bass tournament since.

Really? Why's that?

He won that tournament over on Pickwick, and his partner graduated, and he just stopped. He never was as passionate about it the way the other one was.

What's the best piece of advice you've given Fisher as an angler and as dad?

Going into college fishing, of course, he's going to be a freshman. He's probably going to have a junior or a senior for a partner. So, my best piece of advice to him was just use your versatility. I've always tried to really instill in him to don't be a one- or two-dimensional type of angler. Learn how to do it all. Wherever your weakness is, you need to be doing a lot more of that.

Just try to eliminate any weakness you have, whether light tackle, heavy tackle, power fishing, finesse fishing, jigs, topwaters, frogs ... everything. Learn it all. That's my advice to him.

I've been to a few Strike King media events over the years where you got up in front of the group and told some hilarious stories. You're kind of known for that. How'd you get so good at storytelling?

I don't know about that. Maybe it stems back to all the years that I was guiding and the fish weren't biting and you had to do something to pass the time, so you had to learn how to tell stories. We've had a lot of crazy things happen over the years, and outdoorsmen love to hear that stuff.

A lot of those old stories have been told over and over and over again, and people want to hear them over. That's what's crazy. "Well, I've already heard you tell that story, but let me hear ya tell it again." And they'll say, "You told it exactly the same way you told it the last time."

Well, yeah. I mean, it really happened that way. I'm not making this stuff up. You can't make it up.

Do you have a story about a bass that got away?

I'll tell you the story about a bunch of them that got away.

It goes back into the '80s. It was on Lake Okeechobee. We were fishing out of Clewiston, and I was fishing way up on the north end, and I caught a really good limit. We were weighing in seven good fish and had to get to weigh-in.

So I'm making my way back, right out in the middle of the big water out there, and I felt something hit my shoulder. I look back, and there's a 4-pounder bouncing on the back deck. Now, I'm running down the lake, and it's rough, so I just let go of the wheel and just dive back there and grab that bass and put it back in the livewell. The livewell lid had come open, obviously. I closed my livewell lid and kept going, thinking, *I hope that was the only one that jumped out. I don't have time to stop and catch another one.*

I go on in, check in, get up there, get my weigh-in bag and I've got three bass left. Four of them jumped out. The fifth one jumped out, and I just happened to get him back. I weighed in three. That's a true story.

Ouch. How about a memorable one you landed?

Yeah, I remember when I won the Classic. It was the final day, and I cast my crankbait out. I'm cranking it on 20-pound line so I can boat-flip these fish because we can't use a net. I crank it down, and I'm like, *Man, this is a good one.* I'm fighting it, and it's fighting all weird, and I look, and I've got a 4-pounder on one hook and a 2 1/2 on the other hook. And I've got big No. 2s (hooks) on the crankbait, so I'm thinking I'm just going to winch them. I could see them on top of the water. They were out there a pretty good distance.

So I just start winching 'em, and now I've got them really coming fast just kind of skiing them into the boat. When I get them there, I swing, and when the fish get up out of the water over the gunwale of the boat, the bait comes loose from both fish, and both fish fall. They both hit the gunwale of the boat. The 2-pounder bounces and goes back into the lake, and the 4-pounder bounces into the floor of the boat.

And I won the Classic. I mean, that was one of those deals where you kind of know the Lord is looking out for you and it's your turn.

What an unbelievable story. We've been looking back a lot, so tell me this: What's next in Mark Davis' career?

Well, I would say it this way: I'm in the fourth quarter of my career, and I don't know how many minutes are left.

I take life and my career one day at a time and one fish at a time. I'm not ready to retire just yet, but I realize I have definitely made more casts in the past than I'm ever going to get to make in the future. If my health holds out and everything, I'll keep fishing, but who knows how long. It's been fun, and I'm still looking forward to having some more fun going forward. ■

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VERONEE, GRAMLING WIN SAF HIGH SCHOOL FISHING WORLD FINALS



TUCKER VERONEE AND LANDON GRAMLING OF LEXINGTON, S.C., weighed in a three-fish limit of 9 pounds, 6 ounces to win the 11th annual Student Angler Federation (SAF) High School Fishing World Finals on Pools 7, 8 and 9 of the Mississippi River June 24-27. Representing the Gilbert Bass Club, the pair topped a hard-fishing field of 312 two-angler teams to claim the coveted title.

"We've been friends a long time, and it means a lot to us to win this together," Veronee says.

"Our dads are boat captains, and they put everything into supporting us," adds Gramling. "I can't thank them enough."

The team overcame a series of challenges – many of which were equipment-related – on the road to victory.

"It started out rough, but we put our heads down and kept fishing," says Veronee.

"In practice, we hit a wing dam and busted up our skeg," Gramling explains. "We got that fixed, but then our trolling motor quit on us an hour and a half into the first day of the tournament. With all the current, that was really tough. Without our shallow-water anchor, I don't think we would have caught anything."

Their persistence paid off, however. They eventually earned a spot in Friday's semi-final round, during which they topped the competition with an 11-pound, 9-ounce limit.

Although the duo fished a variety of areas, a main-river break wall with a slight current break was particularly productive. Drop-shots and Texas rigs were their weapons of choice in anywhere from 1 to 20 feet of water.

The win earned Veronee and Gramling a variety of lucrative scholarship offers, including a \$56,000 scholarship offer from Bethel University in Tennessee, which is SAF's longest-running scholarship partner. The list also includes a \$120,000 scholarship offer from Simpson University in California, a \$100,000 scholarship offer from Kentucky Christian University and a \$12,000 scholarship offer from The Bass Federation (TBF) to any college or trade school of their choice, should they choose not to accept any of the other offers.

In all, the event's total payout included \$3.2 million in scholarships and a bevy of other prizes, including \$8,000 in Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's gift cards. The purse was the richest in SAF High School Fishing history.

"What a great event from start to finish," says SAF Tournament Director Randy Sullivan. "The young anglers enjoyed exciting competition, meeting new friends, and



many took home potentially life-changing scholarships. We're grateful to the parents and other supporters who encouraged them, the sponsors who made the event possible, our local hosts in La Crosse and Stoddard, Wis., and our volunteers for stepping up to help everything run safely and seamlessly from beginning to end."

Hot on the heels of Gramling and Veronee, a pair of teams sacked 9-pound, 3-ounce limits. Ryan Thomas and Cole Holloway of Madison, Ga., won the tiebreaker to claim second place.

"We're doing great right now," Holloway says.

"We feel like we could have done better, but we're happy with our finish," Thomas adds.



"We caught a lot of fish today, just like every other day," says Holloway, explaining that they targeted shallow water, mainly with frogs, squarebill crankbaits and shaky heads.

Austin Fleming and Ben Brockwell of Ouachita, Arkansas landed in third, also with 9 pounds, 3 ounces.

"It's awesome to finish third in this event. I'm thankful," says Brockwell.

"It's a blessing to be here fishing with everybody," Fleming adds, noting that the team finished fifth in the 2019 SAF World Finals.

Brockwell says they fished frogs the entire event and their go-to fishing spots were "thick grass with open holes in 2 to 3 feet of water in the Pool 9 backwaters."

The 2020 SAF World Finals were held June 24-27 in conjunction with the SAF High School Fishing National Championship. The dual-event format was designed to give high school anglers from across the country and all walks of life an equal chance at winning college scholarships.

The no-entry-fee championships were hosted by La Crosse, Wisconsin and were produced by SAF under the TBF umbrella with the support of a coalition of 19 sponsors, including TBF partners in fishing from FLW. Takeoff and weigh-ins were held at Stoddard Ramp on the Wisconsin side of Pool 8.

Both events kicked off Wednesday, June 24, with the National Championship concluding on Friday and the World Finals wrapping up on Saturday.



Lawson Losee and Kooper Tweite of Riceville, Iowa claimed the National Championship title on Friday with a 30-pound, 4-ounce three-day total. They automatically advanced to the World Finals.

All World Finals competitors fished the first three days, battling for coveted spots in the grand finale. The final field included the 10 National Championship finalists, the top 10 teams from Friday's World Finals semi-final round, and the next 10 teams from the semi-final round and second-chance rounds combined. The winners of a special "Lucky Dog Last Chance Wildcard" drawing won a chance to compete, bringing the number of teams competing to 31. All weights were zeroed to give everyone a fresh start.

On the final day, those 31 teams brought a total of 83 bass weighing 204 pounds, 9 ounces to the scale. The fish were returned to the Mississippi River in the SAF's proven catch-and-release format. Big bass was a 3-pound, 14-ounce beauty brought in by Fleming and Brockwell, who received a pair of Lew's high-performance baitcasting reels for their efforts.

In total, more than 40 scholarship offers were made. Some of the scholarship offers were immediately accepted, and letters of intent signing ceremonies were held on site.

For complete details, visit HighSchoolFishing.org.



HIGH SCHOOL STATE CHAMPIONS

NORTH CAROLINA – MARCH 21 – HIGH ROCK LAKE

Jacob Singleton, Cole Johnson – North Lincoln Knights – 24-06

OREGON – MAY 16 – HOOD RIVER

Joshua Buller, Conner Chase – Thurston Colts – 13-10

ALABAMA – MAY 17 – NEELY HENRY

Aiden Green, Hunter Santosuosso – Alabama SAF – 12-0

WEST VIRGINIA – MAY 24 – SUTTON LAKE

Adam McGhee, Devin Vance – Liberty Raider Fishing Team – 11-15

OKLAHOMA – MAY 26 – GRAND LAKE

Joseph Case, Sydney Meier – Mannford High School – 17-15

ARIZONA – MAY 30 – LAKE HAVASU

Austin Rojas, Branden Kuhn – Lake Havasu High School – 15-7

KANSAS – MAY 30 – MELVERN LAKE

Logan Redeker, Ethan Haufler – Capital City Bass Club – 14-3

MISSISSIPPI – MAY 30 – BACK BAY BILOXI RIVER SYSTEMS

Tommy Loper, Dylan Peterson – D'Iberville High School Warriors – 9-15

MISSOURI – MAY 31 – TRUMAN LAKE

Alec Davidson, Ronin Picker – Lincoln County Lunkers – 16-07

ILLINOIS – JUNE 5 – REND LAKE

Andrew Conrad, Peyton Rose – Flora High School Bass Club – 13-0

KENTUCKY – JUNE 7 – LAKE CHICKAMAUGA

Bailey Gay, Adrian Urso – Ryle High School – 14-03

WASHINGTON – JUNE 7 – MOSES LAKE

Wade Wilkens, Blake Yates – Selah High School – 21-02

TENNESSEE – JUNE 7 – LAKE CHICKAMAUGA

Andon Goins, Blake Wheat – Team Riprap – 24-13

OHIO – JUNE 13 – ALUM CREEK

Nathan Fiant, Tristan Rausch – Hartley Hawgs Bass Club – 14-14

VIRGINIA – JUNE 14 – LAKE GASTON

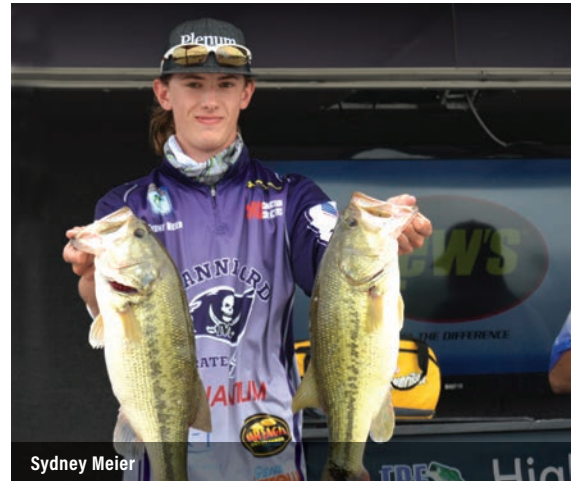
Thai Tatum, Brenton Powers – Clinch Mountain Junior Anglers – 14-9

INDIANA – JUNE 14 – BROOKVILLE LAKE

Judd Linette, Gabriel Verkamp – IBF South Bucket Club – 11-12

MINNESOTA – JULY 7 – LAKE MINNETONKA

Gavin Melcher, Logan Huewe – Elk River Elks – 19-09



Sydney Meier



Andrew Conrad and Peyton Rose



Judd Linette and Gabriel Verkamp

STATE LEADERSHIP MEETINGS SLATED FOR JULY 30-31 IN NILES, OHIO

Every state has a voice. Each year, TBF hosts state federation presidents and other state officers for meetings and a convention. It's there that all big-picture items about the Federation – its format, programs and conduct – are decided on by a vote of the states' representatives.

2020 NATIONAL SEMI FINALS KICK OFF IN OKLAHOMA

TBF District 6, which is comprised of top anglers from Oklahoma and Arkansas, held the first of 22 TBF National Semi Finals of 2020 on June 20-21. The event was hosted this year on sprawling Lake Eufaula in eastern Oklahoma.

Each state sends its top 10 percent in adult participation to a close-to-home district National Semi Final to compete not only for state bragging rights as district champions but to see who will represent their home state at the 2021 TBF National Championship. The top boater and the top co-angler from each state federation advances.



Kevin Brown and Wyatt Ryan

In overall state standings, Arkansas' best topped the Oklahoma squad in total weight and took home the district bragging rights for 2020. In the individual standings, and advancing to the 2021 championship, Arkansas's top boater was Kevin Brown from Hot Springs, Arkansas and Oklahoma's was Wyatt Ryan from Ada, Oklahoma.

Advancing from the co-angler ranks were Arkansas' Jonathan Dotson from Dover, Arkansas and Steve Carlon from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Congratulations to all.



Jonathan Dotson and Steve Carlon

TBF CHAMPIONSHIPS: THE EARLY DAYS

In 1980, the state federation presidents voted on a new program that took effect in 1981, which led to a lot of change and growth in the first several years of the decade. There were only five federation "divisions" nationwide, and all states were divided up and assigned into one these five divisions: Eastern, Western, Southern, Central and Northern.

In more recent years, the federations voted to add new divisions to bring the total up to seven, which included the addition of the Mid-Atlantic Division and a restructuring of the 10 westernmost states to form the Northwest and Southwest divisions, which is how it remains today.

There was no TBF Championship from 1981 through 1987. Instead, each division advanced its top angler from a divisional championship tournament, which, at that time, allowed winners to advance to the Bassmaster Classic, as the federations were aligned with B.A.S.S. up until 2006. Here's who advanced from each in those years:

1981 –

Eastern: Robert Moyer, Pennsylvania
Southern: Blake Honeycutt, North Carolina
Central: Johnny Talley, Louisiana
Northern: Paul Converse, Michigan
Western: Renaud Pelletier, Washington

1982 –

Eastern: James Dudley, Virginia
Southern: Van Kennedy, Georgia
Central: Danny Ashley, Arkansas
Northern: Larry Ummel, Indiana
Western: John Lawson, Washington

1983 –

Eastern: Phil Hunt, Connecticut
Southern: Roger Farmer, Georgia
Central: Alfred Williams, Mississippi
Northern: O.T. Fears, Michigan
Western: Dan Westfall, Arizona

1984 –

Eastern: Dick Garlock, New York
Southern: Larry Lazoan, Florida
Central: Charlie Pierce, Kansas
Northern: Robert Hetz, Michigan
Western: Milo Hardt, Arizona

1985 –

Eastern: Dave Hall, Pennsylvania
Southern: John Hunt, Tennessee
Central: Grayson Tobler, Arkansas
Northern: Jerry Harmon, Illinois
Western: Jeff Boyer, Washington

1986 –

Eastern: Danny Correia, Massachusetts
Southern: David Yarbrough, Alabama
Central: Harold Sanders, Mississippi
Northern: Kenneth Pine, Indiana
Western: Jesse Lane, New Mexico

1987 –

Eastern: Tim Sullivan, Delaware
Southern: Bruce Ellison, South Carolina
Central: Gary Henderson, Arkansas
Northern: Gary Hardwick, Indiana
Western: Ward Cole, Arizona

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

STURGEON BAY SMASHFEST

HOW THE LEGENDARY SMALLMOUTH FISHERY STOOD UP TO MLF'S EVERY-SCORABLE-BASS FORMAT



There are some fisheries just tailor-made for MLF's catch-weigh-release format of bass fishing tournaments. Sure, Lake Fork and the like offer incredible opportunities for Bass Pro Tour anglers to lift 10-pounders over the gunwale en masse, but no one would mistake the quantity of those trophy largemouth for the sheer volume of quality smallmouth pros landed at the MLF Bass Pro Tour Covercraft Stage Five presented by Abu Garcia on Sturgeon Bay.

Justin Lucas earned his first Stage victory at that event in what can only be described as one of the most impressive performances in Bass Pro Tour history. In the Qualifying Round, in the first period alone, the Berkley pro made his mark on Sturgeon Bay to the tune of 78 pounds, 12 ounces en route to a record 141-9 for the day and a total of 50 scorable bass. Both his first period weight and total weight for the Qualifying Round set new records that probably won't be broken for a long, long time – unless the Bass Pro Tour finds its way back to Sturgeon Bay soon.

2020 Points Champion Jordan Lee joined the party, too, finishing fourth in the event and leading all anglers in most overall weight (328-11) and most fish caught (116) after stacking up 34 bass for 94 pounds in the Knockout Round and another 27 scorable fish for 79-7 in the Championship Round.

From start to finish (save for a lightning delay on the final day), Sturgeon Bay showed out in a big, big way. But don't take our word(s) for it. Let's let the numbers do the talking.

8,880 POUNDS

Total weight of all fish caught during Stage Five on Sturgeon Bay. That's more than the combined weight of a Toyota Tundra pulling a Phoenix 921 series boat.
.....

2.97 POUNDS

Average weight of all fish caught during the event. Even with fish nearing 6 pounds being a rarity on Sturgeon Bay, that 3-pound average is only 4 ounces behind the 3-4 average caught at the Kissimmee Chain during the 2020 Toyota Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo event in early June.
.....

1,062

Number of 3-plus-pounders pulled from the waters of Sturgeon Bay during the tournament. That's an average of over 13 3-plus-pounders per angler in the 80-pro field, though it's safe to say Lucas caught more than his fair share.
.....

129-14

Previous single-day record (set by Jacob Wheeler on Table Rock last year) before Lucas shattered it with his 141-9 Qualifying Round performance.
.....

2

Number of times a Bass Pro Tour pro eclipsed the century mark in one day of competition prior to Sturgeon Bay. That number is now 12 thanks to 100-plus-pound showings from Josh Bertrand, Mark Daniels Jr. (twice), David Dudley, Jared Lintner, Cliff Pace, Keith Poche, Scott Suggs and Lucas (twice).

13

Number of 5-plus-pounders caught during the event, with the largest smallmouth coming in at 5 pounds, 9 ounces (courtesy of Adrian Avena).
.....

21-1

Combined weight of Daniels' best five fish during the Knockout Round (in which he tallied 103-5 total), including four fish over 4 pounds.
.....

232

Total scorable bass caught during the Championship Round. What's more, the per-period breakdown of those catches highlights just how consistently incredible the Door County fishery really is. In Period 1, anglers caught a total of 80 bass. They followed that up with 81 in Period 2 and 71 in the lightning delay-shortened final period.
.....

53

Number of minutes it took Lucas to catch his first 12 fish of the day to start his Qualifying Round. He totaled 32-14 in that span to set the table for his record-setting day.
.....

27

Number of minutes it took Lucas to catch his final five fish (for 14 pounds, 10 ounces) to outpace Daniels (also with five fish in that span) and seal the deal. ■



RISE ABOVE



Aaron Martens

When Aaron Martens – the “iron man” of tournament fishing with amazing skills and a lifelong dedication to fitness and health – recently learned he needed immediate surgery to remove life-threatening brain tumors, he turned instantly to his faith. His first thoughts were “... literally prayers to God to direct my steps on the path to beating it,” he said. He also made a powerful commitment to his future. “I’m going to compete. I’m going to persevere.” Martens has indeed persevered and is focused on a quick return to competition.

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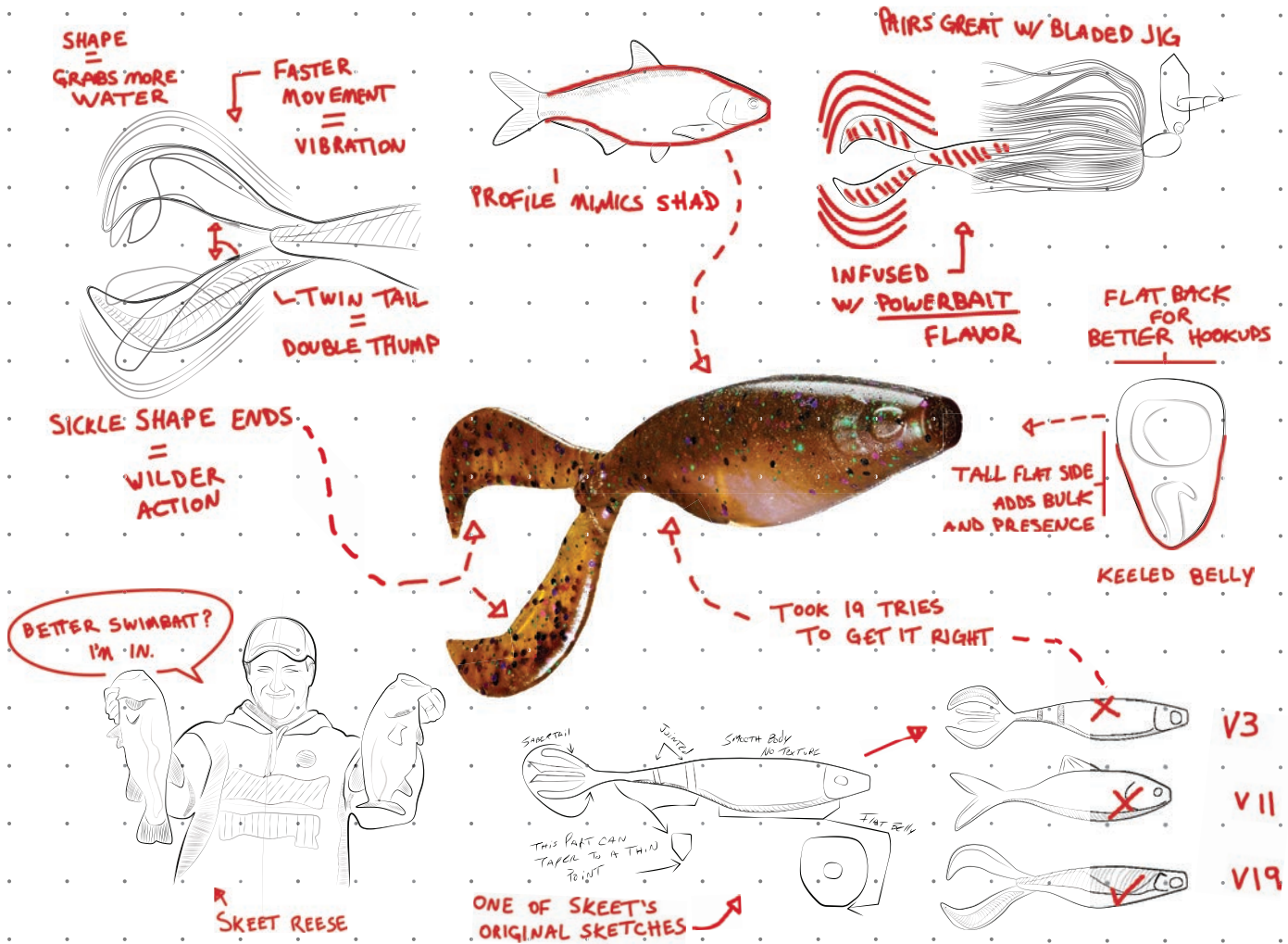
Martens runs a Phoenix 921 Elite powered by a Mercury® V8 250 Pro XS®





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