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ANSWERS, FINALLY

I feel like all I've been writing about in my columns lately is change – changes to the magazine, changes to FLW tournaments, changes in the industry and changes that have stirred a lot of emotions (good and bad) in all of you bass heads. I guess the one thing that isn't changing for the moment is the topic of this editorial because there are more changes to report.

In mid-October, news broke that Major League Fishing had signed a letter of intent to acquire FLW. The deal was finalized around the first of November, officially bringing together two fishing industry powerhouses.

I say "bringing together" because that really is how this change happened. Despite a lot of gloomy, doomsday social media comments and speculation after the announcement, the FLW brand remains. The lights are still on in FLW's Benton, Ky., headquarters, where the staff is continuing with the business of bass tournaments and publishing fishing content.

More importantly, tens of thousands of anglers at all levels will compete under the FLW banner again in 2020. I'm a big fan of that.

Like any business acquisition of this scale, there will be a few changes that don't sit well with some people. However, I venture that if you read the entire feature outlining the future of MLF and FLW on page 54 of this issue, you'll see that the revisions to FLW's roster of tournaments are far and away positive.

For the vast majority of FLW's competitor members, not much is changing, except that many anglers will enjoy lower entry fees and more opportunities to compete in their preferred circuits.

Of course, a lot more attention has been cast toward the announced changes at the top of the FLW tournament hierarchy, where the FLW Tour has been rebranded the FLW Pro Circuit.

The new Pro Circuit will be the qualification route for the MLF Bass Pro Tour. Due to this change, a lot of folks have taken to calling the Pro Circuit a "AAA" league. I have a different perspective. With \$100,000 to each winner and more than 312 hours of TV coverage, plus live broadcasts and a strict qualification metric to get in, the Pro Circuit compares to any traditional five-bass weigh-in professional tournament circuit out there. The biggest difference is that now our bass fishing mountain has two peaks where the sport's best pros can compete – the five-bass-limit Pro Circuit, and the catch-weight-release Bass Pro Tour.

I know many folks want to hold on to the "old school" FLW. Rocking the boat is never easy. Then again, smooth seas don't make great sailors. When Irwin Jacobs launched the FLW Tour back in the late 1990s, he did a lot of boat rocking in the industry. But he also re-energized the sport with bigger payouts and more sponsor participation than ever before. MLF and FLW have a similar opportunity to effect lasting change by combining the biggest media platform the sport has known with a grassroots foundation that welcomes anglers at all skill levels. I expect big things.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, this magazine isn't going away. We're actually expanding it to six issues in 2020. There'll probably be some rebranding and redesigning (we're due for it anyway) before the first "new" issue reaches your mailbox in 2020, but I think that's change most people can appreciate.

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BRONZE AND OTHER FALL COLORS

Lake Cumberland in central Kentucky is one of the most picturesque fisheries in the country, especially when you consider how vast the winding Cumberland River impoundment really is. The ninth-largest reservoir in the United States, Cumberland's steep bluff walls and countless creek channels and cuts combine to form a lake that might look right at home in the deserts of the Southwest if not for all the beautiful foliage surrounding it.

Even a cold, rainy and generally dreary forecast couldn't quell the splendor of Cumberland during the 2019 Costa FLW Series Championship, during which fall colors showed out – perhaps none more than the color bronze. Cumberland is known for its thriving population of both largemouth and smallmouth bass, but it was bronze-backs that did the heavy lifting during the championship event.

Jon Canada, shown here braving the cold and rain on day one, hauled in a mixed bag to finish 23rd.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA



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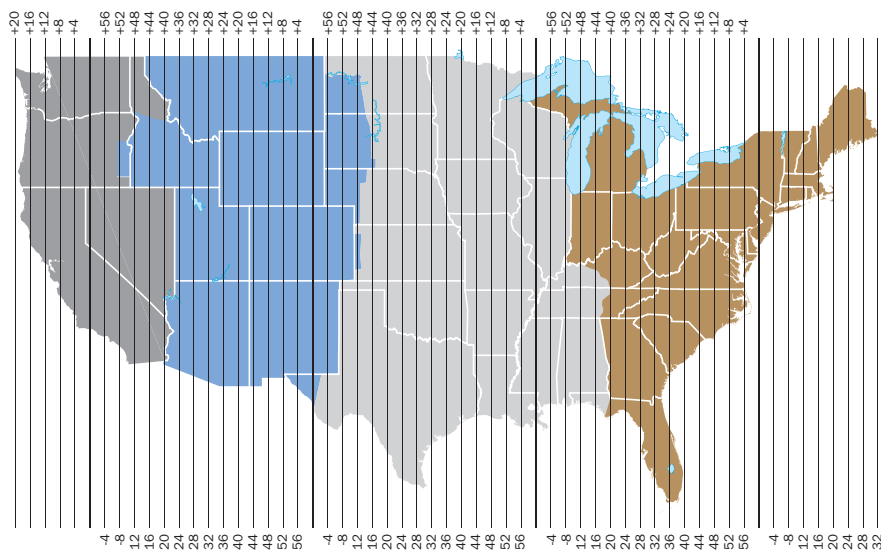
JANUARY 2020

PACIFIC
STANDARD
TIME

MOUNTAIN
STANDARD
TIME

CENTRAL
STANDARD
TIME

EASTERN
STANDARD
TIME



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

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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Phoenix Becomes Official Boat Sponsor of FLW

In December, FLW and Phoenix Boats reached an agreement for Phoenix to become the official boat sponsor of FLW. The Tennessee-based boat company is also the new title sponsor of the Phoenix Bass Fishing League presented by T-H Marine.

"The partnership with FLW and the Bass Fishing League is a perfect fit for Phoenix Boats," says Gary Clouse, president of Phoenix Boats. "I know from personal experience from fishing my first BFL in 1981, and many more since, that the FLW platform delivers a great angler experience at each of their 128 tournaments. That alone makes this a perfect fit for Phoenix."

Throughout the course of the 2020 season, FLW anglers will have opportunities to compete for 39 new Phoenix bass boats as part of FLW's lucrative tournament prize packages. Phoenix Boats



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plans to roll out an enhanced Phoenix First Flight contingency program in 2020. Details about the program were not yet finalized at press time, but the information will be available soon at FLWFishing.com.

For more about Phoenix Boats, or to see the company's line of bass boats, visit phoenixbassboats.com.



Damage Control

It may be impossible to ever fully repair the damage done to the lake sturgeon population in North America. Despite surviving everything nature threw their way for roughly 200 million years, it took a little over a century for man to decimate the population to within one percent of what it used to be. Between massive harvesting in the 20th century, habitat destruction and general disruption of spawning areas for native sturgeon, the lake sturgeon faces an uphill battle to avoid extinction.

Minnesota may soon take a massive step toward repairing the damage, though, led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is exploring the possibility of adding the lake sturgeon to its list of endangered species to provide additional federal protection for sturgeon in the Land of 10,000 Lakes and the Great Lakes region as a whole. While conservation groups have been clamoring for these protections for some time, there may still be time to repair some of the damage done and create a clearer path for the rejuvenation of one of the oldest species of fish on the planet.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KNOTTY BOYS FISHING



One Weird Catch

Debbie Geddes of Plattsburgh, N.Y., likes to do what many area anglers do so often in her part of the country: take advantage of the tremendous fishing opportunities Lake Champlain has to offer. What it offered on one fateful fishing trip, however, isn't something most anglers can expect to experience more than once in a lifetime.

While catching two fish on the same cast isn't prohibitively uncommon, catching one fish with two mouths is. Geddes caught this unusual lake trout back in August, and, realizing how heavy the fish felt, believed she had a giant on the end of her line. It wasn't quite a giant (or a mythical creature like Champlain's Loch Ness Monster equivalent, "Champ") – just a run-of-the-mill mutant trout with two sets of chompers.

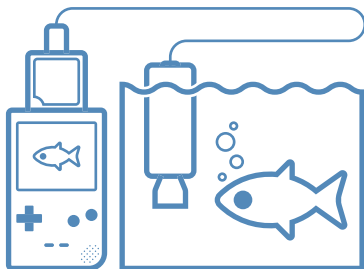


Nature & Nurture

According to recent research done at the University of Exeter led by Dr. Mat White, spending any less than two hours per week in the great outdoors could be detrimental to your health.

The research, which utilized data from 20,000 English participants, clearly suggests that the threshold for better health and overall well-being is 120 minutes in nature per week, either all at once or cumulatively.

And that's just what every angler needs: another reason to get out on the water.



↓ Weird Finds

If you still have an old Nintendo Game Boy lying around, you might be able to put it to use on your next fishing trip. Seriously.

In 1998, Bandai released a “Pocket Sonar” accessory – essentially a sonar-equipped cartridge with a floating transducer – that actually worked as a fish-finder. It also included a fish encyclopedia in the programming.

Retailing for 14,800 yen (about \$136) at the time, it certainly wasn't the cheapest accessory, and finding one now might be a tall task. Still, they pop up on eBay from time to time and aren't prohibitively expensive (at least by vintage Game Boy accessory standards).



↓ Be on the Lookout

The northern snakehead isn't so northern anymore, it seems. In early October, Johnathan Maynard was fishing a private pond in Gwinnett County, Ga., when he hooked into one of the toothy predators that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) says should be killed immediately if caught. Maynard says the fish freed itself from his scale while he was weighing it and returned to the water.

The “Frankenfish,” as it was coined after being discovered in Virginia, is now present in 15 states. It's a nonnative predator that can have serious negative implications on aquatic ecosystems. If you spot one in Georgia, kill it, freeze it and report it to the Georgia DNR.



↓ Get Paid to Fish

The National Parks Service (NPS) is mulling over a novel approach to curbing the spread of an invasive species, and you might like where this story is going.

Brown trout are not native to the Colorado River, and their boom (after initially being introduced in the early 20th century) has led to some ecosystem imbalance, particularly below the Glen Canyon Dam, where the larger cousins of rainbow trout are making a dent in the humpback chub population.

The NPS wants to incentivize the natural removal of brown trout via traditional fishing methods that don't include electrofishing, which would also affect the nonproblematic rainbow trout population and is opposed by some local Native American tribes, and it wants to pay people to help.

While compensation details have yet to be put in place, the NPS will notify the fishing public when it's ready to roll out the incentive program.

↘ 3 Great Holiday Ideas for Any Angler



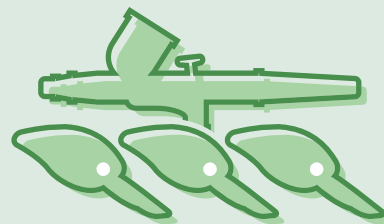
1. Lifetime Fishing License

Several states offer options for lifetime hunting and fishing licenses. Save the outdoor enthusiast in your life some hassle and sign him or her up for a lifetime commitment to enjoying the great outdoors.



2. Tackle Warehouse Gift Cards

Like it or not, a generic pack of hooks and some soft plastics isn't always what the angler in your life wants or needs come Christmas morning. Instead, opt for a gift card or two from tacklewarehouse.com and let your favorite angler buy what they really want.



3. DIY Lure Starter Kit

When anglers aren't fishing, they're thinking about fishing. They're also probably spending a lot of money on the best new lures or the old standbys they have a hard time finding these days. Kill multiple birds with one stone and get them a do-it-yourself lure-making kit (there are dozens to choose from). Whether a balsa crankbait kit or a pour-it-yourself soft plastics setup, giving someone the chance to save money and spend a little more time focusing on what they love is sure to be appreciated.



Conservation Quick-Hits



COLORADO: Despite the popularity of smallmouth bass and northern pike as sport fishing targets, they happen to be nonnative

species in the Yampa River. As a result, Colorado Parks and Wildlife implemented the Elkhead Reservoir Fishing Classic, and the tournament, which aims to reduce populations of both species through harvesting tournament catches, just completed its fourth-annual iteration, tallying totals of 492 smallies and 419 pike removed from the river system. In its existence, the tournament has resulted in the removal of around 1,186 northern pike and 2,524 smallmouth bass.



KANSAS: Thanks to an innovative early spawning hatchery program implemented by the Kansas Department of Wildlife,

Parks and Tourism over the last 10 years, the Kansas bass population is absolutely thriving. The program, which essentially tweaks environmental factors for brood fish still in hatcheries so they spawn earlier than if in the wild, has been showing increasingly impressive results in Kansas' bass fisheries. The offspring that are released are larger than lake-spawned bass, and therefore better able to survive through winter.



MISSOURI: The Missouri Department of Conservation began its Urban Fishing Program 50 years ago as an effort to provide quality

fishing experiences for St. Louis-area anglers. During fall and winter, the MDC will release a number of massive rainbow trout – potentially in the 10-pound range – as a special 50th anniversary treat for area anglers looking for trophy trout.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TENNESSEE AQUARIUM



Asian Carp: The Battle Rages On

The fight against the territorial expansion of Asian carp in U.S. waters is one that is being waged on many fronts, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources has fired the latest shot with a pledge of \$8 million to go toward the construction of a barrier near Joliet, Ill., on the Chicago Area Waterway System. The project is a step in the right direction to prevent Asian carp from expanding into the Great Lakes.

On Nov. 1, it was made public that recent samples from waters connected to Lake Michigan indicated positive results for invasive carp environmental DNA, though no live Asian carp were actually found during the sampling. If they get a foothold in the Great Lakes, invasive carp could have a massively negative impact on the ecosystem and the multi-billion-dollar fishing and boating industry in the region.

Kentucky-Barkley Efforts

With Asian carp still present in Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley, stopping their proliferation remains a top priority. In early November, with the help of \$25 million secured by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to combat the spread of Asian carp, a bio-acoustic fish fence (BAFF) was commissioned below Barkley Dam as part of a three-year, \$7 million trial to find ways to help deter the invasive fish from continuing to move upstream.

The BAFF emits noises, bubbles and lights that will hopefully repel Asian carp and keep them from entering the lock. The commissioning of the fence is the beginning of a trial run that, if successful, could spur similar bio-acoustic technology to be implemented in other bodies of water impacted by Asian carp.



Jerry McKinnis Passes Away at 82

The bass fishing community lost a true legend on Nov. 3, 2019 with the passing of Jerry McKinnis.

McKinnis, who was a former co-owner of B.A.S.S., an author, a television host and a pioneer of professional tournament fishing, was instrumental in the growth of the popularity of the sport of fishing and the education of the fishing public. That included his popular TV show "The Fishin' Hole," which aired for more than four decades and was a favorite source of information and entertainment for anglers everywhere. McKinnis also worked alongside late FLW Chairman Irwin Jacobs and FLW's first president and CEO Charlie Hoover to broadcast the FLW Tour in its early years.

A bass fishing hall-of-famer and a true trailblazer, McKinnis' passing is a loss for the entire fishing community.



Yelton, Thornburg Win Polaris Sportsman Giveaway

This year, FLW teamed up with its partners at Polaris to give away two Polaris Sportsman 570 EPS ATVs, valued at approximately \$7,799 each. One winner was chosen from entries that were included each time someone signed up to fish a Bass Fishing League tournament. The other was pulled from a pool of entries taken online and at FLW tournaments throughout the season.

Here are the lucky winners.

JACOB YELTON | Age: 21
Christianburg, Va.

"It made my year," says Yelton of winning the new ATV. "I think that's the coolest thing that's probably ever happened to me in my life. It was a really unbelievable experience. I'm still kind of awestruck about the whole situation."

Yelton fished the BFL Piedmont Division as a co-angler and plans to do so again next season. He plans to use his new Polaris Sportsman 570 EPS for plowing some driveways this winter and riding around on his 20-acre property.

RICHARD THORNBURG | Age: 33
Lindsay, Okla.

"I was really excited; my fiancée was, too," Thornburg says. "We live in the country. We have 140 acres. It'll allow me to do all the riding I want to do."

An avid angler, Thornburg has only recently gotten into tournament fishing. The 2019 season was his first fishing the BFL, which he did from the back of the boat in the Okie Division. He plans to fish the BFL again next season and potentially a couple FLW Series events before eventually going to the boater side in the near future.



International Giants

FLW's international reach has brought new tournaments and more exposure to the sport of bass fishing from every corner of the globe, just about everywhere you can find bass swimming around. That includes places like Zimbabwe, where giant bucketmouths are apparently pretty common.

Back in late August, anglers participating in the 2019 FLW Zimbabwe Championship hammered on giant bass after giant bass, pulling mind-boggling limits from the waters of Lake Mteri in the south-eastern part of the country. The winning bag, caught by Roger Cousens (above), totaled 101.83 pounds over just three days of competition, with the average bag across the field nearing the 29-pound mark. ■





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TOUR LIFE

HOW TO BE A BETTER COMPETITOR, FROM THE BEST IN THE BUSINESS

+

Competitors such as Brad Cook and co-angler Gabe Talley, shown here, encountered a multitude of conditions ranging from torrential rain to slick calm and sunny at the 2019 Costa FLW Series Championship on Lake Cumberland.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



GOING FOR IT

By Sean Ostruszka

A DREAM OF FISHING PROFESSIONALLY HAS TURNED INTO REALITY FOR DYLAN HAYS

A close examination of FLW Tour pro Dylan Hays' fishing career might make you shake your head. His path doesn't really match up with what one might consider a "typical" pursuit of a fishing career.

Hays grew up in the angler-heaven state of Arkansas, saying he wanted to one day be a professional fisherman, but he never really fished in grade school. Well, maybe not never. A kid in Arkansas is bound to end up fishing at one point or another, if only by accident. Still, "rarely" is not too strong a term to describe the frequency with which he wet a line in those days.

No one in Hays' family fished, and it wasn't until around age 12 that he started to actually get into it. At that point, he was fishing with some buddies in farm

ponds, including the one on his parents' farm. Their species of choice was mainly catfish.

Despite being "obsessed" with baseball and basketball in those days, something about fishing spoke to him.

"Every day I'd fish that little pond in front of my house," explains Hays, who nostalgically remembers fishing a Zoom Fluke all over the pond, which was so small he could cast across it at any point, even with his little Zebco 33 reel. "You want to know what my best day was bass fishing? Three. I caught three bass all day."

It sounds like a pretty sad story, but a year or so after that banner day, he and his dad drained the pond for maintenance. They found three bass living in that pond.

Fast-forward a little to when Hays finally got into tournament fishing. After fishing just a few night tournaments,

he'd gotten enough of a taste to enter a 2007 Bass Fishing League (BFL) event on Lake Ouachita as a co-angler.

The problem was, the tournament was in February, and a cold front arrived right on top of it.

"It was so cold, I remembering putting on two pairs of blue jeans," Hays says. "I didn't have bibs or anything."

That fact would become quite a problem when his boater speared not one, but two waves at takeoff, and Hays had to fish the rest of the day drenched and frozen.

"I got home that night and was cramping so bad because I'd been shivering all day long."

What transpired between takeoff and check-in only makes him shake his head more.

"We pull up to the first spot, and the depth finder says 100 feet," Hays says. "I'd never fished deeper than 6 feet. I was so clueless I had to watch him fish for a while just to get an idea of how to even begin to fish like that."

It didn't matter, though. Hays got a check for \$206 that day. He caught one fish that just happened to be 1 ounce shy of big bass for the tournament, and he finished 16th on the co-angler side.

That would hardly be the last check he'd cut. Despite not growing up immersed in the tournament scene, Hays quickly got on track. At age 26, he finished fourth in the 2013 The Bass Federation National Championship, a tournament won by fellow future pro Mark Daniels Jr., and finished third in the BFL Arkie Division standings in 2014. Then Hays started cherry-picking some Costa FLW Series events in 2015, making the top 10 at Grand Lake in his first tournament.

Of course, you might shake your head to learn that in 2017, Hays walked into his job at a paper mill and quit. He told them he was going to fish professionally.

"It probably looks a little random, but I'd been smart about it," Hays admits. "I'd won a boat the previous fall in a team tournament, and I'd been saving up my money for a while. I wanted to take my shot at what I'd always said I wanted to do."

After having never fished a tournament outside his home region, suddenly, he was going to be traveling the country fishing the FLW Tour, and both the Southwestern and Northern divisions of the Costa FLW Series.

Here's the thing: Once again, things just kind of worked out. Hays bombed in his inaugural FLW Tour event, but he finished third at Lake Travis two weeks later. On top of that, he finished 10th in the Costa FLW Series Northern Division standings and 12th in the Southwestern Division, which earned him his first entry into the Costa FLW Series Championship.

In 2018, Hays finished one point away from making his first FLW Cup, coming painstakingly close by finishing second at the Tour finale on Lake St. Clair. A year later, in his third season on Tour, Hays saw plenty of success, including cutting several checks and finishing as high as third at Cherokee Lake.

His most recent success was a Costa FLW Series Central Division victory on Lake of the Ozarks back in October. That win was another step in what he hopes will be a constant upward trajectory.

Throughout it all, he says the one thing he's always had going for him is the right mental state; a focus to keep pursuing his dream, even if it's a dream that, at times, maybe only he could see becoming reality.

"When you look at it all, I really have come a long way," Hays says with a chuckle. "I mean, I truly didn't have a clue, and I'm still learning. You have to or you'll get your lunch money taken. I know – I've had mine taken plenty. But I always knew I'd be here." ■





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By: JOEL WILLERT

When it comes to fishing, I try to be very organized. I like to be prepared. I like to know where everything is. That's kind of how I've always been. But I also did nine years in the military, and I think a lot of my organizational habits come from that part of my life.

Organization isn't just about tackle, either. I also keep detailed notes about all the lakes I fish. I actually write them in a notepad. It's old school, but it works for me.

I started writing out my notes when I was fishing local tournaments. After a tournament, I'd reflect back on what I did and what I could've done. I'd ask myself, "Why didn't I throw this bait?" or, "How did I not think of doing this?" Things like that would just bug me.

So, what I started doing before I even got to the lake is I'd write the lake name down on a notepad, and I would make a list of every single bait I should tie on. When I'd get to practice I'd get so focused on just a few baits that I'd forget about something I should've been trying. So, I made it a habit to occasionally take that notepad out of its plastic bag, look at my list and maybe remember to give something else a try.

Obviously, if practice is going well, I try to keep doing

TAKE NOTES FOR BETTER PREPARATION

*** OLD-SCHOOL PEN AND PAPER ARE VALUABLE TOOLS FOR THE MODERN ANGLER**

what's working, but there have been times the list has really helped. For instance, at Toho this past year, I had a Speed Worm and Senko tied on. And for whatever reason, I'd written on my list "Junebug Magnum Trick Worm." I guess I read an article or saw something about guys catching them on that worm, but I never even thought about it in practice until I looked in my notebook. I threw it on and fished it real slow – based on some notes I had in there about it – and caught some fish on it. If I didn't have that written down, I probably would've never thought about it. I would've just kept doing what I was doing.

Most of my note writing before the tournament goes on while I'm packing, just sitting in my boat and thinking about the lake. I'll write down random thoughts to try. Or, if I'm sitting down in front of my computer and doing my research for the lake, I'll write down certain creeks. For Rayburn last year, I wrote down creeks where tournaments had been won or that I thought might be good areas. Veatch Basin, for instance, is one I wrote down. Rayburn is a ginormous lake, so having a list of areas to check gave me a few starting points. It helped me eliminate water before I even got there. Then I could start figuring them out.

I make a lot of notes during practice, too. I write down the

date, weather, water temperature, water clarity, what the fish are doing, what kind of bank they're on, how I'm catching them – all that. I know the next time I fish that lake I might not be there at the same time, but the old notes are going to make it easier to realize what those fish are doing when I get back simply by adjusting for season and water temp.

It seems like it's a lot easier to sit down and write a lot of notes during a good practice. At Cherokee last season, I had the best practice I've ever had in my life, so I have a ton of notes in my notebook. At Grand practice was super tough. I was only getting a couple bites a day, so I don't have a lot of notes in there. I didn't want to write down stuff I didn't think was going to help me in the future anyway. If anything, those notes would've hurt me because I'd just have to re-learn the lake the next time anyway.

I suggest, at a minimum, jotting down notes a couple times a day. Do it while you're eating lunch or before running to a new area. You never know what might help you.

I know writing notes with a paper and pen is a little old school. My co-workers remind me about it every time I break out my clipboard in a room full of iPads. But, the way I see it, if it helps me out just once at every tournament, old school is just fine by me. ■

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ST. LAWRENCE RIVER — Sept. 19-21

63lbs, 5oz



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

Wayne Vaughan, Chester, Va.

WINNING PATTERN

Rather than stay in one small area, Vaughan spent the first two days targeting the tips of about 20 island points out in heavy current in 20 to 50 feet of water. When the current slackened around the islands the final day, he adjusted by fishing the main channel. The Virginia angler caught every fish on a drop-shot with a 1/2-ounce weight and either a Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flatnose Jerk Shad or a Z-Man Scented Jerk ShadZ.



CALIFORNIA DELTA — Sept. 26-28

62lbs, 13oz



PHOTO BY ROB MATSURA

Blake Dyer, Walnut Creek, Calif.

WINNING PATTERN

Dyer spent most of his time plying the Delta's grass, paying attention to bring his Z-Man ChatterBait Jack Hammer with the current. He also punched grass with a Reaction Innovations Spicy Beaver (tramp stamp) Texas-rigged with a 1 1/2-ounce WOO! Tungsten weight and Dirty Jigs Punchin' Skirt (big Texan). Finally, a finesse approach with a 6-inch Roboworm Fat Straight Tail Worm (margarita mutilator) on a drop-shot produced a couple of key keepers.



GRAND LAKE — Oct. 3-5

46lbs, 7oz



PHOTO BY JUSTIN ONSLOW

Curt Warren, Rose, Okla.

WINNING PATTERN

Despite failing to catch a limit either of the first two days, Warren still managed to top the field by targeting better quality bass on chunk rock and fresh, leafy brush piles in the mid-lake area. Most of his fish came in 15 to 30 feet, using a 3/4-ounce Bass X football jig (kicker craw) with a Zoom Brush Hog (watermelon candy) trailer to slowly drag over rocks or a 1/2-ounce white spinnerbait with double willow-leaf blades for targeting suspended bass.



LAKE OF THE OZARKS — Oct. 10-12

43lbs, 14oz



PHOTO BY ROB MATSURA

Dylan Hays, El Dorado, Ark.

WINNING PATTERN

Thanks to some last-minute heroics, Hays earned the first win of his FLW career at the Central Division finale. After breaking off the 3/4-ounce Jewel football jig (peanut butter and jelly) that he'd caught most of his fish on that week, Hays spent the last three minutes slinging a Strike King 6XD (blue hering) to a brush pile, which rewarded him with a 4-pound kicker – the winning bass. Prior to that, he fished as many docks and brush piles as he could.



CHAMPIONSHIP — LAKE CUMBERLAND — Oct. 31-Nov. 2

42lbs, 15oz

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD



Andrew Upshaw, Tulsa, Okla.

WINNING PATTERN

Upshaw exploited a transitional pattern where smallmouth bass were setting up on bluff banks in the lower end of the lake near where they'll eventually winter. The best spots were where the depth shallowed up from 45 to 50 feet deep to 22 to 24 feet deep, and where the river channel swung in close to shore.

With the exception of a couple bass he caught on a buzzbait during the first morning, when rain and wind pounded central Kentucky, Upshaw caught all his weight by finesse fishing with a Ned rig and small jig. He rigged the Ned rig with a green pumpkin Strike King Ned Ocho Worm on a 1/8-ounce Gene Larew Ned Rig Pighead Jig Head. His jig was either a 3/8- or 1/2-ounce Strike King Bitsy Flip Jig paired with a green pumpkin Strike King Baby Rage Craw trailer. Upshaw says the jig was his go-to. He worked it slowly down the slope through 5 to 14 feet of water. ■



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ADRIAN COLLEGE WINS SCHOOL OF THE YEAR

The Adrian College bass fishing club won the title of 2019 FLW College Fishing presented by YETI National School of the Year for its outstanding performance throughout the season. The award is based on points earned by the two highest-finishing teams from each school in conference tournaments and the College Fishing Open. The Bulldogs tallied 2,350 points on the back of six top-10 finishes in Northern Conference events and the Open.

"To win an award based on the whole season – our entire body of work – is awesome and says a lot about our roster and our program as a whole," says Seth Borton, head coach of the Adrian College team. "To win a tournament is great, but the National School of the Year is the most coveted award we can achieve because it means we had the best overall season."

Among the Adrian Bulldogs who compete on the team, 15 anglers contributed to the school's winning point total, and no two-person team was responsible for more than one point-earning finish – a sign of a well-rounded fishing program.

"I always tell my anglers that when you get the opportunity, you have to be ready to go – for the team," Borton adds. "We are extremely fortunate to be as successful as we have been since launching the club in 2015, and I'm going to keep challenging our anglers: How can you help make us better, as a team?"

Nickolas Marsh (left) and Jarrett Martin fish for Adrian College, the top FLW College Fishing club in 2019.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

Top 10 Schools in 2019

1. Adrian College, Adrian, Mich. – 2,350 points
2. Murray State University, Murray, Ky. – 2,300 points
3. Bethel University, McKenzie, Tenn. – 2,296 points
4. McKendree University, Lebanon, Ill. – 2,288 points
5. University of North Alabama, Florence, Ala. – 2,280 points
6. University of Montevallo, Montevallo, Ala. – 2,273 points
7. Blue Mountain College, Blue Mountain, Miss. – 2,269 points
8. East Texas Baptist University, Marshall, Texas – 2,257 points
9. Radford University, Radford, Va. – 2,210 points
10. Bryan College, Dayton, Tenn. – 2,186 points

Conference Schools of the Year

In addition to the National School of the Year award, FLW also recognized the top school in each of its five FLW College Fishing conferences based on performance in each conference's regular-season events.

CENTRAL



MURRAY STATE
1,761 POINTS

NORTHERN



ADRIAN COLLEGE
1,760 POINTS

SOUTHEASTERN



MONTEVALLO
1,749 POINTS

SOUTHERN



ETBU
1,752 POINTS

WESTERN



CAL POLY
1,761 POINTS

FISHING

PROFESSIONAL ADVICE FOR BECOMING A BETTER ANGLER



Lake Erie legend Steve Clapper catches some of his biggest smallmouths of the year during the coldest season.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



BALOG'S BIG BASS QUEST



JOE BALOG

Joe Balog is an accomplished tournament fisherman from the Upper Midwest who relocated to Florida to scratch his lifelong itch to chase trophy largemouths.

PHOTOS BY JODY WHITE

LEGEND OF THE NORTH

FOR SEVERAL DECADES, STEVE CLAPPER HAS BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF TROPHY SMALLMOUTH FISHING ON THE GREAT LAKES

Over the last two decades, the concept of trophy bass fishing has expanded to include the smallmouth. It's no surprise, as bronzebacks of heroic sizes continuously pop up across much of the Great Lakes and beyond. In fact, many Northern fisheries now give anglers a legitimate shot at a smallmouth bass of more than 7 pounds, which was once only possible across a small section of the Mid-South.

No one is more qualified to tell the story of the evolution of Northern smallmouth bass fishing than Steve Clapper.

Nearly every smallmouth angler has heard of Clapper. Everyone who's ever fished a tournament on Lake Erie has feared him. Reefs are named after him. In a career spanning more than 40 years, Clapper has fished nearly every trophy smallmouth water in existence and helped spur possibly the greatest renaissance in all of bass fishing: offshore structure fishing on big water.

It's likely no other angler has been more influential in the advancement of this style of fishing, over a longer duration, than the original Great Lakes guru.

Water Temperature and Location

According to Clapper, at no other time are the giants of the species more vulnerable than during the most extreme cold-water periods, including early spring and late fall. This is when the fish are heaviest and when they gather in large, dense schools, assuring Clapper he's putting his bait in front of the biggest fish in the lake. In the Great Lakes, the magic water temperature range is 38 to 42 degrees.

I've often contended that the principle of bass dormancy during winter, especially for bass in the North, is a myth. Both Clapper and I have witnessed aggressive, feeding smallmouths beneath the ice, and we've found the most robust fish immediately after ice-out.

"They could be feeding throughout the winter, really," says Clapper. "We just can't get to them."

Clapper usually concentrates his cold-water search in 22 to 30 feet of water. Smallmouths seem to concentrate in the biggest groups around small, stairstepping breaks that are usually next to a major deep-water sanctuary. Depth and structural elements may vary from lake to lake, but the key factor remains being in close proximity to the main-lake basin.

"You may have to hunt and hunt," Clapper adds, "but when you find them, it's the motherlode."

Baits and Tactics

Once he locates a school, Clapper cycles through a handful of productive lures.

Bare hair jigs are a Northern favorite, and Clapper's experience with bucktail dates back at least 30 years. In fact, he was the first to show me the technique, which later resulted in the two of us teaming up on a 30-pound five-fish bag.

Clapper's hair jigs are all hand-tied and feature a moderate amount of grey bucktail surrounding a stout 3/0 hook. Weight selection varies from 1/4 to 3/4 ounce, depending on depth, waves and wind. Retrieves are simple drags, with the jig lightly hopping over rocky bottom.

While a heavy hair jig with no trailer sinks like a stone, don't be fooled into thinking it's not a subtle presentation. For years, I've studied hair jigs, trying to solve the riddle behind why they are so effective, despite being so simple. I believe the answer lies in the bucktail itself. Even when the jig lies motionless on the bottom, the hair slightly quivers and shimmies. Cold-water smallmouths – especially those found around the massive waters of the Great Lakes – regularly key in on small baitfish such as emerald shiners during this period. Perhaps the hair jig mimics the tiny tail kicks of these baitfish species.

Another old-school lure in Clapper's arsenal is the Vib-E blade bait, which is effective for casting and vertical presentations. Color preferences are simple gold or chrome, and Clapper suggests using relatively small hooks to increase the vibration of the lure. He presents them on a casting rod and 15-pound-test fluorocarbon.

Blade baits are often misunderstood lures. Anglers often overwork them. Clapper's method utilizes continuous light hops, with the lure momentarily touching bottom in between. Rod lifts jump the bait a foot or two and not more.

Still, in terms of cold-water smallmouth fishing, this is heavy-handed tackle that's capable of muscling in big fish much more rapidly than light-line applications, yielding a better chance for landing a monster.

If hair jigs and blades aren't producing, Clapper's third choice is one he's refined most recently: the swimbait. He relies on the 2.8 or 3.3 Keitech Swing Impact FAT paired with a homemade jighead poured with a small, powerful hook. Often, Clapper relies on a football-style head to really "grind the bait into the bottom." He'll use spinning or casting gear with line in the 10-pound-test range. Retrieves are fairly standard, with constant motion and few pauses.



The Presentation

Regardless of his lure choice, the key component to Clapper's system is a precise presentation. Long ago, Clapper revolutionized the deep-structure game by refusing to drift with the wind like most big-water bass anglers. Instead, he invented a system of utilizing a long-shaft trolling motor to hold his boat on specific targets. It's a method that other big-water anglers and I have adopted and continuously refine.

Clapper starts by making accurate casts to specific deep-water rocks and drops. He keeps his bait in the strike zone the same way an expert flipper does along the shoreline. No time is wasted, and structures are systematically eliminated throughout the day.

"I always like to be pulling my bait with the current," he adds. "[Sometimes] that can be against the wind, and that's a detriment. But if it's a spot I have confidence in, I'm going to mill around until I figure out how to catch them."

Clapper confirms – and I can attest – that angle is often everything. Once the proper cast is determined and the first catch lights up the school, successive giant bass can often be the result.

For Clapper, the appeal of giant smallmouths from the biggest waters seems to never wear off. Despite spending an entire lifetime chasing brown bruisers, Clapper continues to discover and refine new techniques on nearly every outing, reinforcing that there are endless possibilities in this final frontier of bass fishing. ■



A selection of Clapper's baits for big smallies.

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DIALING IN WINTERTIME CRANKBAITS

HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST BAITS FOR COLD-WEATHER CRANKING

A passel of baits will catch a bass when the water is cold, but many pros will agree that crankbaits rank among the very best for their ability to quickly and effectively cover water in varied depths around assorted types of cover and structure.

Compared to other times of the year, however, winter cranking can require a little more nuanced strategy to achieve success.

Forage Imitation

Understanding bass forage in the winter is the first step in achieving success when cranking. For instance, in FLW pro Terry Bolton's home region of western Kentucky, one of the main things that makes a crankbait so attractive during winter has to do with how baitfish react once water temperatures dive to the mid-50s or below.

"Some of the best winter fishing always takes place around shad schools," Bolton says. "And depending on which part of the country you live in, there are usually some shad die-offs that happen from December through February as the result of cold water. Their [the shad's] movements are slow and subtle, and certain types of crankbaits do a good job of simulating that."

Greg Bohannon, a fellow FLW pro from Bentonville, Ark., agrees with Bolton's theory about the prolific baitfish, but says crawfish might be an even bigger draw on some impoundments, particularly on deep, clear, rocky lakes such as Beaver, Bull Shoals and Table Rock.

"The bass feed really heavy on crawfish on our Ozark lakes during

Greg Bohannon fishes parallel to deep banks when cranking in winter.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSURA

the winter months," he says. "Our water usually gets really cold in January and February – low 40s and high 30s. But before that happens, usually before Christmastime, is just an awesome time to be cranking. Our magical window is 45 to 55 degrees in these Ozark lakes. It's always going to be on my deck when he water is below 57 degrees."

Greg's Selection Tips

Bohannon says he typically follows two rules of thumb when choosing a billed plug for cold-water cranking.

"I want something with a really tight wobble like a Strike King Lucky Shad or one with some hunting

action to it like the new Strike King 1.5 Deep square-bill, especially on lakes where there is a lot of rock," he says. "Both of those baits will hit that 8- to 10-foot range."

The Lucky Shad looks and performs similar to the old-school balsa Rapala Shad Rap. The 3 3/4-inch bait displaces a tight, subtle wiggle that simulates the sluggish movements of shad in cold water.

"Watch a threadfin shad swim in the winter and there isn't a whole lot of action to it. It just vibrates along," Bohannon says. "The action of the Lucky Shad looks natural to the fish."

The 1.5 Deep has a more radical action. Plus, it is designed to perform deeper in the water column than other square-bills its size.

The bait is built from the same mold as the standard shallow-diving 1.5 square-bill, but is outfitted with a longer bill and a stationary internal weight to aid in casting and promote maximum diving depth while enhancing the hunting action. Bohannon claims he can consistently bomb 30-yard casts and bump bottom in 10 feet with the 7/16-ounce lure on 12-pound-test P-Line Tactical Fluorocarbon.

"It's one of my new favorite wintertime crankbaits, especially around rock," says Bohannon. "It's got that old-school hunting action to it that triggers those reaction strikes, sort of like the old Wiggle Wart does. It may wind up taking the place of the Wiggle Wart for me the way it's looking so far. I think it gives the fish a different look they haven't seen before. I had some great days testing it on Beaver last winter in 47-degree water."

His preferred colors are common for that region.

"I want something crawfish-looking, like brown craw or chili craw," he says. "In clear water, 52 degrees or less, I love red."

BOHANNAN'S BEST ADVICE FOR GETTING BIT

Maintaining optimum boat position is always a big part of Bohannon's wintertime crankin' strategy, especially on Ozark lakes where the banks are rocky and steep. The Ranger pro says any place where a major creek winds close to the bank can pack some of the best potential. He also keys in on areas where a 45-degree bank with big rock and deep water transitions to a flatter gravel bank and shallower water.

"I'm always going to start on either side of where the creek winds up against the bank and make a really long cast to keep the bait down," he says. "I've had some really good winter tournaments at Table Rock where I had to position my boat right up against the rocks, literally almost touching them, in order to make the right cast. The fish aren't holding deep, but they are positioned on a deep bank. Paralleling the bank helps keep the bait in the strike zone for a longer period as opposed to only four or five cranks if your boat isn't sitting right."

Bohannon's Winter Crankbaits



Strike King
1.5 Deep



Strike King
Lucky Shad

Terry's Selection Tips

Bolton is a Rapala guy, which influences his crankbait selection any time of year. For starters, he's always got a Shad Rap tied on when the water gets cold. Shad Raps are classic cold-water bass crankbaits, but they come with some inherent challenges, with the most obvious being that they're difficult to cast.

These days, however, Bolton also relies heavily on the DT Series of crankbaits, which can be just as deadly at times on wintertime lunkers. The series includes six balsa crankbaits designed to cover the water column from 4 to 20 feet.

"There are some subtle differences in the DT lineup, but they all

have a pretty tight action that mimics the movements of the shad," he says. "Shad aren't very active at all in cold water; they are just barely moving along."

Bolton made a strong case for the DT Series last January during the FLW Tour event he won on Sam Rayburn. Lipless baits typically rule on the storied east Texas grass lake during the winter months, but abnormally high water levels had most of the hydrilla beds well underwater.

The Kentucky pro adjusted by rotating between a DT10, DT14 and DT16, which paid off with a four-day weight of 91 pounds, 3 ounces. He targeted inside and outside grass lines at varied depths, as well as a



By adjusting his line size, Terry Bolton is able to hit any depth with the crankbaits in Rapala's DT lineup.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



magical drain in the Hog Branch area where groups of big females were staged ahead of the spawn. The water temperature was around 50 degrees.

"That's the good thing about the DT series; there's one for just about every depth," Bolton adds. "You have to play around with them to learn where they run with different line sizes and long casts, but once you get it figured out they can really pay off."

Like Bohannon, Bolton prefers to keep things simple when it comes to color selection. Among his favorites are chartreuse/brown (hot mustard), red (demon), Helsinki shad and pearl grey shiner.

"If the water is dirty, I'll lean more toward a chartreuse or red," he says. "Red and white kind of crosses between clear and dirty water. Chartreuse comes out more in dirty or stained water."

Bolton's Winter Crankbaits



BOLTON'S BEST ADVICE FOR GETTING BIT

For Bolton, the shallow DT4 and DT6 models have a spot on his deck during the winter and early spring. They work especially well when cranking around rocks and brush piles on Kentucky Lake and other lakes closer to home during warming trends.

One key for getting bit around the brush is to carefully choose baits and match line sizes and line types to make the bait run at the right depth. Generally, the number of the bait in the series equates to the depth it'll run, but changing line sizes can change its depth.

"You can catch them off of rock, but a lot of times they'll be on brush piles off these banks in 4 to 5 feet of water," Bolton says. "That's when I'll go up in line size to 14-pound-test Sufix Advance Monofilament to shallow up that DT6, for instance. The bigger line will make it run 3 to 4 feet deep to clip the tops of the brush piles instead of running underneath them and getting hung." ■

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YETI BUILT FOR THE WILD.

BASS METABOLISM BASICS

BALANCING ENERGY NEEDS, SURPLUS AND OPPORTUNITY

By TJ Maglio

You hear the word metabolism thrown around a lot these days.

Human metabolism is studied heavily in the nutrition and fitness industry, with people throwing around buzzwords like “glycemic index” and television commercials pitching fad diets that promote “ketosis” and “intermittent fasting.” In bass fishing, anglers also frequently talk about metabolism; not in a kitschy sense like with people, but in the context of how it affects bass feeding activity and, thus, catch rates.

As frequently as anglers talk about metabolism of fish, however, few actually understand what it is or how it affects bass activity, particularly in cold weather.

The Basics

The textbook definition of metabolism is “the set of life-sustaining chemical reactions found in all living organisms.” At the base level, there are three textbook parts to any organism’s metabolism:

1. The creation of energy from food.
2. The conversion of food/fuel to anatomical building blocks such as proteins, fats and structural elements (growth).
3. The elimination of waste.

It all sounds awful sciencey, right? A method I think helps people to understand it is to think of metabolism as a monthly financial budget. There’s an income, but there are costs associated with living. At the end of any period of time, add up the costs, and if they are less than the inputs there is a surplus. In the financial analogy, excess is savings in the bank, and any shortfalls must be made up from prior savings. In the context of animal metabolism, any surplus is stored as fat or used for growth, and any shortfall must be made up with reserves.

This analogy holds extremely well for warm-blooded (endothermic) creatures. However, it becomes less apt for fish and other cold-blooded animals (ectotherms), which is a concept scientists understand, but most anglers still don’t.

For ectotherms such as reptiles, amphibians, bass and other fish, as their environment changes, so does the metabolic equation. To return to the budget analogy for a second, imagine if, as it got colder in the winter, your rent or mortgage decreased. That would dramatically change the way you live. But what if, in addition to your bills decreasing in the winter, your salary also decreased?

That’s kind of how bass metabolism works in winter.

Finding Balance

The above discussion is simplistic, but designed to get you thinking about how complicated the study of metabolism gets when talking about a cold-blooded animal like a bass.

At any given moment, a fish’s metabolic “cost” is primarily dependent on the water temperature. In warm water, bass’ muscles fire faster; they process oxygen more efficiently, and can more efficiently chase and capture prey (higher income). The downside is they also need a lot more of it (higher expenses). In cold water, bass need to eat less to survive (lower expenses), but they are in turn less active, have slower metabolic reactions and exposure to suitable prey items is less frequent (lower income).

So, if you’re a bass, would you rather be in a food-rich environment with warm water but need to eat frequently? Or would you prefer to be less active, but also not need nearly as much food to sustain your functions?

Good thing for bass they only have pea-sized brains and don’t get to choose. In reality, bass and other fishes’ locations, activity patterns and many other factors essentially boil down to them searching to balance those metabolic needs.



Bass don't feed heavily in extreme cold, but they will bite if the situation is right.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LINDY FISHING TACKLE

Cold-Water Feeding

In much of the scientific literature, bass and other centrarchids (bluegill, crappies, etc.) have been shown to significantly reduce feeding and movement once the water temperature dips out of the 50s into the 40s.

That being said, there are places all across the country where bass anglers continue to smash them basically until ice-up, and even a few fisheries where you can catch bass routinely through the ice. So what gives?

Science hasn't given us any clear answers, and there has only been limited research done on the specifics of where, why and how much bass feed in the winter. What science has found over and over is that bass (and fish in general) have to be opportunists to succeed.

If the water temperature is only 42 degrees, a bass might turn down a wounded shad fluttering in its face, but it might eat the shad if it's convenient. Though the bass isn't processing the situation this way, the explanation is that the metabolic cost to consuming the shad is less than the energy the shad would bring, so there's potential for a surplus and definitely not a deficit.

In addition to a deeper understanding of fish metabolism, the take-home here for most anglers should be simple: Despite all our knowledge, animals (including us) are constantly forced to search for balance between needs, wants and available resources. To the savvy angler, this means that under the right conditions, there are ample opportunities to keep catching bass even when traditional folklore might say it's not possible.



DAMIKI RIGGING: A HOT TACTIC FOR COLD-WATER SMALLIES

By Curtis Niedermier

One of the hottest finesse baits for wintertime smallies in the clear-water mountain reservoirs of the Southeast the last few years is what local anglers have dubbed the Damiki rig. It's a 3- to 3 1/2-inch soft-plastic jerkbait or minnow bait rigged on a 3/8-ounce (give or take) jighead with a 90-degree line tie and a light-wire hook. The name comes from the Damiki Armor Shad, which was the first bait to become popular for the technique, but dozens of other baits have since been used.

The bait shines when the water temperature is in the mid-40s and smallies are deeper than 30 feet. Anglers typically dead-stick the rig midway down the water column to catch suspended smallmouths that are hanging out under schools of shad and alewives. Sometimes bass will even rise off the bottom to eat the bait, and a little video gaming is necessary to get them to eat.

Smallies will set up on a variety of structure, but finding bait is more important than looking for any particular structure. Find bait, and you can dangle this little morsel in front of some really big smallies. ■

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PHOTO BY MATT PACE



ST. CROIX LEGEND GLASS SPINNING ROD

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

Spinning tackle typically doesn't get much play in crankbait arenas, but it does provide some advantages when it comes to slinging lightweight crankbaits that can give you fits on baitcasting gear, especially in windy conditions. The key to optimum performance is to build the proper setup for the job, and the rod is a vital component in the mix.

St. Croix has the bases covered with a 7-foot, 2-inch, medium-power, moderate-action spinning rod that was added to the high-performance Legend Glass series in 2018.

First Impression

This rod isn't a buggy whip – not even close. Surprisingly light (5.3 ounces) for a glass model, the rod is balanced with a forgiving tip and plenty of backbone in its thick butt section. St. Croix outfitted

the stick with high-quality Fuji K-Series Concept Tangle Free guides, a Fuji reel seat and a split cork handle.

In Action

I played around with this rod for several months, but it only took a couple days and a few solid bass to learn it's everything St. Croix makes it out to be.

CASTABILITY – I was impressed by how well the rod loads and launches Rapala Shad Raps, Strike King Strike Shads (a discontinued balsa crankbait) and other featherweight cranks that can cause line or distance issues when delivered on rods that are too stiff. With the rod matched with a Mitchell Mag-Pro 3000 and 8-pound-test Sufix Advance copolymer mono, I was able to consistently hurl a balsa Strike Shad about 30 yards.

KEEPS 'EM PINNED – The rod provided plenty of

backbone for solid hook-sets, yet was flexible enough at the tip to feed the bait to the fish when they ate it. The tip is also soft enough that it won't tear the treble hooks on a hard run near the boat. I didn't tangle with any monsters during my field testing, but I did hook up with multiple fish in the 2- to 4-pound range. Not one came unbuttoned.

GOOD VIBRATIONS –

Though glass isn't as sensitive as graphite, I found this rod to be extremely responsive, which made it easy to maintain good contact with the bait for the duration of the retrieve. It's lightweight, too, which made it a pleasure to fish with for long periods.

Final Thoughts

There are plenty of spinning rods around that can be used for throwing a crankbait, but few are

designed with the precision balance and specialty craftsmanship found in this one. The rod blends forgiveness and power into a lightweight package designed to keep fish pinned and give anglers a definite leg up when throwing light lures on small-diameter lines.

APPLICATIONS

- Casting lightweight crankbaits in windy conditions
- Maximizing casting distance and diving depth with mid-size crankbaits, lipless crankbaits, small jerkbaits, under-spins and other light baits
- Helping novice anglers throw a variety of treble hook baits

LINEAR S-GLASS:

The linear S-Glass blank has enough flex to really load up with lightweight baits, but with the backbone to handle big fish.



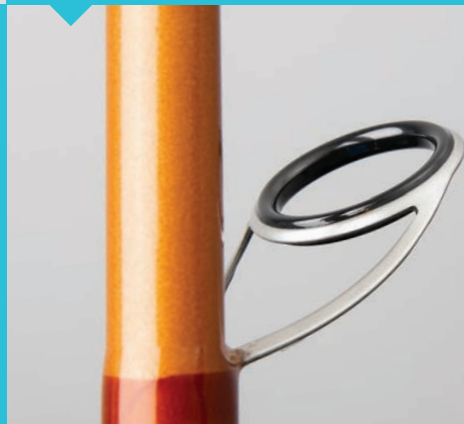
GOOD LOOKS:

The bronze Flex-Coat finish is a little bit vintage and very attractive.



PREMIUM COMPONENTS:

Cork handles, premium tangle-free guides and a hook keeper round out the rod.



Performance Advice

REEL – It's a good idea to match the rod with a 2500 or 3000 series spinning reel with a quality drag that's set properly. Line comes off the larger spools easier to promote smoother, longer casts.

LINE – I experimented with braid, braid with a fluorocarbon leader, straight fluorocarbon and a relatively new copolymer called Sufix Advance. This low-stretch line is extremely supple and doesn't have much memory, so it resists coiling and peels off the spool almost as smoothly as braid – a huge plus in cold weather.

LOAD UP – When casting, leave about 18 to 20 inches of line between the lure and rod tip, which helps the rod load on the backswing for longer casts.

HITS & MISSES

- + Loads and launches lightweight crankbaits in the wind
- + Maximizes diving depth by increasing casting distance
- + Handles baits up to 3/4 ounce
- + Good sensitivity
- + Moderate action to protect light line without sacrificing backbone
- + Feeds fish the bait and keeps them pinned
- + Excellent warranty and service plans
- + Lightweight
- + Premium guides, reel seat and finish
- \$260 is a bit steep for a specialty spinning rod

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Weight:
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Action/Power:
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Lure Weights:
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Line Size:
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MSRP:
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6

7

1. BERKLEY POWERBAIT THE DEAL

Berkley's The Deal (available in 3 1/2- and 4 1/2-inch sizes) turns the concept of a vibrating jig (or swim jig) trailer on its side. Literally, the flapping tails are rotated 90 degrees from what's standard and paired with a meaty shad body.

\$4.99 for eight | berkley-fishing.com

2. SHIMANO SLX DC

Shimano crushed it with the original SLX bait-casting reel and now has the Digital Control – sort of like “smart braking” – version to go with it. An internal microprocessor helps maximize casting distance while preventing backlashes. It's a 4+1 bearing reel that weighs 7.6 ounces. Right- and left-handed configurations come with 6.3:1, 7.2:1 or 8.2:1 retrieve ratios.

\$189.99 | fish.shimano.com

3. REACTION INNOVATIONS SPICY BEAVER

The legs of the Spicy Beaver flutter hard without flailing out to the side, for max action but a tighter profile – perfect on a swim jig or punch rig snaking through the grass. It's also a great choice on a wobble-head jig or Carolina rig. A hunk of extra plastic under the nose extends the life of the bait and helps hold it on the hook.

\$4.99 for six | reactioninnovations.com

4. FISH MONKEY PRO 365 GUIDE GLOVE

Available in three colors and six sizes, the Pro 365 Guide Glove offers UPF 50+ sun protection, a solid grip and protection from the wear and tear of handling tackle, equipment and, hopefully, fish for hours on end. The material dries quickly and is thin enough for good dexterity.

\$29.95 | fishmonkeygloves.com

5. STORM ARASHI GLIDE

Glide baits are red hot right now, and this one enters the market with big expectations. A slow-sinker, the Arashi Glide measures 7 1/2 inches long, making it a legit big-bass bait, but with some tournament applications, too.

\$37.99 | rapala.com

6. BILL LEWIS SB-57 MDJ

Developed with Bill Lewis by pro Mark Daniels Jr. (MDJ), the SB-57 is a 57mm (2 1/4 inches) square-bill with a not-quite-square circuit board lip. Daniels wanted the corners rounded to help it deflect off cover and come through grass in just the way he likes it. Thin walls enhance the liveliness of the action.

\$8.99 | rat-l-trap.com

7. PLANO EDGE

Each box in Plano's EDGE series is packed with features: a waterproof rubber gasket, Rustriector rust-stopping compound infused into the plastic, a clear heavy-duty lid, a stainless-steel hinge pin, a reusable tackle label and a one-handed latch. Of the 10 new pieces, four are “general” models built standard, thin or deep, and six were designed for specific baits or tackle families, such as terminal tackle.

\$19.99 to \$49.99 | planomolding.com ■



PHOTO BY MATT PACE

THE TACKLE JUNKIE

DROPPING KNOWLEDGE ON THE DROP-SHOT

IT'S THE SUBTLE DETAILS THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOOD AND BAD DROP-SHOT WORMS

It seems ridiculous to think something as simple as a drop-shot worm could be complex enough, design-wise, to dedicate an entire article to it, but don't tell that to most FLW pros.

Drop-shotting is like a cult for some anglers. There's one former FLW pro who was so specific about what tipped his drop-shot hooks that he had his lure sponsor make various custom models of his favorite soft-plastic bait with different densities so he could alternate based on how deep he was fishing, the water pressure or the fish's moods.

Or consider the 2018 Tour event at Lake St. Clair. Pros were trying to get their hands on the discontinued Jackall iShads like they were made of gold. Why? Well, even though the baits flopped for what they were designed to do, apparently, they make incredible drop-shot baits.

So, what is it that makes them or any other tried-and-true drop-shot lures such as the Roboworm or Jackall Cross Tail Shad so special? Let's dig into it.

Staying Horizontal

Last I checked, baitfish tend to swim horizontally.

Sure, they might tilt their heads up or down, but most of the time, particularly while hanging out in one spot, they're horizontal.

Thus, if you're going to mimic a resting baitfish with a drop-shot, it stands to reason your lure should rest horizontally in the water.

Soft-plastic materials vary in density. Some float, some sink, and, depending on the material (usually drop-shot lures are made of a buoyant soft-plastic), a lure manufacturer has to add just the right amount of additives such as salt to get the bait to be neutrally buoyant. It's similar to how hard-lure manufacturers aim to nail the formula of buoyancy plus weight plus material density to get a jerk-bait to suspend.

Yet, it might actually be harder to do it for a soft-plastic drop-shot bait. A jerkbait has weight throughout its body when you factor in ball bearings, eyelets, O-rings and hooks. A drop-shot lure just has a weight – the hook – at the very tip of its nose, and that weight varies depending on the size of the hook.

So, the best way to figure out if your favorite worm rests horizontally when



By Sean Ostruszka

Sean Ostruszka is a lure designer whose baits have been sold by various tackle companies. He's also a freak for tackle details.

rigged is to drop it in some clear water – even a bucket or your bathtub – and see if it stays horizontal while at rest.

Staying Soft

All crankbaits wiggle, but some are clearly better than others. It's the same with drop-shots.

Adding salt to any soft-plastic material not only adds weight but also rigidity, making the plastic less flexible. On a bulkier creature bait used for flipping, that might not be as big of an issue, but on a slim, finesse drop-shot bait that relies on maximum action with minimal movement, it's a big deal.

That's the tricky part about a drop-shot worm: In order to make it neutrally buoyant, manufacturers also often make it too stiff.

Back when drop-shots first hit the scene, the only way to get a neutrally buoyant worm that was also flexible was to hand-pour the plastic. The plastic molecules in a hand-pour are typically less dense and more flexible than an injected-plastic worm.

Fortunately, technology and design have caught up with the technique. Roboworm was one of the originators. The company figured out a way to create hand-pour flexibility with an injection process. Meanwhile, other companies have gotten around the issue through design. The Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm, for instance, has a skinny tail that allows for maximum movement while the main body retains its neutral buoyancy.

Again, this can often be tested in your tub. Shake your drop-shot and watch what the lure does. If it just sits still, scrap it. If it sits horizontal but wiggles with even the slightest twitch of the line, you have something that can tease a bass into biting.

Tried and True

So, now you know what to look for in a drop-shot, but what if you don't want to spend a ton buying various baits to test?

Fortunately, we've already mentioned some of the best ones out there in this article. The Roboworm Straight Tail Worm is still, arguably, one of the best on the market for nearly every application. If you're looking for a bit more of a shad profile, the Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm is a perfect small-shad imitator. Jackall just re-released the previously discontinued iShad, which is another to check out. The Jackall Cross Tail Shad is also one of the best on the market. And another sneaky favorite of many top pros is the Strike King 3X ElaZtech Z-Too Soft Jerkbait.

The selection outlined above pretty well covers all the common shapes used for finesse drop-shotting, but there are plenty more terrific options out there. Trial and error is generally the best way to find what works. Test it, try it and then go catch some bass with it. ■

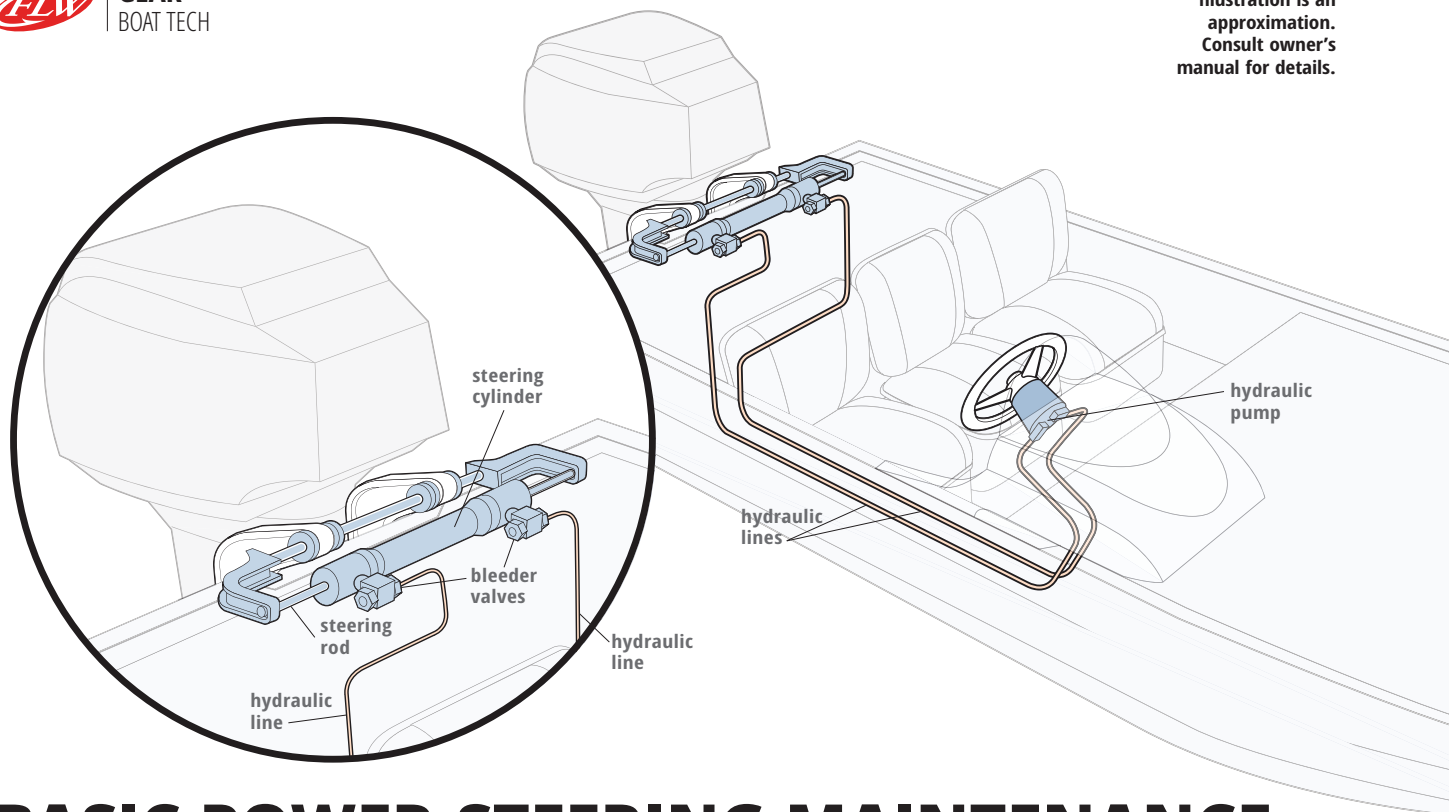
Baits from previous page listed from top to bottom:

Strike King 3X ElaZtech Z-Too Soft Jerkbait, Roboworm Straight Tail Worm, Yamamoto Shape Worm, Jackall Cross Tail Shad, Jackall iShad

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BASIC POWER-STEERING MAINTENANCE

TIPS FOR TROUBLESHOOTING AN UNDERPERFORMING STEERING SYSTEM

By Joe Balog

ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN HAND

Today's bass boat owners have it made. Modern amenities make things so easy, taking the hassle out of duties and upkeep that once were dreaded projects. Maintenance-free trailer hubs immediately come to mind, as do the newest LED light systems.

Power-steering is another perk of the modern bass boat. Veteran anglers might remember a time before hydraulic steering assist, when turning a V-6 outboard took serious muscle. Today's anglers sit back and steer with one finger, never knowing any different.

The ease of use of power-steering might make it seem like there's never any maintenance or attention to be given to keep the system running smoothly. But that's not always the case. It pays to understand what's going on inside the steering system, what can go wrong and what to do if it does. So let's dig under the hood to learn more about our boats.

What We're Dealing With

The term "hydraulic steering" can actually cover several types of steering

systems used in boats today, from manual to electronic. There are even pressurized systems used in large yachts. For our sake, we'll outline the two-line, manual systems that are used in most new fishing and pleasure boats.

It should be noted that many large four-stroke outboards – now quickly integrating into the world of high-performance bass boats – contain separate steering pumps mounted below deck in the boat. For maintenance on those systems, consult your dealer.

A two-line system is a hydraulic network containing two separate lines, or hoses, that run to each side of a steering cylinder, which attaches to the outboard's steering rod. A hydraulic pump at the helm sends fluid through one line when the steering wheel is turned. This line then operates a piston to extend or retract the steering arm, thus turning the outboard. The other line receives the fluid and pumps it back to the helm. The entire operation functions as a closed system, sending and receiving fluid.

Although the system is relatively basic, it is not without moving parts that require some form of maintenance and monitoring. However, the most difficult aspect of hydraulic steering troubleshooting occurs at installation or when an entire system must be replaced.

What to Watch For

The first step to maintaining a hydraulic steering system may have nothing to do with hydraulics. Often, the steering bar behind the hydraulic cylinder needs to be greased. This is a fairly simple procedure, but be sure to use marine-grade white lithium grease.

Once all mechanical fittings within the steering system are properly lubricated, any additional problem can be diagnosed as occurring within the hydraulic system itself.

Here, the most common cause of sticky steering is low fluid level. To check, simply remove the cap at the helm station (usually on the steering column) when the outboard is off. Use a flashlight to visually inspect the fluid level. If it's low, you'll probably see a steering disc, which the

fluid should cover. In most cases, the fluid level should be kept within 1/2 inch of the cap.

If fluid levels seem frequently low or steering problems persist, a hydraulic fluid leak might have occurred. Leaks occasionally pop up around fittings and connections that might need to be replaced. This is a particular problem if a new install incorporates a few old parts. For boats coming straight from the factory, a leak is pretty rare.

More commonly, hydraulic steering leaks develop at contact points where hoses rub or chap. Hydraulic lines have a tendency to move back and forth when fluid is pumped through them. For that reason, lines should have ample room to operate without worry that they will rub on another outboard component or around their entrance into the boat's hull. Be sure to investigate those areas if a leak is suspected, and follow the hoses as far forward as possible.

No amount of hydraulic fluid leaking out of the system should be considered acceptable. It's a closed

system, and hydraulic steering requires no air be introduced, so something bad is sure to happen if seals on lines are compromised. In the event that any fluid needs to be added, use only the fluid recommended by the steering system manufacturer. In an extreme pinch, transmission fluid will work.

Power of the Purge

If steering problems persist, there might be air in the lines, and the system likely needs purging or bleeding. This will also be the case following the installation of a new system. Properly purging air from a hydraulic steering system is likely the most difficult aspect of maintenance. Obviously, you probably shouldn't jump into the process without reviewing the manual for your hydraulic steering system first. That said, here's the basic procedure:

Steering fluid is added at the helm port using a filler tube that threads into the port on one end and to the fluid bottle on the other (you can use a funnel, but the filler tube is

easier). To start the process, turn the wheel and puncture the plastic bottle with the included pin. As the fluid begins to drain into the port, continue turning the steering wheel so the pump is pushing fluid through the system. Once full, turn the wheel hard over to the right, then open the starboard bleeder valve at the rear cylinder. As the wheel continues to be turned, fluid is allowed to flow. Repeat the procedure on the other side. Go back and forth until all the air is purged (fluid flows out with no air) and the steering is smooth.

Leave it to the Pros?

This rundown of basic maintenance gives a good starting point for those who enjoy wrenching their own gear, or anyone with a project boat in the works. For most, however, it may be best to consult a certified dealer if a simple fluid check and fill doesn't resolve a steering problem. Today's bass crafts are becoming increasingly complicated and costly, so advanced work is often best left to certified technicians. ■



The advertisement features a black fishing jersey with a camouflage pattern, displayed against a background of red and black curved stripes. The jersey is covered in various sponsor logos, including E3, Abu Garcia, Berkley, Minn Kota, Evinrude, and Prym. To the right of the jersey is the E3 logo, a stylized red and black 'E' inside an oval. Below the logo, the text 'E3 Sport Apparel' is written in a bold, italicized font. Further down, the slogan 'Anglers are Athletes' is written in a large, bold, italicized font. At the bottom of the advertisement, the website 'E3SPORT.COM' is displayed in a bold, italicized font.

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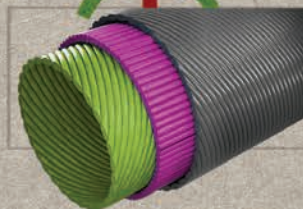
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+



MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

What MLF's acquisition of FLW means for anglers and fans

Throughout the 2019 season, the rumor mill churned like it was built on a Class III rapid as questions about FLW's future swirled: Is FLW for sale? Who's going to buy it? Where will we fish next season?

Now we have the answers. On Oct. 10, Major League Fishing announced that it was in the process of acquiring FLW. The deal, which has since been finalized, marries two of bass fishing's biggest brands – one a storied grassroots organization with several decades of history, and the other an angler-managed trendsetter with a substantial media enterprise at its disposal.

Combined, the brands have the clout to propel tournament bass fishing to new heights. But just what does it mean for FLW fans and anglers who were a part of the organization before the acquisition? And what's in store for tournament anglers in the immediate future? Here's what you need to know.



Who is MLF?

Major League Fishing, or MLF, was founded in 2011 by a group of professional anglers who wanted to create a new style of bass fishing tournament that was made for the TV consumer. The first tournaments aired on the Outdoor Channel.

Today, the organization is owned by Outdoor Sportsman Group and Pro Bass Tour. The organization hosts MLF Cup and MLF Select events, which are multiple-round fishing tournaments with small field sizes that are filmed exclusively for television, as well as the MLF Bass Pro Tour. The Bass Pro Tour launched in 2019 as the first and only professional bass circuit to operate with zero entry fees. Its field of 80 includes

many of the world's best anglers. They compete in eight stages – each six days long – to qualify for the MLF REDCREST championship.

Notable for MLF is a new style of tournament scoring. Rather than anglers holding bass in their livewells to carry to weigh-in, MLF events score every bass that meets a minimum weight. An official rides in each competitor's boat to weigh and record each fish, assign any necessary penalties and tally the day's catch. Bass are immediately released after they're weighed.

The need to constantly catch bass in order to have a shot at winning is one reason why MLF tournament shows are among the most popular in outdoor television, and why they're made available to millions of

fans on Outdoor Channel, Discovery, CBS, CBS Sports Network, World Fishing Network, Sportsman Channel and MyOutdoorTV (MOTV). Bass Pro Tour action is also available live via the MLF Now! Live Stream online or on MOTV.

For more details on MLF's unique format, visit MajorLeagueFishing.com. You can also download the MOTV app to access live streams, full episodes and expanded content from both FLW and MLF.

What's Changing with FLW

The sale of FLW is good news for members and anglers who compete with the organization, as the FLW brand will continue into the future, and, for the most part, the hierarchy of tournaments will remain



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

no-entry-fee tournaments with the chance to qualify for their respective national championships.

Nothing is changing for high school and college anglers in 2020, except that the prize packages in the circuits' respective championships have expanded to include more entries into other FLW championship events. Both members of the FLW High School Fishing National Championship-winning team qualify for the FLW Series Championship as co-anglers. The winners of the FLW College Fishing National Championship will fish the FLW Series Championship as pros. The anglers on the second-, third- and fourth-place teams at the college championship qualify for the Bass Fishing League All-American as boaters. Members of the fifth- and sixth-place college teams qualify to the All-American as co-anglers.

Phoenix FLW Bass Fishing League

The next level is the foundation of FLW: the Phoenix Bass Fishing League presented by T-H Marine. It's the series for weekend anglers, where boaters and co-anglers compete in affordable tournaments close to home for the chance to qualify to no-entry-fee Regional championships and the All-American, which pays six figures to the winner. The highest-finishing boater and co-angler from each Regional championship and Wild Card at the All-American also advance to the FLW Series Championship.

The most notable change for BFL anglers is the reduction in entry fees: \$200 per boater and \$100 per co-angler for one-day qualifiers, and \$300 per boater and \$150 per co-angler for two-day Super Tournaments. Though entry fees go down, payouts remain the same.

FLW Series

Anglers looking to win more or work their way toward the pro ranks can fish the FLW Series, which is expanding from five divisions to eight. The new division roster includes Southwestern, Western, Central, Southeastern, Plains, Northern, Eastern and Southern. FLW also partners with tournament organizations

abroad to conduct International Division tournaments in 10 countries outside the United States.

Top finishers from each division and participating nations qualify for the no-entry-fee FLW Series Championship, which now pays out \$200,000 cash to the pro winner and a \$30,000 17-foot bass boat with a 115-hp outboard to the co-angler winner. A \$10,000 bonus goes to the highest-finishing pro from each of the eight U.S. FLW Series divisions and the International Division at the championship.

More good news: FLW Series entry fees have been reduced to \$1,700 for pros and \$550 for co-anglers.

FLW Pro Circuit

After more than 20 years as FLW's flagship tournament circuit, the FLW Tour will transition to the FLW Pro Circuit beginning in 2020. From the Pro Circuit, the top 10 performing anglers advance to the no-entry-fee Bass Pro Tour after the 2021 season (and every season after).

Other than that, the new Pro Circuit will look very familiar to fans and anglers as the highest level of competition in a traditional five-bass weigh-in format. Each of the 150 pros on the roster must qualify from FLW's hierarchy of tournaments. They compete in seven four-day, regular-season events and weigh in their five best bass each day. The Pro Circuit pays \$100,000 to each winner and cash prizes down to 75th place.

The new championship event, called the FLW TITLE, will feature six days of MLF-style competition, exclusive to the top 50 Pro Circuit anglers each season. The FLW TITLE offers a \$200,000 first-place award and checks of at least \$10,000 to every participant.

Most importantly for fans, following FLW's top pros will be easier than ever. The final two days of regular-season tournaments and the championship will stream live online, with five cameras running at regular-season events and 10 at the FLW TITLE. FLW Pro Circuit anglers will also be featured in 312 hours of programming on the Outdoor Channel and Sportsman Channel.

unchanged. Amateur anglers will still be able to work their way up the ladder to the pro ranks while competing at whatever level they desire along the way.

The biggest differences are all positive: more tournaments to fish, more rungs on the competitive ladder, more TV and internet broadcasts, and more dollars to be earned.

Here are some notable details about individual FLW circuits.

FLW High School Fishing and FLW College Fishing Presented By YETI

The competitive climb begins with FLW High School Fishing and FLW College Fishing presented by YETI tournaments, where students compete as two-angler teams in low- or

Looking to the Future

On the timeline of the tournament bass fishing industry, the union of MLF and FLW in 2019 will garner a mark in time. It's a milestone. Still, the bigger mark is yet to come when, working together, the brands realize their ultimate goals: To be the best tournament organization in the

world. To host the greatest championship. To reach the most viewers. To partner with the top endemic and non-endemic companies. To provide more opportunities for more anglers at every level than ever before. To satisfy you, the best fans in fishing. And to establish a new legacy.

"During the 2020 season, FLW will host more tournaments than ever in the organization's history, and will distribute more fishing content through live streams and television than ever before," says Kathy Fennel, executive vice president and general manager of FLW. "But that's only the beginning. By joining together, MLF and FLW can pursue an aggressive growth strategy to expand the fan base and recruit more anglers into the sport. We'll do it through what is already the biggest media footprint in the industry, but also by working with our partners to expand our tournament circuits and the potential winnings at every level.

"MLF is an angler-driven organization, and FLW's path forward mirrors that approach," adds Fennel. "That's part of why I'm so excited to start this new chapter together. We have so many wonderful, loyal anglers and members that have stuck with FLW over the years, and I'm so thankful for all of them. Now, with MLF at our side, we have a chance to pay forward the support we've always received with more opportunities than ever for our anglers and fans."

FLW Membership FAQ

1. What will a membership cost in 2020?

An annual competitor membership will cost \$75 for 2020. A subscriber membership costs \$25 for the print magazine and \$15 for digital.

2. What's included with a membership?

FLW competitor membership includes tournament eligibility, a subscription to six issues of *Bass Fishing* magazine, exclusive discounts and opportunities to win cool prizes. Subscriber members get access to *Bass Fishing* magazine.

3. How do I renew my membership or sign up to fish FLW tournaments?

To join or renew with FLW, visit FLWFishing.com, or call 270.252.1000.



THE NEW BASS FISHING MAGAZINE

Beginning with the Feb/March 2020 issue, which immediately follows this issue, *FLW Bass Fishing* magazine will become *Bass Fishing* magazine, a bi-monthly publication featuring both FLW and MLF anglers and events. Instead of four issues per year, you'll get six, at no extra cost to you. Each will include the same great how-to content, columns from the best writers in the bass fishing game and coverage of major tournaments, but the scope of content will expand to include MLF-branded events and the 80 anglers competing on the Bass Pro Tour.

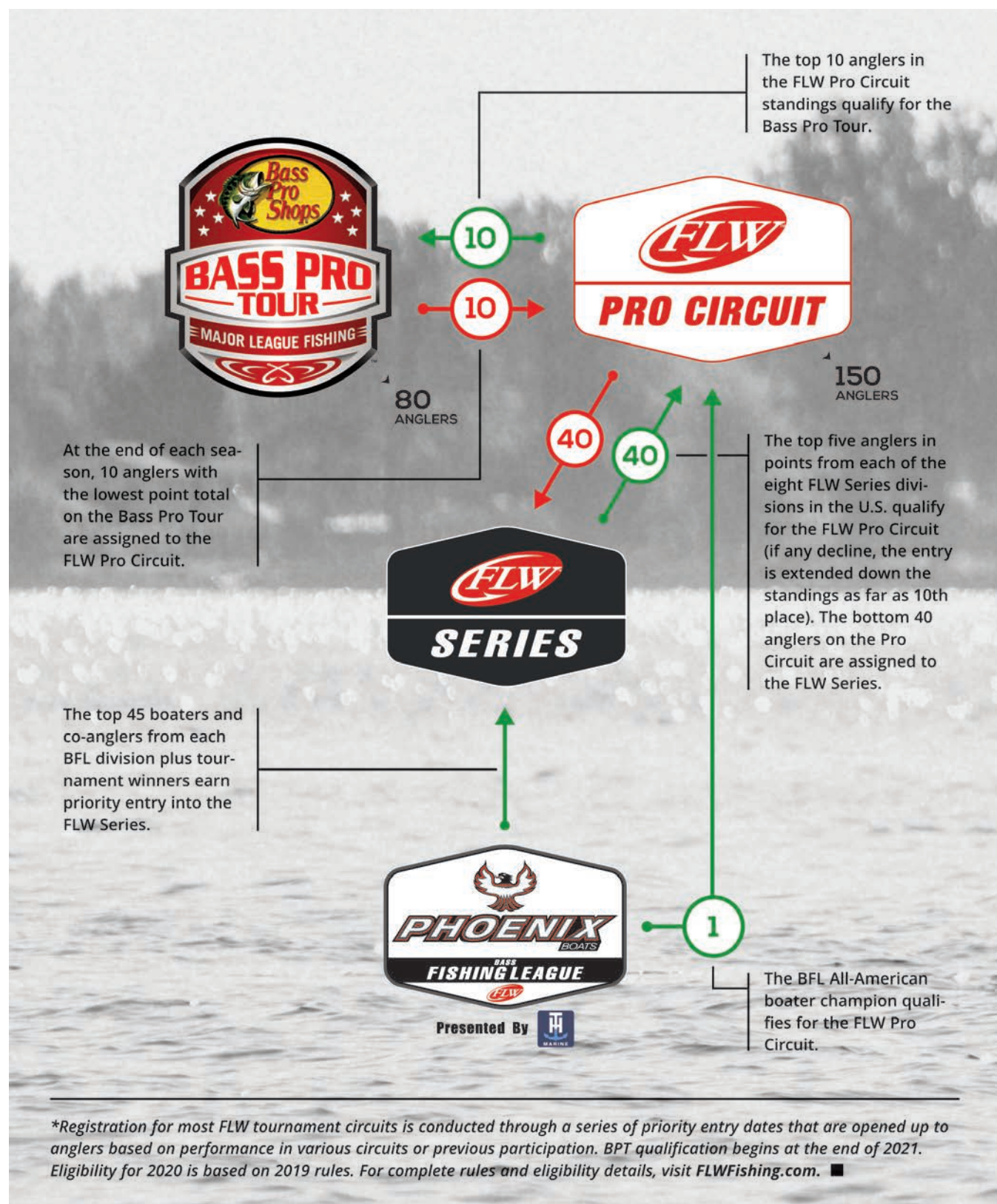
TRANSLATION: You're getting more great content in 2020.

"During the 2020 season, FLW will host more tournaments than ever in the organization's history, and will distribute more fishing content through live streams and television than ever before."

Kathy Fennel

HOW TO CLIMB THE RANKS

MOVING FORWARD, HERE IS MLF AND FLW'S QUALIFICATION STRUCTURE



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WHAT'S THE SECRET TO THRIFT'S GREATNESS?

AFTER SPENDING SEVERAL DAYS SHADOWING THE NORTH CAROLINA PRO, THE AUTHOR REALIZES IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK

By Joe Balog

Bryan Thrift is the best competitive bass fisherman in the world. For some time now, I've held on to that belief, and Thrift's performance has easily proven my point.

Consider his record since 2015. He has 19 FLW Tour top 10s and 10 top-10 finishes in the Costa FLW Series. Six of those events resulted in victory, with the latest coming at the 2019 FLW Cup. Thrift makes the Cup religiously and always performs. He's earned 10 top-10 Cup finishes in his career, including consecutive top 10s from 2012 to 2017.

Frankly, there has been no more dominant record in pro fishing in recent history.

In February 2019, six months before Thrift became the Cup champion, I set out to determine what makes him so good. As Thrift's assigned press observer for the Lake Toho FLW Tour event, I spent three days, mainly in silence, observing him during both competition and the pre-tournament practice period. It was somewhat unnerving for us both.

Truth be told, immediately following the event, I was a bit disappointed. Nowhere did I find Thrift's lucky horseshoe or magic lure. Perhaps I wasn't privy to the good stuff, I thought. Maybe he held back a bit.

But numbers don't lie, and, despite what I personally observed as a mediocre

practice, Thrift somehow took the last spot in the cut and went on to win \$10,500.

I spent much of the spring pondering that tournament, wondering where it was I went wrong. How did I let Thrift's secrets slip through my fingers, despite devoting 30 hours with the man in the heat of battle?

And then it hit me: The answers were there all along.

No Room for Error

I'd heard Thrift had a reputation for being incredibly versatile, and on the first day of practice he didn't let me down.

Thrift began the morning with 28 rods at the ready. He stowed seven next to the passenger seat because they wouldn't fit on the front deck.

"My biggest fear is not being ready for a situation in practice," he said in reference to his rod selection.

Later, I'd find the key word in that statement was "practice," as it seems Thrift's practice never ends.

Thrift's rod abundance assures he never second-guesses his actions while tournament fishing. If something feels right, he tries it – every time. Later, during the event, Thrift purposely stopped his boat and dug out a punching rod, making a grand total of one cast before putting it back in the locker.

He understands the numbers game.

"You just need to make five good casts, two days in a row," he told me.

Thrift's practice methods appeared unusual at first. Rather than fish the endless miles of shoreline vegetation like his competitors, Thrift spent the vast majority of his practice time on Toho idling in an attempt to find subtle offshore haunts where an overlooked group of fish might have taken up residence. It's been a key method in the past.

"You win tournaments when you find fish doing what they're not supposed to be doing," he said. "Ideally, I like to have a couple groups of fish located in practice,



Editor's note: In 2020, Bryan Thrift will compete on the Major League Fishing Bass Pro Tour.



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDORN

and a couple patterns I can run all over the place.”

Despite an extremely slow start, Thrift stuck to his plan in practice at Toho, idling and graphing, looking for subtle clues on the edges of grass beds.

Like other top pros I've observed, Thrift was extremely keen on clues given by nature. He watched and followed birds, made reference to a 6-inch drop in bottom contour and claimed to be able to smell shad in open water, all the while scanning, looking and computing.

“All it takes is one spot.”

Dialed in on Tech

Thrift is incredibly tuned in to advances in technology, yet guarded at the same time. He ran every type of sonar scanning available, and did so masterfully well. He used every mapping chip available, too, noting small differences from one to the next. (A tip: He often turned off his graphs while fishing to dim the noise associated with them.)

Despite an affinity for the best, new technology must be proven before Thrift trusts it in competition. His trolling motor was last year's model because he was unwilling to gamble on the latest and greatest until it was proven to be reliable.

Yet, he's always studying what's new. It's been noted that Thrift's sole obsession and hobby is bass fishing, which allows him to spend all of his energy concentrating on the task at hand and improving his skills. His off-season is undoubtedly filled with tweaks and practice to become a better angler.

“If you're the first to get on a new bait or trend a year ahead of everybody, you can make a lot of money,” Thrift explained.

At one point he reflected on a previous win in Florida that affirmed what he said. He won it on a ChatterBait, back before anyone else knew what a ChatterBait was.

Not surprisingly, Thrift's lure selection matched his rod and reel collection. I don't think I've never witnessed so much tackle packed into a bass boat. Personally, I can't imagine processing all of his lure choices. Yet, I wonder if that's another one of Thrift's strengths. Perhaps his mind works in a more advanced way than most people with regard to all those potential choices. He never seemed overwhelmed or disorganized when searching out a new lure or refining it to a masterpiece.

It must be mentioned that Thrift's lure choices were far from ordinary. Sure, there was plenty of emphasis on the baits we all know as Thrift staples, such as small swim-baits and Damiki plastics. But nearly every

THIS SERIES OF PHOTOS WAS CAPTURED BY THE AUTHOR DURING HIS TIME AS THRIFT'S MARSHAL AT THE LAKE TOHO FLW TOUR EVENT IN FEBRUARY

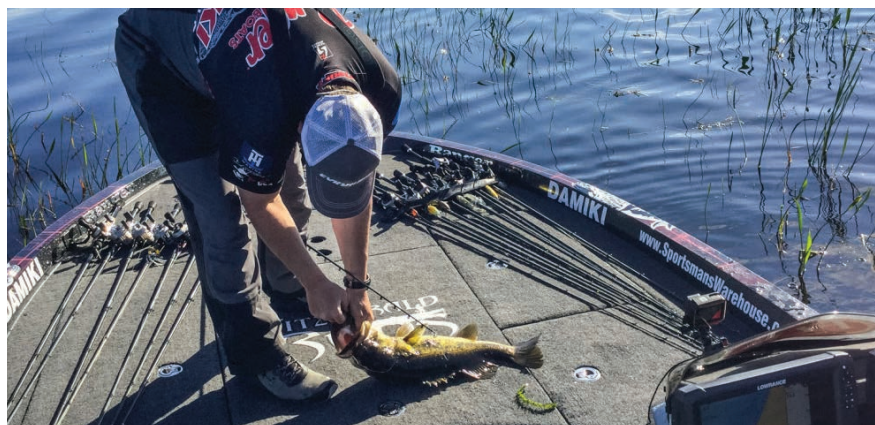




PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDORN

“All it takes is one spot.”

lure he chose was somehow unique or modified. His swimbait rolled a little better. His topwater was customized to give it more flash. When I asked him specifics about a lure, Thrift had the blueprint for perfection, as if he'd spent a lifetime throwing it. Then he picked up a different rod and did it all over again.

Later, during the tournament, I witnessed how Thrift's confidence, blended with his perfection of technique, produced one more fish, or one slightly bigger than those of nearby competitors on a community hole. Time and again, he'd sneak in and steal one, leaving others to wonder how he did it.

Sticking to the Plan

As a slow practice day dragged on, Thrift stuck to the plan. It was Super Bowl Sunday, and despite most of the other competitors calling it quits early to watch the game, Thrift idled on, stopping occasionally to make a few casts. All the while, Thrift appeared to be seeking out the type of water he most preferred.

“I go with the mentality that I might as well look for schools of fish in practice,” he said, “and if I don't find them, I'll go and fish the bank, because everybody knows how to fish the bank.”

At the end of the day, Thrift was flagged down by a buddy for a quick recap, and mentioned he did poorly. His friend offered a quick rebuttal: “Yeah, right. You probably caught 20 pounds.”

This was the first time I observed the “aura” around Thrift that's recognized by nearly everyone on Tour, including the tournament officials. Without fail, no one believed Thrift was ever struggling. His track record is so strong that his stature is nearly super-human. Throughout the event, everyone perceived him as simply more talented, and I often wondered how that fed into his confidence. It certainly couldn't hurt. In fact, Thrift is about the only one who seems to ever question it.

Come tournament time, Thrift's plan was to blend fishing with more looking. He was never satisfied with his chosen areas. Again, this is a trait I've noticed in a select few star performers: they're always practicing, even in the tournament. As fish change, so must the best fishermen, often by the hour. And there's always a bigger fish to catch.

Thrift's observational mindset and flexible fishing methods allowed him to move quickly throughout the tournament without worry about running out of options. He repeated water only a handful of times when it was apparent other things weren't



PHOTO BY MATT PACE

PHOTO BY JOOY WHITE



working, and he most often did so with a new selection of lures. The result was often one more fish and a slight cull.

At one point, once he recognized the day's productive water, Thrift expanded and was rewarded with a bonus 7-pounder and a major cull to a respectable stringer. I wondered if it was the move, or the slightly superior lure.

When day two dawned, despite being nearly the last boat in the order to go out, Thrift was once again at the ramp before everyone. His workmanlike mentality never wavered. It's readily apparent that Thrift feels blessed to be a professional bass fisherman, and takes none of it for granted.

Tough fishing again had Thrift hunting for new options. He moved incessantly, even talking to himself on occasion. Moving, looking ... waiting for something to happen. There had to be an undiscovered variable and a way to catch one more fish.

Slowly, Thrift again reached his limit and culled slightly. A final move at the end of the day produced one more solid keeper near the launch ramp for a slight upgrade and a place in the cut. At weigh-in, Thrift seemed to be the only one surprised by his good fortune.

As we parted ways, I wondered aloud what Thrift thought of all the flattering

attention. His sarcastic comment was vintage: "Everybody needs to worry about something else, and quit worrying about what Bryan's doing."

Through it all, and after considerable time to reflect, my eureka moment came months later. Bryan Thrift is incredible, no doubt. But he doesn't possess a super-human ability to catch fish. Nor does he carry a lucky rabbit's foot in his pocket. He simply does everything in his power to catch one more bass than everyone else, every day he's on the water. After all, it's a game of ounces. ■

"If you're the first to get on a new bait or trend a year ahead of everybody, you can make a lot of money."

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF





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Photo By Don Shomette

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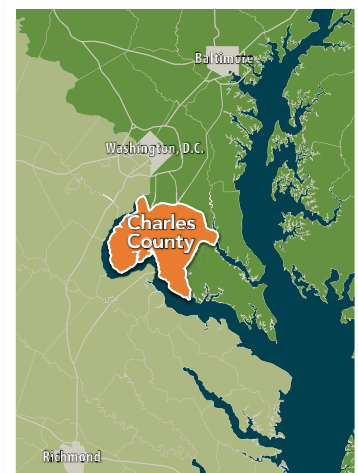
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LESSONS FROM THE ROAD

WHAT I LEARNED FROM A CROSS-COUNTRY BASS FISHING ROAD TRIP

By Matt Allen

Most bass anglers have probably wondered the same thing: What if you were like these pros that get to travel from lake to lake? What would happen? Could you catch fish all over the country?

You aren't alone in wondering. We wondered, too.

In 2017, my wife, CC, and I decided it was time to find out. We spent a year planning the route, gathering equipment and preparing for a two-month bass fishing road trip that would take us from our home on Clear Lake in California to destinations around the country.

The next June, just two days into the trip, disaster struck. A head-on collision in eastern Wyoming shattered our dreams of life on the road. We lost the truck, boat, camper and gear, but we survived. As we limped 1,200 miles home in a rental car, we knew this wouldn't be the end of the story.

Within weeks, we began to rebuild and plan: two months, 21 states, 28 lakes and a whole lot of driving. The plan was to compare bass behavior on a national level, all the while testing our own angling abilities.

Would a bass in Alabama behave the same as one in California? What about a smallmouth when muskies are close by? We had so many theories and only one way to test them: by hitting the road.

Matt and CC Allen, with their daughter, Sierra, spent eight weeks traveling the country and breaking down unfamiliar bodies of water to test their own angling skills.

✚ **Editor's note:** Matt Allen and his business partner, Tim Little, own Tactical Bassin, a website and YouTube channel dedicated to teaching people how to be better bass anglers.

BACK ON TRACK

April 2019 came quickly, and before we knew it, CC and I were traveling east, her navigating beside me, with our 2-year-old daughter, Sierra, riding along in the backseat for the adventure of a lifetime. We traveled across the deserts of the Southwest with a truck, cab-over camper and 21-foot bass boat.

The schedule was tight. We only allowed half-days on most lakes. The plan was to drive all morning, fish a half-day, then drive again. Only the largest bodies of water were afforded extra days for exploring. To further complicate matters, we were filming every stop for TacticalBassin.com – the website CC and I run with Tim and Tonya Little – so anglers everywhere could learn from our experiences in near real time.

As we worked our way east, it became apparent that weather would dictate our trip. Thunderstorms, tornadoes and repeated deluges added to the challenge. We routed and rerouted in an attempt to dodge severe weather. We ate donuts in Roswell after finding amazing fishing on Elephant Butte. We hid from a tornado in Missouri before catching grand slams of quality bass on Table Rock. We ran from floodwaters in Arkansas, and wished we'd quit just a few minutes earlier at Guntersville where we learned how hard rain could fall.

Accepting the inevitable complications that living on the road brings, we pushed on. Each new lake brought surprises. We fished rising water on Tenkiller, navigated churning water below Wilson Dam on Pickwick, tested our offshore skills on Chickamauga and explored flooded Timber on Indiana's Patoka Lake. At every stop we strived to avoid local knowledge. We weren't just trying to catch fish. We were there to test our skills and our theories, something that could only be done by truly exploring the fisheries unaided. The results were amazing.

By the time we turned north in mid-May, our confidence in breaking down water and finding fish was at an all-time high. To cap it off, Tim and Tonya, as well as a few other friends, flew in and met with us in Green Bay, and we explored Lake



Michigan as a group. Bolstered by the successes we found there, we gave ourselves three days to find consistent bass on Lake Superior.

By the time we arrived back home in mid-June, our entire perspective on bass fishing had changed. We no longer wondered if we could find fish on a new lake. We knew exactly what it took to eliminate unproductive water in a matter of hours. We knew how to do it with a swimbait, and we knew how to do it with a Ned rig. Most of all, we learned that bass fishing in this entire country is incredible. In fact, some of the overlooked central states proved to be our favorites. Sure, you might not catch a 10-pounder on your first stop in Indiana, but that doesn't mean you can't have an amazing time catching quality fish.

And that's what we accomplished: a better understanding of what it takes to be a consistently successful bass angler anywhere in the country.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Though it'd take a book to document all of our experiences on the road last season, there were certain lessons that stood out from the trip that we've dubbed the six keys to catching bass from coast to coast.

1. Spend time researching the fishery.

A few well-spent minutes before you reach the lake can change the course of your day. Quickly catching bass on a lake is much easier with basic information. Try to answer these questions:

- Which species of bass live there?
- What are their predators?
- What baitfish are in the lake?
- How large is the lake?
- Is the water rising or falling?
- What is the typical water color?

Early research will narrow your learning curve on many fronts. The presence of large open-water predators such as striped bass might push bass tighter to cover, while shallow-cover predators such as pike can push bass to deeper offshore hard structure.

Knowing "average" water color is critical because a bass that lives in muddy water will aggressively hunt in it, while a bass that is suddenly thrust into muddy water overnight will pull to cover and is far less reactive to moving presentations. Rising water will tend to push fish to the shoreline, and falling water will tend to pull them out into the open.

DO NOT fall into the temptation of studying local anglers' habits. Following "local knowledge" on spots or lures is the fastest way to have an average day on the water. Your goal should never be to mimic local anglers because what they do can rarely be duplicated with satisfactory results. Instead, apply your own style to a new fishery. Show the fish something different, and you might unlock a lake in ways no one ever dreamed possible.

2. Focus on building patterns.

This is true on your home lake and on the other side of the country. The worst mistake an angler can make is falling into the trap of slow fishing too soon. There are times when a slow-moving offering is all a bass will eat, but these times are rare. You are better off moving quickly, covering water in search of active fish. If you have no history on a fishery, fish even faster.

Your entire goal should be finding that first sign of life. When the first bite occurs, you have something to build from. Take the second bite as



PHOTO BY TACTICAL BASSIN

confirmation, and now you have a pattern. Check the pattern on a similar spot or structure, and if it repeats, you're set. If you're happy with the size of bass, the mystery is gone, and you can enjoy a pleasant day of catching fish. If the bass are too small, start over again in search of a new pattern. It really is that easy.

3. Recognize the bass on the lakes you dream about are no different than the bass at home.

The bass on a new lake might be bigger than where you live. Perhaps they target different species of bait-fish, too. But they are inherently the same fish. They will use similar spots and, most importantly, will eat the same lures.

If you want to travel, your confidence baits at home should remain your confidence baits on the road. If we had left our rods rigged from our last day at home in California, we could have made it all the way to the Great Lakes before we needed to tie on something new. There are no secret mystery lures. You should fish with confidence when your opportunity presents itself.

Conversely, the lures you read about in magazines and see in videos will produce on your lake, too. When you read about Western anglers throwing swimbaits, Southern anglers fishing giant worms, or Northern anglers fishing tiny finesse baits, recognize that all of those baits and techniques will work on your home waters. We proved it on our trip.

4. Quality maps are critical.

If we had attempted our trip without our LakeMaster map cards it would have been a disaster. The advantages of quality maps are

many: safely navigating underwater hazards, finding our way to and from the ramp at low light, locating key offshore structures with ease.

If you're operating basic electronics or shore angling, the same information can be gleaned from a paper map with minimal effort. Your goal with mapping should be to effectively shrink the size of the lake. Identify high-percentage areas, and ignore the rest of the lake. Focus your time around narrow pinch points, offshore humps, ledges that provide current breaks and long tapering points with access to deep water. As spring approaches, focus on the same areas, but eliminate any that don't have quick access to shallow flats or the backs of shallow coves.

5. Fish shallower or deeper based on fishing pressure.

We found fishing pressure dictated two distinct patterns across the country. From California to Tennessee and from Texas to Michigan, if the bass were relatively unpressured by anglers, they were much more likely to be in shallow cover. Docks, standing timber and shallow debris were virtually guaranteed to hold fish in unpressured lakes. On the Tennessee River lakes and anywhere else we encountered with heavy pressure, bass were much more likely to be offshore on deep structure.

6. Fish the extremes for bigger fish.

If your goal is to catch big fish, don't waste time in the middle. Whatever pattern you develop, push it to its limits. If you want to throw a swimbait in search of a big bass, jump in with both feet. Don't waste time with 5- to 6-inch baits

when you could be throwing an 8- to 10-inch bait with exponentially more drawing power. While you might get fewer bites overall, the largest fish you're ultimately looking for are far more likely to strike the larger offering.

Testing the waters will do nothing but slow your journey to success. Conversely, if the fishing dictates a finesse approach, waste no time in the middle. Don't drop down to 8- or 10-pound-test line with a 6-inch worm in clear water and hope the bass cooperate. If you're faced with crystal-clear water on the Great Lakes or any other clear-water fishery, take it to the extreme. Drop down to 4- to 6-pound-test line and a 3- to 4-inch bait on a tiny hook, and find out if the fish are willing to cooperate. You might risk breaking off, but you will discover what is working, and the odds of a giant fish being willing to bite rise exponentially.

This was our strategy around the country, as we realized that spending time cautiously fishing the comfortable baits in the middle rarely produced extraordinary results.

Even if you can't head out on the road like we did, the lessons we learned can help you still. Drive to that lake you rarely visit. Fish that tournament that's a few hours away. Tackle your home fishery through a fresh set of eyes. Ignore past experience, start fresh, build patterns and – most importantly – don't settle until you've met your goals.

**“DON'T SETTLE
UNTIL YOU'VE MET
YOUR GOALS.”**



WHERE WE FISHED

Matt and CC Allen left their California home on April 20 and spent eight weeks traveling nearly 10,000 miles around the country. They fished 28 lakes, rivers and reservoirs along the way, totaling 42 days on the water and catching hundreds of bass. Here's where the trip took them.

🏠 April 20 – Departed California

1. April 22 – Colorado River, Ariz.
2. April 23 – Elephant Butte Lake, N.M.
3. April 24 – Lake Alan Henry, Texas
4. April 25/26 – Lake Fork, Texas
5. April 27 – Lake Athens, Texas
6. April 29 – McGee Creek, Okla.
7. May 2 – Table Rock Lake, Mo.
8. May 3 – Loch Lomond and Lake Windsor, Ark.
9. May 4 – Lake Eucha, Okla.
10. May 5 – Lake Tenkiller, Okla.
11. May 6 – Lake Dardanelle, Ark.
12. May 7 – Pickwick Lake, Miss.
13. May 8 – Pickwick Lake, Ala.
14. May 9/10 – Lake Guntersville, Ala.
15. May 11-13 – Lake Chickamauga, Tenn.

16. May 14 – Watts Bar Lake, Tenn.
 17. May 15 – Melton Hill Lake, Tenn.
 18. May 16 – Patoka Lake, Ind.
 19. May 18/19 – Green Bay/Little Sturgeon Bay, Wis.
 20. May 20-25 – Lake Michigan, Door County, Wis.
 21. May 26 – Clark Lake, Wis.
 22. May 28/29 – Minocqua Lake, Wis.
 23. May 30 – Lac Vieux Desert, Mich.
 24. May 31 – Lake Superior, Keweenaw Bay, Mich.
 25. June 1 – Portage Lake, Mich.
 26. June 2 – Lac La Belle, Mich.
 27. June 3/4 – Lake Michigan, Menominee, Mich.
 28. June 5/6 – Lake Oahe, S.D.
 29. June 7 – Returned to crash site one year later near Lusk, Wyo.
 30. June 11 – Flaming Gorge Reservoir, Utah
- 🏠 June 13 – Returned home ■

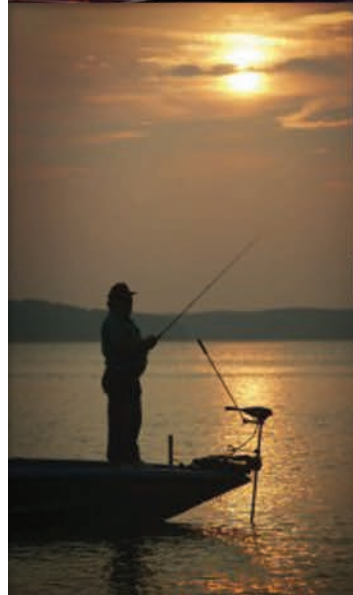
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WHAT'S MAKING NEWS IN THE BASS FEDERATION



HOMETOWN HEROES

2019 TBF JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPS RECEIVE POLICE ESCORT UPON RETURN HOME

A surprise welcome party that included a police escort and dozens of bass boats lined up along Main Street in Citronelle, Ala., celebrated the arrival home of Huntley Dees and Triton Graham, the winners of the 2019 The Bass Federation Junior World Championship.

"We worked so hard for the last two years to get to this moment, and it finally happened," said Graham, while fighting back tears during a television interview at the ceremony. "We're so proud to be here. I'm amazed and surprised to see all of them come out, and thanks for all the support."

North Little Rock hosted the annual youth event for anglers ages 15 and under on the Arkansas River. Junior anglers competed at the state level to advance to the national contest for a chance at the titles, scholarships, prizes and the opportunity to walk across the stage at the FLW Cup.

Dees and Graham formulated a plan in practice that considered the forecasted rain and targeted backwater eddies with an early morning top-water pattern and a midday switch to shaky heads.



A large crowd gathered in Citronelle, Ala., to celebrate Huntley Dees and Triton Graham's World Championship win.

The final-day launch was delayed due to weather, and the team fought through fluctuating water levels, current and downpours that caused them to take shelter for more than 45 minutes.

A final keeper with just 15 minutes to spare was the winning fish as Graham and Dees finished with 30 pounds, 5 ounces and only 1 pound, 6 ounces separating them from second place. ■

2020 TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP HEADS TO GROVE, OKLA., AND GRAND LAKE O' THE CHEROKEES

Increased payouts for the fourth consecutive year and bigger prizes help make grassroots anglers' dreams come true

The Bass Federation's top grassroots anglers are headed to Grand Lake in Grove, Okla., March 10-14, 2020, for the TBF National Championship. Competitors will enjoy one of the nation's premier lakes. Grand is centrally located and diverse enough that no matter what style of fishing anglers enjoy, they can find it on Grand.

Up for grabs is a significantly increased prize pool – the fourth year in a row that payouts have increased – and more advancement opportunities thanks to the growth and success of TBF's National Semi-Finals program across North America. The total purse will surpass \$300,000.

"Grove and Grand Lake O' the Cherokees is so very excited to be hosting The Bass Federation's 2020 National Championship," says Donnie Crain, executive director of the Grove Convention & Tourism Bureau. "This championship will bring to our lake some of the finest anglers in the country. We are proud of our great bass fishing at Grand Lake, our world-class facilities at Wolf Creek Park and our genuine Okie hospitality, and we look forward to showcasing all three during this prestigious national event."

All boaters and co-anglers in the National Championship will compete for three days. TBF covers hotel room nights for the actual event days, and all seven division champion boaters and co-anglers will advance to the 2020 FLW Bass Fishing League All-American.

The overall boater and co-angler winners will leave with the title of "National Champion" as well as the Living the Dream package. The boater package is valued in excess of \$130,000. Previously, it included a new Ranger bass boat to use for the following season, but in 2020, the champ gets to keep a new Ranger Z520 powered by a 250-hp Evinrude G2 engine, Lowrance electronics and Minn Kota trolling motor.

TBF strongly believes in the value of co-anglers, so the 2020 co-angler champ wins a Living the Dream package worth more than \$30,000, including cash, a clothing package, multiple advancement opportunities and more.

TBF plans to roll out even more prizes and advancement opportunities to more anglers finishing near the top at the championship, all with the goal of helping them live their dream in the bass fishing world. Full details will be announced soon.

Coverage of the TBF National Championship will be broadcast in high definition in the *Federation Angler TV* block on the Pursuit Channel and streamed live from Wolf Creek Park daily on bassfederation.com. ■



TBF, FLW EXTEND PARTNERSHIP

In early December, FLW and The Bass Federation reached an agreement to extend their partnership and to continue working together to service grassroots anglers across the continent.

Through the partnership, FLW and TBF will continue to afford opportunities for co-membership and FLW tournament bids to TBF anglers. The top boater and co-angler from each of seven divisions at the TBF National Championship will advance to the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American. Additionally, TBF will be introducing a revamped and expanded "Living the Dream" prize package for anglers in 2020 and beyond that will still include fully paid FLW Pro Circuit entry fees, use of a tow vehicle and boat, and travel stipends for many events.

FLW and TBF will also continue to co-manage the nation's largest High School Fishing program that includes 66 tournaments and a host of sanctioned trails serving more than 20,000 students across the United States. Participation in FLW and TBF High School Fishing tournaments is free to all Student Angler Federation (SAF) members, as SAF membership includes both TBF and FLW membership.

More details will be made available soon. ■



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2019 TBF NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS CONTINUE TO GROW

The Bass Federation's close-to-home model for hosting 22 National Semi-Finals events continues to gain momentum as more than 1,800 anglers participated in 2019. The program, which is the steppingstone to the TBF National Championship, boasts payouts of more than 100 percent every season.

In Semi-Finals competition, the top boater and co-angler from each state advance to the National Championship. One additional boater and co-angler also advances for every

40 boats a state qualifies to the Semi-Finals. Kentucky and Idaho also qualified additional anglers since both states had co-anglers out-fish their top boaters.

Here is a list of qualifiers (listed as boater then co-angler) for the 2020 TBF National Championship from each of the 2019 National Semi-Finals events.

District 1 – FL/GA – West Point Lake – Oct. 26-27

Florida: Jason Stake, Jacksonville, Fla.; Tiffany Grant, Eustis Fla.

Georgia: Oscar Aguero, Valdosta, Ga.; Marshall Harrelson, Clarksville, Ga.

District 2 – NC/SC – Santee Cooper – Nov. 9-10

North Carolina: Justin McBrayer, Carthage, N.C.; Robert Barrett, Youngsville, N.C.

South Carolina: Cecil Wolfe, Summerton, S.C.; Brandon Jeffcoat, Columbia, S.C.

District 3 – KY/TN – Kentucky Lake – Oct. 12-13

Kentucky (1): Lance Freeman, Eddyville, Ky.; Craig Middleton, Harrodsburg, Ky.

Kentucky (2): Michael Blumer, Louisville, Ky.; Scott Neiheisel, Cincinnati, Ohio

Tennessee (1): Larry Dunlap, Paris, Tenn.; Mark Pappas, Dandridge, Tenn.

Tennessee (2): Matthew Wilson, Ashland City, Tenn.; Eddie Enteman, Church Hill, Tenn.

District 4 – AL/MS – Biloxi Back Bay and Pascagoula – Oct. 26-27

Alabama: Jake Childers, Hamilton, Ala.; Adrian Gonzales, Eastaboga, Ala.

Mississippi: Dale Main, Perkinston, Miss.; Thomas Stanley, Columbia, Miss.

District 5 – LA/TX – Toledo Bend – Sept. 28-29

Louisiana: Kevin Lasyone, Dry Prong, La.; Samuel Jenkins, Abita Springs, La.

Texas: James Biggs, Euless, Texas; Peter Hart, Hurst, Texas

District 6 – OK/AR – Lake Millwood – June 15-16

Oklahoma: Michael Morris, Ada, Okla.; Larry Carter, Shawnee, Okla.

Arkansas: Blake Wilson, Benton, Ark.; Matt Tucker, Pottsville, Ark.

District 7 – KS/MO – Wilson Lake – Sept. 21-22

Kansas: Sheldon Rogge, Green, Kan.; Justin Harris, McPherson, Kan.

Missouri: Jared Knuth, Wahoo, Neb.; Greg Harris, Kansas City, Mo.

District 8 – ND/NE/SD – Big Stone Lake – Sept. 14-15

North Dakota: Cody Arth, Bismarck, N.D.; Ron Arth, Bismarck, N.D.

Nebraska: Zane Ridpath, Gretna, Neb.; Rick Schwerzler, Sleepy Eye, Minn.

South Dakota: Tyler Darling, Box Elder, S.D.; Justin Heidinger, Sioux Falls, S.D.

District 9 – MN/WI – Mississippi River, La Crosse – Sept. 21-22

Minnesota: Jason Howland, Albert Lea, Minn.; Robert Beaman, Sauk Rapids, Minn.

Wisconsin: Cade Laufenberg, Goodview, Minn.; Dave Aldrich, Oconomowoc, Wis.

District 10 – IL/IN – Lake Shelbyville – Oct. 12-13

Illinois: Mike Barnes, Mackinaw, Ill.; Marc Rosefsky, Morris, Ill.

Indiana (1): David Schneider Jr., Indianapolis, Ind.; Derick Pendleton, Seymour, Ind.

Indiana (2): Brian Hensley, Edwardsburg, Mich.; Roger Dunaway, Corydon, Ind.



District 1: Jason Stake and Tiffany Grant



District 1: Oscar Aguero & Marshall Harrelson



District 16: Jason Bacon, Riley Abair, Jarrod Spice & Anthony Vinton



District 17: Daniel Tavilla, Tyler Robinson, Nick Deering & Brian Rumery

District 11 – MI/OH – Detroit River – Oct. 12-13

Michigan: Josh Kolodzaike, Toledo, Ohio; Rob Ryder, Gallipolis, Ohio

Ohio (1): Danny Vandine, Malta, Ohio; Dean Osborne, Jackson, Ohio

Ohio (2): Troy Sneddon, Bethesda, Ohio; Matthew Schlabach, Apple Creek, Ohio

District 12 – VA/WV – Stonewall Jackson Lake – Sept. 14-15

Virginia: Chris Fiore, Midlothian, Va.; Tom Hayes, Stephens City, Va.

West Virginia: Tim Wade, Orlando, W.Va.; Robert Fleshman Jr., Tad, W.Va.

District 13 – DC/DE/MD – Nanticoke and Wicomico River – Sept. 28-29

District of Columbia: Bill Easter, Clinton, Md.; John Wiseman, Huntington, Md.

Delaware: Rodney Oberdick, Felton, Del.; Roger Shirley, Federalsburg, Md.

Maryland: Frank Arthur, Fallston, Md.; Andrew Wiley, Joppa, Md.

District 14 – NY/PA/ONT – Lake George – Sept. 21-22

New York: John Ernest, Oakland, N.J.; Mark Kurtzner, Albany, N.Y.

Pennsylvania (1): Tony Dorman, Taylor, Pa.; Adam Ivory, Dillsburg, Pa.

Pennsylvania (2): Paul Bottali, York, Pa.; Dave Wilt, Lititz, Pa.

Ontario: Joe Rodrigues, Welland, Ontario; Will McFarlane, Guelph, Ontario

District 15 – CT/NJ/RI – 1000 Islands – Sept. 21-22

Connecticut: Keith Cleary, Bethel, Conn.; Ryan Kusmit, Northford, Conn.

New Jersey: Nick Diamandas Jr., Oak Ridge, N.J.; Brian Wisniewski, Washington, N.J.

Rhode Island: Jeremy Sadowski, Voluntown, Conn.; Scott Arruda, Hope Valley, R.I.

District 16 – MA/VT – Lake Champlain – Sept. 14-15

Massachusetts: Jason Bacon, Nutting Lake, Mass.; Jarrod Spice, Waltham, Mass.

Vermont: Riley Abair, Duxbury, Vt.; Anthony Vinton, Braintree, Vt.

District 17 – ME/NH – Lake Winnepesaukee – Sept. 28-29

Maine: Nick Deering, Portland, Maine; Brian Rumery, Buxton, Maine

New Hampshire: Daniel Tavilla, Chelmsford, Mass.; Tyler Robinson, Nashua, N.H.

District 18 – OR/WA – Columbia River – Oct. 5-6

Oregon: Kory Ray, Lebanon, Ore.; Todd Woolard, Salem, Ore.

Washington: Chris Lambert, Olympia, Wash.; Mel Marchese, Granite Falls, Wash.

District 19 – ID/MT – Noxon Reservoir – Sept. 7-8

Idaho (1): Loren Torok, Hayden, Idaho; Alex Torok, Hayden, Idaho

Idaho (2): Shane Torok, Hayden, Idaho; Dylan Soppe, Caldwell, Idaho

Montana: Danny Stamper, Eureka, Mont.; Jacob Weaver, Columbia Falls, Mont.

District 21 – CO/NM – Navajo Lake – June 22-23

Colorado: Sam Heckman, Pueblo West, Colo.; Brian Wiese, USAFA, Colo.

New Mexico: Matthew Adamson, Farmington, N.M.; Vanessa Berger, Bloomfield, N.M.

District 22 – NV/UT – Lake Powell – Sept. 7-8

Nevada: Stephen Tauriello, Las Vegas, Nev.; Adam Cacal, Las Vegas, Nev.

Utah: Zac Dinkins, Green River, Utah; Jackson Hinckley, Lehi, Utah

District 23 – AZ/CA – Lake Havasu – Oct. 26-27

Arizona: Stephen Lund, Glendale, Ariz.; Loway Shammass, Surprise, Ariz.

California: Justin Arellano, Rio Vista, Calif.; Kerry Harris, Bethel Island, Calif. ■

2020 HIGH SCHOOL DETAILS AVAILABLE

The Bass Federation expects more than 35,000 participants in all Student Angler Federation-sanctioned events in 2020. SAF High School Fishing and TBF/FLW major events comprise a 76-tournament season, but there will be hundreds of other tournaments hosted through local SAF-sanctioned trails.

The schedule includes 48 SAF High School Fishing State Championships, two Open Challenge events, 13 state high school athletic association sanctioned tournaments, up to 15 FLW High School Fishing Opens and the 11th annual High School Fishing World Finals and National Championship, which will be held June 23-27 on the Mississippi River at La Crosse, Wis.

The World Finals and National Championship scholarship prize pool is already building. Last year, the pool topped out at \$2.8 million.

Check highschoolfishing.org for details and complete schedules. ■



HIGH SCHOOL STATE CHAMPIONSHIP WINNERS

MINNESOTA

Mississippi River Pools 4 & 5, Aug. 10
Caden Stevens and Will Utpadel
Albert Lea Anglers

NEW YORK

Lake George, Sept. 15
Derek Carter and Aidan McConnell
Central Square Redhawks

COLORADO

Lake Pueblo, Sept. 22
Jack Harpole and James Brady
Colorado Bass Club

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Connecticut River, Oct. 5
Matthew Roberts and Tanner Graves
Monadnock Regional & Killington
Mountain School ■

ANDREW UPSHAW

TULSA, OK

By Sean Ostruszka

Winning the Costa FLW Series Championship was not a bad way to end the year, huh?

Definitely. I wish I could end the season like that every year.

When you start talking about the amount of tournaments you fish in a year and how long a season it is – from January up until we were fishing in November – and then to win the very last tournament; that's pretty spectacular in my book.

Especially after the year you had.

Yeah, I had a very blessed year. I was consistent in the Costas. I made a lot of cuts on Tour and won at Cherokee. I made the Cup and the Costa Championship. I had the kind of year you always hope to have.

Best fishing year of your life?

There's not a year even close to it. Even after just winning the Tour event, nothing was going to beat this year. Then the Costa Championship was just icing on the cake.

Pretty good icing.

Yeah, and the funny thing is, I always used to tell my wife and anyone who would listen that I was going to win a Costa event before I ever won a Tour event. And I always said my first win would be in Texas on Toledo Bend or Sam Rayburn.

Instead, I won a Tour event before a Costa, and they came in Tennessee and Kentucky, both fishing for smallmouth. That was never on my radar.

How did a Texas angler get so good fishing for reservoir smallies?

So, I traveled for a year with a co-angler named JB King. He's a very

good friend of mine; someone I've always looked up to. Well, he also happens to be a guide on Dale Hollow. So, during that year, he really helped me understand how those smallmouth set up in reservoirs like that. It was very instrumental.

And quite profitable for you this year. Do you officially like smallmouths more than largemouths now?

Never. I really like catching smallmouth, but there's nothing like catching a 10-pound largemouth. Seeing one of them come out of the water, so big it can't hardly jump ... there's nothing comparable for me as a bass angler.

How many 10-pounders have you caught?

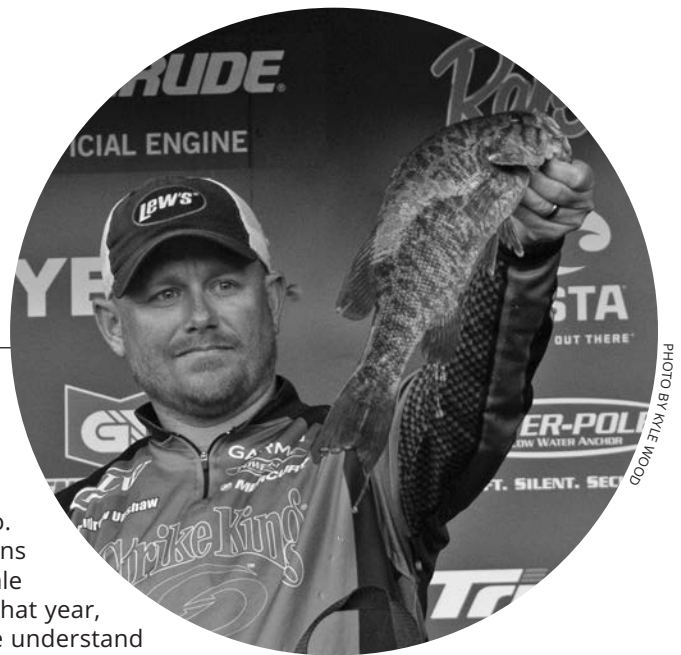
Twenty-two, and 18 have come from Toledo Bend.

Toledo Bend has quite the special place in your heart, I bet.

It does. It's where I won the very first tournament I ever fished when I was 14. I was fishing with my neighbor, Harold Gilbert, fishing in the back of the boat, though it was every man for himself. I even remember the lure I won it on – a silver flash-colored Bomber Long A.

You actually got started fishing FLW events pretty young, even before FLW College Fishing events, didn't you?

I did. My very first BFL I fished I was 17 as a co-angler. I remember practicing and being on a big stringer of fish, but come the tournament my



boater never would go where I wanted to fish. After that, I said I was done with that. I wanted to control my investment and fish in the front of the boat.

So the next one I entered I did as a pro on Toledo Bend, and I finished second by 1 ounce. I was hooked after that.

At that point, were you already all in on becoming a professional bass fisherman?

Yeah. I actually played college football for a second at Louisiana College before suffering a second knee injury. After that, I decided I should probably focus on something with some longevity, and at about the same time I realized I could make some real money fishing.

Speaking from experience, knee injuries are rough.

Oh, I know. I've torn my ACL four times and had five knee surgeries over the years.

Four ACL tears? Yikes.

Last one was last year. Tore my ACL playing flag football, of course. My wife, Valerie, said I'm no longer allowed to play recreational sports.

I actually didn't know if I could stand on the deck come the Amistad Costa that kicked off this year. So, to have the year I've had fishing with a bad knee is really something. ■

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