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JUNE-JULY 2020

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ON THE COVER: MARK DANIELS JR. — PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

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Bass Fishing (ISSN 1543-6179) is published six times a year (February/March, April/May, June/July, August/September, October/November, December/January) by FLW, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025. Periodicals Postage Paid at Benton, KY, and at additional mailing office. Rates: one year (6 issues) \$25.00; two years (12 issues) \$50.00; three years (18 issues) \$75.00.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Bass Fishing*, 30 Gamble Lane, Benton, KY 42025. For questions regarding your subscription call 270.252.1000 Monday thru Friday, 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. CT.

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FIRST CAST: CURTIS NIEDERMIER

THAT SPRING WHEN WE ALL WENT FISHING



Finding good news throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been about as hard as finding toilet paper back when shelter-in-place orders were first taking effect. At this point, if you're still struggling to track down TP, you might want to try Amazon. And if you're still struggling to find some good news, allow me to offer a couple of examples.

The first was published at StarTribune.com on May 5, in advance of the Minnesota fishing opener (it's a holiday, dontcha know?). In "Explosion of Minnesota fishing licenses among teens adds new wrinkle to opener," Tim Kennedy reported that sales of special youth resident fishing licenses for 16- and 17-year-olds were up 99 percent in Minnesota. Say this in your best Al Lindner voice: Holy buckets, that's a whopper of an increase.

I think it's great that more young people are discovering a safe, fun alternative to the typical spring sports and activities they might otherwise be participating in if their schools weren't closed. Now we need to figure out how to retain some of those young anglers once the typical demands on their time return.

Minnesota isn't the only state that's seen an uptick in angler participation, either. KATV in Little Rock recently ran a story called "More people fishing leads to nationwide bait and tackle shortages."

While reporter Parris Kane points out how manufacturing and distribution chains that have been mired with delays are partially to blame for the shortages, overall, the positive takeaway is that more people are going fishing.

I know it's true because I've witnessed it during my own fishing trips. Some of our local public access sites were flooded with people fishing throughout spring. Thankfully, most of the families I saw were practicing social distancing while doing it.

Fishing was an important activity for my family during Kentucky's shelter-at-home period. This was the first spring in a long time that I wasn't on the road covering tournaments. I took advantage of the unexpected time away to take my wife and kids shore-fishing for bream and bass. The positive distraction that fishing provided and the memories we made are the silver lining I'm hoping to take away from the pandemic.

As the father of young children, I've thought about how I'll explain this situation to my kids when they're older. My daughter, who's 3 1/2, might always remember staying home with Mom and Dad for all those weeks, but right now she doesn't understand why. And my son, who just turned 1, will never recall what it was like to live through it.

When I explain it to them, I'll tell them how our brave healthcare workers and first responders saved so many lives. I'll tell them how we had to come together by staying apart. I'll tell them about planting tomatoes, daily walks and near-daily video calls with Grandma and Poppa. I'll also tell them about our fishing trips. I'll show them photos of my daughter wading on a gravel beach to hunt for shells while Daddy fished, and videos of my son giggling when he touched a bluegill's tail. I'll talk about how, even though the pandemic was awfully tough on everyone, for one spring we all just went fishing to help cope with the challenges.

That's not the kind of story you read very often in the news, but it's the way I hope they remember it.

CURTIS NIEDERMIER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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BRIGHT LIGHTS ON THE BIG STAGE

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit rookie Laramy Strickland needed just two tournaments to notch his first tour-level win and a third to add his second top-five finish, this time a fifth-place showing at Lake Martin on March 18-21. The 23-year-old Floridian seems to be getting used to having FLW Live cameras in his boat on the final days of competition.

The bright lights haven't been difficult for Strickland to handle to this point, despite being one of the youngest anglers on the Pro Circuit. At Martin, he pulled this quality largemouth from one of the lake's many docks in front of a throng of fans watching at home, not to mention one well-placed FLW media boat. He weighed in 9 pounds, 14 ounces on day three en route to 49-1 total, just a couple ounces behind fourth-place finisher Matt Becker.

During a tough tournament that saw many pros struggling to find the right fish, Strickland proved his win at the Harris Chain a month prior wasn't just home field advantage at work. He can catch 'em anywhere, and he's been on a mission to prove that in 2020.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA





BIGGER IN TEXAS

If you visit the Major League Fishing website and scroll through the daily results from the 2020 Bass Pro Tour General Tire Stage Three Presented by TrueTimber at Lake Fork and Lake Athens, the most telling stat column is on the far right: Largest Fish.

It reads like a major league slugfest, with a wad of 5-pounders, 6-pounders and 7-pounders, plus a few 8s, 9s and 10s for good measure. To compete in Texas, the BPT's best needed giant bass and lots of them.

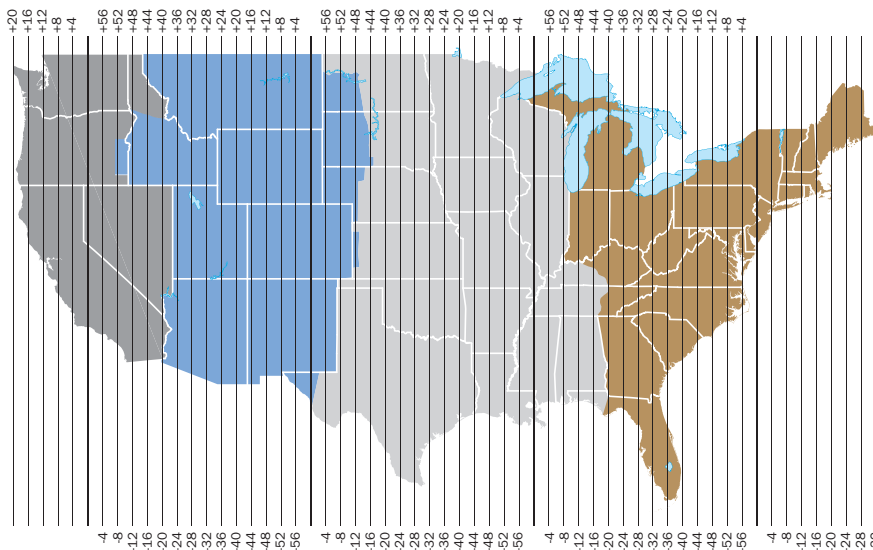
Among the tournament leaders was Justin Atkins, a former FLW Cup champion who's already proven himself a capable pro at just 30 years old. The bass shown here was caught by Atkins on the second day of the Qualifying Round to help him advance to the Knockout Round. He eventually finished ninth.

Amazingly, this hawg wasn't Atkins' biggest of the event. That honor goes to the 10-pound, 8-ounce fish he caught on the first day of the Qualifying Round to establish the record for largest bass in a BPT event.

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

SOLUNAR TABLES

JUNE-JULY 2020



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

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SOLUNAR TABLES® are designed to forecast the daily active feeding periods of fish. They are formulated from the position of the earth in relation to the sun and moon.

The major periods last for approximately 2 to 3 1/2 hours, and the minor periods last for approximately 3/4 to 1 1/2 hours. To determine the start of major and minor times for your area, find the bold time-zone rule on the map. If you are located in the area left of the time-zone rule, add the number (in minutes) at the top to the corresponding time on the chart. If you are located in the area right of the time-zone rule, subtract the number (in minutes) at the bottom from the corresponding time on the chart. Add one hour to all times during daylight saving time.

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WHAT TO WATCH IN THE COMING WEEKS

LIVE TOURNAMENT STREAMS

June 7-12 - 2020 Bass Pro Tour Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo @ Lake Toho/Kissimmee Chain

MLF NOW! Live Stream at MajorLeagueFishing.com or MyOutdoorTV

June 23-26 - 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Super Tournament @ Lake Chickamauga

FLW Live at FLWFishing.com

July 10-15 - 2020 Bass Pro Tour Evinrude Stage Five Presented by Covercraft @ Lake Champlain Hosted by Experience Vermont

MLF NOW! Live Stream at MajorLeagueFishing.com or MyOutdoorTV

July 29-Aug. 1 - 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Super Tournament @ Mississippi River (La Crosse)

FLW Live at FLWFishing.com

TV BROADCASTS

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

June 6 - 2020 MLF Summit Cup Sudden Death Round 1

2-4 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

June 13 - 2020 MLF Summit Cup Sudden Death Round 2

2-4 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

June 20 - 2020 MLF Summit Cup Championship

2-4 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

June 27 - 2020 MLF Patriot Cup & Summit Cup Major League Lessons

2-4 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

July 3 - 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit @ Sam Rayburn

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

July 4 - 2020 Bass Pro Tour B&W Trailer Hitches Stage One Presented by Power-Pole @ Lake Eufaula - Knockout Round

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

July 10 - 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit @ Harris Chain

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

July 11 - 2020 Bass Pro Tour B&W Trailer Hitches Stage One Presented by Power-Pole @ Lake Eufaula - Championship Round

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

July 17 - 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit @ Lake Martin

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

July 18 - 2020 Bass Pro Tour Favorite Fishing Stage Two Presented by Bass Cat @ Lake Okeechobee - Knockout Round

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

July 25 - 2020 Bass Pro Tour Favorite Fishing Stage Two Presented by Bass Cat @ Lake Okeechobee - Championship Round

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

DID YOU SEE: MLF TRICK SHOTS

Sheltering in place this spring during the COVID-19 pandemic might have kept Major League Fishing's pros off the water for a while, but it didn't stop them from practicing their casting and nailing some impressive trick shots.

In a recent viral video shared by MLF, 11 pros showed off their casting skills with such feats as knocking the cap off a Coca-Cola bottle, breaking an egg dangling on a string and even casting into the vent stack on the roof of a shed.

The video, which is available at MajorLeagueFishing.com and [Facebook.com/MajorLeagueFishing](https://www.facebook.com/MajorLeagueFishing), is a fun watch. After you've seen it, take a crack at your own trick shot, film it and share it on social media with #MLFtrickshots so we can see what you can pull off.



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Bass Fishing Hall of Fame Class of 2020

Five new inductees to the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame have been announced. Each was voted in by a 30-member panel of sport-fishing industry leaders and will be formally inducted on Sept. 24, 2020.

The 2020 class includes:

○ **Bryan Kerchal**, who was the first Bassmaster Classic champion to come from the B.A.S.S. Nation ranks.



○ **Jay Yelas**, who topped \$1 million in earnings with both Bassmaster and FLW, to go along with a Bassmaster Classic win and Angler of the Year title as well as two FLW Angler of the Year titles.



○ **Steve Bowman**, a journalist who, among many other things, helped orchestrate ESPNoutdoors.com.



○ **Ron Lindner**, a teacher, entertainer and innovator, who is already a member of the National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame. He co-owns the "Angling Edge" TV show with his brother, Al, and sons James, Daniel and Bill.



○ **James Heddon**, inventor of the first wooden artificial lures in the 1890s. He was the originator of the Zara Spook, and the Heddon lure company remains his namesake to this day.

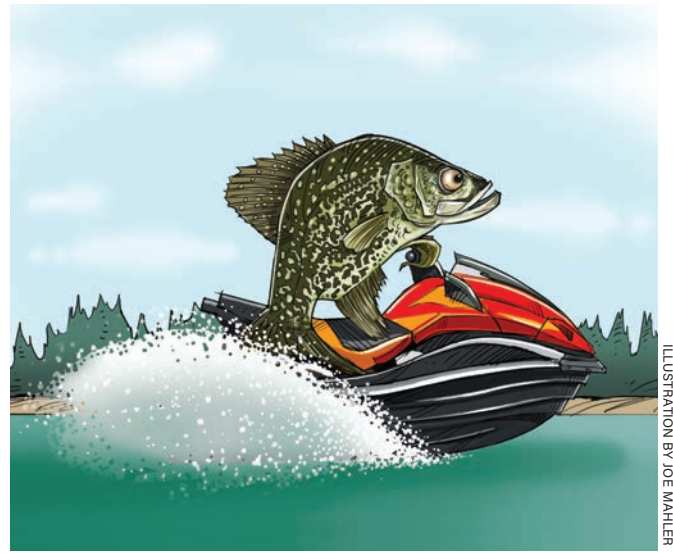


ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

A LONG WAY FROM HOME

If you thought a 32-mile run in a bass boat was a decent haul, try doing it without one.

A recent tagging survey of crappie in Arkansas returned some surprising results, at least for one crappie in particular. The 12-inch female black crappie in question was caught near the Petit Jean River Wildlife Management Area, and, as it turns out, that crappie was tagged as part of a 2018-19 Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) Fisheries Division survey – in Lake Dardanelle, some 50 miles of winding water away.

AGFC fisheries biologist Nick Feltz surmises that the crappie didn't quite travel 50 miles, but most likely went over the Dardanelle Dam into the Arkansas River and then through the Holla Bend levee breach (instead of all the way down the Petit Jean River), ending up about 32 miles away, perfectly healthy and full of eggs, ready for another spawning cycle a long way from home.

While it might not happen often, such a journey is an encouraging sign for biologists who want to know more about how major flooding can impact fisheries in a given region. Though flooding might impact spawning success, it doesn't seem to do much to adult fish populations.

That same 2018-19 AGFC study involved tagging 800 crappie in Dardanelle to allow biologists to get a better understanding of what percentage of Dardanelle crappie are caught and harvested in a given year. According to the study, that number is about 44 percent, which is right in line with figures for other local Arkansas fisheries.

Simplifying for Safety

The National Weather Service (NWS) is looking for boater feedback on a new proposal to change the term "Small Craft Advisory" to "Small Craft Warning," a move the NWS hopes will help clear up confusion about terminology involving boating conditions. They're calling the project the NWS Hazards Simplification, or "Haz Simp."

Currently, the NWS issues watches, warnings and advisories for small craft based on wind speed and wave size. This new proposal would eliminate the term "advisory" and simply leave "watch" and "warning" as the two flagship terms, thereby simplifying the process and making it easier for boaters to understand the conditions they might face on the water.

To learn more about the proposal and give your feedback, visit weather.gov/hazardsimplification.

Companies Lending a Hand

Many companies throughout the U.S. have used their resources during this difficult time to make life a little easier for those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among them is Lucas Oil, which has begun offering hand sanitizer in 64-ounce refill bottles.

According to the company, Lucas hand sanitizer is produced with 80 percent ethyl alcohol and includes glycerin additives to “keep your hands from feeling dry and cracked.” It’s available at eckartsupply.com and distributors nationwide.

Likewise, PRADCO Outdoor Brands shifted part of its production process to making PPEs and hand sanitizer to give to hospitals, clinics and nursing homes. PRADCO, which owns YUM (producing the hand sanitizer), is crafting its PPE frames (shown below) and face shields under the BOOYAH name in a collaborative effort with Baptist Health in Fort Smith, Ark.

Covercraft, which specializes in vehicle and watercraft covers, already had the non-woven specialty fabrics to lend a helping hand in the fight. The company announced on April 2 that it would begin immediately shipping orders for personal protective equipment for hospitals and first responders. Clay Callan, president and chief operating officer of Covercraft, says the company has the capacity to produce “hundreds of thousands of units” and that “we felt it was our duty to step in and help our country in this time of need.”

Toyota, in addition to providing \$2.5 million in grants for nonprofits via the Toyota USA Foundation, is also using its resources to produce protective equipment for medical professionals. Toyota’s TILT Lab specializes in using 3-D printers, lasers, augmented reality technology and the like to shift (or “tilt”) conventional thinking and produce prototypes of new concepts. The lab is now focusing its efforts on producing personal protective equipment using its lasers and 3-D printing equipment. By mid-April, Toyota had shipped 56,600 face masks, with a goal of fabricating and donating 500,000 commercial-grade face shields through June.



PHOTO COURTESY PRADCO

Potential Expansion of U.S. Fishing and Hunting Opportunities

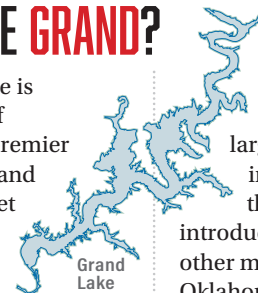
In early April, U.S. Secretary of the Interior David L. Bernhardt proposed the largest expansion of fishing and hunting opportunities in the history of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The proposal, which has yet to come to a resolution, would open 97 National Wildlife Refuges, nine National Fish Hatcheries and about 2.3 million acres of public land for hunting and fishing opportunities. In 2019, the federal government added 1.4 million acres of hunting and fishing opportunities.

The U.S. Department of the Interior hopes to have the new measures finalized in time for the 2020-21 hunting season. Should the new plan be accepted, a total of 399 units of the National Wildlife Refuge System will be open to hunting opportunities as well as 331 for fishing, not including the nine units of the National Fish Hatchery System.

AIN'T LIFE GRAND?

Grand Lake is already one of Oklahoma’s premier fishing lakes, and it’s about to get a whole lot better.

In late April, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) began stocking the lake with Florida-strain largemouth bass, beginning with 400 pure Florida-strain fish in the 10- to 12-inch range. Not long after that, it introduced another 850 in the 12- to 14-inch range with several dozen 6 pounds or better to follow.



There’s plenty of evidence to suggest that the Florida-strain largemouth can thrive in Grand Lake, as the state has already introduced the fish in other more southerly Oklahoma fisheries. In 2013, the ODWC stocked 2.22 million fry and fingerling Florida-strain bass in 44 lakes, and many of the largest bass to be caught from those waters have had some Florida-strain genetics.

The ODWC has been spawning Florida-strain largemouth bass at its Durant Fish Hatchery since 2000.



Revised 2020 Schedule

FLW is committed to giving anglers the best schedule it possibly can coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. The 2020 schedule has been revised for all circuits with new dates and venues through the remainder of the year. Be sure to visit flwfishing.com for scheduling information for the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit, Toyota Series, Phoenix Bass Fishing League presented by T-H Marine, Abu Garcia College Fishing presented by YETI and FLW High School Fishing presented by Favorite Fishing.

FLW LENDS TRAILER TO HELP WITH COVID-19 TESTING

> WITH TOURNAMENTS POSTPONED during the COVID-19 pandemic, FLW was in a unique position to offer a helping hand to medical professionals in the form of one of its Phoenix Bass Fishing League weigh-in trailers.

A COVID-19 community task force centered in Paducah, Ky., used the trailer as a check-in point for its mobile COVID-19 testing station, which Dr. James Kyle Turnbo says was a welcomed and crucial addition to the facility.

"We're pretty proud of the community's response, and the FLW trailer has been instrumental in allowing us to do this from a safe distance with all the appropriate control mechanisms from an infectious disease standpoint," says Turnbo. "We're tremendously grateful for the contribution."

"Everybody in the community has really stepped up and contributed; certainly, FLW and other local contractors. It's really been a nice demonstration of what a community can do when they come together."



SOME PEOPLE SPEND WAY TOO MUCH TIME ONLINE



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ONE UNIQUELY SPECIAL FISH

FLW anglers John Cox and Keith Carson are pros at sight-fishing huge bass in Florida. On an April trip to the St. Johns River, the pair (along with Cox's wife, Melissa) spotted a massive 10-pound, 15-ounce largemouth and caught it (kind of). That's not too unusual for the Florida hammers.

What is unusual, though, is the state of the fish in question, which they pulled from the water and later named "Walter." The mammoth 29-inch largemouth appeared to have been attacked by an alligator or hit by a boat prop, and it had a huge gash of missing flesh to show for it. It was also totally blind.

"Keith named it 'Walter,' and then we all looked at each other and all thought it at the same time: We need to save Walter," says John.

After scooping up the fish, John, Melissa and Carson began to rehabilitate it in a bathtub, eventually moving it to a large aerated 300-gallon tub, which they hoped would be Walter's new home until he was healthy enough to be released again.

"Melissa made a sling to hold him upright after hours of taking turns keeping him up straight and breathing," John adds. "Then we went to bed thinking he would probably be gone in the morning."

Walter survived for a couple days thanks to their care, but the wound ultimately proved to be too much for the fish to overcome. John sent Walter off to the taxidermist to become the first fish he's ever mounted.

"This one just seemed like the right one to have done," he says.

While the story doesn't have the happiest of endings, it does show just how far anglers will go to care for the fish they love to catch so much. #ripwalter

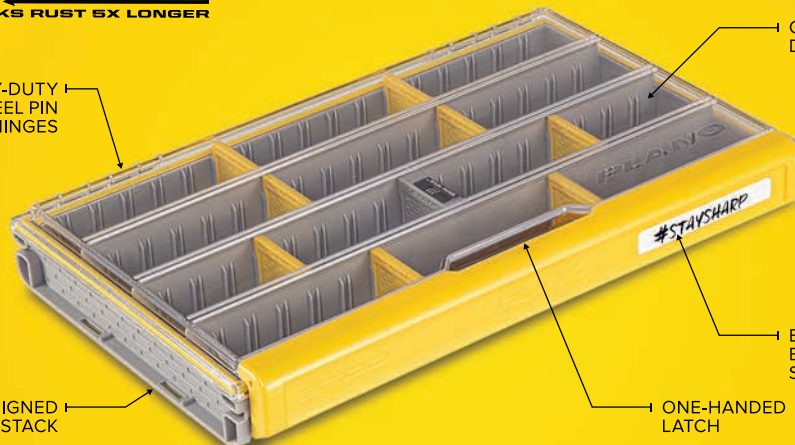


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A LOOK AHEAD FOR FLW

New Pro Circuit Super Tournaments promise excitement for everyone

> **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC** has affected everyone in one way or another, and the tournament bass fishing industry is no exception. From anglers to tournament staff and media to fans and sponsors, life just hasn't been the same the last several months. Everyone is looking forward to a return to normalcy, or at least something close to it.

When the FLW tournament schedule resumes in June, there will be a familiar feel, but there will also be a lot more than that to latch on to, especially as it pertains to the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit.

First – and let's not bury the lede – FLW has some incredibly exciting tournaments to finish out the 2020 schedule thanks to a new "Super Tournament" format that will include 56 Major League Fishing pros to go along with the regular Pro Circuit field. That means 209-boat, star-studded fields that will showcase an incredible



amount of bass fishing talent competing in the five-bass tournament format.

For FLW anglers, that means bigger payouts, more live coverage and more exposure for them and their sponsors, while MLF pros will enjoy additional opportunities to compete in the wake of their season being cut short by COVID-19. It means the top 50 percent of the field will be earning at least \$10,000 at every tournament and first-place payouts jumping from \$100,000 to \$125,000. It

means four days of *FLW Live* coverage – a total of 24 hours of live coverage for each four-day Super Tournament.

For fans, it means getting to watch Jason Lambert on Lake Chickamauga in June, fishing in what could be a ledge slugfest with a winner eclipsing the century mark. It means once again seeing Bryan Thrift and David Dudley fishing for their five best, but this time against FLW pros and their new MLF peers who will be doing the same thing. It means Andy Morgan and Jacob Wheeler and many other former FLW hammers back where it all began.

The Pro Circuit will be fishing one fewer event than originally scheduled, but the three remaining tournaments on the schedule (not including the TITLE Championship) will absolutely make up for it. Who doesn't want to see Edwin Evers try to repeat his RED-CREST win on the Mississippi River but in a five-bass format?

FLW isn't looking to just return to the pre-pandemic status quo. Inviting MLF pros for three high-octane Super Tournaments is about celebrating bass fishing in a way fans didn't get to experience before the fishing world stood still. It's about exceeding expectations for fans and anglers alike and creating a product too good to ignore. It's a feast after the fast.

The tournament bass fishing world has changed immeasurably in the last couple years – and change can be hard – but this is a change that should be welcomed by everyone who enjoys professional bass fishing. We at FLW are excited, and you should be, too.



REMAINING 2020 PRO CIRCUIT SCHEDULE

- Lake Chickamauga – Dayton, Tenn. – June 23-26
- Mississippi River – La Crosse, Wis. – July 29-Aug. 1
- Detroit River – Trenton, Mich. – Aug. 11-14
- Tackle Warehouse FLW TITLE presented by Toyota – Massena, N.Y. – Aug. 24-29

REDCREST Comes Home in 2021

TULSA, OKLA., TO HOST MLF'S PREMIER EVENT IN FEBRUARY

Major League Fishing's Bass Pro Tour will have a hometown event in 2021, and it comes in the form of REDCREST, the circuit's premier championship tournament, scheduled for Grand Lake O' the Cherokees Feb. 23-27.

Championship tournaments always tend to draw larger crowds and broader appeal than regular-season events, and MLF wanted the epicenter of REDCREST to be home in Tulsa, where the organization is headquartered. Along with a tremendous fishery for the tournament itself, Tulsa is a perfect destination for the REDCREST Expo (Feb. 26-28) at the River Spirit Expo, which is one of the largest clear-span buildings in the world – fitting for one of the biggest tournaments in professional bass fishing.

"Always, it was going to be Tulsa. It was the only place I was going to settle for," says MLF President and CEO Jim Wilburn. "For the first big expo, Tulsa has proven itself as a bass fishing mecca."

REDCREST promises to be a boon for tourism and the local economy of Tulsa. In turn, Tulsa offers a spectacular fishery and tailor-made expo venue to go along with the symmetry of hosting REDCREST in MLF's hometown. It's an ideal pairing.

With the tournament ending on Saturday and the expo running through Sunday, it'll be a perfect opportunity for fans to get to interact with pros who didn't make the cut, as well as MLF's 30 REDCREST participants after the dust has settled and a champion has been crowned. All 80 Bass Pro Tour anglers will be in attendance on the final day of the expo.

In addition to the expo, fans will have the opportunity to watch 50 hours of coverage from the five-day event, which will be streamed live on *MLFNOW!* and MyOutdoor TV. The catch-weigh-release format and all the live coverage make MLF events – REDCREST in particular – professional bass fishing's new frontier. There's no better place for the next great fan experience than Tulsa.

"One of the reasons MLF was born was we wanted to expand the footprint of anglers," says Wilburn. "We want to grow the sport of competitive fishing."

Tulsa hosting REDCREST is one heck of a way to further that mission.



HEAVY HITTERS

> FOLLOWING THE TEMPORARY HIATUS

in the tournament bass fishing world due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bass Pro Tour resumes its 2020 schedule with a unique event on June 7 at the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes.

Heavy Hitters was originally billed as a mid-season qualifier for the top big-bass anglers through the first five events of the season, but will now include all 80 BPT anglers and feature bigger payouts across the field.

"After working with state, local and public health officials, we feel we can return to the water for two final tournaments in 2020," says Boyd Duckett, MLF co-founder and pro.



Heavy Hitters will feature a massive \$745,000 prize pool with payouts for the entire field of anglers and serve as Stage Four of the BPT season.

In addition to the traditional payout schedule based on finishing order, the biggest bass caught for each group over the two-day Qualifying Rounds (June 7-10) will pay a \$25,000 big bass bonus (\$50,000 total). The Knockout Round on day five (June 11) will feature a \$50,000 big bass bonus, while the Championship Round (June 12) will feature a \$100,000 big bass bonus, on top of the Stage Title \$100,000 prize.

REMAINING 2020 BPT SCHEDULE

This revised BPT schedule permits MLF to deliver an additional 100-plus hours of live-action sports as well as meet television production deadlines to fulfill sponsorship agreements despite the unprecedented season.

2020 Heavy Hitters Presented by Venmo – Kissimmee Chain, Fla. – June 7-12

2020 Bass Pro Tour Evinrude Stage Five Presented by Covercraft – Lake Champlain, Burlington, Vt. – July 10-15

2021 REDCREST – Grand Lake O' the Cherokees, Tulsa, Okla. – Feb. 23-27 ■

MEET EVAN HAFER, FOUNDER/CEO OF BLACK RIFLE COFFEE COMPANY

LIFELONG ANGLER CHANNELS SAME ENERGY INTO CATCHING FISH AS ROASTING COFFEE



Evan Hafer knew he'd been bitten hard by the bass bug. As he lay in bed with his iPad – scouring fishing websites, YouTube and Google for any crumbs of info he could find that might help him coax a bass to bite in a small creek east of San Antonio – the CEO and founder of Black Rifle Coffee Company surrendered to the fact that he was “going down a rabbit hole.”

“My wife actually called me out on it,” Hafer chuckles. “This is a tiny little creek, no more than 30 feet wide, and there’s hardly any current at all. But I hooked one and had it strip line. I know there are bigger bass in there. So I’m in bed watching bass fishing tutorials on YouTube. I’m usually answering Slack messages and emails and messages about selling coffee, but I put my evening business on hold. My wife said, ‘I haven’t seen you this excited for years.’ I told her, ‘You don’t understand. I HAVE to catch one of these fish.’”

Anybody who’s followed Black Rifle Coffee Company’s aggressive path through the coffee market – from Hafer’s 1-pound personal coffee roaster in his garage to a coffee-purveying juggernaut with \$80 million in annual sales – likely understands that there’s a lot of “HAVE to” in the former Green Beret.

“Fishing isn’t that much different than business: Every cast is another opportunity,” Hafer says. “How could you not be excited about that?”

FROM 10 POUNDS TO 1 MILLION

Hafer’s special operations background – and how those experiences contributed to the business trajectory of Black Rifle Coffee Company – are almost the stuff of social marketing legend. The Idaho native became a devotee of high-quality brew in the late 1990s and carried that bean-roasting obsession with him through 15 years of deployments and operations throughout the Middle East and Africa while serving in the U.S. Army Special Forces and the Central Intelligence Agency. He sold his first bag of “Dark Roasted Freedom” in 2014, as part of a 500-pound batch that he roasted (pound at a time) in his garage.

Fast-forward through six years of nose-to-the-grindstone labor, astute, hyper-creative marketing, viral videos, and explosive growth, and you have BRCC, circa 2020.

In its current iteration, BRCC operates out of roasting facilities in Utah, Tennessee and Texas; employs more than 230 people (nearly half of whom are military veterans); and roasts more than 1 million pounds of coffee a year. That coffee – from the mega-bestselling 12-ounce bag of Just Black roast to recently released BRCC Coffee Steep Bags – is sold in more than 1,700 retail locations and online.

The BRCC product line starts with high-quality ground and whole-bean coffees – as well as single-cup rounds – ranging from light to extra-dark roast, but also includes a canned espresso drink (Ready To Drink Coffee), cocoa and coffee additives. It’s delivered weekly to monthly through a customizable subscription service to a pool of subscribers that grows by the month.



It's safe to say that BRCC's brews are as popular on bass boats as they are in suburban kitchens, an observation that Hafer welcomes with enthusiasm.

"Fishing is one of my sub-cultures," Hafer jokes. "Fishermen? That's my community. I understand that group. I built my first fly rod when I was 12 years old, back before it was cool to be building fly rods. I'm pretty good at making coffee, but I was a kid who loved fishing a long time before I started serving my country or roasting coffee."

IT STARTED IN THE HILLS OF IDAHO

History buffs will identify the hamlet of Weippe, Idaho, (population 441) as the prairie in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests where Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and the members of the Corps of Discovery Expedition met the Nez Perce.

It's big timber, hunting and fishing country, laced in all four directions with trout streams and steelhead rivers, and within an hour's drive of Dworshak Reservoir, a smallmouth haven that is fed by the North Fork Clearwater River.

It's a place where you expect to find loggers and outdoorsmen, which is exactly what Whitey Vanderpool was. Hafer's grandfather, Vanderpool was the second of three generations of loggers in the family tree – a lifetime resident of western Idaho who was handy with a fly rod, and generous of his time with his fishing-crazy grandson.

"My granddad was such a prominent figure in my life, and the summers I spent with him are what connected me the deepest to fishing and the outdoors," Hafer admits. "We'd spend the summer catching beautiful rainbows and cutthroat, watching moose and bear, and just having an incredible adventure between a grandson and a grandfather. He was retired, so we could go out for a couple of weeks on end. It was campfires every night, driving four-wheelers up to these amazing mountain lakes around the North Fork of the Clearwater. It was a magical place to me. I still fish up there every year."

CATCHING WHAT YOU'RE CASTING FOR

After poring through several sessions on YouTube, Hafer walked out of the tackle shop in San Antonio with a collection of plastic worms and creature baits, mice, frogs, and assorted hardware to throw at the fish in that small Texas creek.

"I've been really surprised about the complexity of bass fishing," Hafer admits. "When I went into Bass Pro three to five years ago, I was going to buy camo, binoculars and scopes, or maybe some fly gear. Now, I'm going in as a bass fisherman, and I'm blown away by all the different baits. There's so much room for creativity in figuring out what's going to make a fish bite. I'm into it. I can go right down that rabbit hole."

His strategy for connecting with the tight-lipped fish in that Texas stream was simple and logical: "I have to throw enough diversity at them – things that are distinctly different – to see what they might hit. Is it the brown mouse? The gray mouse? Is it a different color of worm? Is it action? No action? What do they want?"

And as has been the case almost routinely with BRCC – from those first bags of Freedom Roast to the tons of beans shipped out of the company's roasters in Utah and Tennessee – Hafer found the right combination. After a morning of fighting lures out of trees and slogging through muddy, chest-deep water, he slung a low cast under some overhanging branches, into the back of an eddy, and hopped his mouse across the foamy sludge in the middle of the swirl of current.

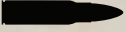
"BOOSH! That big boy came out to eat my mouse right in that sludgy water underneath that tree, and I swear to God, I couldn't have been happier," Hafer says. "It was just perfect. But even in that instant, my mind is screaming to me, *When do I set the hook? Do I set it hard? Do I set it light?* That's a whole other learning point, and so interesting to me. But when that thing hits and you get it in, you're instantly teleported back to a fish you caught when you were 6 years old."

COMPLEXITY, CREATIVITY IN FISHING [AND MARKETING]

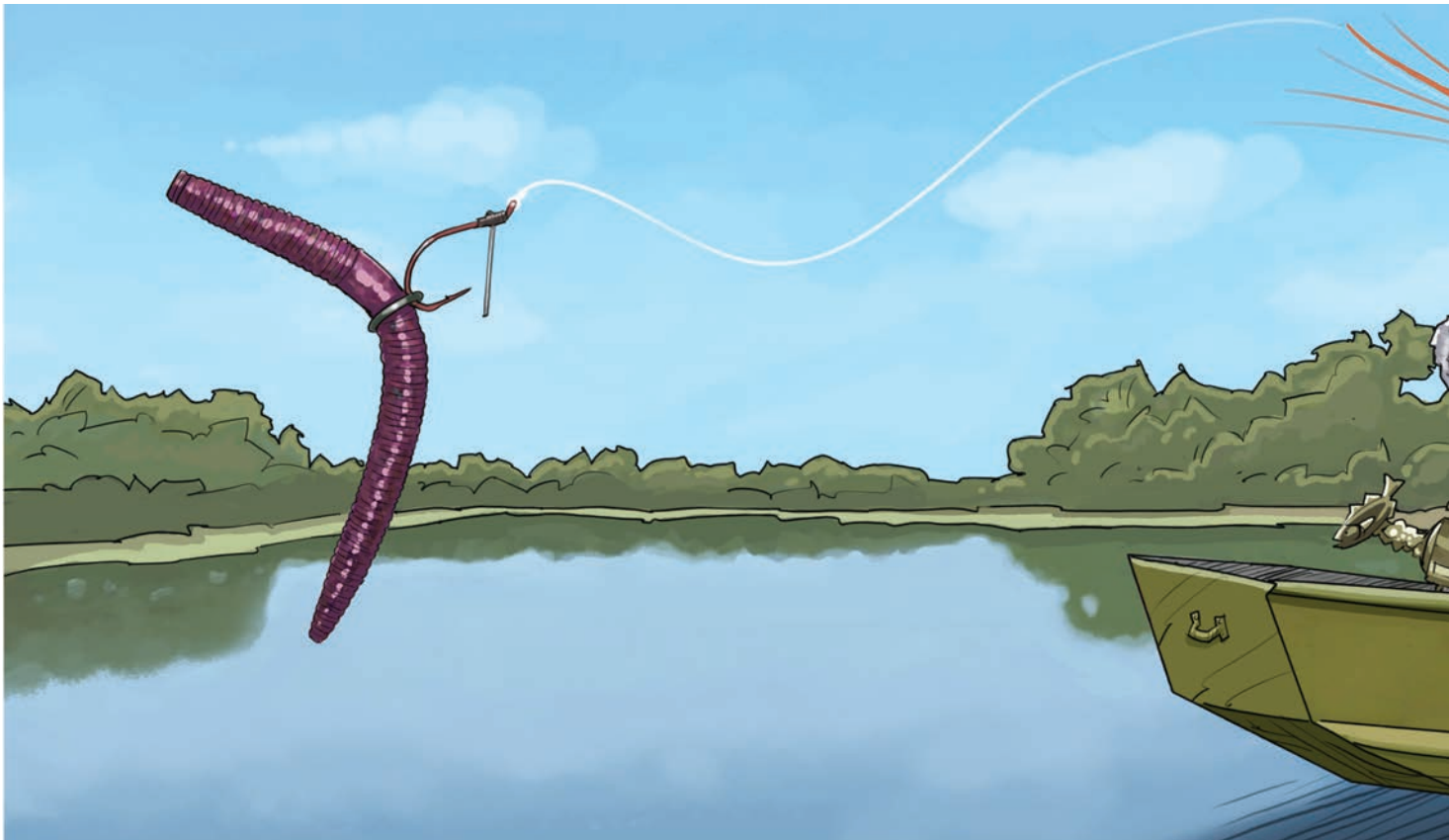
As he comes to the end of the story about his Texas bass, Hafer is reminded of the cornerstones he's touched on repeatedly throughout the 45-minute conversation: strategy, hard work, coffee, marketing and fishing.

"There's such a strong correlation between fishing and marketing, it's crazy," Hafer says. "When you're building out your marketing plan for the year, you're creating strategy. I have a military background. I'm experienced leading men in really complex environments that demand you to assess and adjust to conditions. You have to figure it out. It's the same with fishing: I love to try to figure out what they're eating, what the currents are like. I'll never forget when I figured out a hopper dropper. It blew my mind.

"As we start to unravel what we're doing [at BRCC], people who know me say, 'Oh, Evan is just basically fishing.' I'm roasting badass coffee, organizing strategy, figuring out what people will be interested in. When we're figuring out content, I don't want to build boring marketing content. I don't want to fish the same stream that everybody else has fished 1,000 times, man. I want to go somewhere nobody else has fished and catch fish in the most pristine areas. BRCC is mission, management, logistics. I get to feed my imagination, and then watch it play out every day." ■

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JOHN'S BOAT

Thanks to incredible skill, John Cox can win with simple equipment



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

“Do what you do.” That’s a phrase pro angler John Cox should wear on his sponsor jersey – perhaps somewhere on his sleeve.

I first met Cox in 2011 when he showed up at an FLW Tour event on the Red River with a 17-foot aluminum boat. While other competitors ripped up and down the river in full-size glass boats, Cox putted downstream at 37 mph and then proceeded to push his tiny tin craft into a backwater pond through a metal culvert with a two-by-four.

Cox won the event outright. It was a smart play, but I figured once Cox got his \$100,000 check, he would “upgrade” to a new glass boat with four big-screen

electronics units, strap 30 new rods to the front deck and buy a fancy souped-up truck.

Man, was I ever wrong about that kid in the tin rig from Florida. A million-and-a-half dollars in winnings later, there is still nothing fancy about John Cox. To this day, he still fishes – and wins – out of aluminum boats. Those wins now include a Forrest Wood Cup, four Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit events and two Bassmaster Opens. In fact, the only brand-new glass boat he has ever owned is one he won in a tournament.

Cox’s unique approach to the sport doesn’t end in boat composition, either. During a decade of pro fishing that has been defined by remarkable

advancements in electronic fish-finders, Cox hardly ever relies on such technology. Transducers must be mounted on the outside of aluminum crafts. Therefore, they often become compromised when jumping logs, bumping into rocks, burning over sandbars or grinding through muck. Fishing without a fish-finder is something that doesn’t bother Cox at all. In his Pro Circuit win on Sam Rayburn earlier this year, Cox didn’t even have a fish-finder on his deck the first two days. He is perfectly comfortable fishing “blind.”

In addition to advancements in electronics, trolling motors have also been improved by leaps and bounds in recent years. “Anchor Lock”



and other anchoring capabilities on trolling motors are now “must-haves” for professional anglers. But Cox has bucked the GPS trolling motor movement as well, preferring to stick with the tried-and-true cable-steer foot pedal.

Also, don’t look for many rods to be on his deck during a tournament.

“Since I didn’t install rod straps on my boat, I can only handle three to five rods out on the deck at a time,” he once reasoned.

On those rods, you will find nothing fancy, either: a swim jig, a vibrating jig, a wacky rig, a frog and occasionally a shallow-running crankbait. All baits designed to fish about 6 feet or less.

Considering his old-school approach, it doesn’t seem possible that Cox could win as much as he has against an armada with a glass, graphing and global positioning advantage. But in order to better understand the method to his madness, you have to step into Cox’s boat.

As a kid, Cox grew up stalking bass in the small ponds of central Florida. He cut his teeth fishing in a 12-foot john boat.

“It was actually an aluminum row-boat,” Cox recalls. “My uncle built a wooden front deck in it. I used to fish the john boat league around home.”

From that grew a passion for watching and observing how bass behave in shallow water, especially in vegetation. He became consumed with fooling visible bass into biting, not just during the spawn, but at all times of the year.

While his contemporaries mastered side-scanning and “video-gaming” to depths of 30 feet, Cox stayed consumed with small crafts, neck-deep “salad bowl” lakes, and lures that closely resembled bream and other sunfish forage in the shallows.

Over time, his Power-Poles became his depth-finder, his eyes became his fish-finder and his rod became his cover-finder. Through his lures, Cox knows the feel of hydrilla versus pepper-grass versus eelgrass. His brain time-stamps when one vegetation turns to another and forms a seam. He fishes to find gaps, grooves, sandbars and those magical “voids” in vegetation that electronics don’t always see. No matter what

lake Cox fishes, he searches out these shallow, shrouded locales; places that lack eye-catching contour detail or are not on GPS mapping at all.

Cox is especially attuned to any small condition changes that might create vulnerability among his quarry: the sun going behind a cloud, a sudden breeze that ripples shallow voids in vegetation, a band of slightly clearer water seeping out of a marshy backwater. As of now, no fishing instruments can be bought to alert anglers to such condition changes.

One lapse in judgment from a single bass to boil on Cox’s offering and the colony’s cover has been blown. Suddenly, all the snippets snap into place for Cox in an obscure location that is far from the draft of bigger boats and out of range of sonar pings.

Indeed, fishing from Cox’s boat is seeing the fishing world from a different platform. It’s a little old-school and a little unconventional at the same time, but it works for him, making Cox’s boat a refreshing reminder that no matter where you fish or what you fish for, just do what you do. ■



Lloyd Pickett Jr.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

SECRETS OF THE ALL-AMERICANS

How five BFL standouts became perennial contenders for one of bass fishing's greatest championships



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

I've long considered the All-American to be at the top of competitive fishing's bucket list. While angler-of-the-year titles and world championships get all the press, the All-American, which is the championship for the Phoenix Bass Fishing League presented by T-H Marine, is tougher to conquer. Period.

Consider this: In each season for the last five years, an average of about 4,300 unique anglers fished across the nation on the boater side of the Phoenix Bass Fishing League. Of that figure, only 42 qualified for the All-American each year through the standard Regional process (seven others qualified each year through TBF's championship). So qualifying is roughly a one-in-a-hundred shot, at best. Contrast that with most major pro fishing leagues, where as many as a third of the anglers in the field might qualify for the year-end championship.

Despite the difficulty of making the All-American, a few anglers seem to have cracked the code, making qualifying a routine thing. As we'll see, their secrets lie in careful planning and playing to their strengths.

THE MISSISSIPPI HAMMER

Lloyd Pickett Jr. has qualified for six All-Americans since 2011, making him one of the hottest anglers on the BFL trail. However, even with his modern success, Pickett's tactics remain old school.

"I look for a Regional location where I have some experience, and where I can throw a Carolina rig," he says.

You heard right. Pickett's secret lies in the technique that dominated during the 1980s.

"I've earned 95 percent of my earnings – over a half-million dollars – with that technique," he says.

While the approach might sound simple, an in-depth look reveals a pattern. Pickett's most successful Regionals came on Mid-South reservoirs in the fall of the year. Most featured fish positioned on sparse, isolated cover off the bank and around points and drains – perfect Carolina-rig water.

In an effort to maximize his lure's effectiveness, Pickett will tweak his rig to meet conditions. That could mean switching to a lighter sinker or even a differently shaped weight to ensure his bait slides through the cover. Often, he uses a monofilament leader instead of fluorocarbon to slow his lure's fall. Subtle changes in his setup are the kind that lead to one more fish here and there, which can make a big difference.

Regardless, Pickett lives and dies by the sword. It's the only way he knows to make the Big Show.

"If you've got a technique that's your strength," he says, "you've got to use it to make an All-American."

(Read more about Pickett's Carolina-rigging strategy in the feature on page 64.)



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

KING OF THE HILL

David Wright has fished more All-Americans than anyone in history – a staggering 11 times over the past four decades. A retired computer applications teacher by trade, Wright has always taken a mathematical approach to tournament fishing.

"There are six spots at each Regional [that will qualify for the All-American]," he says. "That's not good odds. So, I pick a division that hosts its Regional at a place where I can fish my strong suit."

Wright admits his specialty is fishing isolated targets offshore, likely with a crankbait, and specifically on the lowland reservoirs of the South. For that reason, his goal is to qualify for Regionals that meet those criteria, with places such as Buggs Island, Eufaula or Gaston topping the list of preferred lakes.

"You've got to be smart enough to know what you're better at than others," the Carolinian insists.

In addition, Wright feels comfortable only with proper preparation.

"If I can't go and practice, I might as well stay home," he says.

He'll often visit Regional sites long before he's qualified in order to search for isolated, overlooked targets. In the event that he makes the Regional, which he usually does, Wright will already be one step ahead once practice begins.



PHOTO BY CURTIS NIEDERMIER

THE OZARK DUO

Roger Fitzpatrick and Dennis Berhorst are two of the most successful tournament anglers in the history of the Ozarks. Together, they have qualified for a stunning 15 All-Americans. They also share information while preparing for tournaments. Their All-American secret lies in playing their strengths as shallow-water powerhouses.

"Put the trolling motor down and fish everything," says Fitzpatrick of his usual game plan.

"If there's a fish on the bank," adds Berhorst, "I'm going to find him."

Fitzpatrick and Berhorst take casts-per-day to the extreme. In fact, Berhorst will often fish 30 or more tournaments a year and never break 50 hours on his outboard, yet he'll put thousands on his trolling motor. To each, burning the bank is a lifestyle, which is a big part of why they've had so much Regional success.

"Regionals are in October, and, most of the time, they are won fishing shallow," Fitzpatrick says.

Practice usually follows a pretty standard procedure, where they start fishing near the bank, and, once a fish is caught, attempt to quickly duplicate likely scenarios and cover. After a key trait has been established, they compare notes.

"You've got two minds, and two lines in the water instead of one," Berhorst says, adding that he only listens to Fitzpatrick. "I pay no attention to dock talk of any kind. I just keep my line wet."

It's a unique approach, but, obviously, an effective one.



PHOTO BY MATT PAGE

ALL-AMERICAN BOATER CHAMPIONS

YEAR	NAME	FISHERY
2019	Brennon McCord	Potomac River
2018	Nick LeBrun	Cross Lake
2017	Marshall Deakins	Pickwick Lake
2016	Jeremy Lawyer	Lake Barkley
2015	Curtis Richardson	Kentucky Lake
2014	Marcus Sykora	Wilson Lake
2013	Kerry Milner	Nickajack Lake
2012	Brian Maloney	Potomac River
2011	Jacob Wheeler	Cross Lake
2010	Troy Morrow	DeGray Lake
2009	Adam Wagner	Mississippi River
2008	Shayne Berlo	Lake Hamilton
2007	Shonn Goodwin	Ohio River
2006	Robert Walser	Connecticut River
2005	Wade Ramsey	Ohio River
2004	Allen Hayes	Lake Hamilton
2003	Tony Christian	Mobile Delta
2002	Eddie Waits III	Cross Lake
2001	Jeff Coble	Lake Hamilton
2000	Jeff Coble	Lake Hamilton
1999	Mike Baldwin	Mississippi River
1998	Kim Carver	Mississippi River
1997	Daniel Branscum	Arkansas River
1996	Stephen Browning	Arkansas River
1995	Rick LaMountain	Ohio River
1994	Dean Starkey	Arkansas River
1993	Doug Garrett	Black Warrior River
1992	Clark Wendlandt	Arkansas River
1991	Arvin Smith	Lake Erie
1990	Joe Thomas	Lake Erie
1989	Grayson Tobler	Arkansas River
1988	<i>*All-American tournament date moved from November 1988 to June 1989</i>	
1987	O.T. Fears	Arkansas River
1986	Joseph Yates	Lake Havasu
1985	Rick Clunn	Lake Havasu
1984	Shaw Grigsby	Kissimmee Chain
1983	Dean Starkey	Kentucky Lake

A CAROLINA CHAMPION

Robert Walser won the All-American in 2006 and has racked up two Regional wins to boot.

Walser is a shallow-water power fisherman and proud of it. He sums up his shallow-water program – and his approach to fishing Regionals – pretty simply: “I’m not one to drop-shot, and I’m not going to put time in to go to a Regional at Lanier.”

Forty years of tournament fishing have grounded Walser in terms of tactics.

“From the start in practice, I just look for a place where I can get a bite,” he says. “From there, I duplicate it.”

Walser admits that his Regional plan is to fish textbook fall patterns on shad-filled reservoirs. But, he cautions that eliminating water is as important as finding productive stretches because “not every creek is a fall creek, for whatever reason.”

With four full days of practice, Walser burns through tremendous amounts of shallow water in an attempt to unlock the secrets of the lake. He does so through a practiced program, fishing spinnerbaits, topwaters, crankbaits – anything he considers efficient. He scoffs at the idea that he’s a one-trick pony with a diving plug, despite a reputation for winning with a crankbait.

“I don’t want to be known as anything other than the man who took your money this week,” he says. ■



PHOTO BY MATT PAGE



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PHOTO BY ERIC ENGBRETSON

FINDING BASS PART 2: FORAGE AVAILABILITY

Knowing what bass eat, its prevalence and seasonal abundance can lead to more successful days on the water



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

The focus of the last few *Conservation* columns has been this revolving concept of using science and critical thinking to help answer this seemingly simple question for your local fishery: “Where are the bass?” As all bass anglers know, in order to catch them, you have to be around them.

In prior installments, we covered an overview of population dynamics and took a deep dive into habitat and how it can help determine the presence or absence of bass. In this piece, we’ll look at another important factor in the location and catchability of bass: forage type and availability.

A BASS WON’T BE WHERE A BASS CAN’T EAT

This might sound like an oversimplification, but except for the week or so of the year that bass are actively spawning on a given fishery, they don’t have much else to do other than eat and grow. For that reason, it shouldn’t be a surprise that once the bass are off the bed, you can guarantee that by keeping yourself around potential prey items, you’re probably going to be near a bass or two.

It’s certainly true that there are prey items available in many places where there are no bass. Look under any dock or slowly troll through some lily

pads and you’ll no doubt see a host of bugs, minnows and other potential bass prey, regardless of whether you see any bass.

Bass are opportunists, though, so when forced to choose from a row of docks that all have random minnows and bugs around them, they are more than likely going to choose one that’s got relatively more minnows and bugs, or the one close to deep water or a point, which might also offer access to some random schools of shad.

The key is to look for relative abundances of prey species. If they are eating bluegills, look for areas with

relatively more bluegills. The same thing applies to any other prey species. The trends are what matter most.

FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

Anglers don't generally have the time or scientific acumen to analyze specific baitfish assemblages on each waterbody, or to learn the Latin names of all the darter species native to the Arkansas River basin. But by doing a little research up front, it's easy to set a "mental table" of what types of forage are available in a lake. It's also smart to learn a little base info about the forage species available, including how they behave and how bass utilize them.

By spending a little time online looking at fisheries data and creel or shocking surveys – or even going down to the lake and doing some old-fashioned looking – you can usually get a pretty good idea of what's available in your local haunts. The key is to keep it high-level, as the dominant trends are more important than the minutiae.

Examples of things to look for and questions to ask include: Are there shad in the system? If so, is it just threadfin shad, or are there gizzard shad as well? What types of sunfish species are available? How big are they? What do they look like? Are there pelagic (open-water) baitfish present such as blueback herring, alewives or smelt? Do they stock trout in the lake? What do the crawfish look like locally, and roughly how big are they?

Answers to each of these questions can dramatically flatten the learning curve and help anyone be more successful faster on new bodies

of water, because each tidbit of knowledge can help hone fishing location and presentation details.

Take a simple question like, "Are shad present?" If the answer is no, you might want to focus more on bottom-related offshore presentations, as offshore bass are likely eating crayfish and other bottom-dwelling minnows (versus shad that would likely be up in the water column). You might also want to look for aggregations of bluegills since it's a good bet that's a more important forage species on that fishery.

Knowing what forage is present can also help you hone your presentation. If the lake has shad – but only threadfins – it might be OK to leave the big baits at home since threadfin shad max out at around 5 inches, unlike their bigger cousin, the gizzard shad, that easily reaches 12 inches.

Similarly, a lake with a huge population of yellow perch should alert anglers that perch patterns will be a bigger player.

SEASONAL CHANGES

If you have a good understanding of what forage is available in your local haunts and use that information in your daily fishing plans, you're probably catching bass more regularly than you were before, and that's a great place to start.

The next level is to include seasonality in how you think about bass forage. In the term "forage availability," the word "availability" is equally important as the word before it. Just because a prey species is present in a given lake, river or reservoir doesn't mean it's available to the bass all year.

Experience tells us that in much of the country the shad spawn starts a few weeks after the bass spawn, and targeting bass feeding on spawning shad is a great way to get your string stretched. But get there a week early or a week late and you're likely to strike out.

Other examples of seasonality in prey species include learning the stocking schedule in a trout-fed lake and timing trips accordingly; or the knowledge that the crawfish of the genus *Cambarus* tend to burrow up in October and emerge from their burrows in March or April to breed. Perhaps that's why crawfish patterns are so effective in the early spring.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

While this might seem like information overload, the key takeaway should be this: Bass don't just randomly disperse across a waterbody. After the spawn, they are keenly attuned to the movements and behavior of their forage base. For that reason, the more anglers can learn about what the bass are eating, the more they can apply it to their plans.

You don't need to be a fisheries biologist to catch more bass, but understanding what they're eating and why those prey animals do what they do can go a long way toward putting you around more and bigger bass, which is the best way to catch them.



PHOTO BY ERIC ENGBRETSON

LOCAL FORAGE ODDITIES

Across much of the country, the three main forage types bass feed on are shad, bluegills (and other bream) and crawfish. However, bass are opportunists, and as such, they are more than willing to feed on something else provided it's available and reasonably nutritious. Paying attention to any "oddball" forage species available can also be key.

A few years ago, a tournament on the tidal James River in Virginia was won by a gentleman fishing a finesse worm, targeting bass feeding on blue crabs molting due to the new moon. Bass fishing legend Aaron Martens won another top-level tournament on Lake Havasu by punching deep into tule fields to target bass feeding on baby birds.

Other regional forage species include barfish (yellow bass) in Texas and Oklahoma, golden shiners and amphiuma (a legless salamander) in Florida, and certainly round gobies in the Great Lakes. Without question, there are many more, too. ■

Everyone knows to fish shade in the summer, but some of the best patterns exist within shadows that many anglers overlook.



PHOTO BY TACTICAL BASSIN

FIND MIDDAY BASS IN THE SHADOWS

Summer patterns don't have to fizzle out midday if you find key targets in the shade



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



If we told you to fish shadows this summer, you'd probably immediately envision skipping a bait up under a dock, pitching a Senko to the dark side of a lay-down tree or punching through a heavy mat. That's not a bad start, but it's also not exactly what we're talking about.

Everyone knows that it's a good strategy to fish shadows in summer, but odds are, you've never even considered the shadows that actually matter on your lake.

OBVIOUS LOW-LIGHT PERIODS

The average angler fishes at first and last light all summer. They're on the water for the morning reaction bite, and they're back off as the recreational boaters begin to launch.

The real die-hards show back up for the evening or night bite.

Morning and evening are low-light periods and full of potential shadows. It's comfortable to fish then, and, frankly, it works.

As the sun begins to beat down and the mercury rises, bass begin to congregate in the remaining shadows. Most anglers are already gone and have no idea that the best bite of summer is about to begin. Fish that spent the morning roaming are suddenly huddled in small clusters just waiting for their opportunity to feed.

Yes, this happens under docks, mats and laydowns, but that's just the tip of the iceberg. They also congregate on overlooked locations. Exactly where depends on the type of fishery.

HIGHLAND COLOR LINES

Highland reservoirs are typically characterized by steeper shorelines, winding river arms full of secondary points and fairly clear water. Think of lakes like Cumberland or Table Rock.

Highland reservoirs offer the most unique shade pattern of any lake type on an overlooked shadow that we call the "color line." As you move away from the bank the water begins changing color from lighter greens and blues to the deeper greens and blues of open water. The transition from light to dark is the color line. It could be in 3 feet of water or 50 feet, depending on the lake clarity. Bass will gather just below and outside the color line all summer long.

To take advantage of the color line, wait until the sun is at

its highest and fish your baits parallel along the line. If the lake has a lot of spotted and smallmouth bass, this is a great place to throw topwater for suspended fish, regardless of depth. If you're primarily targeting largemouth bass, focus on deep crankbaits or slower bottom-contact baits. If they're pulling water out of the lake and creating flow, continue to fish the color line, but do it on points and islands that intersect the current.

LOWLAND GRASS AND CURRENT

Lowland reservoirs are typically characterized by large bays full of humps, ledges and slow-tapering points. Most of the Tennessee River lakes are prime examples of lowland reservoirs.

In these fisheries you'll find two distinct groups of fish. The first group of fish will spend the summer on outside structure and will position near current when water is being pulled. Rather than fishing the same ledges as everyone else this summer, intentionally search for ledges that top out at the same depth as the color line. This is where you stand the best chance of finding the mega-schools of summer bass that others have overlooked.

The second group of fish in these lakes will stay shallow after the spawn and spend the summer in the shade of the grass. The best place to start is around grass clumps that grow just outside the main grass beds. These single, small patches nearest to open water will often hold the bigger bass, and as a rule of thumb, the single patches that actually touch the surface will hold the biggest fish of all.

NATURAL LAKE GRASS LINES

Natural lakes that have no dam and little water fluctuation provide the easiest shade patterns. Because the water is stable, the grass line almost always coincides with the color line. The key here is simply to get away from the bank. Fish the farthest outer edges of the grass.

Just like in lowland reservoirs, expect your best bites to come from the smaller clumps that are farthest from shore. Keep in mind, these fish could be just below the thickest surface grass waiting to ambush your frog, or they could be hunkered at the base of the grass stems ready to devour a jig. Their exact depth will vary with conditions, but their location is incredibly consistent.

CURRENT, COVER AND CREEKS

Creeks and rivers, including tidal fisheries, make up the final category (though you'll have to stretch the information to fit tidal rivers). Summer bass love current. Expect them to be very close to fast-moving water without actually being in it.

While many anglers focus on deeper pools and shade lines, we've found an incredible number of big fish holding at the first piece of overhead cover below big riffles. Don't be afraid to make repetitive casts at a small piece of shade after the first catch, since summer bass are rarely alone.

As small creeks turn to rivers, the target changes from an overhanging limb to a wing dam or a log stuck on the corner of a sandbar. The targets are larger, but the bass' desire to hold on structure near current remains the same.

Whichever type of fishery you frequent, your bass fishing doesn't have to end when the sun peeks over the horizon. When other anglers are heading for home midday, switch your attention to overlooked shadows and enjoy all that summer has to offer. ■

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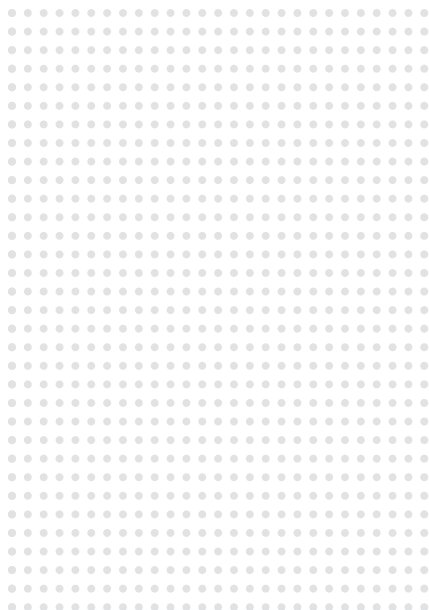


POWER FISHING

By Tyler Brinks

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL HOEWELER

IS IT POSSIBLE TO COMPETE AND SUCCEED WITHOUT HAVING TO FISH FINESSE? ISH MONROE AND ZACK BIRGE BELIEVE IT'S [ALMOST] DOABLE.



In bass fishing, there are two predominant ways to catch fish: power-fishing techniques on bait-casting gear and finesse applications with spinning equipment.

Sure, the lines are blurred with some light-line baitcast rigs and heavier spinning outfits, but for the most part, it's one or the other. Both styles of fishing have their time and place, and the majority of bass fishermen are adept at fishing both and equally comfortable no matter what type of rod they're using. Whatever the situation calls for, most bass anglers are ready to adapt in order to catch fish.

But what if you could make a living using only power-fishing strategies? What if you didn't need to slow down or fish finesse except in extreme cases? Is there an advantage to the heavy line and high speed of power-fishing only, or would there be a major handicap?

Major League Fishing pros Ish Monroe and Zack Birge are proof that power can pay off virtually all the time. They are both more than capable of picking up spinning gear and succeeding. They just prefer not to. They're power fishermen, and they've made their power-fishing approaches work. They generally fish their way and find success wherever the Bass Pro Tour schedule takes them.

We asked them to divulge a few of their power-fishing reasons and strategies for success.

ZACK BIRGE



PHOTO BY JESSE SCHULTZ

ISH MONROE



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

COVER MORE WATER WITH HIGH-SPEED TACTICS



Birge is of the mindset that covering water will lead to more opportunities during the day. Hence, moving quickly has always been his favorite way to target bass, and he's made it work as a professional angler.

When he gets into a competition, his goal is to use power-fishing strategies to up his odds of finding and capitalizing on those opportunities, rather than getting mired in a slow, finesse approach.

"I grew up fishing fast and running whatever looks good to me, and that is still how I approach tournaments," Birge says. "The more casts you can make in a day, the more fish you can get in front of."

Since power-fishing techniques often produce big bass, Birge says it's an excellent approach for tournament fishing. The added benefit is the number of fish that can be caught while covering vast expanses of water.

"For my sake, fishing fast is the best way for me to get in a position to do well, both in the individual tournament and for points for the end of the year," he adds. "If you keep moving quickly and start getting bites in certain areas or on types of cover, you can build off of that and figure the pattern out that much faster, in my opinion."

He also feels it's an asset for the MLF every-fish-counts format.

"Our game is all about generating bites. Fishing fast with power-fishing techniques is a great way to do that," Birge adds. "There isn't a better way to both cover water and eliminate water than by moving down the bank and fishing quickly."

TARGET BIGGER FISH WITH HEAVY-COVER TECHNIQUES



While Birge likes to cover water quickly and move down the bank with reaction baits, Monroe is known for his prowess with big rods and heavy braided line.

A big reason why is that power-fishing tackle is necessary to fish in the places that Monroe believes are home to the biggest bass.

"If you look at tournament fishing from the very beginning to now, spinning tackle has never been a large player in the wins," he says. "Sure, it has moments on some lakes, but for the most part, you can't expect to win with a spinning rod, and I would much rather be fishing the way that I want to every time I am on the water."

The techniques he most often employs to catch better quality bass - frogging, flipping and punching thick vegetation - require that he use power-fishing tackle.

"I am always fishing to win, and that often means flipping the heaviest cover you can find," Monroe says. "You just can't do that with spinning tackle or you would lose every fish that bites. It's just my mentality, and when I am in a tournament, I am still looking for those 8-, 10- and 12-pound bass. Those fish of a lifetime are still possible in a tournament."

"Power-fishing is my way of fishing whether it is a five-fish game or the Major League Fishing format," he adds. "If you look at all of the Bass Pro Tour events that have taken place so far, only one, at Table Rock Lake, was won with a spinning rod. Power-fishing with baitcast gear is still the way to win tournaments."



FULL-POWER BAIT SELECTION

A pile of lures fit into the power-fishing category, but Birge and Monroe find themselves gravitating to some more often than others.

1. CRANKBAITS

"I throw a Yo-Zuri square-bill crankbait a lot," says Birge. "It's something that you can fish just about everywhere and anywhere. I believe there will always be some resident fish in shallow water, and a square-bill is one of the best ways to target these bass with the way that I like to fish."

"I'll start early in the year with the crawfish patterns and switch to shad patterns as the season goes on. You can do it all year long."

2. CHATTERBAITS

Birge is also a big fan of the Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer.

"I throw a bunch of ChatterBaits because they work everywhere and you can fish them fast," he says.

3. TOPWATER AND SPINNERBAITS

Also favorites of Birge and Monroe, topwater baits and spinnerbaits work well for the same reason as the ChatterBait: They can be fished fast to cover a lot of water.

4. FROGS

Monroe's first choice for lures would be a frog if conditions allow for it, specifically the River2Sea Ish Monroe Phat Mat Daddy Frog. Frogs are notorious for getting the biggest bites. Plus, they can be fished in heavy cover where big bass live.

5. FLIPPING BAITS

Monroe's success as a power fisherman over the years has lent itself to a host of other signature-series fishing products, from spinnerbaits and square-bills to flipping hooks and punch rods. The latter are among his favorites for hauling big fish out of heavy cover.

OFF THE BANK

Though the baits and patterns Birge and Monroe prefer to use really lend themselves well to fishing shallow, the concept works on offshore fish, too. Birge likes to stay on the move and fish fast in either case and believes his method is valid no matter where he's fishing.

"If I'm fishing offshore on a long tapering point or a rock pile, I am always going to start fishing it with a fast bait," he says. "Right when I pull up, I'm going to make several casts with something like a crankbait and try to get those aggressive fish first."

If that doesn't work, he'll slow down and target the area with a bait along the bottom, especially if fishing a brush pile or other specific piece of cover.

Monroe has a similar strategy. He'd prefer to fish shallow around heavy cover, but he'll fish offshore if he feels



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MONROE

that gives him the best chance to win the tournament.

Because fish group up offshore, it actually can pay to use more aggressive tactics in order to try and get bites from better quality fish.

"If I am offshore, I'm still going to be looking for the biggest fish. Ledge

fishing is a good example of where you often see schools of fish grouped by size," Monroe says. "If you are catching smaller fish, chances are that's the size of most of the fish in the school. They don't want to compete with bigger fish, and it tells me to move on and keep looking."



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PHOTO BY JOSH GASSMANN

Fork this year) and other subtle soft plastics sometimes are the best choice, but they're not these pros' first choice.

POWER FAILURES

Both Monroe and Birge admit there are potential downfalls that can occur with their power-fishing mindsets. Recognizing the limitations helps them to avoid overlooking opportunities.

"I know there are times when I am just going too fast and going by fish that I could catch if I slowed down," Birge says. "The other weakness of fishing like this is that you tend to get locked into the pattern and moving quickly, and you might overlook the obvious. If you are burning down the bank trying to cover water, you might not be looking for bedding fish or a piece of submerged cover."

Monroe also acknowledges that his approach has led him astray on certain fisheries where it's inherently difficult to win or do well without fishing finesse. Usually, that's a matter of water clarity or the predominant species.

As an example, he points to fisheries like Lake St. Clair and the St. Lawrence River. Rather than finesse for smallies, Monroe has fished tournaments at both fisheries and applied his power-fishing approach for shallow largemouths. In each case, he got beat by competitors targeting smallies.

Monroe was able to make his approach work to some extent, but it just wasn't good enough to compete on those fisheries, where finesse can't simply be relegated to being a last resort.

"As I have gotten older, I have become more stubborn and want to fish my way," he says. "Sometimes, you try hard to make something happen, and it's just not going to happen. At the Great Lakes, you need to get out there with a spinning rod if you expect to do well. That's just the way it is."

There's something to be said for being a versatile angler and being willing to do what it takes to catch fish. That's one of the hallmarks of many successful professional anglers.

However, for Monroe and Birge, sticking to a power-fishing approach breeds confidence, and it allows them to stay efficient at locating bigger bass. Their careers were built on power-fishing, and they plan to keep it that way. ■

THE MIDDLE GROUND

So, what do you do when you're "wired" for power-fishing but are faced with tough fishing conditions, whether due to fishing pressure or adverse weather? While most anglers reach for spinning tackle and tie up finesse baits to get bites, Monroe and Birge alter their standard tactics for a more middle-of-the-road approach.

"I still use spinning tackle if I absolutely have to, but for me, finesse fishing is switching to a smaller jig or using a 5-inch Senko on baitcast gear with 12-pound-test fluorocarbon," Monroe says. "You can still do what you need to do and slow down to get more bites with baitcast gear."

Location changes also factor in.

"My first approach is to look for areas that other people won't fish or

the places that are hard to get to," Monroe adds. "Most of the time, I can do that and still fish the way I like to, but I may have to downsize my bait a little bit to get bites."

Birge follows a similar strategy. Rather than a full-on switch to something finesse, he makes adjustments to the baits he prefers to be fishing so he doesn't have to sacrifice speed and efficiency.

"I'll start by changing lure colors or start to experiment with little things to change the baits - something like adding bigger blades to spinnerbaits to get them to slow down some," Birge explains.

Eventually, if they must, Birge and Monroe will resort to spinning tackle. Shaky heads, wacky worms, floating worms (Monroe threw one at Lake

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WORLD'S BEST SMALLMOUTH WATERS PRESENT MOVING TARGETS, MEGA REWARDS

By Cory Schmidt

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

The power and enormity of the Great Lakes have been known to occasionally turn the legs of otherwise experienced anglers into Jell-O. Imagine, then, the unstoppable force created by collecting the entire volume of all five Great Lakes – approximately 6 quadrillion gallons – and squeezing it through a relatively narrow downhill corridor toward the ocean. You begin to understand the relentless energy and infinite conveyor belt of aquatic life that is the St. Lawrence River.

As bass, walleye and muskie boats float downstream toward the Atlantic at an average clip of around 3 mph, current closer to bottom delivers a never-ending bass food buffet – round gobies, shad, shiners, perch, crayfish and anything else that more or less fits into the jaws of 4- to 7-pound smallmouth bass.

Right now, the water level in Lake Ontario, which directly feeds the “St. Larry,” is higher than it’s been in a hundred years. More water means faster flows in the river, and even greater challenges for anglers attempting to position their boats and deliver baits to prime real estate. Certainly, when anglers visit the river for this summer’s Tackle Warehouse FLW TITLE presented by Toyota, they’ll be contending with some formidable flows.

The silver lining, whether you’re planning an excursion to the St. Lawrence, Niagara, Detroit or another mega bass river, is this: Current means aggressively biting bronzebacks that grow as large and powerful as any specimens on Earth.



According to FLW pro Scott Dobson, controlling drift speed is a huge consideration when fishing the fast flows of the Great Lakes region's major rivers.

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

CURRENT, WIND AND GREAT BIG SHIPS

Given a lifetime of Great Lakes experience, Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit angler Scott Dobson knows a little something about catching bass from moving water. Before making a strong tournament run shaped by Michigan's mighty St. Clair River and Detroit River, however, Dobson earned his victories via plenty of trial and error.

"At a 2002 tournament near the 1000 Islands [St. Lawrence River] area, I had been smashing big postspawn smallmouths and leading the event for two days," recalls

Dobson. "On day three, a big east wind came along and really humbled me. Overnight, water temps had plummeted 10 degrees in the west-side bay I'd been fishing. My fish just vanished. Meanwhile, guys fishing the wind-blown side of the river absolutely wrecked the bronzies. The wind had totally altered the current, pushing the lighter, warmer surface water from one side of the river to the other."

Since that event, Dobson – who secured the 2019 Toyota Series Northern Division Angler of the Year title with a second-place finish on the St. Lawrence – has learned to factor in wind direction and velocity just as prominently as current speed itself.

"The St. Lawrence generally flows west to east [specifically, southwest to northeast, toward the Atlantic], but a good west or southwest wind can really speed up your drift in the main river," notes Dobson. "If you're fishing a drop-shot or a tube vertically, the increased boat speed can kill your presentation because bass know what current speed looks like, and often won't react to something tumbling along bottom at an unnatural speed, particularly on the fast end of the spectrum. Likewise, current near bottom often flows slower than it does at the surface, so sometimes you've got to slow your drift by pointing the bow into the current and setting the trolling motor at 3 or 4. In ideal conditions, I'd say drift speeds between 0.5 to 1.3 mph are about right. As drift speed increases, of course, you've also got to deploy a heavier jig or sinker to maintain vertical control."

Conversely, Dobson says, a stiff east wind can substantially slow your drift speed.

"Sometimes, that's a good thing," he says. "But it can also be a challenge because it doesn't allow your boat to drift at the same speed as the current or as your bait down below. Often, you have to point the nose into the wind [down current] and increase your trolling motor speed to match the flow. This is also important because it gives you more control of your bait, keeps it in the strike zone and helps reduce snags."

Further complicating matters, current on rivers like the St. Lawrence can change from day to day, nearly always making bass move. Creating the pool known as Lake St. Lawrence, the Moses-Saunders Power Dam near Massena, N.Y., for example, can alter daily discharge by tens of thousands of cubic feet per second (CFS). Even on a 30-foot-deep shelf, a sudden shift in current is likely to prompt smallmouths to reposition or vacate the area entirely. But while slack water may turn bass tough, increasing current normally induces a more aggressive bite – once you locate fish.

Another interesting influence results from the massive, impossible-to-ignore freighter ships navigating large rivers on a daily basis. Particularly on narrower rivers such as the Detroit and St. Clair,



GOLD MEDAL BAITS

The 2019 Pan American Black Bass Championship – featuring Olympic-style team fishing – occurred on the St. Lawrence River near Cornwall, Ontario, last October. While Team Canada won the overall gold medal among participating nations, primarily with ChatterBaits in shallow milfoil, Team USA members Brian Latimer and Mark Daniels Jr. won the individual two-angler team gold with a variety of Z-Man Ned-rigged plastics.

Most of the anglers keyed on late-fall backwater staging zones near shallow milfoil flats and associated isolated holes with rock and sand. A key adjustment by Daniels and Latimer was to make extra-long casts toward less obvious holes within the vegetation.

Earlier in the season, anglers targeting shallow structure near current rely on jerkbaits to find fish. Spy baits, black hair jigs, drop-shots and Ned rigs shine for triggering bass that follow but hesitate to bite faster-moving lures. Scott Dobson wields a size 100 DUO Realis jerkbait, because it's simple to work and easy on his wrists.

For deeper drifting, prominent drop-shot baits include an X Zone Lures Pro Series Finesse Slammer, Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flatnose Minnow and Jackall Crosstail Shad. Stanley's The Goby offers an incredibly lifelike baitfish shape.

Grae Buck prefers Eco Pro Tungsten drop-shot weights and a Z-Man Trick ShotZ on a No. 1 drop-shot hook. He's also experienced recent hot bites with a Z-Man Trout Trick – a finesse-sized inshore saltwater bait.

All the usual Ned-rigged baits produce shallow and deep, though anglers often opt for slightly heavier jigheads with beefier hooks, such as a 1/3-ounce Z-Man Pro ShroomZ or Reins Tungsten Ned Rig Jig Head.

On bright, sunny days when bass are especially spooky, Dobson turns to translucent-colored baits or natural colors that blend into the bottom. Dobson notes the goby exhibits a chameleon-like ability to change colors to match substrates.

the giant props propelling these ships can actually create artificial feeding situations.

"You see the big freighters going up and down the river 15 to 20 times a day," Dobson adds. "Over time, the water they're moving – pushing it up toward the bank and then sucking it back out – creates new scours or depressions in the sand. Shallow fish, in particular, use these as current breaks. But even if you're fishing the edge of a deeper shelf, you want to be up there fishing before the freighter goes through. The sudden surge in current displaces gobies and crayfish, which gets the bass fired up."

DEEP DRIFTING DILEMMAS

While most days Dobson would certainly rather tuck his bass boat out of the wind behind an island and sight-fish a jerkbait around a shallow point – the tactic he used to lock down Angler of the Year in 2019 – he admits that in the summer, the largest concentrations of 4- and 5-pounders are often munching gobies in 20 to 40 feet of water. Some of the better drifts occur on 20- to 25-foot-deep hard-bottom humps, shelves or points off islands, surrounded by 40 feet of water or more. He says

chutes between two humps can also be key bass zones. Always, current breaks are the answer, whether it's the highest spot on a vast hump or the eddy behind a single boulder.

"The deal is to start your drift about 50 to 100 feet upstream from the front side of the break. You want to give yourself time to drop the trolling motor and get your drop-shot, tube or Ned rig to the bottom. It needs to be down there before you reach the front face of the rise. Your bait should crawl up the drop on the upstream side of the structure, canvass all the real estate on top of the hump and then inch its way back down the drop-off on the down-current side. You'll typically get most of your bites in one of these three zones. Once you figure it out, you can pattern fish using similar spots along other drift locations.

"It usually takes several drifts to discover all the bass-holding areas, the sweet spots, and get them punched into your GPS. My new Lowrance Ghost trolling motor even lets me tap a button on my foot pad to log waypoints, which will be huge. The goal is to hit all the sweet spots on each drift. It can be a slow process. Some of the humps stretch over a mile, but the juice might lie within 30 yards. Other

times, you never entirely figure out the perfect drift."

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit angler Grae Buck is a fellow big-water smallmouth expert. He notes that while smallmouths typically show up clearly on electronics, river bass exhibit the vexing ability to pin themselves to bottom and elude sonar detection. He also finds that bass on big rivers tend to school by size. It's the reason many anglers, such as MLF Bass Pro Tour angler Ott DeFoe, often deploy an underwater camera while scouting deep river locations, where the bass hunker deep among the rocks.

"The Aqua-Vu underwater optics show the bass clear as day," DeFoe says. "It's given me the confidence to stay and execute the right drift, angle and speed to catch 4-pounders."

Further, in the clear waters of Great Lakes rivers, anglers often observe smallmouth bass utilizing the boat's shadow for cover and ambush feeding.

"This can be an advantage for co-anglers, because on drifts, their baits are usually in better position to entice bites in the boat shadow," says Dobson. "It's another reason I often prefer shallow patterns over deep drifting in tournaments. Of course, many days, particularly with lots of fishing pressure, the bass won't bite a vertical presentation, and you have to get your bait far away from the boat."

THE SWEET CAROLINA

Playing a quiet role at the 2019 Toyota Series Northern Division finale was a traditional bass rig that's often overshadowed by the usual drop-shot, Ned rig and tube jig programs – a Carolina rig. Nonetheless, many anglers opted not to go on record regarding use of a Carolina rig for deep-current situations.

Fortunately, ace fishing writer and friend Tim Allard put me in touch with Canadian tournament hammer Dave Chong, who competed against top U.S. pros in the 2019 Pan American Black Bass Championship on Lake St. Francis, a pool of the St. Lawrence River. Chong was happy to divulge the technique that has produced prodigious bags of bass in many moving-water derbies.

"I've used a heavy-duty version of the Carolina on the St. Lawrence and other rivers for around a decade,"



Dave Chong has mastered the longline Carolina rig with big tungsten weights for fishing on bottom in deep, fast-moving rivers.

PHOTO BY CONY SCHMIDT

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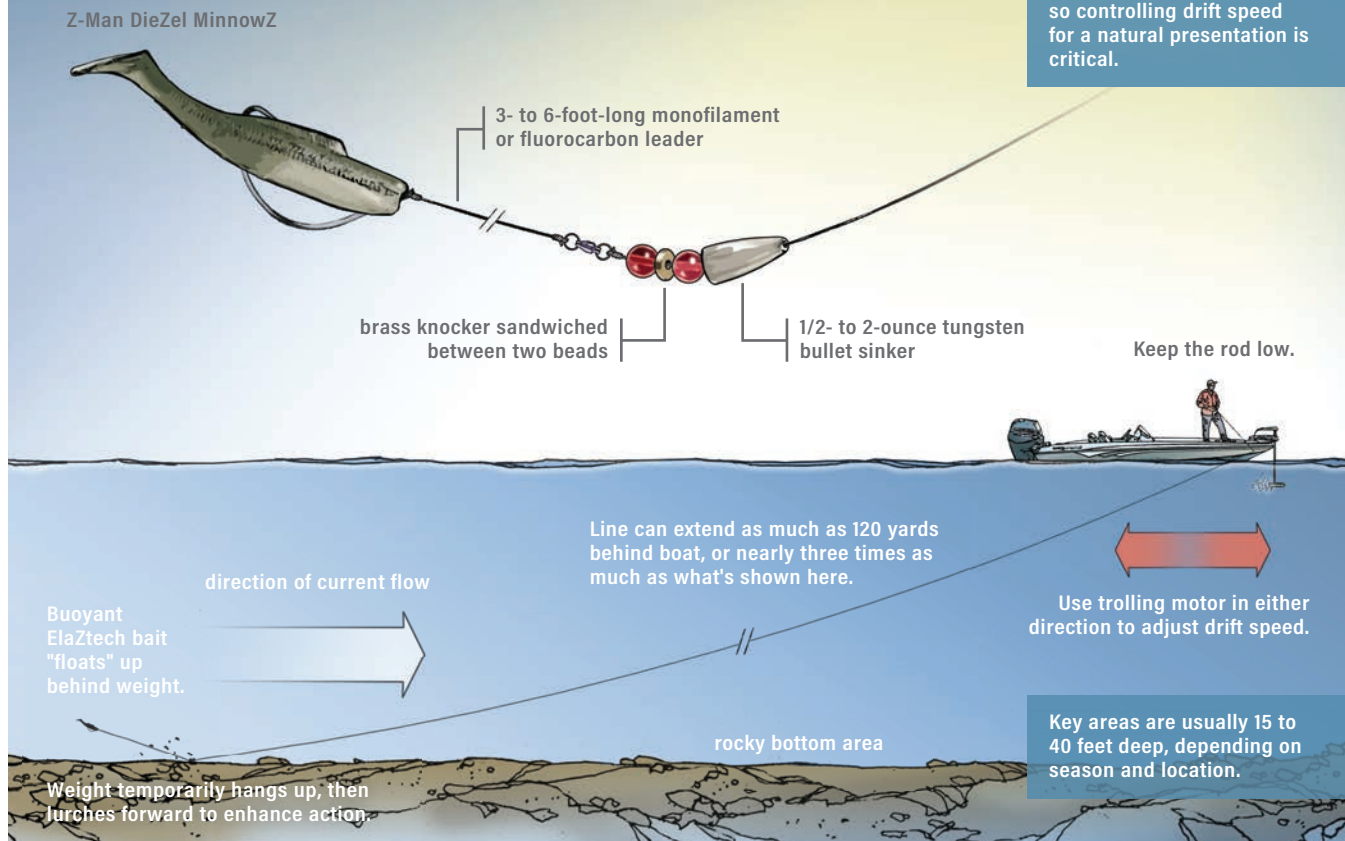


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DEEP CAROLINA RIGGING IN HEAVY CURRENT



says Chong, who won a Renegade Bass Classic a few years ago with a power Carolina rig. "Even when current is ripping on the St. Lawrence and Lake St. Francis – with water moving from 2.5 to 6 mph – we've proven bass are perfectly suited to feeding in those situations. When they shut off flow at the dam, a drop-shot or tube might be better, but for big aggressive bites in heavy current, nothing beats a Carolina."

Particularly for inducing bites from big wary smallmouths in clear water, Chong prefers to longline drag a 1/2- to 2-ounce tungsten bullet sinker in front of a Zoom UV Speed Craw or 4- or 5-inch Z-Man DieZel MinnowZ swimbait. He rigs the Speed Craw on a 4/0 Owner TwistLock 3X hook. The swim-bait matches an offset hook like the Mustad Grip-Pin.

"We target stretches with the snaggiest bottom in 15 to 40 feet of water," says Chong. "Drifting along the edge of a deep weedline in 15 to 18 feet can also be productive. Usually, we can pull

the sinker right through snags and rarely lose many rigs. Particularly with a buoyant ElaZtech DieZel MinnowZ, the bait itself elevates and stays out of the rocks."

The other side of the heavy-duty equation is Chong's flippin' stick and 50-pound-test braid main line. He starts with a 3-foot leader of 16- to 20-pound-test Sunline fluorocarbon and occasionally lengthens to 6 feet if bass are spooky.

"A lot of times, people see us whipping by at current speed and give us weird looks," Chong laughs. "Of course, anglers are even more skeptical when they find out I'm running up to 120 yards of line behind the boat."

To accomplish this, Chong employs a large-spool Daiwa Tatula 200.

"I'm often running all the way down to my backing," he adds. "We see so much pressure on these fish that you need separation between your boat and your bait. The speed of your bait becomes a trigger, but the sinker plays two roles: One, when it

momentarily hangs up, the bait pauses and then surges forward, which resembles the quick darting, gliding action of a goby. I think the sinker also puts out a high-pitched clacking noise as it hits rocks, which attracts attention from smallmouths. I keep the rod low during the drift and shake it occasionally to increase sinker noise and bait movement."

Chong adds an extra brass clacker below the sinker, surrounded by two plastic beads to protect the knot from the tungsten weight.

"The claws on the Speed Craw flap like mad and are easy to activate, even at slow speeds, but for big fish, the DieZel MinnowZ is my go-to."

Chong boated his biggest St. Lawrence River bronzeback to date, a solid 7-pounder, on a Carolina-rigged DieZel MinnowZ a few years back.

"I've seen smallmouths eat gobies up to 10 inches out there, so I'm kind of excited to try a big 7-inch paddletail this year. For a personal-best bronze bass, there's no place I'd rather be." ■

BASSING BOB'S NEW FISH-INTEL WEBSITE PLATFORM ENABLES ENTREPRENEURIAL ANGLERS TO REEL IN ONLINE SUCCESS

By Deborah Wolfe



ADVERTORIAL



Bob Bueltmann's Fish-Intel platform can provide any angler with a money-making fishing website.

When software executive Bob Bueltmann retired, he envisioned spending his leisure hours avidly fishing the waters of Lake of the Ozarks. But he was surprised to find how little info there was on the ins and outs of fishing one of the most popular lakes in America.

Realizing the high demand for reliable fishing content, Bueltmann launched BassingBob.com in 2013. Since that time, he and his team have spent countless hours on and off the water compiling fishing

reports, interviewing pro fishermen, and tracking lake levels, weather conditions and tournament results. Their efforts resulted in the most comprehensive compilation of online information to be found about fishing Lake of the Ozarks.

Today, BassingBob.com garners hundreds of thousands of pageviews each year, making it the No. 1 source of information about fishing Lake of the Ozarks. Now, Bueltmann and the Bassing Bob team are ready to help others turn their passion for fishing into online profits with the new Fish-Intel website platform.

"With Fish-Intel, license holders can launch their own monetized fishing website with a low startup cost," Bueltmann says. "In turn, they receive a fully functional website along with a high level of tech support, robust content archives, marketing tools and expert guidance from the same team that developed BassingBob.com."

Table Rock Lake guide Eric Prey credits Fish-Intel's

user-friendly platform and team of professionals for his successful launch of TableRockFishingIntel.com earlier this year.

"After trying for a couple of years to build a quality fishing website for Table Rock Lake, I contacted Fish-Intel for help," Prey says. "Within a few weeks we put together a membership-based revenue-generating website that has been nothing short of fantastic."

TableRockFishingIntel.com reflects the same format that made BassingBob.com a success. Its rich content includes videos, photos, maps, articles, fishing reports and more.

"Soon after launching TableRockFishingIntel.com I was able to recoup all of my initial investment and have been in profit ever since," Prey says.

With \$50 billion in annual retail sales and a \$125 billion economic impact, recreational fishing is a powerhouse industry. Millions of anglers are now one click away from the path to purchase their fishing essentials, and advertisers are hungry for their attention.

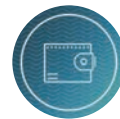
"Fish-Intel websites provide numerous opportunities to profit from online revenue," Bueltmann adds. "Our startup package includes materials and advice on selling online advertising, email marketing and sponsorship opportunities that will maximize income potential."

Learn how you can profit from your passion for fishing with your own Fish-Intel website by calling Bob Bueltmann at 314.575.5545 or visiting fish-intel.com.

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Just like starting a boat simply requires turning a key, a Fish-Intel website comes fully functional and ready to launch. The pre-built platform is already equipped with the modules, widgets and functions site owners need to easily post all types of online content, including:

- Daily, weekly and monthly fishing reports
- Tournament schedules and results
- News, articles and resources
- Photo galleries and videos
- Forums
- Online store
- Integrated e-commerce
- Local business directory
- Paid banner ads

Plus, a Fish-Intel website can be customized to feature content relating to the types of fishing and the lake locations relevant to your followers. ■

HOWLERS



WHILE LEARNING

By TJ Maglio

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

UNDERSTANDING LEARNED BEHAVIOR IN GAME FISH CAN REVEAL BETTER TACTICS FOR CATCHING BASS ON PRESSURED LAKES

Oftentimes, critical thinking is what separates the best anglers from all the rest. The most successful of us spend ample time researching the most recent articles and commentary, poring over fisheries reports and aerial photos, and lingering long hours at the ramp after a derby, decompressing and yukking it up about what those “silly green fish” are doing.

Call it what you want – camaraderie, commiseration or even amateur research – but it’s safe to say the majority of bass anglers have spent at least the occasional drive back from the lake (tail tucked firmly between their legs) pondering what the bass were thinking.

For that matter, do bass even think?

It’s a fairly safe bet that they do; just not in the way humans or even other more advanced lifeforms than fish, such as apes, dolphins and crows, do.

How do we know bass think? We can tell by observing fish interacting with their environments and how they make the hundreds of tiny choices they make every day to go about their lives; things like swimming up to hide under a dock instead of the laydown next to it.

Take a bedding bass, for example. Why is it the fish bites on the 15th pitch to the same spot, rather than the third or 16th or 25th?

It’s because the fish made a choice to bite your bait on that specific pitch.

Assume you fish a small lake or pond and you know there are 500 bass in it. Why is it that you catch one on a spinnerbait right away, proceed to throw it all day and only catch a handful more? One bass ate it. If they weren’t unique individuals making independent choices, it stands to reason you should have caught all 500, right?

It’s the understanding of the mechanisms behind these “fish thoughts,” as well as research on social interactions, physiological oddities and their relative moods, that comprises the frontier of fisheries biology.



FISH LEARNING

The concept of animal “learning” is one of the most interesting aspects of this new area of research. We know animals learn. That’s one of the pillars of evolution. Animal experiences, choices and results directly impact a given animal’s fitness – and thus its ability to pass on its genetic material to subsequent generations.

Take the bass living in the storied Carolina reservoirs of Lake Hartwell, Lake Keowee, Lake Jocassee and Clarks Hill. Until the 1970s, they lived an existence very similar to any other reservoir-bound bass throughout the South. Then, several blueback herring

were accidentally included in a stocking of threadfin shad and quickly flourished. Blueback herring behave, spawn and interact very differently than other shad – preferring pelagic open-water areas and remaining up in the water column most of the year.

In the following 30 years, the bass in these reservoirs have not only learned how to successfully feed on the bluebacks, but now often forsake traditional cover and structure to live a semi-pelagic lifestyle much of the year.

Similar documented cases of “bass learning” can be found throughout the country and across species. Imagine being the first smallmouth to lay eyes

on a round goby. Did it even recognize the goby as something it could eat?

DIRECT LEARNING

Undoubtedly – whether out of hunger, curiosity or something else entirely – a smallmouth somewhere along the line decided to eat a goby and used its caloric content to grow, move about its environment and thrive. This is called direct learning, wherein an animal alters its behavior due to interaction with one or more stimuli.

In the case of the smallmouth eating the goby, one may infer that this individual decision to consume a goby could have resulted in that bass being



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

dangerous experience. Consider the way bass use shade as a form of cover. It's easy to imagine that at some point there was a bass sitting out in the open, and it was attacked by an osprey, eagle, heron or some other threat from above. It survived, but it learned that shade was a much safer environment.

This is an oversimplification, for sure, as evolution is an extremely nuanced topic, but it demonstrates that all animals, including bass, have the ability to learn from direct interactions with their environment.

SOCIAL LEARNING

A different type of learning frequently studied by biologists is the concept of social learning, or learning not just from direct experience, but rather from observing and interacting with other members of the same or other species. For more socially involved animals, this happens all the time.

Studies of the lined bristletooth, a saltwater reef fish, showed that individuals on reefs more frequently targeted by spear fishing anglers – where they witnessed other lined bristletooth being hunted – were quicker to flee than those individuals that lived on reefs and weren't, and the response was even quicker when the individual diver was actually holding a spear gun. These results support the idea that not only were lined bristletooth able to learn from watching their fellows be hunted, but also that they would react differently to a diver depending on whether or not he or she was holding a spear gun.

Another example of social learning in fishes was a 2007 study in which juvenile Japanese flounder that had observed other flounder being consumed by predators showed a better ability to avoid predation than naïve juveniles that hadn't interacted with the predators. This showed that not only could these flounder learn socially, but also that they were able to funnel at least some of what they learned into behavioral changes.

As interesting as these studies are, the questions remain: Does this happen with bass? And how can I use this information to catch more fish?

BASS LEARNING

In 2019, researchers from the University of Illinois published a paper

that for the first time reported on a comprehensive study on bass' ability and propensity for both direct and social learning. Unsurprisingly to many seasoned anglers, they found that bass do indeed learn from being caught.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, the results also showed that bass don't seem to have the ability to learn socially. Observing other bass being caught, as well as the presence of "learned" bass, didn't alter the behavior of naïve individuals (that hadn't been caught).

To set up the study, researchers stocked bass into four ponds, and then anglers fished two of them with wacky-rigged stick baits. This gave the bass in the two fished ponds "experience," and as the bass were caught, catch rates decreased as expected. The bass were "learning" to avoid the lure.

Once this had occurred, the researchers then stocked some of the naïve bass from the two unfished ponds into the ponds with educated bass that hadn't been caught and fished again, this time with a series of different baits: two plastics (the green original one again as well as a white version) and an in-line spinner. These naïve bass showed no difference in catch rates or response times relative to the educated bass. In other words, they weren't "learning" from the educated bass. Similarly, catch rates declined as the bass "learned," until a new lure was introduced. Then catch rates again temporarily spiked.

These results should be interesting to anglers for several reasons, most importantly because they address the age-old concept that as fisheries mature, the bass in them become educated to certain lures.

This study helps illustrate that it's probably not the result of bass learning from the mistakes of their compatriots – like an older generation of bass that previously was exposed to certain lures.

Certainly, angler pressure has been shown in countless studies to reduce catch rates, but science would argue that's mostly from direct learning. The idea that another bass watching its buddy get caught can learn to avoid your lure is directly disputed by these results.

healthier and more robust than its buddies, which cascaded into better fitness, better nest success and perhaps a more fit brood, which over time became predisposed to consuming gobies. After several generations, those bass that were more likely to eat gobies became more abundant and successful than those that weren't, and thus the population evolved to where we are today – with the round goby as a predominant forage species for smallmouth bass anywhere they coexist.

Other examples of direct learning include the opposite end of the spectrum, whereby an animal learns to avoid something due to a negative or

BREAKING IT DOWN

Although the aforementioned study showed bass have seemingly no ability to socially learn (or at least not from observing other bass being caught), there were several other aspects of the study result that anglers can absolutely learn from, some of which are things we already do every time on the water. Others are things we should maybe think more critically about.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

1

BAIT AND SWITCH

In the study, anytime bass were being caught, catch rates tended to decline over time with that specific lure. Picking up another lure style triggered an uptick in catch rates, whereas simply switching colors didn't have the same impact on catch rates. When the researchers switched from a green worm to a white worm, catch rates didn't change. When they tried the in-line spinner, though, catch rates jumped again.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

2

CYCLE BACK THROUGH AREAS

Imagine the study area as a specific bay, cove or other small part of your local lake. During the study, anglers fished numerous sessions on the small study ponds and caught bass each time. How often have you left an area thinking they were done biting or that you'd caught all the bass that were present? If you've found an area and think there may be multiple fish, don't be afraid to fish and re-fish it. As the study showed, bass will often continue to bite in subsequent sessions – especially with a different presentation.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

3

WHAT'S OLD CAN BE NEW AGAIN

Just because something doesn't seem to work as well as it did in the past doesn't mean it won't work again in the future. We see this all the time in tournament results, as tackle trends evolve and presentations go in and out of style. Keep this in mind when you plan your fishing trips, and don't be afraid to try a presentation that you haven't used in recent years if the bite gets tough.

If you've been around bass fishing for any period of time, you've more than likely got at least one box of baits somewhere collecting dust, and those baits used to catch the snot out of them. They likely will again at some point. ■



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PRO FISHING HINDSIGHT



TOP MLF AND FLW PROS SHARE WHAT THEY WISH THEY'D KNOWN ABOUT PROFESSIONAL BASS FISHING BEFORE THEY GOT STARTED

By Matt Williams

Life as a pro angler is a journey – one that is fueled by dreams and built around a steady stream of learning experiences. I don't fish a lot of tournaments, but I've been around the sport long enough to know that people who play the game are among the world's biggest dreamers, and those who learn from their lessons, both on and off the water, are often the ones who rise to the top.

Bass pros can learn a lot from one another if they'll watch and listen. To help others learn, we recently asked several Major League Fishing Bass Pro Tour and Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit anglers to share some knowledge they wish they would have had before dishing out their first big entry fee.

Here's what they had to say.



PHOTO BY MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING

JASON CHRISTIE BASS PRO TOUR

TURNED PRO: 2008

WHAT HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN: IT AIN'T OVER UNTIL IT'S OVER

BPT angler Jason Christie says it's important to treat every day as a new one, and to not get discouraged when a productive pattern appears to fizzle out. Staying open-minded is one of the most common attributes among top-level performers.

"A tournament day is an eight-hour day, and the last hour is just as important as the first," he says. "Back when I first started, if I wasn't catching them in the first two or three hours, it was easy for me to get discouraged. I didn't give up, but it was sort of like I just started going through the motions instead of trying something different. I've learned that sometimes it might just take an area change or a bait change to turn things around."

Christie recalls the 2011 FLW Tour event on Lake Hartwell as a good example. After using a spinnerbait to build a solid lead going into the final day, his bite seemed to go away when he needed it most.

"I knew my fish were being depleted," says Christie. "By 11 a.m., I hadn't had a single bite."

Rather than abandoning the area or the pattern, Christie made a blade swap that turned the day around.

"I switched from a No. 5 Colorado to a No. 4 1/2 to make a more subtle thump," he says. "I ended up catching enough in the last two hours to win."

KELLY JORDON BASS PRO TOUR

TURNED PRO: 1996

WHAT HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN: DON'T LET DOCK TALK GET YOU OFF YOUR GAME

BPT pro Kelly Jordan has learned plenty of lessons over his 25-year career. One of the most valuable is to always trust your instincts and abilities over the chatter you might hear on the bank.

"It's kind of cliché, but it's true," Jordan says. "I've seen it be detrimental to guys who may have otherwise had a chance. I've never been one to get caught up in dock talk, but I have had some instances where I listened to other anglers and it wound up taking me on wild goose chases that cost me dearly."

One of the costliest of those instances occurred during the opening round of a 2008 tournament on Florida's Harris Chain.

Jordan, who had an early boat draw, had located an area in practice he felt really good about. However, rather than going straight to his juice, he decided to act on a last-minute tip offered up by another competitor who drew out near the bottom of the last flight.

The other angler claimed he had located a pair of whoppers on beds at the rear of a canal. Realizing his chances of getting to the fish before someone else were slim, that pro offered the spot to Jordan since the latter had an early boat draw. The problem was that the sweet spot was close to 50 miles from where Jordan had originally planned to start.

Jordan elected to gamble on the offer, and it cost him. The beds were vacant when he arrived, and he left the canal with an empty livewell. To make matters worse, Jordan found a flotilla of boats in his primary area by the time he made the run back.

"Everybody in the top 15 after the first day was in there," Jordan recalls. "They hammered them. It felt like somebody had kicked me in the gut. I was sick about it. I ended up finishing 108th out of 109 in that tournament."

For Jordan, the memory brings to mind another lesson learned many times over by a passel of pros since the advent of tournament fishing: "You can't win a tournament on the first day, but you can certainly lose one."



PHOTO BY MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING



PHOTO BY MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING

JARED LINTNER BASS PRO TOUR

TURNED PRO: 2006

WHAT HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN: **SHALLOW-WATER COVER HOLDS BIG FISH YEAR-ROUND**

During the formative years of his career, BPT pro Jared Lintner spent the majority of his time targeting bass strictly according to where seasonal patterns said the fish "should be," as opposed to where they actually were.

"I wish I had known how many fish live shallow right on through the winter," Lintner explains. "The general consensus back in the day was you had to fish deep and slow to catch fish, but I eventually learned there is a resident population of bass that lives shallow year-round, provided they have sufficient cover near deeper water like a channel swing or something else with deep-water access.

"I won a local tournament two years ago during early December throwing a frog on the bank in 51-degree water. When I first started, I didn't even have a topwater bait in my boat for half of the year."

MILES BURGHOFF TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT

TURNED PRO: 2019

WHAT HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN: **BASS ARE BASS NO MATTER THE LEVEL OF COMPETITION**

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit angler Miles Burghoff says he felt a little anxious when he stepped up to the FLW Tour level in 2019, but the uncertainty began to wane once he caught a few bass.

"It calmed me once I learned the fish are the same," Burghoff admits. "Catching bass has nothing to do with the tournament you are fishing or the level of competition. Once I settled in, I realized it was the same game I'd been playing for years; that I was just playing it against stiffer competition."

The only real change necessary was mental. There was no adjustment in tactics or strategy, and understanding that fact as a means to cope with the pressure was key.

"I learned that I need to be more diligent about getting the next bite and to make sure I have enough fish for multiple days," he adds.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



PHOTO BY MAJOR LEAGUE FISHING

JUSTIN ATKINS BASS PRO TOUR

TURNED PRO: 2017

WHAT HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN: THE PRO FISHING LIFESTYLE CAN BE DIFFICULT

BPT pro Justin Atkins has experienced considerable success since he began fishing tournaments at age 16. At 19, he won the co-angler title in the 2009 Bassmaster Weekend Series National Championship before moving to the front of the boat and eventually earning FLW Tour Rookie of the Year runner-up in 2017 – the same year he went full-time pro, won the FLW Cup and grabbed third in the Phoenix Bass Fishing League presented by T-H Marine All-American. He followed that up with a third-place finish in the 2018 Cup before moving over to the Bass Pro Tour in 2019.

Looking back, the 30-year-old pro cautions aspiring anglers about getting caught up in the prestige of being a successful pro angler without considering all the baggage that comes with it.

"Technically, I have the greatest job in the world, but it isn't easy," Atkins says. "You have to be mentally prepared for those times when it may not seem so great, like when you have two or three bad tournaments in a row and you haven't been home in a month. It's real easy to get disgruntled about it.

"You have to find the enjoyment in the process of being a pro – the travel, no sleep, late nights, up early and being gone from home."

Supportive friends and family certainly make it easier, but in the end it's up to each angler to manage the lifestyle. Even anglers who don't compete on the national level, the way Atkins does, can take a lesson from the pro on embracing all parts of the experience in order to deal with the more difficult side of competitive fishing.

"If you only enjoy it when things are going good," he says, "you'll get burned out really quick."

RON NELSON TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT

TURNED PRO: 2019

WHAT HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN: LOCAL TACKLE TRENDS ARE REALLY IMPORTANT

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Ron Nelson, the 2019 Polaris Rookie of the Year, learned from experience that specific baits or colors with histories of working well on one lake may not even get a sniff on a fishery in a different part of the country.

In short, you can't be overly prepared when it comes to tackle.

"Back when I first started, I tried to get by with baits that work for me locally, but once I started traveling, I found out pretty quick they didn't always work," he says. "It pays to do some research and find out what works before you go to certain lakes.

"Tackle trends are constantly evolving. You have to keep up with it. Don't be afraid to try something different."

Nelson uses the 2013 Toyota Series event he won on Smith Mountain Lake in Virginia as a good example. He was sight-fishing in that tournament, targeting postspawn cruisers and bedding fish.

"I rely on a watermelon or green pumpkin Zoom Speed Craw a lot back home, but those fish wouldn't touch those colors," he recounts. "I went through my plastics and found Speed Craws in a funky bullfrog color. I could hardly keep those Smith Mountain fish from eating it, but they won't even look at it on the lakes back home."



PHOTO BY JDOX WHITE



PHOTO BY JACOB FINE

GREG BOHANNAN TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT

TURNED PRO: 2008

WHAT HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN: **NON-ENDEMIC SPONSORS ARE INCREDIBLY VALUABLE**

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit ace Greg Bohannon quit his job as a plant manager for Tyson Foods in 2008, when Walmart was the title sponsor for the former FLW Tour. The Walmart agreement brought a wealth of non-endemic sponsors into the sport, allowing select pros to secure lucrative sponsorship deals in exchange for wrapping their rides with colorful advertising for everything from candy bars to motor oil.

Bohannon was sponsored by Kellogg's Pop-Tarts for six years before the deal went away. He has since secured non-endemic title contracts with Old Spice (for three years) and is currently sponsored by Pringles.

"When Walmart and some non-endemics stepped back, it left me in a position to go out on my own," he says. "It really opened my eyes to the value of the financial opportunities outside the fishing industry. Once you get established, it's a good idea to focus on non-endemic sponsors that line up demographically with the fishing industry. They have bigger operating budgets, and it's been my experience they are more interactive."

While Bohannon's experience might seem to apply only to touring pros, a similar strategy can work well for high school or college clubs, Federation clubs, and even regional anglers, all of whom compete for sponsor dollars from tackle companies that are bombarded with pro-staff requests every season. Anyone trying to develop new marketing relationships would be wise to work with local tourism agencies or business groups to find restaurants, resorts, convenience stores and other companies in fishing communities that don't sell tackle, but might benefit from some creative marketing to outdoorsmen. Even auto dealerships, realtors and other regional businesses might be interested in some additional "salesforce." After all, every lead has the potential to develop into a successful relationship down the road.



PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

MARTENS' MISSED OPPORTUNITY

BPT pro Aaron Martens has a supplementary lesson he learned several years ago, stemming from a missed opportunity and a big regret.

After competing in Major League Fishing from the get-go, Martens still regrets turning down the opportunity to invest in the circuit prior to its 2011 debut.

"It is one of the worst decisions I ever made," he admits. "I knew it was going to be successful, but I just didn't have the money at the time. My wife and I had just had our second child, bought a motorhome and had made some other investments. I should have borrowed the money, but I didn't."

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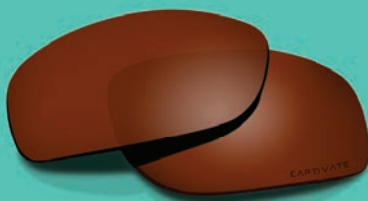
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THE OLD BALL AND CHAIN

THE CAROLINA RIG PROBABLY DESERVES MORE RESPECT THAN YOU'RE GIVING IT

By Sean Ostruszka

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

It was kind of remarkable to watch, really.

Darold Gleason sat over a typical offshore spot – a roadbed crossing a hump – on Sam Rayburn during the 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit kickoff and was having the morning of his dreams. In contention to win starting the third day of his rookie year, he'd fired up his school with a vibrating jig for bites on his first, second and fourth casts of the morning, prompting him to let out some hilarious "Gleasonisms" on FLW Live.

But, as they tend to do, the school settled, and Gleason started cycling through the normal rundown of offshore offerings: a jig, a crankbait, a drop-shot. Among all the usual suspects, one stood out; one that definitely wasn't new, yet rarely gets much notoriety or play outside of southeast Texas anymore – a Carolina rig.

It seemed like every time he tossed the C-rig out there, he got bit, and he certainly wasn't alone that event. That was something we saw time and time again.

Ron Nelson had an offshore spot where the only thing he could get a bite on was a Carolina rig. Every so often, he'd switch it up and maybe get a nibble on a jig, but they'd never eat it well, and they ignored everything else. Then, he'd launch out the Carolina rig and recommence catching fish every cast, which he did for more than an hour.

Miles Howe had a similar experience. The only difference was he was doing it in less than 2 feet of water (more on that later). In fact, in more than a dozen years of covering tournaments, I've never seen so many Carolina rigs being thrown, let alone shining as much as they did.

One might just pass it off as a Sam Rayburn quirk, but to hear it from pros like Gleason or Lloyd Pickett Jr., who's dragged a rig around all over the Tennessee River to earn a shocking percentage of his half-million dollars in FLW earnings, the Carolina rig is much more than a local option. It's a long-forgotten reality for bass anglers everywhere.

In an age when every angler is seeking that go-to, secret offering to give them an edge, it seems the "new" baits many anglers are seeking could already be in a tackle box buried in their garages or boats. It's just a matter of getting reacquainted with the old "ball and chain."

THE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO THE "IDIOT RIG"

Certain rigs have a way of eliciting polar-opposite reactions from anglers. The Carolina rig certainly qualifies.

If you live around Sam Rayburn or Toledo Bend, you're almost certainly pro Carolina rig. At the same time, Andy Morgan once got so fed up with the rig that he tossed his entire Carolina rig box out of his boat in frustration and says he's never fished one since. People love it or hate it.

A lot of the hate seems to come from a misunderstanding of the "idiot rig." That's where we asked Gleason and Pickett to break down its components (and the proper scenarios) to hopefully help turn a few haters into lovers.

THE WEIGHT

The C-rig originally claimed notoriety as an offshore specialist that allowed an angler, before the times of high-tech graphs and sonar, to really feel the bottom and better understand structure. The reason for this was the ability to put a 1-ounce egg sinker on the line, which allowed for extra-long casts and more contact with the bottom, without squandering the action of the bait behind it.

With many pros' boats now equipped with multiple thousands of dollars in sonar, one might think the rig's original use has been rendered moot. Thinking that way would not only be shortsighted, but it also would mean missing the biggest benefit of the weight in the eyes of the experts.

"They're still some of the best lures for feeling the bottom, which can be really good if you're not fully dialed in with your electronics or if you're trying to line up with what you're seeing on your graphs," says Pickett. "I can always feel if the weight drops into a hole or is coming up a hill better than with any jig, and I can also tell depth. A Carolina rig with a 1-ounce weight sinks 2 feet per second. So, when I'm



PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

counting down, I can always know the exact depth my cast is landing."

Pickett and Gleason keep things pretty simple when it comes to the weight, nearly always going with a 1-ounce egg sinker regardless of depth. Both prefer lead weights most of the time, with the exception being when Pickett fishes around rock. He thinks tungsten better transmits the feel of the bottom. Gleason actually likes lead when fishing around rock because of the increased chance of snags that can lead to breaking off more expensive tungsten.

Gleason doesn't really change too much when he's fishing shallow, even around bedding bass in a foot of water. That's by design.

"It's all about disturbance," Gleason explains. "I want the weight kicking up as much mud as possible, because I think it gets a bass' attention. Then, it sees this lazy bait behind it and gets curious, and when a bass gets curious, he takes a bite to figure it out."

Think of that the next time you're fishing a spawning flat where you can't see the beds. Just imagine how curious (and angry) a big female will be about the creature that strolls into its bed right behind a 1-ounce weight.

BEADS AND SWIVELS

If Gleason were walking around his backyard with a golf ball on a string tied to his belt, you might not notice. If he were doing it with a beach ball full of marbles, it'd be almost impossible not to notice.

That's the idea behind adding beads to a C-rig. While many anglers contend that putting a bead between the weight and swivel protects the knot (which it does), doing so is more about creating additional disturbance.

For our experts, the choice comes down to personal preference.

As a guide, Gleason is all about maximizing time and effort. Threading on a couple beads every time he re-ties

GLEASON'S GO-TO RIG



V&M BABY SWAMP HOG

APPROXIMATELY 3-FOOT LEADER

Lloyd Pickett Jr. still prefers to “feel what’s down there” the old-school way.



PHOTO BY DAVID A. BROWN

the rig adds up. Plus, he figures the weight hitting the metal swivel produces more than enough disturbance on its own.

Pickett feels differently.

“I’ve played with thousands of configurations of the Carolina rig,” he says. “One thing will always stay the same for me: I won’t throw one without a glass bead above and below the weight to get maximum disturbance.”

THE LEADER

Leader combinations are endless. Let’s simplify it.

Based on both pros’ preferences, a 3-foot leader is the happiest of mediums. Both agree the added buoyancy of monofilament allows the lure to look as natural as possible, though Gleason still likes fluorocarbon for simplicity since he’s using it as his main line anyway. And 15-pound-test line is again a happy medium between the two pros’ preferences.

Obviously, adjust accordingly depending on water clarity (lighter line, longer leader) or if you really want to make longer casts (shorter leader).

THE LURE

Almost any bait at the end of a Carolina rig will catch fish. That might be an oversimplified exaggeration, but maybe not by much.

“I’ve put a square-bill crankbait behind one and wore them out in 30 feet of water,” says Pickett.

That’s an extreme example. The typical presentation for Pickett and Gleason is more conventional: a creature bait.

Gleason loves the V&M Baby Swamp Hog and Pickett a Zoom Baby Brush Hog. The traditional trailer for a C-rig is a lizard, though traditional doesn’t always work best all the time. The other go-to for Gleason is a V&M Pork Shad 2.0 in the winter months, but 90 percent of the time, both will have a creature bait rigged up.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

C-RIGS AND GRASS

While the Carolina rig is great both shallow and deep, most shy away from trying to toss it around grass. Pickett sure doesn’t, and neither did Miles Howe during the Pro Circuit event on Rayburn.

Pickett loves it around sparse grass, where he swaps the 1-ounce egg sinker for a 3/4-ounce (if he wants to stay on bottom) or 1/2-ounce (if he wants his rig to stay on top of the grass) bullet sinker.

Howe went even more finesse at Rayburn. While fishing grass in only a couple feet of water on a spawning flat, Howe used just a 1/4-ounce weight to intentionally keep it light enough to stay atop even the lightest grass. He used short drags to almost dead-stick his rig. It was painfully slow, but entertainingly effective.

1-OUNCE LEAD EGG SINKER



"I think it looks like a big crayfish," says Pickett of a Carolina-rigged creature bait. "And crayfish are a lot heartier than shad."

THE WHERE AND THE WHEN

If you haven't gathered, the "where" for this technique is anywhere, and the "when" is anytime.

"I don't care what lake I'm at or what time of year," says Pickett, "there's a Carolina rig bite somewhere. Guaranteed."

Pickett says he struggled mightily for years fishing for smallmouth bass up north until he finally ditched the tube jigs and drop-shots for his trusty Carolina rig, even on fisheries like St. Clair or the Mississippi River.

And there's not a single day of the year Gleason doesn't have one rigged up on his deck, especially now that he's fishing the Pro Circuit.

"It's not the sexiest technique," says Gleason, "but it sure will get you a lot of checks."



THE RIGHT SWING

As great as the Carolina rig is at prompting bites, it can be just as great at raising blood pressure if you don't use the right hookset.

"You can't do the typical over-the-shoulder hookset with them," explains Gleason. "You do that, all you'll be doing is snatching the weight up off the bottom and not ever moving the hook."

Hooking up is more about performing what Gleason calls a "reverse-golf-swing hookset." Once you feel a bite, sweep the rod to the side to pick up as much line as possible while leaning into the fish.

"You really want to hold that follow-through like a camera is watching you," adds Gleason. "Then, it's all about keeping the line tight to keep the fish pinned." ■

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

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PHOTO BY MORGAN SANDLER

4 WAYS TO FISH A FROG

How to maximize your chances with this favorite topwater bait family

By Curtis Niedermier

PHOTO BY BRODY McWILLIAMS



Frog-fishing season" for MLF pro Jacob Wheeler lasts from before the spawn in the spring until the water temperature dips into the low 50s in the fall. To tackle such a wide range of scenarios, Wheeler keeps a slew of frog makes and models in his boat and has mastered a handful of techniques for fishing them.

1. Walking in Place

Wheeler starts throwing a frog early in the spring before the water reaches 60 degrees, but really ramps it up when bass start spawning. Catching bedding bass requires a presentation that can pester them into biting.

"That's when I'm tending to slow walk a frog a lot more in cover," he says. "I'm trying to keep that bait over their head. I'm trying to not move it too far toward me but bringing it side to side. If I only have a small strike zone to catch them, I try to really slow that bait down."

The best strategy to accomplish the slow walk or walk in place is to give the frog a little extra slack and focus on really popping the slack with each twitch.

2. Popping and Bobbing

When he's in search mode and/or the water is warm, Wheeler will sometimes ditch trying to walk the

frog and instead pop it or bob it quickly across the surface. It should look like the frog's face is slapping the water.

In this case, speed is a trigger.

"I've seen it where those fish really get on a popping action of moving that bait very, very fast," he says. "Everybody now is so caught up with walking it that I feel like it's almost a deal where you're popping it and getting them to react because they see a frog a decent amount of time now."

3. Walking the Dog

The standard walk-the-dog action is still a go-to, but Wheeler rarely walks a frog in a consistent, monotonous way.

"If I'm in open water, I tend to pop it more until I get into those areas where I can tell it's a really high-percentage area," he says. "If I'm fishing lily pads, I might want to walk it in the little holes. I might slow the presentation down once I get in a high-percentage area. It's all dependent on different kinds of presentations for different targets."

4. Mat Popping

Wheeler's first choice when fishing a mat is to work the frog with three pops followed by a pause. He calls it a cat-and-mouse game, where he's trying to make an impression in the mat that the fish can see and then pausing to try and tempt a bass to come up and strike.

"That's probably my favorite cadence, but, then again, I've also seen it where the fish get very pressured and a constant, fast movement is the only way to trigger a bite," he adds. "It's almost like throwing a DT 20 [crankbait] through a school of bass offshore, and you have to burn it."

Wheeler's best advice for any frog-ging scenario is to keep mixing it up to see what works, because having a variety of retrieves and a wide collection of frogs can help extend the frogging season.

DON'T SETTLE ON SOFTNESS

While Wheeler claims to have more than 500 frogs in his personal collection, the one feature he's unwilling to settle on is the softness of a frog. To him, the softer the better.

"You can do a lot of different things to a frog, like tweaking the hooks out, and you can make it decent, but if it's not soft, the hookup ratio is not going to be as good as it could be. That's No. 1," he says.

Wheeler likes the Terminator Walking Frog and Duckett Fishing BD Frog because they tend to always be soft. But he fishes other models, too, and will actually sort through to find the specimens with the softest body. He's not sure why some are softer than others (sometimes there's variation between colors or in the manufacturing process, he thinks), but, regardless of why, he always puts the softest ones in his tournament box. ■



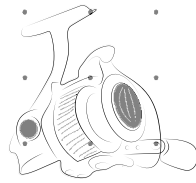
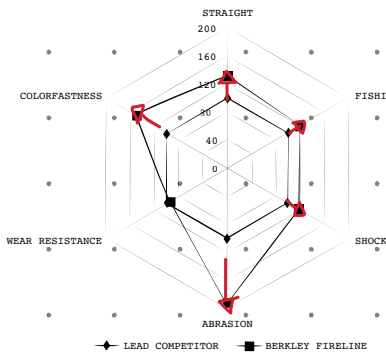


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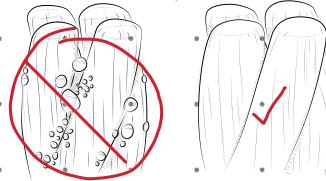
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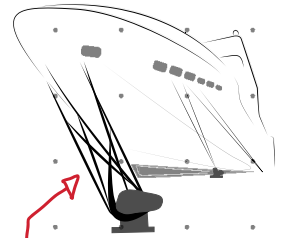


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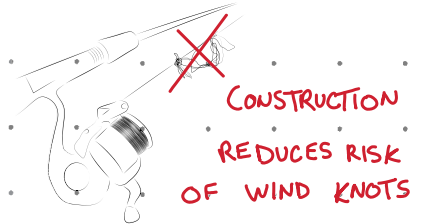
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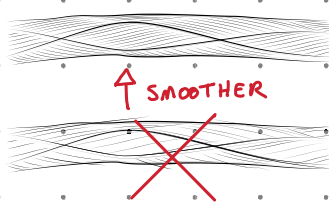


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PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

If you want to catch big, angry smallies, try Matt Stefan's approach and slowly wake a topwater over their heads.

Searching the Spawn

Spawning season (usually around Memorial Day in Stefan's region) is the start of the smallmouth wake bait pattern. Stefan targets the fish on rocky flats in 8 to 12 feet of water. Even in clear water, the beds are often deep enough that they're challenging to see. By throwing the wake bait, he can get the bass to reveal themselves.

"That's a good spawning range, but it's also at the point where, unless you have absolutely perfect conditions, you don't see them," Stefan adds. "That's what's so great with this [wake bait]. It draws them up, and then you know where they're at. You'll catch a bunch, but at the same time, it's really about locating fish. Usually you'll get multiple fish in a small area, and that'll tell you that's a good spawning flat so you can come back and pick it apart [with other baits]."

Topwater, in general, works well for this approach, and Stefan bases his choice between a wake bait and other options on the scenario. You throw the wake bait when you can answer yes to the question: Can a smallmouth see this thing coming from far away?

"When they're on a big rocky flat in clear water, they'll see that bait coming from 30 feet away, and they can't take it by the time it's 10 feet over their heads," Stefan says. "They'll come up and roll on it."

At the April 2019 FLW Tour event on Tennessee's Cherokee Lake, smallies were spawning in droves. Stefan was able to catch some fish with the wake bait, but he determined it wasn't the best choice in that situation. The fish were locked down on precise rock "wedges" rather than spread across a flat, and he thinks they weren't keying on the wake bait from a distance.

"I did better throwing a topwater bait like a popper that I could keep over their head," he adds.

HOW TO WAKE UP MORE SMALLIES

A slow-moving **surface bait** is too much for **smallmouths** to resist

By Curtis Niedermier

The aggressive nature of smallmouth bass is one of their most endearing qualities in the eyes of many anglers. The smartest anglers figure out how to take advantage of that character trait.

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Matt Stefan hammers big smallmouths all season near his Wisconsin home. Among his favorite tools to do so is a wake bait, which doesn't get a ton of attention as a smallmouth catcher. To Stefan, a wake bait is hugely productive

because of its slow, lumbering action across the surface, which aggressive smallmouths just can't ignore.

"It's a killer bait all year long for them," Stefan adds, "and you will get some of the most explosive bites on it. I find that the hookup percentage is really good when you compare to throwing a Spook. With a Spook, I feel like they'll hit it three or four times, and with the wake bait, they get it the first time. I feel like that's because it's such a slow, tantalizing deal."

Go-To Wake Baits

Stefan still likes fishing vintage models of the Bomber Long A, which has long been a popular wake bait. However, he's mostly shifted to newer alternatives that are easier to cast, come in more good colors and are designed to easily stay up on the surface during the retrieve. Two favorites are the Berkley Surge Shad and Jointed Surge Shad.

"The thing I really like about the Surge Shad is, No. 1, it casts great, but it's also got a reflector on the bottom [Berkley calls it a FlashDisc]," says Stefan. "I personally feel that really helps trigger fish and draw the fish up. It has great sound, it casts really good and it has great movement."

Most of the time, Stefan throws the standard Surge Shad on a straight retrieve, but he's always experimenting with the jointed model, too, because it has a little different action. When he's targeting a spot where he knows there are fish, he'll sometimes sling the jointed model and mix in twitches or soft jerks – not enough to pull it far under the water, but enough to create rings on the surface. When the bait comes to a stop, the tail keeps moving.

"That's a very good triggering mechanism," Stefan says.

Go-to colors are pretty typical for stick-style wake baits and include black chrome and white shad. Stefan is also a fan of the solid black color called maverick, which he says is a longtime, somewhat clandestine favorite of smallmouth anglers in the Upper Midwest.

Summer Catching

While a wake bait is a tool for finding smallies in spring, it's a tool for catching them in the summer. In fact, it's so good on clear natural lakes that Stefan was at first hesitant to share.

"The thing that I love about topwaters in general for smallmouth is you get bigger bites, in my opinion," Stefan says. "I love fishing feeding flats.



Berkley Surge Shad

Berkley Jointed Surge Shad

Fishing a wake bait is a slow process, but if I know I've got flats with fish on them, I think I'll get more bites on that than I will if I'm throwing a faster-moving topwater bait. And I feel like my hookups are better.

"With a wake bait, I don't know what it is, but maybe they think it's already dying and they have it, so they don't come up and try to 'kill' it first. I don't get the tail slaps with a wake bait that I get with a walking bait."

On some Northern lakes, smallies inhabit water from the bank to 40 feet deep in summer, so there are plenty of situations to give a wake bait a shot. Stefan's favorite scenario is to target flats in the 6- to 12-foot-deep zone. A good-looking flat will have a mix of sand and rock, maybe with some defined transitions between the two. He also targets clumps of cabbage.

If it's calm, this is an all-day pattern, and it can actually be better under a blaring midday sun.

The Presentation

There's no need to get aggressive with the retrieve. A wake bait works because the fish can track it as it weaves its way softly across the surface.

"I would say the slower the better for me," Stefan says. "I think with smallmouth there is something about

just antagonizing them. I think you get more aggressive fish in the summer where you could reel it faster, but I can't say that I do reel it faster in the summer because of that. As long as the bait's slowly wiggling or has actual movement, you're good. Any faster than that and I feel like you're actually pulling the bait out of the strike zone faster than you need to be."

Be Careful of Conditions

There are some limitations inherent with this style of wake bait because of its subtle presentation and visual nature. Here are some things to consider:

Clarity – Stefan likes 3 to 4 feet of visibility at a minimum. Clearer would be better for calling fish up from the bottom in mid-depth ranges.

Wind – Even a light ripple or chop on the surface can be too much for a wake bait. It's more effective when it's carving a wake across a glass-smooth surface.

Barometric pressure – "In my opinion, it's not even worth throwing on a high-pressure day," Stefan says. "Those fish are locked on bottom and don't want to come up. But if you have good stable conditions or a warming trend, it can be dynamite."

Current – The Upper Midwest is crisscrossed with some of the best smallmouth rivers in the country, and

they're full of powerful, current-dwelling bass that fight above their weight class. Stefan actually lives on one – the Wisconsin River.

While fishing for river smallies is a ton of fun, he's not wrecking them on a wake bait.

"I don't have nearly as much success on current-based stuff because I don't think the bait runs right," Stefan adds. "It starts getting pulled by the current."

Tackle

In most situations, Stefan throws a wake bait on a medium-heavy, 7-foot MHX MB843 baitcasting rod with a 6.6:1 Abu Garcia Revo Premier reel spooled with 30-pound-test braid with a 12-pound-test Berkley Trilene XL monofilament leader.

"The mono leader is important because you get some separation from the braid so the fish can't see it as much, but you also need it to float. You can't throw it on fluorocarbon," Stefan says.

This tackle and technique have many similarities to wake baiting on clear spotted bass lakes in the South. The main differences are that it lasts all throughout the fishing season, and instead of 2-pound spots plucking the bait off the surface, there's a chance on every cast to have a 5-pound smallmouth go killer whale on it with the kind of aggressive strike we all dream about.

WHOPPER WAKE BAITS WORK TOO

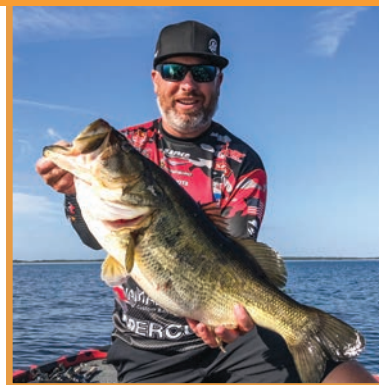
Jumbo wake baits are specialty baits, but that doesn't mean they don't have tournament applications. As one example, MLF Bass Pro Tour angler Brett Hite has successfully integrated the Evergreen ND-180 wake bait into his tournament arsenal.

At 7 inches long with a beefy profile and jointed wooden body, the ND-180 certainly looks big, but it only weighs 2.2 ounces. That makes it light enough to cast accurately and control around shallow targets, where the clanking body segments help trigger bass to strike.

"If you're in a place that you know there are some good ones, and they're in that prespawn, spawn, post-spawn funk, where they're just suspended way up in the water column or over grass, I've caught them really good," Hite says.

"Since that thing has so much buoyancy, you can reel it quite a bit faster than you can a Bomber [Long A], and it just disperses a lot more water. What else is cool about it is you can twitch it kind of like a Spook or Shower Blows, so you can get it to walk back and forth. I've had a lot of success with the ND over grass or around bushes. I'll wind it, and then I'll stop it and twitch it a few times, and then wind it. Or I've even caught 'em where you almost give it a big chug – wind it, wind it, wind it and then rip it. If there's one following it a lot of times that's when they'll eat it."

Hite throws the ND-180 on a 7-foot, 8-inch, heavy-action Evergreen rod with a long handle and parabolic action. He pairs it with either 65-pound-test Sunline braid or 20- or 22-pound-test Sunline Shooter fluorocarbon, which he can get away with because the bait is so buoyant. ■



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1. MLF BASS PRO SHOPS HERITAGE CUP PRESENTED BY BERKLEY
Henderson Bay (Lake Ontario)/ Lake Skaneateles/Cayuga Lake
 July 29-Aug. 3 2019

Jacob Powroznik spent the Elimination and Sudden Death rounds of the Heritage Cup (on Lake Ontario's Henderson Bay and Lake Skaneateles, respectively) targeting schooling smallmouths. During the Championship Round on Cayuga Lake, it was all about making adjustments to find the right school of largemouths. The Virginia pro had himself a day on Cayuga thanks in part to a big school he found taking refuge in a clean spot in some 10-foot-deep offshore grass on a

25- to 30-foot-deep ridge. Employing a drop-shot tipped with a hand-poured worm or a V&M Flat Tip Worm, Powroznik finished his day with 28 fish for 57 pounds, 2 ounces (both best for the round), all while fishing near Aaron Martens, who finished in second place, 6 pounds, 2 ounces behind him. Powroznik landed his biggest fish of the day – a 4-3 – in the last 10 minutes of competition, which helped give him the cushion he needed over Martens to finish the job. The Heritage Cup was Powroznik's first-ever MLF Cup event, though he's had some good experiences with Cayuga in the past, having fished two events on the central New York fishery

prior to the Heritage Cup and turning in a top-10 finish in each. Still, Powroznik wasn't familiar enough with the fishery to run to a spot and start catching them (with no practice period or foreknowledge of the competition waters), making his dominant win all the more impressive. Powroznik qualified for the 2020 General Tire World Championship with the win.

2. MLF SQWINCHER PATRIOT CUP PRESENTED BY VENMO
Fort Gibson Lake
 Sept. 23-28, 2019

There aren't too many people capable of showing up to a brand-new body of water and dominating the way Mark Rose did in the 2020 Patriot Cup. The

Arkansas pro had never been to Fort Gibson before, but that didn't stop him from doing work from lines in to lines out, tallying 25 fish for 41 pounds, 1 ounce and taking home the victory by nearly 16 pounds. Rose, a former FLW Tour Angler of the Year, led from the onset and maintained a double-digit lead over second-place finisher Jordan Lee nearly all day. He had nine more fish than Lee and more than double over anyone else in the Championship Round field. Brent Ehrler finished third with 12 fish for 20 pounds, 4 ounces. To catch his fish, Rose found a narrow creek where he was able to flip up bass after bass using a black and blue Strike King Rage Twin Tail Menace Grub around



“green bushes and some hard cover” that were also holding shad. He used that same Strike King bait as a trailer on a swim jig to form a formidable one-two punch.

Making Rose’s win all the more impressive was the fact that he was the final angler to make the cut in Elimination Round 3. The opening rounds were a struggle for the second-year MLF pro, but a key bass he flipped up in the Elimination Round revealed a pattern that carried him through the Sudden Death Round and into the Championship Round.

From there, it was all about leaning on that pattern to dust the competition, win his first MLF Cup event and secure a spot in the 2020 General Tire World Championship.

3. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT Lake Martin

March 18-21, 2020

Three consistently solid days anchored by a tournament-best limit of 17 pounds, 10 ounces on day two earned FLW veteran Jason Abram his first career victory at the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit’s third stop of the 2020 season at Lake Martin.

With the off day removed between the final day of practice and the first day of competition (due to the onset of COVID-19 restrictions), Abram was able to take full advantage of the pattern he found during the practice period, which necessitated some warm weather and sunshine to keep big prespaw females

tucked under docks. With conditions holding the first two days, Abram was able to run his pattern to near perfection, jumping out to the lead after day two.

Day three brought falling water and cloud cover, though, and Abram was worried his pattern was going to dry up. To make matters worse, he wasn’t exactly catching a bunch of fish those first two days – just the right ones.

Abram wasn’t just targeting random docks, either. He exclusively worked the final few docks in the back of “flatter pockets,” and bites were few and far between. Abram says he caught a fish every 15 pockets or so.

To compensate for the changing conditions on days three and four, Abram

dedicated a few hours each morning to targeting spotted bass with a Reaction Innovations Skinny Dipper to fill out his limit and calm his nerves. Martin is known for its spotted bass, though it’s hard to make a run at winning a tournament on spotted bass alone. He needed just one big bite to seal the deal on day four.

Limit secured, Abram went back to work on his docks, twitching a weightless Reaction Innovations Flirt Worm in search of a couple big bites. He got one – a 4-pound spotted bass, bumping his total to 52-9 – but the second one never came, which turned Abram into a bundle of nerves until the dust settled on the weigh-in stage and his name remained atop the leaderboard.



AARON MARTENS: "He's just ... Aaron."

By Joel Shangle

It's a hot July afternoon on the upper Mississippi River in Wisconsin, and right in the middle of a stream-of-consciousness chat about the point angle and diameter of fishing hooks, Aaron Martens spots something that galvanizes his attention. The southern California transplant steps on his trolling motor, kicks it up to high and makes a beeline for a sandy spot on the bank.

There's a pile of tree branches spilling into the water just downriver, and at the speed that Martens is pushing his trolling motor, it seems like a safe assumption that he's seen something at which he dearly wants to make a cast. But

as he noses the boat directly into the bank, leans forward and stretches the 7 1/2-foot rod in his hand as far out as he can reach without falling out of the boat, it becomes clear that he's not interested in fish at the moment.

"Hey there, little snake," Martens says as he pulls the rod back, with a 6-inch snake wrapped around the tip.

Martens coaxes the snake from his rod onto his hand, and then spends the next couple of minutes allowing the tiny serpent to weave its way through his fingers while he observes, engrossed in its movement. He identifies the species as easily as he identifies fish on

+ Support the Martens Family

Fellow MLF pro Gerald Spohrer recently launched a GoFundMe campaign to help support the Martens family as Aaron undergoes treatment. Anyone interested in making a donation can do so at gofundme.com/f/aaron-martens-and-family.

his electronics, giving his co-angler for the day a quick rundown of what this snake likes to eat.

"I know all that because my daughter, Jordan, loves snakes. I mean, she really loves snakes," he says. "Hey, can you take a picture for me to send her? Oh man, Jordan is going to LOVE this."

With that, Martens hands over his phone, poses for several snapshots of the snake winding its way around his hand, and then leans back over to gently allow the little critter to slither off his fingers and back onto the sandy beach.

"Bye, little snake. Thanks," Martens says as he trolls downstream, chattering about the terrarium he built for Jordan's snakes before he goes back to the business of finding fish.

He finds plenty of them, of course (happily talking to his co-angler the whole time), because that's what Martens is known for by the millions of people who have paid attention to his 23-year professional career.

But it's the brief encounter with the snake – that five-minute blip in a 10-hour day – that really defines Aaron Martens to the people who know and love him best.

"From the day I met him when he was a 14-year-old kid, Aaron has been the same person: He's the most genuine, kind, sweet person there is," says John Murray, who has been friends with Martens since the two competed in tournaments in California in the early 1990s. "He's just ... Aaron. Anybody who really knows him knows exactly what I mean when I

say that. There's no perfect, easy way to describe him, because he's just such a unique person. Big, big, big, big, big heart."

This spring, Martens' big, big, big, big heart was paid back to him tenfold, with an outpouring of concern and love for him and his family as he began the fight of his life. A pair of tumors were removed from his brain in April. On May 14, Martens began radiation and chemotherapy as part of his treatment.

"It brings me to tears, the amount of love and prayers people have shared with us," Martens says.

Postscript: Martens has just finished his first day of radiation at Grandview Medical Center in Birmingham. He looks calm, almost serene, as he delivers an update to friends and family on Instagram.

"All right guys, I just finished my first round of radiation," Martens says. "It wasn't so bad. Great people here [at the cancer center], very easy. This is the beginning of the fight, you know? The rest of the fight. Thank you, and thanks for your prayers."

He ends with a thumbs up.

"I want people to know I'm doing okay," Martens says later, when asked about his IG post. "I don't want people to worry about me."

"Aaron obviously loves to catch fish, but he's not motivated by the same things the rest of us are," Murray adds. "He's always thinking of other people. Always. It's never about him, ever. It's always about his family and his friends. That's just what makes him Aaron." ■



NEVER GIVE UP

Mark Daniels Jr.

Since fishing the wind-blown shores of San Francisco Bay as a youngster – for fun and for dinner – Mark Daniels Jr. dreamed of competing against the world’s best tournament anglers. After earning a degree in 2006 from Tuskegee University, Daniels made a commitment to compete hard on the tournament trail for five years. Now he’s fishing against the best on the MLF Pro Tour. His climb to the top was fueled by three words: Never give up. “You have to disregard the naysayers and never give up, always follow your passion.”

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ABU GARCIA REVO BEAST X

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

Big on muscle yet moderate in size, the low-profile Revo Beast X combines some of the best features of Abu Garcia's entry-level Revo X with its flagship 40-size baitcaster, the Beast. The result is an affordable powerhouse hybrid specifically engineered for tackling heavy-duty applications using big baits and large-diameter lines.

The \$179.95 price point on the Beast X is a good one for a mid-sized "specialty reel" with such high qualities. At just 9.35 ounces, the Beast X is like a beefed-up welterweight that's well equipped to take on the biggest bass in the lake.

First Impression

The matte black Beast X is identical in frame size and weight to its grayish Beast brethren, which costs \$100 more, but the similarities

between the two reels don't end there. Both utilize the same heavy-duty brass gearing, clutch design, extended 95mm handle and high-capacity spool that combine to ease the inherent strains of retrieving big, hard-pulling baits and help in delivering them long distances.

The main differences worth noting include the X model's traditional paddle-style grips (the regular Beast has large foam knobs), a 24-pound drag system (the regular Beast has a 30-pound drag) and the MagTrax magnetic braking setup (the regular Beast has an upgraded Infini braking system) – all incorporated to reduce cost while maintaining Abu Garcia's reputation for quality.

In Action

Abu Garcia's claim that the reel is a big-bait workhorse is right on the mark.

Just make sure you've got plenty of line handy before you start filling the spool, because it gobbles up a bunch. The Beast X is rated to hold 165 yards of 50-pound-test braid and 170 yards of 17-pound-test mono.

I used it to throw 2 1/2-ounce glide baits, magnum swimbaits and hard-pulling crankbaits such as the Strike King 10XD. Casts were smooth across the board in combination with 14- to 20-pound-test fluorocarbon and braided line up to 50-pound test. The clickable 28-point magnetic braking system – called MagTrax – helped to keep overruns in check.

I was equally impressed by the reel's torque, stability and leverage. It felt like a winch as the big handle, oversized brass gears and rigid frame all worked in unison to retrieve hard-digging

baits with noticeably less effort than a standard-sized cranking reel. Paired with the proper rod, it's a powerful setup you can still use for extended periods without fatigue.

Final Thoughts

Though it's primarily touted as a "specialty reel" for throwing big, heavy baits or hard-pulling deep-divers – and it works great for that – the Beast X doesn't necessarily have to live in the rod locker until a specific duty calls. I found it to be versatile enough to toss smaller baits such as medium-sized paddle-tail swimbaits, the Strike King 6XD, under-spins and more, as long as the appropriate line and rod were used. You can even flip with it if need be. Being able to cover multiple bases effectively with one reel easily justifies the \$179.95 price tag.

LOW PROFILE:

Though it's packed with powerhouse features often found in reels with larger frames and footprints, the Beast X maintains a low-profile, compact design.



DEEP SPOOL:

A deep spool boosts line capacity and maximizes casting distance with the large-diameter lines frequently used with big baits.

POWER GRIPS:

The oversized handle and power grips help maximize leverage.



Performance Advice

Power up – To maximize performance, be sure the reel is strapped to a rod that is powered to handle the lure of choice.

Fine-tune it – Make use of the reel's MagTrax braking system and spool tension knob for precision adjustments based on line size and type, lure size, and wind direction. The brake features 28 clickable settings to help get everything dialed in.

Weight and balance – At 9.35 ounces, the reel feels most balanced when paired with rod lengths of 7 feet, 6 inches or longer.

Applications

– Increased line capacity provided by the large spool makes it ideal for launching long casts with big baits and heavy line.

– It's a good choice for long-lining deep cranks around offshore structure.

– The Beast X can also be used with mid-sized baits or for flipping big jigs and heavy tungsten.

HITS & MISSES

- + Smooth casting
- + Large spool for max line capacity
- + Power handle and large paddle grips
- + Oversized gears for more torque
- + Lightweight for a large-spool reel
- + 28-point clickable braking for dialing in casts
- + 24-pound star drag to handle heavy fish
- Only one gear ratio

>> ON THE WATER



PHOTO BY MATT PACE

Zata: Another Low-Profile Hit

Abu Garcia recently introduced its all-new Zata series low-profile baitcaster, spinning reel and rod/reel combos. If you're looking for a more traditional all-purpose baitcaster in the same price range as the Beast X, the Zata might be the one, with a 7.1:1 ratio, 11 ball bearings, upgraded braking and stout brass gearing. It retails for \$174.95.

DETAILS

Gear Ratio: 6.4:1

Weight: 9.35 ounces

Line Capacity: 165 yards of 50-pound-test braid; 170 yards of 17-pound-test monofilament

Bearings: 8

Drag: 24 pounds

Retrieve Hand: left and right

MSRP: \$179.95

Contact: abugarcia.com



1. RABID BAITS

The folks at Rabid Baits have been tinkering with adding fly-tying materials to soft plastics for years, but it wasn't until a few seasons ago, while trying to catch heavily pressured smallmouths on the St. Lawrence River, that they realized the full potential of the concept. Molding fur into popular soft-plastic shapes creates a unique finesse presentation because even when the baits are dead-sticked, the fur keeps pulsing in a way that bass can't resist. Zonker – strips of rabbit fur – was chosen for the fur because of its ability to store well after use to be fished again later. Strategic placement helps create the look of injured bass forage.

Among the company's current lineup (more baits are coming this summer) are the Rabid Craw, with its two hairy pincers, a soft stick bait called the Shaker Worm, plus a Goby and Darter that each sport a trio of spiky zonker clumps. Baits come four to a pack for \$6.99 or \$7.99. rabidbaits.com

2. B&W TOW AND STOW ADJUSTABLE BALL MOUNT

Leave busted shins and unlevel trailer tongues in the past thanks to B&W's innovative Tow and Stow Adjustable Ball Mount. This clever hitch is adjustable up and down in 1-inch increments for a proper towing setup, which is especially handy if you're swapping from a boat trailer to a utility trailer or camper from time to time. Also handy is the ability to rotate between two or three ball sizes, depending on model. When not in use, just pop out a couple pins and rotate the hitch underneath the vehicle into the stow position to protect your shins and provide a few extra inches of garage door clearance. The Tow and Stow comes in two finishes, three shank sizes, four drop lengths and three ball configurations, all of which are easy to select on the B&W website to match your needs. \$194 to \$351 bwtrailerhitches.com

3. NORMAN LURES SPEED N

When you look at the Speed N, you definitely see the family resemblance. It's a chip off the old Norman N-series block. In fact, the Speed N's body is the same size and weight as the legendary Deep Little N. Where the Speed N finds its niche is as a crankbait for fishing around grass – though it'll work around any sort of cover or structure in that 4- to 6-foot range.

A square-ish lip and careful weighting give the bait a tight wobble, with enough pitch and roll and the kind of hunting action that often work so well. The company says it has a unique dull thumping sound thanks to the body material, and a gelcoat to protect the finish. It costs \$7.99. normanlures.com

4. MYCHARGE ADVENTURE H20

Throw anything you want at the Adventure H20 series chargers, and they return exactly what you need: power. These rugged, portable power sources for small electronics are waterproof, shock-proof and can stand being tossed around in the muck and the grime. Use them to re-power tablets, smartphones, GoPros and the like. Several sizes are available to provide from two to six charges for the average smartphone, with 1A to 2.4A of output. \$29.99 to \$54.99 mycharge.com



5. PH CUSTOM LURES P1

Phil Huntley of PH Custom Baits is picking up the balsa-bait torch from the late Ed Chambers, whose W.E.C. crankbaits have a cult-like following. In fact, Huntley designed his new P1 to look and act like Chambers' old E-series crankbaits.

The P1 has a squat, round body and a thin square lip cut from circuit board. Highly buoyant with a wide wobble, the P1 deflects off shallow cover in an erratic way to trigger strikes. It also hunts, making it versatile enough to fish from early in the season right through the hottest parts of the year. Retail price is \$22.99.

phcustomlures.com



HOW TO CHOOSE CRANKBAITS WITH A MASTER MAKER, ANGLER

There's a lot you don't need to know about crankbait design to be successful, but some things should be considered essential info

By Curtis Niedermier

Most bass pros are experts at putting a variety of baits to work to catch fish, but few have the same level of expertise with regard to any one type of bait as MLF pro Cliff Pace has achieved with crankbaits. The 2019 Bass Pro Tour Stage Eight champion has helped Jackall Baits design plastic crankbaits for market. He's also the owner, designer and manufacturer of the Black Label Tackle brand of hand-built balsa crankbaits.

Black Label crankbaits are built following a tedious 45-step process that ensures every component – from the ballast weight to the final protective clear coat – is manufactured and assembled to Pace's exacting standards. His design process is just as rigorous, since altering the body shape, weight, line tie location, bill geometry or any other detail will result in an entirely different end result.

Pace, as well as others schooled in crankbait design, understands the nuances better than most of us will ever need to, but all bass anglers would be wise to study what makes some crankbaits work better in common situations than others. And for that, Pace has great advice.

Test and Classify

First things first: You can't always judge a crankbait when it's in its package. Sure, some are obviously designed to be fished certain ways and around certain types of cover. Also, most companies do a solid job of explaining where and when to throw their baits. But to really understand a crankbait's action – and to compare one to another – you often need to see them in the water.

Hand-made balsa baits, especially, require some first-hand water review because no two are alike. One might hunt hard, while another "identical" bait doesn't. Two baits from the same batch might deflect or wobble differently. The variations are usually the result of natural inconsistencies in the balsa and the handwork that goes into building them, and that's why most bass pros in the know have a box of "special" tournament crankbaits that are just a little better than the rest.

Tight vs. Wide Action

According to Pace, most crankbaits can be categorized into two groups based on their action type: tight action and wide action.

The wider the wobble, the more vibrations the bait puts off in the water.

The subtler, tight-action baits create less vibration.

Most of the time, tight-action crankbaits have narrow bills, and wide-action crankbaits have wider bills. A steeper bill angle creates more vibration (and helps with deflecting off cover), and a shallower angle creates less vibration.

Other factors are in play, but that's the 101 explanation of what creates the two action types. What's more important than how a bill design affects the action is how the action applies to fishing situations.

"Typically, your tight-action baits are going to be more effective in colder water, and the wider-action baits are more effective in warmer water," Pace says. "Same thing with water clarity. I like a tighter-action bait in real clear water and a wider-action bait in off-color water."

In addition to temperature and clarity, also consider the fishing pressure. A tight-action bait can put bass in the boat when bass have been fished for a lot. For this reason, when fishing near his home in Mississippi, Pace throws a tight-action, flat-sided crankbait a lot in the fall after a long season of fishing pressure.

Cover Factors

The type of cover being fished is a major deciding factor, too. A tighter-action bait is usually better in grass since the bill is less likely to hang and isn't as liable to get bogged down.

"The complete opposite of that would be a wider action is better around wood," Pace says. "You have a larger bill, which is what creates a larger action, but it also helps protect the hooks and helps it deflect.

"To be generic about it, your pointier, rounder-bill baits are more effective in grass," he adds. "Baits with squared-off lips are more effective in wood."

You should also consider how long the bait will make contact with the cover.

"If you throw a crankbait around a tree, it's only going to make contact at one point when it hits the tree," says Pace. "When cranking grass, most of the time you're cranking the outside edge. So, you crank it down, it comes in contact when it hits the grass, then comes free and back into open water. When you crank rock, whether it's riprap or chunk rock or a gravel bar, once you get the bait on that cover, it's going to stay there. You need a bait that maintains good bottom contact if you're going to crank rock with it. You need a bait that recovers real well."

In wood, you want a bait that will deflect and, preferably, one that can float out of a snag, which is why highly buoyant, wide-wobbling balsa baits

have always been popular for cranking shallow wood cover. Look for the same characteristics in a deep-diving crankbait if you want to fish offshore brush piles.

For grass, several types can work, but Pace often chooses tight-action, straight-running plastic crankbaits. They can be ripped clean easily, and many have rattles, which help to draw fish out of the grass.

Baits that Hunt

Hunting is built-in action, and it's a hallmark of some classic crankbaits and dozens of handmade balsa plugs. When a crankbait hunts, it wobbles like normal, but will also veer left or right 6 inches to a foot and then come back to center.

"A lot of baits say they hunt, but they really don't," says Pace. "I really like that style bait for cranking wood and for cranking rock because I think it generates more bites. It makes the bait look more natural to a fish. I do not like that style of bait for cranking grass because, typically, a bait that has a good hunting action like that is not going to break free of grass very well."

More on Plastic vs. Balsa

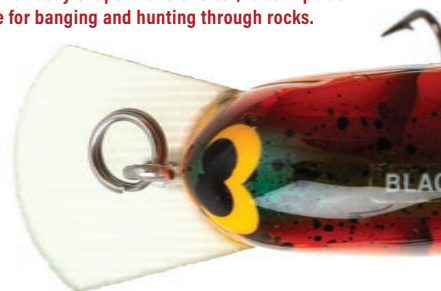
Speaking generally, plastic has advantages over balsa, and balsa has advantages over plastic in certain situations, but you can't disregard the specific design elements already described and choose only based on the material.

"Balsa baits are normally going to be more buoyant. They're great baits for cover. That's what they've always been known for," Pace says. "Plastic baits are going to have a lot cleaner finish. You can get so much more realistic with plastic baits. You can do all your transparent colors that you can't do with balsa, which makes plastic baits pretty much dominant in your clear-water environments. When I say clear, I mean gin-clear."

Plastic baits also can be made with rattles and weight-transfer systems that aid in making longer casts, which is why they often dominate for cranking at the deepest end of the bass-fishing spectrum.



The Black Label Slim (top) has flat sides and a rounded lip. It's designed with a subtle, hunting action. The new Black Label Peanut (bottom) has a similar body shape with a shorter, fatter lip. It's made for banging and hunting through rocks.



Embrace the Variety

The most important takeaway when it comes to crankbait selection is that anglers should take advantage of all the options on the market these days. There are dozens of flat-sided crankbaits, square-bills, round-bills and on and on, and they come in balsa, plastic and other materials. Two seemingly similar baits can have widely different actions. Each has its place.

"Anglers need to understand that all crankbaits are not designed for any and every application," Pace adds. "You can definitely fine-tune your cranking lure choice just like you can fine-tune everything else. In the world we live in now, the bait options are nearly endless, which is great as a fisherman, but you have to understand all those little nuances." ■

Pace shows off the Black Label CBS 1 (left) and Jackall Aska square-bills that he used during his 2019 BPT win in Wisconsin.



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

PROFILE: **DUSTIN**
CONNELL

CLANTON, AL



While it used to seem like “breaking out” at the professional level of bass fishing took years to accomplish, pros in Dustin Connell’s “college fishing generation” have shown that it’s possible to not only make it to the top in a relatively short time, but to learn to thrive despite a comparative lack of high-level tournament experience. Then again, it’s not surprising for Connell. At just 30 years old, the hard-working Alabama pro has a long and well-travelled road of local and regional competition behind him, with signs pointing toward a lengthy tenure on the MLF Bass Pro Tour.

We recently took the time to learn more about how he fished his way to BPT stardom.

QA

By Sean Ostruszka
PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

You seemingly came out of nowhere a couple years ago, and now you’re one of the young stars of the sport. How does that happen?

Well, I’d probably have to start at the beginning.

Fair enough. How did you get started?

Honestly, dude, I came from the bottom.

Bottom, as in?

I came from a low-income family in Alabama. I mean, we just barely got by, so I never had anybody hand me anything. Not even money for gas.

So how did you even get started in fishing tournaments?

I didn't even start fishing until I was 10, and even then, that was just from the bank in ponds around the house. I didn't fish from a boat until I was 12.

My brother, James, bought a 16-foot aluminum boat with a 25-hp motor on it. It wasn't anything special, but I absolutely thought it was awesome. We started fishing the Coosa River and Lake Mitchell, and started fishing some local night tournaments.

Then, when I was 16, I bought a 16-foot Champion with a 90-hp motor, which really allowed me to start fishing tournaments.

Most 16-year-olds buy cars — you all buy boats. How did you even afford them, or even the gas?

So, from 15 to 17, I worked in a metal fabrication shop. I was basically a go-getter; you know, "go get this" or "go sweep the floors." My mom, Teresa, let my brother and I borrow her 1995 Ford F-150. All the money I earned basically went toward buying the boat, gas for it and tournament entry fees.

How much gas can you afford with that job?

Not much. This was back in the late 2000s, so I'd only be able to buy like three gallons of gas. That's as far as we could fish in any tournament.

Quite the tournament strategy. Where'd you go from there?

Well, I graduated high school and went to the University of Alabama, in part so I could be on the fishing team. Well, that was eye-opening. I still had the same truck and boat from the mid-90s, and keep in mind it is 2010. Meanwhile, everyone else on the team is showing up with new trucks and boats.

That had to be a little intimidating.

Not really. I'd been fishing four days a week for years. I figured no one had fished as much or put in the hours I had.

So, which came first: fishing or school?

Dude, all I wanted to do was go out and fish.

Was school even on your radar?

It was. Originally, I was in engineering, but my junior year I made a pivotal decision. I'd won angler of the year all three years on my college team, and I made the decision I wanted to make a career of fishing, so I switched to marketing so I could focus more on that future career.

And you graduated with that degree in, what, 2012?

Yep. Now, most people get a job out of college. I instead went straight home and started fishing every local tournament I could; any tournament I could get in. It was my only source of income.

In 2013, I won \$50,000, but keep in mind, they were team tournaments. I was splitting that with my brother. Still, I had like \$7,000 in the bank. I thought I was doing really good.

Considering your background, yeah, I bet you did.

I really did, and I thought I was set and rolling. Then, 2014 happened. Things got tough, and I didn't win a single tournament. I spent \$3,000 to enter my first B.A.S.S. Open and didn't get a check. Before I knew it, it's June and I'm broke. My girlfriend broke up with me. I'm living at home with my mom, and I have nothing.

Ouch.

Yeah. I had no other options but to get a job, so I took a construction job up in Winston-Salem, N.C., building apartments.

I'm not going to lie, I hated it. I mean, I was truly miserable.

Man, that had to be brutal. Did you think your dream was dead?

No. I knew I needed to bow up and try again, so I saved up another \$7,000 after 10 months so I could go home and enter another B.A.S.S. Open, this one on the Alabama River. Well, I won that.

The first tournament you entered when you got back?

First tournament, and I make \$50,000. The following weekend, I win \$20,000 in an Alabama Bass Trail tournament. A month after that, I win

\$17,000, and a month after that I win another \$17,000. In 2015, I won more than \$100,000 fishing locally.

Wow. What happened? What changed for such a turnaround?

I didn't want to ever go back to wearing that hard hat. I never took fishing for granted like I did before.

In 2016, you fished the Opens and qualified for the Elite Series. Then in 2017, you not only won your fourth Elite Series event on Ross Barnett, but you won Rookie of the Year. And now, here you are, competing on the Bass Pro Tour.

Yeah, here I am. I'm very fortunate and very blessed.

How'd you do it?

Sweat equity. You've got to love bass fishing and really hate getting beat. Even today, I realize you're going to lose a lot more than you're going to win, but I still hate losing so bad it's unbelievable. It's not about the money anymore; it's about the competition. And it's not even the other anglers. Those fish make me so mad sometimes when I can't figure them out.

Do you feel like you've made it?

No. I'll never feel like that.

I always try to stay humble, because I've seen just how quick things can go bad in this sport, and I don't want it to happen again. I want to do this for the rest of my life, and I'm going to bust my butt to make sure that happens.

Fair enough, but looking at all you've overcome, do you ever have moments where you have to pinch yourself?

Oh, all the time.

Like when?

Any time a kid comes up to me and asks me to sign his hat or shirt.

I had a moment this year where I was at Eufaula, and a kid drove all the way from Mississippi to show me his hat that I'd signed in 2017 when I won the Ross Barnett event. It's 2020 now. It's flown by. But I still remembered that hat. I couldn't believe it; couldn't believe all that's happened. ■

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2020 JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP AND STATE FEDERATION LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE HEAD TO OHIO



THE BASS FEDERATION RECENTLY ANNOUNCED THAT TWO OF ITS PREMIER SUMMERTIME EVENTS WILL TAKE PLACE IN TRUMBULL COUNTY, OHIO, IN JULY

The 2020 The Bass Federation Junior World Championship (JWC) is set for July 29-31 on Mosquito Lake. It's a two-person team tournament spread over three days of competition. The TBF Junior program includes all anglers age 15 or younger as of Aug. 31, 2020, but only top Junior teams that qualified through state-level competition will compete.

As is tradition, the TBF State Leadership Conference will also be held in conjunction with the JWC. As part of the conference, 49 TBF-affiliated state Federations in the U.S. and Canada have been invited to send officials to attend meetings on youth and conservation items, strategic planning, tournament fishing, and safely operating local and state events in the era of COVID-19, as well as to participate in the annual elections of TBF national directors.

The North American Bass Challenge (NABC) will also host a premier Big Fish event at Mosquito Lake on Saturday, Aug. 1, with the top prize of a new Ranger aluminum boat for the single biggest bass caught. The event

is open to the public. Visit the web at NorthAmericanBassChallenge.com for more information.

"We're excited to hold this event in Cortland, Ohio, on Mosquito Lake," says TBF President and CEO Robert Cartledge. "It is a new location for us, but Mosquito Lake is a top-rated Ohio destination and a great place to host our events. There is a lot in the area for our attendees to do, and Trumbull County is rolling out the red carpet for them."

Trumbull County is located midway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh and about an hour from each. It's home to Mosquito Lake, which is Ohio's second-largest inland lake at 7,850 acres, plus the Mahoning River and Pymatuning Creek, a state-designated Wild and Scenic River. It's also home to the nation's fourth-largest Amish community and the birthplace of President William McKinley.

"We're thrilled to welcome anglers from around the country here to Mosquito Lake, Ohio's premier bass fishing location," adds Beth Carmichael, executive director of the Trumbull County Tourism Bureau. "In addition to the excitement of these 'top-in-class' competitions, the area offers fantastic opportunities for family

and friends who travel with the competitors, including kayaking the Mahoning River, area playgrounds, golfing and disc golfing. The Eastwood Mall Complex not only offers a variety of shopping and dining options, but there are also two movie theaters, a trampoline park and creative opportunities at their one-of-a-kind shops."

EXTRA PRECAUTIONS IN PLACE

By its very nature, fishing out on a lake away from crowds is social distancing. Regardless, event officials are taking extra steps to ensure a safe event. Conference invitees who happen to be in a COVID-19-restricted state or area at that time, those who are at risk, and anyone who simply chooses not to attend in person will be able to access conference content digitally. Federation officials have worked with health experts to develop COVID-19-compliant measures for the conference, weigh-in and meetings, as well as at other events across the nation (more on that momentarily). TBF officials note that these measures will help keep participants and communities safe while still doing their part to help ease the economic strain and get people and businesses in our country back to work.

JWC: SPRINGBOARD TO THE PROS?

Many of today's top pro anglers started in the TBF Junior program and competed in the Junior World Championship, including 2006 JWC qualifier Jacob Wheeler, 2007 JWC champion Shane LeHew, and 2017 FLW Cup winner Justin Atkins, who competed in the 2008 JWC. Lance Freeman, the 2020 TBF National Championship winner, also started out in the TBF Junior program in Kentucky.



Lance Freeman



2020 EVENTS RESCHEDULED AND UNDER WAY

ALWAYS MORE THAN 100 PERCENT PAYBACK IN CASH AND PRIZES

With tournaments picking up again following postponement due to COVID-19, anglers interested in finding The Bass Federation events near them can visit BassFederation.com and respective state Federation websites for up-to-date schedules. There's still plenty of opportunity to qualify through state Federations or TBF-affiliated clubs to fish a close-to-home TBF National Semi-Finals event. From there, top anglers from each state advance to the 2021 TBF National Championship for a shot at the \$125,000 top boater prize or the \$30,000 top co-angler prize.

Here's a list of upcoming TBF National Semi-Finals events:

June 20-21

District 6 – Oklahoma/Arkansas – Lake Eufaula, Okla.

Sept. 12-13

District 11 – Michigan/Ohio – Mosquito Lake, Ohio

District 16 – Vermont/Massachusetts – Lake Champlain, Vt.

Sept. 19-20

District 12 – Virginia/West Virginia – Kerr Lake, Va.

District 7 – Missouri/Kansas – Truman Lake, Mo.

District 8 – Nebraska/South Dakota/North Dakota – Lake McConaughy, Neb.

District 14 – Pennsylvania/Ontario/New York – Lake Wallenpaupack, Pa.

Sept. 26-27

District 17 – Maine/New Hampshire – Damariscotta Lake, Maine

District 5 – Texas/Louisiana – Sam Rayburn, Texas

District 9 – Minnesota/Wisconsin – Leech Lake, Minn.

District 13 – Maryland/Delaware/Washington, D.C. – Upper Bay, Md.

Oct. 2-3

District 19 – Idaho/Montana – C. J. Strike Reservoir, Idaho

District 3 – Kentucky/Tennessee – Green River Lake, Ky.

District 21 – Colorado/New Mexico – Pueblo Lake, Colo.

District 18 – Washington/Oregon – Roosevelt Lake, Wash.

Oct. 10-11

District 10 – Indiana/Illinois – Lake Wawasee, Ind.

District 15 – Connecticut/Rhode Island/New Jersey – Hudson River, N.Y.

Oct. 17-18

District 4 – Alabama/Mississippi – Pickwick Lake, Ala.

Oct. 24-25

District 1 – Florida/Georgia – St. Johns River, Fla.

Nov. 14-15

District 23 – Arizona/California – Lake Shasta, Calif.

District 2 – North Carolina/South Carolina – Roanoke River, N.C.

TBA

District 22 – Nevada/Utah – Lake Mead, Nev.

NEW TOURNAMENT PROTOCOLS IN PLACE

We think that fishing is the “OSD,” or Original Social Distancing, but The Bass Federation national office has put extra measures in place to help keep anglers safe as the country deals with COVID-19.

Due to current public health concerns and out of respect for our participants, things might look a bit different for a while. These extra safety steps certainly require some temporary changes. So, TBF asks for your patience for as long as those safety measures are necessary to protect the health and well-being of anglers, staff and communities in which we do business.

This applies to every tournament circuit under the Federation Angler (FederationAngler.com) umbrella. You can see the complete list of tournament circuits and respective websites listed on the facing page. Events will

operate under these special procedures until further notice.

As is always the case, safety is the paramount concern. That won't ever change.

Here's a summary of changes:

1. Rules briefings and meetings can be streamed live on our websites. A signed entry release from each participant will clearly state that the person has read the rules and understands them. Phones can be used to check in, and anglers can watch the rules briefings online or listen to them from inside a nearby parked vehicle. Extra sound systems will be utilized so that all can hear, even from parked cars.

2. Morning takeoffs are closed to spectators, and we will live stream them on social media. Livewell and safety checks will be done in a drive-by fashion.

3. Weigh-ins will be modified because social distancing **MUST** be observed. There will be no indoor weigh-ins. They will be open-air events only so that people can feel comfortable spreading out as far as needed, including the option to listen to weigh-ins from their vehicles. Access will be restricted to various areas. One of the best places to watch is from home via live feeds on websites and Facebook Live, as well as via live leaderboards and various coverage we produce on the internet.

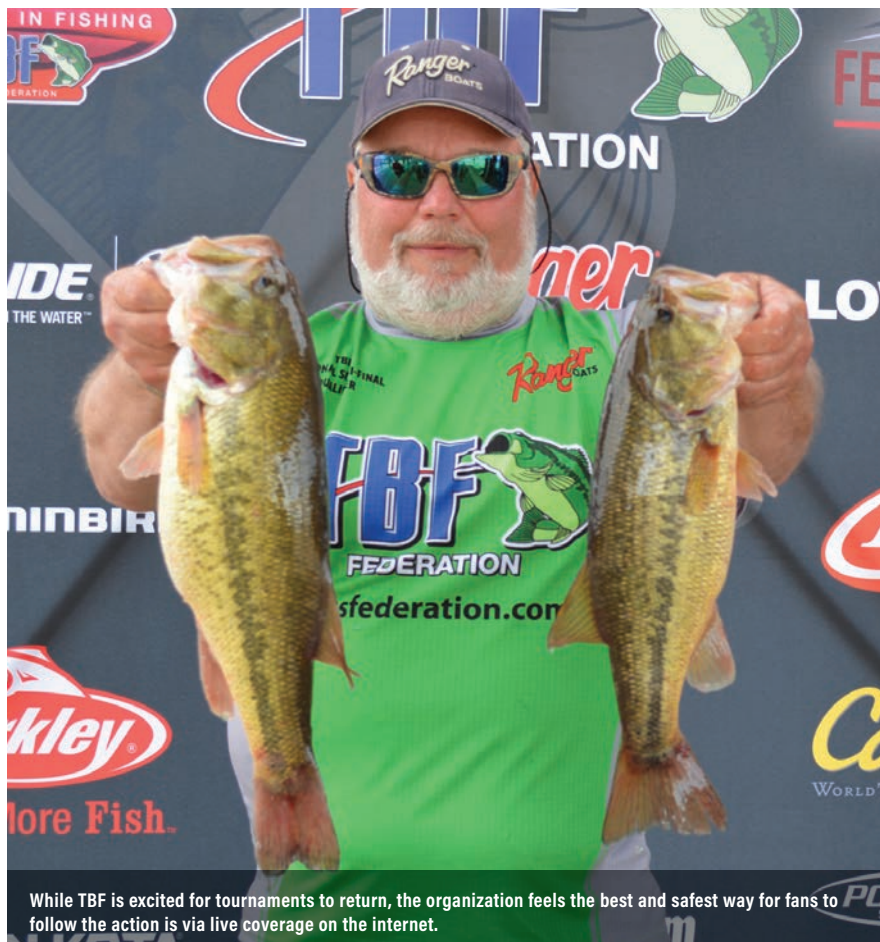
4. Multiple flights and holding tanks will be added to space out the anglers during weigh-in to ensure proper fish care and to comply with CDC guidelines on social distancing. Barriers will be used to separate anglers in line.

Anglers will cross in front of the stage on camera and place their bag of fish in the stage container provided. Officials will weigh them and hand them back off the stage for pictures and return to the lake.

Awards ceremonies that might gather an unacceptable crowd of people won't be held. Plaques, trophies and prize checks can be mailed to the winners, or recipients can be called up one at a time from their vehicles or boats.

Further decisions and adjustments may be made as conditions require. And always remember: **NO MATTER WHAT, IF YOU ARE SICK, STAY HOME UNTIL YOU FEEL BETTER.**

“We greatly appreciate everyone's cooperation and understanding,” says TBF President and CEO Robert Cartlidge. “It impacts us all when our fans, sponsors and spectators cannot interact with our events, however, due to current COVID-19 guidelines in the U.S., it is in everyone's best interest to follow the path laid out by officials and to do our part in conducting the safest possible events for everyone concerned. So, if we can do our small part in reopening the economy and help stop the spread and protect those that may be high risk, then that is what we need to do.”



While TBF is excited for tournaments to return, the organization feels the best and safest way for fans to follow the action is via live coverage on the internet.

TIPS FOR STAYING SAFE

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for most people, the immediate risk of becoming seriously ill from the virus that causes COVID-19 is low. Based on the recommendations from the CDC, we highly recommend the following tips:

- **STAY HOME** when sick or living with a sick person.
- **DISTANCE** yourself and stay at least 6 feet away from other persons.
- **COVER** the nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, and/or wear a face covering at all times.
- **WASH** your hands **OFTEN** with soap and water.
- **CLEAN** frequently touched surfaces and objects routinely.
- **AVOID** touching your face or eyes with your hands.
- **CONSULT** a health-care provider as needed.

GET MORE INFORMATION

The Federation Angler family includes the organizations listed below. Check respective websites for more information about tournament schedules and rules.

[The Bass Federation](http://BassFederation.com) (BassFederation.com)

[Student Angler Federation High School Fishing](http://HighSchoolFishing.org) (HighSchoolFishing.org)

[The Walleye Federation](http://WalleyeFederation.com) (WalleyeFederation.com)

[Bass Pro Shops/Cabela's Masters Walleye Circuit](http://MastersWalleyeCircuit.com) (MastersWalleyeCircuit.com)

[North American Bass Challenge](http://NorthAmericanBassChallenge.com) (NorthAmericanBassChallenge.com)

[National Bass Anglers Association](http://NBAA-bass.com) (NBAA-bass.com).

DISTANCE LEARNING AVAILABLE FOR ANGLERS

GET ONLINE TRAINING AT FACULTYOFFISHING.COM

All Student Angler Federation (SAF) members get a free FacultyofFishing.com basic course package with their SAF membership. There are courses for all skill levels, for adults and students, and for multiple species. Additionally, all courses are currently 50 percent off to help with home study. For high school educators, bulk licenses are also available at a deep discount for top-level programs to help provide digital training for an entire class or school. Some public schools are utilizing the service for distance learning – it's that good, and it's all about fishing.

For details, contact the TBF national office at support@federationangler.com or 580.765.9031. Or go to FacultyofFishing.com to get started.



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

TBF CHAMPIONSHIPS: THE EARLY DAYS

Before the creation of The Bass Federation's National Championship, TBF hosted what was called The Bass Federation Chapter Team Championship. Each state Federation (referred to as a "chapter" back then) held qualifying events to determine its eight-person team to compete in the big event. In the last issue of *Bass Fishing*, we revisited events from 1973-1976. In this issue, we're moving on to the 1977-1980 events, which were the final Chapter Team Championships.

1977 – Virginia's Jerry Elder won the event and the \$5,000 top prize in Hardin, Ky., by besting the field of 210 anglers with 28 pounds, 7 ounces on Kentucky Lake. The event took place Aug. 31-Sept. 2.

1978 – Alabama Bass Federation member A.B. Battles won the event with 33 pounds, 3 ounces. He took home \$5,058.66 for his win. A total of 216 anglers competed in the event on Lake Eufaula in Alabama from Aug. 23-25. This was the first time the Chapter Team Championship was tagged with the name "National Championship," although the official name change and end of the Chapter Team events would not happen until 1981. Other notable anglers who fished this event were Chet Douthit, Billy Phillips, Herb Reed and Denny Brauer.

1979 – Gerald Dyer topped the 204-angler field with 31 pounds, 11 ounces to earn a first-place prize of \$5,239.95. George Cochran fished his way to a fourth-place finish in this Aug. 22-24 event, which was held on Lake of the Woods in Sioux Narrows, Ontario. OT Fears, Danny Correia and 1976 winner Don Buffalo also fished the event.

1980 – The last of the Chapter Team Championship events was held on Oklahoma's Grand Lake Aug. 20-22, 1980 and included 278 anglers. Future legendary angler Ken Cook was getting his start back then and won the event with 26 pounds, 3 ounces, taking home \$5,344.90 for his win. Denny Brauer finished fifth, and Billy Phillips finished sixth.

In 1980, the state Federation presidents voted in a new program that took effect in 1981. We'll look at that program in the next issue. ■

PRO ANGLERS ARE HUMAN, TOO

THEY MAY BE GREAT AT WHAT THEY DO, BUT EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES

By Justin Onslow

So many weekend warriors and amateur bass tournament anglers dream about one day fishing at the highest level. Those who do are perhaps blocked only by their own expectations and preconceived notions – chief among them, how do you get to the point where the big mistakes just don't happen? You know the ones I'm talking about.

But if you don't ...

Imagine a scenario in which you're nervous fishing a new body of water in your first-ever big weekend derby, and you catch a fish that wouldn't keep if you were fishing your home lake because of a slot limit. Only you're not on your home lake, and, without thinking, you unhook that 3-pounder and toss it back over the gunwale as if you were. That happened to Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Nick LeBrun in his first big draw derby on Toledo Bend.

"I'd been used to fishing Caddo all the time, and Caddo had a 14- to 18-inch slot," the second-year FLW pro says. "I caught probably a 3-pounder, got him all the way to the boat, and took the Rat-L-Trap out of his mouth and just threw him back in the water."

Perhaps you worry about mechanical issues and the major malfunctions you just don't see on FLW Live. What pro would fail to tighten a couple bolts on a trolling motor mount and watch rough water rip his trolling motor right off the bow? LeBrun can tell you all about that, too.

"I was running the boat as hard as I could and it popped up in the air a little bit too high, and when it came down the trolling motor launched going probably 55 mph," LeBrun says. "It locked in and tore right off the front of the boat. It did \$1,000 in fiberglass damage to the bottom."

Sure, those kinds of blunders don't happen that often for any given pro, but consider mistakes like the one Pro Circuit veteran Tom Redington made at Lake Martin back in March, when he unhooked

his best fish on the second day of the event, paused for a quick photo and, as if the tournament hadn't started, tossed it back over the side of his boat instead of dropping it in the livewell.

Redington returned to that spot later in the day and caught what he believes to be the same fish, and he'll tell you all about it in his YouTube video entitled **"Lake Martin FLW recap: Overcoming DUMBEST mistake ever."**



Surely that kind of thing can't happen to everyone, though. Unless you want to ask James Biggs, who returned to the Pro Circuit this season after having fished the FLW Tour in 2013 and 2015 and who won the TBF National Championship in 2014.

In the 2011 TBF National Championship, Biggs got on a fired-up school of fish and didn't have time to spare between casts. He culled and culled again, replacing his smallest fish – a 1-7 – with a larger specimen. He proceeded to throw back a 1-14 that he thought little of.

It turned out Biggs actually had another 1-7 in his livewell, and he threw back 7 ounces that would have helped in a big, big way.

"Day three, I wreck 'em, and the leader struggles, and I lose \$100,000 and the Living the Dream package by 4 ounces. I threw back 7 ounces."

There isn't a pro out there who doesn't have a similar story of opportunity lost, though they're not all of that magnitude. Take Pro Circuit rookie Erik Luzak, who hails from Canada and once tried his hand at a pike tournament with his friend and tournament partner Tom Hardy.

Opting not to include a 50-inch aerated cooler in his boat (which is sometimes necessary as a livewell to house massive pike for a full tournament day), Luzak found himself with a broken livewell and a 42-inch pike that wouldn't fit in it.

To make matters worse, he and Hardy misinterpreted the tournament rules that stated each angler – not each team – was allowed just one pike over 34 inches and threw back several of their own would-be winning fish.

"We ended up getting third or fourth – we did win big fish – but if we'd kept one of the other 34-plussers, we would have won the event," Luzak says. "It cost us a couple grand, and I would have won my only pike tournament."

Even James Watson, an established pro who spent nine years at FLW's highest level and now fishes MLF's premier circuit, has a story to tell. In 2018, his FLW Tour season started with a whimper instead of a bang when, during his very first practice day on Okeechobee, Watson took a wrong turn and ended up running through a hayfield, staring down the barrel of a boat lane about as wide as his lower unit.

"There's only one thing you can do: Hammer it," he says. "I hammer it, hit bottom right there as soon as the big reeds ended, and my big motor kicks up and shoots me to the left into this grass."

"I'm in no way, shape or form able to get this boat off. I get out and assess the situation, scared to death I'm going to get eaten by a big python or alligator. Thank God I had cell service and BoatUS."

Each of these very true stories is rare, sure, but everyone who's fished at any level has a similar tale to tell – and sometimes several. Being a pro doesn't mean you don't slip up from time to time. After all, we're all human, tournament professionals included.

**EXCEPT MAYBE BRYAN THRIFT.
WE'RE PRETTY SURE HE'S A MACHINE. ■**



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