

2020 TITLE CHAMPION | RUSTY SALEWSKE

# Bass

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2020

Magazine™



## RUSTY RETURNS

SALEWSKE CLAIMS FIRST-EVER TACKLE WAREHOUSE TITLE

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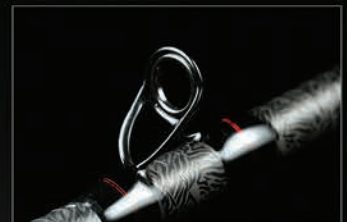
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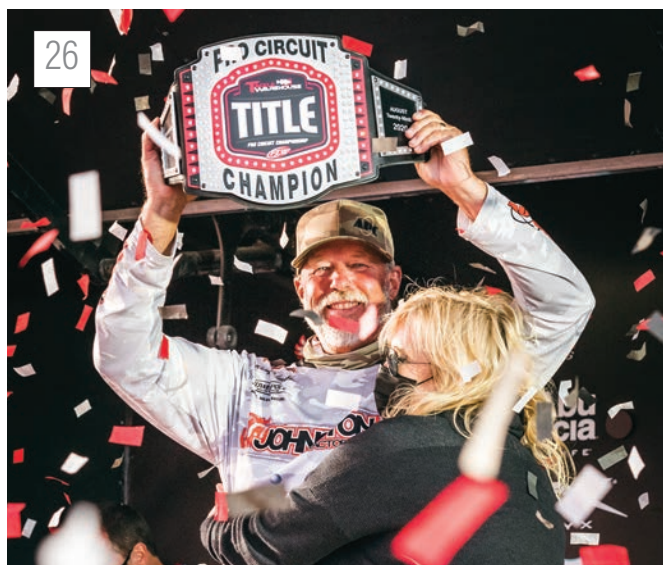


PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

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# CONTINUING THE EVOLUTION



In late September, while this issue of *Bass Fishing* magazine was on the presses, Major League Fishing announced the birth of the Major League Fishing BIG5. This next major **evolution** in the sport of competitive bass fishing will welcome the five five-fish-limit circuits of the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit, Toyota Series, Phoenix Bass Fishing League, Abu Garcia College Fishing and High School Fishing fully under the MLF umbrella starting in 2021.

## ABOUT EVOLUTION ...

If you're a longtime reader of this magazine and/or a bass angler with some appreciation of history, you're already well aware that **evolution** has been a major (very positive) characteristic of the tournament organization that is now the MLF BIG5.

Some of you knew it in the 1980s (and probably fished it through the mid-1990s) as Operation Bass, which held its first tournament on the Barren River in Glasgow, Kentucky, in 1980. Operation Bass contributed multiple first-ever/seminal events in the **evolution** of the sport of bass fishing - the first \$100,000 award (in the 1984 All-American), the first television news program dedicated to tournament bass fishing, etc. - in its 42-year existence.

Even more of you came to know it when Operation Bass **evolved** into FLW (for Forrest L. Wood) and FLW Outdoors in 2001, and grew into the largest bass-fishing organization the world has ever seen.

Along came the sport's first \$250,000 (and then \$1 million) tournament payday, and the face of a fisherman (FLW pro Denny Brauer) on a box of Wheaties. Along came the first organized high school and college fishing programs. Soon thereafter, the name evolved to Fishing League Worldwide, and the brand welcomed 10 countries into the fold under the International Division flag.

And now the **evolution** to Major League Fishing's BIG5.

## ABOUT POTENTIAL ...

Kathy Fennel - who as the company's Executive Vice President and General Manager has been part of the monumental growth of the organization since the early years of Operation Bass - is matter-of-fact about the creation of BIG5: "Merging the FLW brand into the Major League Fishing umbrella is the next logical step in our company's evolution, which now includes a broader reach than any of us thought possible in our formative years."

As many of you finish out your 2020 BFL, High School, College and Toyota Series seasons and begin to plan for 2021, I know you'll have questions. Naturally, "What will BIG5 mean to me?" will be tops among those.

I encourage you to read up on the what/when/where/why of BIG5 on the new FAQ page recently published at FLWFishing.com and MajorLeagueFishing.com. In the meantime, take Kathy's words to heart: "The key to our success lies not in a name, but in our unwavering focus on providing the best possible tournaments for anglers, fans, hosts and sponsors - our family. Uniting with MLF under a single brand makes the whole greater than the sum of the pieces. The letters may be different, but the people and the values will remain the same."

JOEL SHANGLE, EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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## FAMILY FIRST

**“F**ishing family” is an oft-used term in the tournament fishing world, from the weigh-in stage to the pages of this very magazine. In this world, every angler and fan shares a certain kinship that lacks a more apropos word than “family,” even though family in the most literal sense is quite often the most important thing to the pros who grace these pages.

Zack Birge can attest to that. As he fished along the banks of the Mississippi River en route to a fourth-place finish in the second Super Tournament of the 2020 Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit season, Birge was afforded the kind of first-hand support most pros aren’t usually able to get out on the water.

On the final day of the event, Birge fished in front of a campsite at which his wife, Kristina, and daughter, Emma – as well as his mother, Tina – watched and provided their loving support.

Photographer Charles Waldorf captured this photo and took in the scene from behind the lens as Emma cheered “Go, daddy!” every time Zack landed a fish.

All those who belong to the fishing world are family in a sense, but there’s no truer support than the love and encouragement of one’s own loved ones – especially when they’re just 50 yards away.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF





## HEART-STOPPING ACROBATICS

**F**ew things in life and in fishing can stop your heart like an acrobatic smallmouth.

Whether it's a 2-pounder or a 6-pounder, when that brown beauty makes a run for the surface and breaches like a killer whale harpooning a seal, there's not much you can do but hold on for dear life and hope it's still on the hook when it dives back to the depths.

That adrenaline-inducing display of aerial activity is heightened tenfold when you're fishing for \$200,000 and the first-ever Tackle Warehouse TITLE presented by Toyota champion's belt.

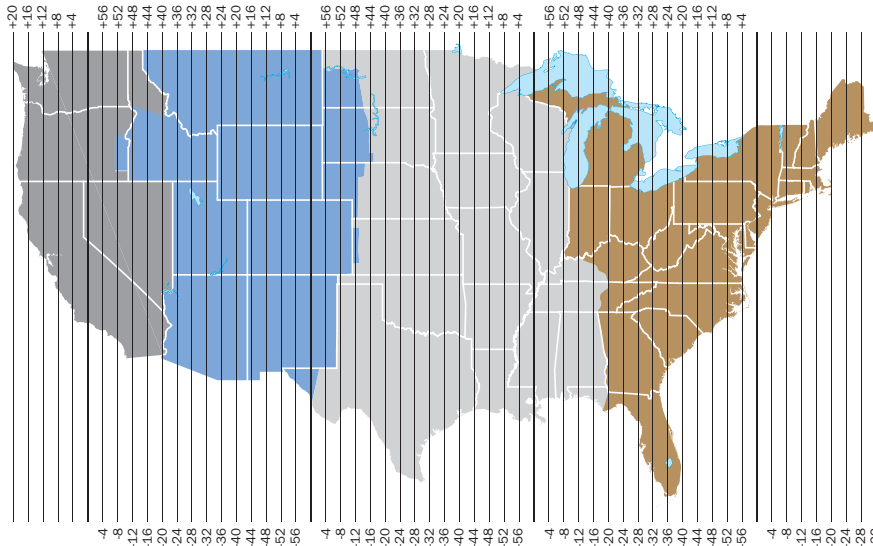
Matt Stefan wasn't alone in feeling that excitement at Sturgeon Bay in August, though he certainly was the beneficiary of the best photo of one of those moments. Jody White managed to capture an entire sequence of electrifying jumps from the smallie in question, which aided in Stefan weighing 68 pounds, 5 ounces in the Qualifying Round to make the top-20 cut and fish in the Knockout Round on day five.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

# SOLUNAR TABLES

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2020

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME  
 MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME  
 CENTRAL STANDARD TIME  
 EASTERN STANDARD TIME



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

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

## TV BROADCASTS

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

**Friday, Oct. 9 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE**  
Presented by Toyota @ Sturgeon Bay - Qualifying Round Day 1  
7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

**Saturday, Oct. 10 - 2020 General Tire World Championship**  
Shotgun Round 1  
7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

**Friday, Oct. 16 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE**  
Presented by Toyota @ Sturgeon Bay - Qualifying Round Day 2  
7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

**Saturday, Oct. 17 - 2020 General Tire World Championship**  
Shotgun Round 2  
7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

**Friday, Oct. 23 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE**  
Presented by Toyota @ Sturgeon Bay - Qualifying Round Day 3  
7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

**Saturday, Oct. 24 - 2020 General Tire World Championship**  
Elimination Round 1  
7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

**Friday, Oct. 30 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE**  
Presented by Toyota @ Sturgeon Bay - Qualifying Round Day 4  
7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

**Saturday, Oct. 31 - 2020 General Tire World Championship**  
Elimination Round 2  
7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

**Friday, Nov. 6 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE**  
Presented by Toyota @ Sturgeon Bay - Knockout Round  
7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

**Saturday, Nov. 7 - 2020 General Tire World Championship**  
Sudden Death Round  
7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

**Friday, Nov. 13 - Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE**  
Presented by Toyota @ Sturgeon Bay - Championship Round  
7-9 p.m. ET - [Outdoor Channel](#)

**Saturday, Nov. 14 - 2020 General Tire World Championship**  
Championship Round  
7-9 a.m. ET - [Discovery Channel](#)

## DID YOU SEE: LAST-MINUTE HEROICS

If you were watching the final period of the Tackle Warehouse TITLE presented by Toyota on Sturgeon Bay, you can probably understand why MLF's catch-weigh-release format makes for absolutely exhilarating bass fishing tournaments.

For much of the day, it looked like Bradford Beavers would be hoisting the TITLE belt and a fat winner's check at the end of the day. Beavers, though, struggled in the third period and ended up throwing a Hail Mary that came up short of the end zone when he went hunting for largemouth in the waning moments of the Championship Round.

And like a ball-hawking defensive back, Rusty Salewske was there to capitalize on the errant pass, toughing out the rough water and his dying trolling motor batteries to catch some last-minute winners, including a 4-14 with just 12 minutes left to leapfrog Beavers and secure the win.

That winning moment, which viewers were able to experience in real time, right alongside Salewske, will go down as one of the most memorable finishes in FLW history - and you can tune in to watch it all unfold again (along with the rest of the first-ever TITLE event) from Oct. 9 through Nov. 13 on Outdoor Channel (see TV broadcast schedule for more details).



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

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## 2021 TOURNAMENT SCHEDULES

### > TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT

Feb. 11-14	Lake Okeechobee
March 11-14	Smith Lake
April 22-25	Lake Murray
May 13-16	Lake Eufaula
June 17-20	Potomac River
July 29-Aug. 1	St. Lawrence River
Aug. 17-22	Tackle Warehouse TITLE Mississippi River @ La Crosse



### > TOYOTA SERIES

#### CENTRAL DIVISION

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

#### NORTHERN DIVISION

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

#### PLAINS DIVISION

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

#### SOUTHERN DIVISION

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

#### SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION

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

#### WESTERN DIVISION

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

#### TOYOTA SERIES CHAMPIONSHIP

Oct. 28-30	Pickwick Lake
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\* Tuesday - Thursday event

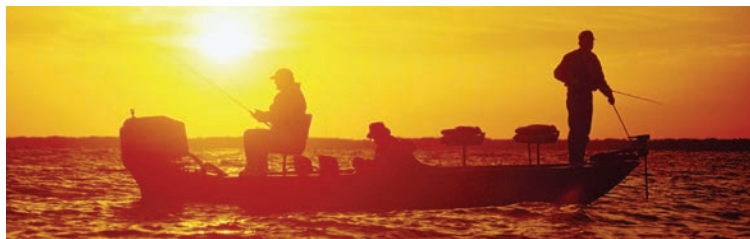
\*\* Wednesday - Friday event

## A TIME OF PROGRESS

Each year, the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation publishes a special report on fishing participation. The results of the latest report, using data from 2019, are overwhelmingly encouraging. Here are some highlights:

- Participation in fishing among the U.S. population is at its highest point since 2007, with 17 percent of the country having gone fishing at some point in 2019 – a total of 51.1 million people over the age of 6, which is up more than 700,000 participants from 2018.
- Of 2019 participants, six percent (3.1 million people) tried fishing for the first time in 2019.
- For the third-straight year, female participation in fishing increased from the previous year. In 2019, female participation in fishing grew to 17.9 million.
- Americans totaled more than 631 million freshwater fishing outings in 2019.
- Despite female anglers making up only 36 percent of the fishing population in 2019, eight percent of all participants in 2019 were first-time female anglers, as compared to just five percent for first-time male anglers.
- While many anglers also enjoy hunting, the No. 1 crossover outdoor activity among anglers in 2019 was camping (40 percent), followed by bicycling (30 percent) and hiking (28 percent).

Given the perceived increase in participation in fishing during the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdown, it stands to reason that next year's report should continue to illustrate an upward trend in the fishing industry as a whole.



## Assembly Bill 3030 Stalls Out In California Senate

In more good news for the fishing industry, California's Assembly Bill 3030 did not advance past the California Senate Appropriations Committee in late August. The proposed bill aims to protect 30 percent of California's lands and waters by 2030, posing a threat to those who use those lands and waterbodies for recreational purposes.

The recreational fishing community at large opposed the bill, due in part to the fact that sponsors of the bill were unwilling to identify recreational fishing as a compatible use in conservation areas. In addition, the bill outlined protections that would be implemented without a clear explanation of how those protections would be put in place.

As anglers and outdoors enthusiasts, we're all stewards of the environment and protectors of our precious natural resources. Still, conservation efforts should be compatible with recreational fishing so we can all continue to enjoy the natural resources we work so hard to protect and nurture.



## 2021 Wildlife Forever Fish Art Contest

> **Wildlife Forever**, Bass Pro Shops and the Johnny Morris Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium recently announced the start of the 2021 Fish Art Contest, which is open to all learners from kindergarten through 12th grade. The contest, which is free to enter and is an international art and writing competition, is meant to inspire and educate students while helping them discover the great outdoors.

To enter, participants should select a species from the official fish list, create an original illustration of that species and include a one-page essay, story or poem (grades 4-12) to go along with it. Judging will take place next April with winners announced in May.

Along with prizes for each grade group, the 2021 contest has many specialty award categories and opportunities for additional prizes and recognition, such as the Fish Habitat Award, Western Native Trout Award and Guy Harvey Award.

"The State-Fish Art program has the power to connect youth to the outdoors through the arts," says Bob Ziehmer, Senior Director of Conservation Programs at Bass Pro Shops. "This contest empowers outdoor learning and the exploration of our natural resources, creating the next generation of stewards."

Participants can win prizes and earn recognition both in their state and internationally. The Art of Conservation® ignites a lifelong appreciation of fish and fishing. Visit [www.statefishart.org](http://www.statefishart.org) for more details.



## FEDERAL AMMUNITION SIGNS WITH MLF

> **Federal Ammunition** has signed on as sponsor of 2021 MLF Cups, which began taping in September. As the No. 1 television program on Outdoor Channel for the last five years, the MLF Cups offer Federal an extensive reach with an invested outdoor audience. MLF Cups feature four television-exclusive events, which premiere on Outdoor Channel January 2, 2021, and play out over 26 weeks through June.

"We are excited to welcome Federal to the MLF sponsor family," says MLF President and CEO Jim Wilburn. "As the No. 1 show on Outdoor Channel, their sponsorship aligns the Federal ammo brand with the strongest fishing audience in television. Research shows that anglers hunt and shoot, which puts them in front of an audience of buyers each episode."

Federal, headquartered in Anoka, Minnesota, is a brand of Vista Outdoor Inc., an outdoor sports and recreation company. From humble beginnings nestled among the lakes and woods of Minnesota, Federal Ammunition has evolved into one of the world's largest producers of sporting ammunition. Beginning in 1922, founding president Charles L. Horn paved the way for our success. Today, Federal carries on Horn's vision for quality products and service with the next generation of outdoorsmen and women.

"Federal is excited about partnering with Major League Fishing," Federal Ammunition's Media Director Brian Kelvington says. "Data shows us anglers and fans of the premiere bass fishing series are also hunters and shooters, and this is a great opportunity for increased exposure to Federal Ammunition and our innovative products with this passionate audience." ■

**FEDERAL** 

## WISCONSIN FISHING FOR FOOD



In some of the northernmost states of the U.S. (especially), fishing for food is pretty common. There's nothing quite like a fish fry of panfish or walleye filets – and there's plenty of good walleye and panfish fishing in Wisconsin.

According to a study done by Holly Embke, a graduate student of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for Limnology, Wisconsinites harvest about 4,200 tons of fish from inland lakes each year. Embke's figures estimate about 2 1/2 pounds of

edible fish per fishing license issued in the state of Wisconsin.

Embke and members of the U.S. Geological Survey worked with 28 years of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources numbers to come up with statewide estimates for the study. She hopes to scale her research to a national level.

Per Embke's figures, the bottom line of the Wisconsin fish harvesting numbers is this: If instead of consuming fish they caught themselves, anglers would have spent about \$65 million on the same amount of fish at grocery stores. Sure, fishing can be expensive, but it's an easier pill to swallow with a side of fried fish, fresh from your local waters.



# LOCKDOWN LEMONADE

How MLF and FLW pros turned COVID-19 lemons into something much sweeter



## 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.

**A**s the saying goes, when life hands you lemons, make lemonade.

When bass pros endured various levels of lockdown due to COVID-19 during the peak of the 2020 fishing season this past spring, they quickly found ways to apply the down time to bettering their craft as professional anglers. From tackle room renovations to building “lure-testing facilities,” here are a handful of pros who have squeezed their own lockdown lemonade during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## EHRLER TACKLES TACKLE ROOM

After the state of California went into lockdown, Brent Ehrler found himself with no place to fish. With most boat ramps closed for an extended period of time, he committed himself to rebuilding his tackle room.

“We have a single room that’s detached from the

house,” Ehrler says. “Over the years it’s become the catch-all storage room for everything from household items to my fishing gear. All my bass tackle has been stored in various plastic totes and cardboard boxes for the last 14 years. The room was a mess, and I could never find anything I needed. Being that disorganized at home has always been a thorn in my side.”

Ehrler started his complete reorganization by having a dumpster delivered to his house to carry off the bulk of the junk. Then, he went through every piece of tackle and sold a lot of the excess to friends or donated it to his bass club. After that, he installed slat board on the walls and new shelving in the closet. Finally came the tedious process of putting every lure in a specific place, using pegs to hang a majority of his tackle for maximum efficiency.

The project took about two weeks, and the result is a tackle room that now looks like a high-end tackle store.

“I feel so much better with that finished,” Ehrler says. “Now, instead of dreading tackle prep and maintenance, I love going in that room to work. I can find anything I need in two seconds and it speeds up the packing and unpacking process tremendously.”

## RELEARNING FAMILIAR LAKES

Alex Davis has been guiding on Lake Guntersville for 13 years. When the travel restrictions squelched his guide business for a month during peak guiding days, Davis didn’t let a lack of business derail his time on the water.

“I still went fishing as much as possible to relearn my home lake,” Davis says. “Lakes are constantly changing, and the



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

fish in them are constantly adapting. Today's Guntersville is not the same Guntersville as it was 10 or even five years ago."

Specifically, Davis says the proliferation of eelgrass in Guntersville has changed bass habits over the last few years.

"During March and April, I spent many hours studying eelgrass on 360 sonar," he details. "I've learned a lot about how bass relate to the eelgrass through the spring and summer. It's been a tremendous learning experience, both in terms of understanding eelgrass and really tweaking 360 imaging to read it better. Having the time to experiment and learn that stuff would not have happened if it had been a business-as-usual season."

Wesley Strader echoes some of Davis' sentiments in describing how he spent his lockdown time.

"I purposely went to several tournament lakes that I haven't fished in many years," Strader says. "I spent time at Dale Hollow and Center Hill Lakes. Both lakes have changed so much since the last time I fished them; they're like completely different bodies of water now. If a big tournament happens on one of those lakes in the next year or so, at least I won't waste half my practice on old memories that don't work anymore."

## WALKER JOINS THE 'TUBERS

Long before there was such thing as a GoPro, David Walker had already gone pro. For that reason, Walker used his lockdown time to get better acquainted with personal action cams.

"Over the last 10 years, the role of being a professional angler has required also becoming a YouTuber," Walker says. "Making videos of yourself is now basically a prerequisite to being a pro, and I'm way behind on that deal. So, when everything came to a halt in March, I forced myself to learn how to use GoPros and edit videos for social media."

Since then, Walker has learned a lot about pixels, resolution, frame rates and transitions.

"It's been a learning curve with these cameras," he says. "But now I at least know how to turn one on, manage the settings, where to mount them for the best footage, and, most importantly, what to do with the footage once I get home. The irony of the whole process is that in order to learn how to make YouTube videos, I had to watch a lot of YouTube videos."

## DUDLEY'S 'LURE-TESTING FACILITY'

Leave it to the illustrious David Dudley to have one of the more entertaining responses to how he spent his time during lockdown.

"I started building a pool," Dudley answers candidly. "Notice I didn't say a 'swimming pool,' because it's actually going to be a lure-testing facility."

Dudley's "facility" is no spit of water, either. Measuring 20 by 50 feet and 8 feet deep, Dudley wanted a pool that was long enough to accommodate a true full-length cast.

"I used to take all my lures to the big lap pool at the YMCA," he says. "Seeing what lures really do in the water on a full-length cast has been a powerful learning tool in my career. A lot of lures look great dancing around in a tank or aquarium on the end of a dowel rod. Anglers just assume their lures are working perfectly all of the time, but they might be surprised to learn that's not always the case."

Dudley's testing facility will have pilings, stumps and rocks in it to duplicate real cover. He'll customize a casting platform that is the exact height of a bass boat bow on the water. He also plans to install an underwater track camera that can follow the baits through the water to record their every move.

"The plan is to film different lures in action and put the videos on YouTube so anglers can see what these baits really look like underwater," Dudley adds. "It's something I've wanted to do for a long time, and the lull this spring allowed me to break ground and get it going." ■



PHOTO BY JESSE SCHULTZ



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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

# BOBBY BARRACK'S RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

The California legend has been hunting down the right ingredients for decades

**A**s a lifetime fan of pro fishing, I'd heard the name Bobby Barrack for decades. Though his likeness rarely popped up on TV or in the big magazines, I understood Barrack was a dominating force in the West. In fact, he was thought to be the most dangerous tournament angler in California.

A little research confirmed the rumors: Barrack had taken down numerous major titles, most on the California Delta, won about a dozen boats, and pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars on the way. And he'd done it with a flip-pin' stick and a frog, to boot.

In my quest to learn more, I spent nearly four hours interviewing the man. The result was some of the most intriguing information I'd ever heard on hardcore bass fishing.

Barrack's insight, especially his approach to fishing, is very analytical. Personal rules define his tactics, and success and failures can be credited to tangible actions. Very little is left to chance.

It's important to point out that most of what Barrack holds true has been developed through vast time on the water.

"From 1995 to 2018, I averaged 300 days a year on the Delta," he states.

Quick math figures 7,000 trips or more.

In addition, Barrack has always been one to learn through personal experience, ignoring most of what others are doing or saying. In essence, he's been a sustenance fisherman, much like the commercial fishing roots running through his immediate family.

Such an approach has led Barrack to develop his traits based – almost entirely – on awareness. He believes nothing is haphazard, and examples of that are everywhere. A case in point: During an obsessive period of night fishing, Barrack found an overlooked clue.

“Shadow lines (from the moon) can totally influence fish location in clear lakes,” he claims.

Who knew?

Barrack’s early days on the Delta taught him valuable lessons on water movement and fluctuations. Immediately, he learned the importance of tidal changes, the influence of the moon and how they each affect feeding periods of bass – what he calls “bite windows.”

“I’m a moon guy,” he claims, adding that such influence results in “sixteen days a month, the fish bite moving baits, but the other 14 days, bottom baits are far better.”

Those exact days, however, remain a mystery known only to Barrack, despite my prodding.

In any case, fluctuations of activity can also be counted on to occur within every day on the water.

“They (the bass) talk to you about 50 minutes every day, and you better be listening,” he says. “When it ends, the information stops.”

Here, Barrack illustrates an unparalleled belief in peak periods that can be credited, he says, to solunar cycles. The important takeaway is to be ready when it happens and “work your best stuff when it goes off.”

Barrack’s belief in these feeding sprees discounts fishing pressure (“they can’t get beat up if they’re not eating”), as well as pre-fishing and previous successes.

“You went fishing today and your tournament is seven days later? Are you kidding me?” he says, somewhat sarcastically.

But bite windows can prove the validity of a location or technique on any given day. Often, Barrack pushes the envelope to do so, testing under the most extreme conditions.

“I’ll frog fish in 46-degree water,” he says. “That’s when you really get to understand about solunar windows.”

By applying fishing practices based around fluctuating periods of activity, Barrack accomplishes several overlooked goals. First, he keeps himself in the game. Throughout my time speaking with him, Barrack referred to the need for tournament anglers to trust in themselves.

“You need to ask, ‘Who am I as a fisherman?’ and pick out what honestly works for you,” Barrack explains. “If you’re struggling, you have to trust that your fish just haven’t eaten yet.”

Also, uncovering bite windows allows anglers to maximize their catch based on current conditions, rather than history.

“You can’t find them on Wednesday and take them to the scale on Saturday” he adds. “Best days are just that, and not always necessary to win a tournament.

Herein lies another Barrack policy: Only fish during tournament hours. Other times produce results that offer unreliable data. And never listen to dock talk that only serves to make you question your own decisions and instinct.

According to Barrack, each body of water contains a set of parameters that can be dissected. This, he refers to as the lake’s “recipe.” Great anglers may find success in a number of ways, or with multiple lures, but each will correspond to the underlying recipe.

“There’s lots of ovens; I can use my own oven,” he quips. “But I need the recipe for the cake.”

It’s this underlying principle that keeps Barrack fishing day after day, attempting to unlock the secrets of any given body of water. Now a resident of Texas, Barrack finds himself on a quest to do so on some of the country’s largest reservoirs, where navigation alone can be a real challenge.

“Right now, I’m just learning to get from A to B without dying,” Barrack jokes.

It will be interesting to see if Barrack’s mastery of the Delta can be duplicated in his new southern home. He’s currently finishing up a number of projects to launch a rental home business, but he plans to get back to his priorities very soon.

“Once I’m done, my boat will never be unhooked from my truck,” he says.

Time on the water. Recognizing peak periods. Taking maximum advantage of the bite. For Bobby Barrack, it seems simple; but is it? Maybe this reasoning oversimplifies the works of living, breathing things.

Or, perhaps, the recipe has been there all along. ■



PHOTO COURTESY BOBBY BARRACK

Finding the right recipe for consistently catching fish often comes down to experience, time on the water and always paying attention to what the fish are telling you.



Almost every bass angler has caught a fish that sports dark blotches from a condition called "melanosis."

PHOTO COURTESY KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE RESOURCES

# BASS DEFORMITIES

The physical defects that can turn beauty into a beast



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

**W**hen compared to other species, there's very little physically that stands out about a largemouth or smallmouth bass. They lack whiskers, barbels or any other unique appendages; grow to only a modest size (compared to many other fishes across the world) and even their coloration is subdued compared to other species.

To a die-hard bass angler, though, they're the most beautiful fish in the world.

The subtle lines of a bass' jaws suggest the ability to unhinge and inhale a passing bait; their mottled, ever-changing coloration pays homage to

their unique ability to live and thrive in almost any type of water and habitat.

Sure, maybe bass fishing doesn't offer the same artistic experience as watching a blood-red cutthroat trout sip a dry fly off the surface, but boat-flipping a 4-pound largemouth out of a laydown after it inhaled your jig offers its own rush; a rush much more accessible to most anglers.

But that beauty comes with aberrations at times, as is the case with all species of animal. Bass are beautiful to those who fish for them, but even dedicated bass anglers will tell you a tale of one that was just plain ugly.

This column is dedicated to those "ugly" bass – and what we know about the causes of the various deformities we see on the water.

## "PUGHEADEDNESS"

This distinctive condition results in the steepening of the forehead, a widened and shortened upper jaw, exophthalmic (bugging) eyes, and often an incompletely closed mouth resulting in an underbite. Termed "pugheadedness" by fisheries biologists, the condition is known to occur across many species of fish, both in freshwater and saltwater fishes.

The interesting thing is that, despite knowledge of this condition occurring in hundreds of species, there has been little progress as yet in unlocking its cause. Biologist consensus is that it is in some way genetic, since the deformity shares the same general progression and appearance regardless of species.

Despite their “ugly” appearance, anglers can attest that pugheaded bass are still able to feed effectively, and studies have shown that they can also effectively spawn. If you catch one, appreciate it for the oddity it is, but rest assured that it’s not an indicator of ecosystem health, nor is it contagious.

## SPINAL DEFORMITIES

Technically referred to as “lordosis,” “kyphosis” or “scoliosis” depending on where and how the deformity occurs along the spinal column, spinal deformities are common in both largemouth and smallmouth bass.

Anglers often call them “humpbacks” and sometimes mistakenly assume that the damage is caused by mishandling or by physical manipulation of the bass.

In reality, there are a number of conditions that are suspected to cause spinal deformities including genetic mutation, contaminant concentrations in the water and even man-made interactions like the electric lamprey weirs in Great Lakes tributaries.

As one can imagine, it’s hard enough for a bass fry to make it to adulthood (which is why they have so many eggs to begin with), so if a bass with a significant spinal aberration makes it to adulthood, you can bet it had to work hard to get there.

## MELANOSIS

Pretty much every serious bass angler has likely caught a bass that exhibited dark blotches across its body. Anglers sometimes call these “birth marks,” mistakenly assuming bass are born with those darker patches.

This common condition is called “melanosis” and is found in all species of bass, as well as in other fish species. Like pugheadedness,

fisheries biologists have yet to unlock the specific cause of melanosis, but recent research suggests that the areas of higher melanin concentration are closely correlated to an increased local immune response – meaning that, similar to how the skin around a mosquito bite swells up and discolors, the blotches possibly are caused by the fish’s immune response to a viral threat.

Another interesting thing about melanosis is that research indicates larger fish more commonly exhibit the condition, and a recent study in Pennsylvania showed that the blotches also change in size and shape over time, further suggesting that it’s a skin response to external factors. ■

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**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.



# GET CRANKIN'

Often overlooked, the squarebill crankbait can be absolute money in the fall

**A**s the trees transition from vibrant greens to deep reds and yellows, there's something happening below the surface of your lake. It's a silent, mostly unnoticeable change, but when it happens, prepare to catch some fish.

As fall settles in, baitfish that roamed the open water throughout summer are sensing the cooling temperatures and are swimming toward the shallows. Bass are following this migration, swiping at the stragglers in an effort to corral them into shallow areas of the lake. Soon, the backwaters and shallow coves of your lake will come to life with bass exploding to the surface, gorging on

shad and other baitfish in preparation for winter.

When this transition takes place, many anglers turn to topwater lures in search of that heart-stopping surface strike. Topwaters are a great option, but if you want to catch fish consistently, turn your attention instead to the squarebill crankbait.

Squarebills are often overlooked in the fall, but their effectiveness is second to none. Knowing a squarebill will get bit is only part of the equation; understanding how to adapt them to changing conditions will open up a new world of opportunities for you this fall.

Several unique traits set a squarebill apart from every other lure during fall feeding frenzies. First, they can be fished effectively at multiple speeds, including an aggressive stop-and-go retrieve. From a slow, steady crawl (when bass are patrolling the edges of the shallows but not actively ambushing prey) to an all-out blitz as you burn a crankbait to trigger a feeding response when bass are actively chasing minnows, there's no wrong way to fish the bait.

Our most effective method by far is something we call "speed cranking."

Speed cranking is achieved when a crankbait is burned

aggressively, paused briefly, then cranked again. Don't picture a typical stop-and-go retrieve here. We're talking about burning the reel handle as fast as you can turn it with a high-speed reel (we prefer 8:1 gear ratio), pausing for a fraction of a second, then repeating.

This method is incredibly effective around baitfish. The aggressive changes in cadence draws bass' attention away from the real minnows, and the extreme speeds trigger a feeding response in bass that will cause them to chase the bait long distances, ready to attack with brute force on the next pause. This method draws some of the most vicious strikes you'll ever experience and is effective in shallow water throughout the fall.

The second reason to turn to squarebills in the fall is that they can be adapted to virtually any condition. From crystal-clear water to the muddiest of conditions, from moderately shallow flats to ultra-shallow pockets, squarebills can be fished effectively if you know which baits to choose.

Nearly every angler carries a couple squarebills in his or her crankbait box. Most dive 3 to 5 feet and have a wide wobble when retrieved at a medium pace. Likely colors in your box include sexy shad, ghost minnow and chartreuse mixed with any number of other colors. If this describes your box, you're already headed down the right path, but you've only begun to scratch the surface.

The true power of a squarebill is only realized when you begin to adapt. The first step in adapting to changing conditions is to have color options. This part really is simple; if you have something shiny (chrome), something clear (ghost) and something bright (chartreuse or white), you're set. From there, you need to build confidence in both silent and rattling models. Let's talk about the specific baits and their purposes.

Our most consistently productive rattling squarebill is a River2Sea Biggie



The Strike King KVD Magnum 4.0 and SPRO Baby Fat John 50 are vastly different squarebills, but each can serve a specific and important purpose.

(try the abalone shad color). For silent models, it's the Lucky Craft LC 1.5 (try American shad). Many companies make great squarebills, and these are two we've used effectively for years. We're going to call these two models our primary squarebills.

From there, you're going to want to fill in the outliers (this is where the magic happens). Begin by going deeper. Add in a bait that can reach deeper

depths, followed by one that is significantly larger. We suggest a Lucky Craft LC 2.5, followed by a Strike King KVD Magnum 4.0, and ultimately the Lucky Craft Fat CB BDS6 when it's time to target bass chasing bigger baitfish.

For shallower options, we really like some baits that are often overlooked by anglers and tackle companies alike.

We're not just looking for baits that are smaller. They need to actually run shallower than standard baits while maintaining stability and action. This combination is much harder to find than you might expect.

Two of the most effective baits for this approach are the SPRO Baby Fat John 50 and the Lucky Craft LC 1.0. These smaller offerings can be fished slowly when needed but can also be speed cranked in



ultra-shallow water where no other bait besides a top-water would dare go.

Once these different styles are represented in your box in a likely color or two, you're ready to adapt to any situation you'll encounter this fall. If the baitfish move out, you have an option in the box that will reach a bit deeper to elicit bites from the biggest bass in the school. If they move ultra-shallow, you have a bait that's not only effective in the shallows but snag-resistant as well. If you find bass ambushing tiny glass minnows or great big gizzard shad, you're ready for both of those situations, too.

All that remains is finding a quality rod to maximize the effectiveness with which you can fish a squarebill. My rod of choice is a G. Loomis 845 CBR. It's a 7-foot rod, has a very parabolic action and is extremely sensitive. Staying around the 7-foot mark offers the perfect balance of flex (to absorb the inevitable head shakes as you battle big bass in shallow water on small treble hooks) and maneuverability around shallow cover.

There are days in the fall when bass are devouring everything that moves, when it seems like every lure from a top-water to a jerkbait to worm is getting bit. Those days are magical, and we all hope to be on the lake when it happens. But not all days are that easy. Sometimes, you have to adapt to the conditions.

Next time you're at the lake and the fish are up shallow but still don't want to bite, remember the squarebill. Adapt to the depth, adapt to the water clarity, and don't be afraid to speed up that retrieve. You might just set off the feeding frenzy you've been dreaming about. ■

**THE TRUE POWER OF A SQUAREBILL IS ONLY REALIZED WHEN YOU BEGIN TO ADAPT. THE FIRST STEP IN ADAPTING TO CHANGING CONDITIONS IS TO HAVE COLOR OPTIONS.**

# 9 HOT FALL TECHNIQUES

Brought to you by Tackle Warehouse, proud sponsor of FLW and the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit

Fall is a time of transition. The days are getting shorter. The lake is quiet. The air and water temperatures are cooling. The baitfish are on the move – and so are the bass.

Bass follow schools of baitfish in the fall and spend a lot of time feeding up for the cold winter months ahead, migrating from their summer stomping grounds to their wintering haunts. To catch those finicky fish, you need the right tools for the job.

Check out the Tackle Warehouse Hot Baits for Fall Bassin'. These baits will help you best locate and catch fish during one of the trickiest times of the year.

## 1. SPINNERBAITS

Fall is all about the baitfish. There's no better tried-and-true baitfish imitator than a spinnerbait. Virtually snag-free, you can change up weights, blades and colors to match depth, water clarity and forage for fishing around any kind of cover. Enhance your presentation with a soft plastic trailer, and don't forget a trailer hook to prevent short strikes.

**Our recommendations:**

### Booyah Covert Double Willow

White Chartreuse  
Blue Double Willow  
Nickel/Gold



### Revenge Deep Runner Colorado Willow

Bluegill Colorado/  
Willow Gold/Gold



### Picasso Inviz Wire SS Tandem Thunder

Bling Shad



## 2. WALKING TOPWATER BAITS

"Walking the dog" is a fundamental bass fishing skill that helps you bring a walking bait to life. Try this phenomenal technique around schooling fish or slowed down around shallow cover to tempt a big bite.

**Our recommendations:**

### Heddon One Knocker Spook

Okie Shad



### Ima Little Stik 135

Chrome



### Megabass Giant Tog X

Gill



## 3. DEEP-DIVING CRANKBAITS

There's no more efficient way to find and trigger deeper schools and structure-oriented fish than with a deep-diving crank. Limitless sizes, colors and diving depths are available to suit every situation. Vary your retrieve to make those big ones lash out.

**Our recommendations:**



Rapala DT Series  
Live River Shad

### Azuma Timmy Horton Z Boss

Gold Digger Chartreuse



### 13 Fishing Cliff Banger

Mudbug Punch

## 4. FLUTTER SPOONS

As the water cools and the shad begin to struggle, a flutter spoon effectively targets fish feeding on those dying baitfish. Don't forget a set of stinger hooks for larger spoons.

**Our recommendations:**

### Nichols Ben Parker Magnum Stinger Flutter Spoon

Lavender Shad



Lake Fork Flutter  
Chartreuse Shad

### River2Sea James Watson Worldwide Spoon

Bluegill



## 5. TAILSPINNERS

When you've found the school or an area likely to hold one, a tailspinner will get bit, even in the middle of a school of bait. Tailspinners are nothing new, but they're experiencing a quiet resurgence among some of the most accomplished offshore anglers.

**Our recommendations:**

**Mann's Little George**  
Chrome



**Damiki Axe Blade Tail Spinners**  
Moss Back



**Jackall Deracoup**  
Blueback Chartreuse



## 6. FOOTBALL JIGS

While fall fishing is often about mimicking baitfish, bass won't pass up a crawfish meal. Forget about a jig in the fall and you might be really missing out. Many anglers agree that a football jig can do a great job mimicking a dying shad, too. When it comes to versatility, a big jig is hard to beat.

**Our recommendations:**



**Jewell Baits Football**  
TW Bama Bug



**Missile Jigs Ike's**  
Micro Football  
Sunfish IPA



**Greenfish Crawball**  
BBII

## 9. LIPLLESS CRANKBAITS

Something about a rattlebait just drives fall bass nuts. Rip it through grass, wind it around cover or yo-yo it off the bottom – whatever approach the fish tell you they want.

**Our recommendations:**



**Bill Lewis Knock-N-Trap**  
Blue Shiner



**6th Sense Quake**  
Suspending  
Shad Scales



**Lucky Craft LV 500**  
Spring Craw

## 7. PADDLE-TAIL SWIMBAITS

An all-season imitator of baitfish big and small with infinite sizes, colors and rigging options to cover any situation, depth, and condition, a paddle-tail swim-bait might just be the most versatile soft plastic for fall fishing.

**Our recommendations:**

**Keitech Easy Shiner**  
Electric Shad



**Big Bite Baits**  
Finesse Swimmer  
Smallie Magic



**Reaction Innovations**  
Little Dipper  
Pride Shad



## 8. BUZZBAITS

Cover miles of water and elicit strikes from big, grumpy shallow-water dwellers. Buzzbait aficionados will tell you that most anglers put the buzzbait down too early in the fall season and miss out on some heart-stopping strikes from big fish, even as fall is turning to winter.

**Our recommendations:**



Scan the code to shop for these baits at  
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**Revenge Klacker**  
Bluegill



**Big Bite Baits Tour Toad**  
White Silver



**Strike King Premier Plus**  
"The Double Take" Double Buzz  
Black



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# RUSTY'S TITLE RETURN

## CALIFORNIA PRO CLAIMS FLW'S BIGGEST AWARD AFTER 9-YEAR HIATUS

By Joel Shangle

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

**STURGEON BAY, Wis. —**

***"Where have you been, Rusty?"***

It's a question Rusty Salewske grew accustomed to in 2020. Given that it had been almost a decade since the Southern California native had last competed on the national-tour level when the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit kicked off the 2020 campaign in January, Salewske has answered it with good humor: "Just doing life things," Salewske says simply.

Salewske's return to the professional ranks should be judged as a success, based solely on his Pro Circuit regular season. He cashed checks at four of the six events, led the Harris Chain after day one with a 26-pound mega-bag, finished in the Top 20 in Angler of the Year standings and qualified for his fourth tour-level championship.

But nine months after he made his first check of the 2020 season following a nine-year tour hiatus, Salewske now has a new most-asked question to ponder: "How does it feel to be the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE Champion?"

The perfect answer still eludes him, but as Salewske smiles and shrugs his shoulders, this will do for now: "It means the world to me. I don't really know what it all means yet, but it feels pretty darn good."

Salewske captured the late-August TITLE out of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, in a dramatic fashion that seemed to fit the tone of an event that was equally notable for its multi-layered "newness" - new format, new schedule, new minimum fish size - as it was for its outstanding smallmouth fishing. With his trolling motor batteries drained after seven hours of battling 20-mile-per-hour sustained winds and 4-foot waves on the waters of Green Bay, Salewske connected with a 4-pound, 14-ounce smallmouth with 12 minutes left in the Championship Round.

That smallmouth - the second of a pair that Salewske weighed following a last-gasp move to salvage the last hour of fishing on his diminished batteries - eclipsed a 3-6 lead held by Bradford Beavers, giving Salewske 48-11 for the day and an 8-ounce cushion over Beavers (who had made a Hail Mary move of his own to go to the bank to try to coax a largemouth bite). That slim lead would hold for what Salewske describes as "the longest 12 minutes of my life" to earn him the newly minted champion's belt and a \$200,000 payday at the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit TITLE presented by Toyota.





PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDOFF

## RUSTY'S RETURN TO TITLE TOURNAMENTS

In August of 2009, Rusty Salewske walked out of Mellon Arena in Pittsburgh with the slightly bitter flavor of disappointment in his mouth. He had battled it out for four days on the extremely stingy waters of the Three Rivers at the Forrest Wood Cup, finishing in the top 5 behind Greg Hackney, Mike Iaconelli, Cody Meyer and Scott Suggs (anglers with over \$10 million in combined career earnings). No small accomplishment, but Salewske left Pittsburgh believing that he had left a career-defining opportunity on the table.

"That Cup was mine to lose on the last day, and I lost it," Salewske says bluntly of his final day, in which he caught only one fish for 14 ounces. "I showed up to my best spot as high up on the Monongahela River as you could run – it was a big seawall – and there was a barge tied up to it. I couldn't fish that spot like I wanted to, and I let that get to me. I had the best area in the whole river, and I should've just gone fishing. I certainly have some regrets about that."

Salewske followed with a 2010 FLW Tour campaign that he describes as "my best season on tour," qualifying for



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDOFF

the Toyota Texas Bass Classic and hovering in the top five for Angler of the Year until the final tournament of the season (he finished 14th in AOY).

He struggled through a much tougher season in a 2011 plagued with mishaps – he blew two motors, scraped two lower units off his boat and eventually lost seven competition

days in six events due to various misfortunes – cashing only one check for \$4,000 and finishing 120th in AOY points.

And then Salewske disappeared from the national-tour spotlight.

As a successful paving contractor and the father of two high school-age daughters, it was time to focus on

other things beside chasing bass and tournament checks.

Salewske fished local tournaments for the next nine years, focusing on his contracting business, ushering both of his daughters down the aisle, and occasionally jumping into Toyota Series events on fisheries that he liked (he finished sixth and seventh on Lake Cumberland and Lake Mead, respectively, in 2019). He and wife Kelly surveyed the FLW schedules every year for the right set of circumstances that would allow Salewske to jump back into national-tour-level tournaments.

And 2020 turned out to be that year. Rusty and Kelly committed to a two-year plan to fish the Pro Circuit, followed by a financial re-assessment in 2022.

"Everybody who fishes at this level and then has to leave for various reasons wants to get back to this level," Salewske admits. "I didn't even really like the 2020 schedule – I hadn't fished a single day on any of those fisheries before this year – but my wife and I decided that we were in a good enough financial position to do it for two years."

## SALEWSKE'S TITLE PATH

Salewske entered the TITLE fresh off a top-40 finish in the smallmouth-dominated Lake Erie Super Tournament, but with a different mindset about Sturgeon Bay than other tournament frontrunners (and smallmouth specialists) like 2020 AOY Ron Nelson and eventual seventh-place finisher Grae Buck. Salewske practiced for two days without a single spinning rod on deck, instead fishing a spinnerbait, swimbait, jerkbait and jig in search of groups of fish, only picking up a spinning rod for the final hour each day.

"(Sturgeon Bay was) a whole new fishery to me, so I'd lay in bed at night staring at maps on my phone," Salewske says. "None of my spots stuck out to me as THE place. I didn't have a spot where I felt like I absolutely needed to start there. I had spots where I'd get eight to 10 bites, but I knew that eight to 10 wasn't going to do it. It was a straight grind for me."

Salewske weighed 20-1 on day one to settle into 16th place but upgraded with 44-6 on day three to finish the Qualifying Rounds in seventh. He pow-



For Rusty Salewske, figuring out Sturgeon Bay smallies was about more than just turning up the trolling motor and covering water.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

ered his way into the Championship Round with 17 fish for 61-10 in the Knockout Round.

As the tournament developed, Salewske gradually homed in on more efficient ways to fish his spots after evening chats with fellow TITLE competitor and travel partner Wade Strelie. Instead of bulling his way around with his trolling motor on 70, Strelie suggested Salewske spend a little more time fishing each of the breaks he'd marked on his electronics.

"I wasn't fishing in a manner to best take advantage of the areas I found," Salewske admits. "I'd found several little ledges in 8 to 11 feet of water that dropped down to 15 or 20, and that's where I'd get bit, every time – right on those little breaks. I slowly started to realize that every time I'd get bit, it would be right there on my mark, or within half a cast. I started to Spot-Lock and fish those places a little more. Strelie told me 'There's more down there than you think; they're just hard to make bite', and I think he was right."

Salewske finally stowed the casting gear for good after day four, committing to the drop-shot, and battling through a war of gear attrition as he broke a rod and reel, and went through all of his Gamakatsu drop-shot hooks, Kanji tungsten drop-shot weights, and almost all of his Yamamoto Shad Shape Worms. On the final day, as he headed out to his main area – a 350-yard-long shoal on the inside of Riley's Island in Little Sturgeon Bay – he had three spinning rods on deck (one of his

own, two borrowed), and an assortment of weights, hooks and baits that he had gotten from Strelie.

## THE WINNING SPOTS

Championship Day dawned with forecasts of sustained winds of 15 to 20 mph, which put most of the field of 10 in defense mode right from lines in. Salewske committed the day to his best spot, a 350-yard-long shoal extending off of Snake Island at the mouth of Riley's Bay (the bay just north of Little Sturgeon Bay), stacking 28-15 on SCORETRACKER® in the first period and staying within a scorable fish of the lead for much of the day.

"I liked that spot because it gave me some protection if the wind blew from three directions," Salewske explains. "It was a big, long point that came off that island, and had grass out to about 6 or 7 feet. It got real rocky at 6 feet, so I'd catch them on the grass line in the morning, and they'd slowly move deeper and wider off the point onto these little break lines, either for shade or for a current break. I think what made that place special was the amount of current that would roll through there. There was always some current moving over that point, no matter how the wind blew."

Salewske doggedly fished that shoal through an ever-increasing wind in the second and third periods, but his bites gradually decreased (along with the charge in his trolling-motor batteries) as the wind shifted directions. With roughly an hour left in the Championship Round,

## RUSTY'S TITLE RETURN

his trolling motor nearly depleted and Beavers clinging to a lead, Salewske finally pulled the plug on Snake Island and ducked into one final spot – an expansive grassy flat with a rock pile in the middle – to try to scratch out a fish or two.

He was rewarded almost immediately with a non-scorable smallmouth, which hinted to Salewske that there were biting fish on the spot. Fifteen minutes later, he hooked a 2-15; 31 minutes later, he plucked the 4-14 winner out of the rock pile.

And then the waiting began. As Salewske fished the final 12 minutes – and even after his MLF official had called “lines out” and read off the SCORETRACKER® standings – the new TITLE champion grappled with the idea that somebody had overtaken him.

“I didn’t want to believe that I had won,” Salewske says. “As a fan of Major League Fishing, I’ve seen it happen so many times, man. Guys will get late news that somebody had caught one with a minute to go and took time to get to SCORETRACKER®. I refused to believe it for a second or two.”

## LOOKING FORWARD WITH TITLE INTENTIONS

Rusty and Kelly Salewske took the leisurely route home to Alpine, California from the Door Peninsula, stopping for an unplanned three-day visit (and some trout fishing) in Colorado with his parents. They also spent plenty of that driving time reassessing their plans for Salewske’s immediate fishing future.

“Man, it’s still hard for me to believe that I won (the TITLE), to be honest with you,” Salewske says. “It really means everything to me. This is the level of competition that we all strive to have success at – it’s why we’re all here in the first place. We’re challenging ourselves with the best that we can fish against, and when I know I’m up against the best, it’s rewarding to have success.”

“But I can tell you for sure, we’re not on the two-year plan anymore. We’ll just fish the next few years and see how it goes; we’re not drawing that two-year line anymore. I had a pretty okay year in 2020, and a pretty great end. I think that’s a pretty damn good place to start.” ■

Elation often happens long after the final whistle, as Rusty Salewske found out while waiting for the dust to settle at Sturgeon Bay.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

## ROUNDING OUT THE TITLE TOP 10

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



### 2 BRADFORD BEAVERS

Summerville, SC  
 Championship Round weight: 48-3

It's easy to second-guess an angler's decision knowing everything that's going on around them, so when Bradford Beavers decided to abandon smallmouth in favor of finding a largemouth in more protected waters in the waning minutes of the Championship Round – as Rusty Salewske caught the winning smallies – it seemed like an odd choice. After all, no one in the TITLE field was targeting largemouth on Sturgeon Bay (only 12 were caught throughout the event).

But Beavers understood his areas well enough to know what his chances were of catching the smallmouth he needed. He'd only caught six fish in the afternoon, and high winds were making fishing in open water nearly impossible for most pros in the field. Salewske trusted his instincts and stayed put. Beavers trusted his and made the move he thought was the right one at the time. Neither was wrong. One decision just worked out better.

For his part, Beavers had an incredible event (losing the lead with 12 minutes to fish notwithstanding). The 34-year-old rising star caught more fish for more total weight than anyone in Group B during their second day of Qualifying Round action. He then went on to catch 64-11 in the Knockout Round, which was good for fourth place, before coming within one scorable bass of winning the biggest tournament of his life.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



### 3 JOHN COX

DeBary, FL  
 Championship Round weight: 36-14

It's almost comical how good John Cox is at bass fishing. The former Forrest Wood Cup champion with almost \$1.5 million in FLW earnings to his name came straight from Lake St. Clair and a Bassmaster Elite Series event (in which he placed third) to fish the TITLE, never spending a minute of practice time on Sturgeon Bay before launching with Group B on day two of the tournament. All he did that day was catch 18 scorable bass for 66-5 to grab the lead.

Cox spent his next day on the water "practicing," poking around in search of new water from which to catch some Knockout Round fish the following day. He searched some skinny backwaters and managed to catch more than enough to make the top-20 cut. The following day, Cox struggled by his standards, but he eked into the Championship Round in 10th place nonetheless.

The magic of John Cox is in his ability to always keep a level head, so when the final day of competition didn't play out quite as he expected, it came as no surprise when he hit his stride in the early afternoon, landing seven scorables between 12:14 and 1:50 p.m.

Unfortunately, Cox managed to catch just one more good one between 1:50 and the end of competition, leaving him with a third-place finish. Ho-hum, indeed, for one of the best bass anglers on the planet.

PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



### 4 KURT MITCHELL

Milford, DE  
 Championship Round weight: 22-8

Kurt Mitchell's rise to smallmouth-catching superstardom seemingly happened overnight, and it's one of the most under-the-radar storylines of the entire 2020 Pro Circuit season.

Mitchell, like Cox, had a short turnaround before the TITLE. He was busy winning the Toyota Series event on Lake Erie just a week prior, after cashing a check on Erie in the final Pro Circuit Super Tournament of the season (Mitchell also had a top 5 at Champlain last season and took fourth at a Toyota Series event at the Thousand Islands back in 2017). In other words, the fifth-year pro is pretty good at catching smallmouth, and now everyone knows it.

So, when Mitchell weighed 119 pounds, 10 ounces of scorable bass on day one – the only 100-plus-pound showing of the tournament – people took notice. He cruised through day three in search of new schools of fish before weighing in another 58-8 in the Knockout Round, setting up his eventual fourth-place finish.

What ultimately probably hurt Mitchell most was not having his area in the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal (that was producing for everyone fishing there) to himself for very long during the event. Once more competitors started poking around in the canal, it became the worst-kept secret of the week.

Still, being the only pro to eclipse the century mark and walking away with \$25,500 is a nice consolation prize for not winning back-to-back smallmouth derbies.

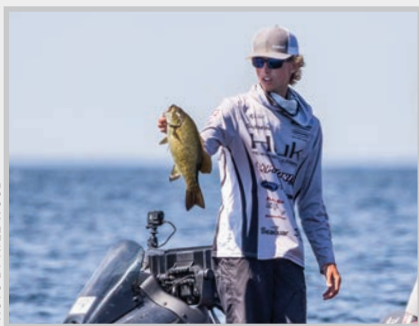


PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

**5 KYLE HALL**  
 Granbury, TX  
 Championship Round weight: 22-0

2020 Polaris Rookie of the Year Kyle Hall hails from Texas, where he didn't grow up targeting fish of the bronze variety. But like many Southern anglers, Hall is consumed with catching smallies, so much so that he fished in the Northern Division of the Toyota Series in 2018 and 2019, simultaneously preparing himself for a tremendously successful rookie year on the Pro Circuit that featured a couple killer smallmouth derbies.

Hall finished 26th in the Lake Erie Super Tournament a couple weeks prior to the TITLE, locking up ROY and cashing an \$11,000 check in the process. It was good practice for Sturgeon Bay, clearly, and the 23-year-old rode that momentum to a top 5 in his first-ever Pro Circuit championship event.

Still, it took Hall a little time to settle in on Sturgeon Bay, finishing his first day of fishing with just six scorable bass for 20-15. He went on to catch the fourth-best weight of day four, making the Knockout Round by just 1 pound, 2 ounces.

Fifty-nine pounds, 11 ounces later, Hall found himself in the Championship Round, fishing against some of the best bass anglers in the world on the biggest stage under the brightest lights. Even at 23, the spotlight didn't seem to faze the quiet and unassuming rookie, and he now has a TITLE top 5 to show for it.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

**6 SPENCER SHUFFIELD**  
 Hot Springs, AR  
 Championship Round weight: 21-7

Just five years ago, Spencer Shuffield hit rock bottom. Financial hardships and a rocky marriage forced the former Pro Circuit angler out of the spotlight and back home to Arkansas, where he sold his fishing gear and gave up on the dream. Shuffield found renewed inspiration in his faith, though, and hit the local tournament trails, winning just about everything in Arkansas until he was financially ready to make a comeback at the pro level.

Fast-forward to about seven months after his comeback began on Sam Rayburn and Shuffield – the runner-up in the 2020 Angler of the Year race – has one heck of a season to show for his perseverance.

Despite spending the last few years fishing down South, Shuffield absolutely loves catching Northern smallmouth, which he showcased with a top 5 on Lake Erie prior to the TITLE. At Sturgeon Bay, he once again had an opportunity to chase big brown fish, and he didn't waste it.

Shuffield finished Group B's Qualifying Round in second place and the Knockout Round in first after catching 86-13 on day five. He left the water that day absolutely amped up about the schools he found that afternoon, but they vanished on him in the Championship Round. He didn't catch his first scorable bass until 3:28 p.m.

Still, Shuffield went on a tear from there, landing six bass for 21-7 to lock up sixth place in what could otherwise have been a disastrous final day, capping off a magical season for the man who found his rebirth through fishing.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

**7 GRAE BUCK**  
 Green Lane, PA  
 Championship Round weight: 20-11

Consistency is key in any multi-day tournament. Just ask Grae Buck, who finished the Group A Qualifying Round in fourth place and Knockout Round in third. It didn't translate to a top-5 finish in the Championship Round, but sometimes nomadic Northern smallies can get the best of even the most experienced anglers.

Buck, who is originally from Pennsylvania and has made a name for himself as one of the premier smallmouth anglers in his four years on the Pro Circuit, finished the 2020 regular season third in AOY points, which only proves how skilled he is at catching more than just brown fish.

Buck and Kyle Hall shared some water throughout the event, taking advantage of some big schools that sustained the duo in making the Championship Round. On the final day, though, those fish had moved elsewhere, and both Buck and Hall had to do some scrambling to make the most of it.

Buck landed four scorable bass in the first couple hours of fishing, but knowing it wasn't going to be enough to contend for the victory, he made a move and trailered to some new water where managed to land just one scorable bass at 3:34 p.m.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

## 8 JOEY CIFUENTES

Clinton, AR  
 Championship Round weight: 18-9

The man known for his signature cowboy hat sure isn't too bad at catching fish. After finishing fourth and sixth, respectively, in 2015 and 2016 as a Pro Circuit co-angler, Joey Cifuentes made the jump to fishing from the front of the boat, and save for finishing 104th in points in 2018, really hasn't had a bad pro season to date. In 2020, Cifuentes finished 32nd in AOY points and added \$40,500 in winnings to boost his FLW career total to over \$287,000.

It looked like Cifuentes was in line for a massive payday at the TITLE when he won the Group B Qualifying Round and finished second behind Spencer Shuffield in the Knockout Round (those Arkansas boys sure love catching smallmouth). The Championship Round wasn't as kind to Cifuentes, though, as the fish he found in the afternoon of the Knockout Round moved on him and left him scrambling to find some more.

After catching three scorable bass in the first hour and a half of competition, Cifuentes spent the rest of the Championship Round in search mode, landing just three more scorable over the final seven hours.

As disappointing as that final day probably was for Cifuentes, the \$16,000 payday may have helped ease the pain.

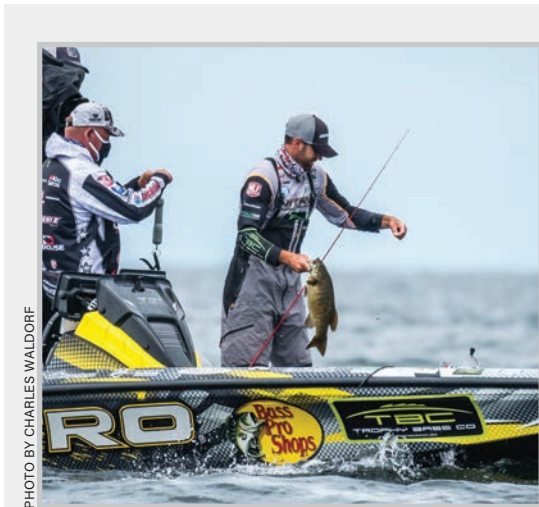


PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

## 9 CASEY SCANLON

Eldon, MO  
 Championship Round weight: 0-0

With his win in the 2019 Pro Circuit event on Lake Champlain, Casey Scanlon established his credentials as an Ozark pro who has no trouble catching bunches of Northern smallies. It comes as no surprise, then, that the Missouri hammer managed to weigh 153-5 worth of smallmouth in the Qualifying and Knockout Rounds en route to a Championship Round appearance.

While Scanlon's consistency (third in Qualifying Round and fifth in Knockout Round) didn't translate to a great final day on Sturgeon Bay, just making the top 10 in a stacked TITLE field is one heck of an accomplishment.

Scanlon now boasts three championship tournament appearances in four years on the Pro Circuit with over \$300,000 in career earnings.



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

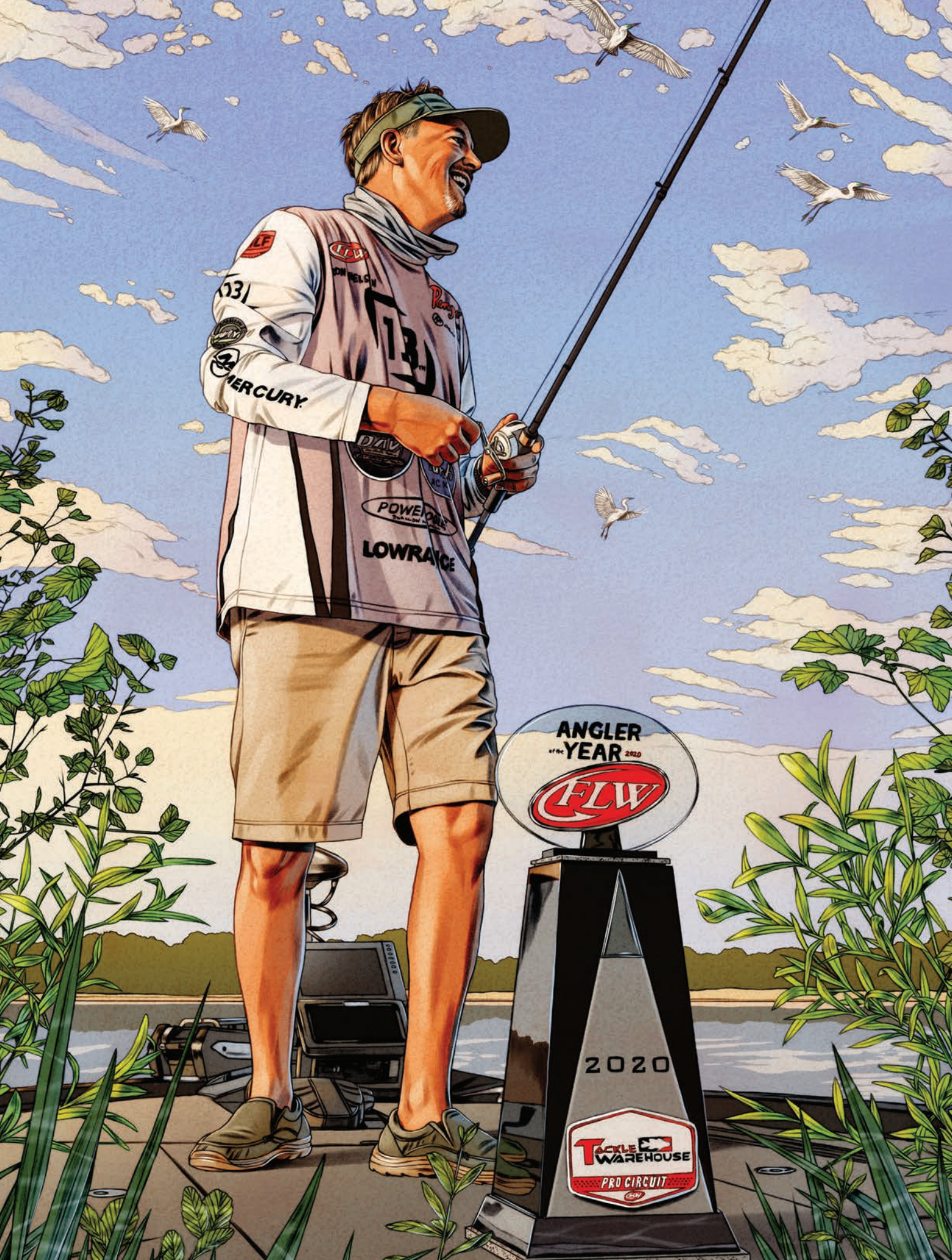
## 10 EVAN BARNES

Hot Springs, AR  
 Championship Round weight: 0-0

Yet another Arkansas pro to make the Championship Round, Evan Barnes crushed 'em in his first three days on the water during the TITLE, weighing 61-10 on day one and another 48-10 in the Knockout Round. While he just snuck in above the cut line on day five with that 48-10, Barnes still managed to catch the fifth-most scorable bass of the day amongst the 20-angler field.

Like Scanlon, Barnes wasn't able to translate his early-tournament success into a strong Championship Round showing, but he still cashed a \$14,500 check for his efforts. Not bad for a no-entry-fee championship event.

Barnes experienced a bit of a career resurgence in 2020, posting his first top-25 showing in the AOY points race, despite finishing the regular season far from home with a couple Northern derbies that could have sunk his season. Luckily for Barnes, he'll be able to build on his 2020 experience up north when the Pro Circuit finishes the regular season on the St. Lawrence River in 2021. ■



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MERCURY

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ANGLER  
OF THE YEAR 2020



2020



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# ANOTHER REASON TO SMILE

*By Sean Ostruszka*

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL HOEWELER

**Ron Nelson** reflects  
on Angler of the Year title

**T**hat big smile. It's basically his calling card. Really, Ron Nelson's smile isn't even all that big as far as smiles go. It doesn't extend from ear to ear or anything. Framed by a salt-and-pepper goatee, it just has a radiant quality of a genuinely happy man that makes it seem even bigger.

And in 2020, those who followed the Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit season got to see it a lot.

After securing the Polaris Rookie of the Year title in 2019, the man known as "Smiley" by some became just the sixth pro in FLW history to add the Angler of the Year trophy to his hardware collection to match.

And he did it in a way that was altogether his own.

Nelson was truly dominant in 2020, but it was a quiet dominance. He had four top-15 finishes and two top fives, yet they almost seemed routine, as if everyone just expected it. Other anglers talked about just how good he is, putting Nelson among the best in the sport right now, but the spotlight never seemed to shine overly bright.

Like his smile, Nelson had a season – and, thus far, a career – that's hard to describe but impossible to miss.

If you see Ron Nelson on the water, it's a safe bet you'll see him doing two things: catching fish and smiling.



PHOTOS BY CHARLES WALDORF

## A GOOD KIND OF DIFFERENT

Technically, the sport of tournament bass fishing pits anglers against one another. That's not how Nelson sees it, though.

"I'm not fishing against the other fishermen," says the sophomore pro from Berrien Springs, Michigan. "I'm just fishing against the lake and the fish. That's what gives me a purpose, excitement and fulfillment – going to new fisheries and figuring them out. I just try to do my best and the end is what it is."

If that seems like different thinking than is the norm, you're right. Then again, if you haven't already gathered from watching the way he does things, most of how Nelson goes about things is different.

Most anglers are driven by the quest for victory or paychecks or exposure. Nelson is driven by a "quest for knowledge." Instead of the brash, look-at-me persona with loud boat wraps and even louder personalities that sometimes steal the headlines, Nelson humbly goes out in his unwrapped boat (though he admits he wouldn't mind having it wrapped) to do what he's proving he does better than most – figure out the fish. He sets his goals for the year, foremost, to "have a shot" at Angler of the Year and at winning

his first Pro Circuit event. His goal isn't to win – "It's super hard to win," he says – but to just put himself in position to have a shot.

It's a different mindset, yet it's a mindset that may hold the key to the success he's chasing for his career. After all, there aren't many eventual ROYs or AOYs who start their career not catching a single fish the very first day of their pro career, as Nelson did in 2019 at the season opener on Sam Rayburn.

"I'm pretty thick-skinned," Nelson admits. "You have to be able to handle adversity. You always have to keep looking for the best solution and move forward."

This year showcased that time and again, from a two-month, momentum-killing layoff because of the COVID-19 pandemic to a blown motor at the Mississippi River (that still resulted in a 12th-place finish) to the pressure of making long runs on a treacherous Lake Erie to seal the deal on his AOY season.

Even the adversity of losing fish – especially big fish – is something Nelson has had to learn to adjust to.

"I'm still learning how to handle those big fish," he says. "It's one of my biggest downfalls of being from up north is I don't catch giants like they have in the South that often."

Those missed fish are especially notable, as lost fish are public enemy No. 1 (and often the No. 1 excuse) for derailing anglers' tournaments, seasons and even careers. And Nelson lost a number of big ones that easily could've sent his season off track. Instead, he shrugged them off and just kept being himself.

"I'm still growing as an angler," Nelson admits. "I'm going to make mistakes. All I can do is the best I can and keep growing and learning."

## JUST GETTING STARTED

A year ago, a day after Nelson hoisted the Polaris Rookie of the Year trophy, bass fishing legend David Dudley hoisted his record-setting fourth AOY trophy. Afterward, Dudley said what made him so proud was that he did it at age 43.

Nelson was 44 when he raised the ROY trophy above his head.

Things like that truly put in perspective how Nelson's professional career is a startling contrast to the youth movement we've seen from the sport of professional bass fishing in recent years.

Jordan Lee won the 2020 MLF Bass Pro Tour AOY title at age 29 and



ROY 2019



AOY 2020

already has a pair of Bassmaster Classic trophies. The top-ranked angler in the sport is 30-year-old Jacob Wheeler, who was 21 when he won the Phoenix Bass Fishing League All-American and 22 when he won the Forrest Wood Cup. And this year's Pro Circuit ROY, Kyle Hall, is just 23.

And then there's Nelson, the 45-year-old painting contractor. Most pros his age are veterans with at least a decade of experience at the professional level. Still, Nelson wouldn't change how his career has gone to this point.

"People always ask why I waited so long to go pro," he says. "I wanted to be smart about it. I wanted to get everything set up so when I took my shot, I did it right. I didn't want to go broke trying it. That's just me."

The results speak for themselves.

Back in Berrien Springs, Nelson and his wife, Karla, have a bookshelf in the corner of their living room. It's one of those decorative shelves that looks like a boat cut in half, and it's surrounded by fish mounts. The shelves tell the real story of his "slowly climbing the ranks." He's got various fishing accolades and trophies on there, including hardware from his three Toyota Series victories.

But there's one shelf you can't miss; one that stands out from the others. It's the one with his Rookie of the Year and Angler of the Year trophies seated side-by-side. Few anglers have (or will ever have) a shelf exactly like it.

Resting in his living room with Karla and their two dogs, Annie and Sofy, Nelson occasionally looks over at that shelf. He admits, even with all the trophies, he still doesn't feel he's "arrived" yet in the sport. Still, he looks, reflects, and feels that sense of fulfillment.

Most of all, he smiles.

## SEASON RECAP

There was very little drama in this year's Angler of the Year race. Nelson made sure of that. With two top fives and very nearly a top 10 in his first three events, Nelson took the lead after the second event and basically never looked back. It was some key bites at each event, though – ones he landed and didn't – that proved it wasn't always as easy as it looked.

### 1. Sam Rayburn Reservoir – 5th

"I was excited to go back and redeem myself after the year prior," Nelson says. "Plus, I wanted to see how the lake fished in its normal state. It fished tough, but I figured it out and really got in touch with what was going on. I ended up losing one fish that could've given me the victory the final day."

### 2. Harris Chain – 11th

"That was my first time there and knew a lot of guys were going to run to Griffin because the grass was so good there," Nelson recalls. "I figured I'd try to stay close and sight fish. On day two, late in the day, I had a pair of 13-inchers in my livewell. I pull into a spawning area and catch an 8-pounder, and then I pole down on a 5-pounder just as John Cox came idling in. Within minutes, I caught that 8 and the 5 to completely turn around my day."

### 3. Lake Martin – 2nd

"This one was a comedy of errors," Nelson says. "I thought this one was going to be my toughest event of the season because I'd never fished that style of lake before, with spotted bass. I messed up a few big sight fish the first couple days, and then the last day, I had one on the bed late in the day. I missed her twice and time was running out. I knew if I caught her, I'd win, but I didn't want to be late, so I headed in. I got back six minutes early. I probably could've caught her in those six minutes."

### 4. Lake Chickamauga – 41st

"That's a special place because any cast can be a 10- or 12-pounder," Nelson says. "There were too many boats for that lake, and I knew there was always going to be somebody on the next spot I'd try to fish. Fortunately, I had a sneaky spot; a deep tree I caught the majority of my weight from. Unfortunately, I lost two fish that were 8-, 9-pound-class fish. In a tournament like that, those kickers are what make or break your event."

### 5. Mississippi River – 12th

"That was a fun one," Nelson recalls. "It was a neat place to figure out because the fish shift with the rise and fall of the water, and I knew I had a good area. I just had technical issues that cost me the third day."

### 6. Lake Erie – 34th

"This ended up being my toughest event," Nelson says. "Erie is only three hours from home, but I'd never been there. It's a body of water that's so big with so many options, so I had to decide if I should lay up and stay close or go for it. On a long run, though, a lot can go wrong. You can catch 25 pounds, but if you can't get back, the Angler of the Year title is done."

"I wanted to figure out something close but never really did, so I ran to the Detroit River. On day two, I had 19 pounds, and I had to stop myself. The competitor in me wanted to keep fishing, but I finally said 'what are you doing?' I left my main area with hours to spare because I wanted to be safe. I was treating that one as a two-day tournament, and I stuck with my plan." ■



# CATCHING UP WITH POLARIS ROOKIE OF THE YEAR KYLE HALL

By Kyle Wood

PHOTOS BY CHARLES WALDORF

**T** It seems with each passing year that younger and younger anglers are making their names known among the professional ranks. The 2020 season was no different, as Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit newcomer Kyle Hall made four consecutive day-three cuts (or better) to end the season and clinch the Polaris Rookie of the Year title. Though the 23-year-old from Granbury, Texas doesn't have the regional accolades some of his fellow rookies do, that didn't hinder him one bit on the big stage.

Here's what the newly minted Rookie of the Year had to say about his spectacular first season on the Pro Circuit and what's next for the rising star.

**Q: You're a young dude and obviously have a knack for fishing. How did you get started?**

I started in the back of the boat when I was probably 4 or 5 years old with my grandpa. He took me every weekend. At one point I got tired of it, but I didn't have the heart to tell him I didn't want to go this weekend.

We used to fish in this little club back home, and I was probably the only youth angler – I think I was, actually – so I would just fish against all

the old men out of the back of the boat. They're all fishing doubles on the front and I'm back there in the back minding my own business, taking naps when I wanted to. I was still young. I used to bring my umbrella with me, and those are some of the best naps I ever took was on the back of that boat.

My dad got me into it after my grandpa passed away. The day I sealed up Rookie of the Year was eight years to the day of my grandpa passing away.

**No way. Man, that's cool.**

It was. It was a pretty emotional evening for me when I won.

**Q: Speaking of ROY, you've had a little time to think about it now. What's it feel like?**

I've had to do a lot of interviews, which is good because of how terrible I am at them – I've had a lot of practice here in the last couple of weeks. I kind of celebrated – not really celebrated, but

enjoyed – the couple days after that was all said and done.

**Q: When did you take the step to go on the national level? I met you that first year at the Series event you won on the Thousand Islands, but when was the moment you were like “Okay, now I need to start fishing regionally or across the country”?**

It was that year you met me.

**Q: 2018, right?**

Yeah, 2018 was when I said I’m going to do the Toyota Series and the Central and the Eastern B.A.S.S. Opens, just to mix it up a bit and travel a little more. Then, I got to the Open on Champlain and Dakota [Ebare] ended up fishing it. He finished like eighth or something. After Champlain, he’s begging me to come and stay for the [Series] on Thousand Islands. He says, ‘It’s the best smallmouth fishery in the country,’ and that’s when I went over there and stayed. We had some fun for a few weeks, and I ended up winning that tournament. That’s when I started traveling the country fishing, but I mainly did Toyota Series around the house before that.

**Q: So then after you won that Thousand Islands event, what was the thought after that?**

Going into that event, I thought it was going to be my last big event. I was tired of depending on a few people, like my dad. I didn’t want to make him pay anymore; I didn’t feel like I was good enough to compete with these guys yet. I figured I would give it a few years and then when I can do it on my own, I was going to do that. When I won, that kind of sparked the next year and pushed me a little harder for the next year and here I am, two years later, fishing all over everywhere – just trying to catch a bass.

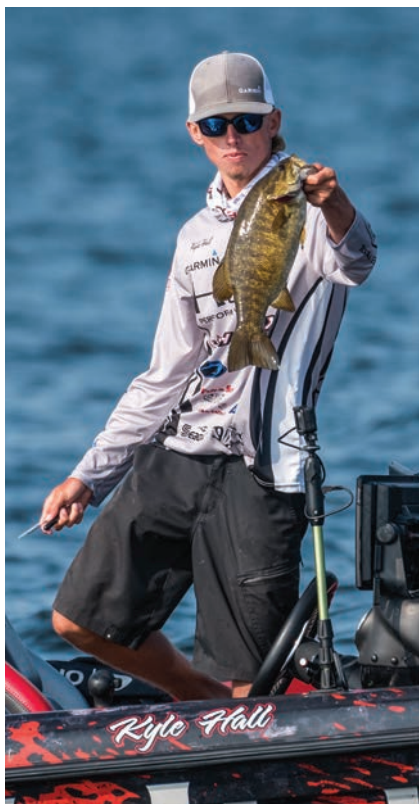
**Q: Was it intimidating when you knew you were going to be fishing on the Pro Circuit this year? Looking at the field, were you scared a little bit? A lot of the rookies have a lot more experience than you do.**

I wouldn’t say scared. I would say intimidated. The first tournament,

nerves really set in and you see how I finished – 142nd. I think after that I just knew I had to step up my game and had to catch a limit every day. A limit goes a long way with these guys, and if you catch a limit, unlike I did at either day of Rayburn, you’ll do fine.

**Q: You seem to have a really good knack with smallmouth. What is it about smallmouth? You seem like you have a lot of fun catching them.**

I do have a lot of fun. Smallmouth are my favorite. I like bed-fishing the largemouth back home, but I think this by far surpasses sight-fishing for largemouth. I’ve never gotten to sight-fish for smallmouth, and they say it’s 10 times more fun than sight-fishing largemouth, but I’ve never gotten to do that. That’s something I want to do. But I feel like if there’s a smallmouth that shows up on my electronics, I’m going to catch it. If it’s not brutally windy, I feel like I can catch it.



**Q: What do you think your strength as an angler is?**

This year, I think I’ve really gained the confidence in myself to make decisions on the fly. Like, one day at Chick, I was

just running down the lake and I hadn’t even practiced on that half of the lake. I pulled up on a spot, and the first cast, I caught a 5-pounder.

Decisions like that, where last year or the year before that I would never have made – I would have pulled over there and I would have been discouraged because I didn’t have anything else to stop on. This year, I’ve done that several times. I think I’ve really adjusted to making decisions on the fly and not getting spun out so quick.

**Q: Going forward for next year or in the future, what’s an aspect of fishing you think you need to get better at?**

I’ll tell you right now: flipping a big weight in grass and fishing any type of grass. If it’s not with a frog in the grass or maybe a swim jig – I think I can do that – but after that, you got me lost in the grass.

**Q: Was there a moment at all before you started fishing the Pro Circuit that made you think “Oh, I’m ready for that”?**

Winning that Thousand Islands Series event, where you have two of the best smallmouth fishermen walking the planet right now in Chris and Cory Johnston, and AJ Slegona, and a lot of the other locals. After that tournament, I thought that I’m ready to do this. I gave it another year and now I’m competing with these guys.

**Q: At this point, you’ve been around the country and fished a bunch of different types of water, so is there a body of water or place in the country that you look forward to fishing?**

As bad as Rayburn was this year, I really look forward to going there. I really get pumped about all these places, even if it’s a place I’ve never been. I don’t think I really have a particular place, unless you say smallmouth – then I really get pumped.

**Q: Final thing. You get a Polaris Ranger 1000 for winning ROY. Got any big plans for it?**

Yeah, I need that Polaris for duck season. We’re going to kill some ducks out of that thing this year. ■

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# FALL FROM NORTH TO SOUTH

5 STRATEGIES FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY  
FOR CATCHING LOTS OF FISH IN THE FALL

*By Sean Ostruszka*

PHOTO BY CURTIS NIEDERMIER

**I**t's a bit different everywhere, but one thing remains generally the same: Find the bait in the fall and you'll find the bass.

Whether you're chasing largemouth in Florida, spotted bass gorging on herring in Alabama or smallmouth fattening up for the harsh Northern winter, fall bass' lone thought is on their stomachs and how to bulge them before it gets too cold.

"Cold" and "fall" are relative to each angler. Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit pro Josh Douglas' fall is quite a bit colder in Minnesota than MLF pro Jeff Sprague's in Texas. They don't even target the same species or the same types of bait. That's why we decided to talk with a handful of pros from around the country to see what fall means to them, and how to stay on the fish (and the bait) during this tricky transition period.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

## JOSH DOUGLAS

**Location:** Natural Northern lakes  
**Species:** Smallmouth  
**Pattern:** Big jigs on deep reefs



If you're about to barely eat for months, would you rather have a snack or a giant meal? You go big, of course, which is exactly what Douglas does when he's fishing on lakes like Mille Lacs in Minnesota in search of smallies about to hunker down for the winter.

"After throwing drop-shots and spinning gear all year, come fall, I beef everything up," he says. "These fish are about to get froze out, and that time of year, the crawdads are the biggest they'll be. The fish are looking for big meals."

For Douglas (and the big smallies he's chasing), nothing looks more like a hearty crayfish than a 1/2- or 3/4-ounce Outkast Tackle football jig. Oranges and reds mimic the rusty crayfish in a lot of his Minnesota fisheries, but he says you can often get away with the old green-pumpkin standby.

As for setup, he swaps the spinning rods for G. Loomis NRX 873 rods, Shimano Curado reels and 15-pound-test Seaguar InvizX flourocarbon line.

"Basically, the same stuff you'd use to fish ledges down south for largemouth," he explains.

## Attacking the School

Speaking of ledges, Mille Lacs is loaded with rock reefs, some coming up so shallow they top out a foot beneath the surface. And, just like their Southern, green cousins, the smallmouth group up in massive schools come fall on these offshore structures – the lone difference being that smallmouth are notorious for grouping up so tight on such small spots that it's like mortar to a brick. If you're not landing your jig right on them, they're not going far to go get your offering.

"Usually, they'll hang deep off the sides of the reef, but if the sun is out, they can get up right on top of the reef," Douglas says. "But usually they'll hang on the vertical edge, where they'll want to stay most of the winter."

As aggressive as smallmouth can be, this is a perfect opportunity to use that bellicosity to your advantage. Once you locate the school, fire that big jig right into it and let it fall as fast as it can to the bottom to hopefully elicit a reaction strike.

"You'll actually feel it bumping the fish on the way down," Douglas says.

Douglas estimates that more than half his bites come on the fall, so be aware. If you don't get bit on the fall, give it a couple hops, or sometimes Douglas will just reel it back in along the bottom, which can get a smallmouth's attention just enough to commit.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

Bradford Beavers doesn't fish the Tennessee River in the fall without a topwater rod on the deck.



## BRADFORD BEAVERS

**Location:** Mid-South reservoirs  
**Species:** Largemouth and smallmouth  
**Pattern:** Topwaters on shallow flats

Bradford Beavers hails from South Carolina, but when it comes fall, his favorite technique is one he employs on Tennessee River fisheries. Of course, winning a Toyota Series Championship on the technique probably explains why he's so fond of it.

"I have so many patterns I enjoy in the fall, but my favorite has to be fishing shallow flats with a walking topwater," says the Pro Circuit pro.

That's exactly what he employed on Kentucky Lake during the 2017 Toyota Series Championship on a pair of shallow flats. The flats were no more than 4 feet deep, but one of the biggest things that made them so good was their proximity to deep water (the main-river channel). Gizzard shad were coming up from the depths to search for food on the flats, and the bass were waiting there to ambush them.

Of course, the bass weren't just anywhere.

"Sometimes these flats are massive," Beavers explains. "You'll want to cover water, but usually, the bass are going to hang around something. On Kentucky Lake, it was some key stumps. They wouldn't be on the stumps but more around them, because the fish move around so much in the fall. It could be a high spot, stumps, a ditch, laydowns – something around them to make them feel comfortable."

Once the location is determined, the technique is simple: Just tie on your favorite topwater in a shad pattern and go. For Beavers, that's typically a Heddon Spook, which he'll throw on a Dobyns 734C rod with 30-pound-test braid and a 15-pound-test monofilament leader.

## Adapt to the Conditions

Don't overthink the model of topwater, but don't be afraid to try different ones depending on the conditions. Beavers usually starts with a rattling or one-knocker version, but if the conditions are calm and the fish seem shy to the noise, he'll go with a silent model. Or, as he did on the final day of the Toyota Series Championship, he may forgo the topwater altogether and throw a Zoom Magnum Super Fluke, working it fast across the surface almost like a topwater.

PHOTO BY JACOB FINE



## JOSEPH WEBSTER

**Location:** Southern herring lakes  
**Species:** Spotted bass  
**Pattern:** Suspended spots on long points

If Pro Circuit vet Joseph Webster launches his boat on a brisk fall morning with a bit of fog on the water, whatever game plan he had in mind, he's scrapping. He knows exactly what he'll be doing instead.

"I'm going to start running every long, shallow, main-lake point I can," Webster says.

Once the water dips below 70 degrees, the spotted bass in Lewis Smith Lake and others like it will start suspending in small groups on the sides of these points, waiting for a school of blueback herring to swim by. The points make perfect spots to push the bait up on and gorge, and they'll stay perfect until the water dips down below 50 degrees.

The points Webster likes best are anywhere from 50 to 100 yards long, going from only a few feet and gradually tapering off into 40 feet.

### It's All About Angles

Of course, suspended bass are rarely the easiest to catch, especially on a large section of structure 100 yards long. What Webster starts by doing is setting his bow just off one side of the point or the other and working his way from shallow to deep using a two-pronged approach.

His main weapon is a 3.8-inch Berkley PowerBait Power Swimmer on a 1/4-ounce head, which he'll throw on a 7-foot, medium-power Abu Garcia Veracity rod and 10-pound-test Berkley 100 Percent Fluorocarbon. He'll cast it both parallel to the point and across it, as he'll never know how the bass will be set up at any one time.

"The schools aren't big; more like small wolf packs that are always roaming," Webster explains. "You have to try different angles."

Sometimes the bass make it easy on him and reveal their location when they push a school of herring up shallow, at which point, Webster will have part two of his plan to employ: a topwater like a Berkley Choppo or J-Walker. When the school goes down, he'll then "mop up" with the swimbait.

As much fun and productive as this pattern can be, it's not a given that every point will be a bonanza. Often, he'll have to hit several points before locating a school, then it's game on.

For Jeff Spague, it's all about downsizing in the fall to match the size of the young baitfish bass are after.



PHOTO BY CURTIS NIEDERMIER



## JEFF SPRAGUE

**Location:** Highland reservoirs in Texas  
**Species:** Largemouth  
**Pattern:** Schooling fish in the back of pockets

While many pros are tossing bigger baits come fall, don't count Bass Pro Tour pro Jeff Spague among them.

"You have a lot of young baitfish swimming around, which are super small," he says. "I downsize my baits a lot to match."

How small? Spague likes the Strike King KVD Sexy Dawg Jr. with a white-feathered rear treble hook, sometimes going with translucent colors to further represent a smaller baitfish.

### Bust Out the Spinning Gear

While this diminutive offering can be thrown on casting gear, Spague opts for a Lew's spinning rod and 10-pound-test Strike King Tour Grade Yellow Braid to 8-pound-test Strike King monofilament. The reason is simple: casting distance.

Spague's target may not always be close and can come up randomly. Waiting around in the backs of pockets, Spague will cast around a 2.75-inch Strike King Rage Swimmer while biding his time for the suspended schools of bass roaming the pocket to push the bait up on the flat and start feasting on the surface. When they do, being able to fire that topwater as far as possible comes in handy.

"Eventually, you'll get dialed in on where they're schooling," says Spague. "But until you do, you need that distance."

Spague says he looks for deeper pockets with significant shallow flats in the backs of them, as they offer the best opportunities for bass to push baitfish up to feed.



Topwaters and fall fishing in Florida go together like peanut butter and jelly – if you can find the right vegetation.

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD



## BOBBY LANE

**Location:** Vegetation-filled Southern lakes

**Species:** Largemouth

**Pattern:** Frogs and topwaters around deteriorating vegetation

Three rods with three baits; that's all Bobby Lane needs on his deck in the fall. That, and some dying vegetation. For him, that's one heck of a successful recipe.

"Once that water dips below 70 degrees, the vegetation starts deteriorating, and really when it gets down toward 60," says the MLF pro from Lakeland, Florida. "When it does, you'll see the grass either matt up really well and get some big holes in it, or you'll see where it dies off so much it no longer reaches the surface. Both can be great with a topwater."

Lane really doesn't care where the deteriorating vegetation is – pockets, points, shallow flats, islands – just so long as it's begun to thin enough either on the surface or beneath it for bass to roam around more freely and for him to more easily get a topwater through and around it.

Even then, don't expect every grass patch to hold fish.

"I may hit 10 or 15 spots before I get a bite, but when I do, with this pattern, it's usually a good one," says Lane.

## Pick Your Poison

As for the topwaters he chooses, if the grass is matted up but with big holes, he'll reach for a Berkley PowerBait Buzz'n Speed Toad or Berkley PowerBait Beat'n Paddle Frog, which allow him to fish fast and cover a lot of water. He'll throw them on 7-foot, 3-inch medium-heavy Abu Garcia Veracity rod, 10:1 Abu Garcia Revo Rocket reel and 50-pound-test SpiderWire Ultracast braided line.

If the holes have switched more to lanes or just patches of emergent vegetation, he'll switch over to a buzzbait with the Buzz'n Speed Toad on it. He'll throw that on the same setup as the soft-plastic frogs.

Finally, if the grass no longer (or only sporadically) hits the surface, Lane goes with the Berkley Cane Walker or J-Walker topwaters. He'll throw those on a 7-foot, 3-inch medium-heavy Abu Garcia Veracity rod, Abu Garcia Revo EXD reel and 30-pound-test SpiderWire Ultracast braided line. ■



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# WHY YOU LOSE FISH

... and what you can do about it

*By Tyler Brinks*

**L**osing fish is part of fishing. The stories of the one that got away have been around longer than the sport itself, but there are always ways to improve your odds of keeping fish pinned until they're in the boat.

Professional tournament anglers Jared Lintner, Skeet Reese, Brad Knight and James Niggemeyer have been bass fishing for decades and have seen many lost fish over the course of their careers. They each offered a few reasons why all anglers lose fish (including the pros), and what can be done about it.

## DON'T CUT THEM ANY SLACK

The first thing that Major League Fishing pro Jared Lintner points to is giving the fish too much slack.

"I see it all the time, and when I was teaching my kids to fish, that was the first thing that I taught them," he says. "People often pump the rod, and that throws slack into the line and a huge percentage of the time, those fish will come unhooked."

## SLOW IS SMOOTH, SMOOTH IS FAST

Another thing Lintner advises against is getting in a hurry when fighting a fish.

"I catch myself doing this as well," he admits. "We all tend to get in a hurry and try to force the fish in instead of taking your time to get them to the boat."

This is especially important when using lures with treble hooks.

"You have to trust all of your equipment and let your rods, line, and hooks do their job," Lintner adds. "Your odds of landing a fish go way up with treble-hooked baits if you simply let them tire out."

## THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Technique-specific rods are the norm for tournament pros – and for good reason. The right rod can significantly help you fish a lure effectively and also help with landing fish.

"You won't be as effective using the same rod for a football jig that you do with a crankbait," Lintner says. "Crankbait rods are a good example of needing the right rod for the job; it's like using the correct tool in your tool belt."

"A fiberglass or graphite composite rod will make it easier to fish crankbaits, but you'll also lose less fish because of how the rod loads."



## RODS

Like Lintner, Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit anglers Brad Knight and James Niggemeyer believe picking the right rod is an essential way to reduce the number of fish you ultimately lose.

"I see people using too limber of a rod, and that directly impacts hooking a fish and getting the barb of the hook into their mouth," Knight says. "It's like a treble hook point poking your finger and it comes right out, but if it goes past the barb, it's going to be much harder to get out."

In general, Knight says if you're having issues with missed fish, go up a power on your rod.

"I'm not saying to use a stiff telephone pole rod, but it needs to be stiff enough to penetrate the hook," he adds. "On the other hand, you still want enough bend in the rod to fish a lure the right way, especially with baits with treble hooks."

Niggemeyer says it's often a case of mismatched gear that leads to fish getting away.

"If your gear isn't matched, it's harder to land fish," he explains. "That could be using a heavy gauge hook with a lighter line that causes your setup to be out of balance or you just become 'outgunned' and are using too light of equipment around heavy cover and can't pull the fish out and away from getting hung up fast enough."



## HOOKS

Knight describes himself as a "technical freak" and has a system that he uses to select the correct line, rod, reel and hooks, down to a specific bait type. He believes using the right treble hook is essential for crankbaits and will adjust them based on the bait to help negate lost fish.

"I throw a lot of handmade balsa baits and fish them on a spinning rod," he says. "A light-wire hook is critical because you don't get the same hooking power with a spinning rod that you do with baitcast gear."

He's found a medium-gauge treble hook for squarebill crankbaits to be the best balance between bait action and hooking power. For deeper divers, he prefers a treble with a wider gap.

"For Strike King 6XD crankbaits and bigger, I like the extra-wide-gap-style trebles because fish get hooked and stay hooked," he adds.



## KNOTS

There are countless ways to connect a lure or hook to your line, and Knight has narrowed it down to just one that works best for him for fluorocarbon line.

"I've seen too many fish lost during the hookset with a Palomar (knot) with fluorocarbon lines and now tie the double San Diego jam knot," Knight explains. "It doesn't break on hard hooksets like the Palomar can."

Skeet Reese matches his rod selection to his hookset style — something he believes is essential for boating more fish.

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

## FISH WITH STYLE — YOUR STYLE

Like the others, MLF pro Skeet Reese emphasizes the need to have the right rod to reduce lost fish. He takes it a step further in believing anglers should also match their gear to their hookset style, and also pay close attention to their mechanics.

"Some anglers really like to crack 'em and set the hook hard, and others tend to reel up the slack and not set as hard and just lean into them," Reese says. "That makes a big difference in hooking fish if you have the wrong rod for your hookset style."

To counter this, Reese advises selecting the right rod for how you set the hook.

"I set the hook hard and prefer a rod with a heavier action than a lot of people, but it still has to have the right



parabolic bend to load up on hard hooksets," he adds. "It's a balance that you have to find between your gear and your style."

## THE MECHANICS OF A HOOKSET

In addition to fishing the Pro Circuit, Niggemeyer is also a guide on Texas' famed Lake Fork. He's seen it all with anglers of all skill levels boarding his boat, and one of the biggest reasons he sees for fishermen losing fish is simply due to their mechanics.

"Having good mechanics and keeping pressure during your hookset is probably the biggest reason people [don't] lose fish," he says. "Often, anglers I'm guiding will set the hook and then freeze to look at the rod tip to see if the fish is still there. That split second with a slack line is when a lot of fish come unhooked."

Niggemeyer advises anglers to apply pressure with a bent rod, while also continuing to reel.

"You always want to be cranking hard and keeping that pressure and you'll greatly increase your odds of landing that fish," he adds.



SKEET REESE

PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

## SHARPER HOOKS = FULLER LIVEWELLS

This one may seem obvious, but many anglers neglect their hooks, and dull or damaged hooks can be a leading cause of lost fish. That's why Reese always keeps a hook file handy.

"I use TroKar hooks - which are very sharp - but even the best hooks can get damaged," he says. "Putting them on your reels when you set the rod down or fishing around wood and rocks can easily damage any hook, no matter how good it is out of the package."

Reese says he's "old-school" and relies on the tried-and-true method to test a hook's sharpness: Prick your fingernail with the hook point.

"If it sticks in your nail and doesn't slide, you're good to go," he explains. "If not, I'll file the edges to get them sharp again."

## LINE CHECK

Niggemeyer believes break-offs due to line failure have become less and less common over the years as the quality of braided and fluorocarbon lines has increased, but lines do still break and lead to lost fish.

"I don't see it as much as in the old days when all we used was monofilament, but you also have to check your line periodically," he concludes. "I look for visible frays and always re-tie if I question the line at all." ■



JAMES NIGGEMEYER

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



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Vehicle shown is special project car, modified with non-genuine Toyota parts and accessories. Modifications with these non-genuine parts or accessories will void the factory warranty, may negatively impact vehicle performance and safety, and may not be street legal. <sup>1</sup>Before towing, confirm your vehicle and trailer are compatible, hooked up, loaded properly and that you have any necessary additional equipment. Do not exceed any Weight Ratings and follow all instructions in your Owner's Manual. The maximum you can tow depends on base curb weight plus the total weight of any cargo, occupants, and added vehicle equipment. "Added vehicle equipment" includes additional standard / optional equipment and accessories added by the manufacturer, dealers, and / or vehicle owners. The only way to be certain of your vehicle's curb weight is to weigh your vehicle without passengers or cargo. Calculated with the new SAE J2807 method. Vehicle loaned to paid talent. \*Assembled in Texas with U.S. and globally sourced parts. ©2020 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A. Inc.



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

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# THE JUICE

TACKLE, TOURNAMENTS & TIPS



PHOTO BY BOB WATSUURA



PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRICKA

1.



PHOTO BY COBI PELLETTO

2.

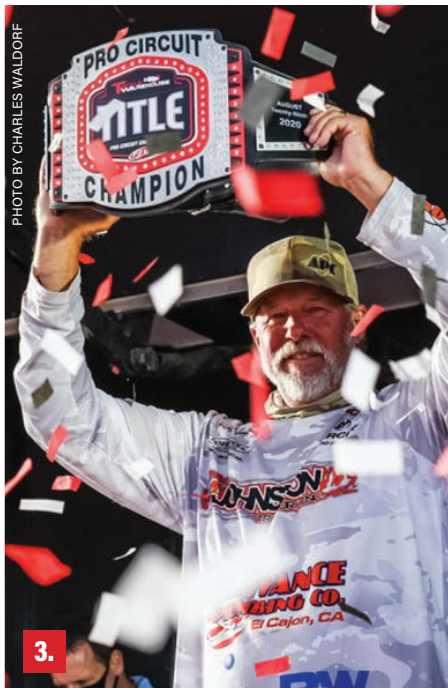


PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

3.



PHOTO BY JACOB FINE

4.



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

5.

**1. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT SUPER TOURNAMENT PRESENTED BY OPTIMA BATTERIES**  
**Mississippi River**

July 29-Aug. 1, 2020

Tom Monsoor is a legend on the Mississippi River. He's also a legend with a swim jig, which he used to secure his second tour-level win with FLW and his first on his home fishery.

Utilizing his signature bait – a Humdinger Tom Monsoor swim jig with a Yamamoto Swim Senko trailer – Monsoor targeted gravel bars and drops with vegetation on them until late morning on day four when his fish vanished and the crafty vet “just went fishing” to land some key upgrades.

Monsoor had to earn his win, dueling with a stacked field of pros from both the Pro Circuit and Bass Pro Tour to edge out Jacob Wheeler by nearly 2 pounds.

**2. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT SUPER TOURNAMENT**  
**Lake Erie**

Aug. 11-14, 2020

In the final Super Tournament of the 2020 season, Justin Lucas

proved he's one of the best small-mouth anglers on the planet. The Bass Pro Tour standout, fresh off a win at Sturgeon Bay, went head-to-head with the likes of Jacob Wheeler, Josh Bertrand and Scott Dobson to catch 79-2 worth of Great Lakes smallies.

Edging out Wheeler by just 1 ounce, Lucas needed every bit of his 19-10 on day four, which he caught using the Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flat Worm he helped design. Lucas bounced around Kelly's Island and Gull Island using his electronics, looking for fish. It didn't produce many bites (he only caught seven or eight keepers a day), but it produced the right bites.

With rough water being a big issue for most of the field – especially pros who ran all the way to Lake St. Clair – Lucas stayed put in Lake Erie to catch his winning fish, primarily poking around Gull Island Shoal and Kelly's Island Shoal near the Canadian border.

**3. TACKLE WAREHOUSE PRO CIRCUIT TITLE PRESENTED BY TOYOTA**  
**Sturgeon Bay**

Aug. 24-29, 2020

After a nine-year hiatus from tour-level tournament fishing,

California pro Rusty Salewske announced his return with authority in earning the first-ever Tackle Warehouse TITLE Champion's belt.

Despite a slow start, Salewske tallied 61-10 in the Knockout Round of the MLF-style championship event and backed it up with 48-11 on the final day to snag the victory from Bradford Beavers. It took some last-minute heroics, as Salewske landed the winning smallmouth with just 12 minutes left. You can read more about his win on page 26.

**4. TOYOTA SERIES SOUTHEASTERN DIVISION**  
**Wheeler**

July 30-Aug. 1, 2020

Wheeler Lake can be stingy in July, but sometimes all you need is a tin boat, some skinny water in which to use it and some fish that love to live shallow. Just ask Kip Carter, who used that winning formula to earn his 51st top 10 and fifth win in FLW competition by getting shallow with a Dirty Jigs buzzbait and a white swim jig to catch his 41-14 over three days.

Carter knew he'd have to fish in a lot of different creeks to find the winning fish, so he used his aluminum tunnel hull rig to bounce

around in those creeks when it was sunny and calm before plying some flats when the conditions changed.

**5. TOYOTA SERIES NORTHERN DIVISION**  
**Lake Erie**

Aug. 18-20, 2020

Before Kurt Mitchell finished fourth in the Tackle Warehouse TITLE presented by Toyota at Sturgeon Bay, he honed his smallie-catching tools on Lake Erie with an impressive win as the only angler in the field to average more than 20 pounds a day.

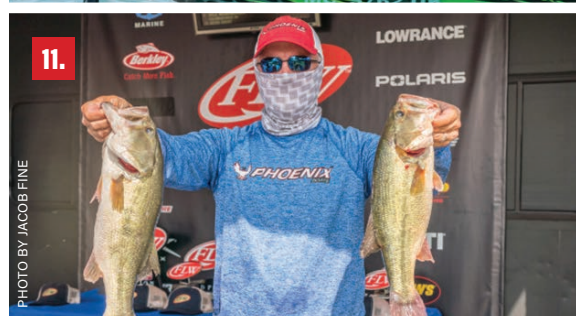
Carrying a 6-pound, 1-ounce lead into the final day, Mitchell worried he left the door open for the competition in weighing in just 15-8, but it was more than enough for the win.

Targeting areas with a rock jetty and some hard spots, Mitchell employed a drop-shot tipped with a Yamamoto Shad Shape Worm and a Ned rig with a cut-down Yamamoto Senko to catch his winning fish.

**6. TOYOTA SERIES WESTERN DIVISION**  
**California Delta**

Aug. 19-21, 2020

Few names are more synonymous with the California Delta than Ish Monroe. It comes as no surprise,



then, that the frog-slinging Oakdale, California pro cruised to his fifth FLW win (and fourth on the Delta) in dominant fashion, besting second-place finisher Beau Joudrey by more than 16 pounds.

Monroe did what he does best to secure the win: Punching a Missile Baits D Bomb and tossing around a River2Sea Ish Monroe Phat Mat Daddy frog, which he utilized in areas that had milfoil with some hyacinth mixed in.

### 7. TOYOTA SERIES SOUTHEASTERN DIVISION Neely Henry

Sept. 2-4, 2020

Mark McCaig, like his good friend Jordan Lee, is learning to trust his instincts on the water. He now has his third FLW win to show for it, thanks to some improvisation and the confidence to just go fishing when the conditions are tough.

McCaig tallied 33-12 over three days by running and gunning docks and shade lines in the morning with a SPRO Bronzeye Poppin' Frog and a Big Bite Baits Fighting Frog, and then targeting rocky points and shallow offshore structure in the current later in the day with various baits, including a squarebill crankbait.

### 8. TOYOTA SERIES SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION Ft. Gibson

Sept. 2-4, 2020

It's one thing to best a professional angler like Zack Birge for a \$27,000 payday. It's another to do it with a 14-plus-pound margin of victory on your home waters.

Cameron Foster grew up fishing on Fort Gibson with his grandfather, and he used that experience to claim his first FLW win, though he did it in an area he'd never fished before – a bend in the Grand River that had brush piles and pea gravel on it.

To catch his 56-11 worth of winning fish, Foster employed a Bass X football jig with a Strike King Rage Craw trailer and a Z-Man ChatterBait with a Keitech Swing Impact FAT trailer.

### 9. TOYOTA SERIES EASTERN DIVISION Potomac River

Sept. 10-12, 2020

Timing is often everything on tidal fisheries, but James Maupin didn't worry too much about incoming and outgoing tides in earning his win on the Potomac. Instead, he found a pair of 200-yard-long

stretches near Greenway Flats and Mason Neck that produced regardless of tidal fluctuations.

For Maupin, it was more about cloud cover. When the clouds rolled in, he was able to get bit on a Terminator spinnerbait with two gold willow blades along grass lines, and he turned to a V&M swim jig with Zoom Fat Albert Twin Tail Grub trailer when the sun was shining.

### 10. TOYOTA SERIES NORTHERN DIVISION Detroit River

Sept. 17-19, 2020

It's never really a surprise to see Scott Dobson's name atop the leaderboard when FLW visits Northern smallmouth fisheries. One of the best smallmouth anglers on the planet, Dobson added to his impressive career resume with yet another Toyota Series victory (his second) and his eighth win and 57th top 10 in FLW competition.

With the field restricted to the Detroit River on days one and two due to high winds, Dobson focused on catching his fish in current on the faces of points and breaks using everything from an umbrella rig to a spinnerbait to several models of jerkbaits.

On day three, Dobson started in the mouth of the river and then ran up to St. Clair for a bit, but the school he found in that area wasn't producing exactly the way he wanted it to. With four keepers in the box, Dobson ran back down the river to land his winning fish, a 4-pounder he caught with five minutes left to fish.

### 11. TOYOTA SERIES PLAINS DIVISION PRESENTED BY FISH-INTEL Dardanelle

Sept. 17-19, 2020

Jason Lieblong spent almost all his time at the southern end of Dardanelle to earn his second Toyota Series victory on the fishery, though he did make a long run north on day two, only to catch zero keepers in a few hours of fishing and run all the way back south to finish off a 13-pound limit to make the top 10.

The south end was more stable and less pressured, and Lieblong used those factors to his advantage in employing a Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer, a Paycheck Baits topwater and a Zoom Brush Hog to catch his 40-9 for the event and his tournament-best 15-15 on day three to seal the deal. ■



PHOTO: Phoenix Moore/MLF

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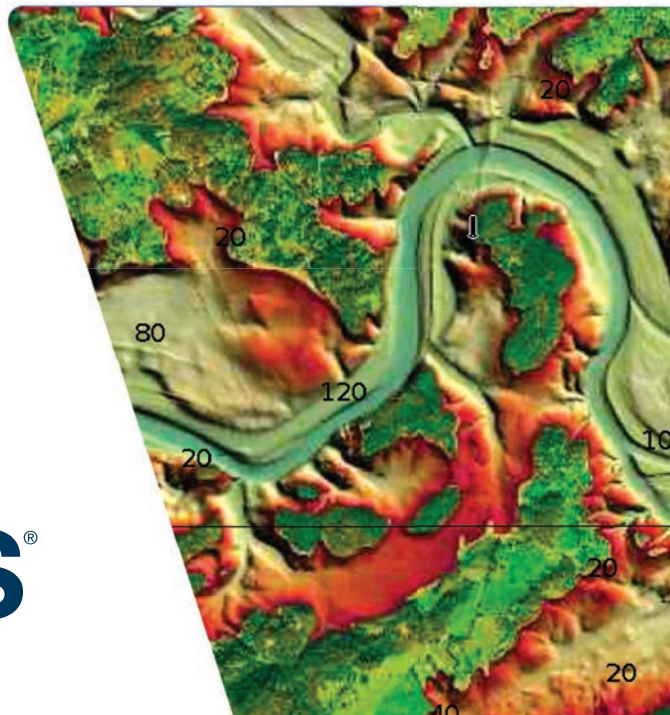
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## BERKLEY FRITTSIDE 5

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

**D**esigned with a wealth of input from veteran crankbait expert David Fritts, Berkley's Frittside 5 is a nifty little flat-sided plug fashioned to get down and dirty in skinny water with a signature swagger and distinctive thump while delivering the castability of something heavier and with the solid feel of wood.

### First Impression

The bait actually feels heavier than it looks, mainly due to a pair of FlashDisc weights that sit flush with the beefed-up belly wall. The flat weights are about the diameter of a pencil eraser. The Frittside comes with 3D eyes and 18 finishes that are about average in quality, including four crawfish and shad patterns, along with a couple that closely resemble bluegill. Two black nickel Fusion19 trebles hang from the stainless O-rings.

### In Action

One of the first things I like to check out on shallow-diving cranks is buoyancy. The more buoyant the bait, the easier it floats up and out of cover when paused. It came as no surprise to find the Frittside 5 is pretty slow to rise, mainly because of the weighting system. I cranked it down on 12-pound-test fluorocarbon and it seemingly took forever to float to the surface.

Timed in 2 feet of pool water, it took about seven seconds for the bait to resurface. That's not a bad thing, particularly in winter and early spring when the water is cold and the fish are acting sluggish. Feather it around rock, stumps, docks or grass and the bait will almost suspend in the water column when paused. It casts really well for its size, tracks true at speed, rolls side-to-side the way you want it to and delivers a definitive thump you can feel all the way to the rod tip.

### Final Thoughts

Berkley nailed it with the introduction of its Frittside family of plastic crankbaits, and the No. 5 flat-side model is just what the doctor ordered for shallow-water applications, particularly when surface temps are on the chilly side and sluggish pre-spawners are just beginning to nose around near the bank. The integrated disc weighting system lends to optimum balance and castability while promoting a superslow float that almost suspends the bait in the water column and keeps it in the strike zone longer. It'll catch 'em in open water, around submerged grass, brush, stumps or docks. There isn't much hard stuff in eastern Texas where I'm from, but I'm betting it will really shine when banged around rock and gravel in pursuit of any bass species.



## NICKEL TREBLE HOOKS:

Comes stock with a pair of quality black nickel Berkley Fusion19 No. 5 trebles.



## INTEGRATED WEIGHT SYSTEM:

Equipped with an integrated patented FlashDisc Weighting System to optimize balance, castability and to make it fish like a solid bait. The round weights sit flush in the belly, fore and aft the front treble.



## Performance Advice

Fish it on a medium or medium-heavy rod with a fast or moderate action. The rod should have some backbone with good sensitivity so you can feel your way through cover, yet be limber enough at the tip that it will launch the bait and be somewhat forgiving when a bass eats it.

Rod lengths around 7 feet are ideal for bombing long casts on open flats or points, but you may want to downsize to something shorter for more precise presentations around stumps, docks or other isolated targets.

A quality baitcaster with a gear ratio of 6.3:1 or so provides the flexibility of being able to crawl the bait around cover to tempt lethargic bass or speed it up when they're more willing to chase.

## Applications

- Cold water to target lethargic or sluggish fish
- High-pressure fishing situations
- Ideal for crashing rocks, docks or stumps
- Feather it around grass or brush

## HITS & MISSES

- + Good castability on a baitcaster
- + Tracks true at high speeds
- + Diverse color selection
- + Great rolling action
- + Durable plastic body
- + Quality hooks
- Must be worked carefully and deliberately around snaggy cover due to lack of buoyancy

## DETAILS

**Length:** 2 1/4 inches

**Weight:** 2-5 feet

**Rattles:** No

**Hooks:** Fusion19, No. 5

**MSRP:** \$9.49

**Contact:** [berkley-fishing.com](http://berkley-fishing.com). ■

## >> ON THE WATER



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

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**1. VMC CROSSOVER RING**

Catching more fish is all about maximizing efficiency. VMC designed a new system for wacky- and Neko-rigging soft plastic stick baits with that in mind. Designed to work with the new VMC Crossover Pliers, the Crossover Ring is of a unique design that's meant to increase your hookup ratio and extend the life of your bait, all while taking less time to get the job done. It features a new dual-channel hood that facilitates rigging wacky and Neko alike, and the Crossover Pliers make it a breeze to slip on a Crossover Ring and get to catching. The Crossover Rings are available in 4-8mm options in black, white and green pumpkin. \$4.49 for a pack of 10. Crossover Pliers are sold separately for \$14.99.

[rapala.com](http://rapala.com)

**2. BERKLEY POWERBAIT BUZZ'N SPEED TOAD**

Built for speed and power, the 4 1/4-inch Buzz'n Speed Toad is designed to get into the thickest of cover and come out in the mouth of monster bass, time and again. The bait's durable material is engineered to allow anglers to catch multiple fish with the same bait, and the PowerBait scent keeps them holding on up to 18 times longer than other baits. Fitted with perpendicular hook point keepers for use with single and double hooks, the Buzz'n Speed Toad maintains a weedless presentation, and the topside features an extended leading edge to keep it on the hook shank better than most similar products. The icing on the cake is a set of serrated feet that move a lot of water to elicit heart-stopping strikes. \$4.99 and \$5.99 per pack of five.

[berkley-fishing.com](http://berkley-fishing.com)

**3. LEW'S PRO SP CASTING**

Technique-specific rods are the norm for hardcore bass anglers, and reel manufacturers are beginning to catch on, too, especially when it comes to baitcasting reels designed specifically for skipping and pitching applications. The new Lew's Pro SP (skipping/pitching), designed with input from Kevin VanDam, features an anodized duralumin 32mm spool and a six-pin, 27-position QuietCast centrifugal braking system with an "orange skipping zone," which reduces inertia to allow for fewer backlashes. The nine-bearing reel also features a carbon fiber drag system (20 pounds) for winning fish from heavy cover. Available in right- and left-hand retrieve models with a 8.3:1 gear ratio for picking up 33 inches of line per turn of the handle. \$199.99

[lews.com](http://lews.com)

**4. 6TH SENSE VEGA**

Every tackle company is constantly looking for a new spin on frog fishing, and 6th Sense may have created the best of them with the Vega frog. Designed with a unique cupped mouth that hybridizes walking and popping techniques, the 2 3/4-inch hollow-body frog has a narrow keel that allows it to walk 180 degrees side-to-side with ease while still functioning as a formidable popper in both open water and heavy-cover situations. Equipped with a leak-resistant belly plug and a quality 5/0 black nickel hook, the Vega has everything anglers want from multiple technique-specific frogs in one dynamic package. It comes in 15 realistic color schemes and weighs 2/3 ounce. \$12.99

[6thsensefishing.com](http://6thsensefishing.com)

5.

COLOR: grunge



COLOR:  
GOAT

## 5. NEW COLORS FROM BERKLEY

Whoever said colors catch more anglers than fish hasn't tried the brand-new colors on offer from Berkley in the Mike Iaconelli line of PowerBait soft plastics. Available exclusively at Tackle Warehouse, the Berkley PowerBait Iaconelli Series – now including the Chigger Craw and The General – come in a variety of new Ike-approved colors, like “grunge” and “GOAT” (Greatest of All Time), a color Iaconelli says combines two of the best soft plastic colors ever produced: green pumpkin/black flake and black/small blue flake. These new colors, combined with Berkley's tried-and-true designs, promise to do one thing all anglers want: put more fish in the boat.

The Chigger Craw is available in Ike's three new colors (GOAT, grunge and Labatt) in both the 3- and 4-inch versions at \$4.99 for a pack of 10 (nine for the 4-inch version). The General is available in 4 1/4 (10 per pack), 5 1/4 (8) and 6 1/4 (6) inches in GOAT, caramel apple and grimace for \$4.99 per pack.

[berkley-fishing.com](http://berkley-fishing.com) ■



## THE FLAT TRUTH ABOUT THE BERKLEY FLAT WORM

By Joel Shangle

**U**nless you spent the summer of 2020 under a rock, you're probably already aware that the Berkley PowerBait MaxScent Flat Worm is one of the most effective small-mouth-catching baits ever produced.

Over the course of 45 days in July and August, Alabama pro Justin Lucas – one of the key advocates of the innocuous-looking Flat Worm throughout its design phase at Berkley – claimed both the Major League Fishing Stage Five trophy in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, and the trophy in the final Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit Super Tournament on Lake Erie.

Lucas weighed in 129 smallmouth totaling 294 pounds, 13 ounces in seven days of competition – 100 percent of those fish were caught on various colors of Berkley Flat Worms.

For those counting, that equated to \$225,000 in Lucas' bank account. It also contributed to the bait being

quickly cleaned out of tackle stores around the Great Lakes, and online tackle retailers' sales carts (not to worry, production runs of the Flat Worm are ongoing even as you read this).

"I've been saying since we first started producing the Flat Worm that it was the best smallmouth bait ever, but we hadn't had the opportunity to really show it off (before Sturgeon Bay)," Lucas says frankly. "A couple of us (Berkley pros) have had that bait for awhile, and we'd just been waiting for the chance to really put it in front of people. Look at the results; I don't know what else I can say about it."

Well, actually, a lot.

Although he deflects credit for the Flat Worm's efficacy as a smallmouth bait, Lucas was the one who sketched the basic original design on a restaurant napkin during a conversation with Mark Sexton, Berkley's Manager of New Product Design and Evaluation. And Lucas – along with Arizona

pro Josh Bertrand – fished the Flat Worm through stages of development and adjustment in 2017-18, helping Sexton and the Berkley product-design team hone the shape and structure of the bait.

Here's what makes the Flat Worm the most precious commodity today among smallmouth anglers.

### The Punch of PowerBait MaxScent

Both Lucas and Bertrand are pragmatic about the characteristic that makes the Flat Worm such a killer smallmouth bait: Berkley's PowerBait MaxScent, which builds on the foundation of the original PowerBait scent and provides a supplement to GULP!, which is already a proven smallmouth scent but creates a stiffer, drier bait.

"Each species of fish prefers different things, whether it's bass, walleye or

saltwater, and smallmouth bass in particular seem to be more scent-oriented than largemouth," says John Prochnow, Berkley's R&D Director and the creator of the original PowerBait scent. "The active ingredients (in MaxScent) are right in their wheelhouse."

Berkley's packaging states that MaxScent catches "45 percent more fish" – that's not just a sexy number cooked up for marketing purposes, but an assessment of the scent's fish-attracting power made through thorough, controlled testing. It's a claim that Lucas has witnessed throughout his hands-on experience with the scent, and wholeheartedly supports.

"I knew that MaxScent was as good as gold," he says. "It doesn't dry out, and you can make baits in better shapes and colors. I knew how important GULP! was for smallmouth, but we needed a good drop-shot bait in the MaxScent lineup. The scent is the real deal."

## Form Follows Function: The Flat Worm Shape

While the Flat Worm is certainly an effective delivery device for MaxScent, it's also a smartly designed drop-shot bait that contributes the necessary attraction of action and appearance to the PowerBait MaxScent scent profile. Here's how:

**THE RIGHT SIZE FOR SMALLMOUTH:** At 3.6 inches, the Flat Worm is, by both Lucas' and Bertrand's estimations, the perfect size for a drop-shot bait for smallmouth. Its length and profile approximate that of multiple kinds of baitfish (especially goby).

**ABOUT THAT PROFILE ...:** Although it went through a handful of iterations in development (thicker body, fatter tail, etc.), the final form of the Flat Worm is spot-on, according to Bertrand.

"The profile looks like something that would live on the bottom of the lake," he says. "It doesn't have all kinds of weird appendages flapping around – it looks like a small fish or creature that should live on the bottom of the lake."

**THICKER TO THINNER:** The Flat Worm broadens out by a scant few millimeters from the nose to the 11th of the 22 ribs molded into the bait, before thinning dramatically in the 3/16-inch section in front of the tail. That thinner section is what facilitates most of the action of the spade tail.

### >> ON THE WATER



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

"Instead of a long, noodle type of motion, there's only one area where the bait thins down, which makes the tail twitch," Bertrand says. "It has just the right amount of action. I think that's a little overlooked in smallmouth baits: It has action, but it's not so thin and soft that it looks like a noodle."

**FLAT BELLY = A SPIKE IN ACTION:** The Flat Worm gets its name from the flat plane that runs the entire 3.6-inch length of bait, from its nose to its flapper/spade tail. That flat belly – a characteristic that Bertrand observes was common with the original hand-poured finesse worms developed on

the West Coast for drop-shotting – provides a surface for water displacement, which creates action when the bait is falling.

**IT'S IN THE COLOR:** The Flat Worm's natural, matte color profile is markedly different than drop-shot baits with shiny finishes. That color palette – along with the texture provided by the ribbed body – adds to the bait's natural, lifelike appearance in the water.

"If I took my 3-year-old daughter to the tackle store and asked her to pick a color, she probably wouldn't pick these matte colors," Bertrand jokes. "She'd choose bright, shiny,

pretty colors every time. Even as a pro, I didn't know how I felt about these matte colors. But when you think about it, you want something sitting on the bottom to look natural, not shiny. There's something incredibly natural-looking to those matte colors. You want a bait like a spinner-bait to flash, but that's not really what you need in a bait you're fishing on the bottom." ■

### DETAILS

Length: 3.6 inches (9 cm)  
Colors: 10  
Price: \$6.99 for 10  
Info: berkley-fishing.com





## QUIET, POWERFUL PERFORMANCE

The Lowrance Ghost lives up to its name

By Tyler Brinks

PHOTOS COURTESY LOWRANCE

**F**or years, bass anglers had two main choices for trolling motor brands. It stayed that way for quite some time before more brands got into the game with sophisticated trolling motors that are improved in many key areas.

One of the newest trolling motors is the Lowrance Ghost, which was purposefully built to be quieter and more powerful than other trolling motors on the market. It also integrates seamlessly with Lowrance's proven marine electronics.

Tackle Warehouse Pro Circuit angler Jimmy Reese put Ghost to the test this year, and he says it's met and exceeded any expectations he had when it was first installed on his Ranger boat.

## Brushless Motor Technology

Brushless motors have been around for decades in manufacturing for things like conveyor belts. Over the past several years, they've become popular choices for power tools thanks to reduced friction. This helps to increase both speed and power, while also keeping them running longer.

Brushless motors have become part of fishing, too, and have brought those benefits to the water. They make a whole lot less noise, which is a huge plus when it comes to trolling motors.

What that means to bass anglers is stealth, and Reese says that's a huge plus, especially in shallow water.

That element of stealth helped him stay quiet early this season when targeting shallow pre-spawn bass on Sam Rayburn Reservoir and while flipping and pitching at the second Pro Circuit stop of the season at the Harris Chain of Lakes.

"The brushless motor makes it more efficient and is definitely quieter than other trolling motors out there," says the California pro, who's run all the major brands during his fishing career. "There are so many little differences with the Ghost, and all of them add up. Everything about it makes you more efficient."

## Integration with Lowrance Electronics

Since it comes from the same brand that produces some of the most trusted marine electronics in the industry, it makes sense that Ghost works exceptionally well with Lowrance chartplotters.

Lowrance units connect to Ghost with a simple plug-and-play attachment. It has different transducer options that are built into the head unit and works with their major technologies like Lowrance CHIRP, SideScan, and DownScan Imaging.

"The HDS units are already flawless, and with Ghost, there's no interference because of the brushless motor," Reese says.

## Plenty of Power

Ghost utilizes a unique propulsion system that is said to give it up to 25 percent more thrust while also saving battery life. In their internal tests in June 2019 against leading trolling motors, it had a 60 percent longer run time without charging.

In the real world, where it counts on the water, Reese noticed the power immediately.

"It'll throw you out of the boat if you aren't careful because it's so fast," Reese says with a laugh. "I measured speeds of up to 3.7 mph, and it consistently ran over 3 mph. That's very fast and helped me several times during the season."

Looking back at the completed season, he lists two examples of how the speed helped him be more efficient.

"Early in the year, it was key for covering water while looking for bedding fish during practice and on the tournament days," Reese says. "Also, at Lake Erie, I was cruising with my trolling motor on high while looking for any irregularities I could find while also watching my LiveSight. That extra speed makes it so much faster to search for new areas."

## Cable-Free Steering

Another difference between Ghost and previous generations of trolling motors is the trolling motor cable – or lack thereof. Using a cable-free system, Ghost instead uses fly-by-wire steering that feels similar to a cabled system without the chance of wearing out over time.

Through a season of hard use, Reese says it passes the test.

“Usually, by the end of the year, my trolling motor cable is destroyed,” he explains. “That’s one of the first things to fail on a trolling motor since we’re pulling it out of the water and deploying it so many times over the course of a season.”

## Configurable Battery System And Foot Pedal

Most trolling motors on bass boats are either 24- or 36-volt systems, and one must buy the right motor for their battery configuration (or vice versa). Ghost is compatible with either, and anglers can rig it on their boat and not have to worry about purchasing an extra battery or getting a new charging system. The same Ghost motor will work with either configuration.



Lowrance Ghost is designed to pair seamlessly with their exceptional electronics.

Another available adjustment is the foot pedal itself, and there are quite a few ways to customize it. The switch to operate the motor can be on either the right or left, depending on personal preference.

There are also several shortcut key options and monitors built in with LED lights and beeps to keep you aware of what Ghost is doing, while also making it easy to monitor your batteries with the built-in battery-level indicator.

The buttons on the pedal allow you to switch to Anchor or Heading mode, lower or raise your Power-Poles, and create waypoints.

The latter is something Reese says is very simple – but invaluable – for the tournament angler.

“When you’re fishing around a bunch of anglers and you reach down to mark a waypoint, everyone sees that and knows you’re marking something good,” Reese says. “With Ghost, you just touch the button with your foot. I can think of several times this year where I did that, and it makes it so easy to save a waypoint, and you can go back later and label it or adjust the icon.”

Anchor Mode is the precise GPS anchoring that keeps your boat in place, right on a waypoint, or your current location.

“The Anchor Mode on Ghost is spot-on,” Reese adds. “It’s a must on bass boats, and I can’t say enough about it. It is a great feature.”

## Stowing the Ghost

One of the simplest things about Ghost is something Reese has learned to love: how easy it is to stow and deploy the trolling motor. It has a dual-action gas spring to make the process easier, while also reducing noise as it’s lowered into the water or stowed on the mount. There’s also an automatic alignment, so it always lays right where it

needs to be.

“It’s a little clip, and when you pull the trolling motor out of the water, it lays perfectly,” Reese says. “Click and boom; it goes in easy. You don’t have to worry about it slamming down and breaking your rods because you don’t put it down right. I know, because I’ve done that with other trolling motors.”

The mount is also built to withstand abuse with a 360-breakaway system that will protect the shaft. It helps to withstand abuse from impact as it deflects and then repositions itself if needed. A stabilizer bar is also added in and helps to reduce damage from rough-water boat rides.

“Every feature they added to Ghost was thought-out, and you have so many features at your fingertips,” Reese says. “Or, in this case, right at your toes.” ■



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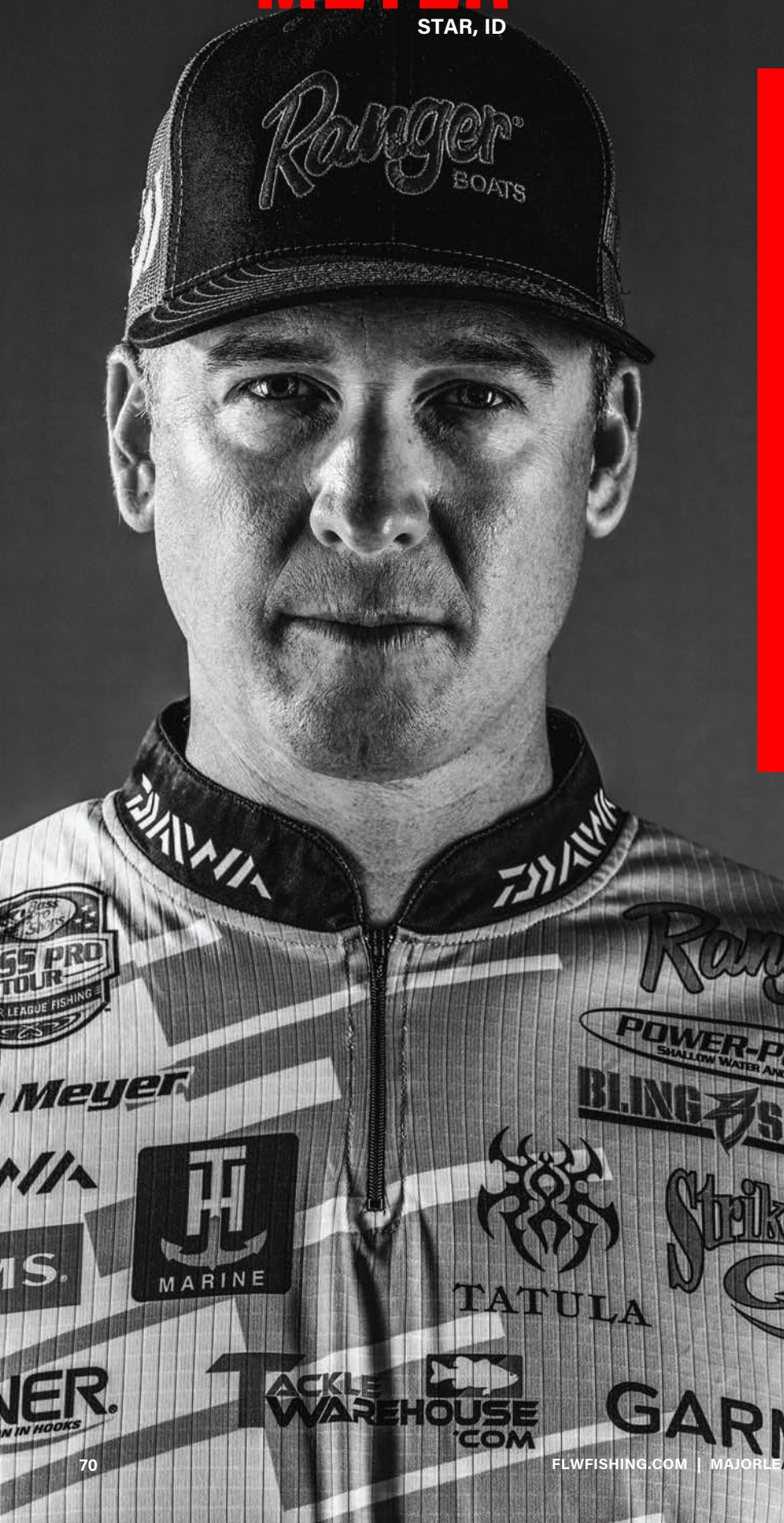
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PROFILE: **CODY**

# MEYER

STAR, ID



*If ever anybody deserved the nickname of "Hardest Working Man in Bass Fishing," it's West Coast pro Cody Meyer. Or at the very least "Most Well-Travelled Man in Bass Fishing".*

*Meyer made a gigantic splash on the tour-level tournament bass fishing scene in 2009 when he came out of the Stren Series Championship to finish third in the Forrest Wood Cup on Pittsburgh's Three Rivers. A year later - his rookie season on the FLW Tour - the Northern California native finished second in the 2010 Forrest Wood Cup on Lake Lanier, Georgia after qualifying through the Western Division of the National Guard Series.*

*Meyer's success as a pro in both FLW and MLF has come with some timely breaks, lots of good decision-making, and more days criss-crossing the United States than most tour-level anglers can even imagine.*

*Here's what the new resident of Star, Idaho had to say about his career, his time behind the wheel, and how he plans to keep on keepin' on as the hardest working man in bass fishing.*

## QA

By Joel Shangle

PHOTO BY PHOENIX MOORE

**The bass-fishing world identified you quickly as a very successful pro after you came close to winning both the 2009 and 2010 Forrest Wood Cups. Here was this smiley, fresh-faced 26-year-old kid from Northern California, mixing it up with Larry Nixon, Mike Iaconelli, Scott Suggs, etc., and making it look pretty easy. It wasn't THAT easy, was it?**

(laughing) 'Easy' is definitely not the right word. I'd say more like 'lucky'. I remember seeing a photo from that 2009 Cup in Pittsburgh where I'm standing onstage with Nixon, Iaconelli, Suggs, Greg Hackney, Bryan Thrift, just a group of hammers. Suggs had won \$1 million at the Cup on Lake Ouachita two years before that, and here I am standing right next to him in the top 10 photo. It was pretty awesome.

I won \$75,000 at that Cup, which allowed me to buy a new truck, pay all my entry fees for the 2010 FLW Tour, and pay the taxes on it. That was my plan at the time: This is my one shot at the tour. Here we go, let's see if we can make this work. I won something like \$30,000 that year on the Tour, finished 43rd in the points. I knew that I couldn't afford to do it again on \$30,000, so I thought 'Cool, at least I got to try it' – I'd planned to just go back home and go back to work.

**But then along came the 2010 Forrest Wood Cup at Lake Lanier, which you qualified for through the old National Guard Series. You finished second in that event to Kevin Hawk, and picked up a paycheck for \$100,000. Is it safe to say that that event gave you a second chance?**

I had the one-year plan that turned into a two- or three-year plan because I hit that big one for \$100,000. It allowed me to go on for at least a couple more years – I set that money aside for entry fees and travel, went out and had some success the next few years on Tour. But how many guys don't get that lucky break? I just happened to do good on Lake Lanier and it gave me the break I needed to really go after it.

**Your typical travel year as a West Coast resident fishing as a tour-level bass pro is pretty astounding. I understand that was especially crazy this year, not only because of COVID, but because you recently moved to Idaho after living your entire life in Northern California. Talk about your 2020 schedule.**

On a normal year, I drive back East one time, to go to Florida or wherever we happen to start the season. I make one four-day, 3,000-mile trip from California, leave my truck and boat at friends' houses in Alabama or Arkansas or Tennessee, and fly back and forth between tournaments. It's still a ton of driving, but I've figured it out enough that it's manageable. This year, though, I started off the year fishing a ton of stuff in Northern California, made the long drive to Eufaula, Alabama for the first Bass Pro Tour event, and then did

the usual drive-and-fly schedule for Lake Okeechobee and Lake Fork.

But when this COVID stuff all hit, I flew home from Lake Fork and then had to fly back out to Texas to get my rig and drive it all the way back out to California. I then had to drive it *all the way back out to Florida* for Heavy Hitters. We finished up there, went straight to Lake Chickamauga for the Pro Circuit event, then to Sturgeon Bay. I went from there to the World Championship, then to La Crosse, then to Lake Erie for the final Pro Circuit event. I'd fly home for two or three days to help my wife Keri pack for the move.

I've never driven back-and-forth across the country more than two times in a year, but I did it six times this year. I say this all the time: I'm a full-time trucker and part-time fisherman, but this year was by far the most I've ever driven.

**You have the best/worst truck-storage story I've ever heard. Remind me again of your 'rats nest' experience on the FLW Tour.**

That's quite a story, isn't it? I had fished a tournament on Beaver Lake in Arkansas and had gone from there to my buddy Stetson Blaylock's house, about three hours away. I left my vehicle there for two weeks, flew home, and then flew back out to go to the next tournament at Table Rock Lake. I jumped in, cranked it over and ... nothing. Totally dead. I popped the hood and found a GIANT rat's nest on top of the motor. They had eaten a bunch of the wires in my motor. I got the truck towed to a dealership, and it cost \$2,500 to fix it up.

I drove from there to Table Rock in Missouri. After that event I popped the hood before I flew home and saw some acorns sitting on the motor. I thought to myself 'Huh, that's odd; they must have not cleaned the motor good after they fixed it'. I drove 10 hours to Montevallo, Alabama from there, left my truck with my buddy Clent Davis and flew home again. But I had this weird feeling, so I asked Clent to check my truck, and what do you think he saw when he popped the hood? Yep, another rats nest, bigger than the last

one. They ate all the wires again, but even worse.

Apparently, this family of rats had been living somewhere in the truck, and had travelled from Benton, Arkansas to Table Rock to Alabama. That's about 20 hours on the road. Those rats were some travelers.

**Now that you're finally off the road and settled into your new place near Boise, Idaho, I'd imagine that you've already started to figure out where the best bass fisheries are.**

We haven't been here long, but I can tell you that I absolutely love it here. The rest of the world underestimates just how good the bass fisheries are in Idaho. There are tons of big smallmouth to catch all around here. The Snake River is three hours away, the Columbia River is close, and there are all kinds of little out-of-the-way largemouth lakes that I guarantee you've never heard about before. There are so many cool, underestimated fisheries that are going to be totally new to me.

When I'm fishing those places in Northern California that you see on my social media – Lake Shasta, Bullards Bar, Clear Lake – I'm super familiar with all of it. I'm definitely not bored with any of it, but I can't wait to get to places like Lake Owyhee, Brownlee Reservoir, Dworshak Reservoir; all of these places where I keep hearing about guys catching big ones. I'm stoked about all of them. We still fish the 'mystery lake' format in the MLF Cups, where we have to fish new lakes that we've never seen before, and just figure them out on the fly. That's what I'll be doing at these new lakes around Idaho.

**Having said all that, is it still safe to say that you're going to be fishing in Northern California this fall and winter?**

Of course! My year definitely isn't over. It's my wintertime ritual to go to Lake Shasta, Bullards Bar, all those places that I've fished for years. Also, there's a Toyota Series scheduled for January on Lake Shasta that I'm really looking forward to. I just love those spotted bass fisheries, and I plan to keep fishing them every fall and winter that I have the time. ■

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# COLORADO WINS JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP



**CODY MILLER AND RYAN STEINHOFF**, representing the TBF of Colorado and the Southern Colorado Jr. Bass Club, came out swinging on day one of the TBF Junior World Championship on Ohio's Mosquito Lake. The two junior anglers settled into sixth place overall with 7 pounds, 10 ounces after the scales cleared on day one. They covered lots of water and utilized multiple baits to do their damage.

The everchanging weather conditions each day threw the Colorado duo a curveball on day two, though. They searched hard for bites and only had two for the entire day. By bringing only two fish to the scales, Miller and Steinhoff were certain their tournament was finished. As luck would have it, those two fish were the right ones: That pair of keepers was enough to earn them the division champs spot for the Western Division and secured their spot in the third and final day.



Ryan Steinhoff and Cody Miller

After a short night of sleep, weights were zeroed and division champions from all five Federation junior divisions took the field for the final day in search for the Junior World Champions title.

Miller and Steinhoff took to the banks for the first portion of the day with no success; they soon moved out to deeper water, but still came up empty.

At about 11 o'clock, they decided to move to a point where they had some success earlier in the week. With such a slow bite, the team decided to slow down with a Yamamoto Senko and picked up their first keeper fishing some shallower water along the inside edge of a point.

That proved to be a winning move, as Miller and Steinhoff had one of the best days of fishing they'd ever experienced. Cast after cast, the duo hooked up with solid fish after solid fish to the tune of about 15 keeper bass, upgrading ounces at a time until the day was done.

When the dust had settled and the scales locked in, Miller and Steinhoff had 10 pounds, 6 ounces in their bag, a trophy in their hands and a college scholarship offer on the table.

The young anglers thanked their Colorado Youth Director (Sam Heckman), Colorado TBF President Rod Allen, and Steve Way, who served as their boat captain for the event. Without all the help from the Colorado TBF and its members believing in them, it could not have been possible, the duo said.

Miller and Steinhoff also gave credit for the win to their home state, which prepared them well for the adverse weather and fishing conditions. They also thanked their parents for allowing them to compete in the TBF Junior program and TBF for offering a junior program that is open to all junior anglers who are 15 and younger.

# EARN A SPOT IN THE 2021 TBF CHAMPIONSHIP THROUGH THE TBF NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS

**THE TBF NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS** are close-to-home events. There is one held in almost every 500-mile circle across the United States, which means anglers need only travel as far as a neighboring state (in most cases) every other year to fish one.

TBF Semi-Finals boast affordable entry fees and 100 percent payback. Held on weekends – so working anglers can attend and attempt to advance to some of the biggest events with the largest prize purses in fishing – they're extremely popular with members, and membership continues an upward trend as a result.

September marks the beginning of the bulk of these Semi-Finals events.

District 11 Semi-Finals (held Sept. 11-12 on Mosquito Lake in Ohio) pitted Ohio and Michigan anglers against one another in a dual-state matchup. Top anglers advance to the 2021 TBF National Championship.

Because of Ohio's large membership total, the state advances its top two boaters and top two co-anglers.

Representing the state of Ohio as boaters will be district champion Nick Prvonozac and runner-up Ken Pond. The Ohio co-anglers will be Don Ary and Chris Langenfeld.

Representing the Michigan membership as its top boater is Chase Fennell and the Michigan co-angler advancing to the TBF National Championship is Randy Burr.

District 16 is Vermont and Massachusetts, also held Sept. 11-12 and hosted by the Massachusetts Federation this year on Lake Champlain. The first day went off without a hitch, but the second day had to be called off due to winds up to 40 mph on the lake. In the end, advancement was determined by day one standings.

Representing Vermont as its advancing boater is Tom Waltz and as co-angler, Andrew Goodrich.

Brian Carmichael led the Massachusetts team and advances as the state's representative boater. Joe McKinnon took the Massachusetts co-angler top honors.

Good luck to all these anglers at next spring's TBF National Championship.



Tom Waltz



Andrew Goodrich



Brian Carmichael



Joe McKinnon

## HIGH SCHOOL STATE CHAMPIONS

**DELAWARE – JULY 12**  
**NORTH EAST RIVER UPPER CHESAPEAKE BAY**  
Logan Ruff and Evan Bond – 2.18

**NEW JERSEY – JULY 12**  
**NORTH EAST RIVER UPPER CHESAPEAKE BAY**  
Kyle Gilson and William Whitehead – 12.73

**MARYLAND – JULY 12**  
**NORTH EAST RIVER UPPER CHESAPEAKE BAY**  
Travis Nale and Reed Barra – 12.10

**PENNSYLVANIA – JULY 12**  
**NORTH EAST RIVER UPPER CHESAPEAKE BAY**  
Jerry Brumbaugh and Hunter Klotz – 14.67

**SOUTH DAKOTA – JULY 12**  
**ENEMY SWIM LAKE**  
Cody Neumann and Ashton Olivier – 16.13

**MICHIGAN – JULY 19**  
**HOUGHTON LAKE**  
Michael Lowe and Shea Lee – 13.25

**VERMONT – JULY 19**  
**LAKE CHAMPLAIN**  
Andrew Goodrich and Matthew Safer – 17.41

**WISCONSIN – AUGUST 9**  
**BAY OF GREEN BAY**  
Nick Frisk and Brant Rowland – 21.02

**IDAHO – AUGUST 30**  
**BROWNLEE RESERVOIR**  
Haden Ryza and Trace Freeman – 13.07



Michael Lowe and Shea Lee



Nick Frisk and Brant Rowland

## CONSERVATION CORNER

**TWO TBF STATE FEDERATIONS AND AN SAF HIGH SCHOOL** club were among the groups chosen by the Bass Fishing Hall of Fame for conservation grants.

The Clarks Hill Youth Fishing Team (GA) was awarded a grant to help with the continuation of their Clarks Hill Reservoir habitat project. SAF High School anglers will build habitat structures and subsequently record data on the success anglers have fishing around the structures.

The Virginia Bass Chapter Federation (VA) was awarded a grant for the Virginia Invasive Species Education Project, which involves the production and distribution of educational materials and the formation of a coalition of fishing organizations. Later, there will be creel surveys aimed at collecting data on the extent of the illegal introduction of Alabama bass in Virginia waters.

The Indiana Bass Federation (IN) received a grant for the Patoka Lake habitat project as part of a continuing initiative in cooperation with the Indiana DNR that will be completed in the 2020-21 seasons.

Congratulations to these affiliated chapters and thank you for your hard work on behalf of anglers everywhere.



**"Saving Our Fisheries Together"**

# TBF ANNOUNCES 2021 EVENTS SCHEDULE

## THE BASS FEDERATION'S STUDENT ANGLER

Federation (SAF) has announced its 2021 High School Fishing schedule. Offering more opportunities than ever before, the schedule includes 48 SAF High School Fishing State Championships, two Open Challenge events (including the Bass Pro Shops/Cabela's Early Bird Open), 16 state high school athletic association-sanctioned tournaments, as well as a number of FLW High School Fishing Opens and the pinnacle event in all of high school fishing: the 12th-annual High School Fishing World Finals and National Championship.

Available dates and locations are listed on the website at [highschoolfishing.org](http://highschoolfishing.org).

In 2021, across all SAF-sanctioned events, more than 35,000 anglers are expected to participate in the program. Between the TBF and FLW major events, there will be 75-plus tournaments in which to compete, plus hundreds of other events through local SAF-sanctioned trails.

"As the founders of the national high school fishing movement back in 2007, we continue to see the program grow and get more young anglers and families out into the outdoors," says TBF President Robert Cartlidge. "For us, it has never been about 'growing the sport of tournament fishing,' which is one reason why we will not pay cash to kids at our youth events; we do scholarships and prizes only.

"For us, our high school and youth program under the SAF umbrella is and always has been about education through fishing and getting people into the outdoors. It's not about trying to win some money or getting a sponsor patch on your shirt. It's about having some clean family fun.

"We're proud to have had our partners in fishing at FLW be the very first to join us in the national high school fishing arena. Together, we provide more fishing opportunities for not just for youth anglers but all anglers than anyone else in the world. We will continue to jointly push the programs forward to accomplish those goals."

SAF-sanctioned national events will continue advancement opportunities, with one in 10 teams from each TBF

and SAF and/or FLW State Championship, Challenge or Open events earning a spot in the National Championship. All SAF members worldwide are eligible to compete in the High School Fishing World Finals, where in the 2020 iteration, anglers were offered a record \$3.2 million in college scholarships and prizes.

Additionally, high school anglers who win an SAF state championship and are 16 years old or older (one or both team members) will be offered a High School TBF Living The Dream package, a TBF sponsorship for a year that includes: fully paid adult TBF competitor membership and advancement opportunities to represent their home state in a TBF National Semi-Final as a co-angler with fully paid entry fees. From there, the sky's the limit, as they could qualify for the TBF Federation National Championship.

Additional SAF events are being added every day. For the latest events lineup, visit [highschoolfishing.org](http://highschoolfishing.org).

Complete rules are also available at [highschoolfishing.org](http://highschoolfishing.org) and at [FLWFishing.com](http://FLWFishing.com)

Registration for the 2021 season opens Nov. 1, 2020. For SAF High School Fishing State Championships, each team must compete in the state in which their school is located. Teams from all states can compete in an SAF Challenge event and FLW High School Fishing Open tournament. Entries for all State Championships, SAF Challenge events or State Athletic Association events should be made at [highschoolfishing.org](http://highschoolfishing.org) or by calling TBF at 580.765.9031. Entries for FLW Open events should be made at [FLWFishing.com](http://FLWFishing.com) or by calling 272.252.1000. There is no limit to the number of teams accepted into a tournament from each school or club except per State Athletic Association rules and in those events only.

All TBF/SAF and FLW High School Fishing tournaments are free to enter. Tournaments are two-person (team) events for students in grades 9-12 (one member of each team can be in 7th or 8th grade), plus an adult boat captain, and open to any SAF-affiliated high school club.

## ABOUT THE BASS FEDERATION

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

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

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# ROAD WARRIORS

THE LIFE OF A TOURING PROFESSIONAL ANGLER IS FULL OF UPS AND DOWNS

**W**hen you tune in to FLW Live or *MLF NOW!* or the Outdoor Channel or Discovery or any other outlet that airs professional bass fishing tournaments, it's easy to get sucked into the glamour of it all: a life of fishing for a living; fast boats and high-end tackle, lucrative sponsorships, jerseys adorned with the logos of dozens of brands, big bass and big checks.

The tour life is sometimes all of that, but the vast majority of a tour-level bass pro's life is hidden beneath the surface. Like a giant iceberg, there's much more to fishing professionally than meets the eye.

MLF pro Alton Jones Jr. is just 28 years old, but he was indoctrinated into the touring lifestyle from a young age, often traveling with his father – who needs no introduction among the fishing community at large – and learning the ropes. He saw tour life firsthand before he ever made the choice to make that his life as well.

There are highs and lows and a lot of stuff in between. But one thing is clear: The life of a touring pro sure is interesting, and the lessons are endless.

## LESSON NO. 1

### THERE'S NO REST FOR THE WEARY

Jones lives in Waco, Texas. Sure, there are some tournaments close to home in a typical tournament schedule, but this year especially, touring often requires an awful lot of travel.

"On the year I put about 48,000 miles on my truck," Jones says. "It's not vacation for me. I get there as quick as I can, and I get home as quick as I can. Usually, it's four hours or so [of sleep] on actual travel days. Many of those days, depending on what the hotel situation is, probably five nights a year I'll sleep in the back of my truck."

## LESSON NO. 2

### THERE'S NO SNOOZE BUTTON

"A lot of nights I'll drive until 2 a.m. or something and I'll let the sunrise be my alarm the next morning and sleep across the back seat."

During practice and tournament days, Jones gets closer to six hours of sleep a night, but the days are long, and the work never really stops.

"I record a YouTube video of each tournament day and sometimes I do practice," he says. "At Lake Fork for example, I had to put out five videos of that week. That's some of the things that are written into my sponsor obligations. Every night I have to come in and make sure I save all the footage, delete it off the cameras, charge all the cameras and get them ready for the next day."

Jones does all his own video editing and social media posts – "I regret it," Jones jokes – but it keeps his sponsors happy and saves him some money. Pro fishing is a business. Jones takes that to heart.



## LESSON NO. 3

### IT'S NOT ALL BAD

"I make sure to realize how lucky I am," Jones says. "We're seeing these beautiful bodies of water and watching sunrises and sunsets every day, which most people would consider vacation. When I'm fishing, I always stop and realize how blessed I am to do what I do and how beautiful it is where I am."

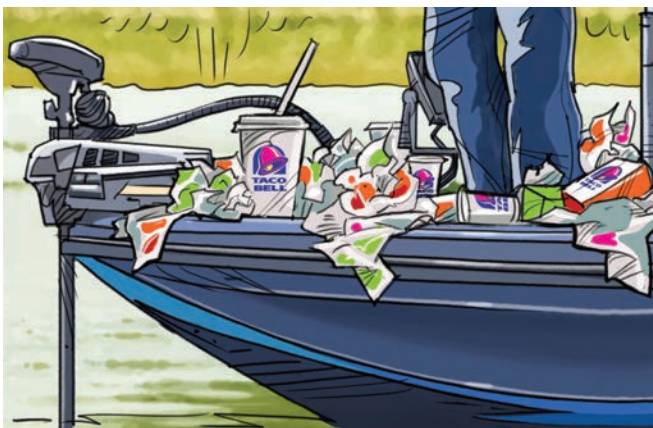
Everyone knows the expression about a bad day fishing beating a good day at work. For Jones, they're one and the same, so finding the beauty and blessings in it all is absolutely essential.

## LESSON NO. 4 FISHING FAMILY IS FAMILY

"The most difficult part for me is time away from home; time away from your family," he admits. "They're the ones that make the big sacrifice to let us pursue our dream."

Additionally, Jones and his peers make up their own family on the road - one their actual families don't have for extra support.

"We all compete with each other on the water. There's nothing I'd rather do than knock them out of the lead and hurt their feelings and make them feel bad about themselves. But outside of that, it really is one big family. I can remember seeing one of the competitors broke down on the side of the road with a flat tire, and within 10 minutes, there's seven other anglers stopped to help. It's a home away from home."



## LESSON NO. 5 IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS...

With all the time Jones spends in his vehicle, keeping entertained is especially important.

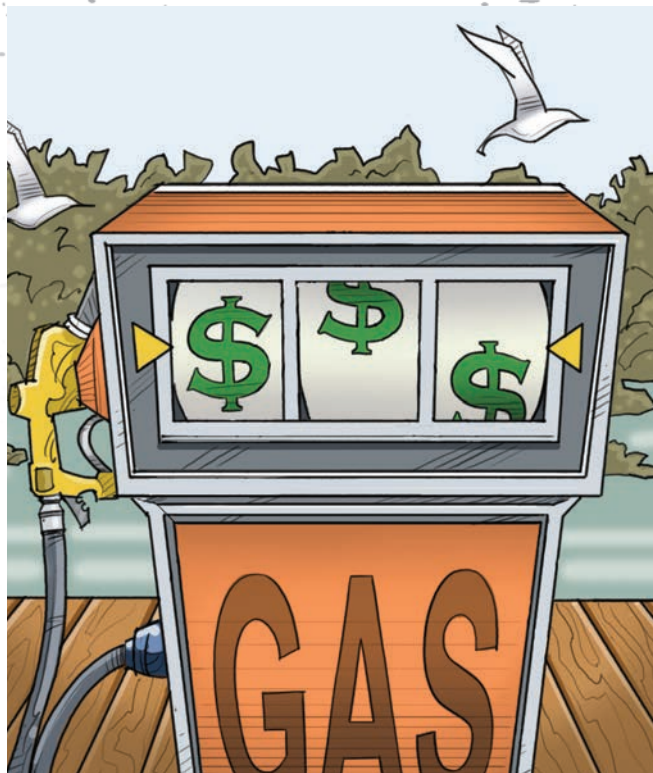
"I listen to a huge variety of things," Jones explains. "My top three would be Whiskey Myers, Turnpike Troubadours and Luke Combs. I click on artists and hit shuffle playlist and it'll play me everything they've ever made. And those are artists I don't think have made a bad song."

"I listen to some murder mystery podcasts, too. There's a couple I really enjoy. One's called Criminal. Another is called My Favorite Murder. I mix it up."

### ...and the cheesy things

"My guilty pleasure when I'm on the road is Taco Bell," Jones admits. "I can't hardly pass one up. I can't pass up a cheesy gordita crunch. Whether it's been a long day on the water or a long day of driving, that's one of the things I have to stop for. I have no self-control."

Jones estimates he stopped for Taco Bell 25 times while on the road for tournaments this season (and admits that's probably a low-ball estimate). When you're traveling that much and time is so valuable, you better have a taste for fast food.



### ...and all the other things

Like fuel costs. At Lake Erie, Jones ran north into St. Clair all four days, burning about \$800 worth of fuel for the 750 miles he ran during the tournament alone. If you're not cashing checks, every tank can sting.

### ...and like managing tackle.

"At Lake Fork I went through provably 60 YUM Dingers in three days," Jones estimates. "At St. Clair I went through quite a few Berkley Flat Worms. I went through probably at least a dozen frogs in three days at La Crosse due to pike. I would say at almost every event I make a Tackle Warehouse overnight order. I think I can speak for my dad and a lot of other anglers; I know they all do the same."

### ...and managing caffeine intake.

"I try to do coffee, but whenever I get really run down, my coffee turns into Red Bull. I try to keep it pretty moderate - one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Give me something to wake up and something to get me through that 3 o'clock feeling."

## LESSON NO. 6 THERE'S NO HANDBOOK

The life of a touring pro can be fun. It can be challenging. It can be exhausting and exciting and terrifying. One thing it can never be, though, is predictable.

"Every day is a new day. You never know what you're going to run into whether it's on the road or on the water. I think fishing is less than half of what we actually do." ■



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