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DAKOTA EBARE

4TH PLACE

JEREMY LAWYER

5TH PLACE

SCOTT MARTIN



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COVER PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

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FLW IS IN MY BLOOD, TOO

I really liked something David Dudley said on stage during the 2019 FLW Tour Angler of the Year award presentation back in June.

"Actually, one of the fish kind of cut my finger earlier today, and the letters F-L-W came out of my blood. I don't know what that means, but I bleed FLW."

I feel the same way as Dudley, and while I might have worded my thoughts a little differently, I couldn't have said it any better.

As fans of tournament bass fishing, you know all about the changes that have taken place in this industry in the last year. We've had to endure a lot of rumors and a lot of talk about entry fees and payouts and the business behind big-time bass tournaments. All the chatter has, at times, drowned out the fishing.

I don't know what all is in store for the sport of pro bass fishing in the next few years, but I know that despite any changes that have already occurred, one thing has stayed the same. It's what Dudley was getting at on stage: Here at FLW, we're all one big family.

This organization is still comprised of some of the best anglers in the world – people like Dudley and our new FLW Cup champ, Bryan Thrift – plus a staff of hard-working, honest people who love bass fishing and love FLW's customers – you.

I'm proud to be part of the FLW family. I grew up here. I was only 22 when I started in the editorial department. When I attended the 2007 Cup at Lake Ouachita in Hot Springs, Ark., not only was it my first bass tournament with FLW, but it was my first bass tournament of any kind.

My bosses at the time, possibly to test how badly I really wanted to do this job, sent me out on the water with Dudley during practice. Dudley is what you might call an "interesting cat." He has a lot of personality. There's no one like him. He could obviously tell how green I was that day, which I guess is why he picked on me the entire time. Whenever I'd write a note on my pad, he'd pretend to narrate: "At 9:30 a.m., David scratches his butt." He also referred to me by my full name all day long.

At one point, when he snagged a favorite crankbait on the bottom, Dudley dove in after it. I couldn't believe it. The water was 16 feet deep, which apparently wasn't too deep for Dudley. He worked his way down his fishing line, rooted around the bottom, and eventually surfaced with a potato sack full of rocks; his crankbait snagged in the fabric. That was my first "Dudley experience." The photo I took of him showing off his crankbait stuck to that sack is still one of my favorites from my career.

I'll never forget that day. Despite the ribbings I took (I delivered a few, too), I had a lot of fun. He showed me every detail of how he planned to catch his fish that week, and I got to see a master at work. Though I'd started my job a couple months earlier, I think that's when I officially joined the family.

Now, 12 years later, we've just wrapped up another Cup in Hot Springs. Dudley is still at the top of the sport, and I'm still lucky to be writing about him – two things I'm glad haven't changed.

Thanks, David, for sticking with FLW, and for not leaving me on the bank that day. And congratulations from the entire FLW family on winning your fourth FLW Tour Angler of the Year.

Curtis Niedermier, Editor-in-Chief

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FISHING EXPOSED
POTOMAC RIVER — JUNE 1, 2019



FISHING EXPOSED
POTOMAC RIVER — JUNE 6, 2019





FATHERLY LESSONS IN BASS FISHING

At age 15, Brennon McCord and his dad, Neil, won a bass boat in an Illini Team Trail Classic. Seven years later, the McCords – father and son – celebrated an even bigger moment with an on-stage embrace after Brennon was crowned 2019 T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League All-American champion at the Potomac River. As fathers are wont to do during hours spent in a bass boat, Brennon says his dad taught him about hard work and commitment, which are obviously important traits for any aspiring champion.

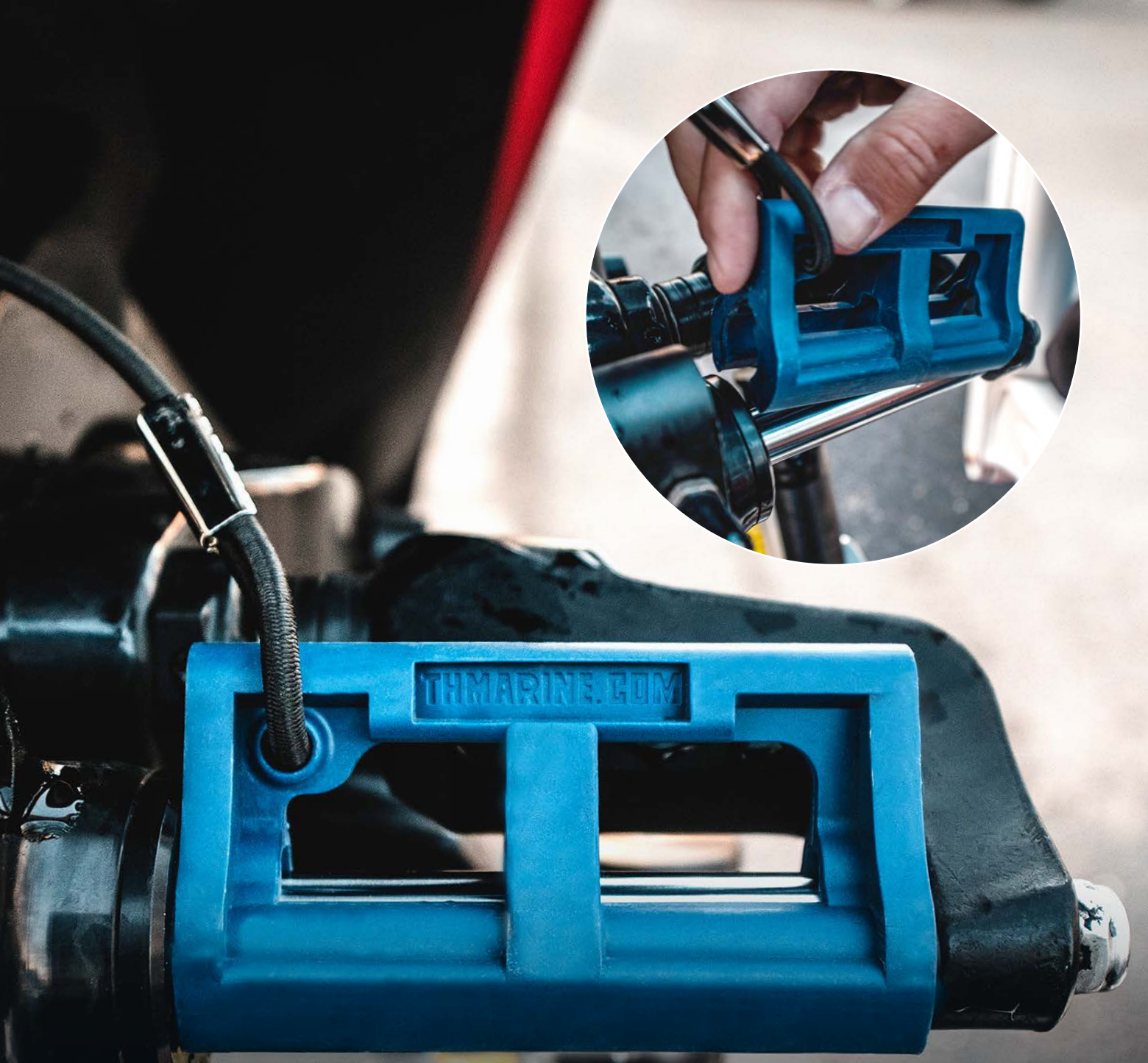
PHOTO BY MATT PACE



RACING AHEAD BY OUNCES

They say every ounce counts in tournament bass fishing, and that was certainly the case for Blake Albertson and Adam Puckett, members of the Murray State University fishing team, when they won the 2019 YETI FLW College Fishing National Championship on the Potomac River. Shown here on the final day of the championship, the Racers needed every fish they could get to outlast a charging Bethel University team by just 3 ounces. For reference, 3 ounces is about the equivalent of a deck of playing cards, and playing this fish perfectly made the difference in Puckett and Albertson earning the win and berths in the 2019 FLW Cup at Lake Hamilton.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



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2020



➤ SCHEDULE

The 2020 FLW Tour schedule was announced at the FLW Cup pre-tournament banquet in Hot Springs, Ark., in August. The season kicks off in January and wraps up with the seventh stop just ahead of Independence Day weekend.

The full schedule is as follows:

1. SAM RAYBURN RESERVOIR

January 23-26 — Brookeland, Texas
Hosted by the Jasper County Development District

2. HARRIS CHAIN OF LAKES

February 20-23 — Leesburg, Fla.
Hosted by Lake County, Fla.

3. LAKE MARTIN

March 19-22 — Alexander City, Ala.
Hosted by the Alexander City Chamber Of Commerce

4. CHEROKEE LAKE

April 2-5 — Jefferson City, Tenn.
Hosted by the Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce

5. LAKE HARTWELL

April 23-26 — Anderson, S.C.
Hosted by the Anderson Convention & Visitors Bureau

6. LAKE DARDANELLE

May 14-17 — Russellville, Ark.
Hosted by Russellville Advertising & Promotion Commission

7. DETROIT RIVER

June 25-28 — Trenton, Mich.
Hosted by Detroit Sports Commission



➤ U.S. SWEEPS GOLD MEDALS AT PAN AM KAYAK CHAMPIONSHIP

Team USA dominated the Pan American Black Bass Kayak Championship on Center Hill Lake at the end of May. FLW Tour pro Eric Jackson (center) won the individual all-around gold medal with a two-day catch of 21 bass that totaled 191.5 scorable inches as U.S. anglers claimed the top five spots and eight out of the top 10. Drew Gregory (left) won silver, with the bronze going to Emily Jackson (right), daughter of Eric, who also won the individual women's gold medal.

Anglers also fished in three-person men's and women's teams. Eric Jackson's team, which included Gregory and Matt Ball, won the gold medal among the men. The U.S. women's team of Bridgett Howard, Shannon Williams and Jenn Nolan also won gold.

In the overall event, the U.S. earned gold medal honors among the eight competing nations, followed by Canada with silver and Costa Rica with bronze. Other participants were Mexico, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Honduras and Dominican Republic.

For complete results, visit usabass.org.

➤ SMITH HONORED FOR SPORTSMANSHIP, LEADERSHIP

Capt. Blake Smith, an FLW Tour pro from Lakeland, Fla., was presented with the 2019 Forrest L. Wood Sportsmanship & Community Leadership Award by the award's namesake at the FLW Cup pre-tournament banquet in Hot Springs, Ark., in August.

A father of four, Smith travels the Tour with his family and participates in FLW community outreach programs in communities the Tour visits. He also hosts about 30 outreach events of his own each year. They include Christian programs and Meet the Pros nights. Smith is known among his peers as a hard worker and a gentleman who's always willing to lend a hand for a good cause.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

➤ WHITE WINS MARSHAL BASS BOAT GIVEAWAY

Don White's career BFL earnings total a little more than \$1,500, but his earnings as an FLW Marshal are substantially higher now. At the FLW Cup in Hot Springs, White's name was drawn to win a new Ranger Z518L powered by a 200-hp Evinrude in the first-ever Marshal boat giveaway.

The Columbus, Miss., man participated in the Marshal program at the FLW Tour event at Lake Chickamauga and the FLW Cup at Lake Hamilton, earning four entries (one

per day) into the boat drawing. A total of 683 marshals were entered in the drawing.

"I've still got some tournaments back home. I'm fishing the BFLs back in Mississippi, and my kids have been wanting me to move up from co-angler to angler," White said during an *FLW Live* interview on day three at the Cup. "I've always said, when I win the boat I'm moving up. So, there you go, I guess I'm moving up to boater next year."

▶ SECOND HIGH SCHOOL FISHING CAMP DRAWS 300 ATTENDEES

PHOTO BY MATT PACE



FLW and Costa welcomed 230 high school anglers and 70 adults for the second annual High School Fishing Camp at Murray State University and Kentucky Lake. Campers were coached by about a dozen FLW Tour pros plus FLW tournament directors, local guides and FLW media staff on subjects such as boat maintenance, tackle selection, fishing techniques, electronics use, fish care, angler etiquette, social media and fishing industry career planning. The adults in attendance were mostly parents and club advisors who participated in seminars on best practices for managing high school fishing teams.

In all, it was another successful venture in preparing the next generation of professional bass anglers.



"The 2019 camp left everyone in attendance feeling energized for our sport and excited to put the newfound knowledge to work on the water," says FLW National Youth Director Scott Ellison, who led the planning efforts for the camp. "It's a tremendous sight to see young anglers from every corner of our country come together with a shared desire for the sport of fishing. We certainly expect to see this camp continue to grow and provide more opportunities for young anglers to pursue their fishing passions."

Details about the 2020 summer camp will be made available in the spring. ■

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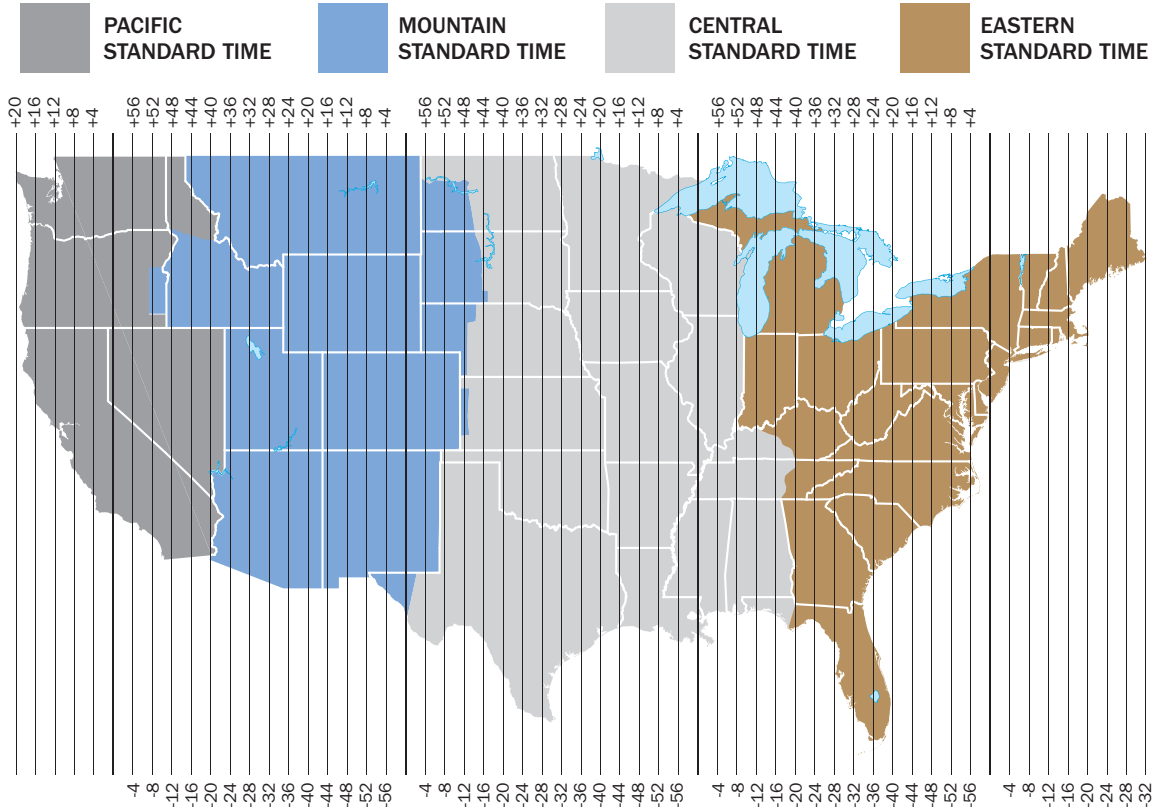
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SOLUNAR TABLES

OCTOBER, NOVEMBER, DECEMBER 2019



OCT. Date	Day	AM		PM		Moon Phases	NOV. Date	Day	AM		PM		Moon Phases	DEC. Date	Day	AM		PM		Moon Phases
		Minor	Major	Minor	Major				Minor	Major	Minor	Major				Minor	Major			
1	Tue	6:50	12:40	7:20	1:05		1	Fri	8:10	2:00	8:45	2:30		1	Sun	8:45	2:35	9:15	3:00	
2	Wed	7:45	1:35	8:15	2:0		2	Sat	9:15	3:05	9:45	3:30		2	Mon	9:40	3:30	10:05	3:50	
3	Thu	8:45	2:35	9:10	2:55		3	Sun	10:10	4:00	10:40	4:25		3	Tue	10:30	4:20	10:55	4:40	
4	Fri	9:40	3:30	10:15	4:00		4	Mon	11:05	4:55	11:35	5:20		4	Wed	11:15	5:05	11:40	5:25	
5	Sat	10:40	4:30	11:10	4:55	☾	5	Tue	11:50	5:40	—:—	6:00		5	Thu	11:55	5:45	—:—	6:05	☾
6	Sun	11:30	5:20	—:—	5:45		6	Wed	12:15	6:20	12:30	6:40		6	Fri	12:20	6:20	12:30	6:40	
7	Mon	12:00	6:05	12:15	6:30		7	Thu	12:55	7:00	1:10	7:20		7	Sat	12:55	7:00	1:10	7:20	
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10	Thu	2:10	8:10	2:20	8:35		10	Sun	2:50	8:55	3:05	9:15		10	Tue	2:55	9:00	3:10	9:25	
11	Fri	2:50	8:50	3:00	9:10		11	Mon	3:30	9:30	3:40	9:55		11	Wed	3:40	9:45	3:55	10:15	
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14	Mon	4:35	10:50	5:00	11:15		14	Thu	5:45	—:—	6:15	12:00		14	Sat	6:20	12:10	6:55	12:40	
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21	Mon	10:50	4:40	11:30	5:15	☾	21	Thu	12:05	6:10	12:20	6:35		21	Sat	12:35	6:40	12:50	7:05	
22	Tue	11:45	5:35	—:—	6:05		22	Fri	12:50	7:00	1:10	7:25		22	Sun	1:20	7:25	1:35	7:50	
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24	Thu	1:10	7:20	1:30	7:45		24	Sun	2:25	8:30	2:40	9:00		24	Tue	2:50	9:00	3:10	9:30	
25	Fri	2:00	8:10	2:20	8:35		25	Mon	3:15	9:20	3:30	9:45		25	Wed	3:45	9:50	4:00	10:20	
26	Sat	2:50	9:00	3:10	9:25		26	Tue	4:00	10:10	4:20	10:40	☉	26	Thu	4:35	10:45	4:55	11:10	☉
27	Sun	3:40	9:50	4:00	10:15		27	Wed	4:55	11:10	5:20	11:40		27	Fri	5:25	11:45	5:55	—:—	
28	Mon	4:30	10:35	4:45	11:05	☉	28	Thu	5:55	—:—	6:25	12:10		28	Sat	6:25	12:15	6:55	12:40	
29	Tue	5:20	11:35	5:45	—:—		29	Fri	6:50	12:40	7:20	1:05		29	Sun	7:15	1:05	7:45	1:30	
30	Wed	6:15	12:05	6:15	12:35		30	Sat	7:50	1:40	8:20	2:05		30	Mon	8:10	2:00	8:35	2:20	
31	Thu	7:20	1:05	7:25	1:40									31	Tue	9:00	2:50	9:25	3:10	

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Name: *Al Murphy*
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Service: *27 Years*

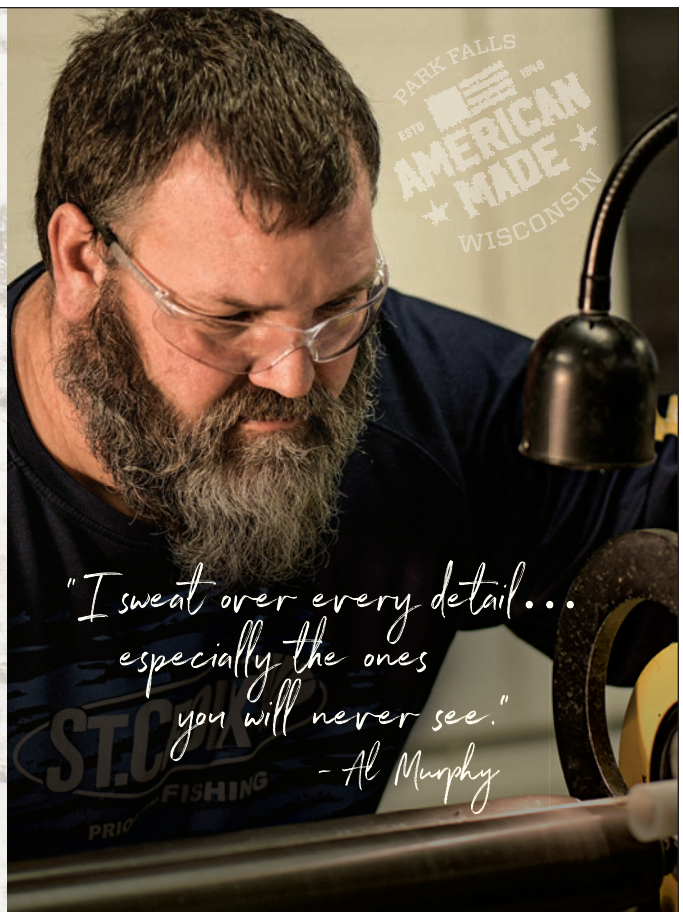
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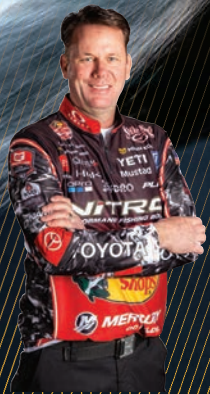


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SAY WHAT?

BASS FISHING LEGEND JIMMY HOUSTON IS ALWAYS QUICK TO MAKE US (AND HIMSELF) LAUGH OUT LOUD

There may not be a bigger personality in the history of bass fishing than the one and only Jimmy Houston. From his signature blond locks to his colorful quips and metaphors, the bass fishing icon has made a career of catching fish and being incomparably entertaining in the process.

Houston's career has spanned six decades, and it would be impossible to pin down all of his greatest quotes and jokes from the water to the weigh-in stage. But, even in 2019 – 51 years since his first professional tournament – he's still giving us pure gold every time he has a microphone under his nose and a camera in his face.

Here's Jimmy Houston, in 2019, from the FLW Tour weigh-in stage.

“I don't have any trouble being humble, because I'm married and I'm a tournament fisherman. If you got any pride and you're those two deals, you're divorced and you're broke.”



“I let Gary go first. My daddy taught me to respect my elders.”

After weighing in behind Gary Yamamoto (age 75; Houston is 74) on day one at Seminole



“One of the good things I figured out by these two days I've been here is I haven't been fishing around any other boats. I think that's kind of a bad deal. I probably should have gone out there yesterday morning and looked for a couple of boats and pulled in there and started fishing.”



“I called him 5 pounds. You want to check that again?”

After weighing in his lone fish for the day which measured to be a 4-pound, 15-ounce largemouth



“I figure I'm going to do pretty good tomorrow. I should have a good day out there. One thing I can figure is I'm not going to have much competition.”

After finding out he probably missed the top-30 cut at Chickamauga



“I've been catching a lot of little bitty fish [in practice]. I caught one the first day, and Chris [Houston's wife] caught three, and then I caught three and she caught six, and then I caught four and she caught 10. But I didn't take her today, so I caught them all.”



“As long as you got those blue-birds and canaries that are flying south and not north this time of year, you can usually get a few bites on a spinnerbait.”

One Man's Trash is Everyone's Trash

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch (also known as the Pacific trash vortex) is the "largest accumulation of ocean plastic in the world," according to theoceancleanup.com. Located between Hawaii and California, the incomprehensibly large mass of floating debris (mostly in the form of discarded plastic) is somewhere between 1.15 million and 2.41 million metric tons in total and growing every day.

Recently, a number of environmentalists did their part to reduce that total, if only by a fraction. In June, the group removed more than 40 tons of fishing net, along with about two tons of other plastic that was donated to local artists to use in artwork to increase awareness of ocean plastic pollution.

The 25-day expedition was carried out by volunteers of the Ocean Voyages Institute and cost about \$300,000. The group plans to carry out a longer three-month expedition next year.

To learn more about Ocean Voyages Institute's mission, visit oceanvoyagesinstitute.org.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OCEAN CLEANUP

Heartbreak on The Heart River

After an investigation by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department (NDGFD), Tom Volk's potentially record-setting catch was not to be.

The Lincoln man would have shattered the North Dakota walleye record of 15 pounds, 13 ounces (previously set by Neal Leier in 2018) by close to a pound with a 16-pound, 9-ounce behemoth walleye caught on April 21, but the NDGFD determined the fish was foul-hooked and therefore not eligible to be considered for state-record status.

Volk, for his part, was fishing with a jig and plastic and said he mouth-hooked the fish, which then became tangled in the line while he was fighting it. The fish was initially certified by the NDGFD but was later reconsidered due to further investigation. The agency has since changed its record-keeping policies to implement a two-week waiting period before any potential record-setting catch is verified.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NORTH DAKOTA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

Light Line, Large Fish

There's more than one way to catch a double-digit bucketmouth.

Back in April, California angler Tracy Hartman did something few bass anglers would even dream of doing: **She landed an 11-pound, 8-ounce bass on 2-pound-test line.**

During a trout tournament on Dixon Lake, Hartman was casting around a Berkley mini jig on light line. When the jig hit bottom, she felt the thump of a big bite and set the hook on a massive largemouth – her new personal best.

After a five-minute fight and some assistance from a fellow angler (who lent her a net) and her son, Carson (who did the netting), Hartman found herself face to face with a potential women's world record for 2-pound-test line, pending International Game Fish Association approval. ■



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Though they didn't win by much, Northlake Christian High School (La.) anglers Sam Acosta (left) and Christopher Capdeboscq caught all they needed to claim the 2019 High School Fishing National Championship on Pickwick Lake. The champs beat out runners-up Colin McCullough and Justin Hamlin of Cedar Bluff High School (Ala.) by a margin of only 1 ounce.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

WHAT'S INSIDE:

AOY profile: How David Dudley found a new source of motivation

Why patience is important in anyone's quest to be a bass pro

Matt Becker's best advice for accurately fishing offshore in big water

We reviewed the Strike King KVD 1.5 Deep

The swimbait strategy a Chickamauga guide uses to catch giants

Tom Monsoor breaks down the nitty gritty on jigs

How to burn less fuel in your tow vehicle

Winning techniques from FLW's summertime championships



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJIMA

STILL NOT SATISFIED

David Dudley's historic AOY season and how he got here

By Sean Ostruszka

David Dudley had been wrestling with it for quite a while. He, like everyone else, had always been told there's no substitute for time on the water when it comes to success as a tournament angler.

It makes sense. The simple fact of being older means more hours logged on the water and more things learned than some 23-year-old rookie.

Then he'd look around. He'd check the standings and see names of anglers fresh out of college far above the veterans. He'd see some in their 20s holding up championship trophies. He'd look at himself, 43 years old and going on seven seasons since his last tournament victory, and wonder if he was already on the downslope of his career, despite the old adage saying otherwise.

"Why is it these young guys are out-fishing the old guys?" says Dudley. "Old guys are supposed to be wiser and smarter. Shouldn't they be dominating? How come they weren't contending for more wins or Angler of the Year titles?"

"This is something I've wrestled with a long time, but especially in the last few years. What is it you lose?"

The situation irritated him, mostly because he couldn't put his finger on what was going on.

It wasn't physical. A 55-year-old pro can still physically drag a worm, pitch a jig or cast a crankbait as well as a 25-year-old.

Could it be mental? But again, that goes against the adage of having mental superiority through experience. Then what?!

Dudley claims he still doesn't fully know. Then again, in talking with him after having just won his fourth FLW Tour Angler of the Year title – the first angler to win four in the Tour's history – you come to realize he may know more than he thinks. By adapting his approach to the fishing business off the water, he's learned to do the same thing on the water, showing that he can stay as relevant as ever while capitalizing on decades of experience. And there's something else he definitely knows for sure.

"My first three Angler of the Year titles were awesome, don't get me wrong," says Dudley, "but this title means more to me than my first three."

A Cot and YouTube

In trying to figure out how Dudley just pulled off his historic AOY run, it's important to see where he's been, as well as where he's going.

Dudley's road started almost 25 years ago.

"A guy who lived in town with me, Steve Lloyd, actually drove down to Birmingham, Ala., and slept on a cot outside the B.A.S.S. office," Dudley says. "This was back when registering was busy signals on the phone and everything. So he drove down, slept outside and then was the third person in the door when they opened. He signed he and I up for the Bassmaster Invationals. I was 18 years old."

Dudley enjoyed a fast start.

"Most people don't know this, but I won Angler of the Year," Dudley says. "The invationals are considered triple-A now, but back then, all the big guys fished them – Denny Brauer, Roland Martin, all of them – and I beat them."

At 19, he fished his first Bassmaster Classic, fished his first full year on the FLW Tour and won a Bassmaster event. At 28, he won the FLW Cup, and five years later he won his first FLW AOY. He added two more in 2011 and 2012.

So, at the ripe old age of 36, he'd won a championship, four pro-level AOYs and five Tour events.

That's about when the changes started.

For a number of years after his 2012 AOY, Dudley still cut checks and qualified for FLW Cups, but he wasn't contenting for wins like he did earlier in his career.

"I reckon I hold my standard high," Dudley says. "A lot of guys are happy just to cut a check. Me? I'm mad. I want to compete. I want to win."

That came to a head last year, when he finished 38th in the standings (not terrible at all, but his lowest finish since 2009) and failed to make a single top 10 for the first time since 2005.

Something had to change, and he found it in the most unlikely place.

"My kids would bug me to watch these videos on YouTube," Dudley says. "Before two years ago I probably hadn't watched two minutes of YouTube videos, but little by little I'd start watching more and more. I'd be surfing around realizing all the stuff you could learn."

Dudley was so taken by the scale of YouTube and its reach that he did something he never thought he'd do: He became a "YouTuber."

"There's probably not too many 40-year-olds trying to become YouTubers, but that's exactly what I decided to do," Dudley recalls. "I realized just how big this thing is, and I can honestly say it's changed my entire perspective of not just myself and how I fish, but even in shifting my career to the digital side."

Suddenly, the man who used to talk your ear off about the intricacies of salt content in soft plastics was now talking at length about engagement rates and follower demographics on YouTube, and about growing his follower base to 300,000 and his digital goals off the water.

For those that have known him for a while, it's quite the shift, but it may be the shift he needed.

DUDLEY'S 2019 SEASON RECAP

En route to his historic fourth FLW Tour Angler of the Year title, David Dudley was able to constantly adapt and show off what makes him one of the best tournament anglers in history. His performances can also teach any tournament angler some valuable lessons.

Sam Rayburn Reservoir – 13th

"I survived because of one hole. I didn't have much going, and I've learned that sometimes you can find fish and repeat the pattern elsewhere, and sometimes you just have that one spot. I just had the one hole and milked it for all it was worth."

Lake Toho – 21st

"That's one where experience played a big factor, just in being patient. I about left an area and decided to stick it out a little longer. I caught 23 pounds in an hour, just from being patient."

Lake Seminole – 74th

"I can say at that one I didn't do well due to a lack of exploring all my options. I checked the rivers and various areas, but I didn't check a particular area of the lake. That's where all the big weight came from. If I'd checked it, I probably could've found something more than I had."

Grand Lake – 25th

"That one was definitely patience. It was so tough. I decided in practice to try and find an area where I could put my trolling motor down for eight hours and get two to three bites. It took me three days to find it, but once I did, I went into survival mode and grinded it out there."

Cherokee Lake – 12th

"That was a fun one. Everything was developing during the week. It basically was just back-to-your-roots bank fishing."

Lake Chickamauga – 5th

"That was a tournament of leftovers. We were catching the leftovers of fish that just got done spawning or leftovers from the shad spawn or leftovers of the fry guards. Sometimes, you just have to pick out what's left in the fridge instead of trying to cook up something new."

Lake Champlain – 7th

"That was all about being able to erase history. I checked a lot of history in practice, and I wasn't comfortable with what I was seeing. So I switched it up. I'm really proud of myself for that one, to not get caught up with what I knew."

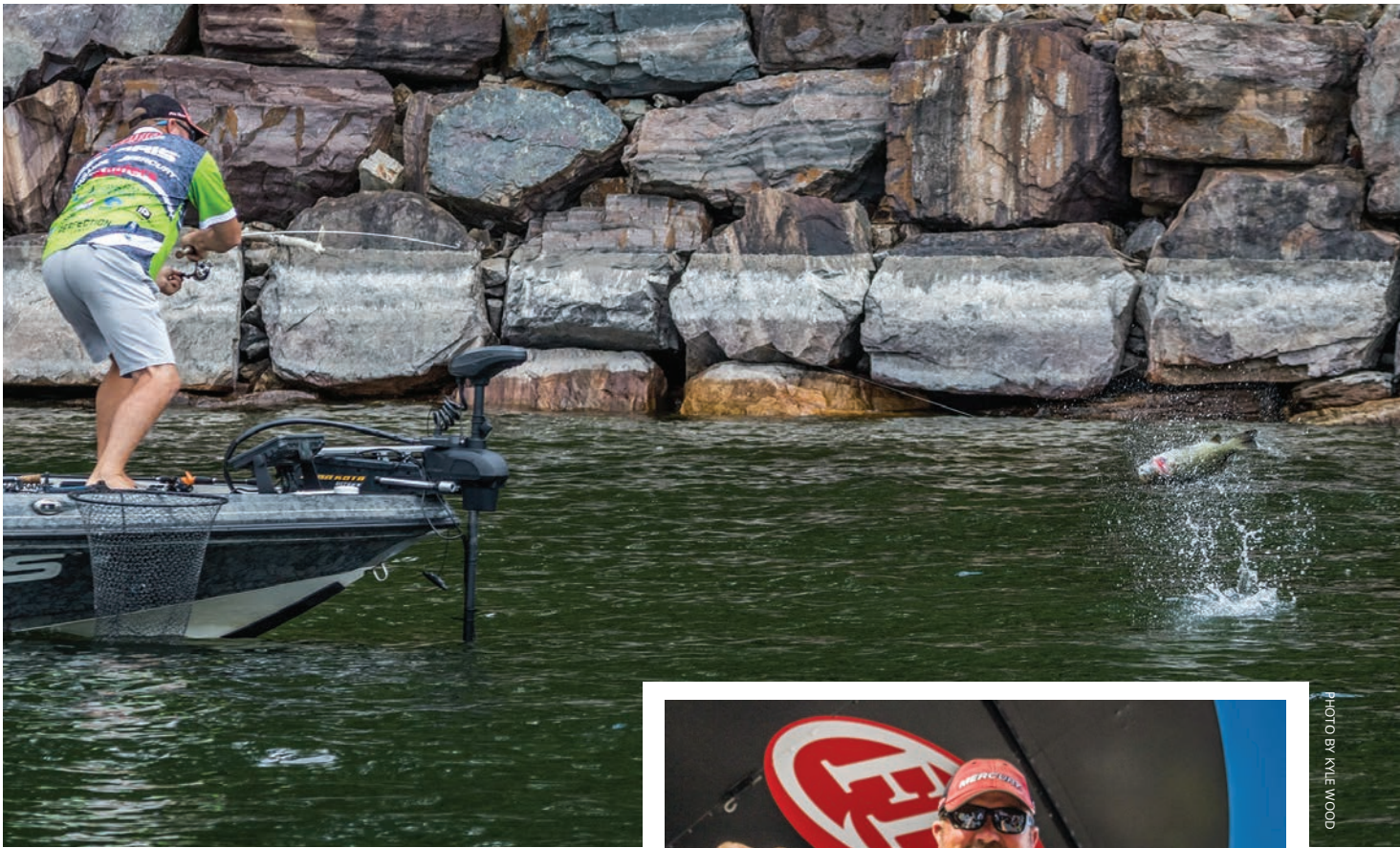


PHOTO BY KYIE WOOD

PHOTO BY JOEY WHITE

Adapting the Want for More

After almost 25 years of professional fishing, an angler might think there's little left to learn in the sport. For Dudley, there are probably few scenarios he hasn't dealt with; few lakes he hasn't fished; few techniques he hasn't mastered.

Not surprisingly, it's often at this moment of experiential mastery, when the time-on-the-water adage is at its peak, that the worst thing that can happen to an angler (or any competitor) happens: He grows complacent.

He stops practicing as hard, opting to rely on history. He stops trying the newest techniques, figuring what worked before will work again.

In the process, he stops adapting, which is something younger anglers do better than most as they try to gain an edge over older anglers.

Much like many of the veteran greats before him, Dudley admits he's dealt with the complacency issue. It's hard not to when you're FLW's winningest angler, and even your second-best performance is still cutting checks and qualifying you for championships.

Fortunately, Dudley is not wired like most. He's far smarter than he lets on; far more introspective and adaptable, too (see: his growing YouTube channel).

So, yes, he became complacent for a little while. He wrestled with it. Then he put it in a sleeper hold and pinned it, with his fourth AOY as his title belt. A big reason why it all worked out is something Dudley remembers from his youth that's always driven him.

"I'm never satisfied," Dudley adds. "My motto is to never be satisfied, and if you're going to be like that, you have to adapt and evolve."

That's why this AOY is so special to him. He was able to adapt and regain the fire he had when he was that 19-year-old who stood toe-to-toe with the previous generation of veterans and won AOY.

The scary part is, now that the fire is back, we may be on the verge of seeing something really special – a tournament angler with the time-on-the-water advantage of a veteran and the adaptability and fire of a rookie. Dudley knows it, too.

"I'm not satisfied with just four Angler of the Year titles," Dudley says. "I want No. 5. I want No. 6.

"When my career is over, I want to make it really hard for someone to beat my records, and I hope to go down as one of the best." ■

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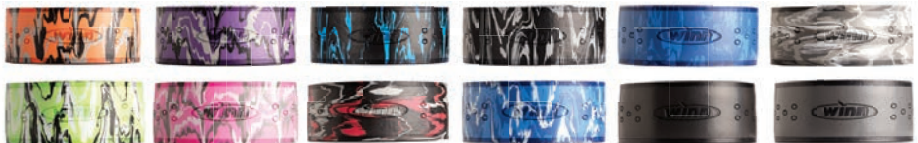
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PATIENCE CAN PAY OFF

DON'T RUSH YOUR RUN FOR THE TOUR; WAIT UNTIL THE TIME IS RIGHT

By Joseph Webster
PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

I might've had the skills to compete on the FLW Tour when I was in my 20s, but it's a good thing I didn't rush it. I wasn't ready. Instead, I was patient and waited until the time was right.

Then, when I was 41, I won the 2016 The Bass Federation National Championship and got my opportunity to fish the FLW Tour through the "Living the Dream" program. I learned a lot in those years in between, and I was ready to take advantage of the opportunity and be a professional angler when my time came.

I'm not saying everyone needs to wait until they're in their 40s to fish the Tour. When you're ready, you're ready, and I know a lot of young anglers really are ready. All I'm saying is, you really need to be dang sure your fishing skills, your finances and your life are all in order.

If not, I'm telling you, you'd better grow up in a hurry when you get to the Tour level, because those boys will eat your lunch.

I worked my way up to the Tour gradually, starting with fishing bass tournaments in North Alabama with my dad and grandpa before I was even a teenager. Then, I fished the Costa FLW Series as a co-angler for several years, which is a great way to learn your skills. I actually learned how to sight-fish in the Costas, and that's how I won the TBF National Championship on Table Rock as a boater.

I was a good fisherman when I was young, and I probably wanted it a lot more in my 20s. I just wanted other things, too. I got married to my wife, Deah, and raised two daughters, Mariah and Olivia, who are now 20 and 15. I built an insulation business that I've run for 12 years, and I kept fishing the BFLs and Federation,

hoping I would get a little lucky and win the championship. It didn't come easy. I made four TBF Nationals before I won.

Taking my time really helped me financially. My business pretty much runs itself when I'm gone, so I'm not building debt in order to fish.

I know some young anglers who ran up major debt trying to make it, and they failed. That's debt they might never recover from. I'm telling you, when you're broke, all you're worried about is making a check to pay the bills. If your bills are paid, you can focus on trying to win. And if you think you're going to go out and solely

you up front, before you even start, you had better give them an honest day's work, or it's not going to last long.

That's why I try to work for sponsors that are close by where I live, or that I can support without a lot of extra travel. I just can't do as much as some other pros when I have to be home running my business. That's OK, though. You have to be honest with yourself and your sponsors.

During those years, I also learned to be patient, which helps in a 170-boat tournament, when you know you're going to find other anglers in the places you want to fish. I learned

to be confident in myself as an angler, and to apply my skills instead of chasing dock talk.

I also learned to not fish scared, which wasn't easy at first. When I joined the Tour, I fished to survive. I'd be right at the cut-off line to make a check, and I'd think, "If I just catch another limit tomorrow, I'll make a check." Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money, but a lot of times, fishing with that attitude, I didn't catch them. I've since learned to fish a little

more on the edge.

I share my story not to tell you how you should live your life, but because everything worked out so well for me, and I think it can work out for others, too. There are more opportunities now than ever before to compete in bass fishing, and there are plenty of success stories about anglers who made it at the top when they were young.

But there are also good reasons to be patient, to wait until the time is right and to not give up if you don't get your break right away. When it's your time, and you do it on a schedule that works for you, you'll be a lot better off in the long run. ■



make a living fishing at first, you're probably wrong. You need a way to make money when you're not on the road.

That's why I encourage a lot of young people to consider the construction trades. There's good money in it and a lot of demand for skilled workers. Handymen can name their price these days, and, eventually, if you can work for yourself, you'll have the flexibility to go fish tournaments. Not a lot of jobs offer that.

Because I run my own business, I also understand what sponsors are looking for when they pay someone their hard-earned dollars to go to work for them. If they're going to pay



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3 TIPS FOR BIG-WATER BOAT CONTROL

HOW TO HIT YOUR BEST SMALLIE SPOT IN THE WIND AND WAVES

By Curtis Niedermier

Big-water boat control has gotten a major shot in the arm from today's high-tech bass-boat accessories. Thanks to powerful batteries, the Minn Kota Ultrex trolling motor and incredibly precise electronics, the days of dragging drift socks and tubes across large swaths of water are basically gone. It's now a precision affair, even when the waves are rolling.

Still, that doesn't mean just anyone can show up at Lake Erie with an Ultrex and hit a rock pile with a drop-shot in 4-footers. It takes proper technique, even if the techniques have changed in the last decade or so.

1. The Trolling Motor

Like most FLW Tour pros, Great Lakes fanatic Matt Becker rigged his tournament boat with an Ultrex. If you have one and the waves are about 3 feet tall or less, just point the bow into the breeze, punch the Spot-Lock button and you're locked in place. With other motors, the same concept applies, but you'll have to control the trolling motor.

Regardless of the trolling motor you choose, get the longest shaft that will fit your boat. The more you can keep the head in the water, the more efficient you'll be. Becker has the 52-inch model.



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

2. Mini-Drifts

When the waves are too big to hold the boat in place with a trolling motor, Becker performs short, accurate "mini-drifts" over his waypointed spots.

A drift starts upwind of the spot by lining up parallel with the waves using the big motor. Once in place, Becker shuts down the outboard, then cranks it toward the upwind side of the boat as far as it'll go. During the drift, as waves push against the canted motor, the force of the water helps direct the bow back toward the waves. This

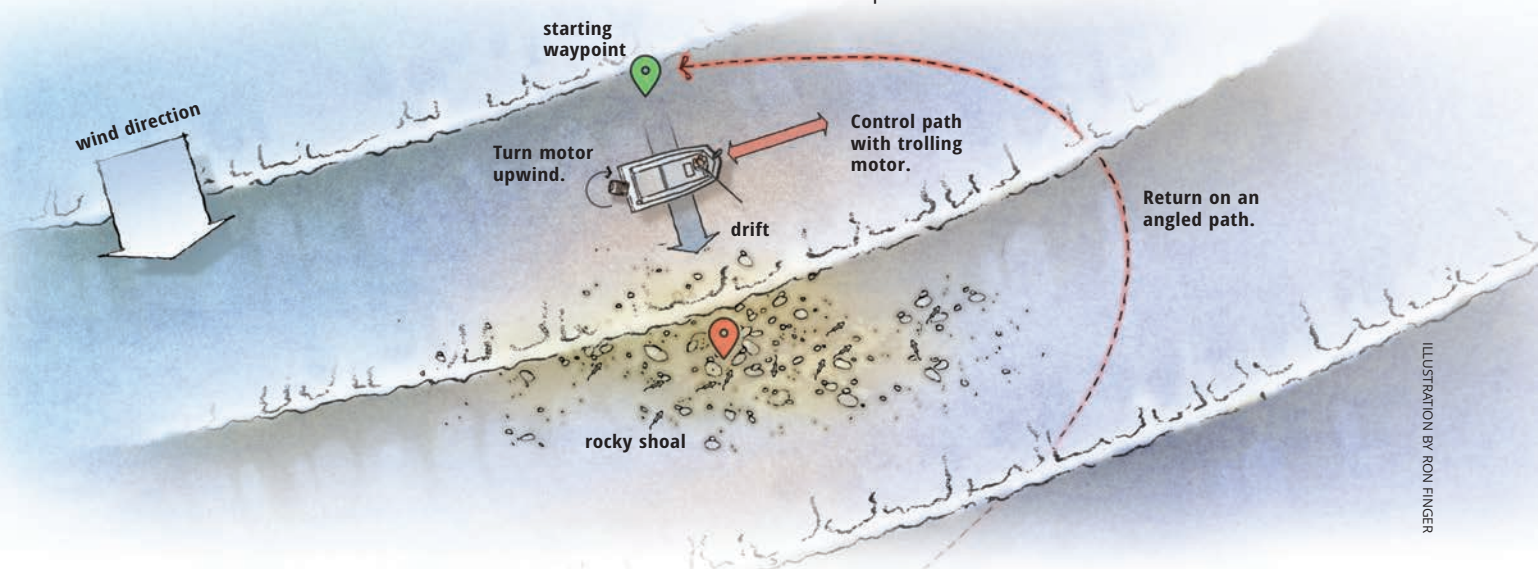


ILLUSTRATION BY RON FINGER

little trick helps with keeping the bow aligned and makes small directional changes easier with the trolling motor.

"You always want to be making adjustments and even just slowing down a little bit," Becker says. "Sometimes you'll drift at 2 or 3 mph and it's way too fast to fish effectively."

Then it's just a matter of steering over the spot and catching fish. Becker mostly fishes vertically, or he makes short pitches to bass he marks on the graph.

"If I see a fish on my graph, I'll pitch out to where I think my trolling motor was when I passed over it," Becker adds. "If I'm blind-fishing and know I'm in a good area, I'll pitch directly in front of the bow of the boat so there's no tension on the line as the bait sinks. I'm never making a long cast; it's 50 feet at the most, just letting my line out and opening my bail so the bait can sink straight down."

3. Realigning

Once Becker figures out where to start his drift in order to pass perfectly over a spot he adds a second waypoint on his starting point. This makes repeat passes easier.

Getting back to the starting point at the end of a drift isn't always fun in the waves. Becker advises not driving straight back over your fish. Instead, you'll stay drier by zigzagging back to your starting point.

"I usually at least try to jump up on plane," he adds. "That way you're not getting wet. Or at least plow at 10 mph or so and get the nose of the boat up. It all depends how big the waves are."

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD



Go with the Flow when Graphing

Becker suggests idling with the wind when searching big water with electronics.

"You'll get a better read and not be bouncing around," he says. "It allows you to scan more smoothly. It may be a little harder to get lined up with them, but it's worth it to run or plow - whatever you want to do - to get lined up." ■

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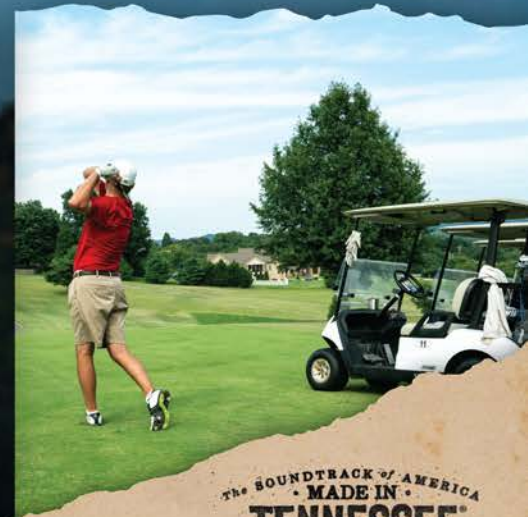


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STRIKE KING KVD 1.5 DEEP

By Matt Williams
PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

Product development experts at Strike King didn't reinvent the wheel with the KVD 1.5 Deep crankbait, but they did add a new dimension to the company's square-bill lineup that takes the hunting, wandering talents of its most popular shallow-diver to a depth range typically filled by magnum square-bills, coffin bills and other medium-diving plugs.

First Impression

The 1.5 Deep's body is made with an identical mold as the shallower-diving 1.5 square-bill, resulting in a familiar body shape.

Both crankbaits also feature the same premium components, including VMC trebles, stainless O-rings, 3-D eyes and an oval line tie.

But there are some differences, the most obvious being the 1.5 Deep's inch-long squared bill that causes the bait to dig deeper in the water column and do an erratic dance as it deflects off stumps, rocks and other hard objects 8 to 10 feet beneath the surface. It's also noticeably heavier thanks to an internal weight that bolsters casting distance but doesn't appear to take away from

the bait's action. The finishes are above average in 25 attractive color schemes.

In Action

The beauty of a good square-bill crankbait is the way it triggers reaction strikes as it hunts and deflects off hard objects such as rocks, stumps and pilings, or traverses submerged grass. For testing, I took the 1.5 Deep to a trio of east Texas lakes, including Lake Naconiche, a 692-acre reservoir full of timber, stumps and brush. While the bait fooled a few fish and navigated the jungle fairly well, it did snag a few times, but I always got it back. It also did a good job of popping free from deeper grass and bumping around riprap and dock pilings.

The 1.5 Deep lacks the buoyancy of the standard 1.5 square-bill crankbait, so it doesn't float up and out of cover nearly as quickly when paused. I compared

the buoyancy of the two lures in 2 feet of water. It took three seconds for the standard model to rise to the surface; the 1.5 Deep took six seconds.

As castability goes, the bait cuts the wind and sails like a rock.

Final Thoughts

Prior to the 1.5 Deep, the only way to apply a square-bill presentation on rock, shell, wood or grass that's too deep for standard models was to go with a larger-bodied "magnum" crankbait. Not anymore.

The 1.5 Deep is advertised to dive to 10 feet on 10-pound-test fluorocarbon, and you can shallow it up using monofilament or a larger-diameter fluoro line. It should be ideal for when you need to reach structure and cover out in that medium-depth zone and want to stick with a square-bill presentation.



CLASSIC BODY SHAPE:

The body is identical in shape and size to the shallow-diving KVD 1.5 square-bill.



LONG LIP:

An extended square(ish) bill helps the bait dive to depths of 8 to 10 feet without sacrificing its ability to wander, hunt, deflect and perform other tricks good square-bill crankbaits are famous for.

FIXED INTERNAL WEIGHT:

Strike King strategically placed a stationary internal weight to aid in casting and to promote maximum diving depth while enhancing the hunting action.



Performance Advice

Square-bill crankbaits usually shine the brightest when they are crashing or bumping into stuff. It's critical to pay close attention and stay in contact with this bait during the retrieve, especially when it's bumping and banging through heavy wood well below the surface. It's not as buoyant as the shallower Strike King square-bill model, so it could get into trouble in really dense, branchy stuff.

Other than that, throw it with your favorite cranking rod and 10- to 12-pound-test fluorocarbon.

HITS & MISSES

- + Casts long distances, even in the wind
- + Comes through cover well
- + Deflects and hunts when crashed into hard objects
- + Great color assortment
- + Good hooks
- Less buoyant than most standard square-bill crankbaits

DETAILS

MSRP:
\$7.59 at
TackleWarehouse.com

Size:
7/16 ounce

Length:
3 3/8 inch (bill to tail)

Hooks:
VMC No. 4

Contact:
strikeking.com ■

APPLICATIONS

- Banging around riprap, wing dams, gravel or shell beds
- Deflecting off stumps and dock pilings
- Probing submerged grass beds and brush piles
- Targeting suspended fish
- Fishing in windy conditions
- Covering water quickly

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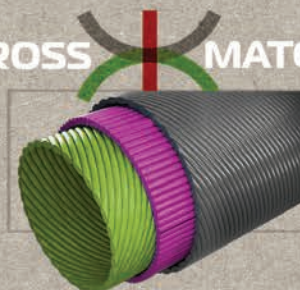
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BALOG'S BIG BASS QUEST



JOE BALOG

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

PHOTOS COURTESY BILLY WHEAT

BILLY WHEAT'S CHICKAMAUGA GIANTS

HOW A TENNESSEE GUIDE KEEPS HIS CLIENTS ON TROPHY BASS

In order to make a living, a fishing guide must stay flexible. After all, the goal at the end of each day is a boatload of happy clients, anxious to sign up for another trip. If those clients are satisfied with catching little fish, so be it.

I get the impression that, at times, Billy Wheat has to remind himself of this concept. A full-time guide on Tennessee's famed Lake Chickamauga, Wheat is one of the most popular – and heavily booked – commercial operators on the lake, requiring him to keep the rods bent at all costs.

But, I think he'd rather just fish for one bite.

"You can catch a big fish at any time here," Wheat says. "But, if you're out chasing schoolers, or finesse fishing, or just out to catch fish, it's a no-go."

Big-bass fans will recognize Chickamauga as the Mid-South's premier lunker destination, thanks to aggressive trophy management by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. Florida-strain

bass-stocking efforts began in 2000, but were tweaked a few years later to ensure better survival of the fingerling stock. The results were magnificent. By 2012, Chickamauga was home to loads of bass exceeding 10 pounds apiece. Catching them, however, is never as simple or easy as it may seem.

Locating Loners

Wheat believes the entire procedure for targeting Chickamauga's monsters is different from the norm. He says even the most predictable big-bass locations are only occupied for short windows, for reasons we may never know. Finding them starts with understanding their habitat preference.

"They're the most isolated," he says, referring to both the biggest bass and their preferred locales. "It may be one big, isolated stump. A single big fish will set up there. But you might have to visit that stump 20 or 30 times before you'll catch it."



Driftwood Custom Baits Swim bait and Super 8 Weedless Jighead

The guide begins his search for prime areas by graphing, but he does his searching for winter in May. That's because the water at Chickamauga is drawn down each year starting in early fall, leaving prime cold-water areas too shallow to properly graph late in the year. Instead, Wheat prefers to look in late spring, before much aquatic plant growth occurs, and when water levels are high enough to allow him access to areas that set up right for prespawn bass.

He focuses on isolated current breaks on river bars, usually in 3 to 12 feet of water.

"On every Tennessee River lake that's drawn down – every one – the big fish are shallow in the winter," Wheat adds.

Usually the band of water with the ideal depth range is very narrow; about as wide as a bass boat is long.

"The front of the boat will be in 3 feet; the back in about 12," Wheat says. "It's like a 20-foot-wide trough."

These "troughs" on the sides of river bars feature the best current flow, broken up by the best cover objects.

"Ditches, tongues, current breaks, shell beds, stumps, drops – anything different out there on that river bar," says Wheat, referring to ideal targets that he's searching for.

Shell beds are particularly attractive.

"Living mussels will only exist in places out of the current and with hard bottom," Wheat explains.

What he describes are naturally good places to come in contact with a giant. They might also exist in the small current breaks created by other objects, such as a stump, or a swing in the overall bottom contour along the "wall," or side, of a river ledge.

Wintertime fishing usually coincides with a steady current flow compared to the fluctuations of summer, when power generations vary. Wheat insists the biggest fish live on the ledges throughout the year, and they simply ride out the conditions, setting up on the best places to hunt large, main-lake forage.

Despite conditions that, at times, seem like a raging river, if you're throwing in the right spot, says Wheat, there's really not that much current – the benefit of locating current breaks.

Riding the Bait

Beginning in November, Wheat spends the majority of his time out on the drawn-down river bars, keeping his lure in the realm of the giants.

"You have to be patient," he says. "You've got to stay in that zone; on that wall."

Wheat will often use his Minn Kota trolling motor's Spot Lock feature to hold on the down-current side of a given target so he can present casts naturally with the angle of flowing forage. He describes the proper presentation as "riding the bait."

"You're really managing your line," he says. "Your line gets pulled by the current, and you have to keep your lure on that wall."

As the line flows down, the lure trails, often tumbling down into the mouth of trophy bass lurking below.

Not surprisingly, Wheat's arsenal of lures throughout the year consists of oversized offerings, including flashy umbrella rigs and jigs with bulky trailers. However, in wintertime, a Driftwood Custom Baits SwimBait nearly always gets the call.

The 5-inch Driftwood bait is a favorite among Chickamauga stalwarts. Wheat fishes it on the company's Super 8 weedless jighead, aptly named for the head's robust 8/0 hook. It has a screw-lock bait keeper and chin-weighted design.

"It's a front-loaded head that can fish through anything," Wheat says.

He insists naturally swimming options replace any bottom bouncing that goes on in the postspawn.

"In summertime, you slam everything on the bottom. In winter, you swim everything through the column," he explains.

The Driftwood SwimBait is key for this presentation because, according to Wheat, it swims at any speed, and it swims on the fall, which is critical when the bait is tumbling through the current.

Wheat's rod of choice is a heavy-power Denali just under 8 feet in length, matched with a high-speed Daiwa reel.

"The big fish want to go back to that timber, or whatever they're on," Wheat says. "You need to hit them and pull them away from that, out into the current."

A Hunter of Big Bass

All throughout the year, Billy Wheat continues to work toward his passion of "pushing people to become better big-bass fishermen." He doesn't hide the fact that he enjoys educating his clients on the lifestyles of the fish, how to read current and the importance of being patient, as well as understanding nature and the underwater environment as a whole. Like just about every big-bass expert I've interviewed, Wheat is a hunter and a student of the game.

That passion flows into each outing.

"I know where to put people – and what to put in their hands – to give them the best shot at a big fish," Wheat adds. "That's what I love to do. That's my love for the sport." ■



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PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

THE TACKLE JUNKIE

A JIG IS A JIG IS (NOT) A JIG

TOM MONSOOR HAS LEARNED MORE ABOUT JIGS THAN ALMOST ANYONE

There may be no lure simpler than a jig.

Take a hook, mold some lead around it and ... *ta-da*. You have the most effective fish-catcher in the history of fishing.

Of course, if it were really that simple, there'd be no reason for this article.

Like many things, the simple has become insanely complex. Head shapes, hooks, skirts, weedguards – there's no shortage of specialization. Then there are the *real* intricacies; things like eyelet-to-shank angle, how the eyelet is turned, lead composition, weedguard angle, trailer keeper, skirt attachment and on and on.

But do all these things really matter, or are they just marketing fluff to sell fishermen? What *really* makes a good jig?

I'd love to say I had the answers to these questions, but I don't. With all the personal preference inherent to jig selection, it's probable that no one has all the answers, but if anyone is going to come closest, it's FLW Tour pro Tom Monsoor.

Monsoor studies jigs like it's a science. He's obsessed with them, really. Monsoor pours more than 2,000 jigs a year and has been designing jigs for more than two decades. Through all that time, he has dissected some key nuances that he says do separate one jig from another, regardless

of personal preferences or fishing style. Let's break them down.

The Head

A good jig is all about balance – between the head's shape and its size, and between the head's weight and the size of the hook.

If a jig is out of balance, it probably won't perform nearly as well as it could. Luckily, this isn't something you need to worry about much unless you're designing jigs at the extremes of hook and head size.

"Honestly, just keep it simple with the head shapes and sizes," Monsoor says. "You see all these new shapes and odd sizes. Stick with traditional shapes and sizes. They've been around a long time for a reason."

The Hook

The reason Monsoor started designing and pouring his own jigs decades ago was because he wanted the best-quality hook he could get for his jigs. Jig hooks often take a pounding, so a quality hook is a must, but many anglers mistake size or strength for quality. Not Monsoor. To him, a quality hook is one that will stay sharp and can be sharpened easily if needed.



By Sean Ostruszka

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

"You actually want the lightest-wire quality hook you can get away with for any technique," Monsoor adds.

Your jig's hook might be a gaff, but a hook that's too strong or thick also has the propensity to dull easier and have a harder time penetrating a fish's mouth, both of which cause you to miss more fish.

The Weedguard

Denny Brauer once mentioned to me that a good jig fisherman can work a jig without a weedguard through a brush pile and never get hung. By that standard, most of us are probably not good jig fishermen.

Still, he was onto something: A weedguard is not always necessary. In fact, Monsoor will often go without a guard at all unless he knows he's fishing cover. Even then, he wants the lightest guard he can get, because a guard is designed to keep things off the hook, and it doesn't "know the difference" between a weed and a fish's mouth.

If you are going to use a jig with a weedguard, make sure the angle between the guard and the hook shank is 45 degrees or less.

"You don't want the guard sticking straight up," Monsoor says. "You'll never hook a fish."

And don't be afraid of wire or thinner guards. You want a guard just strong enough and angled enough to protect the hook but also light enough so it doesn't restrict the hook point from penetrating a bass' mouth.

The Skirt

In Monsoor's eyes, jig skirts are more style than substance.

Yes, color is important, and so can be material, but most skirts are pretty decent quality. What separates one jig from another is the strand count and how it's held to the jig.

You'll actually get more action from a skirt with fewer strands, and while most production jigs are secured to the shank by a rubber band, skirts held on by wrapped wire are more durable in the long run.

The Eyelet

There are two key aspects to the eyelet: angle and turn.

It's not always easy to see the specific angle of the eye to the shank because where the eyelet bends up (assuming it does) is covered in lead. Still, a 45-degree angle is best for most applications. You can get away with less for swim jigs, but too low an angle can cause issues with hook penetration, depending on the technique being used.

Meanwhile, the eyelet can either run parallel to the hook shank or be turned perpendicular to it. In general, if you're fishing cover or swimming your jig, go with the straight/parallel eye since it comes through cover better. If you're dragging your jig, a perpendicular eye will keep your knot dead center and may reduce snags.

There's a lot more to choosing jigs, but a lot of jig fishing is personal preference, and this brief guide is a good start. Hopefully, Monsoor's advice simplifies what has become a not-so-simple staple in every angler's arsenal. ■

The advertisement features a black fishing jersey with a camouflage pattern and blue accents on the sleeves. The jersey is covered in logos for various brands: FLW, Abu Garcia, Berkley, MINN KOTA, EVINRUDE E-TEC, and PRYMI CAMO. To the right of the jersey is the E3 Sport Apparel logo, which consists of a stylized 'E3' inside a red and black oval. Below the logo is the text 'E3 Sport Apparel'. The slogan 'Anglers are Athletes' is written in a large, bold, italicized font. At the bottom of the advertisement is the website 'E3SPORT.COM' in a bold, italicized font.



HOW TO SAVE FUEL WHILE TOWING

THE FLW TOUR'S ROAD WARRIORS HELP YOU MANAGE YOUR BASS BUDGET

By Joe Balog

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER

Professional bass fishermen are road warriors. While fly guides log more miles on foot, and salty captains rack up the hours on their outboards, no angler puts in more time behind the wheel than a touring bass pro.

Through decades of travel, many have learned how to squeeze a few more miles out of each tank, often saving thousands of dollars a year at the pumps. Let's uncover their secrets.

Billy McDonald: King of the Odometer

Often recording in excess of 50,000 miles annually – the bulk of them with a bass boat trailing behind – FLW pro Billy McDonald knows a thing or two about the finer

details of towing. His truck of choice is a half-ton Toyota Tundra with a short bed and the largest cab available. McDonald's latest Toyota features a 5.7-liter V-8 engine, producing 381 hp and 401 foot-pounds of torque.

Regarding fuel efficiency, the 5.7-liter Tundra advertises 13 mpg in the city, and 17 highway. With boat and gear in tow, McDonald reports an average of 10 mpg. He cites two negative impacts to his setup.

"Gas mileage is a factor of how you put your foot in it," he jokes, "and mine's not real good at staying out."

I can personally confirm that most vehicles feature a fuel economy "sweet spot" when towing. My Chevy Suburban, for example, gets far better mileage at 68 mph than it does at

72. It's worth experimenting on your next road trip to try and find your rig's sweet spot.

McDonald also partially blames some aftermarket modifications. A lift kit coupled with larger, aggressive tire treads adds to the cool factor of his rig, but robs him of a mile or two in fuel efficiency.

A stickler for details, McDonald makes up for the shortcomings the best he can by monitoring every part of his system.

"Tire pressure is a major deal," he insists. "Tires are made to be full."

In fact, McDonald confirms that proper tire inflation not only allows for maximum mpg, but it's a strong factor in preventing tire failure.

"In 30 years, I've blown only one tire that I can remember."

McDonald is a supporter of the General Tire brand, and changes out his factory boat trailer tires to AltiMAX RT43s. He says he easily gets 35,000 miles out of a set.

All tires on his truck and trailer are properly balanced at a service station to ensure best performance and even wear. And a B&W adjustable hitch allows for the perfect tongue height, with the boat level on the hitch and a significant amount of weight toward the front, thus preventing any trailer sway.

Proper loading of the boat in tow is also important. In general, tongue weight should equal 15 percent or more of the overall trailer weight, and 60 percent or more of the load should be in front of the axles.

While modern bass boat trailers feature wheels placed very near the rear, remember, the heaviest item on your trailer – your outboard – is in the far back. Improve weight distribution by placing the heaviest parts of your load up front, including heavy tackle items (tungsten), extra outboard oil, coolers filled with drinks and ice, and bulk bags of soft plastics.

Brian Latimer: Go Diesel, Stay Diesel

Gas or diesel is a common debate among the bass boat-towing crowd. FLW pro Brian “B. Lat” Latimer opted for a 2016 Chevy truck featuring a Duramax diesel.

He didn’t go that route because it was the trendy thing to do. Remembering his rookie season, where a truck camper and heavy load required gas stops every couple hours, B. Lat eventually went the way of the heavy haulers. He was immediately impressed.

“The big thing is that I don’t notice any real difference in mileage, no matter what I’m hauling,” Latimer says, though he’s quick to dispel claims of 20-plus-mpg fuel economy. He says mileage in the “teens” is common, even with boat in tow and a camper on top.

Those considering the diesel option would be wise to do the math based on fuel costs. Currently, gasoline is priced about \$.30 per gallon less than diesel, but the efficiency difference can outweigh that cost.

Using our pros’ reported mileage (10 mpg for McDonald’s gas burner

and 14 mpg for Latimer’s diesel), and the U.S. average fuel prices per gallon at press time of \$2.82 for gas and \$3.15 for diesel, we can see the difference over a 500-mile trip.

McDonald would burn 50 gallons, while Latimer would burn 35.71 gallons. Latimer pays more per gallon, but less per mile. In this example, McDonald would spend \$141 to tow 500 miles, and Latimer would spend about \$112, for a savings of about \$29, which could really add up over a long season.

Negative factors must be considered, as well. Diesel trucks are more expensive to purchase than comparative gas models. Service issues can be much more costly, including transmission flushes and filter changing, and modern diesels demand DEF fluid for emission control.

This seemingly archaic environmental fix-all is likely the biggest downside of diesel engines, as DEF monitoring errors can result in a total shutdown of the engine. In addition, DEF fluid must be added regularly; my figuring equates to about \$20 worth of DEF fluid for every 100 gallons of diesel fuel.

Latimer is a fan of diesel, regardless of any negatives.

“The biggest benefit is the power,” he says. “I can pull my boat anywhere in the country and never take my truck out of cruise control.”

Research confirms the torque – and, therefore, the ability to pull a heavy load – of Latimer’s Duramax diesel motor is in a whole different category than comparable gasoline engines, coming in at 765 foot-pounds.

In addition, diesel engines last much longer than gas – quite often reaching hundreds of thousands of miles – resulting in higher resale value. In all, consumers must consider how often they tow extra-heavy loads, what they tow them through and how long they plan to keep a truck.

Finally, consider additional ways to gain a 1/2 mpg here and there. Avoid filling fuel tanks on your boat until you reach your destination. A full tank on a Ranger Z520 comes in around 330 pounds. This could reduce fuel efficiency by as much as 1 mpg.

The same goes for aerodynamics. Some boat covers ride high and catch the wind. Removing pedestal seats can further streamline a boat’s profile. And consider a pick-up topper to add a slip-stream benefit to your trailing rig. For some long-bed trucks, the topper increases mileage quite a bit.

Gas prices go up and down beyond our control. But you can do the research to maximize mpg. It all adds up in the end. ■

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B. LAT Brian Latimer,
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TABLE ROCK LAKE — May 9-11

46lbs, 3oz



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

➤ **Eric Olliverson, Lampe, Mo.**

WINNING PATTERN

A local guide, Olliverson knows Table Rock better than most, and he executed a perfect combo of smallmouths in the morning and largemouths in the afternoon. The former Tour pro caught smallies in offshore areas off points on the lower end using a Keitech Swing Impact FAT 3.3 on a 6th Sense Divine Swimbait Jighead and a 6th Sense Dogma 115 walking topwater. The largemouths came flipping or on the topwater around shallow brush.



CLEAR LAKE — May 16-18

66lbs, 13oz



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUIRA

➤ **Kyle Grover, Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif.**

WINNING PATTERN

Grover got dialed in on a key rock pinnacle and a particular stretch of sloping bank along the rocky shoreline of Henderson Point to catch two stout 20-plus-pound stringers. He tossed a brown/green pumpkin Phenix football jig with either a Strike King Rage Bug or a 3-inch Berkley PowerBait Chigger Craw trailer. A 3/8-ounce jig was his go-to, but when the wind blew, he upsized to 1/2 ounce or mixed in a Norman DD22 crankbait in the chili bowl color.



POTOMAC RIVER — May 30-June 1

45lbs, 11oz



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

➤ **Brennon McCord, West Frankfort, Ill.**

WINNING PATTERN

McCord caught his winning fish in Mattawoman Creek, fishing different targets each day: a small milfoil patch on day one, a patch of grass behind an island on day two, and a combination of the same plus some pads adjacent to deep water on day three. Key baits were Potomac favorites: a 3/8-ounce Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer with various trailers, and a Texas-rigged Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver.



POTOMAC RIVER — June 4-6

51lbs, 3oz



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

➤ **Adam Puckett & Blake Albertson, Murray State University**

WINNING PATTERN

Keeping it simple worked for the Racers. Puckett and Albertson caught their fish from a grassy flat and some bank laydowns up Pomonkey Creek. The team's winning baits included a Reaction Innovations Spicy Beaver, 1/2-ounce white/char-treuse Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer with a Gene Larew Sweet Swimmer trailer and a 3/8-ounce black and blue Jack Hammer with a green pumpkin Lake Fork Live Magic Shad trailer.



COSTA
GP SERIES

SAM RAYBURN — June 13-15

72lbs, 8oz

Kris Wilson, Montgomery, Texas

WINNING PATTERN Wilson went wire-to-wire on Rayburn and cruised to a 13-pound, 15-ounce winning margin by targeting bass still in transition. He keyed in on hard-bottom spots near the mouths of large creeks where fish were on their way out to the main lake. His biggest fish were situated next to bream beds and stumps in 12 to 15 feet of water, where he targeted them with a Carolina-rigged red bug creature bait and a Texas-rigged red bug ribbon-tail worm.

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD



HIGH SCHOOL OPENS

PICKWICK LAKE — June 19-21

35lbs, 12oz

Sam Acosta & Christopher Capdeboscq, Northlake Christian School

WINNING PATTERN Everyone knows that summer ledges get crowded on Pickwick and other Tennessee River lakes, so Acosta and Capdeboscq keyed on ledges and creek intersections that were receiving less pressure. The winning bass fell for a one-two combo of a 6th Sense Cloud 9 C20 crankbait in sexified shad and a 3/4-ounce Strike King Jointed Structure Head with a Zoom Magnum Trick Worm. The latter was key on a calm, sunny final day.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



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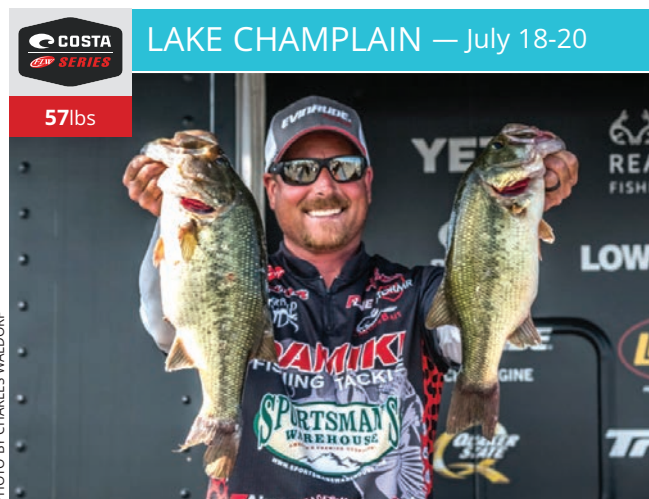
LAKE CHAMPLAIN — June 27-30

76lbs, 2oz

Casey Scanlon, Lake Ozark, Mo.

WINNING PATTERN Scanlon had a milk run of shallow points and grassy areas near Ticonderoga, but within his rotation he junk-fished to catch winning stringers of largemouths. The Missouri pro fished rock and milfoil with a 3/8-ounce chartreuse/white Z-Man ChatterBait and a green copper shad Luck-E-Strike Series 3 square-bill crankbait. When he needed to slow down, he Texas-rigged a Luck-E-Strike Pow Stik or flipped a black and blue Bass Pros Shops tube.

PHOTO BY JODY WHITE



COSTA
GP SERIES

LAKE CHAMPLAIN — July 18-20

57lbs

Bryan Thrift, Shelby, N.C.

WINNING PATTERN Thrift got his 11th FLW win just weeks removed from finishing third in the Tour's 2019 finale on the same fishery. Targeting mostly offshore grass flats in Missisquoi Bay and the Inland Sea, the Shelby, N.C., pro used 4- and 5.5-inch Damiki Stingers on Neko rigs and Texas rigs to do most of his damage. Thrift also mixed in a topwater bait and a small swimbait throughout the event en route to weighing in 10 largemouths and five smallmouths for the tournament.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



LAKE OUACHITA — Aug. 9-10

157.75
inches



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORE

▶ **Clint Henderson, Rome, Ga.**

WINNING PATTERN

Henderson won the inaugural Dee Zee FLW/KBF Cup presented by YakAttack by finding a massive school of largemouths hanging out around a main-channel ledge, which produced 81.25 inches of bass on day one and another 76.50 inches on day two. After catching some of his fish on topwater and a “flashy shad-imitating bait” the first day, Henderson turned to a junebug creature bait, which he Texas-rigged with a 3/4-ounce weight on the final day.



POTOMAC RIVER — Aug. 22-24

38lbs, 15oz



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORE

▶ **Marvin Reese, Randallstown, Md.**

WINNING PATTERN

Despite weighing in just four fish for 8 pounds, 5 ounces on day three, Reese had already given himself enough of a cushion to pull out his victory thanks to consecutive quality bags on days one and two. Reese did most of his damage next to a big pier near deep water with a 1/2-ounce green pumpkin jig with a matching Strike King Rage Craw trailer or a 3/16-ounce shaky head with a green pumpkin and green flake worm. ■

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2019 FLW CUP

LAKE HAMILTON | AUG. 9-11

LOOKING THROUGH THE SMOKE

By Sean Ostruszka

What makes FLW Cup champ Bryan Thrift the best angler in the sport (and maybe in its history)

It's like any other morning at the FLW Cup, though it certainly isn't the prettiest.

A humid fog clings to the southern end of Lake Hamilton, pinned there by a blanket of clouds above. Flags barely flicker, begging for a hint of breeze. This morning is still, with everything cast in a grey ambient light and covered in just enough moisture to make a person feel annoyingly sticky.

There's energy in the air, though. Hundreds of spectators line the shoreline and docks. The lights from the television cameras cast a blinding glare under their tents. And people constantly bounce in, out and around a small flotilla of boats, particularly the 10 beached on shore.

Sitting in one of those boats, Bryan Thrift seems his usual self.

Thrift knows the drill, this being the 67th top 10 of his FLW career. His 14 rods are meticulously arranged on his front deck; reels all aligned in perfect symmetry, as always. He checks and rechecks compartments, mostly as a way to release pent-up energy. He's already done his interviews for the morning; talked about what it's like to be leading going into the final day; what it'd be like to finally win an FLW Cup.

Now he just waits until he can finally do what he does better than anyone in the world.

Thrift doesn't know it, but in less than 12 hours, he'll be crowned FLW Cup champion, something everyone figured was inevitable based on his greatness as an angler. But for now, he sits in his boat and focuses on something he honestly believes before every tournament and every takeoff.

"I'm going to bomb."



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

Smoke and Mirrors

It seems impossible for someone as accomplished as Thrift to ever think he'll do poorly, and especially to think he'll do poorly every time. After all, greatness and confidence often go hand-in-hand. And, make no mistake, Thrift is great.

Even before winning the FLW Cup at Lake Hamilton back in August, Thrift had accomplished more than most of the final 10 anglers combined: two FLW Tour Angler of the Year titles, 11 FLW tournament wins, FLW Tour Rookie of the Year, nine top 10s at the Cup and \$2.7 million in career earnings. He holds records for most consecutive limits across any professional tournament trail and most top-10 finishes on the FLW Tour, among many others.

Basically, Thrift is one of the favorites in almost every tournament he enters, regardless of the location,

and if he hung it up tomorrow, he'd still go down as one of the most accomplished anglers in the sport's history.

So how can a guy like that always feel he's on the verge of utter failure?

"He probably doesn't want me to tell anyone this, but it's a mind game he plays with himself," says Bryan New, a longtime friend and practice partner of Thrift's. "I mean, he knows he's going to be fine, but he makes himself believe he's going to bomb. And he really does believe it."

"It probably wouldn't work for anyone else, but it works for him. It makes him work harder."

On the final morning of the 2016 FLW Tour event on Kentucky Lake, Thrift, Jason Lambert and Terry Bolton all started on the same ledge. Lambert was on one side, Bolton on the other, with Thrift sandwiched in



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

between. None of them was more than 30 yards from another.

Lambert started quick with three fish, and Bolton had one. Finally, Thrift got on the board, catching a 5-pounder that spent as much time out of the water as in it during the fight. Everyone watching clearly saw it was a big fish.

That's when Lambert decided to have a little fun.

"How big was that fish, Bryan?" he casually asked his fellow competitor, loud enough so everyone could hear.

"Oh, 2, maybe 2 1/2 pounds," Thrift replied upon reaching the front deck after putting the bass in the livewell.

"Yeah, and I've got only one fish in my box," Lambert jokingly shot back.

"That's part of that mind game," New says. "He's not lying to lie to you. He's doing it for himself."

IT PROBABLY WOULDN'T WORK FOR ANYONE ELSE, BUT IT WORKS FOR HIM. IT MAKES HIM WORK HARDER.

- Bryan New



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

THRIFT'S WINNING STRATEGY

By Curtis Niedermier

Bryan Thrift took the lead on day one of the FLW Cup and never relinquished it, weighing in 38-7 in three days. In a tournament where most pros settled on one or two patterns and hesitated to adjust, Thrift did the opposite. He capitalized on the best opportunity each day, particularly in the mornings, before finishing each afternoon on a key shallow point in Hot Springs Creek where he culled fish every day.

Thrift started day one on the bank with a buzzbait and quickly picked off easy fish while the picking was good. Those fish would eventually run out, but he knew it, so on day two Thrift mostly fished offshore brush. The final day, he did something entirely new and started on a schooling spot in the lower end. The champ quickly put a small limit in the boat to take the pressure off.

Thrift's winning baits could fill a Plano box: a Damiki under-spin, some swimbaits, a walking plug, a buzzbait, a couple crankbaits. What he caught them on was less important than how he handled the daily conditions and the fishing pressure over seven days of practice and competition. In hindsight, every move made sense, yet Thrift was the only one with the foresight to execute with such perfection.

That's why he's the champ.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

A Routine of Preparation

After every tournament Thrift parks his Ranger in his garage and empties it. Like, all of it.

"I take everything out," says Thrift. "Rods, reels, tackle – everything. All that's left is a life jacket, prop, tools and some rope. I examine everything and put it all back in its spot."

Thrift is a creature of habit, almost on an obsessive level. He says he just "likes things a certain way."

"My wife, Allison, messes with me all the time," Thrift says. "Like, she'll move the soap sponge from the sink to the counter just to see how long it will take me to notice and move it back."

New got a taste of how particular his friend can be back when they were first getting to know each other.

"There were like 422 empty Plano boxes stacked up perfectly," New recalls. "Well, I picked one up and just set it back down, but not exactly perfect. He flipped out. I mean, he was legitimately mad."

"Fortunately, he's calmed down a lot from back then."

Thrift may not lose his cool over tackle boxes anymore, but his anxiety in the week leading up to an event doesn't seem to have subsided. He barely sleeps, spending seven hours a day for up to four days on tackle and boat prep. There's a method to the madness. Many pros get to an event and still need to load their boats or prep tackle. Not Thrift. He's already thought through every scenario his hamster-wheel mind can formulate so he can focus on fishing.

New says it's one of the things separating him from everyone else.

"Say a school of fish comes up busting unexpectedly," New adds. "Most guys are going to scramble because they're not prepared. If you replayed the scenario 50 times, they might catch a fish 15 times. Thrift is going to catch a fish 45 out of 50. He's already thought of the scenario, so he's always prepared and ready."

HE'S THE BEST, AND WE HAVEN'T SEEN NOTHING YET.

- Bryan New

PHOTO BY JACOB FINE



A Legend in the Making

All the preparation in the world can only take you so far. You need talent to get the rest of the way. Suffice to say, Thrift is talented.

"I've spent as much time in a boat with him as anyone," New says. "I know everything he knows and do everything he does. He's just on a different level. I mean, it pisses me off sometimes. He's just that damn good."

"He's the best, and we haven't seen nothing yet."

Thrift's talent stems from his passion for fishing. All he ever really wanted to do was fish. The man has few hobbies. All he does is spend time with his family and fish - more than 200 days a year on the water.

Heck, the day after winning the Cup, Thrift went out with FLW's web crew to shoot a short *Day 5* video. It was 100 degrees and muggy, and Thrift could've easily just tried to catch one fish and call it good. Nope. Even when the FLW crew was done

filming, Thrift wouldn't get off the water until he'd caught a limit.

But when you bring up his accolades, the records or his legacy, Thrift just shrugs it off.

"I don't think about it," he says. "Records were made to be broken. My No. 1 goal has stayed the same since when I started: I just want to do well enough to make a living and pay the bills."

He's certainly accomplishing that goal, and it's something he hopes to be doing for a long time, too.

"I want to be like Larry [Nixon]," Thrift admits. "He's still out there daylight to dark enjoying himself. That's what I hope to be. I want to make a long career of this, and as long as I'm physically able, I'll be fishing competitively, cashing checks and taking people's money."

"Besides, I'm only 40. There's still a lot of techniques I need to get more comfortable with. I still have lots to learn."

Chasing Down History

It's finally time.

The prayers and national anthem now concluded, Thrift slides his 5-foot, 7-inch frame behind the console of his Ranger and presses the start button. The Evinrude roars to life, letting out a soft rumble as he puts it in reverse to back off the bank.

The fog has started to lift a little, which is more than can be said of the humidity. Perspiration is already seeping into his long-faded ball cap.

Over a loud speaker, Thrift's name is called out as the leader going into the final day. Along with it, emcee Chris Jones lists his career resume of accolade. Thrift's is by far the longest introduction of the morning.

Fans on a long pier near the takeoff ramp squeeze together to get a glimpse of him as he idles past. They want to see the best angler in the world on the verge of the greatest feat. They want to see greatness.

Thrift had always said the only thing stopping him from winning a Cup was having one bad day. So far, he hasn't had that yet. He's led for two days. Of course, that worries him and hangs in the back of his mind as he gets in line with the flag boat. He's ready.

With the go-ahead, Thrift hits the throttle, and his boat responds in perfect unison, shooting him off into the hazy fog. Fans on shore watch the man known as "Smoke" fade into the mist.

Will today be the day he falters, or will he finally earn the last jewel in his crown?

No matter what he's telling himself as his Evinrude screams behind him, Thrift won't bomb. And somewhere, deep down, he knows it, too. ■

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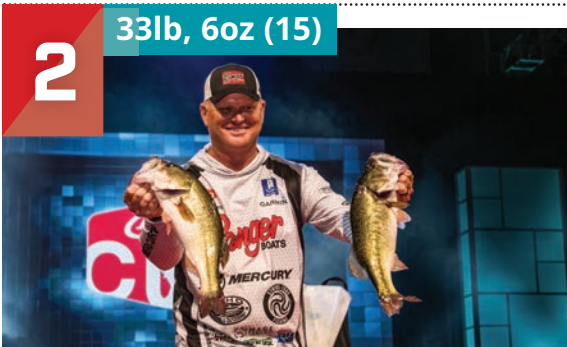
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2-10

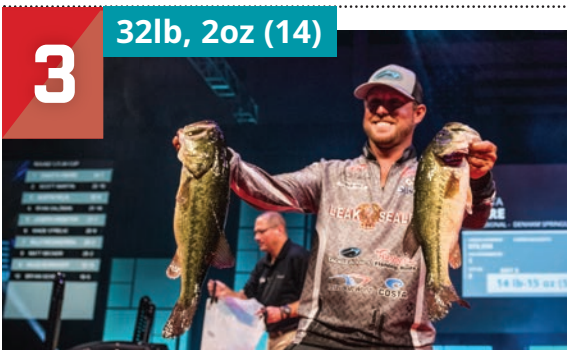
PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



KYLE WALTERS | GRANT VALKARIA, FL

A pair of kickers during each of the first two days gave Kyle Walters a chance at catching Thrift, but Walters never got the big bites on Sunday. He spent the tournament on Hamilton's lower end rotating through 60 brush piles in 15 to 25 feet of water. The best brush was on breaks close to deep water, and Walters had to hit some piles several times before the fish would fire. He used classic summertime brush baits: a Texas-rigged 10-inch worm and a SPRO Little John DD crankbait in citrus shad.

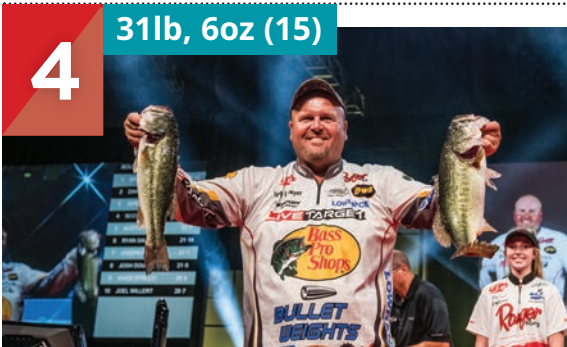
PHOTO BY JACOB FINE



DAKOTA EBARE | DENHAM SPRINGS, LA

Current was critical to get the fish to set up and eat in the cold, clear tailwaters below Blakely Mountain Dam and Lake Ouachita, where Dakota Ebare spent his tournament. When it was flowing, Ebare caught 70 percent of his keepers firing a weightless watermelon magic Zoom Salty Super Fluke to inside grass edges, lay-downs, docks and other current breaks. He says downsizing to 8-pound-test line was critical. The rest of Ebare's catch came by skipping a weightless Zoom Trick Worm under docks and any shady cover nearby.

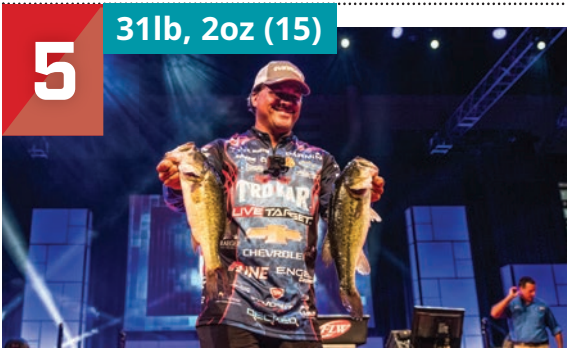
PHOTO BY JACOB FINE



JEREMY LAWYER | SARCOXIE, MO

In the mornings, Jeremy Lawyer threw a River2Sea Whopper Plopper 130, Freedom Tackle Buzzbait with a Zoom Horny Toad trailer or 3-inch Livetarget Glass Minnow BaitBall Popper around the backs of docks located in the front half of coves and creeks. Ideal docks were close to a riprap bank, seawall or some other type of hard structure and had 3 to 4 feet of water under them. Later in the day, he fished brush piles in front of docks in 12 to 18 feet with a Zoom Swamp Crawler on a drop-shot or a Texas-rigged Zoom Magnum Trick Worm.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN ONSLOW



SCOTT MARTIN | CLEWISTON, FL

Scott Martin fished some of the same water in Hamilton's upper end as Ebare, but in addition to a wacky-rigged Googan Baits Slim Shake or Googan Baits Lunker Log, Martin employed a unique presentation with a few big glide baits, which he changed out each day to constantly give the fish a new look. The baits included a Duel Hardcore Twitch'n Ninja Glider, River2Sea S-Waver 168 and a custom model. The Florida pro pitched the gliders around dock corners and other current breaks, plus anywhere he saw cruising bass. He mostly skipped the worms under docks.

6

30lb, 6oz (15)



PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

AUSTIN FELIX | EDEN PRAIRIE, MN

Austin Felix made it a point to stay above Hamilton's "clear-water line," which was formed by the waters of Lake Ouachita flowing through Blakely Mountain Dam. He caught most of his fish from main-lake docks, brush piles or schooling spots, with a few coming from a culvert. Felix skipped docks with a wacky-rigged 4-inch Yamamoto Senko and fished for schoolers with a Keitech Swing Impact FAT 2.8 on a 3/16-ounce All-Terrain Tackle Smallie Smasher Swimmbait Head. The same swimmbait rigged on a shaky head was his brush tool.

7

28lb, 2oz (15)

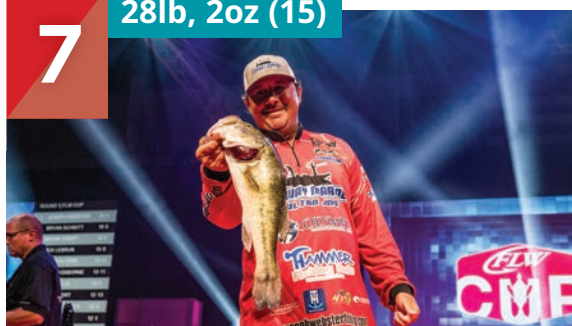


PHOTO BY MATT PACE

JOSEPH WEBSTER | WINFIELD, AL

It was strictly a brush pile tournament for Joseph Webster, who keyed on about 15 brush piles in 15 to 20 feet of water. Webster settled on those piles because he saw life – bait or bass – around them on his graph. Catching them was straightforward. He either cast a plum-colored Zoom Ol' Monster that he'd Texas-rigged with a 3/8-ounce weight and a 5/0 hook or dropped vertically into the brush with a morning dawn 6-inch Roboworm on a drop-shot with a 3/8-ounce weight.

8

26lb, 12oz (15)

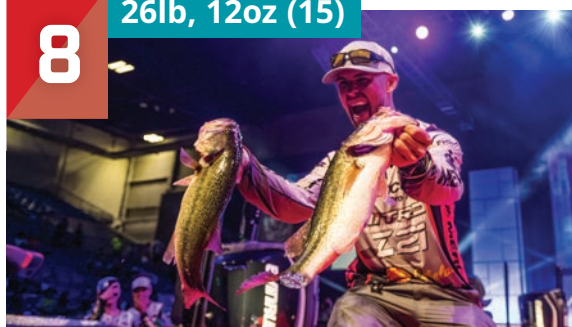


PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

RYAN SALZMAN | HUNTSVILLE, AL

Each morning, Ryan Salzman went to the bank and picked off shallow bass with a 3/8-ounce War Eagle Buzz Toad Buzzbait and an Evergreen OB Popper. After a couple hours, he slid out to fish brush piles, staying in the lower end of the lake for both patterns. With about 60 of the tallest, widest brush piles marked on his GPS, Salzman tore through a milk run, using Lowrance LiveSight forward-looking sonar to line up and cast a Texas-rigged 11-inch NetBait C-Mac Worm or a Reaction Innovations 6.95 Flirt Worm on a drop-shot.

9

26lb, 3oz (14)

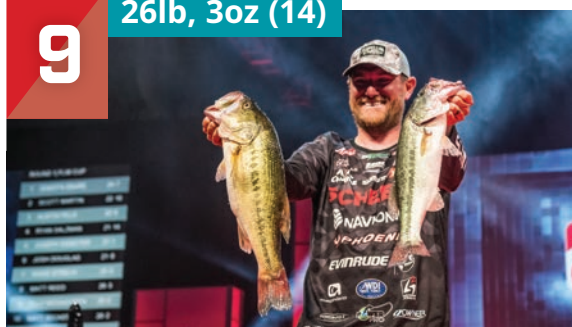


PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

JOSH DOUGLAS | ISLE, MN

While Josh Douglas also caught some early fish on a buzzbait during the first two days, he did most of his damage fishing brush piles on Hamilton's lower end. Most of his targeted piles were in 15 to 22 feet. His first casts to every pile were with a Texas-rigged blue fleck Zoom Ol' Monster with a WOO! Tungsten weight and a 5/0 Owner round-bend hook. Where he saw schoolers or bass around the brush, Douglas threw a BioSpawn ExoSwimmer swim-bait on an Outkast Tackle Goldeneye Swimmbait Jighead.

10

22lb, 6oz (10)

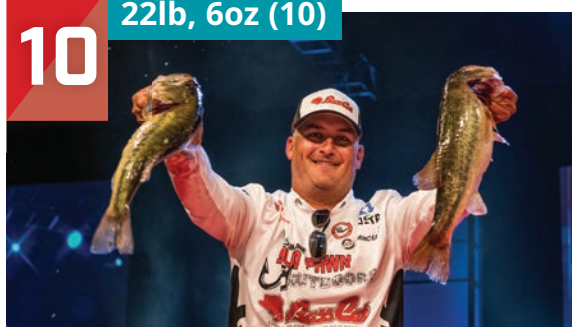


PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

JORDAN OSBORNE | LONGVIEW, TX

Summertime finesse was the recipe for Jordan Osborne around both brush and docks, though brush piles certainly were his primary targets. Osborne's better brush was in about 15 feet of water. He picked it apart with a 6 1/2-inch redbug Strike King Perfect Plastic Finesse Worm on a Picasso Shakedown shaky head. The dock pattern was secondary. In order to show fish something different than a buzzbait, which a lot of anglers used, he skipped a weightless merthiolate-colored Zoom Trick Worm and twitched it back.

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HOW THE CUP WAS ALMOST WON IN THE TAILRACE

A unique cold-water fishery had the potential to produce the win. Here's what happened.

By Curtis Niedermier

On the final day of the 2019 FLW Cup at Lake Hamilton, the field of 10 anglers spread out onto 7,200 acres of competition waters to try and chase down the \$300,000 top prize. Though, they didn't exactly spread out into every inch of available water.

For the most part, the top 10 piled into two primary areas: 1) the far lower end of Hamilton, below the Central Ave./Hwy 7 bridge, and 2) the tailrace below Blakely Mountain Dam, which holds back Lake Ouachita up above.

There were a few pros who worked the waters in between, but it was the extreme ends of Hamilton where the patterns that eventually contended for the win were applied. The lower end, with its deep brush piles, surprised no one. Typical summer tactics worked there as pros started the day on schoolers or wound buzzbaits around docks in the morning before fishing, re-fishing, and re-fishing again through their best brush milk runs.

The cold, clear, current-driven upper end presented a unique situation that many pros got wind of, but only a handful actually deciphered. What they learned about the tailrace offers a lot of interesting lessons in summertime bass fishing that will likely play a part in future championship tournaments.



The first couple miles of Lake Hamilton below Ouachita are narrow, cold and clear with heavy flows at times.

The Basics

The tailrace stretches from Blakely Mountain Dam more or less to the Albert Pike Road/US-270 bridge about five miles downstream. This portion of Lake Hamilton is narrow and riverine and heavily influenced by the water flowing out of the bottom of Ouachita. The inflow is clear, supporting 10 feet or more of visibility in some places, and it's cold enough that the water temperature hovers in the high 50s to low 60s.

Arkansas Game and Fish Commission Fisheries Management Biologist Sean Lusk says this area is home to a diverse mix of fish species. There are hoards of bream, big stripers and enough walleyes that the state pulls brood stock from the tailrace. There's even a seasonal trout fishery that's stocked beginning in the fall. Lusk has also identified at least two species of milfoil, Brazilian elodea, several species of coontail and pondweed in the upper section of Hamilton.

The Flow

Life is right below the Blakely Mountain Dam, which, according to

Lusk, is regulated with a minimum flow, meaning there's always some water coming through. Otherwise, water is pulled when electricity needs are high or water levels must be adjusted.

On some satellite images, the effects of the inflow are visible. The narrow upper end is clear until the lake opens up just past the bridge and the dirtier, warmer waters of the main lake start to mix. Finding this transition line and staying within the clear-water zone was critical for Austin Felix, who finished sixth. Though Felix didn't fish all the way to the base of the dam like third-place pro Dakota Ebare and fifth-place pro Scott Martin, Felix stayed on his bite by moving closer to the dam each day as the clear-water line receded. For Ebare and Martin, the flow itself was more important than the clarity.

"It was changing daily, and that was working against us," says Ebare. "When we got there on Sunday to start practice it [the cold, clear water] was probably about to that last bridge. And then each day it seemed like they cut back the current a little more. When we first got there it was running pretty much nonstop."



PHOTO BY ROB MATSUJURA



According to Dakota Ebare, the best time to get bit in the tailrace was when the current was strongest.

Whenever the current quit, the water mixed, and conditions changed.

“The water would actually backflow,” adds Ebare. “As soon as they would quit flowing current, it would backflow. The grass would actually lean back toward the dam. That’s what was causing that warm, dirty water to flow back there.”

Ebare estimates that the flow dropped off by about 75 percent by the final day, and it kicked in later each morning.

The Pattern

Ebare spent his tournament keying on the first two miles or so of the lake, whereas in practice, he was able to get bit clear down to the first bridge. One reason for sticking close to the dam was the current, but it was also to counter fishing pressure on the first day. Ebare figures 10 to 15 boats fished through the area Friday morning. Once he found an opening directly below the dam, he focused on it for most of the tournament.

A couple of long, narrow creeks that snake in from the east side also

held fish. There was some flow in each creek (one of them connects to the main river via a culvert), and Ebare claims to have seen 20 pounds swimming around in a wolf pack during practice. During the tournament, the creeks were mostly places for him to catch a few little ones before the current started moving. Once the alarm sounded, indicating that the flow would start, Ebare shifted back to the main river.

He and Martin both had their best luck on the main drag. With 10 or so feet of visibility, the fish were easy to see and tough to fool, but they were most catchable when the current forced them to set up in eddies or current breaks.

Ebare and Martin targeted the inside grass line in 3 to 5 feet, “sand spots” that formed where any little creek or wash flowed into the lake and scoured a depression, laydowns, and docks.

The Hawgs

Overall, the tailrace had the potential to produce the winning fish. They

were there, and so were the right ingredients, including bookoo bluegills, big gizzard shad and a smorgasbord of crawfish.

Ebare saw gizzard shad up to 9 inches long up the two adjacent creeks where he thinks runoff created a situation of higher dissolved oxygen that attracted the baitfish. Anywhere he saw big gizzards (including the backs of some creeks in other parts of the lake) he found bass. The gizzards were less plentiful on the main river, but bass in that area apparently had a taste for crawfish. Each night, Ebare’s livewell was full of craws that the fish spit up.

All that food and what Felix figures was a slower metabolism due to the cold water led to some real bruisers swimming around. Ebare and Martin both saw 5-plus-pounders during practice and the tournament.

On day one, Ebare had a 6-pounder nose his Zoom Fluke, and a 4-plus nip at the tail three times. If he’d caught those, he’d have been right with Bryan Thrift, the eventual winner.



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PHOTO BY ROB MATSUURA

photoperiod is getting shorter that that's going into the winter. They're not going to put a bunch of energy into producing young when those fish aren't going to make it through the winter."

Spawning or not, it was a cool moment on *FLW Live* and another part of the storyline of a unique sub-fishery within Lake Hamilton.

The Takeaway

Looking back at the tournament, the tailrace bite probably surprised a lot of people, though it probably shouldn't have surprised any pros, some of whom mistakenly wrote it off the instant they felt the mass of cold air over the water up in the tailrace. Anytime conditions are stagnant and hot in late summer, flowing water attracts bass.

"To me, it just made perfect sense that that's where I should fish, especially when I got up there and started seeing all those fish," Ebare says.

He says a similar pattern can work on other fisheries. As an example, he points to Tommy Dickerson's Fort Gibson Costa FLW Series win last Fall when Dickerson jumped shoals to get into a creek with some flow. The tailrace at the Cup isn't exactly the same and is an extreme example, but there are similarities.

A couple of big bites turned out to be all that separated Ebare, Martin and Felix from Thrift and runner-up Kyle Walters, who fished brush all three days and benefited from a pair of kicker bites each of the first two days. It didn't happen up the river this time, but we've seen similar patterns win Cups before. John Cox did it at Wheeler a few years ago, and Brad Knight did it at Lake Ouachita before that.

Those weren't cold-water, tailrace scenarios, and the winning areas couldn't support the amount of pressure that the Blakely Mountain Dam tailrace did this time. But upriver Cup patterns still present interesting case studies in late-summer fishing that contradicts conventional wisdom. ■

The Weather

Outside of the current, the weather also forced adjustment. During practice, bright, high skies and long periods of sunshine positioned fish in predictable areas where docks and overhanging trees created shade. Pros were able to target bass efficiently by target casting with finesse worms. Clouds, fog and rain overtook on day one and lingered on day two, which prompted the fish to roam (forcing adjustments from pros fishing all over the lake, not just in the tailrace). Moving baits such as Ebare's Fluke and a glide bait for Martin became better tools for getting bit.

The inability to adjust might be one of the reasons why most of the pros who fished the tailrace on day one struggled, then abandoned it altogether on day two.

Sticking it out and making accommodations for the conditions helped Ebare and Martin challenge for the win.

The Spawn

Big bass weren't the only thing people talked about while watching Ebare and Martin fish the tailrace on *FLW Live*. During one segment the last

day, fans watched Ebare attempt to sight-fish a bass on a bed.

Spawners, in August? Ebare believes so.

"I really feel like those fish had not experienced water warmer than 62 to 65 degrees, and that's why I found some spawning," he says.

Considering that there are Florida-strain genetics in the lake and Florida-strain bass are known for staggering their spawn from fall through late spring, the theory could make sense. Though Lusk, who watched it happen on the live show, isn't convinced.

While he says he can't completely rule out some spawning activity, Lusk doesn't believe that just having cold water is enough to trigger bass to go through with it. He thinks they might have been set up on bream beds.

"What you have to take into account is photoperiod," he says. "What really gets those fish spawning is water temperature and photoperiod. In my personal opinion, I don't think they were partaking in any actual spawning activity.

"It [a bass] has got a certain amount of energy to contribute to reproduction. They know when the

CUP REFLECTIONS

SURPRISES AND LESSONS LEARNED AT LAKE HAMILTON

The FLW Cup doesn't always play out as many would expect, but that's what makes it such an exciting championship tournament. In this case, many did expect Bryan Thrift to claim his first Cup victory, but the how and where of it still surprised fans in a number of ways. The same FLW experts who weighed in with Cup predictions are back for some reflections on a tournament that saw Thrift cement his legacy and would-be heroes come up just short on the waters of Lake Hamilton.



Peter Thliveros

FLW Live host and former Tour pro

What Surprised Me

The biggest surprise to me was the amount of sight-fish in the upper end of the reservoir. I think those fish were a surprise to everyone and that they became a factor in the event.

What Didn't

I wasn't surprised at the eventual outcome. Thrift is the consummate professional and had the right game plan for the tournament. Before the tournament I said it could be won on a combination of shallow and deep patterns with brush piles also playing a role. That's how he won.

Biggest Takeaway

The biggest takeaway is that it was Bryan's turn to make someone else be the bridesmaid and take his place in history. I'm sure it won't be the last time we see him there.



Todd Hollowell

FLW Live host and former Tour pro

What Surprised Me

I'm surprised that docks didn't play more in the event. With it being a late-summer event, a lot of people were expecting docks to play a much bigger role at Hamilton.

What Didn't

I'm not surprised Thrift won his first Cup at Hamilton. In fact, I predicted it earlier in the year in this very magazine. In his interview after day one, we heard Thrift say that Hamilton reminded him a lot of Norman. At the last Tour event at Norman (in 2016), I was leading that event on the final day until Thrift weighed in and went on to win. When I heard the word "Norman," I knew Thrift would likely take home the Cup.

Biggest Takeaway

These guys are so good. Someone always figures something out that's a little off the beaten path. I'm shocked at the success some anglers had way up the Ouachita River, focusing on the cooler water. With how good the field is nowadays, you can never rule out any part of any fishery for a win.



Joe Opager

FLW Director of Public Relations

What Surprised Me

Polaris pro David Dudley's tough day two. The reigning Angler of the Year and former FLW Cup champion weighed in a respectable limit on day one, but his day two didn't exactly go according to plan. I guarantee Dudley would have much rather ended his season out on the water on Championship Sunday instead of following along at the FLW Expo with everyone else.

What Didn't

The success of former FLW College Fishing anglers in this event. The last two FLW Cup champions (Justin Atkins and Clent Davis) were both former College Fishing anglers, and Dakota Ebare (second), Austin Felix (sixth) and Ryan Salzman (eighth) all had fantastic showings in this year's event.

Biggest Takeaway

The 2019 FLW Cup will go down in history as "The Bryan Thrift Cup." Every fishing fan in the world knew it was just a matter of time as to when (and not if) Thrift would hoist the FLW Cup, and it just so happened it was his time this year on Lake Hamilton.



Justin Onslow

FLW Associate Editor

What Surprised Me

Overcast conditions on days one and two really put a dent in a lot of anglers' plans. So many pros were relying on the brush pile bite, and cloudy skies put a significant damper on it. Still, I was expecting more anglers to make a quick adjustment when the sun failed to poke through very much on those first couple days.

What Didn't

Bryan Thrift winning it all. No, I didn't pick Thrift to win prior to the Cup, but it wasn't because I didn't think he could or ultimately would. Sometimes picking the prohibitive favorite is just too damn easy, especially when that favorite is the best bass angler on the planet. And make no mistake - Thrift is the best.

Biggest Takeaway

I was surprised more pros didn't decide to trek up the river, if only to escape the heat and search for something different. Hamilton isn't a big lake, and getting up the river from takeoff doesn't take that long. Scott Martin and Dakota Ebare made the trip each day, and they have top-10 finishes to show for it.



Curtis Niedermier

FLW Editor-in-Chief

What Surprised Me

I had no idea Hamilton had so much grass. It's all over the upper end. I'm really surprised that someone like Buddy Gross didn't make the top 10 by fishing offshore in the green stuff.

What Didn't

That Thrift won it with a grab bag of patterns. Hamilton is only 7,200 acres, and with four days of practice, everyone knew pretty much every pattern. Thrift did them all, but won because he chose the best option for each day, like when he caught the easy fish on a buzzbait on day one then shelved that pattern - for the most part - the rest of the event.

Biggest Takeaway

I'm left believing that no one in professional fishing has the mental capacity to juggle multiple patterns, any scenario, changing weather, 20 rods and baits, and the pressure of a major tournament as well as Bryan Thrift. His quirky habits and obsession with the little details are traits we see in many great athletes, but there's still only one Thrift in pro fishing. I'm floored by how great he is. ■



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WHAT'S MAKING NEWS IN THE BASS FEDERATION



PENNSYLVANIA'S CICERO AND SNYDER WIN WORLD FINALS

Anthony Cicero IV and Dakota Snyder won the 10th annual Student Angler Federation High School Fishing World Finals on legendary Pickwick Lake in Florence, Ala., June 19-22. Representing Pennsylvania's Elizabethtown High School, the 2019 victors topped a field of 389 teams from 38 states and three countries, including Canada and Zimbabwe. Teams were comprised of two anglers and an adult boat captain, pushing the total number of participants to more than 1,160.

Cicero and Snyder fought and fished through three days of qualifying rounds to secure a spot in the final day of competition. All weights were cleared on day four, and the pair sacked up a 16-pound, 6-ounce three-fish limit to seal the deal. Anchoring their limit was a 7-pound, 7-ounce beauty that earned Big Bass honors.

"It's absolutely unbelievable," Cicero says. "Emotions are running high."

This was the team's first World Finals appearance, and the young anglers not only had a trip of a lifetime, but walked away the best of the best.



Cicero (left) and Snyder bucked the offshore trend and caught the winning fish up shallow.

"It still hasn't hit me yet; it's just crazy to think about," Cicero adds. "I'm just ready for the next one. I'm going to try to become a pro. It would be my dream come true."

While many teams chose to ply Pickwick's popular offshore ledge offerings, Cicero and Snyder played the shallow game. Targeting the Mulberry Creek area near Kroger

Island, the team zeroed in on shallow grass with woody cover and hooked bass in depths ranging from 8 inches to 5 feet. One such area was particularly productive.

"We were fishing a stump where we caught a couple in practice," Cicero explains. "We caught our three best fish there today [the final day] and ended it all."

Snyder notes that they enjoyed their fastest action throughout the tournament during the morning hours and in overcast conditions – a trend that continued on the final day.

For the win, Cicero and Snyder earned their choice of team scholarship offers to go to a top school and fish on the YETI FLW College Fishing team, including a \$56,000 (\$28,000 per angler) scholarship offer from Bethel University, a \$100,000 (\$50,000 per angler) scholarship offer from Kentucky Christian University and an \$80,000 (\$40,000 per angler) scholarship offer from Simpson University. Snyder plans to join the United States Marine Corps after graduation, but Cicero says the

scholarship options could be life-changing for him.

"This is an amazing opportunity," he says. "The doors are wide open right now to three great schools, and I have a lot of thinking to do."

The record-breaking purse of more than \$2.85 million in college scholarships, cash, gift cards and prizes has elevated the standard not only for SAF High School Fishing, but across all levels of competitive bass fishing.

In total, more than 60 scholarship offers – some to specific schools and some in cash to any school in the country – were offered to top teams at the event. All teams had to meet eligibility requirements of each school's scholarship program.

Contributing to the total scholarship offers and prizes were \$1.62 million from Simpson University in Redding, Calif., \$1.08 million from Kentucky Christian University, \$96,000 from Bethel University in Tennessee, \$10,000 from FLW and \$12,000 from The Bass Federation. Many of the scholarship offers have already been

accepted by eligible students for the upcoming semester.

"It's great to see our sponsor partners and these universities supporting young people in fishing and outdoor sports," TBF President and CEO Robert Cartlidge says. "This is one of the reasons why we founded the national high school program in the U.S. back in 2007, so that young anglers could live their dream and earn a good education through fishing that would be on par with any other sport."

"The future of these anglers and the sport of high school fishing will never be the same," Cartlidge adds. "It was something to see, as multiple colleges and university recruiters were on site competing for top teams to attend their institutions. Whatever else happens, that is a success for these young people in my book."

The 2020 High School Fishing World Finals and High School Fishing National Championship dual event is set for La Crosse, Wis. Full results and information can be found at highschoolfishing.org. ■



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NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS EVENTS HEAT UP THIS FALL

The Bass Federation's National Semi-Finals events pair neighboring states' top anglers in close-to-home weekend tournaments, which are show-downs for berths in the TBF National Championship. One hundred percent of TBF National Semi-Finals entries are paid back to anglers and their home-state federations.

The winning boater and co-angler from each state advance to the championship. Any co-angler who can out-fish the top boater also earns the right to advance as a boater. Top finishers receive hefty payouts, Ranger Cup and Evinrude contingencies, sponsor swag, trophies, and more. Competition for bragging rights between states heats up every year between the districts as they compete for the State Pride Award.

Though, the championship event is what TBF anglers work toward all year. The TBF National Championship-winning boater earns the \$120,000 "Living the Dream" prize package, which includes a \$20,000 cash prize, fully paid entry fees on the FLW Tour as a pro, travel expense stipends for each Tour event and use of a wrapped Ranger boat and a tow vehicle for the year. The champ also gets a spot in the T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League All-American and FLW Cup for a shot at fishing against elite pros for the biggest payday in the industry. The national champion co-angler's prize package also includes a \$20,000 check and fully paid entry fees into the Costa FLW Series division of his or her choice.

All 14 division champions from the TBF National Championship also earn slots in the BFL All-American.

To learn more about competing in the Semi-Finals and the full schedule, visit bassfederation.com. ■



ARKANSAS, OKLAHOMA BATTLE IN DISTRICT 6 NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS

TBF of Arkansas hosted this year's D-6 National Semi-Finals event on Millwood Lake June 15-16. Team Arkansas brought in 113.22 pounds to top Oklahoma's 113.04 pounds and claim the State Pride Award. In the State Pride competition, the top four boaters and co-anglers from each state are selected prior to the event, and their weights are totaled to decide the winning state.

The weather cooperated, and the scale saw 535 fish over the two-day weekend event, but the quality Millwood is known for was a challenge to find for most.

Arkansas boater Blake Wilson solved the puzzle with solid five-bass limits both days, bringing his tournament-winning total to 36.08 pounds. He also landed Big Bass honors with a 5.08-pound lunker.

The top boater and co-angler from each state advance to the TBF National Championship. Joining Wilson will be Michael Morris, who posted a total of 26.06 pounds to lead the Oklahoma delegation. The D-6 co-angler champion was Oklahoma's Larry Carter, who weighed a two-day total of 20.09 pounds. Arkansas's Matt Tucker had 15.15 pounds to advance from the host state's side.

COLORADO, NEW MEXICO BRAVE CONDITIONS IN SEMI-FINALS EVENT

The New Mexico Bass Federation hosted this year's D-21 National Semi-Finals event on Navajo Lake June 22-23. Anglers competed through hail, rain, changing temperatures and rising water levels.

New Mexico boater Matthew Adamson was crowned champion with three fish both days for a tournament total of 17.62 pounds. Colorado's top stick on the boater side was veteran Sam Heckman with 16.45 pounds.

On the co-angler side, Vanessa Berger represented New Mexico with a two-day total of 14.18 pounds. Colorado's Brian Wiese caught 12.13 pounds to advance.

The two Colorado SAF High School Fishing state champions, Brody Sheldon and Cole Miller, competed on the co-angler side and finished in the top 10 for their state. ■



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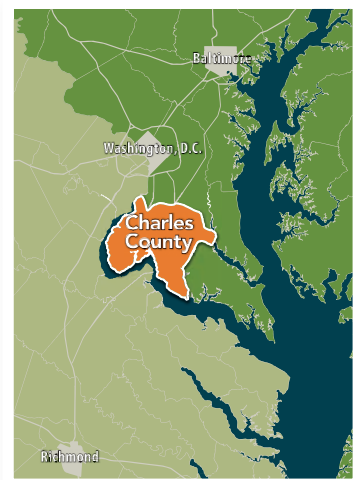
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RON NELSON

BERRIEN SPRINGS, MI

By Curtis Niedermier

Congrats on winning FLW Tour Polaris Rookie of the Year. How do you feel now that your first season was so successful?

Really grateful. I feel blessed to get Rookie of the Year and survive the first year on Tour. It was fun.

Were you surprised when you won?

Yeah, actually, I was. I really thought Miles Burghoff would seal the deal on Champlain, because typically you'll catch a 15- or 16-pound bag that time of year fairly easily, and I figured he'd stay ahead of me.

Learn any hard lessons this season?

Oh yeah. In the first tournament (at Sam Rayburn), you know, coming from Michigan, coming from the snow and the cold, I just decided to not do pre-practice at all and just go straight down. That was a little bit tough because it was my first time being in Texas and then also the first time fishing a lake that was 10 feet flooded.

But I felt really happy with my practice. I had some groups of fish and had some flipping fish, too. I just let some mechanical stuff get ahead of me and kind of lost focus on the first day. I was on the fish and should've not let it bother me and not worry about it.

Positive takeaways?

One thing that was kind of neat was being roommates with Bryan Thrift and Buddy Gross and a few others, for a little bit. Seeing how prepared they are tackle-wise; they pretty much haul a tackle shop with them. I'm just not committed to fishing for a living yet, so on that level it's a big difference.

How'd you get hooked up with Thrift and Buddy?

Oh, I met Buddy Gross at one of the Costa championships that was on Kentucky Lake, and we got along well. Then we talked on and off about lodging. He said he thought he could

squeeze me in. I stayed with Jimmy Brewer, who is a super nice guy, a few times. I stayed with Chad Grigsby and a few other guys as well. I have the utmost respect for those guys. To see Thrift, he's a machine, and he's a machine because he spends all his time on his tackle, on his preparedness. It's still a little bit tough on my level to come from home, from work mode, to jumping in a boat that hasn't been touched since the last tournament. The tackle prep and such is not what it needs to be yet.

What do you do for a living?

I have a painting business. I'm a painting contractor.

So what do you do in Michigan in the winter if you can't paint and can't go fishing?

I try to convince my wife to let me go south.

I actually don't fish much back home, believe it or not. That's why I enjoy getting away and fishing the Costa stuff. With work responsibilities and fishing season being my prime work season, as far as being warm out, it's tough to get out.

If you ever moved south, where do you think you'd land?

Probably somewhere near Santee Cooper or Guntersville. Of course, Chickamauga is pretty close to the top of the list too. That's a sweet lake.

Do you still prefer smallmouths over largemouths?

No. I never have I don't think. I like them all.

Wait, really?

Oh yeah. I'm a bucketmouth fisherman, don't get me wrong. I'm not really a drop-shot guy. I mean, I'll catch smallmouth, and I love power-fishing for them.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

On a scale of 1 to 10, how dumb is a bedding smallmouth?

It depends where you're at. On Champlain they can be probably about as dumb as they can get. A 10. They're dumb. Back home they can be about a 1 sometimes. They can be gone from that bed before you get to that bed, and you'll think the bed is empty but the fish is actually there. These Champlain fish tend to just sit there.

What do you think about the Flogger?

I don't like it.

Why not?

To me, I would rather have it be gone away with just for the fact that there are more and more spawning fish that get targeted now that didn't get targeted before. I think it puts more pressure on fish that guys wouldn't normally see in that range, and now they can.

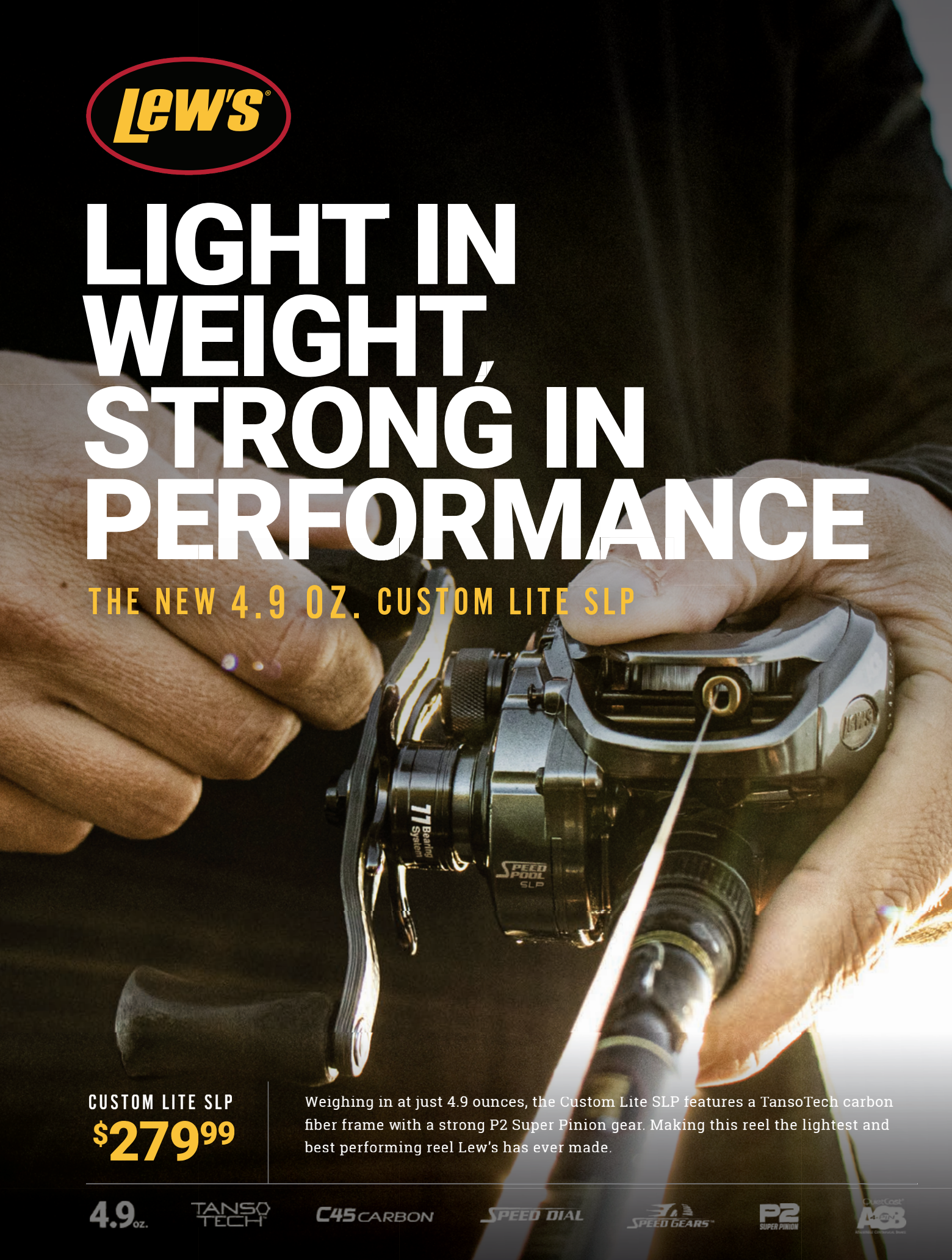
Have you had any weird wildlife encounters when out on the water?

I've had to take a deer to shore before when it was stuck in the middle of the lake and it was struggling to get across. Me and another guy grabbed ahold of the antlers and kind of dragged it to shallow water so it could walk out. Besides that, down south you get snakes that want to come in your boat once in a while, and I'm not a big fan of that. I don't mind the alligators. They're kind of neat to look at, and you give them their space, but the snakes are something else sometimes. ■



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