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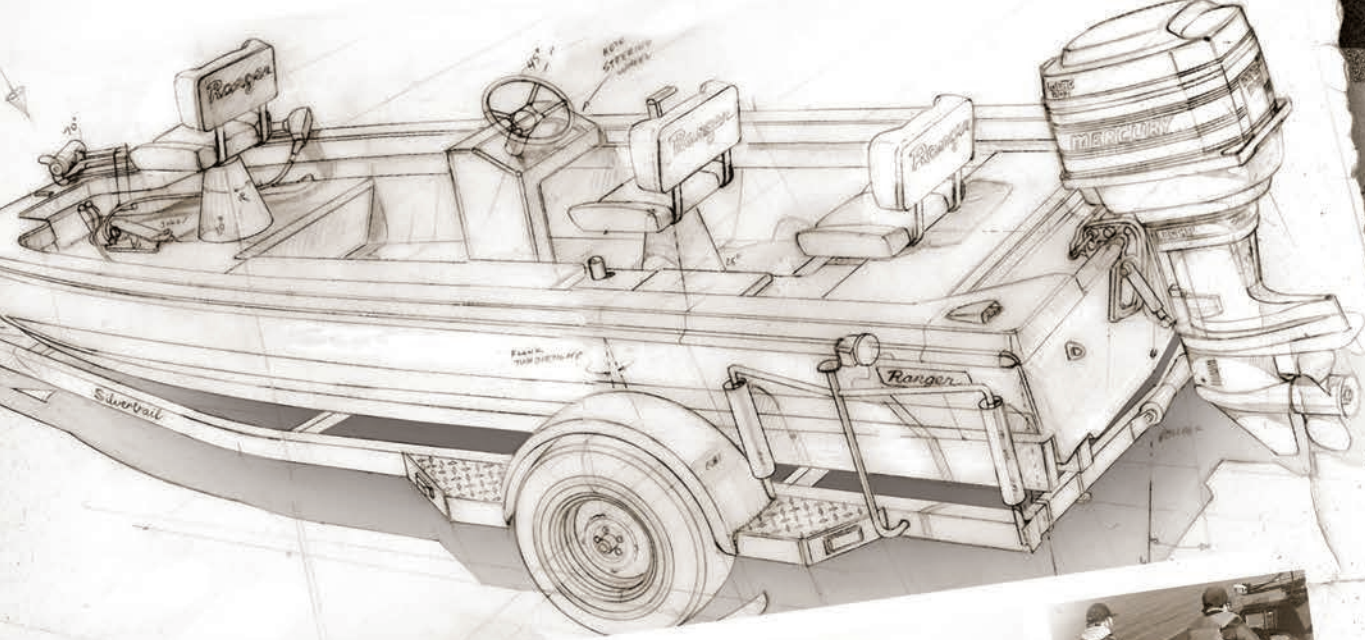
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ONE AT A TIME.™





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COVER PHOTO BY KEVIN PIEPER

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## PRAYERS FOR THE KAYLERS

I never met Nik Kayler, but in the days and weeks since he went missing at Lake Okeechobee on Jan. 4 during the Costa FLW Series event, followed by the six-day search that led to his body being recovered, I've felt no less grief than I would have felt had it been one of my own friends whose life was lost.

I guess the only explanation for the way I feel is that, though I didn't know him, Nik is representative of so many people I love who spend so many days in the outdoors, pursuing their passions at the mercy of Mother Nature. In that regard, I guess you could say I know a lot of Nik Kaylers.

Even my own life has many parallels to Nik's – father, husband, outdoorsman. How many times have I walked out the door on my way to go to a tournament, or to go hunting or fishing for fun, and taken for granted the good-byes I've shared with my wife and daughter? I think that's the part that stings the most – the what-ifs.

Yet the pain is real, and the realization that this kind of thing can happen while participating in a sport we all love has been difficult for me to cope with. I know it has for many of you, too.

How do we move forward? What's next? Many people have tried to speculate. I'm not prepared to do so, other than to say that safety, rightly so, will continue to be in the forefront of everyone's mind as we progress through the season.

For now, we owe it to Nik and his family to honor his memory. He leaves behind a wife, Kelly, and daughter, Caralee. Please, if you're a person of faith, pray for them. Send them well wishes. Contribute to the GoFundMe campaign that's been set up to support them at [gofundme.com/nik-kayler](http://gofundme.com/nik-kayler).

I think it's also important that we thank the people who contributed thousands of man-hours in the search that led to Nik's body being recovered. The list includes members of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the U.S. Coast Guard, local law enforcement agencies in the Clewiston and Okeechobee area, and dozens of brave, selfless volunteers – anglers, Nik's family and friends, even complete strangers – who performed a job that no one would ever wish to do. They're all heroes.

To anyone who prayed for Nik, his family and the rescue crews during the search, thank you very much. I read your posts on social media, and they made me realize just how big this family of outdoorsmen really is, and how powerful we are when we stand together in the tough times. Keep it up.

I will never forget what happened over the course of those six days in south Florida. Nik's loss will leave a scar that might never heal, but as a group I'm confident we'll find a way to honor him and ensure a lasting legacy as we move forward together.

**Curtis Niedermier, Editor-in-Chief**

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## MOON OVER BASS COUNTRY

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Ask a pro angler for a theory on the moon's impact on bass behavior, and you'll get one. You can bet on it.

So powerful is the allure of the moon that it can't be ignored when preparing for a tournament, particularly when a full moon falls within the range of spawning season. Of course, there is scant scientific evidence to back up the connection.

Science, or lack thereof, has never stopped folks from exercising a good moon theory anyway. Nor does it stop FLW from publishing the *Solunar Tables*, which some readers still study when trying to determine the good, better and best times to be on the water or in the woods based on the moon phase.

By all means, use whatever litmus test you require to decide when to go fishing, but probably the most productive advice is the old saw that says the best time to go fishing is anytime you can. That's especially true in winter if you live in Levi Christianson's part of the country. Christianson, shown here fishing under the moon at the Lake Okeechobee Costa FLW Series event on Jan. 4 (just a couple days after the full moon, actually), hails from Sioux Falls, S.D. Despite the favorable moon that, according to many pros, had pushed a wave of spawning fish into the mats, Christianson failed to weigh in a fish, proving (depending on whom you ask) that a full moon is pretty to look at, but bass-catching success follows its own schedule.

PHOTO BY MATT PACE



## A Circle of Sustainability



As president of FLW's marketing division, I'm particularly proud of our title partnerships with Bass Pro Shops, Costa, T-H Marine and YETI. These companies, and our many other sponsors, are fueling the growth of tournament bass fishing by working with us to provide unmatched opportunities for anglers from coast to coast. They are investing in you, the FLW angler, and you are returning the favor by investing in them. In fact, as an FLW member, you are part of a global fishing community that is breaking participation records at every level of competition from High School Fishing to the FLW Tour. You are also doing your part to ensure quality fishing experiences for the next generation of anglers through your support of conservation efforts, locally and nationally.

The trust you've placed in FLW and our sponsors is not something we take lightly. Our goal is to earn that trust every day and to provide you with ever-increasing opportunities to pursue your passion in the most enjoyable and professional setting possible. To that end we have exciting new contingency programs from Bass Pro Shops and new member benefits, including exclusive local and national discounts on food, lodging, apparel and merchandise, that will be rolling out soon. Watch [flwfishing.com](http://flwfishing.com) for details.

In the coming months you'll also learn more about our efforts to help the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation grow fishing participation from the current 47.2 million U.S. anglers to 60 million anglers by the end of 2021. Why is this endeavor, called "60 in 60," important? Because it will generate more than \$500 million to state fish and wildlife agencies for habitat and species management programs. It's a circle of sustainability. More participation means more conservation. More conservation means better fishing. Better fishing means more participation. You get the idea. FLW is committed to helping this endeavor through recruitment, retention and reactivation (R3) programs, such as High School Fishing and FLW Foundation Unified Fishing Derbies. We are also launching a new youth membership, the FLW Kids Club, to ensure that aspiring young anglers have access to all the resources they need to be successful. As FLW members and opinion leaders in your communities, you are well-positioned to lead FLW's R3 efforts at the grassroots level.

One of the most exciting new opportunities we have on this front is our "Fishing Funds the Cure" partnership with the National Pediatric Cancer Foundation and Evinrude. As a cancer survivor with two young children, this one is close to my heart. The goal is simple. Take a child fishing, post photos of the trip on social media, and encourage your friends and family to donate. It's the fishing version of the American Cancer Society's well-known "Relay for Life" program. You'll have a great time on the water, and the National Pediatric Cancer Foundation will use the funds you generate to help develop new drugs and therapies that may ultimately lead to the cure of childhood cancers. That's something we can all support. There are also some great prizes to win along the way. The National Pediatric Cancer Foundation has made it easy to participate. Please visit [fishingfundsthecure.org](http://fishingfundsthecure.org) to get started.

Thank you for your membership in the global FLW family of anglers. I hope to see you at an FLW tournament soon.

Sincerely,

*Trish Blake*

Trish Blake  
President, Marketing Division

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# ROB NEWELL

## The Reset Button



**M**aybe it's the cold water that erases their memory. Perhaps it's because fishing pressure wanes significantly when hunting seasons begin in fall and lakes start icing up.

Or, it could be that forage gets a lot scarcer in the winter months and they forget what the real stuff looks like.

Whatever the reason, this is the one time of year the reset button gets pushed in the brains of bass. I call it the reset button because for just a short while during winter and early spring it seems bass forget everything they've learned about lures and artificial presentations.

It's like the cache in their memory banks where lure shapes, sizes and sounds are stored gets cleared. However, this magical period only lasts a week or so on a fishery, as it does not take them long to "remember" why certain profiles, actions and vibrations sting a little more than others.

Starting about the last week of January in the South and working up through the country until the first week of April in the North, every lake has this special window where the bass, especially the big ones, are oblivious to our fishing tricks, and they eat like they have never seen a lure before.

During this time, bass sort of "wake up" out of their winter dormancy and begin ambling toward the bank. The water is still cold – in the mid- to low 40s in the South, grazing the upper 30s in the North – but the days have started getting longer, triggering that instinct to get moving shallow where the water will warm up first. They're grumpy, like someone

who hasn't had their first cup of coffee in the morning. Their fuse is short, and they snap at anything that comes by.

Several other factors help the reset button get pressed this time of year as well.

Late winter usually means cold rain, which brings muddy water, helping to add color to lakes that are normally considered clear. In many cases that extra stain in the water makes bass less wary about crushing lures.

In major reservoirs, the water is still low due to winter drawdowns, which reduces the number of hiding places bass can use and makes the ones they do use more obvious.

Also, cold winters are hard on forage bases, oftentimes killing off shad and sending crawfish into the ground. The first artificial lure bass see can easily be mistaken for food.

Finally, the weather frontal cycle brings a more predictable feeding window: that prime time on the second or third day after a front when things have stabilized, but just before the next front hits.

When the reset button gets pressed, you can get the bull-in-the-china-shop lures out and push those groggy bass over the edge – no finesse required. Think lipless rattlers in 1/2-ounce and 3/4-ounce sizes in oranges or reds; big, ugly jigs in black and blue or black and chartreuse with full-sized salty chunks; obnoxiously colored crankbaits that dredge up the bottom, banging into cover and making commotion; and even those old gaudy white and chartreuse spinnerbaits with big blades that trip their triggers.

What's more, there is no need to scale down in line size yet. Straight braided line or 20-pound-test fluorocarbon will not bother them.

The best places are the obvious ones. Now is the time to get the low-hanging fruit off the community holes. Find the spawning areas, and start out in the deeper waters "in front" of those bays or pockets. Work into the entrances or openings, and fish the first major points or breaks leading into those spawning areas. Throw at even the most obvious cover.

If you don't believe in the reset button, here are a few comments from FLW's best pros about this rare time of year.

*Sometime about the third week of February here in Tennessee, the fish make that first move out of their winter slumber. For*

*some reason the big ones come to the bank first, and they're not real smart when they get there. – Andy Morgan*

*It's that time of year when the biggest limits are possible. And I don't need to finesse them or beg them to bite. I can fish obvious baits in the most obvious locations, and they're ready to bite. Now, that's when it's fun. – Bryan Thrift*

*In Florida we call them 'waves' when the fish come in, and the first one or two waves of fish always have the biggest, meanest and easiest ones to catch. – JT Kenney*

The reset button has been pressed, lure memory has been cleared, the coffee has not yet been made, stomachs are empty and the big ones are headed shallow – now is the time to get a bait between you and them. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER





**COLIN  
MOORE**

## Bass Have Gone Global



It's safe to say that before last fall many, if not most, fishermen in this country weren't aware that bass lived anywhere except the northern half of the Western Hemisphere and a few places in Asia and Africa. Turns out that bass are a lot more international in their range than we might have originally thought, and it portends an interesting future.

In October, 13 teams from around the globe – including one from this country that was largely composed of FLW Tour pros – took part in the 13th Black Bass World Championships on the Vaal River in South Africa. FLWFishing.com audiences captivated by the tournament must have been at least mildly surprised when they learned that bass fishing has such a foothold in the world. Teams from Russia, Germany, Croatia, Italy, Spain and Portugal joined the usual mix of competitors such as the USA, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mexico.

Thirteen countries might not seem like much of an international mix, but it's a start. Conspicuous by their absence in the World Championships were other countries that didn't show up, but whose teams probably would have done well there: Canada, South Korea, China and Japan in particular.

To recap, South Africa won the event, followed by the United States in second and Italy in third. The South Africans were due, having finished runners-up the past two years. They'll return to defend their title in 2018 when Mexico hosts the World Championships.

Who knows where this will all wind up? Presumably, wherever there are bass, there are avid anglers who want to

fish for them. That takes in a lot of territory. FishBase.org, an online source of information about all things fish and fishing, claims that largemouth bass of the northern or Florida strains are present in 63 countries now and, in most cases, have become well established.

In Japan, for instance, bass were stocked in Lake Ashino in 1925 by a businessman named Akabishi Tetsuma simply because he enjoyed bass fishing when he was in the States and wanted to have access to it in his own land. It worked. Today Japan is known for its world-class bass fishermen, exceptional fishing tackle and Manabu Kurita, who caught the world-record-tying largemouth from Lake Biwa in 2009.

FishBase.org notes that largemouths were shipped to Belgium and France in 1877, making them the first foreign countries where the fish were stocked as far as anyone can determine. Two years later, England became home to largemouths, followed by Germany in 1888 and Italy in 1897 – the same year Hawaii waters got bass.

The Philippines followed in 1907; then Japan in 1925, and South Africa and Cuba in 1928.

And so it goes; bass and bass fishing aren't anything new to the anglers across the seas. It's just that most guys on our side of the Big Pond probably didn't know about it. In fact, foreign anglers have also dabbled around the edges of the American tournament scene for decades.

Zimbabwe was the first country outside the U.S. to affiliate with The Bass Federation, back in the early '70s. One of



In 2017, South Korea's Hyo Chul Kim became the first International Division representative to fish the Forrest Wood Cup.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

its anglers, Gerry Jooste, qualified to fish in five Bassmaster Classics, and placed 15th in 1997. Jooste was the most successful of foreign anglers to compete in a major championship, but he wasn't the first. That distinction belongs to Ontario fisherman Hank Gibson, who reached the Classic in 1990.

Since then, a number of Japanese anglers have fished the Classic and the Forrest Wood Cup, and pros such as Lionel Botha, formerly of South Africa, and Australian pro Carl Jocusen are attesting to the fact that bass fishing isn't confined to the United States.

A number of years ago, Irwin Jacobs, founder of FLW, began to connect the dots in terms of foreseeing the potential of bass tournament fishing as a worldwide sport supported by fans and sponsors wanting to tap into a growing international marketplace. His vision helped position the company front and center in the movement to globalize bass tournament fishing. Now FLW not only represents the initials of Ranger Boats founder Forrest L. Wood, but also those of Fishing League Worldwide.

As of this writing, the FLW partnership involves eight countries, including the United States, Canada, China, Mexico, South Korea, South Africa and – most recently – Italy and Portugal. Basically, countries set up their own qualification parameters and send their top guns to the Costa FLW Series Championship as International Division representatives. The top International Division angler there advances to the following year's Forrest Wood Cup.

Competitive? Committed? You bet. At the Forrest Wood Cup last August, one moving moment occurred when South Korean angler Hyo Chul Kim, who qualified as the first champion of the Costa FLW Series International Division, spoke through an interpreter about his experience in the championship and what it meant to him.

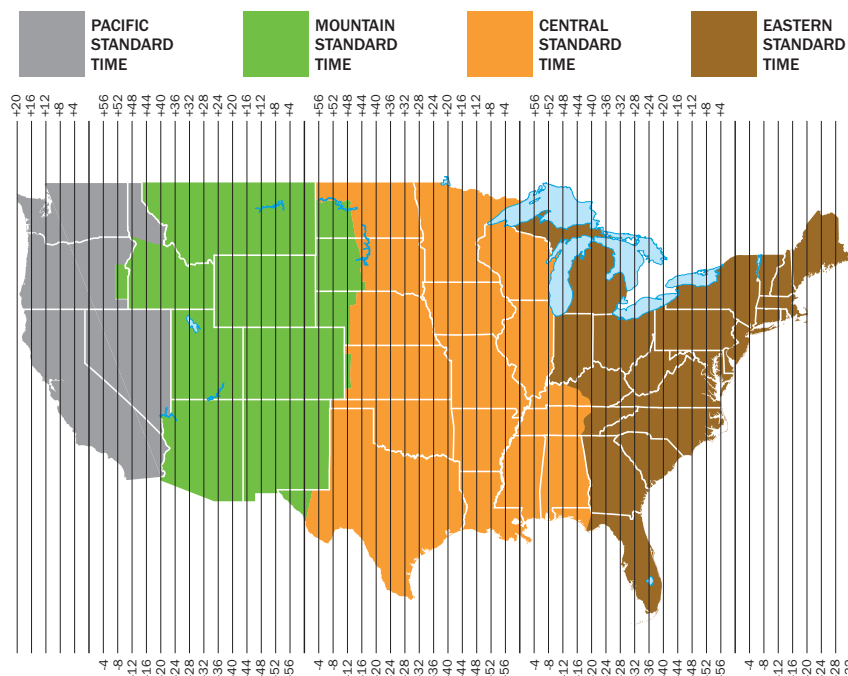
"In my 17 years of fishing, this is the proudest moment of my life," he said

Kim, whose homeland was first stocked with bass in 1963, could have been anybody from any country standing there and baring his soul. As such, he spoke for thousands of anglers from many countries who are now in the process of linking hands. All of them share a love for fishing, and all dream the same dream as Kim: to stand on that larger stage, and be acknowledged as among the best bass fishermen on the planet. ■



## SOLUNAR TABLES

FEBRUARY-MARCH 2018



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

SOLUNAR TABLES® are designed to forecast the daily active feeding periods of fish. They are formulated from the position of the earth in relation to the sun and moon.  
 The major periods last for approximately 2 to 3 1/2 hours, and the minor periods last for approximately 3/4 to 1 1/2 hours. To determine the start of major and minor times for your area, find the bold time-zone rule on the map. If you are located in the area left of the time-zone rule, add the number (in minutes) at the top to the corresponding time on the chart. If you are located in the area right of the time-zone rule, subtract the number (in minutes) at the bottom from the corresponding time on the chart. Add one hour to all times during daylight saving time.

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# TAKEDOFF

## WHAT'S INSIDE:

Pros' favorite prespawn weapons

Another approach to fishing weightless worms

A scientific look at just how big bass can grow

Rose and Nixon debate: When do you leave fish to find fish?

JT Kenney offshore in Florida

Meet the 2018 FLW Tour field

4 tips for landing more giants from a kayak

**HOW JAMES WATSON PUT FUN AND FISHING AHEAD OF EVERYTHING ELSE**

Revisiting the ethanol issue

PHOTO BY KEVIN PIEPER



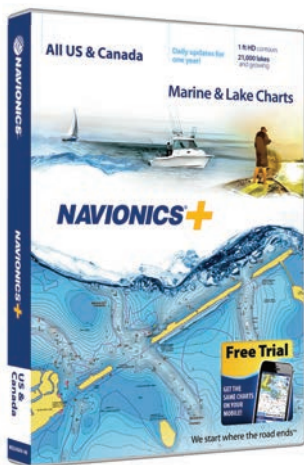
## Seasonal tips and tricks + other odds and ends

By Paul Strege

### SEASON PREP: DATA MANAGEMENT

By spring, many weekend anglers across the country are finalizing preparations for their first outing of the season. One aspect that many overlook, however, is managing their electronics data such as base maps and waypoints. This step is crucial to on-the-water efficiency, according to FLW Tour pro Josh Douglas.

**Base Maps** – “The first thing I do is renew my Navionics+ subscription,” Douglas explains. “That allows me to download any lake or river in the country that I may visit while on Tour or back home. When a lake map is refreshed, you can simply download the updated chart without buying a new card. It’s a tremendous value for anglers.”



Douglas also notes that once a subscription expires, downloaded maps remain on the data card.

**Waypoints** – As part of his offseason ritual, Douglas will also weed through the conglomeration of waypoints he collected throughout the previous year.

“It’s not uncommon to collect more than 200 waypoints on a single lake, and I end up editing or deleting many of those points,” he says. “If I’m fishing a general area, like a spawning flat, I’ll save one point instead of 50. I’ll change that icon to a stop sign and make note of it being a bedding area. Or, if I’m fishing underwater features like submerged brush or rock piles, I’ll change those icons to trees and boulders, respectively. I’ll delete any surrounding points if they don’t relate to something specific.”

### CHOOSING JERKBAIT COLORS FOR SPRING

Jerkbait expert Randy Blaukat breaks down color selection into three categories based on sunlight intensity and water clarity.



● Flat/matte color; cloudy conditions or stained water



● Metallic color; sunny conditions or water clarity of 18 inches to 4 feet



● Translucent color; partly cloudy conditions or water clarity of more than 4 feet of visibility

### PRO'S CHOICE: FAVORITE PRESPAWN LURE



**1. Matt Arey**  
**Lunkerhunt Fetch**

“My preferred way to fish it is weightless or with a little bit of Sticky Tungsten Putty on the hook shank, and to target fish that are just pulling up to stage for the spawn, especially under the last dock that fish would set up on before going back to spawn.”



**2. Casey Scanlon**  
**5-inch Bass Pro Shops XPS Single Tail Grub with 1/4-ounce Hayabusa Brush Easy Head**

“It’s my favorite prespawn lure for clear-water, multi-species lakes. You can count it down to a precise depth and retrieve it just above timber, brush piles or tapering points.”



**3. John Cox**  
**3/8-ounce Dirty Jigs Swim Jig with Zoom Horny Toad trailer**

“Prespawn fish can be lethargic one minute and on fire the next. With a swim jig, I can easily change the speed of my retrieve to give the fish what they want.” ■



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## WATSON'S APPROACH TO THE WEIGHTLESS WORM

A FEW TRICKS THAT MIGHT HELP YOU FINESSE MORE FISH WITH THIS CLASSIC RIG

By Curtis Niedermier

PHOTOS BY KEVIN PIEPER

**A**s a former drill sergeant in the U.S. Army, James Watson is a pretty tough guy, but he's still not afraid to pull out a spinning rod and finesse up a few keepers by twitching a weightless worm just under the surface when the situation requires it. His technique, while not entirely unique, is a slightly different approach from the norm.

### The Worm

Watson uses 6-inch straight-tail worms such as the Luck-E-Strike Live Motion Series Con Man and rigs them Texas style with a 3/0 offset round-bend worm hook.

Favorite colors include Merthiolate, which is a bright red-orange color, black, and an off-white milky brown color he calls night crawler. Generally, the brighter colors get used in clear water, and the darker colors get used in stained water.

### Tackle

Here's where Watson really strays from the path.

"I like to throw it on 10-pound-test Maxima Ultragreen monofilament and a 6 1/2-foot, medium-action Waft bait-casting rod with a Bass Pro Shops Johnny Morris CarbonLite reel," he says. "Vary rarely do I use a spinning rod. A lot of guys will throw a spinning rod with 10-pound braid and an 8-pound fluoro leader, and that will work. But I found that I can get a lot out of the right kind of stretch and pull. You don't want to be too quick on the draw [when setting the hook].

That's a mistake that people make when visually fishing for bass with a floating worm. If you have braided line and you have a fluorocarbon leader, your reaction time can almost snatch it away."

The short length and medium action of the baitcasting rod allow it to load up on the cast even with the light worm. Watson says he can really whip the bait a good distance, and with roll-casts and careful targeting, can place it right where he wants it.

### When Watson Uses It

Prespawn, spawn and early postspawn all fall within the window of opportunity when a weightless worm can be fished in shallow water effectively.

"That time of year I have a rod-and-reel combo set up just for it," Watson says.

The primary limiting factor is water clarity.

"Anything real super muddy where you can't see that thing more than a foot away, that's just too dirty," says Watson. "This is a visual technique. In off-colored water it's still effective depending on how aggressive those fish are guarding or set up on the beds.

"In the prespawn it's effective to cover water – and during the spawn. In postspawn it's very effective to just slow down and throw it ahead of you, and you're looking for bass that are still guarding their old beds."

## Speed of Approach

In the prespawn and spawn, especially, Watson fires casts into areas where he thinks there might be a bed or a staging fish, works the worm a few times quickly, and then hits the next target, effectively covering water.

"It doesn't require a lot of twitching. Just throw it, let it sink a little bit and keep your foot on the trolling motor. A lot of times the fish will come up and show themselves. That's the key, too. It's critical that you see which direction he's coming from. That's why I love my Costa sunglasses – for being able to see the fish boil on the worm. That is a catchable fish. It might not be catchable right away, but you need to make a waypoint or mental note of where he is and come back and make a really long blind-cast.

"I mostly keep it just under the surface," he adds. "Very rarely during prespawn and spawn do I let it go too far down. Sometimes after the postspawn I'll tend to let it sink a little bit more. It just depends on what I'm seeing at the time."

In the postspawn, the "spot" that a bass is using gets bigger, says Watson, because the fish is no longer locked down. They "loosen up" in an area. He still covers water with the worm, but instead of making a specific, targeted cast, he fires a blind-cast out in front and slowly works the worm back to the boat with soft twitches or pulls.

Settling on the perfect cadence takes trial and error, but in many cases Watson believes less is more.

"I catch a lot of fish I see just by throwing it in front of him and letting it sit," he says. "Usually, it's just a *twitch-twitch-pause*. Just keep on watching it. It's important that you watch your bait all the way."

## Hooking Up

Watson's gear is chosen particularly for getting good hooksets, but technique is important, too.

"You need to watch them turn on it," he says. "Let them eat it, turn and move on it, then use a sweep-set."

If he's missing too many fish on the weightless worm, Watson adds a No. 2 mosquito stinger hook with about a 1-inch-long (or shorter) piece of 50-pound-test braid. The stinger gets attached to the bend of the worm hook and dangles freely behind.

"That makes it impossible to thread the nose of another worm on the hook, so you have to cut the line off and reverse-thread the hook – pushing the [worm hook's] eye through the underside of the worm," he says. ■





# GROWING GIANTS

HOW BIG CAN A BASS THEORETICALLY AND PRACTICALLY GET?

By TJ Maglio



**T**he sight of a truly giant bass lolling on the surface while trying to shake a lure or being pulled triumphantly from a weigh-in bag is the fuel that drives many bass anglers. Sure, numbers are great, but how many anglers wouldn't trade a 50-fish day for a single shot at a teener?

The pursuit of trophy bass has created an entire industry; from rods, reels and giant swimbaits, to web forums and YouTube channels dedicated to chasing giants. For the fishermen involved in that chase, hidden behind all the industry and media attention and obsession is a simple question: How big can a bass get?

The current world-record largemouth is held jointly by Georgia's George Perry and Japan's Manabu

Kurita. Perry caught a 22-pound, 4-ounce bass in 1932, and in 2009 Kurita landed one that weighed .96 ounce more – not enough of a difference per International Game Fish Association rules to be deemed the new record.

In addition to those giants, most bass anglers know the story of "Dottie," certainly among the most famous bass ever caught, so named because of a telltale spot on her gill plate. She was targeted every season by big-bass seekers in California's Dixon Lake and caught multiple times. In the most noteworthy catch in 2006, Dottie pulled a certified scale down to 25 pounds, 1 ounce, but she didn't get submitted to the record books because she was accidentally foul-hooked. A couple years later – identified by the dot – she

was found floating dead and weighed about 19 pounds.

From an empirical perspective, we've got a pretty good idea of how big a bass can get, and it's around 25 pounds. In the 77 years between Perry's record catch and Kurita's in 2009, an astronomical number of hours have been spent probing the best bass waters of the world by millions of anglers, and we've only seen three fish caught that weighed more than 22 pounds (and one other that weighed exactly 22).

This is not to say the world record won't be broken, just that the odds are likely that we've got a pretty good idea of the upper limit of largemouth growth potential. The interesting story, though, is how and what factors influence whether a bass will reach that potential.



COURTESY DAVID SWENIDSEID

## HOW BASS GROW

Like almost all fish, bass are considered indeterminate growers, meaning they don't ever stop growing. You might think this means there is no upper limit to their maximum attainable size, but in reality the growth begins to taper off to almost indistinguishable levels as they reach the ends of their natural lives, which is why we've never seen a 40-inch, 55-pound largemouth.

A 22-pound-plus bass such as the one caught by Manabu Kurita (shown above) from Lake Biwa is at the peak of its life, and the product of optimum genetics and growing conditions.



PHOTO BY D.W. REED II

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Bass are cold-blooded animals, and their metabolism is directly related to the water temperature. Studies have found that the maximum growth for largemouths occurs at water temperatures around 77 degrees, which is why bass tend to achieve a larger maximum size in the South, where the water temperature remains near peak levels longer during the season.

Other locational factors include water quality – obviously bass in more conducive water conditions get bigger faster than those stressed by poor water quality – and habitat, as bass need the proper mix of cover and structure to live long enough to reach their maximum size potential.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

## GENETICS

Female Florida-strain bass grow to be larger than northern-strain largemouth bass, and the vast majority of the truly giant bass (more than 13 pounds) studied have had at least some Florida-strain DNA in them. The California giants and most Texas lunkers are the result of someone stocking Florida bass in those states in the past.



PHOTO BY DAVID A. BROWN

## FORAGE SPECIES AND ABUNDANCE

The availability of high-calorie, abundant prey species is also paramount to bass reaching their maximum growth potential. Many of the entries on the bass all-time list were caught from lakes stocked with trout or gizzard shad – or lakes benefiting from the forage boom caused by “new reservoir effect,” which occurs when a lake is first flooded and the prey fish populations skyrocket.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER IDOL/JENGBRETSON UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

## POPULATION DYNAMICS

Bass maximum size is also heavily impacted by competition. Too many bass will cause a shortage of resources, which slows growth and causes stunted populations. The most productive lakes for giant bass will also have a healthy size structure across all species (including forage), and there will likely be some source of regular mortality – whether natural or man-made (angling).



PHOTO COURTESY CLAM OUTDOORS

## AGE HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH IT

Interestingly, in most population studies, the largest bass sampled are not necessarily the oldest. An exhaustive study of bass in the coastal waterways of North Carolina sampled bass up to 13 years old. The average size of the oldest fish was less than 3 pounds. Another study found that after about age 8, the growth curve for largemouth and smallmouth bass in New York essentially flattens. What this means is that, although older bass have had more time to grow to larger size, age is likely a secondary factor in overall growth, and the general health of a fishery is the real key. Thus, a 5-year-old bass from one lake could easily be heavier than a 9-year-old bass in another. ■

# LEAVING FISH TO FIND FISH

DOES THIS OLD ADAGE STILL HOLD TRUE?

By Joe Balog

**“Y**ou don’t leave fish to find fish” is one of the few rigid rules of old in tournament bass fishing, but is it still true today?

Veteran pros Larry Nixon and Mark Rose have their own opinions on the matter.

## Rose: Read the situation and adjust

As one of the sport’s greatest offshore anglers, Rose has learned over the years how to run and gun using electronics and to locate fish that are willing to bite. As a result, he’s more inclined to risk leaving fish to go in search of others that he has a better chance of catching.

Yet, it’s not easy for him to explain when and why to make a move.

“It’s all by feel,” Rose insists.

Starting with a basic understanding of average tournament catch rates helps Rose decide in practice whether he’s on the right quality of fish or if he should keep moving, but it’s the first day of the event that ultimately dictates Rose’s approach.

“Day one is evaluation day,” he says. “It sets the pace and lets me know what I need to catch.”

When Rose likes his chances for a high finish, he often gambles right off the bat, taking advantage of the security blanket of a decent limit.

“I’ll catch five, then switch and throw a big bait to

catch one big fish, then leave.”

In tougher conditions, or when he’s catching mostly small fish, Rose’s first instinct is to try to trigger the bigger fish in a school.

Occasionally, this is through trial and error of big-fish lure choices, but more often, it’s a matter of firing ‘em up.

“When I can’t catch fish that I know are there, I try to figure out why. Sometimes all I need to do is finesse fish and get one to bite, and it changes things with the whole school.”

However, Rose is quick to point out that if things don’t work out, he’ll be more than happy to pack up camp.

“A tournament fisherman doesn’t have all day; he has eight hours. And there’s a biting school somewhere.”



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD



PHOTO BY PATTERSON LEITH

## Nixon: Persistence pays

Nixon is a bit more hard-headed than Rose.

After three practice days on the water, if an angler of Nixon’s stature has only located bass in one section of the lake, you can bet he’s going to set up shop there.

His theory is based on the belief that if a tournament pro couldn’t locate multiple productive areas in extra-long practice days, what makes him think he could find one on the fly during competition? If anything, abandoning an area is likely to fill an angler with self-doubt.

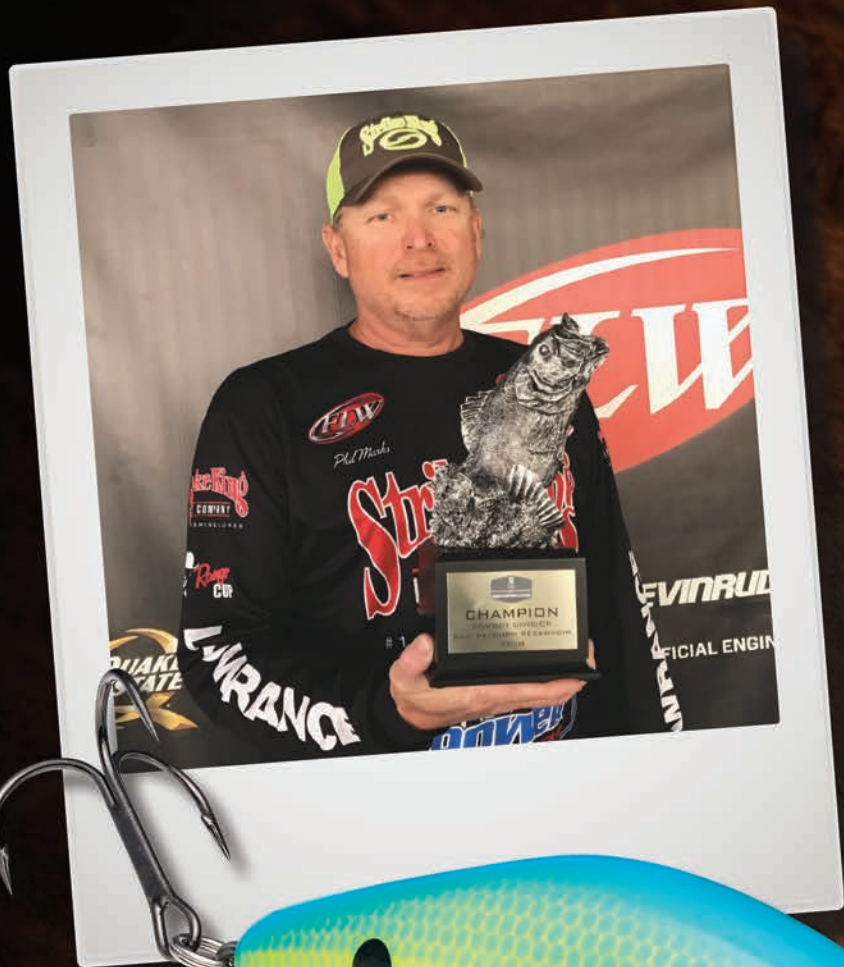
“If you find fish in only one area and leave it, immediately your confidence goes down,” the General concludes. As a tournament angler, nothing’s worse than waning confidence. “Sure, if I’ve hammered on the fish for two [competition] days and I’ve run out of fish, I’ll move and go fishing. But, if an area’s big enough, I’ll never leave it.”

Here, it’s impossible to argue with Nixon’s lifelong competitive experience.

“Forty years has proven it to me: If I stay around where the fish are, I’m gonna have a good tournament, and even win one now and then.

“There’s always a way to catch a few fish. It’s usually just a bait change or a timing deal, but there’s always a way.”

Tournament bass fishing presents more variables than any other sport, and as a result, there are dozens of approaches to competitive strategy. When it comes to the question of whether to wait it out with a known population of fish or move on in search of greener pastures, the situation might dictate the decision, but ultimately it’s an angler’s willingness – or lack thereof – to start fresh mid-tournament that determines whether or not he’s game to gamble. ■



# Phil Marks

T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing  
League Event Champion  
January 6, 2018  
Sam Rayburn Reservoir  
27 pounds, 8 ounces

Second Place:  
19 pounds 12 ounces

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October 11, 2012  
Sam Rayburn Reservoir  
32 pounds, 12 ounces



# OFFSHORE IN FLORIDA

HOW JT KENNEY TRACKS DOWN PRESPAWN BASS OFF THE BANK IN THE SUNSHINE STATE



PHOTO BY CHRIS BURGAN

When other prespawn and spawn patterns fade out, JT Kenney falls back to hard-bottom shell beds to find staging bass.

**"P**respawn" is a fairly nebulous term when applied to bass fishing in the state of Florida.

Depending on the weather, you might be able to find a prespawn pattern in January and in June of the same year.

JT Kenney will tell you that this prolonged will-they-spawn, won't-they-spawn? game comprises one of the biggest hang-ups for out-of-town anglers who aren't used to the unusual ways of Florida-strain bass. Fortunately for him, the Florida pro has figured out something that lends itself not only to consistent results during this wishy-washy period, but also to some giant bags, as his 27-pound, 3-ounce limit the last day of the 2017 FLW Tour event on the Harris Chain illustrated.

The pattern? Targeting bass relating to hard-bottom areas created by offshore mussel shell beds, which attract crawfish, baitfish and other forage species that bass eat.

"People always think of grass when it comes to Florida, because we go to

lakes like Okeechobee and Toho," says Kenney. "But there's a lot of good fishing offshore for guys that know."

## Shelling Out

First off, when Kenney says "off-shore," don't imagine he's fishing ledges in 15 to 20 feet of water or randomly out in the middle of the lake. Kenney's best offshore shell beds tend to be in 4 to 7 feet of water, situated in areas with one key component.

"Current," says Kenney. "Mussels are filtration feeders, and they can't move. So they need current to eat. You're not going to find them in the backs of pockets or anything."

Current is usually wind-driven in Florida (though some systems connected by canals and rivers have actual flow). Since wind is unpredictable, however, mussels tend to colonize in places where any current is enhanced; namely, the mouths of canals or atop humps. The canals are the easiest places to search, according to Kenney, who often finds

shell beds within 100 yards of the mouth of a canal, right along the channel edges. The humps can be much harder to find, so Kenney looks for any area with a nearby drop. Since most Florida lakes are bowl-shaped, a drop of even a foot or two elevates a hump enough to position a mussel where it should be able to catch the current it needs to feed and survive.

## When to Go Deep

Since prespawn often overlaps the actual spawn, most anglers depend on bed-fishing as opposed to focusing on prespawn tactics in a tournament scenario due to the lure of visibly seeing fish being too strong for many to resist. And even if they do find a prespawn pattern, they'll usually opt for one that involves fishing vegetation.

Kenney will do the same, but what usually keys him on to the shell-bed bite is when he's seeing a lack of quality bass on the beds.

"If I'm seeing a ton of males on the beds for a few days in a row, but no big

girls, that tells me the big girls are usually on the shell beds,” Kenney explains. “There is usually a lot of bait around them, so that’s where they’ll stage before and after spawning.”

That’s the exact scenario he found at the Harris Chain event. On day three, he got a lot of bites fishing for spawners up in the pads, though without getting a sniff of anything big. On day four, he stopped on a shell bed, caught a 7-pounder almost immediately and had more than 20 pounds before 10 a.m.

Another key clue is the weather; specifically, cold fronts and warm-ups. Florida bass tend to move offshore temporarily when there’s a dip in the temperature. Even if everything seems prime for spawning, the big girls will often stage back out on the shell beds after a cool-down before going shallow once it warms up again.

## Offshore is Offshore

Fishing shell beds in Florida might be something new for many anglers, but catching fish on them is pretty similar to anywhere else. Florida’s offshore bass are triggered by the same arsenal



A lipless crankbait is Kenney’s go-to lure when he’s sampling a shell bed.

of baits employed on any other lake – crankbaits, swimbaits, jigs, Carolina rigs, etc.

For Kenney, one lure stands out more than most: a lipless crankbait. No matter how big the shell bed, there will be grass nearby (it’s Florida, after all). A lipless crankbait can be ripped out of grass without killing the lure’s action, which makes it ideal for throwing past a shell bed and reeling back over it. If the lure encounters any grass before reaching the shell bed, a good rip or two can usually clean it. However, Kenney doesn’t let the rips stop once his lure is over the hard-bottom clearing.

“I like to put some action into it,” says Kenney of his retrieve style with a lipless crankbait. “You’ll see a lot of guys just cast it out and reel it in. I pop it, twitch it, rip it. I never just reel it in. You want it to look like you would a crankbait on a normal offshore spot, deflecting off the bottom.”

Just as the same lures used elsewhere also apply to Florida’s offshore bite, so do similar tactics. For instance, the shell-bed bite in Florida is a timing deal. It’s worth stopping on a shell bed multiple times throughout the day to determine if there is a morning or afternoon window for best results. ■

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# MEET THE 2018 FLW TOUR FIELD

THE 2018 FLW TOUR WILL FEATURE 188 OF THE BEST BASS ANGLERS ON THE PLANET. THERE ARE NEW FACES, OLD FAVORITES AND A FEW FOLKS RETURNING TO THE TOUR AFTER SOME TIME AWAY. HERE'S A CLOSER LOOK AT HOW THE ROSTER BREAKS DOWN.

(ALL STATS ARE CURRENT AS OF JAN. 10 UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED.)

## CURRENT HIGH EARNERS ON TOUR




**DAVID DUDLEY**  
\$3,556,409.75



**SCOTT MARTIN**  
\$2,714,770



**MARK ROSE**  
\$2,337,294.73



**BRYAN THRIFT**  
\$2,238,482



**CLARK WENDLANDT**  
\$2,169,033



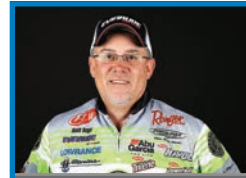
**ANDY MORGAN**  
\$2,154,057.31



**ANTHONY GAGLIARDI**  
\$2,058,541



**DARREL ROBERTSON**  
\$1,924,056.53



**SCOTT SUGGS**  
\$1,835,245.14



**LARRY NIXON**  
\$1,814,787



**JT KENNEY**  
\$1,524,823.50



**KOBY KREIGER**  
\$1,473,808.01



**JIM MOYNAGH**  
\$1,389,278.30



**SCOTT CANTERBURY**  
\$1,229,644.50



**TERRY BOLTON**  
\$1,083,734.98



**JAY YELAS**  
\$1,047,079



**JIM TUTT**  
\$1,023,958.73



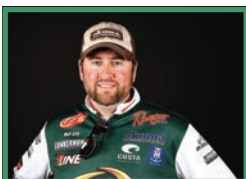
**GLENN BROWNE**  
\$1,002,980.50



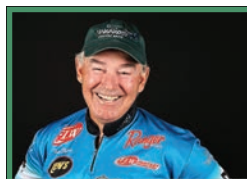
**JOHN COX**  
\$994,224



**CODY MEYER**  
\$938,289



**MATT AREY**  
\$884,387



**TOM MONSOOR**  
\$858,585.64

**\$68,017,086.27**  
The combined FLW earnings of every 2018 FLW Tour pro.

## PROS WITH MORE THAN 1 TOUR-LEVEL WIN

Scott Martin – 8  
 Mark Rose – 6  
 David Dudley – 5  
 Bryan Thrift – 5  
 Anthony Gagliardi – 4  
 Clark Wendlandt – 4  
 Larry Nixon – 4  
 John Cox – 3  
 JT Kenney – 3  
 Matt Arey – 2



## WHERE THEY'RE FROM

Texas – 22  
 Alabama – 18  
 Florida – 15  
 Tennessee – 12  
 Georgia – 13  
 Arkansas – 12  
 Kentucky – 12  
 Oklahoma – 12  
 South Carolina – 9  
 California – 9  
 Louisiana – 6  
 Minnesota – 6  
 Indiana – 5  
 Missouri – 5  
 North Carolina – 5  
 Ontario – 4  
 Wisconsin – 4  
 Illinois – 3  
 Virginia – 3  
 Michigan – 2  
 Pennsylvania – 2  
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 Maryland – 1  
 Mississippi – 1  
 Nebraska – 1  
 Ohio – 1  
 Oregon – 1  
 West Virginia – 1

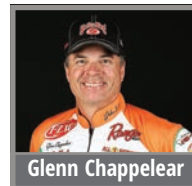
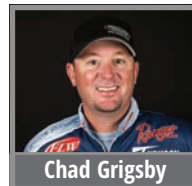
## NEW FACES

The 2018 roster includes 50 pros who did not fish a single regular-season FLW Tour event in 2017 and 33 pros who have never fished an FLW Tour Major event as a pro. Among them, there are 25 official FLW Tour rookies – pros who've never fished from the front of the boat in any Tour-level event with FLW or the Bassmaster Elite Series. The rookie list is below. Anyone indicated by an asterisk fished the entire 2017 FLW Tour season as a co-angler.

Taylor Ashley	Cameron Gautney	David Nichol
Matt Becker	Cody Hahner	Craig Rozema
Clint Brown	Steven Hatala*	Tyler Stewart
Tim Cales*	Miles Howe	Joe Thompson
William Campbell	Freddy Hurley	Andy Wicker
Todd Castledine	Rob Jordan	David Wootton*
Russell Cecil	David Larson*	Ronald Young*
Sheldon Collings	Wes Logan	
Matt Garner	Greg Mansfield*	

## OLD FACES

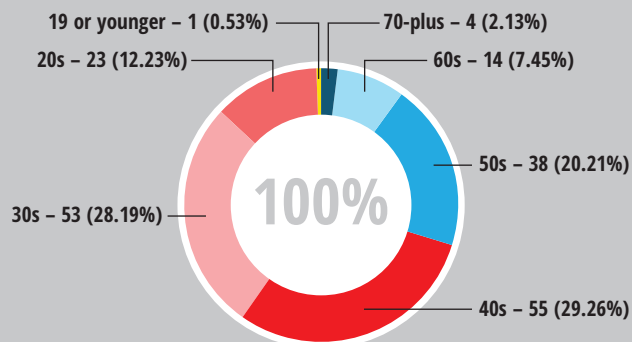
Five pros who have fished at least 75 Tour-level events with FLW, but did not fish last season, are returning in 2018, including:



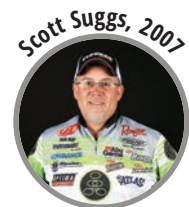
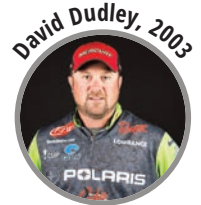
## AGE

Gary Yamamoto, at age 74, was the oldest angler on Tour when the season kicked off in late January. Jimmy Houston, Nick Gainey and Dave Smith are all 70-plus, too. Sheldon Collings, whose birthday is in early February, was the youngest at age 19.

As of Jan. 25, which was the first day of the first Tour event, here's the age breakdown:



## CUP CHAMPIONS



# 2018 TOUR ROSTER

**JASON ABRAM** | Piney Flats, Tenn.  
**DEAN ALEXANDER** | Georgetown, Texas  
**MATT AREY** | Shelby, N.C.  
**TAYLOR ASHLEY** | Warrior, Ala.  
**SCOTT ASHMORE** | Broken Arrow, Okla.  
**JUSTIN ATKINS** | Florence, Ala.  
**TODD AUTEN** | Lake Wylie, S.C.  
**EVAN BARNES** | Hot Springs, Ark.  
**CLAYTON BATTS** | Macon, Ga.  
**MATT BECKER** | Finleyville, Pa.  
**ROBERT BEHRLE** | Hoover, Ala.  
**ZACK BIRGE** | Blanchard, Okla.  
**DARYL BIRON** | South Windsor, Conn.  
**DERRICK BLAKE** | Rockwood, Tenn.  
**RANDY BLAUKAT** | Joplin, Mo.  
**GREG BOHANNAN** | Bentonville, Ark.  
**TERRY BOLTON** | Paducah, Ky.  
**ALLEN BOYD** | Salem, Ind.  
**CHRISTOPHER BRASHER** | Longview, Texas  
**JIMMY BREWER** | Marshall, Texas  
**AARON BRITT** | Yuba City, Calif.  
**CHASE BROOKS** | Iraan, Texas  
**CLINT BROWN** | Bainbridge, Ga.  
**GLENN BROWNE** | Ocala, Fla.  
**KEITH BRYAN** | Novato, Calif.  
**GRAE BUCK** | Harleysville, Pa.  
**TIM CALES** | Sandstone, W. Va.  
**WILLIAM CAMPBELL** | Middlesboro, Ky.  
**SCOTT CANTERBURY** | Odenville, Ala.  
**TODD CASTLEDINE** | Nacogdoches, Texas  
**RUSSELL CECIL** | Willis, Texas  
**RYAN CHANDLER** | Hebron, Ind.  
**GLENN CHAPPELEAR** | Acworth, Ga.  
**JOEY CIFUENTES** | Clinton, Ark.  
**BRANDON COBB** | Greenwood, S.C.  
**SHELDON COLLINGS** | Grove, Okla.  
**RAMIE COLSON JR.** | Cadiz, Ky.  
**KYLE CORTIANA** | Broken Arrow, Okla.  
**JOHN COX** | DeBary, Fla.  
**SHIRLEY CRAIN** | Fort Smith, Ark.  
**WADE CURTISS** | Meadow Vista, Calif.  
**ALEX DAVIS** | Albertville, Ala.  
**CLENT DAVIS** | Montevallo, Ala.  
**DARRELL DAVIS** | Dover, Fla.  
**BILL DAY** | Frankfort, Ky.  
**JOHN DEVERE** | Berea, Ky.  
**JIM DILLARD** | West Monroe, La.  
**JEFF DOBSON** | Bartlesville, Okla.  
**SCOTT DOBSON** | Clarkston, Mich.  
**BRADLEY DORTCH** | Atmore, Ala.  
**JOSH DOUGLAS** | Isle, Minn.  
**KURT DOVE** | Del Rio, Texas  
**DAVID DUDLEY** | Lynchburg, Va.  
**TONY DUMITRAS** | Winston, Ga.  
**LUKE DUNKIN** | Lawrenceburg, Tenn.  
**RICHIE EAVES** | Nauvoo, Ill.  
**CHARLIE EVANS** | Berea, Ky.  
**AUSTIN FELIX** | Eden Prairie, Minn.  
**MARK FISHER** | Wauconda, Ill.  
**TIM FREDERICK** | Leesburg, Fla.  
**ANTHONY GAGLIARDI** | Prosperity, S.C.  
**NICK GAINEY** | Charleston, S.C.  
**MATT GARNER** | Seminole, Okla.  
**CAMERON GAUTNEY** | Muscle Shoals, Ala.  
**CHRIS GOSSELAAR** | Fresno, Calif.  
**MATT GREENBLATT** | Port St. Lucie, Fla.  
**CHAD GRIGSBY** | Maple Grove, Minn.  
**BUDDY GROSS** | Chickamauga, Ga.  
**JEFF GUSTAFSON** | Keewatin, Ontario, Canada  
**CODY HAHNER** | Wausau, Wis.  
**BRADLEY HALLMAN** | Norman, Okla.  
**STEVEN HATALA** | St. Clair Shores, Mich.  
**RANDY HAYNES** | Counce, Tenn.  
**DYLAN HAYS** | Sheridan, Ark.  
**BILLY HINES** | Vacaville, Calif.  
**TODD HOLLOWELL** | Fishers, Ind.  
**JAMIE HORTON** | Centerville, Ala.  
**JIMMY HOUSTON** | Cookson, Okla.  
**MILES HOWE** | San Juan Capistrano, Calif.  
**REX HUFF** | Corbin, Ky.  
**JOHN HUNTER** | Shelbyville, Ky.  
**FREDDY HURLEY** | Somerset, Ky.  
**BILL HUTCHISON** | Bessemer, Ala.  
**ERIC JACKSON** | Walling, Tenn.  
**CARL JOCUMSEN** | Frisco, Texas  
**JASON JOHNSON** | Dawsonville, Ga.  
**CHRIS JOHNSTON** | Peterborough, Ontario, Canada  
**CORY JOHNSTON** | Cavan, Ontario, Canada  
**JIM JONES** | Big Bend, Wis.  
**ROB JORDAN** | Flowery Branch, Ga.  
**CODY KELLEY** | Conway, Ark.  
**JAY KENDRICK** | Grant, Ala.  
**JT KENNEY** | Palm Bay, Fla.  
**ROB KILBY** | Hot Springs, Ark.  
**BRAD KNIGHT** | Lancing, Tenn.

**KOBY KREIGER** | Bokeelia, Fla.  
**JASON LAMBERT** | Michie, Tenn.  
**DAVID LARSON** | Mound, Minn.  
**BRIAN LATIMER** | Belton, S.C.  
**JEREMY LAWYER** | Sarcoxie, Mo.  
**SHANE LEHEW** | Catawba, N.C.  
**SHANE LINEBERGER** | Lincoln, N.C.  
**WES LOGAN** | Springville, Ala.  
**RICHARD LOWITZKI** | Hampshire, Ill.  
**GREG MANSFIELD** | Olathe, Kan.  
**SCOTT MARTIN** | Clewiston, Fla.  
**LENDELL MARTIN JR.** | Nacogdoches, Texas  
**BILLY MCCAGHREN** | Mayflower, Ark.  
**CHRIS MCCALL** | Palmer, Texas  
**JOHNNY MCCOMBS** | Morris, Ala.  
**BILL MCDONALD** | Greenwood, Ind.  
**TIM MCDONALD** | Prestonsburg, Ky.  
**BRANDON MCMILLAN** | Clewiston, Fla.  
**JARED MCMILLAN** | Belle Glade, Fla.  
**JASON MENINGER** | Saint Augustine, Fla.  
**CODY MEYER** | Auburn, Calif.  
**KERRY MILNER** | Bono, Ark.  
**KURT MITCHELL** | Milford, Del.  
**YUSUKE MIYAZAKI** | Forney, Texas  
**TOM MONSOOR** | La Crosse, Wis.  
**HARRY MOORE** | Valley, Ala.  
**ANDY MORGAN** | Dayton, Tenn.  
**CHAD MORGENTHALER** | Reeds Spring, Mo.  
**BOB MORIN** | Seymour, Tenn.  
**TROY MORROW** | Eastanollee, Ga.  
**BRANDON MOSLEY** | Choctaw, Okla.  
**JIM MOULTON** | Merced, Calif.

**JIM MOYNAGH** | Carver, Minn.  
**SHAWN MURPHY** | Nicholasville, Ky.  
**BRITT MYERS** | Clover, S.C.  
**MICHAEL NEAL** | Dayton, Tenn.  
**CHRIS NEAU** | New Orleans, La.  
**DAVID NICHOL** | Gainesville, Ga.  
**JAMES NIGGEMEYER** | Van, Texas  
**LARRY NIXON** | Bee Branch, Ark.  
**JORDAN OSBORNE** | Longview, Texas  
**ROBERT PEARSON** | Herndon, Va.  
**PETE PONDS** | Madison, Miss.  
**BRETT PREUETT** | Monroe, La.  
**CHAD RANGLES** | Elkhorn, Neb.  
**TOM REDINGTON** | Royse City, Texas  
**MATT REED** | Madisonville, Texas  
**CLARK REEHM** | Elm Grove, La.  
**JIMMY REESE** | Witter Springs, Calif.  
**JASON REYES** | Huffman, Texas  
**CURTIS RICHARDSON** | Belleville, Ontario, Canada  
**DARREL ROBERTSON** | Jay, Okla.  
**MARK ROSE** | West Memphis, Ark.  
**ZELL ROWLAND** | Montgomery, Texas  
**CRAIG ROZEMA** | Simpsonville, S.C.  
**CASEY SCANLON** | Lake Ozark, Mo.  
**BRYAN SCHMITT** | Deale, Md.  
**BRAXTON SETZER** | Montgomery, Ala.  
**WILLIAM SHELTON III** | La Crosse, Va.  
**CAPT. BLAKE SMITH** | Lakeland, Fla.  
**DAVID SMITH** | Edmond, Okla.  
**JEFF SPRAGUE** | Point, Texas  
**MATTHEW STEFAN** | Junction City, Wis.

**TYLER STEWART** | West Monroe, La.  
**SCOTT SUGGS** | Alexander, Ark.  
**MIKE SURMAN** | Boca Raton, Fla.  
**PETER THLIVEROS** | Saint Augustine, Fla.  
**TIMMY THOMPSON** | Myrtle Beach, S.C.  
**FURMAN (JOE) THOMPSON** | Clayton, Ga.  
**BRYAN THRIFT** | Shelby, N.C.  
**DENNIS TIETJE** | Roanoke, La.  
**RUSTY TRANCYGIER** | Hahira, Ga.  
**J. TODD TUCKER** | Moultrie, Ga.  
**JIM TUTT** | Longview, Texas  
**ANDREW UPSHAW** | Tulsa, Okla.  
**JOHN VOYLES** | Petersburg, Ind.  
**JAMES WATSON** | Lampe, Mo.  
**JOSHUA WEAVER** | Macon, Ga.  
**JOSEPH WEBSTER** | Winfield, Ala.  
**KYLE WEISENBURGER** | Ottawa, Ohio  
**CLARK WENDLANDT** | Leander, Texas  
**ANDY WICKER** | Pomaria, S.C.  
**SCOTT WILEY** | Bay Minette, Ala.  
**DAVID WILLIAMS** | Maiden, N.C.  
**BARRY WILSON** | Birmingham, Ala.  
**MATT WITTEKIEND** | Angleton, Texas  
**KENNETH (BOO) WOODS** | London, Ky.  
**MICHAEL WOOLEY** | Collierville, Tenn.  
**DAVID WOOTTON** | Collierville, Tenn.  
**GARY YAMAMOTO** | Palestine, Texas  
**JAY YELAS** | Lincoln City, Ore.  
**ANDY YOUNG** | Mound, Minn.  
**RONALD YOUNG** | Lake Wales, Fla.



## MORE FUN THAN PROFIT

WIN, LOSE OR DRAW, JAMES WATSON IS HAVING A BLAST

By Colin Moore

PHOTOS BY KEVIN PIEPER

If James Watson could talk bass into biting as well as he can talk people into buying houses, his den would be festooned with Forrest Wood Cups. In 2006 and 2007, Watson was not only Realty Executives' top salesman in his home state of Missouri, but the international realtor's top salesman in the world. Then he walked away from it all in 2013 to fish full-time.

Since then, Watson has carved out a niche for himself in the tournament realm. He's one of only a few still-active pros to have qualified for both the Bassmaster Classic (in 2016, finishing 15th) and the Forrest Wood Cup. Most importantly to him, Watson is doing what he always wanted to do with his life, and just being able to fish tournaments is part of the payoff.

### Joining the Pro Ranks

Watson is committed to the Tour's pro side now, but if he had it to do all over again, probably he would have continued to fish as a co-angler for a

couple more years before going to the front of the boat in 2010.

"I made the switch too early. I came to that conclusion after I got my butt handed to me a few times," he says. "I first talked to Robbie Dodson about fishing the Tour in 2009. He was going to fish as a pro, and I was going to fish as a co-angler, and we were going to split the bills. I grinded out that season, but I got it in my head that fishing out of the back of the boat in a tournament wasn't for me, so I made the jump in 2010. I was fishing, but I was still in the realty business, too."

A couple of dismal seasons followed, yet Watson felt that he had the skill to do better. One distraction was his Watson & Associates realty business, whose office was just outside the gates of Fort Leonard Wood between St. Louis and Springfield, Mo. Watson had opened it a few years earlier following a nine-year stint in the Army, where his last assignment was as a drill instructor ("I was mean only when I had to be; otherwise, I

was about the way I am now," he says). Once he decided to focus on tournament fishing, he worked out a deal with one of the agents in his office, a retired lieutenant colonel named David Holbrook, to become a silent partner of sorts.

"I said I would be a partner on condition that I didn't have to talk to any customers, and I told David where to mail my checks," recalls Watson. "David is a top producer and a great organizer, and there wasn't anybody better than him to take over. So in 2013, when I made the move to full-time pro, I qualified for the Cup and I won a PAA [Professional Anglers Association] tournament. Of course, I haven't cashed nearly as many tournament checks as commission checks, but I'm satisfied because I was able to go in the direction I wanted to go with my life."

The highlights of Watson's 2017 campaign included a 40th-place finish in the Forrest Wood Cup on Lake Murray and a 10th-place showing in a





Ozarks. In the fall of 2017, he joined seven other teammates in a trip to South Africa to fish for the U.S. against other international teams in the Black Bass World Championships on the Vaal River. The event was an offshoot of the ongoing effort to transform tournament fishing into an Olympic sport.

"[FLW Tour pro] Charlie Evans was one of the promoters of the tournament in this country. At the Lake Cumberland tournament he asked me if I wanted to be on the American team. He also told me I shouldn't take much time thinking about my answer. I said 'heck yes' right then and there. I went for it without hesitation and was glad I did – what an adventure."

"Adventure" being the operative word for Watson. It's the ride, and not necessarily the results, that motivates him in the bass tournament game.

## A Typical Start

Growing up in central Missouri as he did, Watson developed a love of fishing early in his life. His first tournament forays were with his father, Bill, and assort-

ed friends. He developed a taste for the sport through the old Red Man circuit, which eventually gave rise to FLW. Even at the local level, however, Watson's tournament track record in his early years could hardly be labeled meteoric.

"Heck, one reason why I got in the Army was because I went broke fishing tournaments," says Watson, whose favorite fishing partner nowadays is his fiancée, Sheri. "That's a true story, and I tell kids that when they ask me about tournament fishing: If you want to fish tournaments all the time you better know that you're not going to cut a check every time and be prepared for that with other revenue sources. Your principal responsibilities are to pay the bills and support your family – if you have one."

Watson served in the Army for most of the '90s, starting in the Corps of Engineers and finishing as a sergeant in basic combat training at Fort Leonard Wood. Along the way, Watson discovered a couple of things about himself: He was a hustler in the best sense of the word, and he had a way with people. Once he was transferred back to his home state, Watson started

a lawn maintenance business on the side. It thrived, but Watson decided it wasn't a long-term proposition for him. A local real estate broker that utilized Watson's lawn care service suggested that, with his personality and disposition, he shouldn't have any trouble selling houses to soldiers mustering out. Watson didn't need much coaxing; soon afterward, he acquired a realtor's license and opened his own business.

"My first commission check was for \$5,800," remembers Watson. "I thought 'man, that was easy,' and I didn't look back. And here I am today; I gave up at least a quarter of a million dollars a year in real estate commissions to be a full-time fisherman. I finished No. 1 in the world in my [Realty Executives] franchise in 2005 and 2006, and no realty agent in the world closed more units than I did in those two years. But no regrets; I wouldn't change anything – except maybe win more tournaments."

Never at a loss for a wisecrack, Watson's self-effacing humor is one of the traits that has made him popular among his fellow pros. It's not just words, but deeds as well. Prior to a



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weigh-in at the Forrest Wood Cup in Columbia, S.C., last summer, Watson sat down in one of the aerated water tanks, telling a protesting Senior Director of Tournament Operations Bill Taylor that he was suffering from South Carolina's broiling heat. Another time, on the weigh-in stage, Watson wore a face-mask that mimicked Tour great Bryan Thrift – in looks, if not in catch.

Perhaps his ever-present happy-go-lucky demeanor is an offshoot of his self-realization that he isn't a Scott Martin or a David Dudley and doesn't claim to be. Qualifying for championships and capitalizing on opportunities to move up in the standings are more realistic goals, and he gives them all his focus.

## Reflections On Tournament Fishing

Inconsistency has been Watson's biggest nemesis. He put together three solid days when he won the Norris Lake Tour Invitational event in 2016, but has struggled mightily to keep up the pace in other tournaments. In the Costa FLW Series Central Division test on Lake of the Ozarks last season against some of Missouri's best, for instance, he was in third place after the second round. Then he broke one of his own cardinal rules by recycling an area in hopes of catching a third good limit from it. Instead, he caught a single keeper and slipped to 10th in the final standings.

"Boy, did I mess up that one," says the 45-year-old Missouri native, who jokingly describes himself as a "power junk-fisherman." "I hate it when somebody says they should have won, but I should have won that one. Most of the time, I'm not the type who goes in to every tournament trying to win. That's just not a reasonable expectation. What I do is just try to figure out a pattern that will put me in a position for a paycheck or as many points as I can get. But, hey, a win is nice too, and if it's in the cards, then great."

Regardless of the approach he takes to various fisheries, Watson's track record shows that he has his best success in difficult autumn tournaments, whether on Norris or the Ozark lakes of Missouri. Tough fishing is something of an equalizer for him, as he's had a lot of experience scratching out decent limits from waters not known to produce big stringers. The first bass club he joined after entering the military was the

Radcliff Bassmasters near Fort Knox, Ky., where he was stationed for a while. Mainly the club held its tournaments on the Ohio River, Barren River Reservoir and Nolan River Reservoir – none of them having a reputation for producing hefty stringers. One year, Watson won his club's annual Big Bass Award with a fish that weighed 3.33 pounds.

Watson admits that he has some blank spaces in his fishing toolbox to fill in before he reaches the level of expertise he hopes to attain. Fishing ledges is the weakest part of his repertoire and causes him the most frustration. Lakes of the Tennessee River chain such as Kentucky Lake and Guntersville, in particular, aren't high

on his list of favorite fisheries.

"Ledge tournaments are absolutely the scariest for me. I have to undergo psychiatric treatments and take anxiety medicine for a while," he kids. "The thing is, though, when that tournament's all over, it's back to business. I'll put a smile back on my face and look forward to the next one."

His love of tournament fishing might have kept Watson from becoming a sort of Midwestern Donald Trump in the real estate business, but he doesn't second-guess himself and the professional choices he made. Though his roller-coaster tournament career has had its exasperating moments, Watson has experienced enough success – and a load of fun – to



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## ANOTHER PRIMER ON ETHANOL

HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS PROBLEMATIC FUEL ADDITIVE

*By Joe Balog*  
PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

Once perceived as a remedy for rising fuel costs and emissions issues, ethanol has seen its reputation called into question in recent years, especially among boaters. The controversial biofuel is known to cause a multitude of problems within outboard motors – particularly vintage models – and many bass anglers are trying to avoid ethanol-mixed fuels altogether. That’s not as simple as it sounds, as nearly all U.S. gasoline sold at pumps is mixed with ethanol, with about 10 percent of content being the norm.

Ethanol is grain alcohol produced mainly from corn, marketed as a sustainable source of fuel with other advantages such as reduced emissions. It’s ethanol’s other traits and unintended side effects, however, that cause concern among boaters.

One of the biggest problems with ethanol occurs because of its tendency to absorb and mix with water more readily than gasoline. When this occurs within a fuel tank, the result

is “phase separation,” where the ethanol/water combination within the fuel settles to the bottom of the tank.

If this watery material is passed through an outboard, the result can be anything from sluggish performance to engine failure. Once phase separation takes place within a fuel system, no additive can restore the fuel mixture back to normal, and the only real fix is to completely drain the tank.

Ethanol presents additional issues to boaters. Its shelf life is around 90 to 100 days, and old ethanol fuel can readily go bad due to evaporation of certain hydrocarbons and its ability to absorb water. This is especially true when stored at a station or in a boat. In addition, ethanol can cause damage in a variety of ways in outboards or fuel systems by degrading tanks, hoses, seals, etc., not designed to run it.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Ethanol has been phased into our fuel supplies slowly over the last two decades, and most engine builders have reacted accordingly.

While older two-stroke outboards dating back to the mid-1980s might still experience part failures, more modern outboards and boats are being built with components that can stand up to a 10 percent ethanol blend.

To safeguard against other ethanol concerns, the best approach is to try to run new fuel always.

"The overwhelming majority of [fuel] issues that we've seen recently have been related to boats that are left to sit for extended periods of time without being prepped for storage," says Mark Lundgren, service manager at Toho Marine in St. Cloud, Fla.

In fact, most bass boat dealers in warm climates see relatively few ethanol fuel-related problems throughout the year, as tournament bass fishermen typically fish all season and run through their gas tanks much quicker than recreational boaters. Often, pontoon boats – especially those that see action just a few weeks each summer – are the boats in need of service.

But that's not to say that anglers are free and clear of potential problems.

For starters, if you have an older boat, chances are there's already some moisture in its fuel tank. Phase separation occurs suddenly when ethanol-blended fuels reach a certain maximum carrying capacity of water, so even though you may not have problems yet, any further introduction of moisture could be a deal-breaker.

Running new fuel from a busy station is best, and keeping gas tanks filled during down periods can help as well. By reducing the amount of open space within your boat's gas tank, surface-to-air contact of the tank is reduced, thus trimming down on condensation.

Also – good news for bass anglers – the more an outboard is used, the less likely it is to have problems; so get on the water frequently, even if it's just to run your boat around the lake. Another rule of thumb is to avoid running old fuel with new. It's best to take whatever steps necessary to completely drain out the old gas and dry the tank if your boat has sat a year or more.

The ultimate safeguard for future problems is the installation of a fuel/water separator on your rig. Most large, off-shore boats – those that burn thousands of gallons of fuel each year – have one in place, and it will immediately correct any moisture problems that pop up.

While stabilizers and gas treatments have been linked to potential remedies for ethanol woes, none can restore bad fuel. In addition, several sources, including some manufacturers of the stabilizers themselves, report that there is no practical additive that can fully control ethanol/moisture issues. The primary function of these additives is to reduce gumming and lubricate working parts. Some stabilizers absorb slight amounts of water, keeping it within the fuel solution to reduce binding to ethanol. The benefit is figuratively small, yet every little bit helps.

Finally, the ultimate solution is to run ethanol-free fuel. Once very difficult to find, ethanol-free blends are becoming more available, likely due to pressure from boaters, car buffs, and those of us tired of replacing two-stroke leaf blowers and chain saws that have conked out due to fuel issues. Many lakeside and boating communities have an ethanol-free pump somewhere, and major chains, such as Wawa in Florida, are featuring no-ethanol choices at every pump. You'll pay a little more up front, but remain worry-free on the water. ■



Modern boats are designed to be used with ethanol blends, but there are still issues to be aware of if you burn it in your rig.



PHOTO BY MATT BALL

## 4 TIPS FOR FIGHTING FISH FROM A KAYAK

A FORMER NATIONAL CHAMPION'S APPROACH TO IMPROVING LANDING PERCENTAGE



By Matt Ball

**A** lightweight kayak is a great craft for accessing tucked-away areas where a lot of unpressured big bass are waiting. However, the same attributes of a kayak that make it great for access – light weight and compactness – can also make fighting and landing big bass a tough job.

I've learned to deal with the challenge first hand while competing in kayak fishing tournaments, and I've assembled a list of tips based on my experiences to help you land more big fish, too.

### 1. STICK THE HOOKSET

The first step in landing any fish is the hookset, which is much more difficult when sitting in the confines of a kayak than it is in a bass boat. The best strategy I have is to keep slack out of the line when fishing, so when it's time to set the hook I can drive it home in an efficient way.

Proper gear selection and setup are important, too. I prefer a reel with a high-speed retrieve ratio, which helps to remove slack quickly before the hookset. When I first started kayak fishing, I erred toward a loose drag setting, because I thought it was necessary for fighting fish. Consequently, I wasn't getting good hooksets. Now, I tend to tighten my drag down more than I would in other fishing situations.

### 2. KEEP IT PINNED

Coaxing a big fish out of the thick stuff requires more finesse than brute force because the kayak is often moving toward the fight, which makes it tough to horse in

the fish. You're also less mobile in a kayak. That's why I really focus on using the bend in the rod to tire and fight the fish.

Don't worry about your drag being too tight, either. If the fish surges, the boat will move, and the rod will bend. Play the fish by keeping slack out of the line and countering each move with the rod.

Rod length is also important. I generally use 7-foot and 7-foot, 3-inch rods, which are long enough that I can steer my line around the front of the kayak without getting hung up on the rough underside of the hull.

### 3. CONTROL THE BOAT

Boat control depends on the type of kayak you use. With pedal kayaks, such as the Jackson Coosa FD, you have a big advantage by being able to backpedal and keep your hands free to fight the fish. Use the pedal power to counter the wind or current, or to back out of brush, docks and other obstructions.

In a standard paddle kayak you'll mostly need to rely on the rod and reel to fight the fish, but a good lightweight paddle that can be used with one hand is a valuable tool. I prefer the Bending Branches Angler Pro, which I keep across my lap while fishing. Once I hook up, I can use the paddle with either hand to make minor corrections in boat position during the fight. It helps to practice these one-handed maneuvers to learn how to back up and turn the bow either direction.

### 4. NAIL THE LANDING

The last step is landing the fish. Again, gear is important. You need a net that is easily accessible, can be used one-handed and has a handle long enough to reach out and net the fish at the first opportunity. A lot of times that will be the best and only chance.

My favorite net is the YakAttack Leverage Landing Net. It's somewhat oblong, which gives me more reach than a wide, round net, without extra weight.

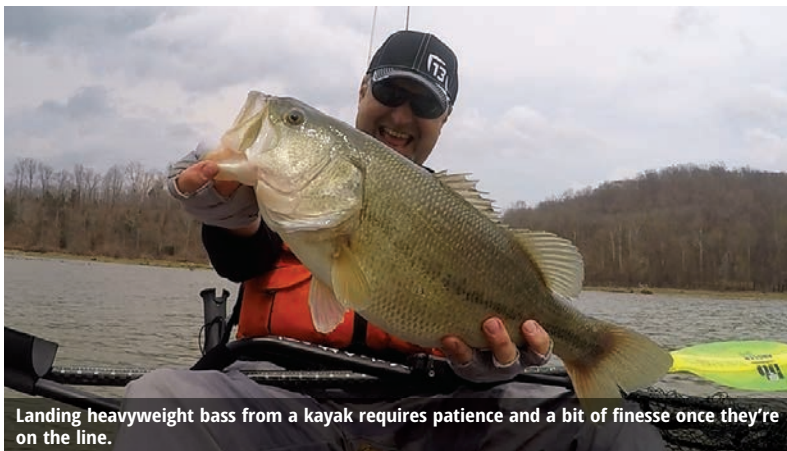
Another important consideration is to keep rods and baits in place so they're not hanging out the front and sides of the kayak where they can grab the line.

Fighting fish in a kayak can be a challenge, but that's part of the fun. With the right gear and a few adjustments in technique, you should be able to rise to the challenge and land more of the big bass that bite.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Ball is a professional kayak angler from Little Hocking, Ohio. He's won more than \$40,000 in a kayak, and in the last three years has earned 21 top-10 finishes and two wins, including the inaugural Kayak Bass Fishing National Championship on Kentucky Lake in 2016.

PHOTO BY MATT BALL



Landing heavyweight bass from a kayak requires patience and a bit of finesse once they're on the line.

## Accessories to Hold You in Place

One of the hindrances when fighting fish from a kayak is that it's tough to hold the boat in place, particularly when you've hooked a giant. The techniques outlined in the article will help you overcome the issue, but there are also a couple of after-market anchoring tools that can keep you locked in place during the fight.

The Power-Pole Micro is one popular option that performs best in skinny water. Most kayak anglers wear the control fob on a lanyard around their neck for quick deployment. The price is about \$595. A built-in battery pack and the spike are sold separately.

For deeper areas, one of my favorite tools is the Anchor Wizard. It's a manual-crank anchor deployment system that lets the angler deploy and stow the anchor with just one hand. For deployment, a clutch system releases with just a short turn of the handle, allowing the anchor to free-fall. Just be mindful of the line when fighting the fish so you don't tangle. The standard kayak anchoring system is \$149.99. A smaller low-profile model is \$99.95 ■



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# GEAR

PRODUCTS AND INSIGHTS TO HELP YOU CATCH FISH



## WHAT'S INSIDE:

Zoom's new Frog might be the most durable surface-buzzing soft bait yet

High-tech, easy-to-use tools from Lowrance and Power-Pole

4 conservation-conscious culling clips

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T OVERLOOK SUB-7-FOOT RODS IN THE LONG-ROD ERA



## ZOOM FROG

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

It's been awhile since somebody brought a buzz frog to market that is truly unique. Leave it to the same company that started the buzz frog craze with the Horny Toad in 2004 to break the mold. While the all-new Zoom Frog has the traditional look of a soft-plastic buzz frog, it's built to do more than zip across thick cover, make racket and leave a bubble trail in its wake. It'll take a serious beating, too.

### First Impression

The Frog is a big-bodied bait at 4 inches long and 1 inch across at the widest point, so it casts a large profile. Zoom designed it with raised eyes, a pointed head, flat legs, boot-style feet and a meaty belly section with a deep hook slot on the bottom to allow for maximum penetration and bite.

What really sets the frog apart from the competition

is the material from which it's made. Zoom wouldn't reveal exactly what it used, but the result is soft to the touch, yet stretches like rubber and is so durable that you can't tear it apart.

### In Action

As with buzz frogs of comparable design, the flat, flimsy legs and boot feet flutter wildly when the bait skims the surface at a steady clip, creating a defined bubble trail and a significant gurgling sound. But that's where the similarities end. Zoom's new buzzer is capable of doing a few tricks that most others can't.

For starters, it's a floater. Even a big 5/0 or 6/0 EWG hook won't sink it. I found this to be a huge plus for incorporating assorted retrieves – from ultra-slow to burning fast – while also delivering some maneuvers usually

reserved for hollow-body baits. I could kill it over open holes in grass or give fish that missed on the first attempt a second chance to eat it.

It can also be worked like a prop bait. By stopping and twitching intermittently, its legs and feet swish and spray water. The action isn't as pronounced as a prop bait's, but it's similar, which is a nice touch when fishing around shallow vegetation or bluegill beds.

As I mentioned, the material is incredibly tough and much more resistant to tearing than traditional soft plastic. I made three different trips before I got into one of those magical frog bites that resulted in a half-dozen blow-ups and five fish weighing 2 to 4 pounds apiece. All of the fish choked the bait and were hooked in the roof of the mouth. A couple were

hooked so deep I had to reach for the pliers. Amazingly, the Frog still looked new with no evidence of wear. FLW Tour pro Troy Morrow of Eastanollee, Ga., reports catching as many as 20 bass on the Frog before it needed to be replaced.

### Final Thoughts

The bait's ability to pull double duty as a buzzer and a floater, coupled with the fact it can take some serious abuse, should make it a good choice just about anytime the conditions favor a buzz frog bite. The Frog traverses thick cover like a 4x4 and churns up plenty of commotion when buzzed on the surface, so it'll shine bright in flat or choppy water. The bait is a little pricey at \$10 for three, but then again, each one lasts so long that it's probably not a bad buy.

**DETAILS:** Length: 4 inches — Colors: 6 — MSRP: \$9.99 for three — Contact: zoombait.com

## DURABLE MATERIAL:

The bait is made using super-stretchy material that resists tearing.



## SMART DESIGN:

Its meaty midsection features a deep hook slot for good penetration with EWG hooks.



## BIG CLOMPERS:

The boot feet catch water and create a deep, gurgling sound on the retrieve.



## Performance Advice

One of the main keys to optimum performance is pairing the frog with the right hook. I threw it with a number of single and double hooks with a variety of keeper styles, and the best overall was a single Owner 5/0 EWG.

Wire and prong-style keepers did a decent job of holding the frog in place, but they eventually pulled out. The material doesn't accept a traditional spring very well, either. Springs equipped with a centering pin like those used on Owner's Double Toad Hook are a much better choice.

No matter which single hook you choose, it's a good idea to skin-hook the point to prevent snagging on vegetation should the bait land upside down in the slop or not right itself for some reason.

Also, don't store the Frog in direct contact with other soft plastics. I did so on purpose to see what would happen, and as suspected a soft-plastic worm melted an imprint into the Frog's back after a few days.

## HITS & MISSES

- + Floats when idle
- + Extremely tough material
- + Works with multiple retrieves
- + Large profile
- + Casts well
- Limited hook choices
- Pricey, though they last awhile

## APPLICATIONS

- It works well around all sorts of flooded vegetation, bushes, docks and over open-water grass flats.
- The bait skips easily under overhanging trees or docks and stays on the hook thanks to the durable material.
- It casts well enough and can be fished fast enough to be a great search bait in shallow water.



## TRIMMED FOR POPPING

A torn nose doesn't render the Zoom Frog useless. Rather than toss a spent bait in the trash, I trimmed off the damaged portion and gave it a popper-style head. Then I could fish it with short twitches just like a popping frog.

I experimented with knives and razor blades, but sharp scissors provided the most uniform cut. The best results were achieved by gripping the head around both eyes, squeezing firmly to make the nose protrude and then making the cut. The cut should be made swiftly at a downward angle to give the frog a slight overbite and create a small cup. ■



# NEW HIGH-TECH HARDWARE FOR CHASING BASS

MODERN ANGLERS SHOULD APPRECIATE RECENT PRODUCT RELEASES FROM LOWRANCE AND POWER-POLE

*By Curtis Niedermier*

**N**owadays, we see as many digital screens on the dash of an FLW Tour pro's boat as there are in the typical nine-to-five office space. It makes sense though. A bass boat is a tournament angler's "office," and all those screens are tools to help them get the job done.

Even if you're not a touring pro, it's worth giving new tech tools a look when they become available, particularly the new equipment that was released by Lowrance and Power-Pole over the last few months. Their latest product iterations are incredibly powerful, yet these "smart systems" were designed to be simple to use.

Here's a rundown.



## Lowrance's Easiest-to-Use Model Yet

Lowrance nailed it on the head when the company came up with the tagline "We find. You fish." to describe its new Hook2 series of budget-friendly fish finders. Basically, Lowrance pooled all the best technology it has developed in its high-end units together into the Hook2 and then simplified the operation with one-touch button access to key menus, basic menu screens, two-plug (power and transducer cable) installation and a pretty slick Autotuning function that adjusts the sonar settings (frequency, sensitivity, etc.) for you. If you've ever been intimidated by menus full of functions and settings, but you're not willing to give up any of the trappings of modern sonar technology, you're probably a Hook2 kind of angler.

Lowrance broke down its Hook2 transducer choices into three groups: TripleShot, SplitShot and Bullet. The TripleShot transducer features 3-in-1 sonar with High CHIRP, SideScan and DownScan. The SplitShot transducer, which can be mounted to a trolling motor or the transom, features 2-in-1 sonar with High CHIRP and DownScan. The Bullet transducer, which is available only on the 4-inch model and can also be mounted to the trolling motor or transom, features Broadband Sounder.

Another changeup in the line is a new "2X" sonar cone that essentially doubles the field of view when using Broadband Sounder and CHIRP sonar.

Hook2 comes with screen sizes of 4, 5, 7, 9 or 12 inches, and Lowrance offers various mapping options. Each model comes fully packaged with everything needed for installation, so there are no additional costs. Prices range from \$99 to \$1,499.

If simple, plug-and-play operation with high-end capabilities is what you're after, check out more details on each Hook2 unit and available options at [Lowrance.com](http://Lowrance.com).

## Power-Pole's Digital Dashboard

Command and control are what you get if you outfit your rig with the new Power-Pole VISION, a 7-inch tablet-like device that connects to accessories in your boat to create what Power-Pole calls a "digital dash."

Power-Pole accessories can be connected via the C-Monster 2.0 wireless control system. Other accessories get



hard-wired to the VISION with an included accessory switch. Once added, you get full control and can even add dimmers, timers or preset functions. Everything from jack plates and running lights to the bilge pump, livewell and sound system can be run off VISION. And because VISION is NMEA 2000 capable, you can also monitor engine data via digital "gauges" and run diagnostics on the water.

That's the operational side of VISION, but it's also a handy tool for finding and sharing fishing information, whether you're a tournament angler practicing for an event or promoting a sponsor, or you just want to enjoy fishing for fun.

VISION utilizes the Android operating system for accessing the web (via Wi-Fi or a personal hot spot) and many fishing

and boating apps, including mapping and satellite imagery programs that make it a handy addition when searching new water. Power-Pole even incorporated a camera, so sharing fish catches on social media pages is even easier.

Other cool features include a "high bright" 7-inch screen that can be read in direct sunlight while wearing polarized glasses, nighttime settings and a swipe-down Water Shade function that prevents spray from activating touch-screen functions. It mounts in dash or on accessory mounts just like most depth finders.

Price is \$1,595. At press time in early January, the VISION system was not yet available, but it should be on the market soon. For more information, visit [Power-Pole.com](http://Power-Pole.com).

## An Even Smarter Charging System

Power-Pole's CHARGE is more than a charger; it's a battery "manager."

For starters, it can be incorporated into the VISION system to show you precise power levels on all batteries. If you don't have VISION, you can still link it to a smartphone or tablet using the C-Monster app.

On the charging front, CHARGE is a 500-watt power station that delivers up to 25 amps of charging power to the trolling motor batteries and 40 amps to the cranking battery. And it works with lead acid, AGM, gel and lithium batteries.

Yet, the coolest feature is its ability to charge across the system, from battery to battery in order to carefully manage power levels. Power-Pole says it's the world's first AC/DC and bi-directional DC/DC charger.

When plugged in to a 120-volt shore outlet, the system charges and balances power on up to three auxiliary batteries, plus the cranking battery. When charging off the boat's alternator, the system

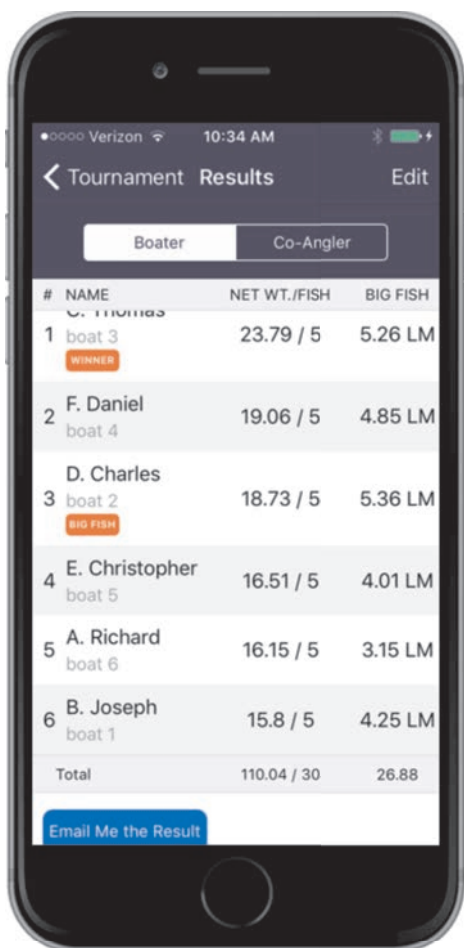


automatically charges the cranking battery first, then moves and balances power to the other batteries.

You can even use the VISION system or app to set a minimum charge level on the cranking battery, and when it falls too low, CHARGE will move power from the auxiliary batteries to the cranking battery in order to have enough

juice to start the motor. The system is smart enough to alert you when batteries are getting low and predict how long you need to run to charge the batteries fully with the alternator. And there's a built-in emergency start feature if you get in a jam.

Price is \$1,295. Like the VISION, it'll be available soon. Visit [Power-Pole.com](http://Power-Pole.com) for more information.



## A NEW TOURNAMENT APP

By Colin Moore

In the realm of free smartphone gadgetry, there's a new app that our buddy Joe Balog steered us to. It's called At The Ramp, and it helps tournament directors or bass club members keep track of their events. Such information as weigh-in stats, boat pairings, lake and ramp maps, entry fees and payouts, tournament dates and times, and who's competing can be accessed.

As noted, the app is free at present on iPhones or Android systems through their respective "stores." Learn more at [attheramp.com](http://attheramp.com). ■

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# PUNCTURELESS CULLING SYSTEMS COME OF AGE

THE LIST OF NON-INVASIVE CULLING OPTIONS FOR TOURNAMENT ANGLERS IS GROWING

By Chad Love

Virtually every action a tournament angler takes from the moment a bass comes into the boat until it's weighed and released involves one common goal: keeping that bass alive and healthy both during the tournament and afterward.

In fact, there's an entire industry dedicated to ensuring that bass caught during tournaments live to swim and fight again, providing everything from rubber landing nets that don't remove as much of a fish's protective slime when it comes out of the water, to state-of-the-art livewell systems and water additives.

Now that catch-and-release ethic has made its way into the manufacture of a piece of equipment used by virtually all tournament anglers, but one that – until recently – hasn't changed much over the years: the culling system.

The majority of culling systems on the market involve metal clips whose ends are punched through the membrane around the lower jaw of each bass destined for the livewell. Once an angler catches his limit and then starts culling fish, he can hang what he thinks are his two smallest by their clips on a culling beam to determine which one is heavier. He then returns the lighter bass to the fishery.

Even under the best of circumstances a clip leaves a hole, while at worst it can leave a gaping tear that could interfere with a bass's ability to feed and breathe. On lakes that host lots of tournaments, bass can be caught and subjected to the stress of culling punctures multiple times, making it harder to keep that fish alive.

Enter punctureless culling systems, which typically utilize a clip that attaches to a bass's jaw without puncturing its lip. These new, non-invasive systems are quickly gaining traction among anglers looking to minimize bass stress and also avoid potential dead-fish penalties.

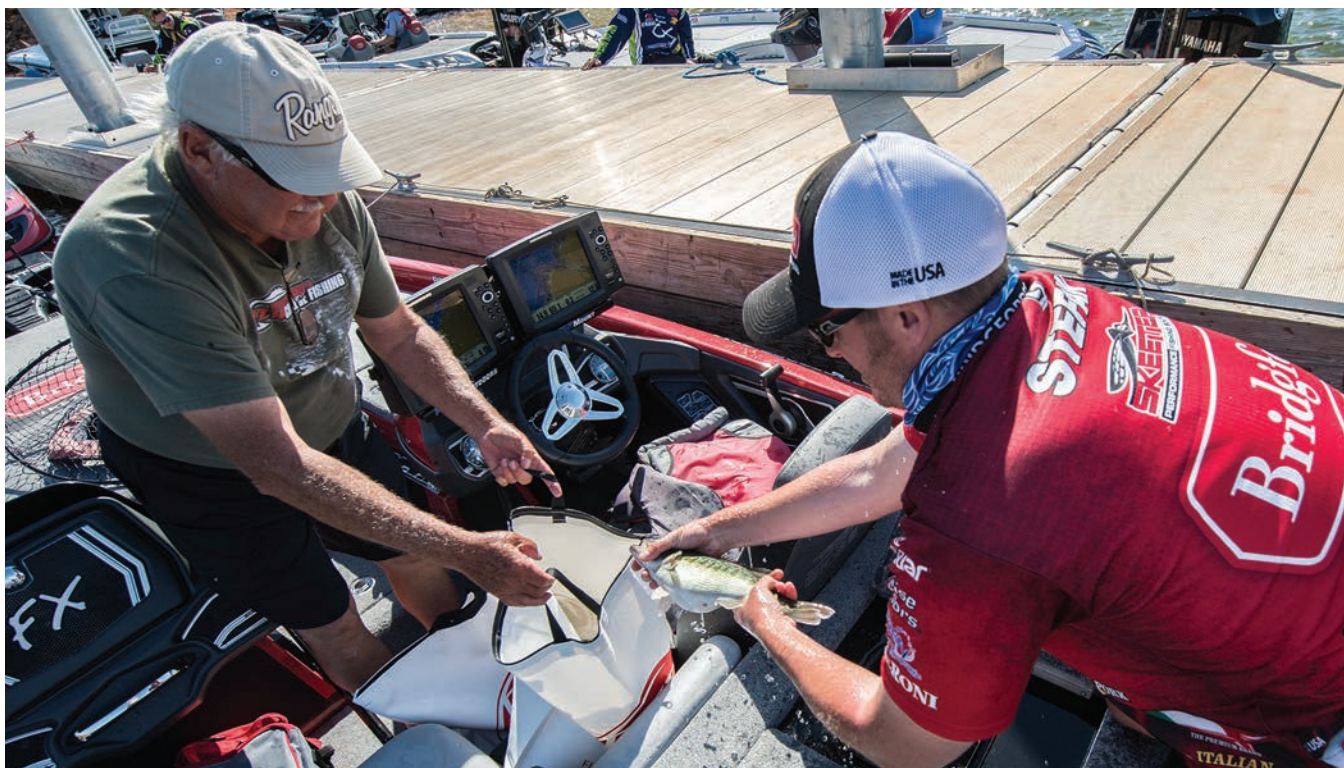
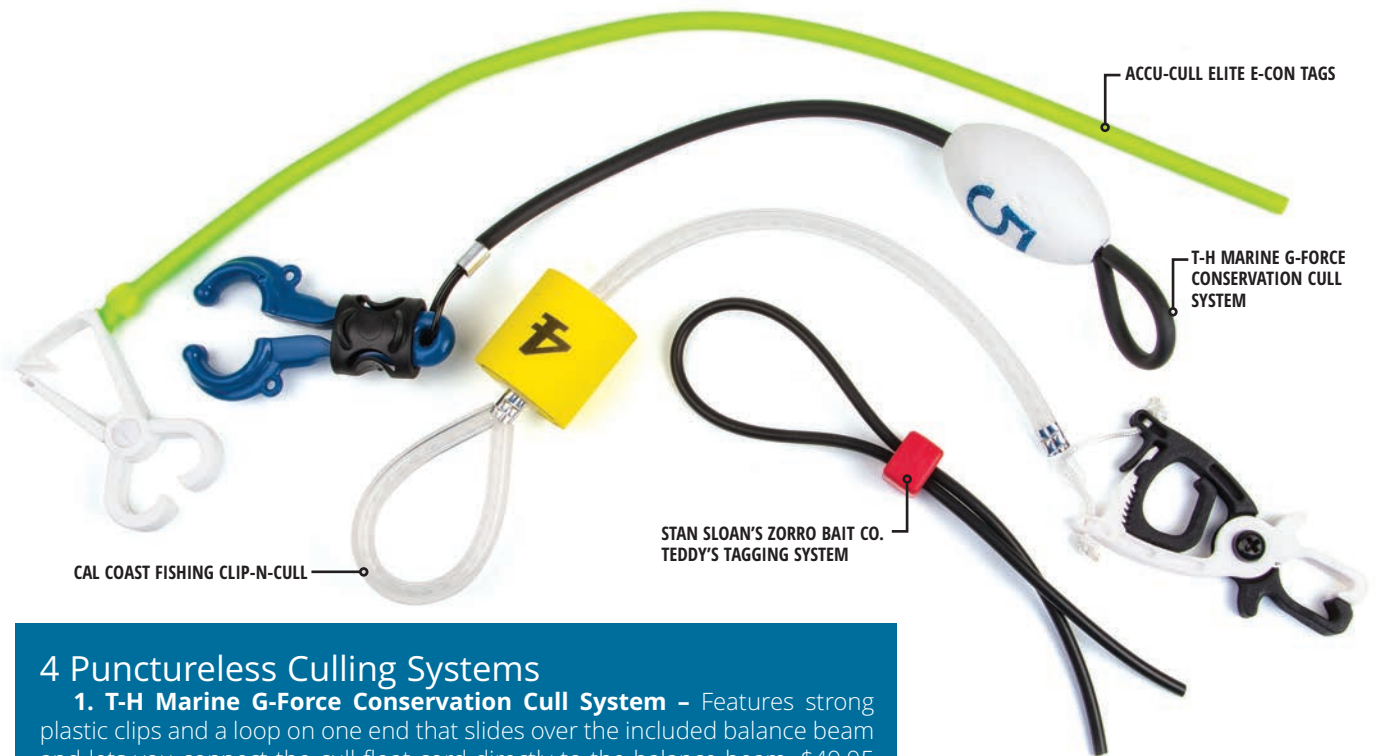


PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDORN



## 4 Punctureless Culling Systems

**1. T-H Marine G-Force Conservation Cull System** – Features strong plastic clips and a loop on one end that slides over the included balance beam and lets you connect the cull float cord directly to the balance beam. \$49.95 [thmarine.com](http://thmarine.com)

**2. Stan Sloan's Zorro Bait Co. Teddy's Tagging System** – A unique clip-less system that slides over the fish's tail. \$12 [zorrobait.com](http://zorrobait.com)

**3. Accu-Cull ELITE E-con Tags** – Features color-coded tubing and locking clips that attach to the lower jaw and hold with zero pressure. \$27.99 [accucull.com](http://accucull.com)

**4. Cal Coast Fishing Clip-N-Cull** – Newly redesigned to be smaller, lighter and more streamlined than the original, the Clip-N-Cull includes seven clips to a set and comes with a bracket to store them. \$49.99. [calcoastfishing.com](http://calcoastfishing.com)

FLW Tour pro Matt Stefan, who has been using punctureless clips for several years, became a convert after analyzing how much dead-fish penalties were costing him in tournaments.

"For me, fish care is a huge factor," says Stefan. "Going back and looking at my stats over the course of a season, it seems that every year I've had one or two instances where, depending on the tournament, that 4-ounce penalty [per dead fish weighed in] has affected me."

According to Stefan, the decision to use punctureless clips comes down to one question: "What are the things that I can do in my livewell to keep that fish as stress-free as possible? And a punctureless clip is much less invasive than punching a hole in its mouth."

Beyond stress, there are other biological reasons that should encourage anglers to switch to punctureless clips. According to Adam Martin, a fisheries biologist with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, tears in the membrane of a bass's jaw can affect

how efficiently a bass feeds and breathes.

"Some people think that when a bass eats a prey item it simply opens its mouth and swims forward until it's able to close its mouth around the prey. This is not the case," says Martin. "Due to fluid dynamics, simply swimming forward with an open mouth would have the effect of pushing the prey away from the mouth by a wave of water being pushed in front of the bass. To overcome this, a bass will expand its mouth both laterally and dorsoventrally [up and down] to create a suction effect, which pulls water and the prey into its mouth. Having a hole in the soft tissue of its mouth results in a slight decrease in the overall suction force. This likely results in a slightly reduced feeding ability."

A bass's breathing mechanics are also predominantly a result of the suction force created by expanding or contracting its gill flaps, says Martin, and holes from cull clips could also have a potentially negative effect on breathing ability.



## Matt Stefan's Cull Clip Tweak

"One thing I like to do is take off the buoys that come with the clips, and replace them with rubber tubing. The idea behind that is most people put the clip on the bottom lip because it's easier, but that buoyancy has a tendency to keep the bottom lip pulling upward and makes it more difficult for fish to open their mouths. It may make it more difficult for them to breathe. I'll even use just the clip sometimes so all the fish has is the clip on its lip."

Although punctureless cull clips are not currently required by FLW, their use is encouraged in the preamble to the official FLW tournament rules. So, are punctureless cull clips becoming a popular trend? Stefan thinks so.

"In the past there just weren't that many good clips out there," says Stefan. "But I'm using the T-H Marine G-Force Conservation Cull System, and I think it's the best one out there. Punctureless clips might take a little getting used to initially, but once you get used to it, it's just as fast as puncturing a hole in a fish's lip." ■

# SHORTENING UP

WHY SOME PROS BUCK THE TREND OF EVER-LONGER RODS

By *Matt Williams*  
PHOTOS BY D. W. REED II

**L**ong rods are all the rage these days. In fact, there are quite a few anglers who don't even keep a rod shorter than 7 feet in their rod locker anymore.

Evinrude pro-staffers Jim Tutt of Longview, Texas, and Terry Bolton of Paducah, Ky., aren't among that crowd. Both veteran FLW Tour pros still make use of shorter sticks a high percentage of the time, largely because of the belief that shorter rods provide some inherent advantages not found in longer ones.

"I use them so much that some of the guys on Tour make fun of me," Tutt says. "You might sacrifice a little bit in casting distance with a shorter rod, but in my mind it's usually not enough to offset the other advantages. The only time I might go to a 7-footer would be in obvious power situations, when I might need to make super-long casts to reach schooling fish with a topwater or when fishing swimbaits in really clear water."

Like Tutt, Bolton's penchant for short sticks is based largely on factors like functionality, efficiency and personal preference.

"I'm sort of old school," he says. "I started out fishing with short rods, and they still have a place in my arsenal. I'm going to have a rod under 7 feet on the deck for something in just about every tournament – sometimes more than one."

## Maneuverability, Low Trajectory

Both pros point out that short rods yield some definite advantages over long ones, especially when casting around docks or really tight cover like bushes or trees.

One of the main benefits is maneuverability. According to Tutt, a long rod can be more of a hindrance than an asset when there are lots of bushes and other obstacles in close proximity to the casting deck and he's making casting presentations versus flipping.

"A shorter rod makes it much easier to get in there and bang around in the trees without hitting limbs on your backcasts or on a side pitch," he says. "Plus, it makes it easier to make underhand skips under docks. You can't do that very well with a 7 1/2-footer unless you are really tall, because the bait will sometimes slap the water before it ever leaves the rod. It's just easier for me to put a shorter rod in motion, and that enables me to make a quieter, more precise presentation with the bait."

Bolton agrees with the tall guy/long rod analogy and used the physique of his good friend and three-time FLW Tour Angler of the Year Andy Morgan of Dayton, Tenn., to illustrate.



Terry Bolton prefers shorter rods when he's fishing around docks or overhanging shoreline cover that requires more precise casts.

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Jim Tutt still relies on 6-foot and 6-6 rods when accuracy is a must.

“Andy is a tall guy with really long arms, so he’s naturally higher above the water than me – I’m 5-11 – when he’s fishing,” Bolton says. “He can throw a 7 1/2-footer like I throw a 6 1/2-footer. The height factor is really important, in my opinion.”

## Roll-Cast Accuracy

The Kentucky pro adds that he finds a shorter rod to be particularly advantageous when performing low-trajectory roll-casts with everything from spinnerbaits to Texas rigs.

“I like a shorter rod, like a 6-6, around boat docks where you are having to cast under cables, support arms or the dock itself, or when making tight casts around bushes, stumps, low-hanging limbs and other bank cover,” he says. “I think it gives you a little better angle to keep the bait at a low trajectory. It helps you lay the bait into tight spots much softer and more accurately.”

Bolton believes making subtle, precise presentations can be especially beneficial when bass are relating to isolated pockets of shade or holding tight to cover during the spawn.

“There are times when the difference between a good cast and bad cast is about an inch,” he explains. “An inch too far and you’re hung up or the fish doesn’t bite it. It’s a big deal during the spawn, when the fish are holding tight to cover. The key is to get the bait in there soft to get the drop on the fish and then hope its protective instincts kick in.”

Tutt says a 6-6, medium-heavy rod played a big role in his fourth-place finish in the 2016 Costa FLW Series event on Fort Gibson Lake. He was fishing shallow laydowns up the Grand River, and making accurate, subtle entry presentations with a ChatterBait was an important key to getting bit.

## Less Fatigue, Easier Manipulation

Two more reasons Tutt prefers short rods over long ones are related to physics. For starters, he thinks a shorter rod is more sensitive for feeling subtle bites. The Ranger pro also says it isn’t necessary to move a 6-foot rod as far to impart action to a Zara Spook or a Senko, and it’s lightweight, which results in less fatigue at the end of the day.

Similarly, walking-style topwaters, poppers and jerkbaits are typically brought to life by the angler using staggered twitches of the rod tip, and Bolton believes it is much easier

to accomplish and maintain the proper cadence using a short rod with a softer action.

“I’ll even use a shorter rod like a 6-10 when I’m lifting and dropping spinnerbaits on ledges in open water,” he says. “I think it makes me a little faster on the hookset if a fish bites the bait on the fall, too.”

Other design elements of the rod factor in, too. For instance, Tutt prefers a rod with a short 8- to 10-inch handle for baits that require a lot of rod tip manipulation.

Naturally, there are anglers who will always prefer longer rods because they match up better with their physical build. There are also techniques and presentations – long-distance casting, pitching, lobbing big swimbaits, flipping, extra-deep cranking, etc. – where a longer rod constitutes a definite advantage. Still, short rods have their place as well. They can deliver impressive casting accuracy in close quarters and render easy bait manipulation with low user fatigue. That alone makes them valuable tools for tournament anglers.

## SHORT-ROD CHOICES

### Terry Bolton:

**Jerkbaits/Small crankbaits/Small topwaters** – 6-8, medium-light, fast-action Lew’s Custom Speed Stick Series

**Spinnerbaits/ChatterBaits** – 6-10, medium-heavy, fast-action Lew’s Custom Lite Speed Stick Series

**Poppers/Walking topwaters** – 6-8, medium-light, fast-action Team Lew’s Custom Lite Speed Stick

**Small spinnerbaits/Bladed jigs/Topwaters** – 6-10, medium-heavy, fast-action Team Lew’s Custom Pro Speed Stick Series

### Jim Tutt:

**Topwaters/Senkos/Jerkbaits** – 6-foot, medium-action rod with a medium-fast tip and a short 8- to 10-inch handle

**Spinnerbaits/ChatterBaits/Texas rigs/Square-bills** – 6-6, medium-heavy rod with a fairly stiff tip ■

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# AT HOME IN RANGER COUNTRY

50 YEARS AFTER FOUNDING RANGER BOATS,  
FORREST AND NINA WOOD STILL KEEP BUSY

*By Colin Moore*  
PHOTOS BY KEVIN PIEPER





**N**ina Wood doesn't like what she sees, and tells Forrest so.

Her concern is justifiable. Calving season in the southern Ozarks is enough to make farmers uneasy, what with the bountiful supply of black vultures that always seem to know when and where a cow and her newborn calf are most vulnerable. The vulture Nina is watching through the pickup's side window is circling the scruffy end of a pasture where it angles down to meet a wooded creek bottom. She spots a lone cow that to her practiced eye looks and acts as if it has recently given birth. Nina suspects the hungry vulture is waiting for the opportunity to find and kill the calf.

Nina and Forrest's grandson, Keith Daffron, is in the truck trailing ours.

She phones him and asks him to investigate. Within a few minutes he reports back, telling his grandmother that he located the calf in high weeds where vultures wouldn't be able to get to it without going to a lot of trouble. Besides, he adds, he'll return later to make sure all is well. This satisfies Nina, and Forrest drives on.

As banal as it seems, the episode is somehow analogous to how Forrest and Nina Wood tend to their lives: Whatever they do, whatever they build, it's never undertaken without an attention to details.

### Farm Living Suits Them

On this balmy autumn morning, not counting the occasional detours to check on this or that, we're in Marion

County, Ark., and cruising Highway 178, which connects Flippin and Mountain Home. It's a fairly curvy and hilly two-lane road whose importance to the outside world isn't really measured by the 33 miles it covers, but by the various waypoints it links in the lives of the founders of Ranger Boats.

Forrest and Nina see a lot of Highway 178 and its side roads. Forrest has the hat, and he has the cattle. That equates to a lot of hard work. On a typical day, the couple might check on their herd – about 1,200 head of crossbreeds and Herefords plus a few registered Angus tucked away on their own – and rotate them to greener pastures. Then there's the haying. In growing season that means baling hay, loading it on trucks and taking it to various barns.



**“THAT DOESN’T  
MATTER, BECAUSE  
THIS HAY HASN’T  
BEEN RAKED BEFORE.”**

– FORREST

They move tractors, mowers and balers to where they’re needed; they feed stock winter rations when the time comes and generally tend to the things that a typical farm family has to look after.

*Forrest was raking hay one day when he was hailed by son-in-law Randy Hopper and told he had some phone calls that needed answering right away. Forrest asked Hopper to make a couple of rounds with the rake while he went to his house to return the calls.*

*Hopper responded that he had never raked hay before.*

*“That doesn’t matter,” said Forrest, “because this hay hasn’t been raked before.”*

The Woods also putter around the two-story house they’ve called home since 1971. It’s big, and at times full of

people. When it’s their turn to host their four daughters’ families and various friends and random kinfolk at holiday feasts, upward of 50 guests of all ages will gather.

Outside the house, nearby barns and outbuildings store various stuff; the usual mix of stuff that might be needed, stuff that probably will be needed some time and stuff that is just too precious to part with, such as their daughters’ riding gear from the years when they rode show horses. Tip, the couple’s black-and-white border collie, stands watch over the place, but given his tail-wagging disposition, probably he’s not going to dispute anyone taking anything.

A pilgrim passing through northeast Arkansas might wonder if Forrest Wood is a farmer who somehow

became a boat builder, or a boat builder who became a farmer. In the long arc of his life, either job description would be accurate, but it’s reasonable to suspect that down in his core, farming takes precedence. He was always a farmer, even through the years he ran Ranger Boats, the company Nina and he started in 1968.

Forrest’s bond to the land where he grew up, became a man, married, raised a family and started Ranger Boats began when he was born and was never really broken. It runs along a separate track. A family photo taken outdoors shows Forrest as a teenager with his younger brother, Mickey, and parents, Beulah and Ervin Wood. They’re standing behind a stock truck, and Forrest is wearing overalls and a hat

that looks like an expensive Stetson, though it probably isn't.

Indeed, anyone not familiar with the entire story might be hard-pressed to identify Forrest and Nina as anything except hard-working octogenarians toiling on their cattle ranch not far from Flippin, population 1,357 – or almost 1,000 more people than lived there when they were married 66 years ago. If there's anything more remarkable than the pair becoming the iconic founders of the world's most famous bass boat line, it's that they came from so bucolic a setting and anomalous a background. And their history is more appealing because it speaks to something singularly American: Given the right circumstances, anybody with the gumption to succeed, likely will.

While it's true that Forrest and Nina caught a few breaks early on because they were a part of that remarkable first generation of bass tournament promoters who changed the fishing world, a great deal of the good fortune they experienced just counterbalanced the bad luck they had starting out. The condensed version of their narrative suggests that everything fell into place for them, but it really didn't, and like the parable of the seemingly laid-back duck paddling furiously under the water, there was more to their tale than meets the eye.

## A Short History of Everything

"Nobody in my family, the Kirkland family, called me Nina when I was growing up. They called me Mae before I started going to high school. Then they started calling me Nina," says Nina. "That's all Forrest knew me by. I didn't know him at all before high school. In our graduating class, there were 18 girls and three boys, including Forrest, and I felt lucky I got one of them."

The two were married soon after graduation. Their first house had been in the Wood family since 1918, when it was constructed by Forrest's grandfather, Walter. It sits amid enfolding hills of the southern Ozarks, looking much the same as it did when it was newly finished and surrounded by cotton fields. Electricity was added years ago, and the cistern that supplied their water has long since been replaced by a utility line. The milk cows are gone, as are the chickens that nested in the henhouse out back. Gone, too, is the big







# “WELL, I COULDN'T TELL FOR SURE WHICH ONE STARTED IT.”

– NINA

hackberry tree – once declared the largest hackberry in Arkansas by the state forestry department. Its descendants shade the front porch where Forrest and Nina still sit awhile and talk when they're in the neighborhood.

---

*Forrest tells of the time when he was puttering around near the house and found one of Nina's roosters lying dead on the ground. A few feet away, he found another dead rooster. Alarmed, he yelled out to Nina, who was in the house: "Nina, somebody or something has killed two of your roosters."*

*"I know," answered Nina, "it was me."  
"Why in the world did you kill them?" Forrest asked.*

*"Because they were always fighting," answered Nina. "I just got sick and tired of it."  
"But why both of them?" Forrest asked.  
"Well, I couldn't tell for sure which one started it."*

---

The Woods lived in the house for a few years, then bought 40 acres overlooking the river. Forrest borrowed money to buy feeder cattle and start his own ranch, but beef prices plummeted

and he couldn't pay his debts. For a time, Forrest found work on the construction of the Bull Shoals Dam. It didn't pay much, but it kept the family afloat. In 1953 he got a better job in Kansas City at the General Motors Fairfax Assembly Plant, helping to build F-84 Thunderjets for the Air Force.

"I just drove by there [the plant] one day and thought to myself 'surely as big as this place is they'll have a job for me.' They did, and we stayed there as long as we needed to," he recalls.

The first of the couple's daughters – Brenda, Linda, Rhonda and Donna – were keeping Nina busy back home, but she and they moved to Kansas City in 1954. The family remained until they were able to pay off their bills. Homesick, they returned to northwest Arkansas where they set up a guiding business to take advantage of the newly finished Bull Shoals Lake's growing popularity. Forrest became so busy guiding he had to give up one of his other enterprises: home builder and general contractor.

Trout stocked in the lake's cold tail waters thrived. That created more guiding opportunities for the Woods, who built a two-story dock downstream of the dam on the northwest bank of the river where Nina and her girls managed a growing number of guides and customers.

The White River shoals were hard on the wooden johnboats that the guides used. A practical man, Forrest got the idea of putting fiberglass mats on the bottoms of the boats to protect them. Forrest had a lot of fishing-friendly ideas about boats. A while later he decided to make his own fiberglass boats in the back of a filling station. In

1968, he built a half-dozen 16-foot boats, rated for 50-hp outboards. On the back corners of each boat, the name "Ranger" was stenciled in paint (last fall what was billed as the first Ranger ever made was towed in the 72nd annual Turkey Trot festival parade in Yellville, the county seat of Marion County).

In 1969, after Forrest started making the rounds at various tournaments and anglers had a chance to look over his boats, the operation was moved into a closed nightclub, and 600 more Rangers were built to fulfill orders. In 1970, production doubled. Then came the Big Fire of 1971, when the plant burned down and the Woods and their employees had to start all over. There followed a few restart bumps, but Forrest and Nina never considered that they would do anything except get the company up and running again.

"That was a bad time, but the late '70s were really bad, too. Interest rates got so high that a lot of people stopped buying some things for a while – including boats," notes Forrest. "It slowed down our business quite a bit, and we just had to make the best of it like everybody else. But

we and the country gradually worked through it, too."

## The Fruit of Their Labor Is More Labor

Somebody mindful of Forrest and Nina's busy routine once asked Forrest when they rested.

"When we go to sleep at night," he answered offhandedly.

That's only a slight exaggeration. Cattle ranching and haymaking in the hills and dales along the White River take up most of their time, though Nina breaks away once in a while to participate in her favorite sport: bowling. There's also the curtain call of the Ranger legacy to deal with, even though Forrest and Nina aren't directly linked to the company anymore. In the minds of most fishermen, however, they're the walking, talking embodiment of Ranger, and always will be. The connection still keeps them busy with various projects, such as putting in special appearances at FLW events, attending promotions for high school and college tournaments, and generally being Forrest and Nina Wood to an admiring public.



---

*"Forrest always had an arsenal of funny homespun jokes. I don't know where he got them, but he would keep me laughing when we used to fly around putting on fishing seminars," recalls tournament great and Ranger pro Denny Brauer. "The seminars themselves and seeing how Forrest interacted with people was really a valuable experience for me when I first started out. He would always carry a notebook with him, and if somebody asked him for a hat or to check on something or anything like that, he would get their phone number or address and make a note to himself to follow up when he had the chance. He treated everybody equally important, and Forrest had a way of making people feel like they were seeing an old friend when they went up to talk with him."*

---

Closer to home, signposts that they passed this way aren't hard to find. Besides the Forrest and Nina Wood

Preschool in Flippin, the Forrest and Nina Wood State Park Access below the Bull Shoals Dam and the Forrest L. Wood Crowley's Ridge Nature Center near Jonesboro, there are the occasional billboards along the local highways that associate them with Ranger Boats.

Our hopscotching tour of White River Country concluded, we return to where we started: the Forrest L. Wood Outdoor Sports Gallery off Highway 178. The museum sees double-duty as an office and houses numerous awards, trophies, souvenirs, curiosities and photos of the presidents, governors, celebrities and pros that Forrest and Nina have known and befriended. This treasury of memories also includes a sizeable collection of Forrest's buck and bull elk mounts and plaques acknowledging the couple's inductions into various halls of fame, which take up most of the floor and wall space in the two-story building.

And the huge Ranger Boats plant is across the road. If there's one singular memento of Forrest and Nina's time on this planet, Ranger is it. It reminds them, and passersby, that in their hands it became an earthmover and an empire builder of a company that helped elevate bass fishing into something special.

---

*Former tournament great and current TV show host Hank Parker has long been one of Nina's favorite Ranger pros, but it never kept her from fussing at him when she felt it was deserved. At one tournament that took place in the early '80s, Parker weighed in a limit, but explained to the weighmaster that he might have had more weight had he not had to deal with boat trouble that robbed him of fishing time.*

*After he left the stage, he was confronted by a concerned Nina, who asked him what kind of boat trouble he had experienced.*

*"Well, my trolling motor kept going out and giving me fits," answered Parker.*



*"Your trolling motor? That's not boat trouble. There's a big difference between boat trouble and trolling motor trouble," Nina retorted, letting the angler know that guarding the Ranger reputation for dependability was a priority for her.*

When they ran their boat company back in the '70s and '80s, and for a number of years afterward, Forrest and Nina Wood flew thousands of miles around the country to visit tournament weigh-ins, present awards and sign autographs, and figuratively stamp an event with the Ranger imprimatur. Such attention won the company fans among boat dealers, fishermen and sponsors, and as the Ranger reputation grew, their presence made an event more special.

Forrest always claimed that the Ranger name was inspired by his fondness for the Army Rangers and the Rangers associated with law enforcement. Over time, the name also conjured

an image of a lanky country gentleman wearing a cream-colored Stetson who let hard work, determination and exactitude for quality in whatever he and Nina did do the talking for Ranger Boats.

Whenever he speaks in public or reminisces with friends, Forrest always gives credit for the success of Ranger to the hard work of the "unknown heroes in the background," the ordinary people who helped the company achieve extraordinary results. Many of these were employed by the company for more than 30 years – some still are.

It was always the family business, mainly the big family of Wood and Kirkland kin by blood or marriage. In 1989, after serving an apprenticeship of sorts as artist, designer, mold maker, gel-coater and marketing guru, Wood son-in-law Randy Hopper became Ranger president and helped boost the company into its glory years of the '90s and beyond.

"The work ethic in this part of the country is second to none. The one thing that we got right from the start was having good people on our team. All can take credit for the part we played in helping to grow fishing," says Forrest. "We sponsored as many tournaments and fishermen as we could. We gave boats away as prizes and backed every tournament organization there was – including Operation Bass, which became FLW. It helped our business, but it helped a lot of folks in a lot of other ways, too."

Bass boats and fields and the White River Valley – just as water coursed along the most important places of their lives, Forrest and Nina Wood have coursed through the history of bass fishing. Somewhere along the way they also became a symbol, not so much a symbol of what the rest of us are, but of what we might aspire to be. ■





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# FISHING THE PRESPAWN HIGHWAY

3 SCENARIOS FOR LOCATING STAGING BASS ON “REST STOPS” ALONG THEIR TRANSITION INTO SPAWNING AREAS

By Joe Sills

ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN HAND

**T**he road trip usually begins when the water temperature approaches the low 60s, or even sooner in some waters. Bass, often waiting somewhere in deeper wintering areas, are compelled by environmental changes to begin their transition to spawning flats. During the big migration, says FLW Tour veteran Mark Rose, they “loiter” at rest stops along their prespawn highways, waiting and foraging until the spawning flats can provide what they need for a successful spawning season.

“Prespawn highways are ditches leading up to spawning flats,” Rose notes. “If I could draw a picture of one, I would draw a bay with a little channel coming out of it, then a drop-off with a stump or three or four on it. That channel is the highway, and before spawning, a fish is going to stage on that drop-off beside the stump.”

Rose knows this scenario is accurate because he keyed on several types of prespawn highways when he claimed a 2017 FLW Tour win at Lake Guntersville in early February.

Rose wasn't the only pro to tap into the prespawn highway pattern in 2017. Birmingham pro Barry Wilson ran similar patterns at a Tour event on Lake Cumberland and a Costa FLW Series tournament on Lake Chickamauga and narrowly missed out on wins. Still, the two second-place finishes netted him close to \$50,000.

Rose and Wilson are experts at identifying spring travel routes and the staging stopover areas that bass use along the way. For the most part they rely on three strategies during the prespawn, and suggest that these approaches will work on any body of water to help catch big stringers.

## 1. THE SHALLOW DITCH

**Strategy:** Mimic shad using a vibrating jig or lipless crankbait.

At Cumberland, Wilson targeted a classic prespawn staging area for his second-place finish. He located a ditch in the back of a creek channel. Green, leafy, almost grass-like brush that had been growing in the area on dry ground had recently been inundated with water when the lake level rose. Bass were positioned in the cover along the edge of the drop-off into the ditch, waiting for the right time to spawn on large flats located along outside bends in the creek channel.

"They would pull up on the flats occasionally as it warmed up throughout the day," Wilson recalls.

On sonar, Wilson found the area stacked with near-surface baitfish. Even though the bass weren't busting the baitfish topside, he was able to use a white vibrating jig with a YUM Pulse swimbait trailer to lure several largemouths out from the cover and into his boat.

The flats were about 2 1/2 feet deep, and the channel edge varied from 5 feet deep to around 10 at its deepest. Wilson says he's found similar scenarios on other reservoirs around the region.

"They'll sit on those 2- to 3-foot differences on, like, a little 'plateau area' before they move up on the flat," he explains. "That's typically what I look for in the spring – a place like that. It was basically a highway."

**Another approach:** While Wilson opted for a vibrating jig, Rose prefers to throw a Strike King Red Eye Shad lipless crankbait, particularly when there's grass in the ditch. He says the lure will attract and agitate bass taking shelter in the cover. He also used this program at Guntersville to target bass along inside grass lines.



PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

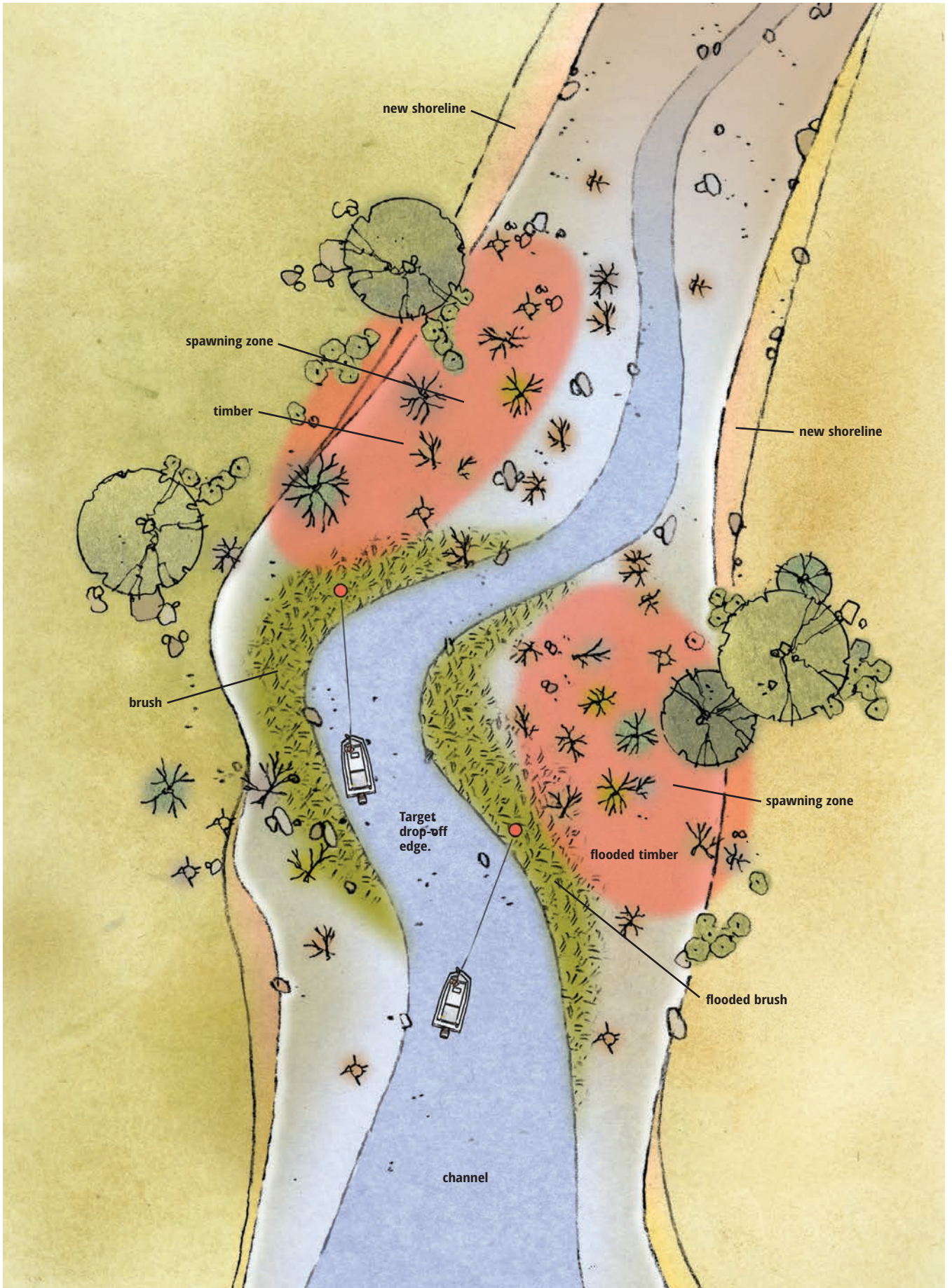


ILLUSTRATION BY RON FINGER

## 2. THE WOODED WAYPOINT

**Strategy:** Offer up a crawfish imitation with a square-bill, or mimic a wounded shad with a jerkbait.

According to Rose, submerged wood – stumps or standing timber – located near a spawning area provides bass with cover to stage on before the spawn begins and they disperse.

To him it's a high-percentage area, and if he finds a drop-off with submerged stumps or trees, it's almost a guarantee that bass are loitering on them. Once the sun starts hitting that cover, it's time to target the area.

In Rose's experience, the fish get more active as the water warms from sunlight, and they tend to move a bit out of the cover into adjacent areas where they can be targeted with a jerkbait.

"Sun is a big deal," Rose adds, "but they stay close to the cover so they can get tight to it if they need to."

Rose likes to toss a Strike King KVD jerkbait around wood, especially if fish are suspended and soaking up a few rays. The key here is to work the bait slowly, stopping often between jerks. In the heaviest of cover, such as thick tree branches, Rose will switch to a light jig.

**Another approach:** Wilson, in contrast, reaches for a crawfish-colored square-bill crankbait around wood. He says the lure's snag-resistant design, coupled with a crawfish-like profile, triggers fish into biting – especially in early spring.

"Crawfish have the most protein they [bass] are going to get from a meal," he says of his theory on spring bass behavior. "So instinctively they are going to go after crawfish before they feed on anything else."

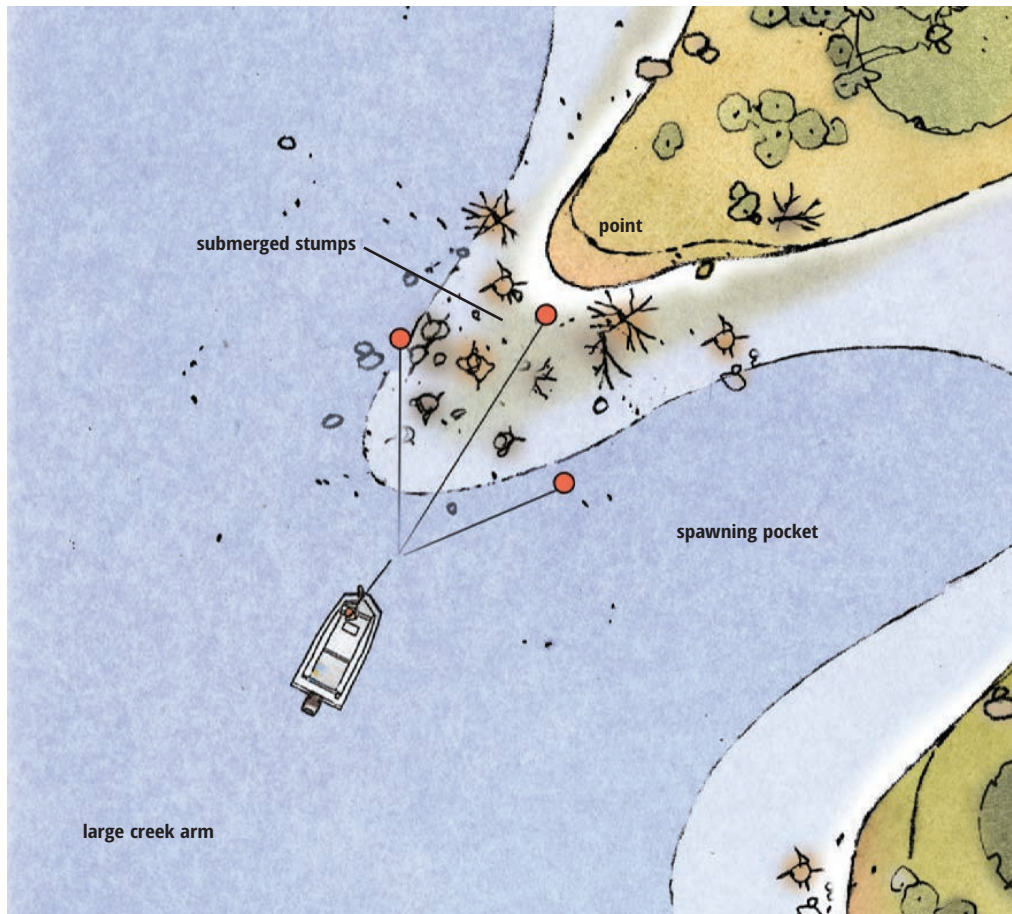


PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

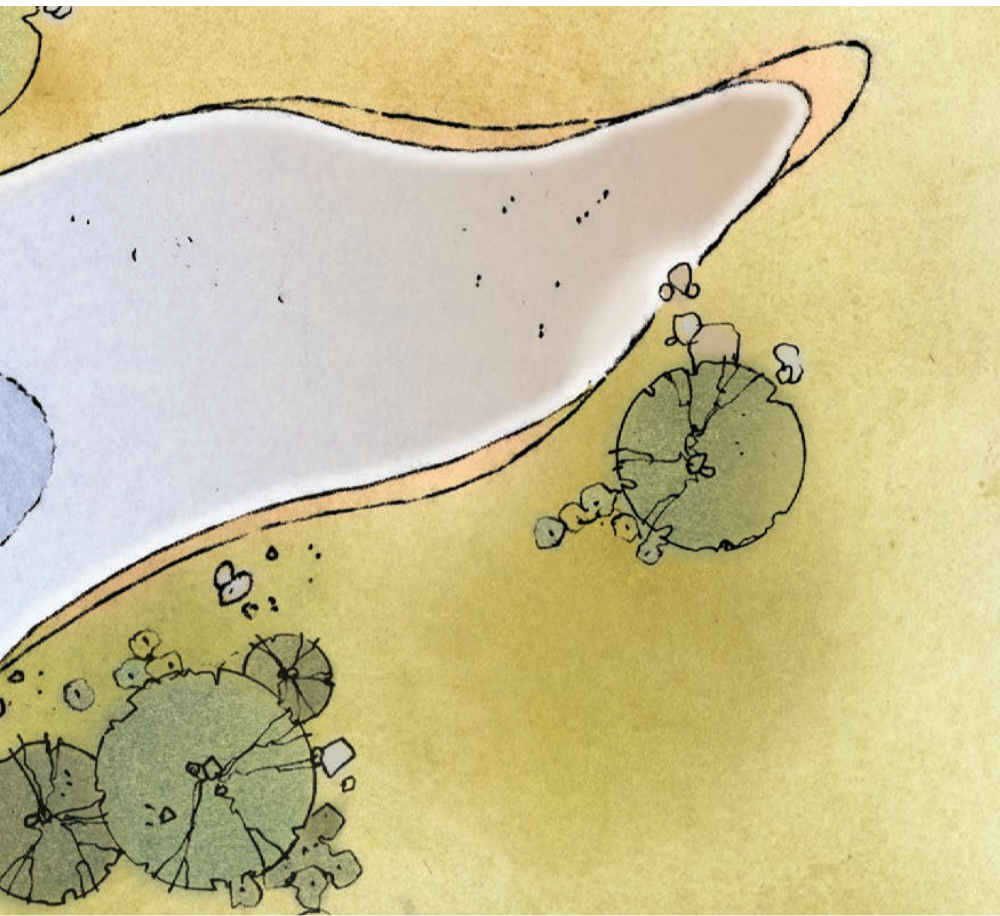


ILLUSTRATION BY RON FINGER

## TACKLE ADVICE FROM WILSON AND ROSE

### Barry Wilson's Vibrating Jig Setup

- 7-foot, medium-heavy Team Lew's Custom Pro Speed Stick Series rod
- Team Lew's Custom Pro Speed Spool SLP Series reel (6.8:1)
- 15-pound-test P-Line Fluorocarbon line
- 1/2-ounce vibrating jig (white)
- YUM Pulse swimbait trailer (pearl white)

### Mark Rose's Lipless Crankbait Setup

- 7-foot, 6-inch, medium Team Lew's Custom Pro Speed Stick Ledge Series rod
- Team Lew's HyperMag Speed Spool SLP reel (7.5:1)
- 1/2-ounce Strike King Red Eye Shad (red/craw or orange in muddy water, or chrome)
- 15-pound-test Seaguar Tatsu fluorocarbon line

### Mark Rose's Swing Jig Setup

- 7-foot, medium-heavy Lew's Custom Speed Stick Series Magnum Bass 1 rod
- Team Lew's HyperMag Speed Spool SLP reel (7.5:1)
- 1/2-ounce Strike King Jointed Structure Head
- Strike King Rage Bug (Bama craw)
- 15-pound-test Seaguar Tatsu fluorocarbon line

### Barry Wilson's Square-Bill Crankbait Setup

- 6-foot, 10-inch, medium-heavy Team Lew's Custom Pro Speed Stick Series rod
- Team Lew's Custom Pro Speed Spool SLP Series reel (7.5:1)
- 15-pound-test P-Line Fluorocarbon line
- BOOYAH Flex II (custom painted in spring craw pattern)



PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

### 3. THE ROCK/GRASS LANE

**Strategy:** *Slow it down with a crankbait or jointed structure jig.*

Rocks and grass contributed significantly to Rose's 2017 victory at Guntersville, where he worked prespawn travel routes in Browns Creek to take home the trophy. In the creek, Rose located open lanes of water – transition lanes – between inside grass lines and rocky banks, as well as channels loaded with large rocks and riprap along a bridge causeway. The staging areas he found at Guntersville

were shallow – only 2 or 3 feet deep – but they kept reloading with bass on each day of the tournament.

"In stained water, the staging areas can be very shallow," he says, "which is exactly what happened there."

Rose fished a lipless crankbait on the inside grass line for a couple days before a cold front hit, forcing him to switch to slowly fishing the rocks (and some wood cover along the banks) with a combination of small jigs and crankbaits for the last two days.

Given just one lure with which to work rocks, though, Rose suggests the Strike King Jointed Structure Jig.

He rigs the swing jig with a Strike King Rage Bug and methodically scrambles the bait up, down and around the rocks to tempt bass.

**Another approach:** *Wilson, too, faced rocky staging areas during the 2017 season. At Chickamauga, he realized that the bite would be slower because water temperatures were barely topping 60 degrees and fish were just starting to transition in from deeper areas. Consequently, he fished a football jig on steep-sloping rocky banks near a spawning flat in 8 to 10 feet of water.*



### Key Factors

Depth is relative in bass fishing, but in the prespawn transition situations they encountered during the 2017 season, Rose and Wilson spent the majority of their time fishing 8 feet deep or shallower.

In fact, they both agree that staging areas can be as shallow as 2 feet under the right water conditions. The key is being able to identify spawning areas, finding channels or other highways that run to them, and pinpointing the cover or structure that they'll group up on along the way.

Whether it's grass, wood or rock, once you find it, you'll probably find the bass. ■

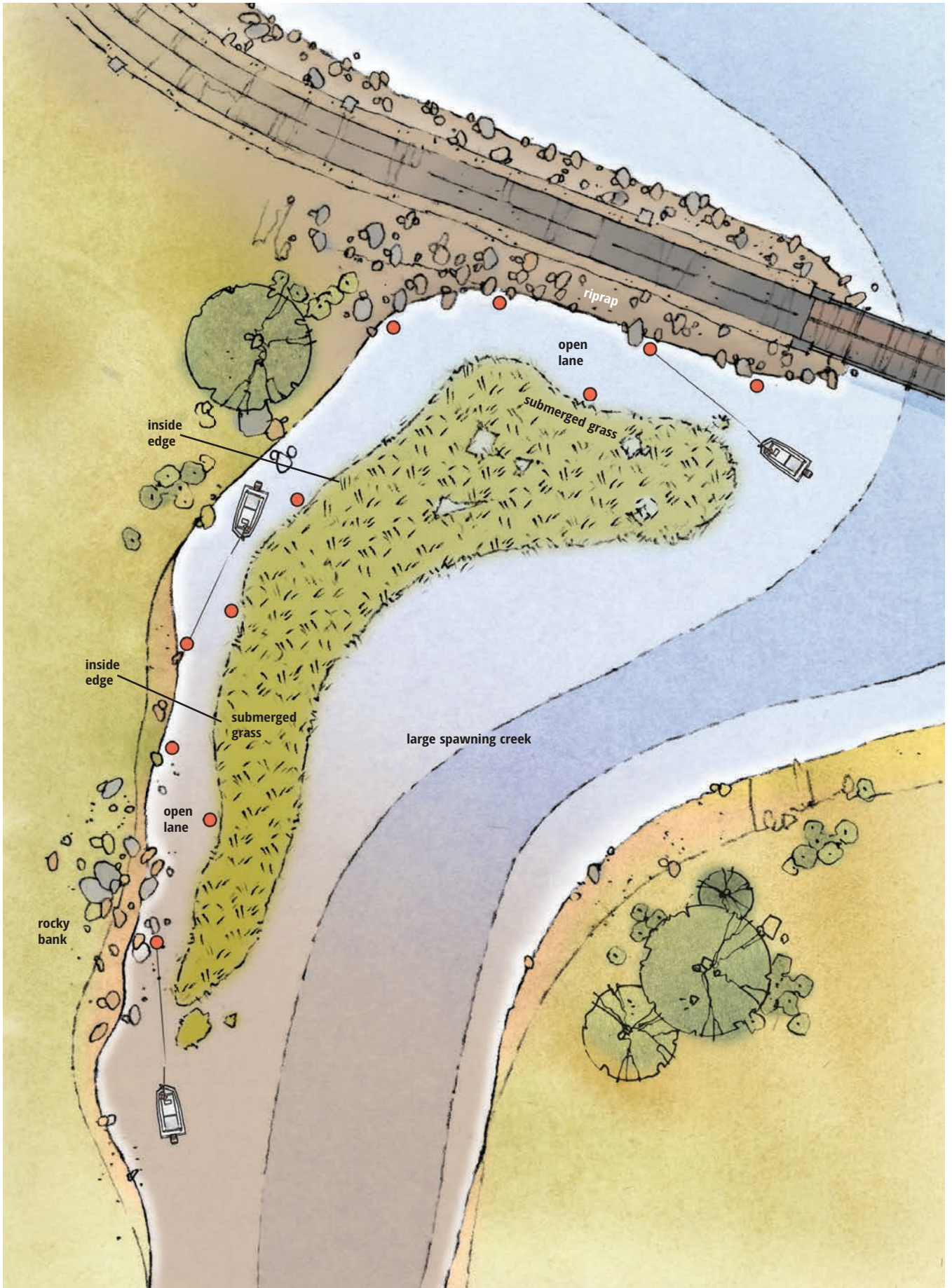


ILLUSTRATION BY RON FINGER

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# ON TOUR



PHOTO BY MATT PACE

**WHAT'S INSIDE:**  
TUCKER'S TACTICS FOR  
COLD-FRONT FISHING  
AT OKEECHOBEE

The latest BFL, College  
Fishing and High School  
Fishing results



# COSTA FLW SERIES | LAKE OKEECHOBEE

OKEECHOBEE, FLA.

By Rob Newell



## WINNING ANGLER

**Terry Tucker**  
Gadsden, Ala.

**Winning Weight:**  
21-03 (5 fish)

**Details:**  
Jan. 4, 2018

Presented by Power-Pole

Hosted by Okeechobee  
County Tourism  
Development Council

Southeastern Division

PHOTO BY JESSIE SCHULTZ

**T**erry Tucker of Gadsden, Ala., has been fishing FLW events for the better part of 25 years. During that time, he has learned a thing or two about the dicey relationship between Florida-strain largemouth bass and cold fronts.

"Once the fish move into an area and start spawning, they're committed; they're going to stay there," Tucker says. "If a cold front hits, they're going to stay in the area and hunker down under something – a mat, a reed head – something that forms a canopy on the surface."

Tucker took those lessons to heart on Lake Okeechobee, weighing in a 21-pound, 3-ounce day-one limit on Jan. 4 to win the Costa FLW Series event presented by Power-Pole. The tournament was ended after the first round when it was learned that co-angler Nik Kayler had been thrown from a boat and was missing. Kayler's body was recovered the following week.

Due to hurricanes, high water and a sudden loss of vegetation in the months before the tournament, the Big O was in bad shape for the FLW Series event. Muddy water had crept into a lot of Okeechobee's best spawning grounds, making clear, stable water scarce. To add to the challenging conditions, a severe cold front was bearing down on central Florida.

"I practiced specifically for the approaching front," Tucker says. "I kept my efforts focused in the north end of the lake where the water would be most protected."

Tucker located a small bay where buck bushes and clumps of Kissimmee grass had collected floating vegetation and debris, creating small mats.

"The water was a little more stained than I'm comfortable with in Florida, but it was fishable," he says. "The fish had moved in there to spawn with the growing moon."

Tucker began the tournament punching small mats and quickly found success

with two 6- to 7-pound fish. A few minutes later he caught another big fish on a ChatterBait, then headed to a new area and filled his limit with two small fish.

Tucker took the day one lead, but shortly after weigh-in the horrific news regarding Kayler began to circulate. When the remainder of the tournament was canceled and the day-one standings became the official results, Tucker was declared the winner.

"I hate that I won under these circumstances – it's a horrible tragedy," Tucker says. "I've thought about it a lot. I'm saddened about the whole thing, but there is nothing I could have done that would have changed what happened that day."

Tucker used two different lures at Lake Okeechobee: He punched a Zoom Z Hog Jr. (black and blue) with a 3/4- or 1-ounce tungsten weight tied to 40-pound-test braid, and wound a 1/2-ounce ChatterBait (green pumpkin) trailed with a Zoom Ultravibe Speed Worm.

## WINNING CO-ANGLER



PHOTO BY MATT PACE

**James Lehman**  
Oviedo, Fla.

**Winning Weight:**  
17-08 (5 fish)

### Winning Program:

Lehman fished with boater Jessie Mizell of Sarasota, Fla., in some protected areas where the water was deeper, clearer and warmer than the main lake.

Lehman's primary lure was a Gambler Fat Ace in black and blue glitter fished on a 3/8-ounce Gambler Big Giggly Head. ■

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**-TIM FREDERICK,**  
FLW Tour Angler



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**T-H MARINE FLW BASS FISHING LEAGUE**

**Cowboy Division – Sam Rayburn Reservoir – Jan. 6, 2018**

**Boater: Phil Marks, Dallas, Texas – 27-08**

Cranking a Strike King 8XD (powder blue back chartreuse) in 16 to 19 feet of water on the tips of main-lake ridges with isolated stumps, switching occasionally to a 10XD for cranking the 18- to 24-foot range

**Co-angler: Michael Cotter, Arlington, Texas – 20-10**

**YETI FLW COLLEGE FISHING**

**Southern Conference – Ft. Gibson Lake – Oct. 14, 2017**

**Oklahoma State University**

**Jake Biram and Rhett Meyer – 16-07**

Slow-fishing shallow wind-blown points in the mid-lake area with square-bill crankbaits, topwater and Bill Lewis Rat-L-Traps (ghost shad)

**BASS PRO SHOPS HIGH SCHOOL FISHING OPENS**

**Georgia Open – Lake Lanier – Dec. 2, 2017**

**Fannin County High School**

**Blake Cobb and Luke McHan – 15-15**

Fishing shaky heads through brush piles 30 to 40 feet deep in an area about 40 minutes south of the takeoff, which was located in the lake's upper end

**Florida Open – St. Johns River – Dec. 9, 2017**

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**Chandler Mills and Alec Pope – 21-04**

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# TBF



## WHAT'S MAKING NEWS IN THE BASS FEDERATION

By Dan Johnson

### 2018 TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP SET FOR BULL SHOALS

Grassroots bass fans can expect a battle of epic proportions this spring when The Bass Federation's 2018 National Championship is held on Bull Shoals Lake out of Flippin, Ark., April 9-14.

Competitors for the big event qualified through 22 district competitions in the National Semi-Finals system, which spans the traditional seven TBF geographical divisions. The framework is designed to make it easier for TBF anglers to fish premier events by minimizing travel time and expenses.

With the success of the new TBF National Semi-Finals program feeding the 2018 championship, the event will offer an all-time record payout of nearly \$300,000 in cash and prizes, and will feature the top grassroots field of boaters and co-anglers from across North America.

The top boaters and co-anglers from each state will compete in new Evinrude-powered Ranger bass boats for all three days of competition. Contestants will vie for a share of the record payout and for 15 berths in two of the sport's most coveted events.

Fourteen finalists – seven boaters and seven co-anglers – will advance to the 2018 T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League All-American. The National Championship boater winner advances to the 2018 Forrest Wood Cup, for a shot at winning the biggest payday in bass fishing.

The winning boater will also receive the \$100,000 "Living the Dream" package to include a cash prize, fully paid entry fees on the 2019 FLW Tour as a pro, travel expense stipends for each event and use of a wrapped Ranger boat with Evinrude outboard for the year. The top co-angler will also receive a cash prize along with fully paid entry fees into the Costa FLW Series division of choice.

Longtime TBF sponsor Ranger Boats will host the event. Based in Flippin, Ark., the legendary boatmaker marks its 50th anniversary in 2018, as does TBF.

"Ranger was founded in 1968, the same year the first Federation club [the Chattanooga Bass Club] was formed," says TBF President Robert Cartledge. "For 50 years, the Federation and Ranger Boats have worked separately and together to support fishing, youth, conservation and the foundation of the sport at the grassroots level. Ranger Boats is the Federation's oldest and longest-running sponsor. The 2018 TBF National Championship will help us celebrate our shared heritage, and we wish our friends at Ranger Boats a happy golden anniversary."

### About Bull Shoals

Spanning 45,000 acres and rich in timber, structure and bass, Bull Shoals Lake has a long and storied history of producing exciting bass fishing tournaments, including TBF National Championships.

In March 2013, Vermont TBF member Gilbert Gagner fished Yamamoto Senkos and jigs to claim the TBF crown on Bull Shoals with a three-day total of 15 bass weighing 35 pounds, 5 ounces. The grand finale was a true nail-biter that saw Gagner and Arizona's Jeff Erickson locked in a tie for first. The contest was decided by the second tie-breaker in TBF rules, which is the number of bass weighed alive. All of Gagner's fish were alive, while Erickson had one dead fish in his three-day catch.

The action was no less entertaining in March 2009, when West Virginia's Robert Harkness rallied to claim the TBF crown on Bull Shoals with a three-day total catch of 15 bass weighing 40 pounds, 13 ounces. After landing in 17th on day one, he moved up to fifth on day two before taking the lead at the final weigh-in.

Coverage of the TBF National Championship will be broadcast nationally on the Pursuit Channel and streamed live daily on [bassfederation.com](http://bassfederation.com). ■

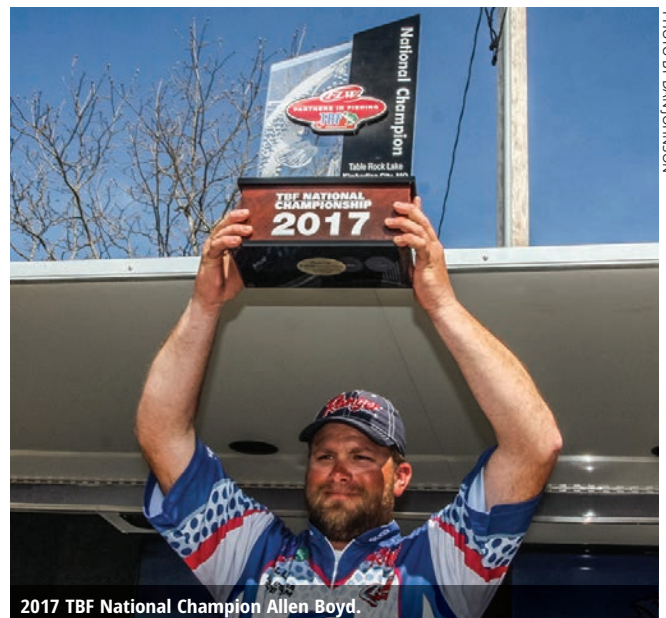


PHOTO BY DAN JOHNSON

2017 TBF National Champion Allen Boyd.

# SPONSOR SPOTLIGHT

A CLOSER LOOK AT A FEATURED PRODUCT FROM ONE OF TBF'S VALUED SPONSORS

## LONGTIME TBF SUPPORTER BERKLEY DRIVES SOFT BAIT EVOLUTION

It's a safe bet that, coast to coast and all season long, The Bass Federation members catch more bass on soft artificial baits than all other lure types combined. And it's for a good reason: That deadly combination of lifelike feel, profile and action triggers solid strikes, even when a fisherman can't buy a bite on other baits. An enticing cocktail of bass-busting scents and flavors make some soft baits even more effective.

Longtime TBF sponsor Berkley has been building bass-catching baits with those traits for years. The company's soft-bait roots date back to 1985, when it hired the now-legendary fish research scientist Dr. Keith Jones. With the aid of equally talented chemist John Prochnow, who joined Berkley in 1986, Jones quickly improved the company's existing family of Strike fish attractants while secretly developing an extremely effective new bait.

That new concoction was Berkley PowerBait, which featured a pliable, soft body laced with natural attractants. The blend caused fish to hang on to the bait up to 18 times longer once they bit – giving anglers more time to set the hook. PowerBait hit the market in 1988 with the release of Trout PowerBait, which was an instant success story. Jones and Prochnow were far from finished, however. They pressed forward in their laboratories in Spirit Lake, Iowa, tirelessly researching what trips bass' triggers.

In 1989, they released the PowerBait Power Worm and Power Grub, a pair of PVC-based baits infused with natural attractants.

PowerBait gained widespread favor among millions of anglers. That initial success in turn fueled the development of a long line of PowerBait products that continues today.

Traditional PowerBait excels with active presentations aimed at fish that are using their vision and lateral line to track down prey. If PowerBait wasn't enough, Jones and Prochnow eventually created Gulp! to add offerings that could attract fish to the angler's bait by smell and taste.

Brought to market in 2003 after years of research and testing, the water-based bait releases water-soluble scents, making it ideal for slow-moving and stationary presentations. Once Gulp! reached store shelves, savvy bass anglers quickly adopt-

ed it for fishing smallmouths on drop-shot rigs.

Berkley expanded anglers' options by adding Gulp! Alive! to the family shortly thereafter. Gulp! and Gulp! Alive! are similar products, except Gulp! Alive! is packed in natural juices that constantly recharge its power of attraction.

In 2011, Berkley added yet another soft-bait alternative with the introduction of its Havoc series. Led by initial offerings including the Devil Spear, Craw Fatty, The Deuce and Pit Boss, the family quickly expanded to an array of exciting shapes and actions.

"Havoc is geared toward our pro-staff's passion for detail in terms of shape, action and colors," says Jones, noting that Havoc is poured from a more palatable plastic than others on the market. As a result, Havoc fills the bill for running and gunning with aggressive, fast-moving techniques.

Berkley announced its latest innovation, PowerBait MaxScent, at ICAST last July. This new family of baits combines the best properties of PowerBait and Gulp! in one highly effective package.

In a nutshell, MaxScent baits are durable and long-lasting, but the soft material also releases a scent field into the surrounding water. As a result, they attract bass from a distance, and they're sure to have an impact on TBF events this season.

MaxScent options include the General, a 5-inch stickworm that wobbles seductively on the fall; the Kingtail, a thick, 8-inch, curly tailed worm sporting reversed ribs for greater scent dispersion; the Lunch Worm, a meaty, 6-inch, curly tailed ribworm great for fishing in grass and when Texas-rigging cover; the Meaty Chunk, a 3-inch jig trailer with long, flappy pincers and added material for extra strength; the Flatnose Minnow, a thin, 4-inch bait that dances like a live minnow when paired with a drop-shot rig; the D-Worm, a 5 1/2-inch worm blessed with a lively bulbous tail that's perfect for drop-shotting and shakychad applications; the Creature Hawg, a 4-inch creature-style bait; and the Hit Worm, a thin, 4 1/2-inch finesse worm that excels in a variety of rigging options.

Collectively, Berkley's PowerBait, Gulp! and PowerBait MaxScent families allow TBF members everywhere to choose bass-catching soft baits that fit their styles of fishing and favorite presentations, and match the conditions virtually anytime they hit the water. ■



Berkley PowerBait MaxScent  
Flat Nose Minnow

# 2017 TBF NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS UPDATE

The final round of regional tournaments in The Bass Federation's National Semi-Finals program produced a flurry of exciting grassroots bass fishing competition, as TBF members battled for the last invitations to fish the 2018 TBF National Championship this spring.

Highlights from the last wave of events:

## District 1

Competitors from Georgia and Florida enjoyed picture-perfect conditions for the District 1 event Nov. 4-5 on Lake Eufaula. Stable weather, water temperatures in the low to mid-70s and water levels a few feet below full pool set the stage.

When the scales settled after the final catch was weighed, Georgia's Brent Tullis led the boater field with a tournament total of 28.78 pounds. Tullis earned \$2,810 for the win, including the \$2,310 first-place cash payout and \$500 Ranger Cup award. He will also represent Georgia at the championship.

Florida's Edward Fry topped the co-anglers with a total of eight bass for 19.01 pounds. Fry pocketed \$1,155 plus a ticket to nationals. Other anglers advancing to the finals are Florida boater A.J. Willequer (18.06 pounds) and Georgia co-angler Ray Edelen (17.09 pounds).

The Georgia Bass Federation, which hosted the event out of Lakepoint State Park, won the District 1 State Pride Award with 90.57 pounds.

## District 2

The District 2 National Semi-Finals event was held Nov. 4-5 on South Carolina's Lake Murray, site of the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup. While the lake has a well-deserved reputation for producing limit catches and heavy weights, Murray was in transition in early November and challenged TBF members in the 52-boat field to put double-digit daily numbers on the board.

South Carolina's David Kneece topped the boaters with a 26.11-pound two-day weight. He cashed a \$2,600 check and advanced to the championship.

Fellow South Carolina angler Preston Rikard paced the co-angler contingency with 16.63 total pounds, good for \$1,300 and a trip to nationals, where he'll be joined by second-place boater Brian Fritts of North Carolina (26.01 pounds) and second-place co-angler David Ford, also of North Carolina (15.43 pounds).

In one of the closest state battles to date, South Carolina won the District 2 State Pride Award with 82.97 pounds to North Carolina's 79.31 pounds.

## District 3

A total of 162 TBF members from Kentucky and Tennessee converged on Kentucky Lake Oct. 21-22 for the District 3 showdown.

Clear skies and calm waters prevailed, but the impoundment still dealt the field a challenging hand as many anglers struggled to get bit. Tennessee boater Larry Dunlap overcame the challenges with 20.40 pounds.



Larry Dunlap paced the District 3 boaters.

Conditions soured on day two when lower temps, stronger winds and scattered rain further tested TBF members' mettle. Dunlap rose to the challenge again, boxing a 14.05-pound limit for a 34.09-pound total to win the boater title. He cashed a \$4,370 check and will represent Tennessee at nationals.

Tennessee boaters swept the top seven places. Kentucky's Steven Taylor landed in eighth with 18.07 pounds and will represent the Bluegrass contingent in the championship.

On the co-angler side, Kentucky's BJ Nelson sacked just two bass for 4.07 pounds on day one, but he vaulted into first on day two with a 14.13-pound limit and 19.04-pound total. Nelson won \$2,185 plus a trip to nationals. Tennessee's top co-angler, Chris Franco, (13.05 pounds) will join him in the finals.

The Tennessee Bass Federation won the District 3 State Pride Award by a healthy margin of 87.13 pounds to 44.12 pounds.

## District 4

The Mississippi Bass Federation hosted the District 4 National Semi-Finals event Oct. 14-15 on Biloxi's Back Bay out of D'Iberville Marina. Balmy weather greeted the 35-boat field, but high pressure kept the tide in and made for a tough bite.

Mississippi boater Wayne Parish bested the boater field with a 14.50-pound total. Parish pocketed \$2,250 for the win and will represent Mississippi at nationals for the second year in a row.

Alabama's David Salter led the co-anglers with 10 bass for 10.64 pounds, good for \$1,126 and a championship berth. Other anglers advancing to the 2018 championship are top Alabama boater Larry Franks Jr. (11.41 pounds) and top Mississippi co-angler Justin McKee (7.73 pounds).

The Alabama Bass Federation won its second straight District 4 State Pride Award with 43.40 pounds.



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Wayne Parish won the District 4 Semi-Finals event.

## District 10

A total of 142 TBF members from Illinois and Indiana clashed in the District 10 Semi-Finals event Oct. 28-29 on Kentucky and Barkley lakes. Launching out of Kentucky Dam Village Marina, contestants were met with near-freezing temperatures and a challenging bite.

Indiana's Brad Schneck tied for second on day one with three bass for 10.06 pounds, then moved into first on day two with a 12.03-pound limit and 22.09-pound total. Schneck collected \$4,300 for his efforts, including the \$3,300 first-place payout and \$1,000 Evinrude E-Tec award, along with a trip to nationals.

Indiana co-angler Bruce Schuyler blanked on day two, but his 9.07-pound day-one weight carried him to victory among the non-boaters – good for \$1,650 cash and a championship invite.



Brad Schneck topped the District 10 boaters.

Illinois sent two anglers to the finals: boater Brian Elgin, who finished third overall and first for Illinois with 17.06 pounds, and co-angler Jeff Morrison, who placed 16th overall with 4.10 pounds. Indiana's participation numbers opened up four championship slots, allowing second-place boater Jerry Arnett (21.14 pounds) and second-place co-angler Rodney Johnson (9 pounds) to also advance.

The Indiana Bass Federation won the District 10 State Pride Award with 34 pounds to Illinois' 28.14 pounds.

## District 14

A 62-year field hailing from New York, Ontario and Pennsylvania anticipated world-class smallmouth action during the District 14 Semi-Finals event Oct. 7-8 on the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario.

Indeed, the tournament provided plenty of beefy bronzebacks. Two Ontario anglers, Andrew Shufelt and Charles Simm, ended up taking first and second, respectively, on the boater side with a mere 0.34 pounds separating them. Shufelt's 24.56-pound limit topped the field and earned him \$3,100 plus a ticket to fish the championship. Simm sacked a 24.22-pound limit, good for a \$1,840 second-place check and the \$500 Ranger Cup award.

Along with Shufelt, Pennsylvania boater John Schoener (third overall, 23.25 pounds) and New York boater Chris Gore (fourth overall, 18.24 pounds) qualified for the championship, as did co-anglers Colton Sowers of Pennsylvania (first overall, 19.41 pounds), Will McFarlane of Ontario (fourth overall, 15.88 pounds) and David Dumas of New York (fifth overall, 13.89 pounds).

The Ontario Bass Federation ran away with the District 14 State Pride Award with 109.77 pounds.

## District 23

The Arizona Bass Federation hosted the District 23 National Semi-Finals event Nov. 11-12 on Lake Havasu out of Lake Havasu City. Some anglers struggled to find fish measuring up to the 13-inch minimum size limit, but overall the field caught good numbers of bass with a few bulging bags coming to the scales.

California's Austin Wilson won the boater division with 25.53 pounds, good for \$1,420. Fellow Cali angler Aldo Acevedo tallied 11.69 pounds to win the co-angler division, earning \$710.

Wilson and Acevedo advance to the championship, along with Arizona boater Richard Vizcarra (third overall, 23.41 pounds) and Arizona co-angler Jesse Parks (third overall, 9.50 pounds).

The Arizona Bass Federation captured the District 23 State Pride Award with 83.92 pounds to California's 61.08 pounds. ■

### CORRECTION

In a previous issue, we listed the wrong winners for the Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania Quad State Championship on Chesapeake Bay July 9. Zachary Tamandl and James Soldridge were the Pennsylvania champions, and weighed in the heaviest overall weight. Other state winners include Jackson Staib and Jasper Brown of Delaware, Garrett Geiger and Nick Naggie of Maryland, and Vincent Pustizzi and Tim Nichols of New Jersey. We regret the mistake. ■



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# JOE URIBE JR.

Surprise, Ariz.

By Sean Ostruszka

**In seven years of fishing the Costa FLW Series Western Division, you have five top-five finishes in the Angler of the Year race and two more top 20s. That's kind of ridiculous, don't you think?**

Yeah, I've been very blessed. I've been fishing for quite a while. So even though I'm pretty young at 38, I'm still a veteran out here. I have confidence in my knowledge of the lakes and in my abilities.

**To what do you attribute most of your success?**

I think it's a few things. I have a better understanding of the lakes out here [in the West] than I do elsewhere. Part of it also is how I practice; how I fish. I'm a very technical, organized angler. I also try to be very observant, both of the conditions and of other anglers' body language. You can tell if a guy is calm and has a good bag or if he's struggling and making a lot of casts. Little things like that make a difference.

**Well, it's obviously all working. Let's talk about practice. I hear you have a great partner.**

I do. My sister, Rachel, travels and practices with me. She's been a really

big reason for my success, especially in the last three seasons since she's been a co-angler in every event.

We complement each other really well. If I'm fishing fast up shallow, she'll be slowing down out deep. She's the reason I won the tournament at Clear Lake in 2015.

**Why's that?**

Well, I'd been cranking shallow, but I felt my pattern was running out. She'd found a pattern dragging a Texas rig in deeper water, and she did well the first day doing that and really well the second day.

The night after the second day, she told me I really should try her pattern. Well, I started out doing mine, but then I finally gave it a shot and I caught a 6-pounder. But after an hour it was getting windier and I felt my crankbait pattern would improve. So I went back to that and lost a 4-pounder. I thought I needed one more good bite, and with 30 minutes left I decided to try her pattern again. First cast was a 9-pounder.

She was actually in a camera boat watching me when that happened. I remember turning to her and her just saying, "I told you."

**Who got you both into fishing?**

Our dad, Joe Sr. We grew up in a tough neighborhood in Long Beach, Calif., but he introduced us to fishing, hunting and the outdoors. It really kept us out of trouble.

**I take it there weren't too many outdoorsmen in your neighborhood growing up, huh?**

No. My friends always gave me a hard time about me fishing and it being boring. They thought we were just bobber fishing, waiting for something to happen. Then, once I started fishing tournaments, they were like, "How much money did you make?" It wasn't so boring to them then.

**Circling back, in that 2015 season you earned two wins and another top 10. What was that like?**

It was amazing. That first tournament at Havasu was special because it was my first win ever in the Costas. I'd almost given up on trying to win, because I'd finished second and third so many times, but never won. I was mentally exhausted from trying to figure out why. I'd finally let it be before that season, left it up to God, and figured when it was my time it would be my time. ■

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