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PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

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COVER PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

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EDITOR'S NOTE

TOO MUCH TO WRITE ABOUT

I've been writing about bass fishing for 11 years. In that time, I've never really suffered from writer's block, with one exception: this column.

It's almost always the last item on the list to be finished for every issue, causing a lot of consternation for Michelle Dowling, our production manager.

The problem isn't that I can't get the words to flow; it's that I can't decide in which direction the flow should travel. There are so many topics I'd like to dig into, and when I start down one path, I instantly wish I'd taken another.

And so, this time (and probably not for the last time) I decided to cover several topics that have been on my mind. Call it taking the easy way out.

1. Bryan Thrift ... Wow – I recently enjoyed a lively discussion over dinner with several members of the FLW media team about whether or not Bryan Thrift is the best bass fisherman on the planet right now. There was no debate. We all agreed that he is. You can read a statistical breakdown on Thrift in *The Deal* on page 30, which factors in his latest victory at Lake Cumberland.

Based on my own observation, I can tell you there's not a more versatile pro on the FLW Tour. No one stays on the cutting edge of techniques and tackle like Thrift. No one is in contention to win as often as Thrift. And if you disagree with me, ask Andy Morgan. He shares my opinion.

2. Missing Guido – A big regret in my career is not spending more time working with Guido Hibdon. The legendary bass pro passed away back in March. I interviewed him once or twice and photographed him on the water a couple times, but I never got to know him. It's a shame. Guys like Guido are rare. He was a complete outdoorsman – a woodsman – and I know I could've learned a lot from him.

3. I Love Largemouths *and* Smallmouths – You probably do, too, but what I really mean is I love multi-species fisheries, particularly where either species could win and 5-pound specimens of both are in play. The recent FLW Tour stop on Lake Cumberland showcased one of the best multi-species fisheries in the Southeast. What's the best smallmouth/largemouth destination in the country? I don't know, but I plan to investigate that question later this season.

4. Spinnerbaits are Back – Spinnerbaits were once declared dead, but now they're back. OK, so they've always been effective bass catchers, but spinnerbaits have hogged the spotlight lately, both at the Costa FLW Series level and on the FLW Tour.

The best advice I can give you about spinnerbaits, based on what I saw on the water this spring, is that if you want to really unlock their potential, you need to learn how to put a spinnerbait in places other anglers can't. You need to learn to cast like Andy Morgan. That's a tall order, but all it takes is many, many hours of practice. In other words, you need to fish more.

As if you needed another reason.

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SPOT ON

A small lead is a big lead on most lakes dominated by spotted bass. That's because the feisty little cousin to the largemouth generally doesn't grow much beyond 4 pounds, and most professional anglers have little trouble sacking up a small limit. So to mount a come-from-behind win means every fish in your limit probably has to be a massive spot (aka spotopotamus).

Zack Birge, shown here on day three at the Lake Lanier FLW Tour event, did his best to chase down Bradley Hallman, who began the weekend 7 pounds, 9 ounces ahead of his fellow Oklahoman. Birge weighed in 15-01 and 16-00 for his final two limits and closed the gap to 2-10, which made for some dramatic footage on FLW Live, but didn't quite earn the young pro his first Tour victory.

PHOTO BY KJELL KVANBECK

Join Us at Summer Camp

Summer camps are cool. If you've ever attended one, you know what I'm talking about.

Athletic camps provide opportunities for high school students to make new friends, have fun with teammates and grow as athletes under the expert instruction of top coaches and professional players. There are summer camps for basketball, football, baseball, softball, soccer and now … High School Fishing.

As part of our recruitment, retention and reactivation efforts to help the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation grow fishing participation to 60 million anglers by 2021, an ambitious but achievable goal called "60 in 60," FLW and the nonprofit FLW Foundation have partnered with Costa Sunglasses to host the inaugural Costa FLW High School Fishing Summer Camp July 18-20 at Murray State University in Murray, Ky., with daily activities on Kentucky Lake. The three-day, all-inclusive camp is designed for serious high school anglers, parents and coaches who want to gain an edge on the competition by getting hands-on bass fishing experience alongside the biggest names in the industry.

Campers are also invited to put their skills to the test July 21 in the FLW Foundation #MarshallStrong tournament benefiting victims of the Jan. 23 shooting at Marshall County High School in Benton, Ky., where FLW is headquartered. The tournament will be held on Kentucky Lake out of Kentucky Dam Marina. It will feature two divisions – boat and kayak. One lucky camper will be selected to fish the tournament with FLW Tour pro Scott Martin. The winner of each division will receive $1,000 and the Costa FLW High School Fishing Cup. The entry fee is $200 per boat/kayak.

While camp is restricted to high school students, parents and coaches, participation in the FLW Foundation #MarshallStrong tournament is open to everyone, including middle school and elementary school students accompanied by an adult. You do not have to attend camp to participate in the tournament. To make the tournament even more fun, we've included nine categories (men, women, college, big fish, etc.) that each team in the boat division can enter to earn a $500 bonus. The cost is $25 per category, and you can enter as many as you'd like to increase your odds of winning.

Camp attendees will be immersed in instruction from top professionals and industry executives. Students will learn the tools they need to take their fishing and fishing-career readiness to the next level while parents and coaches learn how to support them. FLW Tour headliners including Forrest Wood Cup champions Scott Martin and Justin Atkins, Pennzoil Marine Anglers of the Year Bryan Thrift and Andy Morgan, Costa pro Casey Ashley, and other top pros will be onsite to provide personal instruction on an array of topics for students, parents and coaches.

Sessions offered for students include boating safety, seasonal techniques, electronics, lure and rod building, equipment basics, fish care, and off-the-water necessities such as building a social media following, career exploration and resume building for the outdoors industry. Seminars offered for parents and coaches include best practices for sanctioned teams, optimizing individual and team performance, career readiness, and fish care at weigh-ins.

Visit FLWFishing.com to register for the Costa FLW High School Fishing Summer Camp and/or the FLW Foundation #MarshallStrong tournament. If you have specific questions, please contact FLW Youth Director Scott Ellison at scott.ellison@flwfishing.com. Camp participation is limited to approximately 100 students. If the camp fills before you register, you will receive priority registration for 2019.

I look forward to seeing you at the Costa FLW High School Fishing Summer Camp or an FLW tournament soon.

Sincerely,

Trish Blake

Trish Blake
President, Marketing Division

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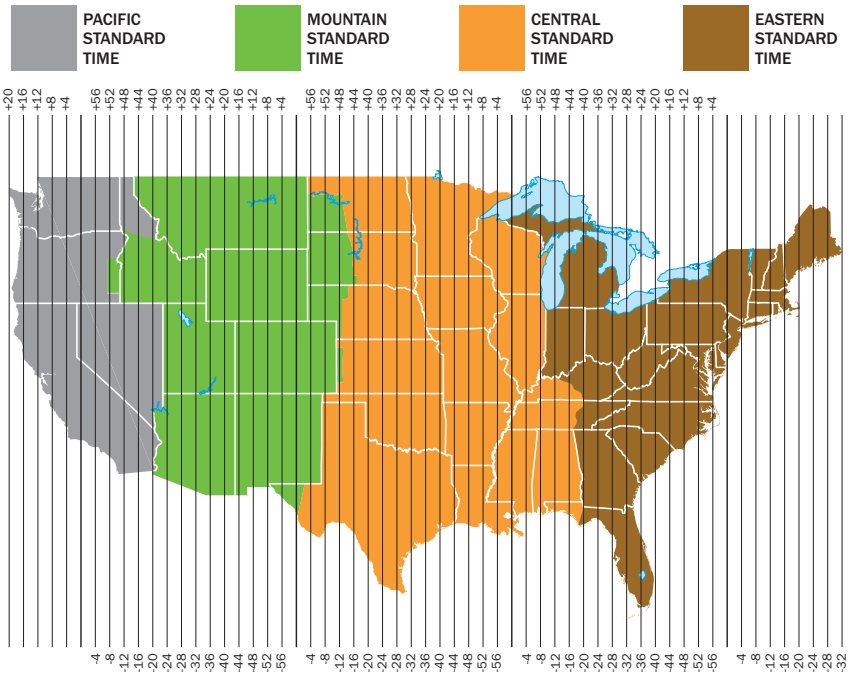
SOLUNAR TABLE

MAY-JUNE 2018



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

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

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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.

REMEMBERING GUIDO

By Brent Frazee

When I heard in March that Guido Hibdon had passed away, my mind drifted back to a beautiful spring day in 1980.

I was a cub reporter for *The Kansas City Star*, and one of my first assignments was to cover the B.A.S.S. Missouri Invitational at Lake of the Ozarks.

There, a great storyline fell into my lap. A longtime guide at the lake entered his first national B.A.S.S. tournament at the urging of some of his clients, who even helped pay his entry fee and lent him a bass boat to compete. He went out and dominated the event, fishing some of the same spots he had fished since he started guiding at age 13.

That was Guido's start. And it was mine, too. We became friends. He went on to become one of pro fishing's all-time greats, and I went along for the ride.

I returned to the lake the next year when Guido made a repeat performance. He talked about how he had won on a plastic crawdad imitation he named the "Guido Bug" that his son Dion had made for a school project.

The more I talked with Guido, the better the story got. He related how living off the land was a tradition for the Hibdons. He talked about his dad, a pioneer guide whom he called "the best fisherman I have ever seen." And he reminisced about how he got started guiding by rowing his customers to different spots.

"We couldn't go that far, but we didn't have to," he said.

From those humble beginnings, Guido went on to become a fishing legend, a household name in the sport. He won virtually every award pro fishing has to offer.

In my eyes, Guido was a bigger-than-life Paul Bunyan. He was one of those "live-off-the-land" types. Except for a brief stint as a butcher in Kansas City ("He hated it, so he quit after three months and went back to Lake of the Ozarks and started guiding again," Dion told me.), he never had any job other than fishing and hunting.

He was as surprised as anyone when greatness came knocking.

"I remember when he won those two tournaments at Lake of the Ozarks," Dion recalls. "Dad was excited about the publicity it would bring to his guide business.

"I don't think any of us in the family dreamed of what that would lead to."

Dion followed in his dad's footsteps, winning the Bassmaster Classic and the Forrest Wood Cup.

During a press conference after Dion's Classic win, a reporter observed that, "It has to feel good to step out of your dad's shadow." Dion quickly replied, "I've never minded being in dad's shadow. I've been lucky to learn from the best."

More than anything, that told me a lot about the Hibdon family and its "all-for-one, one-for-all" kind of attitude.

With his wife, Stella, at his side, Guido rocketed to the top of the fishing world and stayed there for years. But I never saw success go to his head.

He remained steadfastly loyal to family, taking pride that his grandsons Payden, Lawson and Connar also became involved in tournaments. He also remained loyal to his fans, offering fishing advice whenever he was asked.

I wasn't surprised. Guido tried to portray a gruff exterior, but he had a heart of gold. I wrote countless stories with him and about him over the years, and he taught me a lot about bass fishing. He also taught me a lot about life: Never to forget your roots, to treasure your family and to remain loyal to the people who always stood behind you.

I'll miss him greatly. As Dion said, "There will never be another Guido Hibdon." ■

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ROB NEWELL

Algorithms and Weigh-ins

It's been interesting to watch the mix of bass fishing and social media unfold over the past 10 years. The new form of fishing gold, as far as public perception is concerned, is the modern metric of likes, shares, followers, views and subscribers, which represent a kind of new standard by which social media gurus' fishing skills are judged.

I was not really aware of this form of digital fishing competition until last summer when I was privy to a spirited discussion among some high school-age bass anglers about the "best bass fishermen." I'm embarrassed to say that I didn't recognize a single name these youngsters threw out as being the supreme bass fishing masters of the digital universe. In fact, none of them mentioned well-known pros such as Kevin VanDam, Bryan Thrift, Jacob Wheeler or Mike Iaconelli in a discussion about the "best" bass anglers. I was a little perplexed.

Since then I've taken some time to watch this new generation of bass fishing stars at work in their social media world of Facebook, Instagram and especially YouTube. Yes, this content has plenty of fishing, but there is also plenty of talking.

Lots and lots of talking, in fact.

There is play-by-play of everything from getting ready to go fishing, to driving to go fishing, to getting some food while fishing, to the in-depth review of every fish caught while fishing. And last, but certainly not least, the grand poobah of YouTube videos is the "unboxing" of any new gear that comes in the mail.

Apparently many of these videos are considered to be "vlogs," where young anglers talk to their peer viewers to connect with them on a more personal level.

What really caught me off guard about these vlogs, however, was the number of views they get. We're talking 100,000 to 300,000 views per video in a matter of months, not just on one video, but on dozens.

At that point, I was pretty impressed with this new crop of anglers. I did a quick check of the viewer numbers for some of the well-known bass pros I just name-dropped in this column, and they don't stack up to the numbers posted by these fishing sensations on a weekly basis on YouTube.

The huge "followings" social media stars command have led to rumors of big-time sponsorship deals for this new era of digital anglers, which has raised some eyebrows.

However, it seems the valuable scoring metrics of social media, being in the form of likes and shares and views, by no means constitute a set of strict standards. Apparently, there are these neat things called "algorithms" that can be tweaked at any given time to strengthen or lessen the relationship between videos you watch and the ones you're served up. And it's now become a normal practice in some social media channels to "boost your post," or actually pay money to have your content pushed to new audiences, thereby improving the numbers.

Yes, as shocking as this may be, social media numbers can be manipulated. It seems there are plenty of third-party companies that can perform such manipulation miracles for a fee.

I point this out because the only metric I grew up with in bass fishing was pounds and ounces, determined by a certified scale.

I participated in tournaments where we fished against the clock and other anglers. Back then an "unboxing" was dumping your whole tackle box out on the floor of the boat in a desperate attempt to find something that would catch a couple of more upgrades before weigh-in. When fishing time was officially up, we brought our bass to the scales to be weighed and recorded.

After everyone weighed in, a sheet was printed that listed the anglers' names, by catch, in order from the highest weight to the lowest. There were no algorithms applied to this order. The guy in 50th place couldn't pay a few extra bucks to "boost" his weight by a couple pounds. Those who didn't catch much were at the bottom of the sheet, and the angler with the highest weight was deemed the best – all right there in black and white.

Anglers that consistently scored top finishes in the local scene moved up to regional events. If they experienced success there, they advanced on up to national circuits such as the FLW Tour. In doing so, they accrued a degree of earned credibility as talented anglers who were considered media sources on fishing patterns, techniques, lures and equipment. Because of their influence in the marketplace, they were then hired by companies as professional spokespeople to represent their products. Meanwhile, they had to maintain their status in the sport by continuing to perform at exceptionally high levels in tournaments. It takes an incredible amount of dedication, skill, sacrifice and natural fishing talent to post the right kind of numbers consistently in the top fishing tours of the nation.

As tournament bass fishing and social media continue to mix on the swirling winds of the fishing industry, I'm a little concerned that social media metrics, built on the shifting sands of algorithms and paid boosts, are becoming a convenient replacement for true tournament performance metrics rooted in the solid standards of pounds and ounces. After all, it's far easier to look up an angler's social media numbers than it is to drill down and examine tournament stats across different circuits and tours.

I understand that social media numerics have their place in fishing and that instructional videos provide value for beginners; I get it, but personally I hope the primary standard of determining the best bass anglers will always be solid numbers that can't be manipulated, ones that have created a sport with a 50-year history of performance-driven statistics. ■

FLW Tour pro Scott Martin's resume reflects a rare combination of skills: the ability to win tournaments, and to draw a social media following.

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Running Buddies

Back in the days when bass tournaments first caught on, friendships among anglers usually began and ended at the water's edge. It was tough enough for one fisherman to discover a fishing pattern that would hold up throughout a tournament, much less afford to share any useful information. There were exceptions such as the so-called "Hemphill Gang," whose membership included Tommy Martin, Larry Nixon and Harold Allen, among others. Yet even their relationships were measured and based more on mutual respect among homeboys than any kumbaya camaraderie.

Times have changed to some degree; the pros are more open with each other, perhaps more so because they realize that the other guy isn't just a competitor, but a card-carrying member of the same trade, somebody who has experienced the same emotional highs and lows, who has suffered through the same sort of disappointments and still soldiered on. Theirs is a shared professional pride.

That doesn't mean they share everything, however. It usually depends on how their personalities and fishing approaches dovetail. Not counting family members or co-anglers who travel and practice with pros, there are basically three types of running buddies on the pro side of the FLW Tour: true-blue friends who keep no secrets from each other, and who actually might help each other in competition; those who travel together, but keep their own counsel about fishing specifics; and the remainder who are somewhere in between. Typically, on the road they room in the same rental houses or stay in the same motels, and eat their meals together. They're buds.

No Secrets Here

As Jeff Sprague puts it, he and fellow Texas angler Jason Reyes are "thick as thieves – straight-up friends" and share knowledge and fish. Other examples include Todd Castledine and Russell Cecil, and 2017 Forrest Wood Cup champion Justin Atkins and pals Brandon Cobb and Shane LeHew. One of the first rules of such partnerships is that information travels a two-way street, and the arrangement has to be mutually beneficial.

"Complete trust and honesty is the key," adds Sprague. "If I find something that might turn in to a winning pattern, I share it with him – and vice versa. If I tell Jason that I'm punching a hard reed line with an ounce-and-a-quarter weight and I've got them dialed in, he knows that's exactly what I'm doing, and it might help him wherever and however he's fishing. It kind of follows the old saying about two heads being better than one."

Typically, Sprague and Reyes go their separate ways in practice, but check in with each other by phone and compare notes at the end of each day. In competition, they're each other's head cheerleader – though out of contact on the water.

"As long as one of us is catching them, I'm happy," says Sprague. "I'm just as happy when Jason's on them as I would be if it was me."

Different Approaches

South Florida stick Brandon McMillan and his running buddy, Canadian Jeff "Gussy" Gustafson, are miles apart geographically, but blood brothers when it comes to fishing. Like Sprague and Reyes, they keep each other clued in, though their fishing approaches are different. Where McMillan is a short-range cover bomber, Gustafson isn't so locked in to flipping or pitching.

"We fish completely opposite each other. Maybe that's why our little partnership works out as good as it does. We each catch the fish the other one probably isn't going to catch," says McMillan. "There have been times when Gussy's pulled up on me or I've pulled up on him when one of us needs a fish. No problem. My brother [Jared] fishes so much like me that if I told him that I caught fish on the last dock in such-and-such creek, we'd wind up hurting each other."

Atkins, Cobb and LeHew don't go so far as sharing waypoints and fishing side by side, though they will alert each other regarding patterns and fishing locales. They cooperate to a certain degree, but each angler wants to win if there's any chance of making it happen.

"Say a tournament is on a lake like Okeechobee. It's so big that no one person can cover it all. So we communicate during practice, put our heads together and try to break things down," notes Atkins. "If one of us gets on a specific bite, one of the others might be able to use the same pattern on another part of the lake, or maybe it's a timing deal one of us might be able to take advantage of when the others can't. If everybody's catching good weight, we might not share as much; you play it by ear."

Pals, Sort Of

Simple compatibility often trumps other reasons why some pros pal up with each other. There are the FLW veterans such as Andy Morgan, Darrel Robertson, Terry Bolton and Ramie Colson Jr., who just get along because they've campaigned together for so long. And there are always similar alliances percolating among Tour newbies.

For instance, James Watson, Casey Scanlon and Jeremy Lawyer have started running together even though there's not a lot similar about their fishing styles. Watson tends to fish quickly, while Lawyer is more a plodder. Scanlon is somewhere in between. At Okeechobee in the season opener, Lawyer finished 15th, Scanlon 16th and Watson 18th. Collusion? No, it was pure coincidence.

"We don't share a lot of fishing information, unless one of us is really struggling by the end of practice," notes Lawyer. "Usually, though, if one of us is struggling, all of us are probably struggling to some degree. We might compare notes and maybe throw each other a bone, but that's about it."

Chums on the bank, but mum on the water, the trio's original common denominators were various Ozark tournaments they fished. Otherwise, theirs has been sort of an odd-couple arrangement.

"We don't travel together much. I like to start out at daylight and get to the tournament [site] early so I can get everything arranged. James likes to sleep 'til about noon and then get to where we're going about midnight," says Lawyer. "But we do try to get a house together at a tournament and share the load. I'll usually bring groceries and do the cooking, and Casey will bring a bunch of groceries. James will pitch in on everything else, except he won't wash dishes. He'll wash your boat if you ask him to, but he won't wash your dishes. I don't know if it gives him bad flashbacks to all the KP he pulled in the Army, or what."

Which brings up another point: Having a running buddy doesn't mean you have to be nice to him all the time. ■

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

Jeff Sprague (left) and Jason Reyes are friends on and off the water. They work together to try to promote mutual tournament success.

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TAKEOFF

WHAT'S INSIDE:

3 fish care tips and tricks

How Mark Rose longlines a crankbait

Science explains fish schooling activity

Larry Nixon talks reputation management

Targeting drains for late-spring success

A look inside Wonders of Wildlife

JOHNNY McCOMBS MAKES HIS COMEBACK

Tips for caring for a boat's gel coat

Motorizing a kayak: Is it right for you?

PHOTO BY CHRIS IRWIN

Seasonal tips and tricks + other odds and ends

By Paul Strege

STEFAN'S WING DAM PRIMER

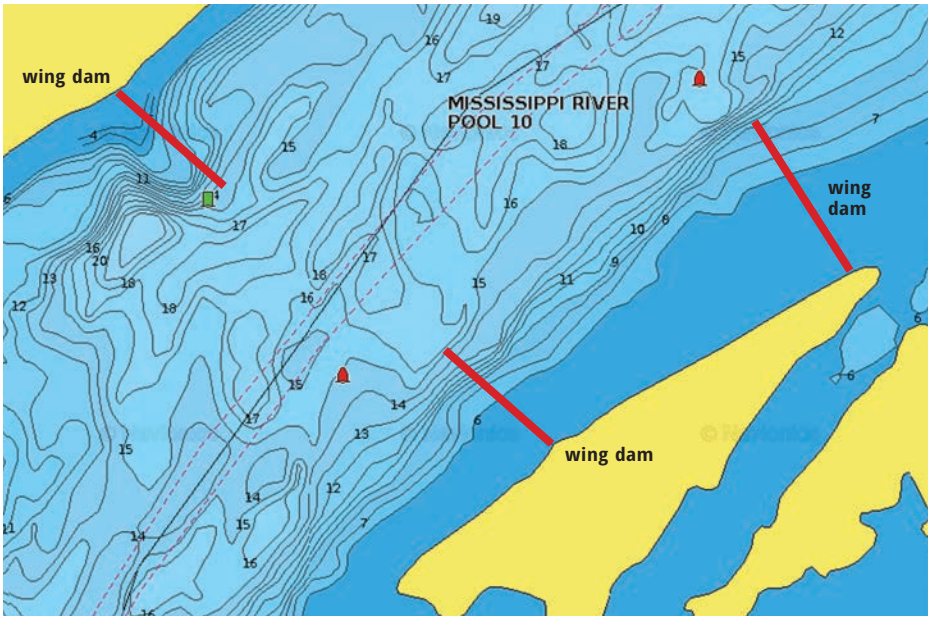
As bass make their late-spring-to-early-summer migration on navigable waterways and river systems, FLW Tour pro Matt Stefan gravitates toward wing dams to locate active fish.

Which ones – "The first wing dams I look at are the ones closest to spawning habitat," Stefan says. "Ones located around the mouths of backwaters can be really productive early in the year. As summer progresses, bass will spread out from those areas farther up and down the river."

Dialing in – Once he has located a potential wing dam, Stefan concentrates on key areas along the rocky outcropping.

"I always start by fishing the base of the wing dam and the tip. And, if there are any irregularities like a blowout, I'll fish those, too. If I don't get bit in those places, I'll move on."

Some of the most active and accessible bass utilize wing dams topping out in 4 feet of water or less, so Stefan relies on a combination of topwater walking baits, swim jigs and flipping jigs to catch them.



FREE FISHING?!

CELEBRATE NATIONAL FISHING AND BOATING WEEK

Starting in May, a number of states across the country offer "free fishing" days as a way to introduce more people to outdoor recreational opportunities. Often coinciding with National Fishing and Boating Week (June 3-11, 2018), participating states allow interested anglers to fish without a license on designated dates.

Also consider visiting with FLW anglers at #ReelFun Fishing events, which are held at many Walmart stores June 1-3. Part of National Fishing and Boating Week, the events are hosted by FLW in partnership with the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation and Wildlife Forever.

For complete details, visit takemefishing.org. TAKEMEFISHING.org

PRO'S CHOICE: FISH CARE TOOLS, TIPS AND TRICKS

1. Andrew Upshaw
Lew's Speed Beam Culling System
"The culling system is really easy to use, and the composite clips hold fish really well. Best part is that the clips won't harm the fish."

2. Peter Thliveros
Mountain Dew/Citrus Soda
"If I've nicked a gill or hooked a fish deep, I'll pour a little Mountain Dew on the spot to stop the bleeding. There's something about the carbonation and citric acid that works. It might seem crazy until you try it."

3. Jeff Sprague
Insulated Livewell Lids
"Keeping livewells cool in the summer is critical. My boat has insulated lids, but for those that don't, I suggest laying a life jacket across the lid. It offers protection from sunlight and provides a little bit of insulation." ■

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PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

HOW TO LONGLINE A CRANKBAIT

GET DEEPER AND STAY THERE LONGER WITH THIS ADVANCED MANEUVER

By Tyler Brinks

FLW Tour pro Mark Rose is one of the best in the world with a deep-diving crankbait. In situations when he needs to go even deeper than a crankbait can reach on a standard cast, or he needs it to stay in its maximum strike zone longer, he uses the longlining technique, which is done by casting and then moving the boat in the opposite direction with the trolling motor, letting out a long length of line before starting the retrieve.

"It works best during the hottest times of the year when fish are very deep or when there is a lot of fishing pressure moving fish deeper because they are finicky," Rose says.

He breaks down the details on how to longline like a pro.

Bait Selection

Rose uses one of three crankbaits that can reach depths of more than 20 feet: the Strike King 6XD, 8XD and 10XD. He says he most often reaches for the 6XD.

"The bait is much more compact, and you can still get it down to 30 or 35 feet with longlining," he says of the 6XD. "I will use an 8XD and 10XD if the fish are eating bigger forage like gizzard shad."

According to Rose, the 10XD can reach 40 feet deep with the right gear, a long length of line and proper boat positioning.

Tackle

Rod – Rose developed the Team Lew's Custom Pro Speed Stick Ledge Series specifically for ledge fishing, and it includes two rods that he uses for this technique. Both are 7 feet, 11 inches long to allow for longer casts. He uses the Big Crankbaits (medium-heavy) model for the 6XD and the Magnum Crankbaits (heavy) model for the 8XD and 10XD.

Reel – Rose fishes either rod with a Lew's BB1 Speed Spool Series, opting for 6.4:1 retrieve ratio for the 6XD and 5.1:1 for the 8XD and 10XD.

"The torque of the bigger baits is just too much, and you need that slower retrieve or you will wear yourself out. Trust me," he adds. "The other thing I like about that reel is that it has a large line capacity [160 yards of 12-pound test], and with this technique you do not want to have any backing on your reel. You want it filled all the way up because you'll need plenty of line."

Line – Line size and, more importantly, line diameter are critical according to Rose.

"I use 12-pound Seaguar Tatsu fluorocarbon for the 6XD and 15-pound for the 8XD and 10XD. This line has a very thin diameter and helps get the bait down as deep as possible without sacrificing any line strength," he says.

Strike King 10XD

Strike King 8XD

Strike King 6XD

Technique

Rose typically uses the longlining technique on river-channel ledges, casting perpendicular to the ledge to hit the target and retrieving the bait from shallow to deep.

He makes a long cast past the spot, then turns and trolls straight in the opposite direction. Rose is careful not to cast into extremely shallow water, which could result in the bait getting hung up and ruining the cast.

On average, Rose moves the boat 40 to 50 yards before beginning his retrieve, but some situations require taking it to extremes. And sometimes, he only needs a "little extra."

"You are trying to hit a specific target. It could be a 5- or 10-foot stretch of rocky bottom or a 100-yard-long mussel bed with fish scattered throughout," Rose says. "How far you move with the trolling motor before starting your retrieve varies based on the target you are trying to hit.

"For small targets, I will move the boat as little as 10 or 20 yards because a small target requires the perfect angle to hit it just right. For bigger targets, my drift before starting the retrieve could be 100 yards. The biggest thing with this technique is that with more line out you can get your bait deeper and keep it there longer."

Precise depth control is a matter of experimentation. If you don't hit on the first try, reset and troll farther. Then try again.

Perfect the Presentation

Rose is careful to watch his line to ensure that his bait is on track to dive to the target.

"You don't want a bow in your line because it can affect the angle the bait dives. I will keep the rod tip low to the water with a tight line. Otherwise you risk missing the mark because it is often a very small window to hit it just right."

The entire process can take upward of five minutes per presentation. This includes lining up the target, the cast, moving the boat while letting line out and then completing the retrieve. So one fouled cast can be a big waste of time in a tournament.

Also, be sure to study the regulations in the tournament circuit you plan to fish. Typically, trolling is not allowed, but how it's defined can vary. In a tournament, Rose is careful to stop the boat's movement when he finishes letting out line – spinning around to face the bait is an easy way to be sure the boat is stopped – otherwise, to pull the bait down under trolling motor power is considered trolling, which is a rule violation. Check with the tournament director if you have questions, then take time to practice because longlining can often mean the difference in hitting your target and catching fish, or missing the spot altogether. ■

MINI-LONGLINING

Longlining is an effective way to get a big plug deep and keep it there. Same goes for smaller crankbaits, says Rose. He'll use the technique to drive down a square-bill or a medium-diving crankbait in situations where he wants to gain another foot or two of depth. Usually, it only takes 20 yards or so of extra distance to make a difference.

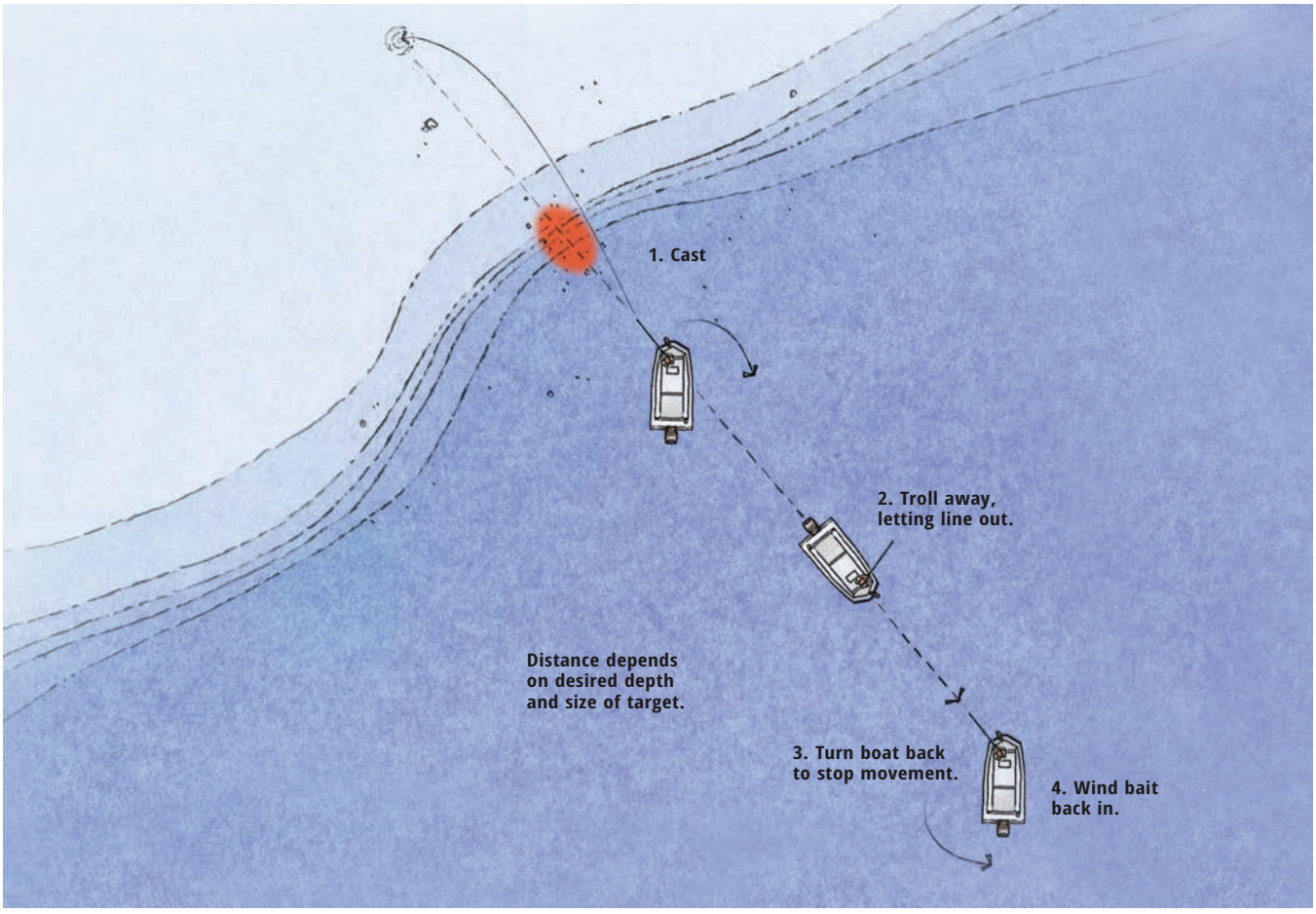

ILLUSTRATION BY RON FINGER

GOING TO SCHOOL

THEORIES ON BASS SCHOOLING BEHAVIOR

By TJ Maglio

Although bass aren't as socially dependent as many other species of fish (think sardines in a school in the ocean), we have all seen situations where they form schools.

This schooling behavior raises all sorts of questions in both anglers and fisheries researchers across the country: Why do they school? What conditions cause it? Is there really such a phenomenon as "igniting" a school – and if so, why and how does it happen?

The truth is there hasn't been any definitive study of bass schooling behavior that can specifically answer these questions. We can, however, look at other aspects of fish behavior that scientists have studied to help suggest information about why bass school, and how to use that knowledge to catch more fish.

PHOTO BY KYLE WOD

Aaron Britt waits for a school to break at Lake Murray during the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup. Though we think we know about bass schooling behavior, it's still somewhat unpredictable, even for the top pros.

When Do Bass School?

There are many reasons why bass might decide to school up and usually it's all about food. Maybe they coincidentally gather in a place where blueback herring or shad are prevalent, or wind up in wolf packs to hunt shorelines for bream. Bass clearly benefit from grouping up at times. Being habitat and behavioral generalists, they are pretty flexible in where they live and how they act. That's why they've been so successful in spreading their range and flourishing in darn near every pond, lake or river across this country and many others.

Bass will school whenever the conditions make it more favorable than not. In other words, if foraging is easier and more effective in a school, or if large schools of forage fish are grouped together where predators can get at them together, bass might naturally group up to take advantage of the opportunity. In some places, this might happen infrequently; in others, the bass could spend much of the year schooled up.

Benefits of the School

The goal of bass outside the spawn is to maximize energy consumption while minimizing energy expenditure. Studies of both saltwater and freshwater predatory species have found that schooling in general increases both the efficiency of feeding, and the likelihood of encountering food sources. One study found that bass of single-species or mixed-species (say, largemouth and smallmouth) schools took less time to find food as school size increased. This is a huge advantage in lakes where the predominant prey species such as gizzard or threadfin shad, which can be found in great numbers, aren't spread evenly across the lake.

Negative Consequences

Solitary bass might have to forage alone, but they also get to be the sole beneficiaries of any food they find. That's the downside to schooling: competition for scarce resources from the other members of the school. Imagine a school of bass hanging out off a deep point. If a small pod of shad swims by and one of the bass decides to go after it, there's a chance that the remaining bass in the school won't have any opportunity to feed. This is the trade-off that each bass in the school is likely to encounter, and it's the reason why there is little schooling activity on some lakes, and lots on others as bass contend with fluctuating forage scenarios.

Igniting a School

We've all seen the video clips from tournaments on the famous ledge lakes of the Tennessee River. An angler is fishing along with not much happening, then suddenly it's like a switch flips, and it's "fish on" cast after cast. This is what many anglers call "igniting" a school, and it's the prize die-hard ledge anglers constantly seek.

Although there's not been a definitive study as to why schools become active seemingly out of the blue, a review of the literature indicates a couple possibilities that might contribute to the phenomenon.

Competitive instincts – Schooled-up bass are used to competing for food, so when one bass eats, it triggers the rest of the school to get with the program. By the time the angler's lure is back in the water, the remaining bass are more inclined to grab it.

Pheromones – In some species of fish, alarm and feeding responses cause the release of "pheromones," or scent compounds that trigger behavior in other fish nearby. This has been demonstrated in various species of freshwater and saltwater fish. Perhaps the feeding action of one bass releases a pheromone that causes the others to get aggressive. ■

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MANAGING REPUTATION

EARNING RESPECT IS ABOUT MORE THAN JUST CATCHING FISH

By Sean Ostruszka

As Benjamin Franklin once said, "It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it." Yet, a reputation is not always the truth, or at least the whole truth.

So how does one manage his reputation, especially in a tight-knit sport like fishing?

"You adhere to the Golden Rule," says Larry Nixon. "Do unto others as you'd have them do to you. Often, it's as simple as that. You do that, and you'll build a good reputation, and you want one in this sport."

With more than 40 years in the sport, Nixon has seen the power of reputation. Whether for attaining sponsors or garnering respect from other anglers, an angler's reputation is often as important as his fishing ability, according to Nixon.

It's something that can be groomed through media appearances, fan interaction and social media, in ways that can help an angler build his brand and protect his image.

Yet, on the water is where a reputation really develops, and that's where it gets tricky, because following the Golden Rule has shades of gray depending on an angler's interpretation of what's acceptable in any given situation. There's an example – quite common in tournament fishing – that can help illustrate the point, and the reasoning behind Nixon's suggestions for handling it can be applied in similar encounters.

Say Angler 1 pulls in on a spot on day two of a tournament. He didn't fish it the day before, but did in practice. Then Angler 2, who is leading the tournament, pulls in shortly after. How does Angler 1 proceed? He was there first, after all, but will he be labeled a "hole jumper" (the deadliest sin on Nixon's list in terms of reputation) for seemingly weaseling in on Angler 2's area? And what if Angler 1 is also in contention for the lead?

Such interactions contribute to building a reputation, and it's also where "unwritten rules" come into play. There are no rules that stipulate Angler 1 has to leave, but if he doesn't his reputation could be tarnished even though he didn't intentionally steal the leader's spot.

Nixon has lost count of how many times such situations have arisen in his career, but because of that, he's come up with some unwritten rules of his own to deal with them.

"The first day of the tournament, anything goes," says Nixon. "I don't know who practiced where, but once you get to day two, if you haven't seen someone in your area, but then you do, that's when it gets questionable. That's where communication becomes so important."

Let's look at the prior example. If Nixon is Angler 1, the second he sees the leader or even one of the leaders come in, he's either leaving the area out of respect (if Nixon is far down the leaderboard) or at least trolling over to communicate his situation (if Nixon is in contention). It's worth noting that in either scenario, Nixon approaches on his trolling motor, not idling.

"Have respect for the angler. You idle over and you could be ruining his area, and just taking off on pad when around others; that's just disrespectful. Trolling motor out 50 yards before you fire up."

Say Nixon is the leader in the previous example, and he pulls in and finds Angler 1 already on his spot. If Angler 1 doesn't communicate with him, Nixon will be sure to go over and communicate with Angler 1 to work out a solution.

"A lot of it comes down to communication," says Nixon. "I'll never be blunt or cuss. Just have a friendly conversation to try and clear the air, but you have to say something."

Nixon says that he has seen many young anglers err in such scenarios as their competitive ambitions often get the best of them.

"They'll be in 120th, and the leader will show up on a spot, and they won't leave or even bother to ask if it's his main area," says Nixon. "Money is such a factor. They just don't understand the proper way to play the game.

"That said, I've seen many young anglers who, as they matured, were able to repair their reputations as they had better respect and etiquette out on the water as their careers progressed." ■

PHOTO BY COLIN MOORE

Few anglers are as adored by fans and fellow competitors as Larry Nixon, who says adhering to the Golden Rule is the best way to develop a good reputation in the industry.

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HEAVY RAINS CAN OPEN BRIEF PATTERN WINDOWS ALONG THE BANK

By Brent Frazee

PHOTO BY CURTIS NIEDERMIER

Cody Meyer finds bass in major inflows following periods of heavy rainfall.

Aside from a severe cold front, not much can drastically change a springtime fishing scenario like a sudden deluge – the type that creates the possibility of flash flooding and causes streams of runoff to pour into reservoir creeks.

Such scenarios create an instant new pattern, one that can be enormously productive, especially in clear-water reservoirs. That's when FLW Tour pro Cody Meyer heads for the backs of creeks, coves and cuts to fish for bass foraging in areas with inflowing water.

"That fresh water will attract shad, crawdads, all kinds of food," says Meyer. "It's like a buffet line for the bass.

"They're not at every one of those spots where runoff is coming in. Sometimes you have to hit several places before you hit the right one. But when you do, they can be stacked in there."

Finding Fish in the Flows

While an extreme water-level change can also impact bass behavior (see the *Forest for the Trees* feature that ran in the previous issue for advice on dealing with high water) and accompany a heavy rainfall, generally any temporary inflow – particularly if the runoff is warmer than the surface water in the lake during spring – can open a window of opportunity.

"I generally start by looking for the biggest main creek flowing into the reservoir," Meyer says of his approach to finding bass. "Those areas, especially when they are steep-sided, generally have the most inflow."

That scenario is especially productive on a deep, rocky reservoir like Beaver Lake, where the water is normally clear. The inflow will add color to the water and make normally wary bass less cautious. On stained reservoirs, the added color might have less of an effect.

Temporary drains can sometimes be obvious. At the 2017 Beaver Lake FLW Tour event, for instance, Meyer fished waterfalls so large that he could maneuver his Ranger underneath them.

In lighter rains or on lowland reservoirs where the terrain is flatter, some drains are much more subtle. Dirty water is an obvious giveaway, but small "valleys" or hollows between hills along the shore often create drains where runoff is concentrated and flows into the lake. Gravel bars and other bottom substrate built up at the "mouths" of these drains are dead giveaways, too.

Go with the Flow

Regardless of location, Meyer likes to try to get his baits to look natural in the flowing runoff. He will use a variety of baits such as light shaky heads, swimbaits, wacky-rigged soft-plastic stick baits and spinnerbaits, and will either swim them with the current or let them drift along in the flow.

On flatter banks, where the inflows might not be strong enough to generate much of a flow, a shallow-running crankbait and jig pitched into the area are good go-to lures.

Depending on the conditions, temporary drains can produce some of the best early shallow fishing, when the water is still cold, and all spring and summer long bass will seek out the well oxygenated water and concentrated food chain created by the runoff for feeding opportunities. ■

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IS THRIFT THE BEST?

By Curtis Niedermier

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

After Bryan Thrift won the 2017 FLW Tour Angler of the Year award, we ran an article detailing his career accomplishments and where they ranked among some of bass fishing's all-time greats. Since then, the Shelby, N.C., pro won the 2018 FLW Tour event on Lake Cumberland, broke the record for consecutive limits in Tour competition, won the 2018 Costa FLW Series Southeastern Division point title and took over the lead in the 2018 FLW Tour AOY standings.

By the time you read this, Thrift will have competed at Smith Lake for the fifth Tour stop, and the stats might have changed. Regardless, where he stands after Stop No. 4 at Cumberland is still remarkable. Here's the latest.

Editor's note: *You can read a complete breakdown of Thrift's Cumberland win in the July 2018 issue.*

BRYAN THRIFT FLW TOUR STATS

Age:
38

Hometown:
Shelby, N.C.

Years on Tour:
12

Tour Appearances:
103

Top-10 Tour Finishes:
38

FLW Tour Wins:
6

AOY Titles:
2

CHASING RECORDS

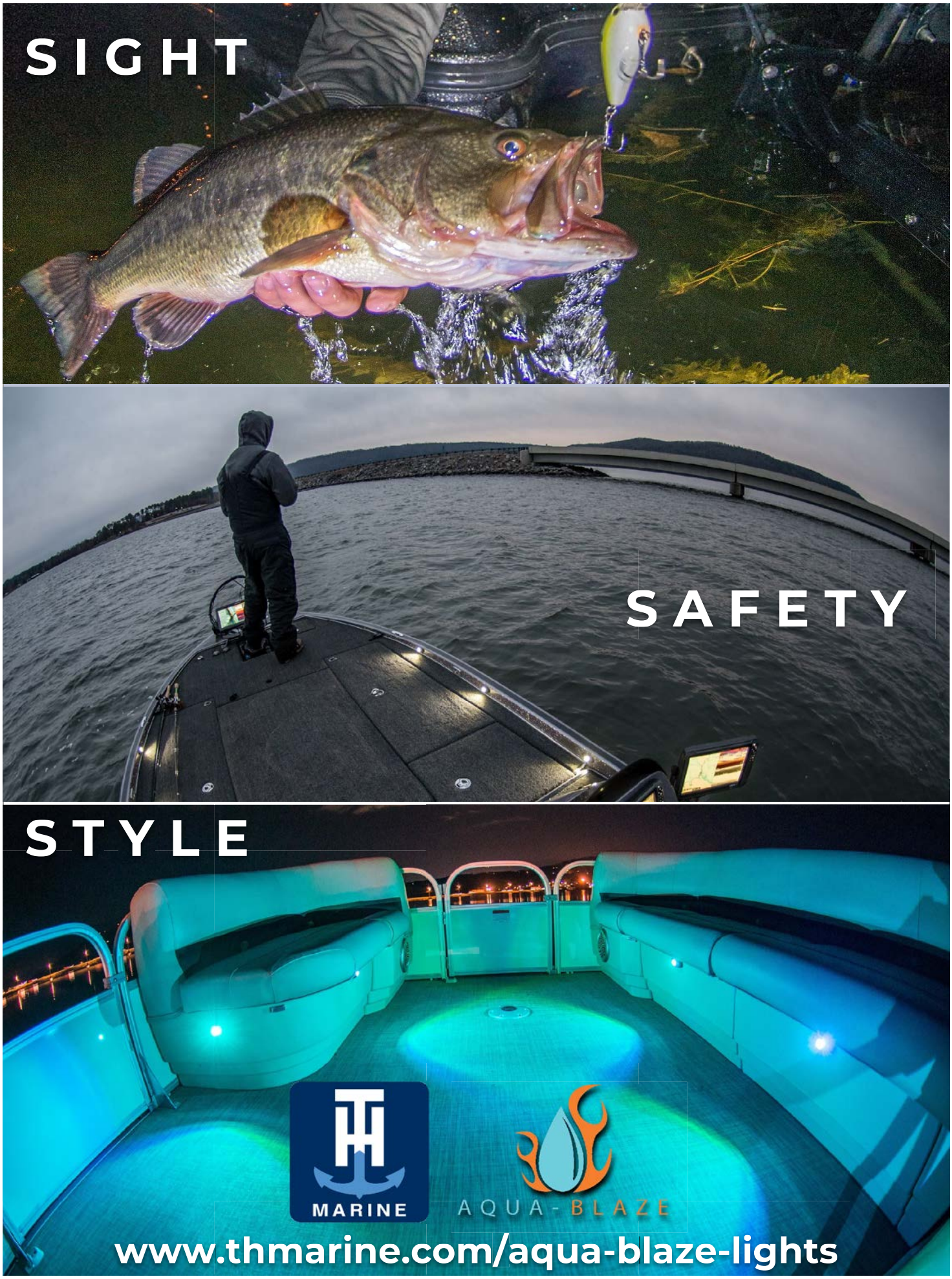
Third in Wins:
With his win at Cumberland, Thrift moves into a three-way tie with David Fritts and Mark Rose for the third most Tour wins of all time behind only Brent Ehrler (seven) and Scott Martin (eight).

Second in Top 10s:
Thrift and Andy Morgan both made the top 10 at Cumberland. Morgan holds the all-time record for most Tour top 10s with 39. Thrift is second with 38.

Second in AOY Titles:
Thrift is the reigning Tour Angler of the Year and has won the title twice. Three pros – Andy Morgan, Clark Wendlandt and David Dudley – have won it three times. Thrift currently leads the 2018 AOY race.

First in FLW Live Appearances:
Since FLW Live was launched in 2017, Thrift has appeared on the show 13 times – the most by far. Only the top five pros on days three and four at Tour events make the show.

Most Consecutive Limits Caught:
At Cumberland, Thrift weighed in four consecutive limits of small-mouth bass, tying, surpassing and twice extending the Tour record for consecutive limits to 53. Cody Meyer's previous streak now ranks second at 50. ■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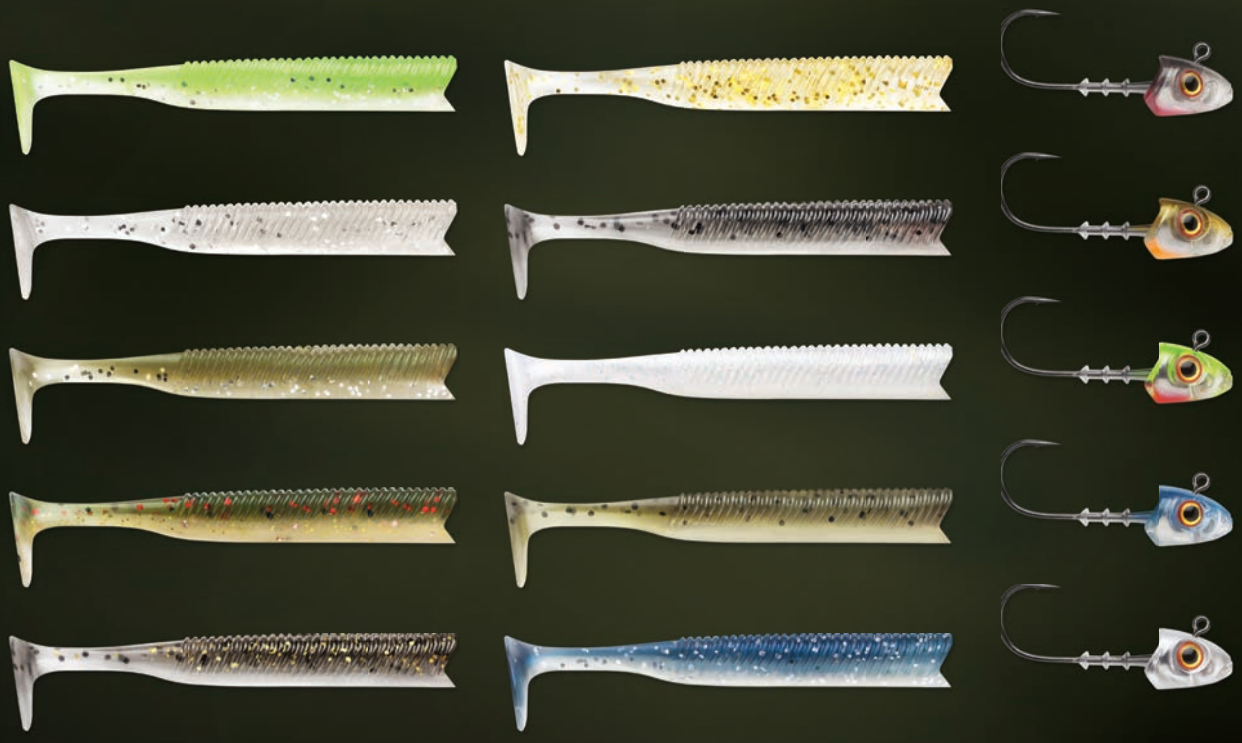

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Bass Pro Shops

After battling the demons of addiction for 15 years, pro Johnny McCombs is back on Tour, thanks largely to the support of his parents, Tyler McCombs and Diann Hays.

LEARNING HOW TO BE HUMAN

JOHNNY McCOMBS OVERCOMES CRIPPLING OPIOID ADDICTION TO FIND REDEMPTION IN FISHING

By Joe Sills
PHOTOS BY CHRIS IRWIN

Johnny McCombs hoisted the $100,000 check high over his head. With the rolling Arkansas hills as a backdrop, the champion's boat could be seen bobbing by the dock behind the weigh-in crowd. The scene was suggestive of any other award ceremony on the FLW Tour: a weary angler, a weigh basket full of fish and a giant check.

To the untrained eye, McCombs might have been any Tour competitor, a Dudley or Cox or Thrift holding up his winner's trophy for photos. But keen observers would have noticed something different about McCombs; specifically, about his boat. Only a handful of rods rested on the deck, and behind the windshield, no sophisticated electronics cluttered the console.

Indeed, when he won the 2017 FLW Tour event at Beaver Lake, McCombs didn't have any electronics. And he only owned a small handful of rods. Some said the win, a major Tour victory with equipment hardly befitting championship status, was a veritable miracle.

They didn't know how right they were.

Walking Home

Twelve months before his triumphant moment at Beaver Lake, McCombs could barely walk. In April 2016, the 43-year-old found himself hobbling down the side of an Alabama highway, shivering uncontrollably in 90-degree weather. He'd shuffle 50 feet or so, and topple over. Then he'd pick himself back up and limp along the shoulder a bit farther. Traffic passed him by without slowing down. Some of the cars and trucks held friends and family, but they couldn't recognize the haggard skeleton that used to be Johnny McCombs.

The various drugs flowing through his veins had turned McCombs' bloodstream into a lethal cocktail of debilitating numbness. For more than 15 years he'd piped a pharmacist's vault of opioids into his system. When a relationship went south for him at age 29, OxyContin, Percocet and Lortab led to real-deal heroin to ease the pain. But the drugs also turned McCombs into a walking corpse.

By the time the once-rising angler found himself crawling alongside that Alabama highway in 2016, a decade and a half had blown by in a blur of drug houses and drunk tanks. His body had become a 150-pound husk draped on a 5-11 frame. He was used up, without ever having accomplished anything other than almost destroying himself.

As McCombs struggled along the road, he dropped to his knees. He had hit bottom and he knew it. He prayed to God for the strength to continue, to make it the four miles down the road to his mother's house.

It was Mother's Day, the day it all changed. Somehow, he found the strength to finish the walk to the home of his mother, Diann Hays.

"I lay in my mother's house for months," McCombs says. "It seemed like I was freezing to death. That's what the detox process felt like after years of taking that stuff. I had to learn to be human again. Most people go to the doctor to recover, but I did it cold turkey. My mom and dad didn't trust me to go anywhere, because they thought I'd go get drugs, and they were probably right."

As he competes in the 2018 FLW Tour season, he's still struggling to cope with the phantoms of his past. The notoriously tight-lipped McCombs is talking now, telling his tale to help others. He makes no bones about it. As an opioid crisis continues to sweep through American towns, contributing to a significant portion of the estimated 64,000 drug overdose deaths in 2016, McCombs stands as a survivor who made it through. Two years after his detoxification, he's built himself up to 220 pounds. He's got abs for the first time in his life, and, at 45, he feels ready to claim his place among FLW's top competitors.

McCombs wants to win the Forrest Wood Cup, to write his name in the tournament record books for years to come. He rattles off the names of aging stars such as Denny Brauer, Rick Clunn and Shaw Grigsby who are still competing at high levels well into their careers. Someday, McCombs would like to join that list. To get there, however, he has to go back to the beginning, to the introduction of opioids into his life.

Skid Row

"I was 25 years old before I ever got high," McCombs says, revisiting the genesis of his addiction. "I was sitting around one day, and a buddy of mine came over and said, 'Hey man, try these pills.' He didn't push me on it, but he put it in my head. When I took them, I wanted to feel that way all of the time."

For the next several years, McCombs casually dabbled in Lortab usage. Similar to Vicodin, the combination of acetaminophen and hydrocodone is a commonly prescribed narcotic pain reliever meant to reduce moderate or severe pain. McCombs says the effect feels the same as drinking seven or eight beers one after the other. Casual usage for McCombs meant popping the pills recreationally every few months, or whenever he didn't want to feel any human emotions, such as fear or pain, that come routinely with the stress of daily life.

The drugs were an escape mechanism that McCombs used even on the water near the end of his first run at the pro tournament trail in the early 2000s.

"I don't think anyone knows that," he says. "But it's true."

For McCombs, Lortab was the launch pad to the more potent lure of OxyContin and heroin, plus codeine. That mix of drugs would fuel a nonstop chase for the next high after what had seemed to be a solid relationship fell apart with earth-shattering finality when he was approaching his 30s.

"When we split, I just said 'screw it.' I went to using drugs every day."

The town of Morris, Ala., is situated about 15 minutes north of Birmingham. Its western boundary just nudges Interstate 65, and the two main entrances to town are guarded by a Chevron on one end and a farm supply store on the other. Morris – population 1,933 – is the kind of country town that legions of professional anglers call home.

"We've got one red light and a caution light," McCombs says. "But the red light hasn't been here for long."

Small rural towns have become another casualty in America's ever-expanding opioid crisis. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), in 2016 the number of overdose deaths involving opioids was five times greater than in 1999. Sales of the prescription drugs quadrupled over that period. McCombs' home state of Alabama had the highest level of prescription opioid use in the United States in 2015, at about 1.2 prescriptions per person.

"You hear about people dying every day," McCombs says. "Young people, old people – they all die from that stuff. It's got no conscience, and you can find it anywhere."

Back on Tour

McCombs made his return to fishing in the fall of 2016. Clean for the first time in years, with no long-term expectations and just months removed from the humbling walk to his mother's house that changed his life for the better, he entered an FLW Tour Invitational tournament at Norris Lake and cashed a $7,840 check for a 13th-place finish. It was his first taste of FLW success

since a 2001 top 10 at Beaver Lake, and it helped set up his return to the Tour full-time in 2017.

"When I started fishing again," McCombs says, "I didn't have much gear. I scrounged up maybe $1,000 worth of tackle, bought a $3,000 truck and used a loan from my parents to get a boat and pay entry fees."

Without electronics and with a sparse amount of tackle, McCombs went back to fishing patterns that had worked for him when he was a younger man. In those years, from 1998 to 2001, he racked up seven top-10 finishes in FLW Tour and Costa FLW Series events. He never notched a victory, though – not until Beaver Lake on April 30, 2017, almost 12 months to the day that he swore off opioids for good.

It marked a new beginning, and a time to reflect.

"I was one step away from skid row," McCombs says. "I'm not going back.

"The final test came a few months after I'd been clean," he tells. "I was about to drive my 70-year-old dad somewhere. I looked down in the console of his old truck, and I saw an old dope bag lying there. It had been mine, and it was full. I picked it up, held the drugs in my hand and told my dad to throw it away. That was a turning point. That was the last bit of drugs I ever had in my hand."

Going Ahead, Sober

As the 2018 FLW Tour season moves into full swing, McCombs finds himself far removed from the lonesome Alabama highway that he used to wander. He says he's in control again, that he's got a plan and a life. He's looking forward to fishing many of the lakes he visited as a young man, clean again for the first time in years.

As for that $100,000 check? A man who suddenly found himself with a six-figure bank account just a year after wearing his last set of clothes until they were rags might be forgiven for a splurge. Ask McCombs what happened to it, though, and he just shrugs.

"Not much," he says. "I'm using most of it to keep fishing."

After the redeeming win at Beaver Lake, McCombs hasn't picked up a plethora of new sponsors. In fact, he's signed just one: Power-Pole. Instead of going on a shopping spree, McCombs secured Power-Poles for his boat, some new rods and reels, and a little more tackle. He has yet to trick out his tournament boat with the latest and greatest marine electronics, and he's still driving the 2003 Chevrolet Tahoe that got him up and running again for $3,000.

"It's got 220,000 miles on it, but it's got four-wheel drive, and it still runs pretty good," he claims.

McCombs says his most valuable asset isn't a truck or a boat or a check; it's his stalwart support system: his parents, his prayers and a new girlfriend. Those are the pillars propping up the resurgent angler from Alabama.

Finally, McCombs says, he's back. Free of ghosts, Johnny McCombs has his eye on the Cup.

"I guarantee you it's coming. I'm just too hungry. I've been gone too long, and with the passion I have for it, I'm going to give it everything I've got. I just want to win. I want to prove myself. I'm 45 years old now. I'm bigger and stronger than I've ever been. I may not be the best fisherman out there yet, but I didn't come back after 15 years for nothing."

Perhaps McCombs' dreams will be fulfilled. Perhaps he will never win another tournament, but he already has won the biggest test of all. In doing so, he reminds us that, ultimately, a man's redemption is in his own hands. ■

KEEP THAT SHOWROOM SHINE

HOW TO PROTECT A FIBERGLASS BOAT'S FINISH

By Joe Balog
PHOTOS BY KYLE WOOD

Bass boats are easily the coolest, fastest-looking boats on the water, and they get their lightning-fast look from a high-gloss finish applied over bright gel paints mixed with metallic or poly flakes. The right formula and procedure produces the eye-catching trademark sparkle we see on the showroom floor. Maintaining this look on the water is easy, provided we steer clear of a few obstacles.

Know the Coats

It's important to understand how bass boats are built and the properties of the outermost layer in order to protect it. A clear coat covers everything on a metallic/poly flake boat. It's responsible for producing such a wet, shiny look. Immediately below the outer clear is the flake itself, which rests on the boat's gel coat.

For boats with no flake – often the case with straight white, black or grey gel coat hulls – there is usually no outer clear coat. The gel coat is the topcoat.

Block UV Rays

The greatest threat to a bass boat's finish is the sun. Over time UV rays can break down the outer coating, leaving it pitted and yellow. In addition, gel coats can oxidize – the oils within the gel itself rise to the surface – rendering the finish white and chalky.

The best way to beat the sun at its own game is to avoid it altogether when the boat's not in use. Complete concealment in a garage is best, but even a carport or boat cover helps. The worst-case scenario is storing a boat on the dock, where reflective rays hit it from all sides.

Stop Threats from Moisture

Another overlooked threat is water; more specifically, moisture. Safeguard against having it enter a boat's finish by maintaining airflow in the storage area, and never leave a wet boat covered up for very long. In time, moisture could find its way between the boat's gel and clear coats, resulting in a hazy look.

Keep Fuel Away

Always immediately clean any fuel accidentally spilled onto a boat. If left unattended, gasoline can penetrate just about anything, and can actually discolor fiberglass.

Basic Cleaning

Once the proper precautions have been taken against the biggest threats, the best way to protect a boat's finish is to keep it clean to avoid damage from less obvious causes. Hard water stains – actually mineral deposits left after evaporation – can be abrasive enough to damage the finish if they're merely wiped off with a dry cloth. Over time, these "micro-scratches" can add up to give a boat a "used" look. A 50/50 mix of white vinegar and water or a commercially available spray-on detailer will help. Premium sprays will also provide a slick coating, which helps prevent bugs and stains from sticking and reduces scum-line buildup. Bass Boat Saver detailer spray is a reliable, popular choice, as are the products by Boat Bling. Be sure to spray overlooked areas around the boat's transom, particularly adjacent to the jack plate, to benefit fully from the protection.

Waxing

While a daily wipe-down is a good practice, establishing a well-waxed outer surface is key to maintaining a pretty rig. The first step is to remove any oils, swirl marks or extra-stubborn deposits through the use of a cleaning wax or polish. There are several products on the market (they usually advertise the ability to rub out fine scratches), but a top choice among many pros is Collinite's Fleetwax.

Cleaner waxes can be applied with a buffer or by hand, but one word of caution: Excessive rubbing can do damage. If you're unsure of how to do it right, consult a professional.

In the case of boats with excessive wear, oxidation or yellowing, the best choice to prevent irreversible damage might be to hire a professional with experience in restoring fiberglass finishes. Boaters who take on major DIY projects should, at the very minimum, do their research. There are step-by-step videos available on YouTube, but be diligent about whom you trust for your info.

Once a rig is properly cleaned and stripped using polish, a protective outer surface must be applied. High-quality carnauba-based waxes do a good job of sealing things up and protecting the boat's finish from UV exposure. Here, you get what you pay for (Marine 31 Gel Coat Carnauba, a high-end product, runs about $50 a bottle), but the protection is worth it.

A practical plan to keep a finish in tip-top shape includes an annual buff with cleaner polish, followed by a topcoat wax applied about three times a year. Another choice is a modern "all-in-one" process that includes a very light polish, combined with a high-gloss finishing wax. While the final product won't offer the lasting protection of the conventional two-step approach, convenience is a benefit. Meguiar's Flagship Premium Cleaner/Wax receives high marks from experienced marine techs.

Finally, for the ultimate in protection, consider hiring a professional offering a polymer-based topcoat (here, the surface must be meticulously cleaned prior to application). While polymer application is costly – often running four figures when included with a full detail job – it's advertised to maintain a showroom shine all year, with little more than a regular wipe-down from the boat owner.

Any step that can be taken to protect the boat's finish is a step in the right direction. After all, resale value and pride in ownership both go up when your rig looks shiny and slick. ■

Boat wax, detailing spray and a little TLC can keep your rig looking sharp and protect its resale value for many years.

PHOTO BY JEFF LITTLE

THE RISE OF MOTORIZED KAYAKS

ADVANTAGES AND ADVICE FOR ADDING MECHANICAL POWER TO YOUR RIG

By Matt Ball

As the popularity of kayak fishing grows, manufacturers continue to roll out better kayaks made specifically for fishing and accessories that provide kayak anglers with many of the high-tech tools that bass boat anglers enjoy.

One of the most popular accessories is the electric kayak motor, which is one of the best tools to maximize your time on the water and put you closer to the same playing field as the high-dollar bass boats, yet at a fraction of the cost.

In kayak tournament fishing, the use of motors is controversial because some anglers believe they unfairly offer competitors an advantage and they contradict the traditional notion that a kayak should be powered by muscles. Still, the advantages are many, and you should consider a motor if you're serious about hard-core kayak bass fishing.

7 Advantages of Motors

1. RANGE – With a motor, you'll save energy and find more fish. Before using a motor, my average range for a day of fishing was three to four miles. With the motor it's not uncommon to cover more than 10 miles in a day.

2. POSITION – One of the biggest challenges with any kayak is maintaining position in wind and current. Without a motor, you're forced to drop anchor or continually paddle to stay in place. This limits the amount of time spent actually fishing a spot. With a motor you can counter the wind and current easily and spend more time focusing on the fish.

3. UPSTREAM ACCESS – With a motor mounted on my kayak, I can launch on a river or stream, motor upstream, and then float and fish with the current back to my vehicle. This is a big plus to me; the days of having to set up a shuttle with another vehicle at a downstream takeout spot are over. Now I can spend a lot more time exploring rivers that seldom see fishing pressure.

4. HANDS-FREE OPERATION – Paddling a kayak in between casts while working down a long stretch of bank and slinging a crankbait, spinnerbait or topwater lure used to be a labor-intensive distraction. A motor enables me many more opportunities to run and gun. All things considered, the ability to work down a bank with both hands free can really expand the range of techniques that are used.

5. ELECTRONICS – A motor's consistent search speed and increased range enable a kayak angler to take advantage of modern sonar – including side-viewing sonar and in-boat map making.

6. SAFETY – This is an often-overlooked benefit of having a motor on a kayak. Pairing big water and little boats can pose many hazards, but a motor can get you back to shore quickly, with little physical exertion in an emergency situation.

7. ACCESSIBILITY – A motor can get someone who is injured or has a disability back out on the water, fishing and competing from a kayak. In fact, some clubs that otherwise don't allow motors will allow disabled anglers to use a motor to make tournaments available to more people.

Choosing Motors

There are many ways to incorporate a motor on your kayak. DIY is one option. Kayakers pride themselves on their DIY skills, so YouTube is full of great examples of clever homemade or modified big-boat trolling motors that have been adapted for a small boat. However, such homemade options often lack reliability, performance and safety features, and they're heavy to boot.

A model designed and built by a kayak accessory manufacturer is almost always a better choice. Companies such as Torqeedo (torqeedo.com) have put time and research into creating the most efficient, safe and lightweight kayak motors – and battery systems – possible. These modern motors and their lithium batteries offer significant advantages.

Kayak manufacturers are also getting on board by offering motor options. For instance, Jackson Kayak (jacksonkayak.com) is currently working on a motor for its popular Coosa FD. When it's available, the motor will be able to be swapped in for the boat's pedal-drive system. Wilderness Systems (wildernesssystems.com) and Hobie (hobie.com) also offer motor systems developed by Torqeedo specifically for their kayaks.

Here are some other factors to consider when choosing a motor.

Weight and Transport

Motors and batteries add weight, but if you choose a premium product you'll see a big difference. One popular 30-pound-thrust transom-steer motor used by kayak anglers weighs around 17 pounds, and a lead-acid battery to power it varies from 20 to 30 pounds, depending on size. A Torqeedo Ultralight 403 hefts about 16 pounds for the total package, including its lithium battery. This makes a major difference in ease of loading and unloading, and the amount of draft in a loaded kayak.

Lithium batteries, such as the one used with the Ultralight, save significant weight, though the tradeoff is a higher price tag.

Installation

Motors designed specifically for one kayak model or a series of kayak models are usually simple to

install. Some just drop in place in the middle of the boat or on the transom, or require some permanent hardware install. Others made to fit any kayak might require a bit more work or an accessory kit to install on the transom, but are usually still pretty easy to set up. Companies such as YakAttack (yakattack.us), Bassyaks (bassyaks.com) and Kevin Dismuke's Kayak Motor Mounts (see Facebook) manufacture motor mounting kits to fit just about any kayak on the market.

Motor mounts should be designed to be easy to remove for transport, and easy for the user to raise or lower from a seated position, which allows access to very skinny water and prevents damage when beaching the kayak.

Steering

Kayak motors usually steer with foot pedals or a hand control. Foot pedals are most convenient for fishing. Some anglers into the DIY scene have even figured out how to rig remote-operated motors on their kayaks.

Registration

Kayak registration varies from state to state. In Ohio, where I live, the law requires all kayaks to be registered, but kayaks with motors must display registration numbers on the hull. Be sure to check local regulations if you're thinking about adding a motor to your rig.

Price

You can pay a lot or pay a little, but you generally get what you pay for when it comes to a compact kayak motor. The Torqeedo Ultralight 403, for instance, costs $1,799, but it's a complete system, is lightweight and is easy to use without any DIY work required to be up and running.

Take Advantage Of More Time

With the limited time that many of us have to actually get out on the water to fish, I believe the motor is the single biggest improvement for maximizing time on the water. Whether you're a weekend angler or an avid tournament competitor, the kayak motor is a tool that can increase your fishing success. That's an advantage that I will take anytime I can. ■

PHHOTO BY JEFF LITTLE

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.

GEAR

PRODUCTS AND INSIGHT TO HELP YOU CATCH FISH

WHAT'S INSIDE:

Product Review: Perfection Lures Shaky Head
WHY YOU NEED TO BE THROWING A SPEED TRAP
New products for the postspawn
An advanced course in wacky rigging

PHOTO BY D.W. REED II

PERFECTION LURES SURE HOOK-UP SHAKY HEAD

By Matt Williams

PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

FLW Tour pro David Dudley had several goals in mind when he set out to design a shaky head he was willing to associate his name with. Ultimately, it had to maintain a stand-up posture, navigate easily through all sorts of tricky cover, provide solid hook-ups and, more importantly, keep the fish pinned. While few things are perfect in this world, what he came up with for Perfection Lures turned out to be pretty darned close.

First Impression

Dudley's shaky head is clearly constructed to perform a balancing act. The football-shaped head is molded with a flat spot on the bottom to give it some stability as the bait traverses a lake floor, but what makes it unique are two thin titanium wires that protrude at outward angles from the base of the head. Their purpose is to provide additional support to keep the jighead standing erect so it is more visible and easier for the fish to inhale. The wires spring back to shape without bending and are outfitted with small rubber tips to help prevent fish from feeling the wires and spitting the bait prematurely.

ACTUAL SIZE

The jighead is built around a needlepoint 4/0 Mustad hook with a vertical 90-degree line tie that is slightly recessed to help protect the knot and reduce fouling. A spike keeper is made from a rigid ABS plastic.

In Action

I played around with the shaky head for the better part of two months and was very impressed by the hook-up/landing percentage as well as the head's weedless nature. Mostly I rigged it with Zoom Trick Worms or Finesse Worms and Yamamoto Senkos and caught close to 100 bass up to 4 pounds on the same jighead (most fish hooked solidly in the roof of the mouth) before one of the titanium legs snapped off at the head. Even then, the jighead went right back to catching fish.

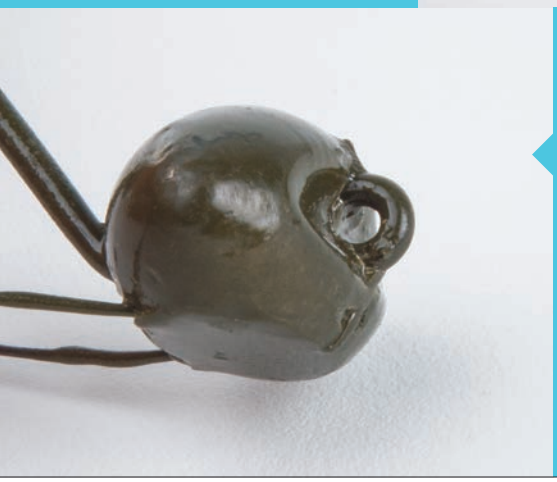
There isn't much rock in the east Texas lake where I did most of the field-testing, but there is plenty of brush, stumps, docks and vegetation – mainly hydrilla and lotus pads. I threw the shaky head into some pretty gnarly stuff at times, hung up rarely and broke off once using 12-pound-test braid with an 8-pound-test fluorocarbon leader.

Final Thoughts

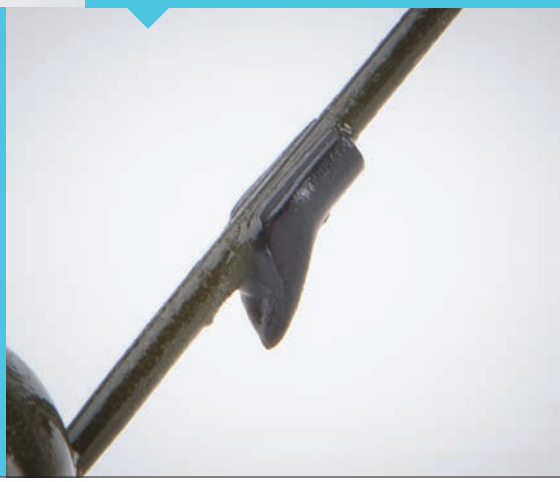
I'm hesitant to say the hook-up and landing percentages were significantly better than with any other shaky head I've thrown, but they were way better than some. Equally impressive were the bait's ability to slide up and over wood and through scattered vegetation with minimal hangs-ups and the performance of the spike keeper at holding plastics in place. The jighead is versatile in that it can be hopped, dragged or shaken in place to give your favorite finesse worm, soft jerkbait, craw, lizard or tube a reliable stand-up action that a lot of other shaky heads can't.

BALANCE:
Titanium wire feelers provide additional stability to help the bait maintain its upright stance whether it's traversing the bottom or sitting idle.

SMART DESIGN:
The rigid ABS plastic keeper holds plastics snug against the head.



RECESSED LINE TIE:
The line tie is semi-recessed to help protect the knot and reduce snagging or fouling. The angle of the line tie promotes better hooking efficiency.



Performance Advice

The line can wrap around the titanium legs on occasion, particularly while fighting a fish, so it's a good idea to give it a look-see now and then to keep things straight. Like other shaky heads ranging 1/8 to 1/4 ounce, this one seemed to perform best on straight fluorocarbon or small-diameter braid with a lighter fluorocarbon leader. Spinning gear generally rules in lightweight shaky head arenas, as do casual reel-and-lift or sweeping hooksets. Most anglers prefer a 6 1/2- to 7-foot, medium-action rod.

APPLICATIONS

- Fishing around rocks, brush, scattered vegetation or boat docks in clear water
- Getting bites in tough or high-pressure situations
- Bed-fishing

HITS & MISSES

+ Gives plastics a reliable stand-up posture
+ Excellent hook
+ Provides good hookset efficiency
+ Navigates cover well
+ Casts well
+ Competitively priced
+ High-quality keeper
– Heavier models would be nice for power-shaking applications.

GO LIGHT WHEN YOU CAN

No matter which type of shaky head is incorporated into your game plan, it's usually best to use the lightest one you can get away with and still maintain contact with the bottom. Lighter jigheads ranging 1/8 to 3/16 ounce provide a slower sink rate and give the bait a more natural action, but they can be next to impossible to fish effectively in a big wind, deep water or strong current. That's when heavier baits weighing 1/4 ounce or more can really shine. ■

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FISHING THE LUHR-JENSEN SPEED TRAP

THIS CLASSIC CRANKBAIT HAS QUIETLY DEVELOPED A RABID FOLLOWING AMONG A SMALL SECT OF ANGLERS

By Tyler Brinks

The Luhr-Jensen Speed Trap has been around for years. And while the unassuming crankbait is largely ignored by the masses, it has a cult following scattered across the country.

You can see its effectiveness if you pay close attention to top-level pro tournament results, where, from time to time, the Speed Trap pops up in the recaps of the top finishers. The reason for its long-term success and loyal fan base owes to the fact that the Speed Trap is much different than most crankbaits on the market.

Speed Trap Basics

The Speed Trap is a compact crankbait with a squared-off bill, narrow profile and long arching back. It's constructed of thin plastic, which results in an extremely lightweight bait. The lip and body design, combined with the lightness of the bait, produces a lot of vibration with a tight wobble. In effect, the Speed Trap behaves like a wooden crankbait, yet with the durability of a plastic lure. It can also be fished at a high speed without rolling over – hence the name.

The Speed Trap is available in two models: The No. 18 is 2 1/4 inches long and weighs 1/8 ounce, and the No. 14 is 2 3/4 inches and 1/4 ounce in weight. Their manufacturer-listed dive depths are 5 and 8 feet, respectively, but expect them to run a bit shallower than that.

New vs. Old Version

Many anglers believe that "original" Speed Traps are better than their modern counterparts – baits made since Rapala acquired Luhr-Jensen in 2005. It's the same sort of story as the Storm Wiggle Wart and other classics, and the theory goes that when the original manufacturers were purchased and production shifted over to the new owner's system, some aspect of the manufacturing process changed and resulted in baits that are a little different.

In the Speed Trap's case, some pros believe there is a major difference in the action of the newer baits, so they're closely protecting their supply of the originals. The current versions include rattles, but some of the original versions came silent, or with one rattle or multiple rattles.

Whether or not the difference is really that dramatic is up for debate, but any Speed Trap will catch fish in the right situation.

A Well-Kept Secret

The Speed Trap has a loyal following in several regions, most notably in the Carolinas and around the California Delta, as well as on grassy lakes up north where anglers fish it above the fringes of vegetation.

It's a lure that some anglers would rather not talk about because it works so well, and also because not as many people throw it since more modern square-bills became the go-to for shallow crankbait fishing.

FLW Tour pro Terry Bolton has been fishing the bait since the early 2000s and says it's at its best when targeting bass that have been seeing numerous crankbaits and lipless crankbaits whiz by lately. One of the keys to the Speed Trap, besides its ability to run true at any speed, is that it offers a different look to pressured fish.

"I have seen plenty of times where I had a good bite going on a lipless [crankbait] and it just stops," Bolton says. "You can usually pick up the Speed Trap and go back through the area and catch a few more because you fish it like a lipless, but it doesn't have the sound and action that fish are conditioned to hearing."

BAIT COLORS

The Speed Trap comes in a slew of colors (the larger version has more options), including many craw and shad patterns and some brighter shades such as chartreuse. Bolton's favorites are: root beer (chartreuse with a dark green back and orange belly) and orange crawfish for spring. For fall fishing, he likes Tennessee shad and "NearClear" pearl shad.

NearClear Pearl Shad

Orange Crawfish

Rootbeer

PHOTO BY D. W. REDDI

Bolton adds that early spring, summer and fall are all prime times to throw it.

"It works any time the fish are in water that is 5 feet or less and is even better when you want a bait that you can use to quickly cover shallow water, like when you're searching for fish on large flats," says Bolton.

Technique

Although the Speed Trap's diving bill has a squared edge, it deflects off cover differently than other square-bills.

"It deflects like a square-bill, but the deflections are not as wide. I like to bang it off of rocks and wood, but most often I fish it just like a lipless and burn it," Bolton says. "You can fish it with a slow retrieve, but it's really at its best with a very fast retrieve."

Bolton also fishes the Speed Trap above shallow grass.

"If the grass comes up to a few feet below the surface, you can reel it right above the grass and just tick the top of the grass. It comes through grass surprisingly well," he says.

Gear Needed

Due to the compact size and weight of the Speed Trap, lighter gear is typically used for fishing it. Some anglers fish it on spinning tackle, but Bolton prefers a 7-foot, medium Lew's Custom Speed Stick Series crankbait rod called the "Wart Special" that he says trends even lighter than a medium action.

"It's more like a medium/medium-light, and that is what you need to be able to get a longer cast with a bait that light," says Bolton.

He prefers a Team Lew's Custom Pro Speed Spool SLP Series in the 6.8:1 or 7.5:1 retrieve ratio and spools it with 12-pound-test Sufix Elite monofilament.

"I like fishing it on mono because it seems to cast the bait much better. The small Speed Trap is only 1/8 ounce and can be hard to cast on some lines," Bolton says. "I also leave a foot or so of line from the tip of the rod to the bait [when casting] to get a little more distance on my cast." ■

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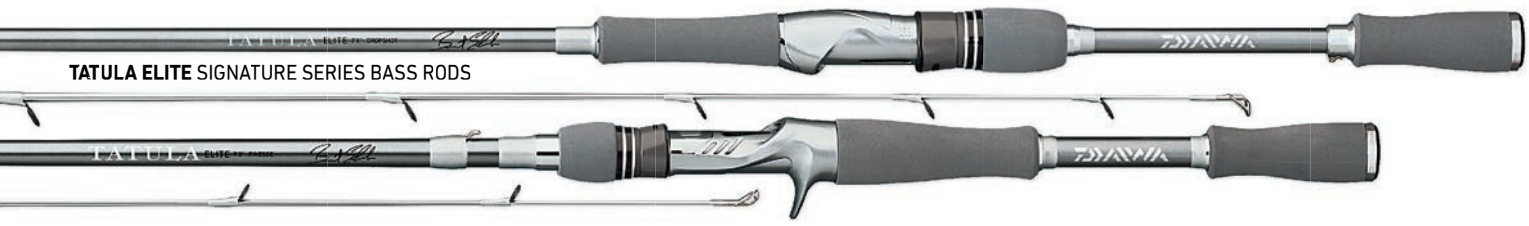

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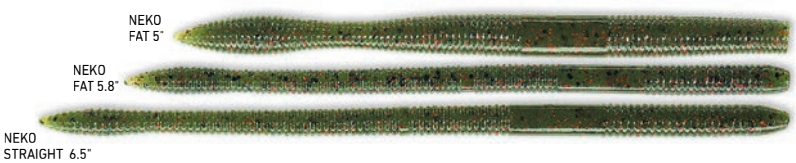

www.daiwa.com/us

COOL NEW GEAR FOR BASS HEADS

By Curtis Niedermier

Power-Pole Ultra-Lite Spike And Heavy-Duty Spike

Power-Pole continues to expand its line of products aimed at perfecting the art of stopping a bass boat dead-still. New offerings include the Ultra-Lite Spike and Heavy-Duty Spike. Both can be used manually to lock a boat in place, or in conjunction with the Power-Pole Micro unit.

The 3/4-inch-diameter Ultra-Lite is made with a hollow composite blank to be strong, yet light, which is perfect for kayaks, SUPs and other small craft up to 1,500 pounds. A 6-footer sells for $79.95; the 8-footer for $99.95. For more stopping power, the Heavy-Duty model's solid spike does the job. It's 8 1/2 feet long and sells for $89.95. All models come with a 6-foot lanyard made of 3/8-inch braided dock line, a rubber T-handle for easily driving in the spike by hand and a threaded insert on top for adding a GoPro or other accessories.

power-pole.com

Dirty Jigs Matt Stefan Guppy Head

The Guppy Head was perfected by FLW Tour pro Matt Stefan to be a premium jighead for light-line, finesse tactics such as Damiki rigging or fishing small Keitech swimbaits. It's built with a 90-degree-eye Gamakatsu hook (ideal for vertical fishing) and a series of molded bait-keeper cones along the hook shank. Sizes include 1/8, 3/16, 1/4 and 3/8 ounce, with the option for a 1/0 or 3/0 hook. Three-packs cost $5.99.

dirtyjigstackle.com

BOOYAH ToadRunner

Thanks to the popularity of the Teckel Sprinker Frog in 2017, demand is already high for the Toad Runner, a similar frog bait from BOOYAH. Like its predecessor, it features a hollow floating body with double hooks and a swimming paddle tail that trails behind. What's particularly interesting about the ToadRunner is the Wire Form Tail. A pliable wire inside the tail can be bent and tweaked in order to dial in the best "plopping" sound during the retrieve. BOOYAH chose clear plastic for the tail to make it less of a visual target, with the aim of encouraging bass to focus on the body and get the hooks in their mouths better. The 7/8-ounce ToadRunner is built on a modified version of BOOYAH's Pad Crasher body, with additional belly grooves and puny legs that help stabilize it as it swims. Razor-sharp Trokar hooks finish out the bait. It comes in 10 colors and sells for $9.99.

booyahbaits.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF MERCURY MARINE CREATIVE DEPARTMENT

Mercury Marine V-6 FourStroke

In February, Mercury Marine released its new V-6 FourStroke lineup at the Miami International Boat Show, launching one of the industry's lightest, most powerful, compact and fuel-efficient outboards. Built on a 3.4-liter V-6 platform, the additions include 175-, 200- and 225-hp models. To illustrate the advantages, the 200-hp V-6 FourStroke motor features Mercury's largest displacement in the 200-hp class, but is the lightest in its class at only 475 pounds. It delivers 20 percent more torque than the closest four-cylinder competitor at cruise, all while burning 15 percent less fuel than the closest four-cylinder competitor. Mercury incorporated a host of other "smart" systems that help maximize performance while minimizing maintenance and expense. Complete specs are available at the company's website. Owners of mid-sized bass boats should also check out the 150-hp ProXS, which joined the fleet in Miami, too.

mercurymarine.com

KastKing KastPro Braided Fishing Line

KastKing weaved Spectra fibers into a thin four-carrier braided line for its new KastPro series, which comes in 10- to 80-pound test in either blue or green finish. The line, which KastKing touts for its abrasion resistance, is made in America and wound on a biodegradeable spool made from compressed wheat straw. Price is $18.98 to $22.98 for 300 yards.

eposeidon.com

Sunline Easy Spool

Unlike the kegs from your college days, Sunline's Easy Spool, nicknamed the line keg, actually eliminates headaches – the kind caused by spooling up in the boat, that is. It's a simple, yet cleverly devised plastic cylinder that snaps around the spool. Line feeds out through a slot for easy refills, while the case provides just enough tension to eliminate tangles. There's also a built-in line cutter and a line holder. The Easy Spool is only available on Sunline's most popular line product, the 660-yard spool of Super FC Sniper fluorocarbon. Spools vary in price from about $65 to $87, in 5- to 25-pound test.

sunlineamerica.com

Molix Lover Spoon

It's tough to innovate when it comes to spoon design, but Italian tackle maker Molix figured out how with the Lover Spoon, a modern take on the classic flutter spoon. The most interesting feature is a bonus two-prong treble hook that mounts near the top of the spoon on a hook hanger that's stamped into the blank. A small magnet holds the hook tight to the body so it stays properly positioned while fishing. The spoon's girthy baitfish profile comes in a 4-inch, 1-ounce size that sells for $12.99 and a 3 3/4-inch, 3/4-ounce size that sells for $11.99. ■

molix.com/en

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SMARTER WACKY RIGGING

THERE'S MORE TO A WACKY RIG THAN A SIMPLE WORM AND HOOK

By Rob Newell

Fifteen years ago, the wacky rig was considered a "window bait," used mostly in the clear shallows during the spawning period. Once fry-guarders left the bank, that spawning window closed and the wacky rig was put away for the season.

These days, however, the wacky rig has become a staple on the pros' front decks, quietly earning a spot right next to the ChatterBaits and shaky heads in spring, summer and fall.

The practical range of depths for wacky rig use has expanded as well, from 5 feet or less all the way down to 30 to 40 feet. Meanwhile, premium water visibility for wacky rigging has shrunk from 3 feet to as little as 10 inches. In short, the modern wacky rig is widely regarded as a viable and versatile finesse option that now covers more real estate – and with more success – than ever before.

Wacky and Variations

A wacky rig is a simple, yet complex lure. It's simple because it's nothing more than a straight-tail finesse worm or Yamamoto Senko-style soft plastic hooked right in its middle.

Above the water, it looks like a useless piece of plastic drooped over a hook. But once it hits the water, the wacky rig comes to life with an undulating, wavering action that some pros refer to as a "sexy shimmy" or "death quiver."

Retaining this unique quivering action is important, and this is where things get a little complicated. The action can be altered drastically by using different components, particularly by adding weight. Nail and Neko rigs are assembled with weight in the tail, while Flick Shake or weighted wacky jigheads add the weight to the center of the worm.

According to western FLW pro Cody Meyer, nail and Neko rigs are most applicable for targeting fish in deeper water on or near the bottom. The tail weight causes the worm to sink with the tail pointed down, for less resistance than a worm rigged horizontally. True weightless wacky rigs and center-weighted rigs are better suited for fish suspended up in the water column, such as under docks, around bushes or in standing timber.

"A Neko rig glides to the bottom faster," Meyer says. "Once it's on the bottom, you can shake it to give it action as it pecks and hunts along. A true wacky rig, on the other hand, needs to free-fall and flutter down through the water column for suspended fish. And a Flick Shake helps speed that fluttering fall up just a bit to either cover water faster or get it deeper."

WACKY JIGHEADS

The Worm

The heart of a wacky rig is a straight-tail worm or Senko-style stick bait. Whichever worm is used, it must be very soft and very salty. Those two ingredients give the rig its irresistible quiver on the sink. The 6 1/2-inch Zoom Trick Worm and the 5-inch Yamamoto Senko are the two most popular soft plastics for wacky rigging, but plenty of other alternatives exist, such as the Strike King Ocho or Strike King Bull Worm, which Meyer likes for Neko rigging in deep water.

David Dudley has spent hours experimenting with many different brands and models of plastic worms in an effort to find the one that "starts kicking first." Though he won't reveal which one he uses, he did share information regarding what anglers should look for when performing tests.

"Some plastics start quivering sooner than others," he says. "Some start kicking as soon as they start sinking. Others have to sink 6 or 8 inches before they start kicking. I went through several kinds to find the ones that start kicking as soon as they hit the water."

Rods and Lines

A wacky rig skips easily, which makes it a great tool for fishing under docks, overhanging limbs and bushes. Skip-casting and the ensuing free-falling presentation are made easier by using spinning tackle.

"Just leave the bail open to let it free-fall," says Tour pro John Cox. "That's where the money is in a wacky rig – that quivering free-fall."

Most pros prefer a medium-action rod in the 7-foot range, though longer rods get the call when fishing weighted rigs in deep water.

The most common line choice is 10- to 15-pound-test braid main line tied to an 8- to 10-pound-test fluorocarbon leader. At times, Meyer and fellow pro Matt Arey prefer to use straight fluorocarbon in the 8- to 10-pound-test range to avoid the inherent floating resistance of braid and allow the rig a more natural fall.

O-Ring Opinions

The downside of wacky rigging is that the soft, salty plastic needed to produce the magic shimmy tears very easily.

One remedy is to slide an O-ring onto the worm and slip the hook under the O-ring parallel to the worm's body. The ring acts as a durable hook holder that absorbs most of the casting and slinging abuse.

"An O-ring saves you a ton of plastic because you're not casting them off all the time," Arey explains. "Plus, it's pretty aggravating to skip your rig to the perfect spot, only to have the worm tear off as it hits the strike zone. It's a lost opportunity."

O-ring

Dudley, who says he's had a similar problem, still refuses to use an O-ring as a solution.

"I like my hook to go through the middle of the worm at a 90-degree angle," he says. "I think it gives it the best action and the best hook-up ratio. But that's just me."

Meyer opts not to use the O-ring when he's fishing a pure weightless wacky rig, but will use one when fishing with a nail-weighted rig out deeper.

"Once you start putting a nail in a soft plastic and really slinging it hard to cast for distance out in open water, it will tear easily, so an O-ring at that point helps a bunch," he says.

Strike Detecting and Hooksets

If you're new to the wacky-rigging game and not sure of the best way to detect strikes and set the hook with this setup, the pros' best advice is to become a line watcher.

"Sometimes you will see the 'tick' in your line when you get a bite," Darrel Robertson advises. "Other times the line will just stop sinking and start moving out toward the boat. At that point just pull into the fish and reel. There is no need for a big line-cracking hookset. It's an exposed hook, and just pulling into them is all it takes."

NEKO WEIGHTS

Weights

Nail weights are made of either tungsten or lead, and are manufactured by many tackle companies. They generally come in 1/32-, 1/16- and 3/32-ounce sizes. Some anglers don't even bother with buying such weights and still rely on true nails or screws for weighting.

Adding a weight is usually reserved for fishing in deep water, but Tour veteran Darrel Robertson adds a small nail weight to his Trick Worm just to give it a little extra weight for a directional sink.

"With the weight in the tail, the worm keeps traveling in the direction you pitch it once it hits the water, and that can be a big advantage when you're trying to pitch behind docks and pontoons," he says.

Hooks

Opinions on hooks vary, but careful selection is important. Bigger hooks offer a bigger bite and more weight for a more controlled shimmy, but are also more visible in clear water. Specialty hooks, including weedless, weighted and heavy-shank models, exist to tackle specific situations.

For a standard wacky rig hook, here's what four FLW Tour stalwarts recommend:

David Dudley: 2/0 Gamakatsu straight-shank hook

Cody Meyer: No. 1 or 1/0 Owner Mosquito Hook

Matt Arey: 1/0 or 2/0 Gamakatsu Aaron Martens G-Finesse TGW

John Cox: 2/0 Gamakatsu Finesse Wide Gap (top) or No. 1 Gamakatsu B10S Stinger ■

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5IVE EARLY SUMMER PATTERNS THAT CAN'T MISS

HOW THE PROS NAVIGATE THE POSTSPAWN PERIOD IN MAY AND JUNE

By Curtis Niedermier

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RYAN KIRBY

Coast to coast, border to border, the months of May and June just might be the most wonderful time of the year for bass fishing. Seasons are finally open in the northern U.S. Largemouths are putting on the postspawn feed in the central regions of the country. And in the Deep South, summer scenarios are setting up, though the weather has not quite reached its boiling point. In other words, in the next few weeks, bass fishing activity will reach its peak, which means you need to be prepared to capitalize.

We can help. As spring morphs into summer, more and more possible patterns emerge. Some bass have moved into deeper water already, while others are still foraging along the shorelines. When it's difficult – if not impossible – to get locked on to a winning pattern, the best approach is to take advantage of opportunities wherever they're found.

What follows is a guide to a few patterns and baits that are hot in the months of May and June. There's something for everyone, no matter where you live, so read on, then get out there and enjoy the most wonderful time of the year for bass fishing.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

1. HOW TO WORK AN EFFICIENT DEEP/SHALLOW STRATEGY

Deep and shallow are relative terms in bass fishing, but no matter where you fish you'll want to become familiar with both extremes if you're going to compete in May and June tournaments.

"Especially more so in May than June, it's that transition time of year," says Florida pro JT Kenney. "It's the time of the year when you should definitely have at least searched for patterns both shallow and deep. You either need a two-pronged approach, or you really need to at least have searched it out and ruled out one or the other."

Kenney takes the two-pronged approach so seriously he has separate strategies for how to search for it in practice and execute during the tournament.

The Tournament

Practice comes first, but to understand the goal of your prep time, it's best to start with formulating a tournament strategy.

"When you do have a two-pronged approach, most people will tend to go shallow early and then go deep later in the day, which, in my opinion, is completely opposite of what you should do," Kenney says.

The Florida pro's preferred system is rooted in efficiency. In the morning, shallow fish tend to roam. Sure, you can catch them on moving baits, but that approach requires covering a tremendous amount of water, which isn't the best use of time.

It's more efficient to start out deep.

"Deeper fish tend to be on a spot," Kenney says. "As we all know, whether it's the Tennessee River or someplace else, the spot is typically the size of your truck and boat. And whether fish are in 2 feet of water or 18 feet of water, typically first thing in the morning is when they're biting. I'd rather start on fish that are concentrated in one area where I know my bait is landing in their faces, where I know the fish should be biting.

"Those deep fish, when they're feeding on that spot, they're right there, and I can make some hay really quick."

As the day goes on and the sun gets high, shallow bass will position tighter to cover – under docks, beside wood, in or along the edge of a grass bed. That's when Kenney heads to the bank and targets them with more precision.

"Say there's 100 yards of bank, and in practice I got two bites just firing down it in the morning. If there are two laydowns and four docks, all I have to do in the tournament in the afternoon is fish those two laydowns and four docks and get out of there. I'm not going to fish the whole way around it on 100 percent like I did in practice."

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

Practice

Contrary to the tournament, Kenney's practice period is geared toward covering water in an effort to "just get bites" and start finding potential productive areas. His mornings are spent capitalizing on the tendency of shallow fish to roam and feed in the low-light period.

"You actually kind of do it backward from in the tournament," he says. "In the morning you go race around the banks throwing something moving, trying to find some areas where fish are. You're not trying to dial anything in. That's for the tournament day.

"So usually every morning I'll fish shallow until 10 or 11 and then idle around all afternoon out deep. To find those deep fish just takes hours and hours of idling. There's no real dialing in deep fish, in my opinion. We all know the stuff they bite. You're just trying to find the spot that they're on."

There are more hours in practice to search than there are hours to fish in the tournament. With this system, Kenney capitalizes on typical fish behavior and, hopefully, comes out the other end with an efficient game plan.

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

MAKING MONEY WITH A SQUARE-BILL

Early in his career, JT Kenney relocated to Florida from Maryland and eventually broke out by winning a tournament in the Sunshine State. Ever since then he's been pegged as a heavy-cover flipper.

Boy, has the media gotten his specialty wrong.

"Nobody ever writes anything about me and crankbaits, but I bet 50 percent of the fish I've caught in tournaments have come on a crankbait," he says.

May and June are prime crankbait months for a variety of depths, and one of Kenney's favorite baits is a 1.5 or 2.5 shallow-diving square-bill model. Here are his ground rules for fishing it.

1. Stay efficient – "To me it's an efficient way to cover water with something I have a lot of confidence in. I can have the trolling motor on 70, and I'm not impeding the action of the bait if I'm going that fast."

2. Land more fish – "They usually get that bait or at least get one of those treble hooks inside the mouth. When that occurs, unless you really screw it up, you've got him."

3. Check the sun, wind – Speed of retrieve can vary dramatically from one scenario to the next, but wind and sunshine are major influencers of the technique. On a windy, rainy day, Kenney burns it. On a "typical" day, he experiments with retrieve speed.

"Of course, at noon, on a flat-calm day, I'm probably not throwing a crankbait. Everything has its window."

4. Deflect like a "minner" – "Bass eat 'minners,' and it looks a lot like a minner, and you can bounce it through stuff," Kenney says. "When you can take one and throw it in and bounce it off a dock or laydown or something like that, it triggers bites."

5. Watch the temp – Kenney first reaches for a square-bill around the spawn, once the water temperature in the shallows creeps up to about 55 degrees.

6. Riprap is right – "That time of year, there's nothing like a square-bill on riprap. I talk about that in a lot of seminars I do: just being efficient and not messing around, like not having to get your crankbait unhung from the riprap. Anything you can do to get 40 or 50 more casts in a day is a big deal."

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PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

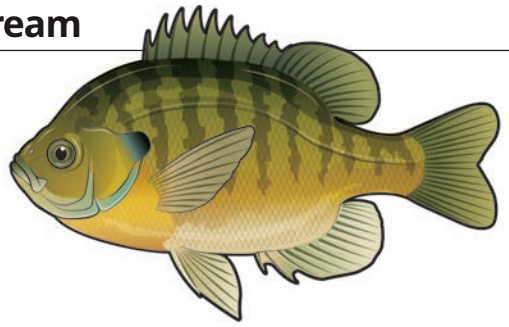
2. MAKE HAY AROUND BAITFISH SPAWNS

In the central and southern states, May and June are postspawn months for bass, when their focus shifts from reproduction to recovery. Anglers shouldn't forget about the spawn for "other" species, however.

"Especially in early May, that's pretty much immediate postspawn where I live," says South Carolina's Brandon Cobb. "It's postspawn for bass, but you need to look at what they're going to eat. They're feeding back up heavy, and it's the spawn time for a lot of forage fish, whether shad, herring or bream."

While the spawning habits of each forage fish are similar, Cobb alters his approach depending on which one is most prevalent where he's fishing.

1. Bream

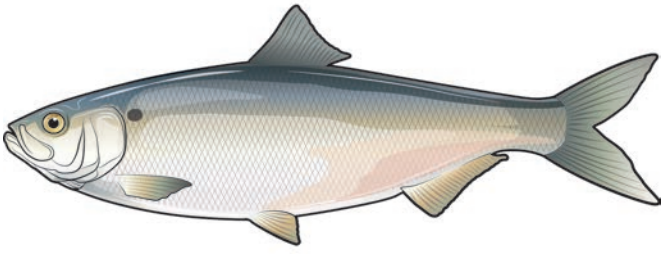


Where to look – Bluegills and other bream spawn in shallow, protected pockets in creeks or in the main lake, usually up against shoreline vegetation, around docks or around wood cover. They'll choose sand or light gravel if it's there, but Cobb says he's seen them spawn on just about any bottom other than muck.

What to throw – If he can see bass cruising for bream, Cobb will launch a wacky-rigged worm in front of them. However, he prefers to cover ground with a popper, frog, Zoom Horny Toad or some other type of topwater.

Strategy point – "You need to cover water because it's not like there's a bass on every bluegill bed," Cobb says. "A lot of times they don't sit specifically there; they're up moving and looking for them like you are. You can cover water quicker with a topwater."

2. Blueback Herring

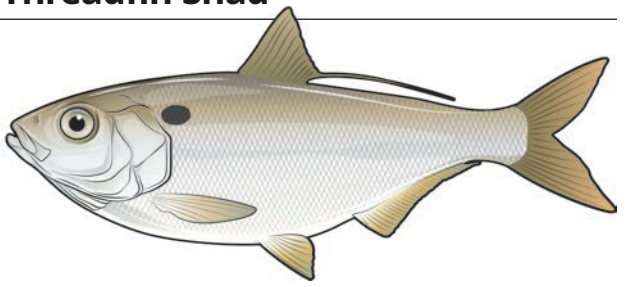


Where to look – Herring spawn at night around shallow cover such as seawalls, chunk rock, wood or grass. In high-water situations they'll spread out into flooded grass and wood, but they're more often found around the main lake or in large creeks near open water.

What to throw – Cobb throws a Yo-Zuri Pencil walking topwater, Zoom 5-inch Swimmer or Zoom Super fluke.

Strategy point – "Early in the morning is best because herring actually spawn primarily at night, and the bass stage on the places where they spawn and don't feed all day. The bass are there; they're just waiting on that feeding window. At some point during the day it's going to fire. That's why you've got two different styles of herring spawn fishing: Find a point or flat you know has a bunch and wait for them to bite, or run a million places and hope to hit them when they bite. That's my style. The longer you sit on them the harder it is to get them to bite. They start getting wary of baits flying over them."

3. Threadfin Shad



Where to look – Shad will spawn throughout a reservoir, usually up against some type of hard cover or edge such as dock floats, seawalls, riprap, chunk rock, shoreline bushes or an outside grass edge.

What to throw – Cobb matches his tackle to the size of the spawning shad, opting for small shallow crankbaits and three-bladed spinnerbaits.

Strategy point – "The shad spawn is inconsistent," says Cobb, "so you're not really looking for the shad; you're just looking for bass eating them and coming up schooling. It's really tricky to catch them after the early morning because they're full. A lot of those big shad-spawn bags you'll see at weigh-in were caught in the first 10 minutes."

MASTER THE ZOOM HORNY TOAD

By May, Brandon Cobb pretty well always has a handful of topwater baits at the ready, but his favorite is a Zoom Horny Toad.

"I've probably made more money on a Horny Toad than any other bait in my boat," says Cobb.

A major part of Cobb's success with the Horny Toad stems from hours and seasons of experimentation, both with rigging and choosing the right scenarios for different presentations.

1. The Right Scenario

While the Horny Toad is Cobb's favorite, he's not stubborn enough to think it works all the time. A Horny Toad, a buzzbait rigged with a Horny Toad trailer and a floating frog are interchangeable in certain situations.

Toads – "When I'm burning down the bank, covering water, 'wolf packing' or just hoping to catch one swimming the bank, I'm throwing a Horny Toad because I can fish fast. I also like skipping a Horny Toad."

Frogs – "When I get to something like an overhanging bush or a target, I switch to a hollow-body frog. You just can't cover water as well with a hollow frog. The only time I throw one is when I know where fish are."

Buzzbait – "I generally throw a buzzbait with a Horny Toad trailer if there's a ripple on the water or it's windy. When it's dead calm I throw just the Horny Toad."

2. Proper Rigging

Weedless hook – For skipping docks with cables or around any type of snaggy cover, Cobb rigs weedless. He used to use a wide-gap hook with a spring lock, but he was losing too many fish because the plastic couldn't slide away from the hook gap on the hookset. Now, Cobb uses a 5/0 Gamakatsu Superline EWG hook. When he sets the hook, the bait usually slides free up the line. ***Rigging tip:*** *"If you crack them really hard on the hookset, you're not going to straighten the hook out, but you'll flex it a little bit. So, it sounds ridiculous, but after every good one I catch I swap the hook out. You could bend it back, but then it's weaker."*

Greenfish Tackle Toad Toter Buzz – Cobb used to make his own version of this buzzbait, but is now working with Greenfish to mass-produce it. The buzzbait only comes in one weight, which Cobb settled on over several years of experimentation. He says it's the perfect size for either a fast or slow retrieve, and it won't roll over. ***Rigging tip:*** *Cobb likes to mash the keeper barb down with pliers and glue the Horny Toad in place. Sliding the Toad clear over the lead weight results in a cleaner setup that skips easily.*

Greenfish Tackle Toad Toter – In open water, around floating docks and when burning down the bank, Cobb fishes the Horny Toad on this open-hook jighead that he says has a tremendous hook-up ratio. He'll throw it just about anywhere he doesn't need to worry about snagging on wood. It casts a mile. ***Rigging tip:*** *Slide the Horny Toad clear over the jighead.*

3. Color Selection

You can't go wrong with the two Horny Toad color staples: black and white. However, Cobb will swap for green pumpkin if he thinks the fish are feeding heavily on bluegills. And in gin-clear water, he likes grey ghost.

"If you throw white in water that clear it looks like a softball coming back," he adds. "Grey ghost is not quite as intrusive."

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3. DON'T PASS UP SPINNERBAITS

A spinnerbait is an old-school tool for finding bass that you probably need to throw more often. Spinnerbaits accurately mimic small clusters of shad. They're pretty weedless, too. And they can be fished at a high rate of speed to cover water, which is one of the main reasons why Oklahoma pro Zack Birge still relies on a spinnerbait to locate and pattern bass.

Chunking and Winding

Birge chunks and winds a spinnerbait on windy banks as long as the water isn't gin-clear. He usually fishes with the trolling motor on about 70 percent and relies on a classic configuration: a 3/8-ounce War Eagle double-willow spinnerbait with either two nickel blades or a nickel/gold combo.

3/8-ounce War Eagle double willow

Target Fishing

Birge also targets "whip-in-and-out" places where he can pull in, target cast at any obvious cover and then slip back out.

"It'd be somewhere around a bunch of docks, or even maybe some bushes," he says. "I would be more apt to throw a War Eagle Finesse spinnerbait, which is like a shrunk-down version with a turtle and Indiana blade, or a 1/4-ounce regular spinnerbait."

The more compact offering is better suited for fishing around cover.

"I'm going to try to hit it off any limb I can swim it by. I might hit the corner of some docks for a reaction bite. Going down a rocky bank I'll just chunk it and wind it. And if I see a laydown I'll try to hit it and will make multiple casts if necessary."

War Eagle Finesse

War Eagle double willow with painted blades

Color Selection

Patterns that resemble shad and other baitfish get most of the work from Birge. Favorites include white, grey/shad, sexy shad, and various combinations of translucent/white or white with chartreuse.

He also suggests experimenting with painted blades, particularly in dirty water.

"I fished a tournament on Ross Barnett recently and caught basically all my fish the second day on a white and chartreuse spinnerbait with a white painted blade and a chartreuse blade. I was burning it, and it was getting a lot of good bites for me.

"You have to experiment a little bit with it," he adds. "Really, there are only three or four options that are popular and seem to work the most: cole slaw [white with green and red], white and chartreuse, straight white and some combinations of orange, white, red and even half-painted."

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4. GET MORE BITES FLIPPING

Canadian pro Bob Izumi has flipped mats for largemouths all over North America. While punching is never considered a finesse technique, Izumi attributes a lot of his tournament success while punching to taking a slightly "lighter" approach to breaking through the cover.

Izumi's strategy is simple: Use the lightest weight possible to punch through the mat.

"If that sinker falls too fast through the mat I think you miss a lot of fish," he says. "It just pummels through the water column so quickly that those fish either don't see it, or they see it and they spook. I'm more concerned with spooking the fish because I'm using a heavier sinker than I need.

"The other thing with a heavier sinker I've found is that a lot of bass – and it doesn't matter how big or small they are – when they feel something that weighs a lot in their mouth they might spit it quicker. Or they might have trouble sucking it in."

To overcome the need for a big weight, Izumi uses a technique that allows him to generate enough velocity with a lighter weight to punch the mat. Izumi also uses this technique to reach far-away sections of large mats – as far as 60 feet away from the boat.

Bob Izumi and his son, Darren, flip mats on Okeechobee using a specialized punching technique.

PHOTO BY CURTIS NIEDERMIER

The Snap

1. Make an underhand or sidearm flip that sends the bait up into the air. How far you flip depends on the distance to the target and the thickness of the mat, but it could be as high as 20 feet.

2. When the bait reaches its apex, stop the spool with your thumb and perform a "controlled snap" with the rod tip to redirect the bait down toward the mat.

3. The rig will turn "bullet-first," so the sinker leads the rig into the mat with some velocity.

4. Once the rig punches the mat, if possible, Izumi likes to "feather" it through the water using his rod tip and his thumb on the spool. The goal is to slow the rig's descent, though sometimes the rig punches through so quickly that Izumi can't slow it down.

5. Now lift and drop the bait as usual, but try to feather the bait and keep the falling action slow on each drop.

Bait selection also helps control the sink rate. Izumi prefers a Berkley Chigger Quad, which has large twister-type appendages that create enough drag to slow its sink. He combines it with a 4/0 Berkley Fusion19 Heavy Cover Hook, which he connects to 65-pound-test Berkley Trilene Braid Professional Grade using a snell knot. A pair of bobber stops keeps the Ultra Tungsten weight pegged in place.

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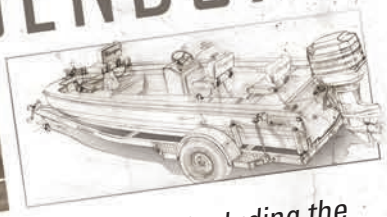

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PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

5. WHACK MARINA BASS WITH A SWIMBAIT

Recovery and feeding are the two primary tasks undertaken by bass once they leave their beds. In many regions, they can do both by setting up under and around large floating dock complexes in reservoir marinas.

Pennzoil pro Matt Arey loves this time of year because he can sling the Lunkerhunt Fetch swimbait – a bait he designed – and load the livewell quickly. He has two approaches.

1. Catch the Early Morning Shad Eaters

Threadfin shad are broadcast spawners and will conduct their reproductive rites up against the hard plastic floats on large docks. Arey targets them in the morning by covering water, slinging long casts and working alongside the floating structures.

"Marinas close to deep water are some of the prime locations during the shad spawn," he says. "When those fish are really active I cover as much water as I can first thing in the morning. Then when you get on the right stretch you can sit there and pound on them."

A slow-and-steady retrieve keeps the bait up in the top 2 feet of the water column, or just beneath the depth of the floats.

"The great thing about that bait is it can trigger the bigger fish in those shad spawn schools," adds Arey. "Sometimes those shad spawn schools can be cookie cutters, but there will be some bigger ones in them."

TACKLE SETUP

Don't shy away from a stout rod when swimbaiting docks. Arey uses a 7-foot, 6-inch, heavy Okuma TCS jig/pitching stick most of the time. Anglers under 6 feet tall might want to opt for something in the neighborhood of the 7-3 TCS swimbait/frog rod, but Arey says the bigger model has more backbone and can sweep more line on the hookset to get fish headed out from the dock quickly.

Likewise, he uses a reel with 8:1 retrieve ratio for taking up line. He spools it with 17- to 20-pound-test P-Line Tactical Fluorocarbon.

RIGGING THE FETCH

While Arey designed the 4 1/2-inch, 1/2-ounce Fetch with enough plastic in its midsection to rig it with a jighead, he primarily fishes it weedless. A large belly hook slot allows for rigging it with a 3/0 to 7/0 Gamakatsu EWG hook. His favorite hook is a 6/0 EWG Superline.

Rigged this way, the Hitch is a shallow-water swimmer. To get it a touch deeper, add adhesive tungsten or lead, or Arey suggests wrapping lead wire around the hook shank.

"You can wrap it so tightly around the hook shank that it doesn't create a big bulky weight like some of the big weighted belly hooks have," Arey says. "That way you can reuse that hook without damaging the nose of the bait when you slide it through the plastic."

2. Skip Docks Up in the Day

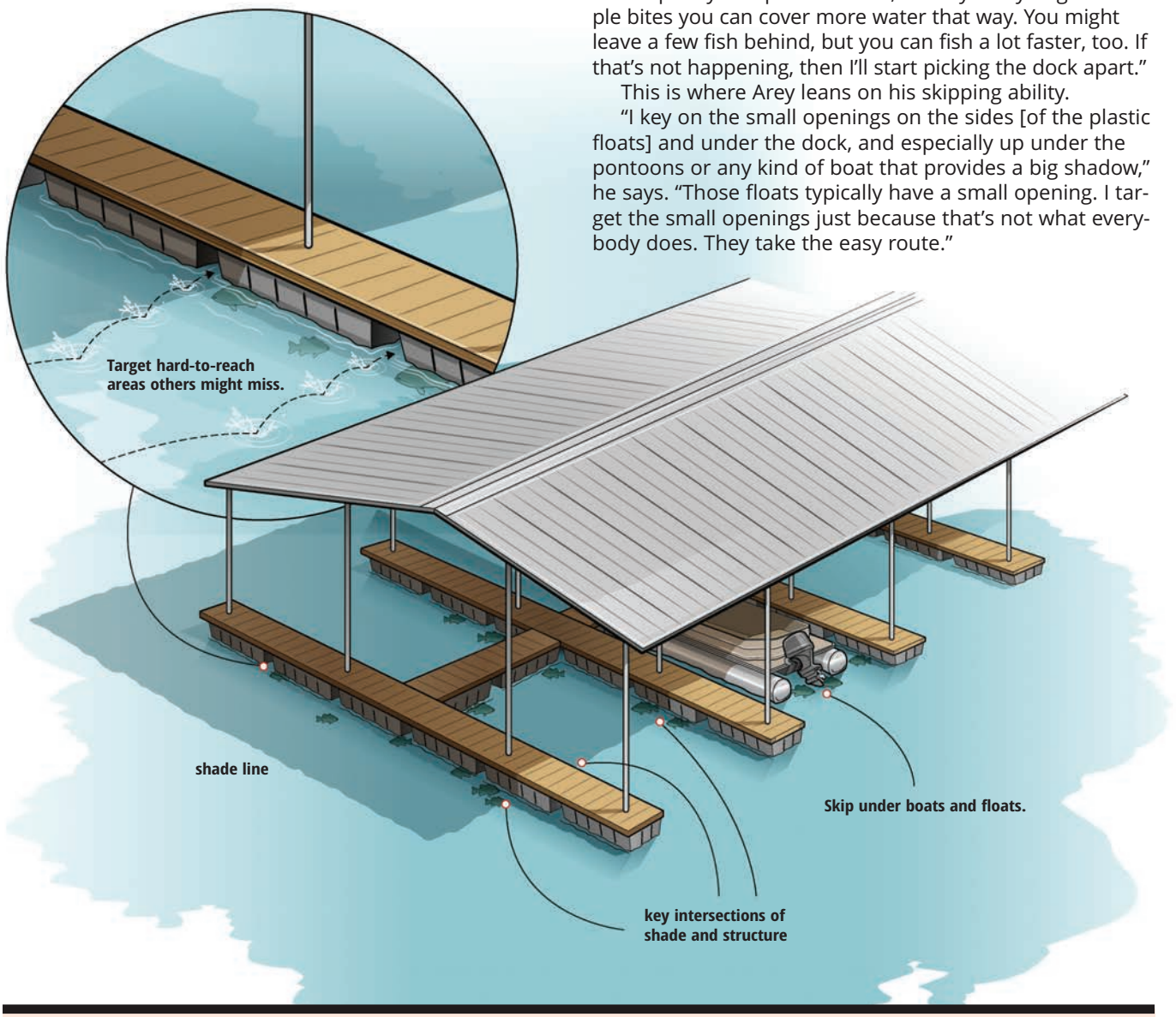
Once the sun gets higher in the sky, the shad spawn is done for the day and the bass disperse. Some ease out to suspend in deep water. Others stage directly under docks or on brush and bottom structure beneath the docks.

Arey's first tactic is to target distinct shade edges or places where the shade lines intersect dock floats and other parts of the structure. Sometimes fish will set up right under the docks along these lines and intersections. They'll also position on bottom or in brush where the shade creates a vertical "wall" of cover down through the water column, and they'll rise up to eat the swimbait.

"I will target the shade lines first because if they're on the most specific shade line or defined shade line I can hit those quickly and pattern them," he says. "If you get a couple bites you can cover more water that way. You might leave a few fish behind, but you can fish a lot faster, too. If that's not happening, then I'll start picking the dock apart."

This is where Arey leans on his skipping ability.

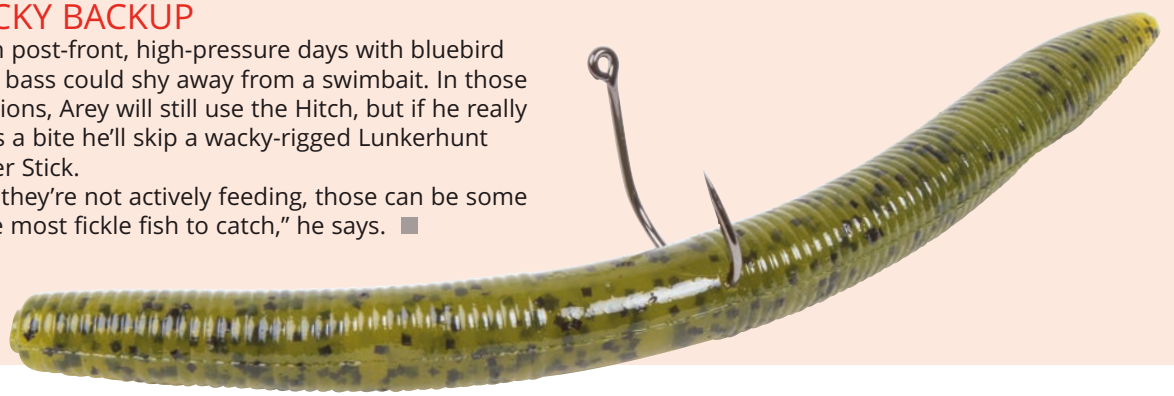
"I key on the small openings on the sides [of the plastic floats] and under the dock, and especially up under the pontoons or any kind of boat that provides a big shadow," he says. "Those floats typically have a small opening. I target the small openings just because that's not what everybody does. They take the easy route."



WACKY BACKUP

On post-front, high-pressure days with bluebird skies, bass could shy away from a swimbait. In those situations, Arey will still use the Hitch, but if he really needs a bite he'll skip a wacky-rigged Lunkerhunt Lunker Stick.

"If they're not actively feeding, those can be some of the most fickle fish to catch," he says. ■



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FLW TOURNAMENT COVERAGE AND RESULTS

ON TOUR

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

WHAT'S INSIDE:

DAILY CHANGEUPS REQUIRED FOR HALLMAN'S LANIER VICTORY

C-rig works in post-frontal conditions at Seminole

Jones wins by tiebreaker at tough Grand Lake event

Shad spawns and wacky rigs play big at Santee Cooper

Shallow points produce at Kentucky Lake College Open

The latest BFL, College Fishing and High School Fishing results

FLW TOUR | LAKE LANIER

GAINESVILLE, GA.

By Sean Ostruszka

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

WINNING ANGLER

Bradley Hallman
Norman, Okla.

Winning Weight:
68-04 (20 fish)

Details:
March 8-11, 2018

Presented by Ranger Boats

Hosted by Gainesville Convention & Visitors Bureau

Being able to adapt is often what separates good anglers from great anglers, but what Bradley Hallman did at Lake Lanier went far beyond adapting.

The Norman, Okla., pro didn't just scrap his Plan A. He ditched Plans B and C, too. By the final day, Hallman was fishing an entirely different area of the lake. Yet, despite changing conditions and changing patterns – sometimes in drastic fashion – on a daily basis, Hallman seemed to make the right call every single time.

He sacked up a jaw-dropping 23 pounds, 11 ounces of spotted bass to set the pace on day one, somehow extended his lead with a "fence panda" pattern (more on that momentarily) on day two, and then scraped and ground out the final two days to hang on for his second FLW Tour victory.

"I fished the best week of my entire life," says Hallman. "I caught them four different ways, changing every day."

WINNING BAITS

Because his patterns varied so much, Hallman relied on several lures. On day one it was a Megabass Vision 110+1 jerkbait and a Keitech Swing Impact FAT swimbait on a 1/2-ounce head. On day two, the swimbait did most of the damage. But by day three he was skipping a Zoom Trick Worm on a shaky head. The final day he went with a spinnerbait.

A Pair of Areas

Technically, the entire lake and its rivers were Hallman's winning area.

Pros tended to dedicate themselves to one of two areas: the stained, largemouth-filled waters of the Chattahoochee and Chestatee rivers, or the clear, deep, spotted bass haven that is the lake's lower end below Brown's Bridge.

The vast majority – Hallman included, at least the first three days – hung below Brown's Bridge. The lower end's prespawn spotted bass bulged with eggs and bellies full of blueback herring. And their abundance was staggering. Many pros claimed seeing 500 fish a day on their graphs.

Schools could easily be found staging on deep points and shoals, while some giant loners hung in and around marinas.

Despite the potential in the lower end, Lanier's rivers and their largemouths also came into play. Hallman joined runner-up Zack Birge and fellow top-10 finishers Joseph Webster and David Williams up in the stained water the final day. The spotted bass were just as plentiful offshore there, but many big largemouths were roaming patches of emergent dogfennel in the backs of shallow pockets.

TOP FIVE

NAME	HOMETOWN	WEIGHT	FISH	WINNINGS
1. BRADLEY HALLMAN	NORMAN, OK	68-04	20	$102,700
2. ZACK BIRGE	BLANCHARD, OK	65-10	20	$30,100
3. JOSEPH WEBSTER	WINFIELD, AL	65-02	20	$25,000
4. JASON JOHNSON	DAWSONVILLE, GA	65-01	20	$20,000
5. BRAXTON SETZER	MONTGOMERY, AL	63-02	20	$19,000

Daily Patterns

Day 1: Hallman's Plan A was to run about 45 rocky points on the lower end with a jerkbait and a swimbait. If the points were shallow or the fish he marked were suspended, Hallman used the jerkbait, but mostly he used the swimbait. He'd cast it out, let it hit bottom and slowly crank it back, nearly dragging it. He had a magic day with more than 20 pounds by 1 p.m.

Day 2: At 1 p.m. Hallman had one fish. That prompted him to turn to Plan B: the "fence panda" pattern – a local pattern on Lanier that involves tossing a swimbait along the outside floating break walls ("fences") of marinas. The walls might float over 100 feet of water, but some giant bass ("pandas") like to hide underneath them, particularly on any point, turn or end in the fence. Hallman quickly crushed 18-7 to extend his lead to more than 7 pounds.

Day 3: With clouds rolling in, neither of the Oklahoma angler's first two plans produced. In practice, many pros were on solid patterns skipping shaky heads under docks and walkways inside marinas, and that's exactly what Hallman did to grind out another solid limit.

Day 4: Clouds turned into solid rain on the final day, prompting Hallman to abandon his other patterns, which relied on sunshine, in favor of fishing in the stained rivers. He started out going after some spots near takeoff before bouncing around the backs of pockets where he threw a spinnerbait around docks and shallow vegetation.

PHOTO BY KJELL KVANBECK

WINNING CO-ANGLER

Joe Anders
Easley, S.C.

Winning Weight:
31-10 (10 fish)

Winning Program:

Anders fished offshore with Michael Wooley on day one. He tried to make fish bite a shaky head, but it was a brown 1/2-ounce E&L jig that produced a pair of 5-pounders to help him take the lead with 17-6.

While Anders caught three bass on the jig the next day fishing with Billy Hines, it was the shaky head that did the heavy lifting.

"Both my big ones [on day two] came on a shaky head," says Anders, whose combo of choice was a 5/16-ounce Big Bite Baits Stand Up Fintwist jighead rigged with a green pumpkin worm.

His 14-4 bag was just enough to beat out Brad Wiley of Alto, Ga., by 9 ounces for the co-angler crown. ■

COSTA FLW SERIES | LAKE SEMINOLE

BAINBRIDGE, GA.

By David A. Brown
PHOTOS BY JODY WHITE

WINNING ANGLER

Matt Baty
Bainbridge, Ga.

Winning Weight:
45-00 (10 fish)

Details:
March 2-3, 2018

Presented by T-H Marine

Hosted by Bainbridge Convention & Visitors Bureau

Southeastern Divison

A powerful cold front with accompanying winds that gusted to 35 mph forced the cancellation of day one at Lake Seminole and also stalled the progression of a pile of fish bent on spawning. Rather than transition from prespawn areas, the school that turned out to be the winning fish held in patches of hydrilla on a channel turn in Spring Creek where Matt Baty did most of his damage.

Baty surmises that the cold front's chilling effect, plus the creek current and the cover afforded by the hydrilla, presented an ideal staging spot for bass waiting to move up.

A prototype 1-ounce Buddha Baits bladed jig (purple haze color) with a 4-inch Big Bite Baits Cane Thumper trailer generated several aggressive bites on the morning of day two. A Jenko Fishing CD 20 Silent Stalker Deep Diving Crankbait also added a couple of keepers for Baty during the tournament. His primary bait, however, was a Carolina rig with either a Zoom Trick Worm or a 6-inch Big Bite Baits Trick Stick (both green pumpkin with the tails dyed chartreuse). He at times also rigged the Trick Stick Texas style with no weight for a finesse presentation.

"I sat in 8 feet of water on top of the ledge and threw into 18 feet of water in the middle of the creek channel," Baty says. "I dragged the Carolina rig up to the edge of the ledge and up to the grass. When I felt that grass, I'd let it sit there and fish it really slow until I felt him, and then I'd get him.

"On the Carolina rig, I would throw the Trick Worm trying to get a limit. Once I got a limit, I'd put that big Trick Stick on there to get a bigger bite. I also used the Trick Stick on an unweighted Texas rig on the bars when I went up shallow later in the day. I caught one key fish both days doing that."

WEIGHTING GAME

Matt Baty was very particular about his Carolina-rig setup, and the key element was a 1 1/4-ounce hand-poured weight made by a local angler. The long, narrow shape is made to slip through grass smoothly with minimal resistance – an essential ingredient of Baty's slow, methodical presentation.

He rigged up with a main line of 16-pound-test Sunline Super FC Sniper connected to 3 feet of 16-pound-test Sniper for his leader. The lengthy tail end afforded Baty dual presentation benefits.

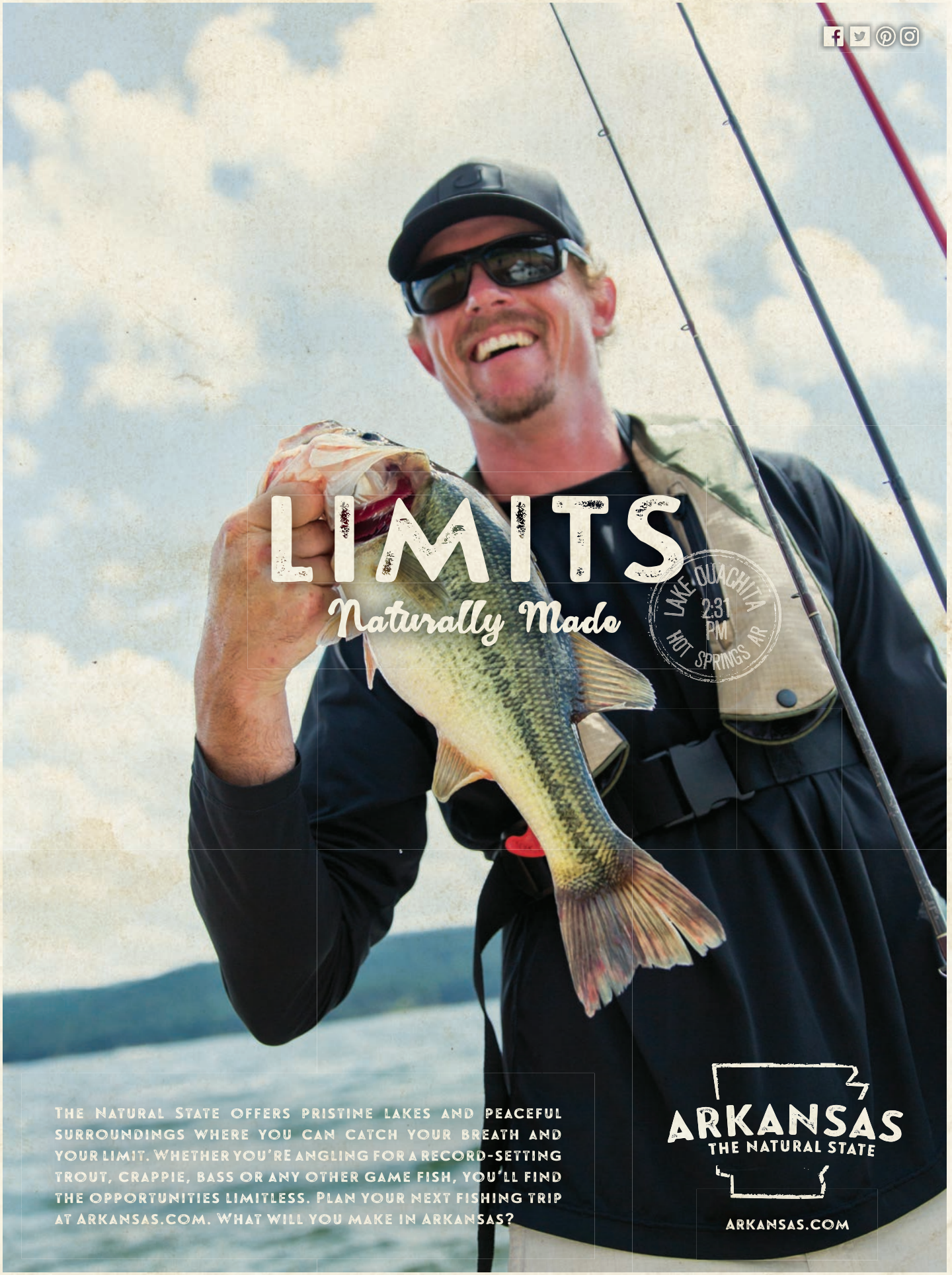
"With the hydrilla sticking up so high, a lot of times those fish will suspend above it, so the long leader keeps the bait in front of them," Baty says. "The longer the leader, the more action your bait has."

WINNING CO-ANGLER

Shawn York
Sarasota, Fla.

Winning Weight:
28-11 (9 fish)

Winning Program:
York caught his day-one fish with a 6-inch Yamamoto Senko (watermelon green) along the bottom. He rigged the bait weightless, Texas-style. That technique yielded a lone keeper on day two, forcing York to shift to a Strike King Magnum Caffeine Shad (smoking shad) to add three more to his total. ■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COSTA FLW SERIES | GRAND LAKE

GROVE, OKLA.

By David A. Brown
PHOTOS BY CURTIS NIEDERMIER

WINNING ANGLER

Christopher Jones
Bokoshe, Okla.

Winning Weight:
47-03 (14 fish)

Details:
March 22-24, 2018

Presented by Ranger Boats

Hosted by City of Grove

Southwestern Divison

Christopher Jones caught exactly what he needed and nothing more at Grand Lake, earning the win by way of a tiebreaker over Jeff Sprague, who also caught 47-3. According to Costa FLW Series rules, final-day ties are settled based on day-two standings. Jones, who was in fourth after two days, narrowly topped Sprague, who was in fifth.

The Oklahoma pro fished Grand Lake's mid-lake area. He spent a little time each day throwing a YUM YUMbrella Flash Mob Jr. with 1/4-ounce heads and 3 1/2-inch YUM Pulse Swimbaits along riprap and rocky points, but his primary approach to catching prespawn bass was fishing docks with a 1/2-ounce chartreuse BOOYAH spinnerbait with a No. 5 gold Colorado blade and a Pulse Swimbait trailer.

Cold, dirty water can be challenging to fish. While Jones knew he could find clean water on Grand Lake, especially if he ventured down to the Pensacola Dam area, it wasn't part of his game plan. He stuck with a calculated strategy based on forecast weather conditions, and it paid off.

"I was staying in the dirtier water because I figured the dirtier the water, the shallower they would be," Jones says. "I knew it would warm up if we ever got a break in the weather, and we did."

As temperatures climbed and the shallows warmed, Jones' bite improved. He gradually pieced together a specific pattern that revealed the best docks.

"By day three I had it dialed in to where I knew the fish were on the first dock on the inside of a secondary corner heading into a drain," he says. "I'm not saying every fish was there, but I knew if I ran enough of them I could get enough bites."

While the front corners of docks offer much easier targets, Jones pushed himself to fish the most protected areas where dock cables, brush and occasional laydowns created significant presentation challenges, but offered tremendous opportunities. The fish were holding close to the surface to warm their eggs in preparation for the spawn. This meant the strike zone was narrow and specific.

"I tried skipping a vibrating jig in there, but I couldn't get them to bite it. I think it was moving too fast," he says. "It would fall through the water and go to the bottom too fast. They wanted something really slow and high up in the water column. That's why they weren't biting jigs very good."

Careful presentations to get his spinnerbait in front of the fish and 20-pound-test fluorocarbon to haul them out resulted in Jones' first Costa FLW Series victory.

WINNING CO-ANGLER

Steve Meador
Bentonville, Ark.

Winning Weight:
27-03 (11 fish)

Winning Program:

Meador built a lead of more than 7 pounds over the first two days by fishing a 1/2-ounce Bass-X jig with a Zoom Chunk or a Zoom Baby Brush Hog trailer. He spent most of that time in the mid-lake area.

Day three proved difficult for Meador, who caught only one keeper on a Megabass Vision 110 jerkbait while fishing the lower end. ■

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PHOTO COURTESY OF FLW/PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

COSTA FLW SERIES | SANTEE COOPER

MANNING, S.C.

By Rob Newell
PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

In multiple-day tournaments, one pattern is good, but two patterns are even better. The two-pattern plan works especially well when the first one is giving way to the second as the tournament goes on, which is exactly what Ronnie McCoy found happening at Santee Cooper during the Costa FLW Series Southeastern Division finale at Santee Cooper.

As lake temperatures peaked in the 65- to 68-degree range, McCoy found the last of the bass spawn finishing up and postspawn bass beginning to target spawning shad. He made a seamless transition from the former on day one to the latter on days two and three to get the win.

McCoy's plan going into the event was to fish the shad spawn up in an area of the lakes known as "the swamp" in the morning when the light was low and then run down to Potato Creek after the sun got up and sight-fish. As it turned out, he only utilized sight-fishing the first day, catching a 9-9 and a 7-pounder off the same bed to weigh in 26 pounds and start the event in third place.

After day one, McCoy felt the sight-fishing window closing due to fishing pressure, so he turned his attention to the swamp, where shad were spawning on primary cypress tree points sticking out into the river.

"The biggest key was identifying exactly which trees the shad were using to spawn," he says. "There are a lot of trees on those points, but only four or five of them had shad actually spawning on them. Casting to an active tree would result in an immediate bass bite or shad following my spinnerbait back in."

Once he identified the active trees, McCoy made repeated casts and would often catch multiple fish.

"It might have looked like I was fishing all the trees on a point, but I was really poling down on specific trees and saturating them with repeated casts," he adds.

McCoy worked that program for 21-6 on day two and 26-2 on day three to pull off a perfect one-two punch for his first Costa FLW Series win.

WINNING BAITS

When sight-fishing on day one, Ronnie McCoy used a Zoom Road Kill Craw in green pumpkin. For the shad spawn he used a 1/2-ounce homemade double-willow spinnerbait with white blades and a Black Flagg Slikk Shadd 4 3/4-inch swimbait as the trailer. He followed up the spinnerbait with a 1/2-ounce Z-Man/Evergreen ChatterBait Jack Hammer with the Slikk Shad as a trailer.

WINNING ANGLER

Ronnie McCoy
Lamar, S.C.

Winning Weight:
73-08 (15 fish)

Details:
April 5-7, 2018

Presented by Bass Pro Shops

Hosted by Clarendon County Chamber of Commerce

Southeastern Divison

WINNING CO-ANGLER

Spencer McNeill
Ladson, S.C.

Winning Weight:
42-00 (11 fish)

Winning Program:

Spencer McNeill dominated the co-angler division on days one and two with weights of 20-13 and 19-4. He didn't even need the lone keeper he caught on day three, and earned the win by a margin of 11-9.

McNeill caught most of his fish on a wacky-rigged watermelon Zoom Trick Worm. ■

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YETI FLW COLLEGE FISHING OPEN | KENTUCKY/BARKLEY LAKES

GILBERTSVILLE, KY.

By David A. Brown

PHOTO BY MATT PACE

WINNING TEAM

Adrian College

Cody Batterson
Pleasant Hill, Iowa
Chase Serafin
Highland, Mich.

Winning Weight:
50-03 (10 fish)

Details:
March 6-7, 2018

Hosted by Kentucky Lake Convention & Visitors Bureau

Chase Serafin and Cody Batterson of Adrian College in Michigan owe their dominant College Open victory (by a 7-pound, 6-ounce margin) to recognizing and adjusting to weather impacts. With Kentucky Lake at flood stage, practice and the first part of day one found the fish tight to the inundated bushes. However, lingering effects from a cold front arriving ahead of the tournament sent temperatures into the low 30s and generated big winds midway into day one. These changes interrupted the shallow prespawn advancement, flushed the fish from the flooded cover and sent them out to points to regroup.

The Adrian College anglers committed to running more than an hour each way from the takeoff at Kentucky Dam Marina to Paris, Tenn., where they focused more on the pattern than particular areas. Serafin says they rotated through approximately 15 spots. The ideal setup included a point with a gradual slope and bushes on top.

"We wanted points that weren't too steep," Serafin says. "We found a lot of banks that dropped right off into the creek channel, but we didn't catch anything off them."

Batterson threw a Rapala DT10 crankbait in red craw and a Terminator spinnerbait with large willow-leaf blades. Serafin stuck with a Picasso umbrella rig with three 1/8-ounce jigheads. He spread Keitech 3.8 Swing Impact FAT swimbaits in bluegill flash on the outside wires, with a 4.3 Swing Impact FAT in ayu color in the center "target" position.

The pair fished about 10 feet deep, which was deeper than most of their competitors. Another key was dialing in the proper casting angle.

"We could follow three or four boats down a line and catch fish right behind them because they were throwing at the bank, but we were keeping our baits parallel with the boat," Batterson says. "We kept our baits in the strike zone longer."

A similar approach of parallel cranking the riprap on the Kentucky Dam Marina break wall shortly before the final check-in resulted in a 5 1/2-pounder that sealed the win for the Adrian team.

2019 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP QUALIFIERS

1. Adrian College – Chase Serafin & Cody Batterson
2. East Texas Baptist Univ. – Jacob Sanders & Chad Poulsen
3. Bethel Univ. – Garrett Enders & Cody Huff
4. Adrian College – Jack Hippe III & Nicholas Czajka
5. Univ. of North Alabama – Luke Mason & Garett Marler
6. Adrian College – Alex Henderson & John Franko
7. Murray State Univ. – Harbor Lovin & Evan Bramhill
8. Bethel Univ. – Hunter Louden & Seth Roberts
9. Campbellsville Univ. – Dakota Cantrell & Austin Moore
10. Bethel Univ. – Dakota Pierce & Cole Floyd
11. Iowa State Univ. – Dylan Rague & Pat Morrison
12. Slippery Rock Univ. – Nathan Quince & Samuel Jenesky
13. Murray State Univ. – Boris Moskoff & Tyler Jennings
14. Virginia Tech – Tyler Dixon & Robert Pryer
15. Univ. of Pittsburgh – Dominic Vitale & Henry Colberg
16. Murray State Univ. – Mitchell Fort & Austin Gruner
17. Saint Cloud State Univ. – Chizta Xiong & Jaret Baker
18. Murray State Univ. – Adam Puckett & Blake Albertson
19. Murray State Univ. – Michael Lowry & Brian Koch
20. Campbellsville Univ. – Travis Hunt & Trevor Sagrecy
21. Bethel Univ. – Brad Ableman & Kristopher Queen ■

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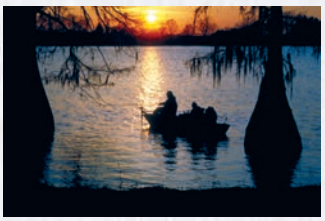

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T-H MARINE FLW BASS FISHING LEAGUE

Arkie Division – Millwood Lake – March 24, 2018

Boater: Wayne Dixon, Morrilton, Ark. – 19-10

Targeting prespawn bass near cypress trees, coontail and milfoil with a Texas-rigged Right Bite Baits stick bait

Co-angler: Kenyon Johnson, Mountain Home, Ark. – 15-13

Bama Division – Lay Lake – March 10, 2018

Boater: Michael Smith, Andalusia, Ala. – 17-14

Targeting stumps and hard-bottom areas in 6 to 15 feet of water with a bruiser flash-colored Missile Baits Baby D Bomb

Co-angler: Tanner Ellison, Jemison, Ala. – 17-06

Bulldog Division – Lake Oconee – March 17, 2018

Boater: Tim Vanegmond, Gay, Ga. – 18-11

Skipping docks with a green pumpkin Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver and a Strike King Rage Bug

Co-angler: Adam Slupczynski, Marietta, Ga. – 8-01

Choo Choo Division – Wheeler Lake – March 24, 2018

Boater: Ryan Salzman, Huntsville, Ala. – 25-09

Targeting smallmouths on isolated rock piles at the Guntersville Dam tailrace

Co-angler: Harry Peyton, Decatur, Ala. – 17-02

Choo Choo Division – Lewis Smith Lake – April 7, 2018

Boater: Gil Summerlin, Guntersville, Ala. – 16-03

Fishing a single tree on a long clay point with a Fish Head Spin tipped with a sexy shad Big Bite Baits swimbait, and a green pumpkin wacky-rigged Strike King Ocho

Co-angler: Justin Stephenson, Jasper, Ala. – 14-04

Cowboy Division – Sam Rayburn Reservoir – March 3, 2018

Boater: Phil Marks, Dallas, Texas – 26-01

Targeting spawning fish in bushes in the mid-lake area with a blue Strike King Hack Attack Jig with a blue Strike King Rage Craw trailer

Co-angler: Bronsun Pusselo, Sulphur, La. – 16-08

Cowboy Division – Sam Rayburn Reservoir – March 4, 2018

Boater: Dicky Newberry, Houston, Texas – 22-03

Catching staging fish in drains with grass using a 3/4-ounce red Bill Lewis Rat-L-Trap and a Carolina-rigged lizard

Co-angler: Ben Faucheaux, Natchitoches, La. – 17-15

Gator Division – Lake Okeechobee – March 17, 2018

Boater: Mikey Keyso, North Port, Fla. – 24-12

Targeting postspawn fish in dollar pads south of the Monkey Box with a Texas-rigged junebug Reaction Innovations Skinny Dipper

Co-angler: Michael Wiles, Perry, Fla. – 19-13

Hoosier Division – Patoka Lake – March 24, 2018

Boater: Jeremy Knepp, Montgomery, Ind. – 8-15

Targeting main-lake points with a Strike King KVD Deep Jerkbait

Co-angler: Lenny Bays, Dayton, Ky. – 8-08

LBL Division – Kentucky/Barkley Lakes – March 17, 2018

Boater: Kane Hackemack, Georgetown, Ind. – 29-08

Focusing on deep points with current breaks with a Strike King Red Eye Shad

Co-angler: Greg Henry, Hixson, Tenn. – 12-08

T-H MARINE FLW BASS FISHING LEAGUE *(continued)*

LBL Division – Kentucky/Barkley Lakes – April 7, 2018

Boater: Drew Boggs, Lebanon, Tenn. – 23-08

Working a single 50-yard-long ditch in 4 to 7 feet of water with a custom umbrella rig tipped with white swimbaits

Co-angler: Ryan Kirkpatrick, Benton, Ky. – 13-01

Mississippi Division – Ross Barnett Reservoir – March 24, 2018

Boater: Anthony Thomas, Jackson, Miss. – 22-09

Fishing heavy grass patches with a natural-colored SPRO Bronzeye Pop

Co-angler: Michael Petras, Diberville, Miss. – 12-10

Mountain Division – Dale Hollow Lake – March 3, 2018

Boater: Pat Eichmann, Nancy, Ky. – 20-06

Targeting bass on mid-lake channel swings with a Stan Sloan's Zorro Bait Co. Booza Bug jig with a green pumpkin Zoom Big Salty Chunk trailer

Co-angler: Brian Hutcheson, Russellville, Ky. – 15-00

Mountain Division – Dale Hollow Lake – March 24, 2018

Boater: (Tie) Matt Stanley, Alexandria, Tenn., and Greg Trobaugh, Rickman, Tenn. – 20-03

Fishing mid-lake grass edges with a Picasso School-E-Rig (Stanley); Fishing mid-lake with an umbrella rig with Keitech and Reaction Innovations swimbaits (Trobaugh)

Co-angler: Ed Bennington, Scottsville, Ky. – 18-02

Music City Division – Dale Hollow Lake – March 10, 2018

Boater: Rod Huff, Monterey, Tenn. – 19-05

Fishing deep water near spawning flats with a 1/2-ounce green pumpkin Stan Sloan's Zorro Bait Co. Booza Bug jig and a Zorro swim jig with a green pumpkin Strike King Rage Craw trailer

Co-angler: Mike Morrison, Prestonsburg, Ky. – 12-12

North Carolina Division – Kerr Lake – March 17, 2018

Boater: Michael Birr, Franklinton, N.C. – 18-15

Cranking shallow in front of bushes for staging fish with a custom-painted crankbait

Co-angler: Bowe Luther, Mooresville, N.C. – 12-10

Okie Division – Grand Lake – March 17, 2018

Boater: Nathan Asbill, Poteau, Okla. – 18-08

Fishing mid-lake and toward the dam in pockets with small pea gravel with a custom jig

Co-angler: Damon Duncan, Kansas, Okla. – 14-09

Ozark Division – Grand Lake – March 10, 2018

Boater: Kevin Miller, Andover, Kan. – 25-03

Targeting suspended fish on points in 10 to 15 feet with a white pearl Zoom Swimmin' Super Fluke Jr.

Co-angler: Michael Fey Jr., Cuba, Mo. – 13-08

Piedmont Division – Kerr Lake – March 3, 2018

Boater: Zachary Whitt, Newport News, Va. – 21-08

Throwing a red crankbait on ledges in 6 feet of water next to deeper water

Co-angler: Craig Wright, Rustburg, Va. – 13-11

Piedmont Division – Smith Mountain Lake – March 24, 2018

Boater: Kevin Chandler, New London, N.C. – 20-12

Targeting rocks in the west arm of the lake with both a green pumpkin and black/blue custom jig tipped with a Zoom Super Chunk Jr.

Co-angler: Isaac Jones, Shawnsville, Va. – 14-01

T-H MARINE FLW BASS FISHING LEAGUE *(continued)*

Savannah River Division – Clarks Hill Lake – March 3, 2018

Boater: Bart Blackburn, North Augusta, S.C. – 17-06

Fishing ditches with a green pumpkin Zoom Trick Worm and deeper humps and rock piles with a red craw Daiwa Flat Flash Crank

Co-angler: Stuart Uldrick, Anderson, S.C. – 12-05

South Carolina Division – Lake Murray – March 24, 2018

Boater: Jeff Jennings, Rock Hill, S.C. – 22-15

Targeting docks and wood in the mid- and lower sections of the lake using a creature bait

Co-angler: Joel Cerv, North Wilkesboro, N.C. – 14-14

Volunteer Division — South Holston Reservoir – April 7, 2018

Boater: Chip Chambers, Elizabethton, Tenn. – 18-04

Targeting secondary points in 8 to 12 feet of water on the lower end with a custom-painted Rapala DT6 crankbait

Co-angler: David Blakely, Kingsport, Tenn. – 13-08

YETI FLW COLLEGE FISHING

Southeastern Conference – Lake Guntersville – March 3, 2018

University of Tennessee – John Lambert and Logan Brewster – 25-09

Slow-rolling ChatterBaits over grass in 2 feet of water

Southern Conference – Lake Texoma – April 7, 2018

Northeastern St. Univ.-Tahlequah – Cody Metzger and Blayke Haggard – 19-04

Targeting smallmouths on windy main-lake points with a citrus shad Bandit Lures 200 Series crankbait

BASS PRO SHOPS HIGH SCHOOL FISHING OPENS

Douglas Lake Open – March 10, 2018

Karns High School – Josh Lee and Mason Cizek – 17-13

Throwing an Alabama rig in the backs of creeks and working a jerkbait on rocky points in the afternoon

Truman Lake Open – March 17, 2018

Plattsmouth High School – Haley Sporven and Draven Ray – 6-15

Targeting rocky points and banks in north-facing coves with gradual drop-offs using a Lucky Craft Pointer 110 jerkbait and a black/blue finesse jig with a Big Bite Baits craw trailer

Ross Barnett Open – March 25, 2018

Oak Grove High School – Bryce Bullock and Blake Bullock – 12-01

Targeting main-lake grass clumps with creature baits and vibrating jigs

High Rock Lake Open – April 7, 2018

Sheets Memorial High School – Brody McCullogh and Jacob Sink – 23-04

Targeting cover-filled coves with a green pumpkin Z-Man ChatterBait and a Texas-rigged Strike King Rage Craw

TBF

WHAT'S MAKING NEWS IN THE BASS FEDERATION

By Dan Johnson

CHASTAIN, OTT WIN GEORGIA HSF STATE CHAMPIONSHIP

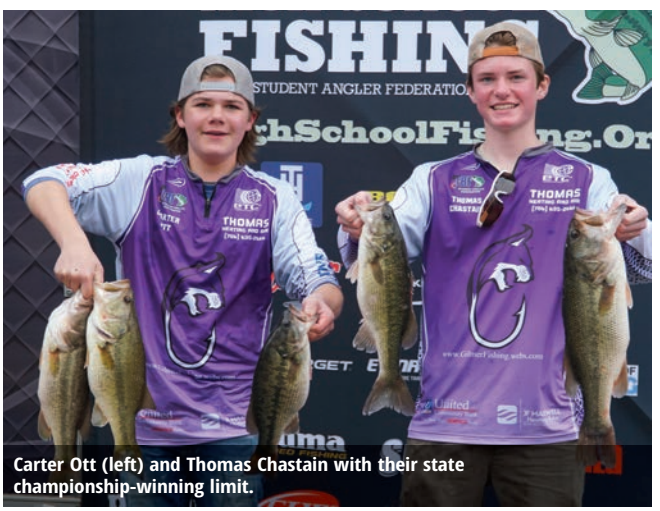
The Student Angler Federation's 2018 High School Fishing State Championship schedule began Saturday, Feb. 10 as 62 Georgia high school teams competed on West Point Lake.

Challenging spring conditions including cold water muddied by recent rains tested the field's skills. Many of the young competitors elected to fan-cast shallow water along chunk rock banks using crankbaits, jigs, spinnerbaits and lipless crankbaits.

When the dust settled, Thomas Chastain and Carter Ott of the Gilmer Fishing Club took top honors with a five-bass limit weighing 15 pounds, 5 ounces.

The top six teams qualified for the upcoming High School Fishing National Championship June 27-30 on Pickwick Lake at McFarland Park in Florence, Ala.

The 2018 High School Fishing tournament schedule consists of 65 events spread throughout the U.S. and Canada. There is no limit to the number of teams accepted from each school or club, and there is no tournament entry fee. For a full schedule of events, or to register, please visit highschoolfishing.org.

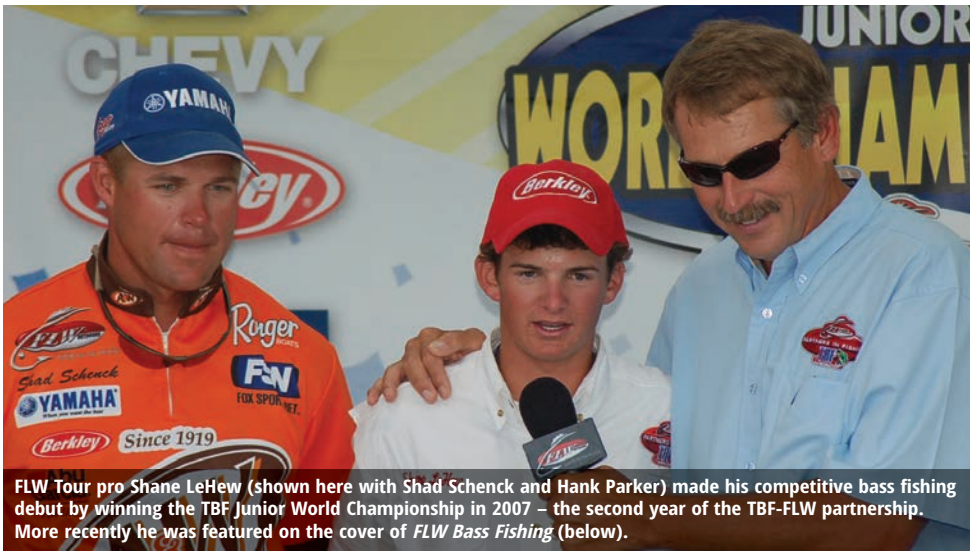


Carter Ott (left) and Thomas Chastain with their state championship-winning limit.

Drake Reeves (left) and Trayton Gay finished runner-up on West Point Lake.

Georgia State Championship Top 10

1. Thomas Chastain and Carter Ott
   Gilmer Fishing Club – 15-5
2. Drake Reeves and Trayton Gay
   Troup High School – 14-15
3. Sam Holley and Jake Holley
   Jackson County High School Fishing Club – 14-9
4. Cal Culpepper and Mason Waddell
   Harris County High School – 14-0
5. Tanner Hadden and Cy Casey
   Greenbrier High School – 12-11
6. Lee Rose and Carter Koza
   Mount Paran Christian High School – 11-15
7. Karston Hopson and Cole Hopson
   Georgia HS Fishing – 10-14
8. Jacob Blumling and Coleman Johnson
   Greenbrier High School Bass Club – 10-7
9. Maddux Walters and Ryan Jackson
   North Forsyth High School – 10-3
10. Chris Carroll and Payton Caldwell
    Heard Country High School – 9-06



FLW Tour pro Shane LeHew (shown here with Shad Schenck and Hank Parker) made his competitive bass fishing debut by winning the TBF Junior World Championship in 2007 – the second year of the TBF-FLW partnership. More recently he was featured on the cover of *FLW Bass Fishing* (below).

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

TBF-FLW ALLIANCE BENEFITS BASS ANGLERS EVERYWHERE

The long-running strategic partnership between The Bass Federation and FLW continues to benefit bass anglers from all walks of life and levels of competition.

"FLW was founded on the principle of providing anglers with affordable, professionally run, close-to-home, weekend tournaments with opportunities for advancement to increasingly higher levels of competition," says FLW President of Operations Kathy Fennel. "Partnering with TBF was a natural extension of this grassroots philosophy, and together we have helped countless anglers fish their way onto the world stage. We are true partners in fishing, working together to recruit, retain and reactivate anglers for the benefit of the entire fishing community."

"Perhaps the biggest thing that makes this relationship so strong is how much alike both organizations are in our philosophies," adds TBF President and CEO Robert Cartlidge. "FLW and TBF both put our anglers first, are honest and above board, and share a deep commitment to conservation and youth programs."

According to Cartlidge, one of the great successes of the partnership is the way it has served as a gateway for anglers to advance up the ranks.

"The strength of this partnership is evidenced by anglers fishing their way from the TBF Junior Program, High School Fishing and TBF adult programs to the Forrest Wood Cup and everything in between," he says. "A number of anglers have advanced through the TBF adult side and done well on the FLW Tour and the BFL, including winning the BFL All-American and placing very high at the Forrest Wood Cup. But we're just now beginning to see the effects of the TBF-FLW partnership come full circle, as anglers who fished the TBF Junior Program early on in the partnership are becoming a major presence on the Tour."

Cartlidge offers examples to support his point: In 2006, Jacob Wheeler fished the TBF Junior World Championship in Alabama. He went on to fish the Tour and won the Cup in 2012. In 2007, Shane LeHew won the Junior World Championship. Now a full-time Tour pro, LeHew was featured on *FLW Bass Fishing* magazine's January 2018 cover. In 2008, Justin Atkins fished the Junior World Championship. He's now the reigning Cup champ.

The relationship between the world's largest tournament-fishing organization and the nation's oldest broad-based grassroots fishing, youth and conservation organization dates back a dozen years.

In January 2006 the organizations announced "a historic alliance that ensures a vibrant and independent future for Federation chapters and members, while further elevating FLW's standing as the world's leading tournament-fishing organization."

At that time, an overwhelming majority of Federation presidents voted to accept a proposal from FLW, presented by FLW Chairman & CEO Irwin Jacobs during a Jan. 8 meeting in Orlando, Fla.

"After our meeting, it was clear what the TBF state presidents wanted to do," Cartlidge recalls. "To a person, they felt at home with FLW. They could tell that we were among people of like values, people of like minds, people who share our concern for the nation's youth and conservation."

The partnership yielded a variety of additional benefits, including the chance for top finishers at the TBF National Championship to advance to the T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League All-American, and the $100,000 "Living the Dream" package that goes to the TBF champion. It includes a spot at the Forrest Wood Cup, entry into the FLW Tour and use of a TBF-wrapped Ranger boat and tow vehicle. TBF members also continue to receive priority entry into all FLW tournaments. And the joint Student Angler Federation is one of the sport's brightest spots.

"The TBF-FLW High School Fishing events have the largest reach and provide more opportunities for young anglers than anyone in North America under the Student Angler Federation," Cartlidge notes. "More than 30,000 participants competed in SAF-sanctioned high school events in 2017."

New in the TBF-FLW partnership for 2018 is yet another expansion to the opportunities for young anglers, with an all-new nationwide format for the existing TBF Junior Program for anglers age 15 and under.

"The TBF Junior Program will transition to a team event, much like the highly popular High School Fishing format," Cartlidge says. "The Junior World Championship, where the top junior team from each state and Canada compete in a true championship event, will continue to be held in conjunction with the Forrest Wood Cup each year.

"Considering the track record of anglers who began their bass fishing careers at the TBF Junior World Championship during the early days of the TBF-FLW partnership, it's exciting to imagine the impact kids who are fishing today's expanded platform of youth programs will have on the future of the sport."

For more information on the youth, conservation and competitive opportunities the TBF-FLW partnership brings to bass fishing, visit **bassfederation.com** and **highschoolfishing.org**.

MAY AND JUNE *FEDERATION ANGLER TV* SCHEDULE

Here's the lineup. For complete *Federation Angler TV* listings and showtimes, visit **pursuitchannel.com**.

May 29 at 8 and 11 p.m. ET – 2017 High School Fishing World Finals at Pickwick and Wilson
June 2 at 8 a.m. – 2017 High School Fishing World Finals at Pickwick and Wilson
June 5 at 8 and 11 p.m. ET – 2017 TBF National Championship at Table Rock Lake
June 9 at 8 a.m. – 2017 TBF National Championship at Table Rock Lake
June 19 at 8 and 11 p.m. ET – 2017 High School Fishing World Finals at Pickwick and Wilson
June 23 at 8 a.m. ET – 2017 High School Fishing World Finals at Pickwick and Wilson

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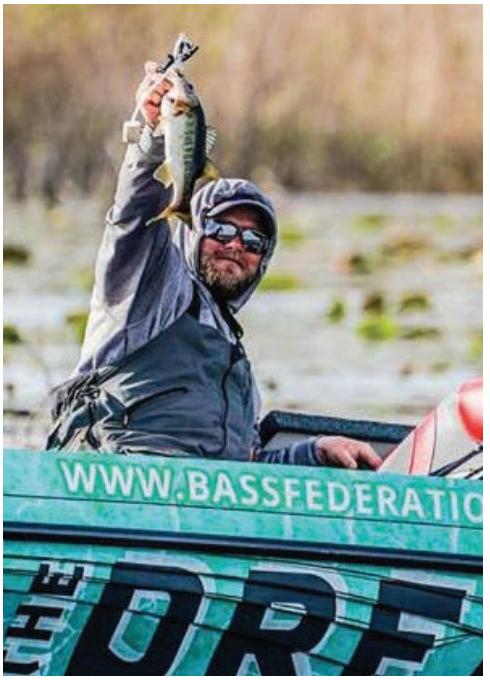
2018 TBF NATIONAL SEMI-FINALS BEGIN IN MAY



The Bass Federation's 2018 National Semi-Finals tournaments kick off in May. Comprised of 22 district championships, the Semi-Finals format makes it easy and inexpensive for grassroots bass anglers to fish "close-to-home" weekend events with anglers from neighboring states while competing for cash prizes and opportunities to advance to the 2019 TBF National Championship.

The 2018 Semi-Finals season opens May 19-20 when TBF members from Nevada and Utah compete in the District 22 tournament on Lake Mead out of Boulder City, Nev. On June 9-10, District 5, which includes Louisiana and Texas, battles on Lake Conroe. Oklahoma's Grand Lake takes center stage when Arkansas and Oklahoma TBF members square off June 16-17 in the District 6 event.

TBF members can qualify for the National Semi-Finals through a state federation event or directly through their TBF-affiliated local club in good standing.

TBF National Semi-Finals entry fees are $200 for boaters and $100 for co-anglers, with 100 percent payback – 75 percent to the top 20 percent of the field, 10 percent to the state federations and 15 percent to the TBF National Championship.

To view the complete 2018 National Semi-Finals schedule, visit bassfederation.com. ■

TBF MOURNS LOSS OF WILLIAM "DAVID" DANIEL JR.

The Bass Federation and bass anglers everywhere lost a true friend and champion of their cause on Jan. 11, 2018, when TBF member William "David" Daniel Jr., of Waverly, Tenn., passed away unexpectedly at age 67.

A longtime TBF leader, Daniel was a member of the TBF National Board of Directors. He was also past president of the Tennessee Bass Federation, having served multiple terms in that capacity, and was a familiar face at TBF adult, High School Fishing and TBF Junior Angler events, where he routinely served as bumpmaster.

"David was not just an asset to the TBF National Board and the Tennessee Federation, but to the Federation as a whole," says TBF President and CEO Robert Cartlidge. "He was a friend to all who met him and was always willing to help, lead, engage and volunteer his time in whatever project was before him, be it family, faith or Federation. His sudden, unexpected loss was a shock to us all. We hope all can take comfort in knowing that David lived his life to the fullest, as we all should do, in service of whatever we choose to do."

Fellow Tennessean and National Board Member Charlie Mitchell, who'd known Daniel since the early 1960s, agrees wholeheartedly with Cartlidge's assessment.

"I met David while I was teaching summer school, and he was about 13 or 14," Mitchell recalls. "He later became active in TBF and started the Tennessee Bass Federation and Kentucky Anglers Club, and we became very good friends. David was always helping people out. He was active in TBF, local fishing events, fundraisers for the local high school and his church. Everyone who knew him liked him."

Mitchell traveled with Daniel to a number of TBF events over the years. He recalls how Daniel handled his bumpmaster duties.

"True to character, David was extremely fair and called it like he saw it," Mitchell says. "But he never tried to find a way to disqualify someone's catch. He always did his best to get the bass to measure up to the limit."

As for Daniel's service on the TBF National Board, Mitchell recalls, "He was always looking out for everyone's best interest, not just Tennessee or the South, but the entire Federation. That's how he approached everything in life."

A retired supervisor for E. I. DuPont in New Johnsonville, Tenn., Daniel is survived by his wife Nancy, son William Daniel, daughter Jamie Epley and five grandchildren. ■

David Daniel (right) in action serving as bumpmaster at the 2017 TBF Junior World Championship on Lake Wateree in South Carolina, checking a bass brought in by soon-to-be-champion Syler Prince.

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ILLUSTRATION BY RACHEL IDZERDA

AUSTIN FELIX

Eden Prairie, Minn.

By Sean Ostruszka

You and former FLW employee Chris Burgan won the YETI FLW College Fishing National Championship in 2014. How big was that title for you?

It pretty much started my career. Actually, you could say College Fishing, in general, did.

Why do you say that?

Before College Fishing I was under the impression that in order to fish on Tour you had to have as much local knowledge on all these lakes as you do back home.

Touring the country for College Fishing, it opened my eyes that if you knew how fish reacted to certain situations, regardless of the lake, you could compete.

If you hadn't been involved with College Fishing, do you think you'd be where you are now, in your third year on the FLW Tour and a two-time Forrest Wood Cup qualifier?

Probably not. I'd probably still be fishing team tournaments back home and maybe a Costa (FLW Series) here or there.

That championship was a slingshot that gave me the notoriety to get my career off the ground.

Being a Minnesotan, do you ice fish?

No. I'm not a fan. I usually go once a year to remind myself of why I don't do it.

So why don't you do it?

Because it's really boring. I like to move around too much.

It has to be rough living up north when a good chunk of the year you can't fish open water.

Actually, you can usually still fish into late October or even early November. Then I pheasant and duck hunt for a month, and right about the time those seasons close it's time for me to head south to start my tournament season.

Well, that doesn't sound too bad.

Yeah, the only bad part is rigging up your boat for the season in the cold. Minnesota winters don't exactly provide ideal boat-prep weather when you don't have a heated garage.

Would you ever consider moving?

Maybe. But not right now. I like it up here, and it's not like I'm home all that much. I still live with my parents because my lifestyle is not conducive to buying or renting a place to live in for only a couple months of the year.

I bet you'd miss the smallmouth fishing if you moved down south.

Definitely. I love smallmouth fishing way more than largemouth fishing. I'd say half the reason is I'm really good at catching them, and half is because most other pros on Tour aren't.

What Minnesota lake would you love to see the FLW Tour visit?

Either Minnetonka or Mille Lacs. Mille Lacs is my favorite, but it's gotten a lot of pressure the last few years since that Elite Series event. Used to be you could go and catch 100 giant smallies without even trying. My best days used to crack 30 pounds for five. Those days are harder to come by, but it still has so many big fish in it.

You have to feel so spoiled to have lakes like that nearby.

I am. There are so many good lakes here. It's what makes me pretty versatile as an angler. You have the Mississippi River, where you can learn to read how current positions fish. You have dirty lakes, clear lakes and your grass lakes.

With all the different styles of fishing up here, there's not a lot that surprises me or makes me uncomfortable while fishing the Tour. ■

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