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COVER PHOTO BY TOSH BROWN

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Are you tired of casting all day and not being able to live stream high-resolution underwater action video from your lure to your smartphone? Of course you are, and for that you'll need the PowerRay PowerVision underwater drone.

Seriously, drones have gone subsurface, and this one was designed with fishing in mind. The PowerVision features a 12-megapixel still camera, 4K video capabilities and WiFi, plus an optional sonar module and virtual reality headset (because the virtual world of fishing is better than the actual world of fishing?). An arm extending off the top dangles the angler's lure in front of the lens, allowing him or her to locate bass on camera in real time and drive the bait straight into the strike zone.

When I saw this product, I was reminded of a conversation I had several years ago with a former FLW Tour pro. I'd describe this pro as "old school" in his approach to tournament fishing. An expert on modern sonar he was not.

During our conversation, he complained about how side-viewing sonar, big-screen GPS units and other technological advances had changed bass fishing for the worse. He believed it wasn't fair that new anglers were able to buy devices that helped them find fish so quickly, whereas his generation had to put in hundreds of hours on the water to learn where bass live and forage throughout the season. He actually wanted FLW to outlaw some sonar technology.

I didn't feel sorry for him then and don't really now, but I do understand his frustration. When technology advances so quickly, keeping up can be a chore, but I'd argue that it's a necessary chore if you want to be a professional angler in the modern era.

That's not the end of the conversation, though. Technology-wise, when is enough more than enough? When does using certain devices become unfair to the fish we pursue?

Such questions aren't limited to anglers. Hunters and wildlife managers have recently begun debating the legality and ethics of using aerial drones, trail cameras and range-finding scopes to take game. Bowhunting enthusiasts have bickered for years over what types of equipment should be allowed during "traditional" archery seasons. There's no consensus on those issues in the hunting world, and I assume there never will be on the fishing side of the equation either.

It's up to state fish and wildlife agencies to oversee the use of new technology and devices for recreational anglers, with their primary purpose being to conserve fisheries. Organizations such as FLW and B.A.S.S. make similar rulings regarding the use of certain equipment in competition based on what they consider to fit fairly within the scope of the modern tournament bass fishing format. In that regard, I think both organizations continue to do a fine job protecting the traditions of the sport, while allowing it to grow and develop.

Personally, I prefer a 12-inch Lowrance unit with StructureScan, but an underwater fishing drone is a step beyond my comfort level. Then again, it'd be handy to have around the next time I hang my crankbait in a brush pile.

Curtis Niedermier, Editor-in-Chief

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FISHING EXPOSED
LAKE CHAMPLAIN — JUNE 26, 2016





YANKEE BUCKETMOUTH

Wesley Strader lives a long way from Lake Champlain in Upstate New York, but he'll tell you that a bass is a bass, wherever it lives. That applies to this bucket-mouthed, slop-dwelling largemouth that he fooled on day four of the 2016 FLW Tour event at Champlain, which was also the final day of the 2016 Tour season. It was another great year for Strader, who finished 14th in the AOY standings for his eighth consecutive finish in the top 25. He took ninth at Champlain.

PHOTO BY JOE HOLLAND



FISHING EXPOSED
TABLE ROCK LAKE — NOV. 4, 2016





THE GREAT DELAY

It took two and a half hours for the fog to lift in order for the second day of the 2016 Costa FLW Series Championship to get under way at Table Rock Lake.

Anglers found ways to pass the time – talking deer hunting, rigging tackle and drinking coffee mostly. Meanwhile, FLW Series Tournament Director Ron Lappin, seen standing on the left in the General Tire boat in the foreground, carefully monitored the conditions with angler safety in mind, and worked closely with local water resource officers.

The foggy conditions resulted from a minor cold front in the region the evening before, and neither the fog nor the high skies that followed it helped the bite. The delay became a major factor in the outcome of the tournament, as game plans were adjusted and catches fell off drastically.

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

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ROB NEWELL



As the Blade Fades



As a kid I fed my fishing obsession with a steady diet of Jimmy Houston and Hank Parker television shows. And you didn't have to watch those productions very long to see a big tandem-bladed spinnerbait getting boiled up on by a bass.

Additionally, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, spinnerbaits were a hot ticket on the pro circuits.

Back in those days, I bought spinnerbaits by the dozen. I had double-willows, double-Colorados, tandem-Indians and big single-bladed "hubcaps." I had spinnerbaits made by Blue Fox, Stanley, Strike King, Limberneck, Hildebrandt, Hawg Caller and Terminator. If it had blades, I bought one.

And spinnerbaits worked, too. I can remember my very first trip to Lake Eufaula in 1989 ... spinnerbaits ruled. To this day I have hundreds of spinnerbaits of every kind, shape and size piled up in my garage. I collected spinnerbait blades like coins. I have more skirts than Katy Perry and more trailers than U-Haul.

Ironically, I haven't thrown a spinnerbait for bass in years – might even be bordering on a decade.

I know I'm not alone in abandoning my blades. I watch tournament competition all of the time and hardly see a glimmer of a spinner anymore.

I'd be willing to bet that some of our younger pros have never weighed a tournament bass caught on a spinnerbait. And I'm even surer that some of the young guns don't carry them at all.

In fact, at the Lake Norris FLW Tour Invitational last fall, Matt Arey admitted that he did not even have a spinnerbait in his boat and had to borrow one from another competitor.

Say it ain't so! Jimmy, you might want to speak with young Matt about that the next time you guys are in the Quaker State booth.

So what happened to the bladed glory?

Well, for starters, a lot of new more "fashionable" lures came along that sort of bumped the blades to the bottom row of the tackle box.

First came the swimbait, a more realistic-looking cast-and-retrieve lure that has been around for years, but made major gains in popularity somewhat recently. Then came the swim jig, which is basically a spinnerbait without blades.

The spinnerbait really took a hit when the Z-Man Original ChatterBait blew up, setting off a whole new category of bladed baits. Instead of a teardrop-shaped blade spinning on a swivel, a ChatterBait featured a flat, coffin bill-style blade that pivoted back and forth in the water, making the rest of the jig body shimmy. For some reason, bass relished this vibration over that of a spinnerbait.

Perhaps the final blow was the fishing bomb called the umbrella rig, which, depending on the rig, is basically a spinnerbait on steroids.

In addition to trendier lures, several other changes have caused the blade to fade. I believe the trend toward holding fewer fall tournaments has caused the spin to thin. Long ago there were

more fall events. In fact, before the rise of FLW, B.A.S.S. officially started its tournament season in October or November, when the shad migration into the upper end of tributaries was peaking. A spinnerbait was a fall staple on the decks of pros back in those years. These days, tournaments have become so spring-centric, and the bladed jig has certainly proven its effectiveness over spinnerbaits when it comes to that prespawn reaction bite, especially in vegetation.

A spinnerbait is an awesome muddy water bait. However, it seems we have less muddy water in reservoirs these days. I'm not complaining. Clean water is good. It's just that those big thumping blades can be a little much in 2 to 3 feet of visibility.

Finally, a lot of those shallow spinnerbait targets such as laydowns, stumps and standing timber have either rotted away or silted in on aging reservoirs across the country, leaving fewer targets to throw the old spinner bug next to.

So is the spinnerbait completely dead?

Oh, no. Not entirely. There are still several windows where a good old-fashioned spinnerbait still shines. One such time, as I mentioned, is in the fall. The Lake Norris Invitational saw a smattering of spinnerbait use in the top 10. I still contend that if there were more fall tournaments, there would be more spinnerbaits flung.

The other scenario is cold, muddy water – plowed-field muddy. We don't seem to get that combination much in tournaments anymore, but when it happens, some big blades will come out.

Also, big wind on the big lakes – as in the Great Lakes – is a great window for ripping blades for smallmouths.

Finally, the spinnerbait is still irreplaceable during the shad spawn in late spring/early summer in the Southeast, especially in a lake that has grass. I was reminded of this during the FLW Tour's visit to Pickwick Lake in May 2016, when roughly half of the top 10 used spinnerbaits to cash some dandy checks, and a shad spawn pattern was in play.

And as for my battalion of blades, well, I have found a very good use for them. Thankfully, bruiser redfish in Florida's inshore waters go after spinnerbaits with gusto. As the fluttering blades wake over the top of eelgrass on high tide, they disappear into a coppery boil so big it would impress even Hank and Jimmy. ■



ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER



**COLIN
MOORE**

The First Bass Professor

.....

Everybody gets ideas; lights come on in people's heads. And then, over time, most of the lights dim to darkness and life goes on. The brilliance gives way to the banal. The sure thing becomes the long shot. Yet some people follow through and actually succeed.

Stephen Lutz is one of them. The quiet, unassuming Illinois native can rightfully lay claim to being the founder of college fishing, which is surging in popularity these days.

Lutz's Big Idea came to him in 1968, during the long drive home from an Alabama bass tournament. It was football season, and Lutz reflected on the frenzy that surrounded the upcoming showdown between the University of Alabama and Auburn University. It was the same thing in Lutz's Big Ten, where games between such schools as Michigan and Ohio State, Indiana University and Purdue stirred up the same sort of excitement.

Lutz began to wonder, what if the Big Ten schools fostered the same sort of friendly rivalries through bass tournaments? What if college students who grew up fishing and hunting had an organized and positive outlet to showcase their skills? What if, indeed? Though a stint in the Air Force during the Vietnam era, an education at Indiana State University and a few years

teaching grade school and junior high intervened, the idea incubated in Lutz's mind. He started a bass fishing club in the Illinois grade school where he taught and, in the meantime, developed a plan to introduce bass fishing as a Big Ten sport.

In 1986, Lutz, having decided that Indiana University was more amenable to his ideas, convinced a dean there that bass fishing as a sport was a big

deal and getting bigger. He was hired to teach an hourlong class on bass fishing as a non-credit physical education course. A few semesters later, the Lutz class became a physical education elective that earned one credit.

Meanwhile, Lutz took the next logical step: The adjunct professor started the Indiana University Bass Fishing Club.

"Only eight kids showed up for the first meeting, but they were enthusiastic," recalls the 71-year-old Lutz. "When we held our first tournament on a local lake there at Bloomington, I would take one kid out in my Ranger for 30 minutes while the other seven would fish from the bank. Then I would swap anglers until everybody had his 30 minutes in the boat. That was in the summer of 1987. By 1990 we had more than 50 kids, and the club included alumni, staff members, faculty and people in the community."

The club didn't go unnoticed outside the Indiana campus. At Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., an aspiring angler named Shad Schenck and some of his buddies started their own club. In April 1992, "The Old Minnow Bucket" tournament pitted IU and Purdue against each other on Lake Monroe in the first intercollegiate bass tournament. The Boilermakers won.

Lutz's original idea of promoting bass fishing at the college level grew exponentially, aided by the support and



Stephen Lutz (front row, second from right) almost single-handedly jump-started college bass fishing when he developed IU's club back in the late '80s.

PHOTO COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS ALUMNI ASSOCIATION/PHOTO HOEMANN

encouragement of friends such as Forrest and Nina Wood, who provided prizes for the early tournaments in the form of clothing and fishing tackle.

"It sounds like you have a great thing going. Maybe someday it will be much more common to have a fishing team as well as football, basketball, soccer, etc.," wrote a prescient Jimmy Houston in a letter to Lutz dated Nov. 25, 1987.

In 1995, the first Big Ten Classic was held, pitting several conference school fishing teams against each other. In fits and starts, collegiate fishing grew from that Indiana nucleus until today when more than 700 schools actively participate.

Except for being there at the beginning, Lutz wasn't around to see the growth. In the mid-1990s, he had to put fishing aside to look after his ailing parents. After his parents died in 1996, he returned to teaching grade school and junior high school in Illinois and even served as a basketball coach.

The years went by, and Lutz and the IU Bass Fishing Club parted company. From 1996 through 2012, he was out of touch with the Hoosier collegians. Student anglers kept it going, however, and in 2012 Lutz attended a college tournament at Lake Shelbyville where a friend was running a boat for one of the teams. Four kids from IU were there, and Lutz made it a point to say hello to them at the weigh-in. They told him they had heard of him, but didn't know what had become of him since he left. The casual conversation rekindled Lutz's interest, and he invited himself to a club meeting where he discussed the birth of the Indiana University Bass Fishing Club.

From then until now, Lutz has resumed his place as one of the team's biggest boosters, and he shows up at various tournaments occasionally to cheer on the Hoosiers.

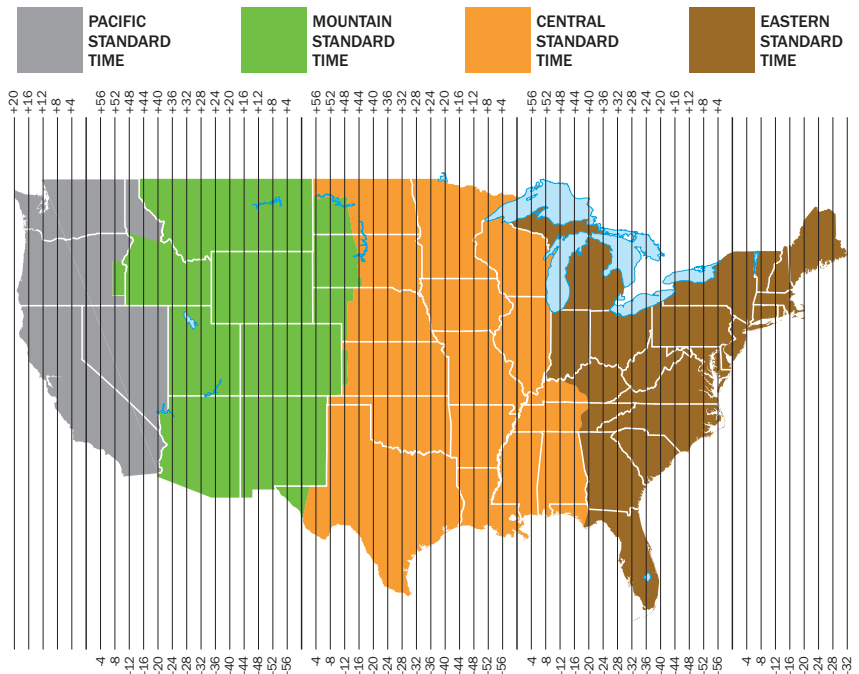
"As far as college fishing in general, I think that it proves that sometimes ideas take on a life of their own with just a little prodding," says Lutz, who retired from teaching in 2006. "That's what happened with college fishing, and I'm glad that I played a role in it. It's something that everybody involved can take pride in."

And none more so than Lutz, who formulated his idea of college fishing while driving home from a tournament long ago, and then made it happen. ■



SOLUNAR TABLES

FEBRUARY-MARCH 2017



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

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

WADE BOURNE
1947-2016

Well-known Tennessee outdoor writer, radio celebrity and television show host Wade Bourne suffered a fatal heart attack Dec. 15 while cutting a cedar Christmas tree near his home in Clarksville. Bourne, who was 69 at the time of his death, was an Air Force veteran who served in the Vietnam War, and later became one of the most respected communicators in the outdoor industry. He wrote regularly for several hunting and fishing magazines and hosted *Ducks Unlimited TV* and the *Wired2Fish/Hunt* radio show.



The quality of his work and contributions to the outdoor community are reflected in the many writing awards and honors he received. He was an inductee of the Legends of the Outdoors Hall of Fame and the National Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame, as well as a recipient of the Southeastern Outdoor Press Association's Lifetime Achievement Award and the Homer Circle Fishing Communicator Award from the Professional Outdoor Media Association.

Bourne is survived by his wife, Becky; a son and daughter, Hampton and Haley; a brother, Joe; three nieces; and a great niece and nephew.

YETI Becomes College Fishing Title Sponsor

FLW and YETI recently inked a multi-year sponsorship agreement that makes the premium cooler and drinkware brand the title sponsor of FLW College Fishing.

"As the interest and popularity of College Fishing continue to grow, we're excited to start our partnership with YETI, a brand known for its creativity and innovation," says Trish Blake, FLW president of marketing.

"We're extremely proud to be the official sponsor of the FLW College Fishing series," adds Corey Maynard, vice president of marketing at YETI. "YETI is dedicated to the expansion and progression of tournament fishing, and we look forward to multiple years on the water with collegiate anglers."



FLW PRO CODY MEYER CATCHES POSSIBLE WORLD RECORD SPOTTED BASS

California pro Cody Meyer might have fished his way into the record books back in mid-December. While fishing Bullards Bar Reservoir in northern California with FLW co-angler JR Wright, Meyer landed a mammoth spotted bass. Well aware that the fish might be a record, Meyer was able to contact Tim Little, a conservation officer with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the current International Game Fish Association (IGFA) spotted bass world record holder, who drove several hours to the lake with a certified scale. Little weighed the fish, which registered an impressive 10.8 pounds, surpassing his own record weight of 10 pounds, 6 ounces. The anglers documented the process of weighing the fish on video and submitted the information to the IGFA. Meyer's possible record is now under review and pending the organization's approval.

According to a press release issued by Strike King, which is one of Meyer's sponsors, he caught the fish on a wacky-rigged Strike King Ocho in the KVD magic color. The fish was suspended about 20 feet down over 100 feet of water. He was using 15-pound-test Seaguar Smackdown braid and a 6-pound-test Seaguar Tatsu leader.

Bullards Bar is one of several trophy spotted bass reservoirs in northern California where multiple world-record-class fish have been landed in recent years in what has become an annual quest to break the record. During this particular outing, Meyer and Wright's best five fish totaled more than 40 pounds.



PHOTO BY TIM LITTLE

KVD 2.5

SQUARE BILL CRANKBAIT

*DIVES TO
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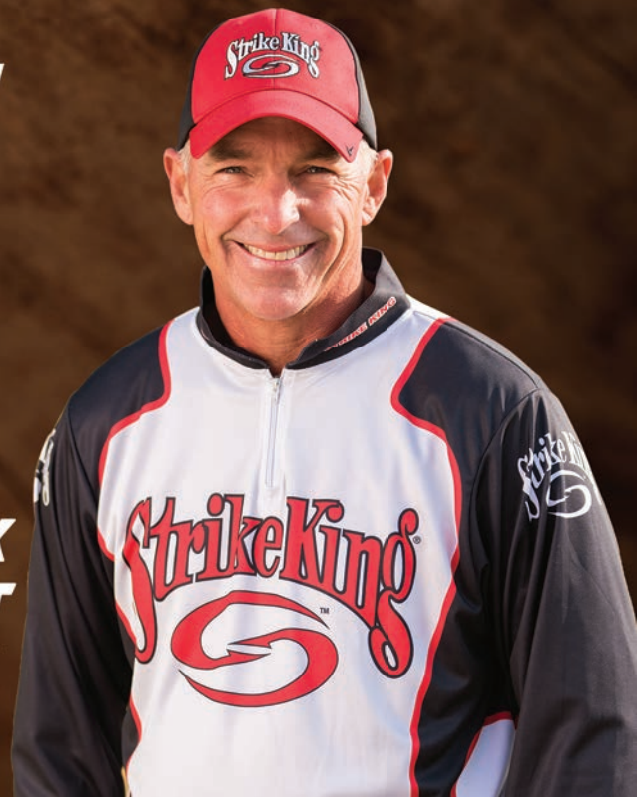
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TECHNIQUES | SCIENCE | PEOPLE | FACTS | ADVICE

TAKEOFF

What's Inside:

T-SHOTTING: A NEW APPROACH TO FINESSE FISHING WITH FLUOROCARBON

"Bassologists" break down the ideal spawning habitat

Expert advice on tracking the prespawn bass transition

A look at the injuries that have plagued some of the sport's best pros

Despite great obstacles, Jeff Sprague's career has reached new heights

How to turn an aluminum boat into an all-out bassin' machine

PHOTO BY MATT PACE

Seasonal tips and tricks + other odds and ends

By Paul Strege

SPOTTED BASS SUCCESS Target Bluffs and Transition Banks Now

Several of the country's best spotted bass fisheries lie just a long cast or two from Greg Bohannon's Bentonville, Ark., home. Year-round access to these waters has allowed him to hone his skills in patterning spotted bass during late winter and into early spring.

"I like to target spotted bass early in the year because they are often more aggressive and less susceptible to cold fronts compared to largemouths," he explains. "The first places I like to explore for big spotted bass are bluff wall ends. Transitions, located between bluffs and gravel banks, are my second choice."

Bohannon believes that when water temperatures consistently register below 45 degrees, a Skirmish Baits AIM-7 suspending jerkbait will entice most spotted bass hovering along bluff walls. As water warms, he changes to a Skirmish Baits A10 crankbait and systematically probes transition bank bottoms.

"Forty-seven degrees is definitely the magic temperature, at least in the Ozarks, when spotted bass begin their migration from bluff walls to shallower transition areas," Bohannon adds.



PHOTO BY CHRIS BURGAN

3 JERKBAIT ALTERNATIVES:



1. Zack Birge

Norman Deep Baby N

"Even though the Deep Baby N is very effective in the spring, it's often overlooked by anglers. I like to throw it on 10-pound-test fluorocarbon and slow-crank it along the bottom, similar to fishing a Wiggle Wart. My favorite colors are chartreuse/blueback or any of the craw colors."



2. Ramie Colson Jr.

SPRO Little John MD

"It's a versatile lure. You can retrieve it at a wide range of speeds, and the lip design helps it to run over branches without snagging. Spring craw is my favorite color of the bunch."



3. Clark Reehm

1/2-ounce Bill Lewis Rat-L-Trap

"Lipless crankbaits produce decent numbers of quality fish during the spring. Additionally, you can cover a ton of water and get fish to react even during a cold front." ■

20 YEARS AGO ...

Rick Clunn Got FLW Win No. 1

Date: Feb. 26-March 1, 1997

Location: Ross Barnett Reservoir, Mississippi

Legendary angler Rick Clunn earned the first of three FLW Tour wins with a four-day total weight of 43 pounds, 7 ounces. He bested the likes of Ricky Green (second), David Fritts (sixth) and Peter Thliveros (eighth) for the win. The ultra-stingy reservoir did not yield many bass, as a mere 10-pound, 2-ounce two-day total weight was adequate to finish in the money.

MARCH						
S	M	T	W	R	F	S
			X			

DON'T FORGET THE ORIGINAL FLOATER

For most regions of the country, the months of February and March are prime for jerkbaiting. Many of the seemingly endless models of jerkbaits in tackle shops can trace their ancestral roots back to a single lure - Rapala's Original Floater, or the Finnish Minnow. The lure dates back to 1936, when Lauri Rapala utilized cork, tinfoil and photo negatives to create his first prototypes. The lure was an instant success. Today, the Original Floater populates millions of tackle boxes around the world.

"The Original Floater remains one of my favorite lures in the spring, especially when bass are guarding beds during the spawn," says Kentucky pro Terry Bolton. "I like to snap it down in short jerks and rolls, and pause it to hover over a bed. It does a really good job of aggravating spawning fish."



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T-SHOTTING

A SIMPLE IMPROVEMENT ON THE BRAID-TO-FLUOROCARBON LEADER SYSTEM

By Curtis Niedermier

David Swendseid is a details guy. Currently DUO Realis' U.S. manager and R&D specialist, Swendseid has worked in product development and promotion in the fishing industry for nearly 25 years, primarily developing Japanese companies in the U.S. market. If you're a fan of the tackle coming out of Japan, then you know that Japanese manufacturers sweat the small stuff. They measure in minute fractions of ounces, design with the most capable computer software, and polish up every last surface.

That attention to detail trickles down to the methods by which Japanese baits are fished and the equipment used to fish them. Which is where Swendseid comes in. He's the guy who helps American anglers adopt new Japanese tackle and, when necessary, apply the new products to the American fishing scene.

Swendseid also possesses a cache of knowledge on the performance characteristics of fishing tackle and has developed systems for maximizing gear performance for a variety of popular techniques, particularly finesse techniques.

One such system is what he calls "T-shotting." It's actually a spin-off of a saltwater rigging system called top-shotting, where anglers replace heavy tackle and monofilament line with light tackle and thin, high-strength braided line connected to a heavy shock leader.

Swendseid's T-shotting adaptation combines braid and a long fluorocarbon leader on spinning tackle. It's a great way to save money, cast farther and improve landing percentages using light-line techniques such as spybaiting.

The Setup

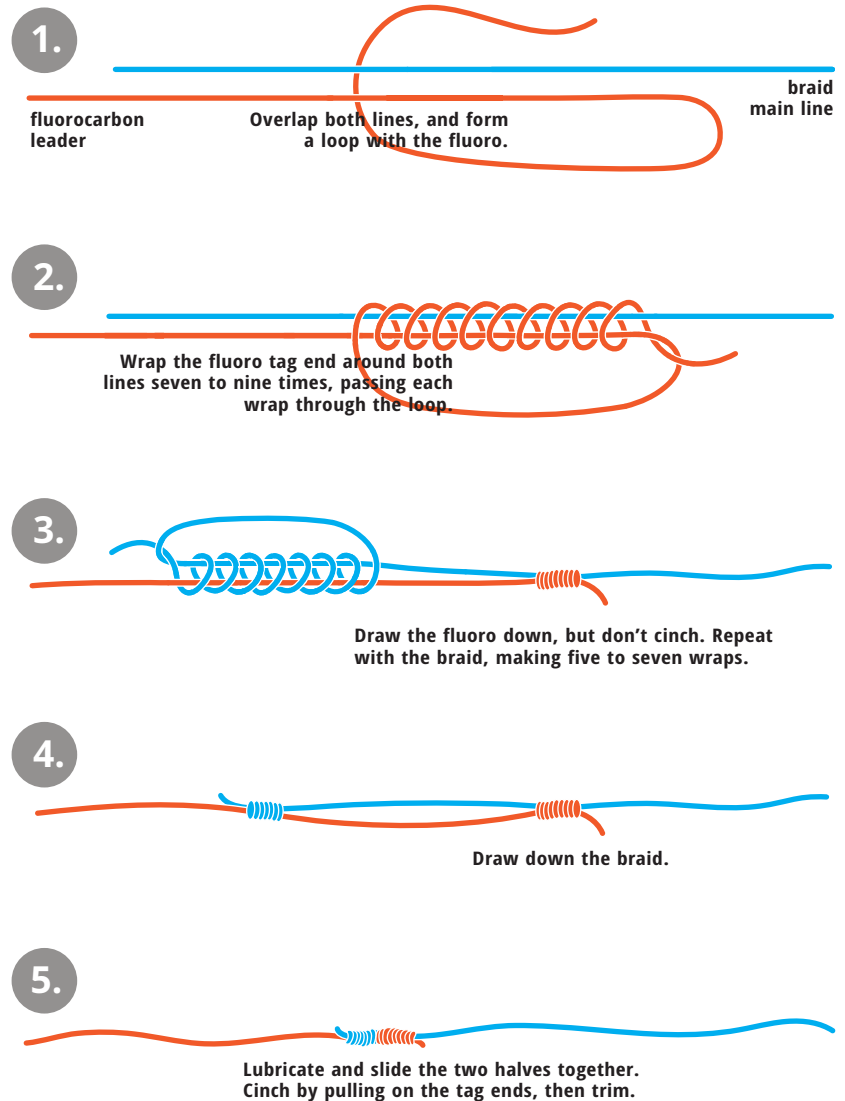
BRAID – Fill the spinning reel with braid – up to 30-pound test.

FLUORO – Tie on about 25 to 35 feet of fluorocarbon in whatever pound-test rating you're comfortable using.

The Knot

Swendseid prefers the double-unit knot, which is one of the simplest to tie. For best results, he says the fluorocarbon needs to be wrapped around the braid with two wraps more than the braid gets wrapped around the fluorocarbon – nine wraps with the fluoro and seven with the braid, for instance. Swendseid says this helps prevent the wraps from slipping under pressure.

"The more refined your knot, the better the release on the spool – as long as you make the knot really tight," Swendseid says. "If I'm fishing a tournament, I'll drop a little bit of Super Glue on there and let it cure before I put it on the spool."

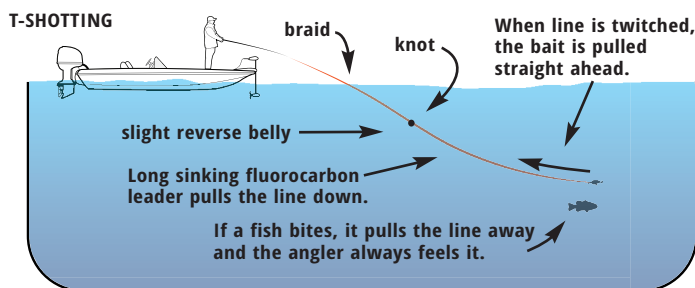
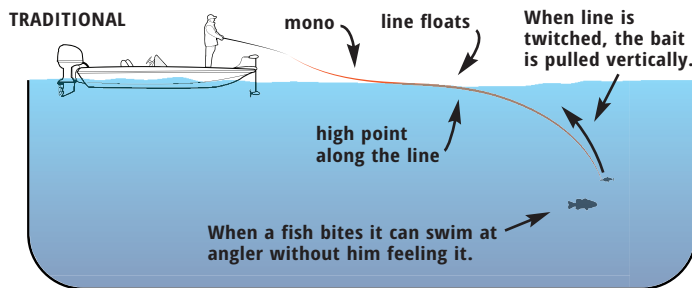


5 Advantages of T-Shotting

The T-shotting system provides anglers with the benefits of fishing with straight fluorocarbon, including low stretch, low visibility and abrasion resistance. Yet it eliminates some of the headaches caused by a full spool of fluoro, which in some cases is so “springy” that the coils loosen or it tangles on a spinning reel’s spool and you end up with poor casting distance or a bird’s nest. Here are five key advantages.

1. The Reverse Belly

Braid and monofilament float, so when a long cast is made, the line can end up with a high point out on the surface of the water – curving from that point where the line is floating down to the lure. When a lure such as a jerkbait is twitched, the line could actually pull the lure in an upward direction. And when a fish bites, if it comes toward the angler, the angler might not feel the bite. Conversely, the T-shotting system uses enough fluorocarbon, which sinks, that the line takes on a “reverse belly” shape. It slopes in a more direct path to the lure or along a slight U-shaped path, so that the line directly in front of the lure pulls more horizontally at the bait. Hookups and the action both improve.



2. A Direct Connection

The advantage of No. 1 primarily comes into play with suspending or middle water column baits. For bottom baits such as a shaky head or drop-shot, the sinking fluorocarbon provides a more direct-line connection for more responsive hooksets and increased control.

3. Cost Savings

Braid is expensive, but it lasts a long time, so using it as backing provides a cost savings because it rarely needs to be replaced. Similarly, the price of high-end fluorocarbons keeps increasing, but this system allows a simple filler spool to last much longer because the angler is replacing only 35 feet at a time.

4. Weight-Forward Casting and Control

According to Swendseid, adding the braid essentially makes the reel’s spool shallower – it creates a larger inner diameter – which leads to what he calls a “weight-forward effect” on the fluorocarbon during the cast. Because the fluorocarbon is heavier per foot than the braid, the fluoro comes off the spool easier, without tangles.

“Your inertia is better,” he explains. “You don’t have to worry about springiness from inside the spool that bursts forward like you might with a full spool of fluorocarbon.”

5. Knot Location

With short leaders, every time a fish surges near the boat, it applies pressure to the knot. When T-shotting, the knot is already on the spool when bass get close, so there’s really no weak point in the system.

For Baitcasters Too

T-shotting works with both spinning and baitcasting reels, though for many tournament anglers, the spinning applications probably outweigh the baitcasting applications. If you want to use it with a baitcaster, Swendseid recommends braid of 40-pound test or heavier, and a 12- to 25-pound-test fluorocarbon leader.

For flipping applications, he suggests tripling the length of the leader. This provides more line for the occasional retie, but you’ll still save money by not using a full spool of fluorocarbon. ■

PHOTO BY D.W. REED II



UNDERSTANDING THE SPAWN

KNOWING WHERE AND WHEN BASS SPAWN IS OFTEN THE FIRST STEP TO SPRINGTIME SUCCESS

By TJ Maglio

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RON FINGER

Procreation is the No. 1 goal of any species, as successful reproduction ensures continued existence. That's why the spawn is the main event of the year for bass.

The annual spawning cycle is also prime time for anglers, as many personal bests and epic days are scored when bass are up shallow and heeding the urge to beget more of their kind.

Regardless of where in the country the spawn takes place, every bass fisherman can identify the telltale white saucers that indicate bass beds. Yet a good many anglers don't truly understand how and why bass spawn, which can inhibit fishing success.

Here are a few insights.

Why Beds?

Bass are members of the sunfish family, and nest-making is one of the functions that ties all sunfishes together. Bedding allows bass to ensure that more of their young are successfully hatched.

"Bass live in a tough neighborhood," says Dr. Cory Suski, associate professor of environmental biology at the University of Illinois. "When a male bass sits over a bed, it's ensuring that none of the local predators can get in and feast on the eggs. By sticking around, it's giving the young a better opportunity to hatch successfully."

In addition to protecting the brood from predation, male bass, which remain at the bed after the female leaves, also use their fins to circulate water through the nest, removing waste products providing oxygen, and preventing siltation. All such behaviors combined give bass fry a leg up on other fish that don't provide any parental care.



Spawning Essentials

Because bass inhabit such a wide range of waters, they've developed the ability to spawn successfully in an extremely wide range of locations, but there are several consistent variables.

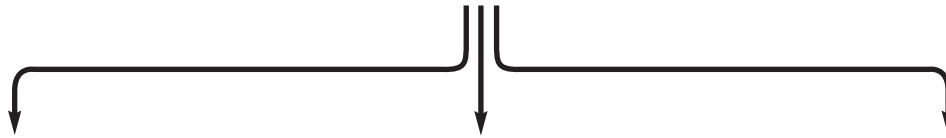
"In general, they're going to be looking for something with a fairly hard bottom so their eggs don't sink into the sediment, and out of the current so they don't get washed away," Suski says. "However, in many bass waters, these types of locations are very limited, so they have to improvise. Beggars can't be choosers, and their urge to procreate will usually overcome lack of suitable habitat."

MOON PHASE

For years, anglers have been convinced that moon phase is a great indicator of spawning activity. The truth is, across much of the bass range, there's not much of a correlation.

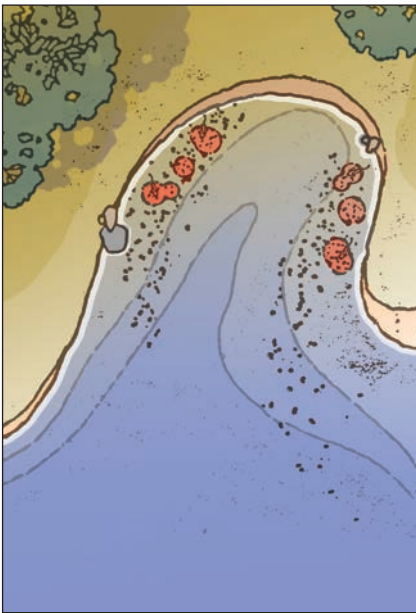
"The No. 1 indicator of spawning activity for bass is photoperiod [length of day]," Suski says. "As the days get longer, spawning activity will increase, regardless of the moon phase. Second is water temperature. Bass eggs need a certain water temperature to mature properly, and when those two conditions get right, the bass will spawn."

IDEAL SPAWNING LOCATIONS



LAKES & RESERVOIRS

In lakes and reservoirs, suitable spawning habitat is abundant, so most bass bed in shallow bays, coves and flats. Smallmouths prefer areas that have small cobble or pea gravel, and largemouths will fan out a nest along pretty much any shallow shoreline.



RIVERS

Scoured hard bottom is everywhere in river systems such as the Ohio, Susquehanna and Columbia, but heavy current makes most of that habitat unsuitable for spawning. Consequently, bass will get out of the current and spawn in marinas, backwater lakes, around manmade features such as industrial loading areas and dredge holes, and behind major current breaks such as wingdams or large boulders. Smaller current breaks such as laydowns can work as well in areas with light flow.



TIDAL SYSTEMS

Siltation is common in tidal systems, and ideal hard-bottom areas often are scarce. In the Mississippi River Delta or Atchafalaya Basin, for example, bass might be compelled to nest on lily pad root masses, stumps, cypress knees and even manmade features such as dock footings.



MORE TIPS FOR LOCATING SPAWNING BASS

By Curtis Niedermier

Watch for vegetation movement – If you know you're in a spawning area and there's emergent vegetation such as "hay grass," cattails and small reeds, watch carefully as you ease through the area on the trolling motor. Bass sometimes reveal their location by bumping stalks and causing the plant above the water to move.

Study local vegetation – If you're not sure what areas might attract spawners, particularly in grass-filled fisheries, talk to a local fisheries biologist or an experienced angler about the types of aquatic vegetation that grow there. Some plant life grows best in gravelly or sandy areas, which are the places that bass build nests. Find those plants, and you'll find spawning bass.

Practice stealth and scan carefully – Most importantly, stay quiet in spawning areas. Don't talk, and don't slam compartment lids. Ease around on the trolling motor at a slow speed, without stopping and starting, and scan the water out in front for subtle movements, a "dark spot" that might actually be a bass tail or any discoloration on the lake bottom that might be a bed. ■



PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

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FROM WINTERING AREAS TO PRESPAWN SPOTS

WATCH FOR THESE CLUES TO PREDICT WHEN BASS WILL BEGIN THEIR SPRINGTIME TRANSITIONS

By Tyler Brinks

The annual transition of bass from wintering areas to prespawn locations varies based on seasonal weather conditions and geographic location. Yet there are several clues and triggers that observant bass anglers can use to capitalize on bass in transition anywhere in early spring. FLW Tour pros Cody Meyer, Mark Rose and Michael Neal offer some advice.



marks the time of year when, in the southern and central states, bass will be on the move. The days are longer then, and that triggers the change, though it can happen sooner than that.

In addition to longer days, Rose looks for a trend of warmer nights as a sign that bass will start their transition.

Moon Phase

When it comes to moon phase, opinions vary, and there isn't conclusive scientific evidence to suggest that moon phase has a direct impact on bass behavior. Still, anglers swear by solunar activity as a component of predicting bass activity. Rose, Meyer and Neal are among the believers, and they

have thousands of hours of observation to back up their claims with regard to the early-season transition.

"Full moons are the strongest, with new moons being the second most important," says Rose. "Both of them will have an impact on movement of bass, especially when they're transitioning from winter locations."

"It's like clockwork, and the first full moon in February gets the large-mouths in the southern states moving," adds Neal.

Even if the water temperature hasn't reached that 50-degree mark that Neal suggested earlier, he believes the full moon can still prompt the move.

Water Temperature

When the water temperature enters the 50-degree range, says Neal, bass begin to push from deep-water wintering areas toward staging areas in the lakes around his home in east Tennessee. That range applies to most other places too, though there aren't any hard-and-fast rules.

"Water temperature is big and much more important than the actual time of year. A warm spell will move things along much quicker," Meyer adds. "It also depends on the water temperature in the region and what is normal there."

Length of Day

Meyer says that the occurrence of daylight saving time in mid-March usually

Locations

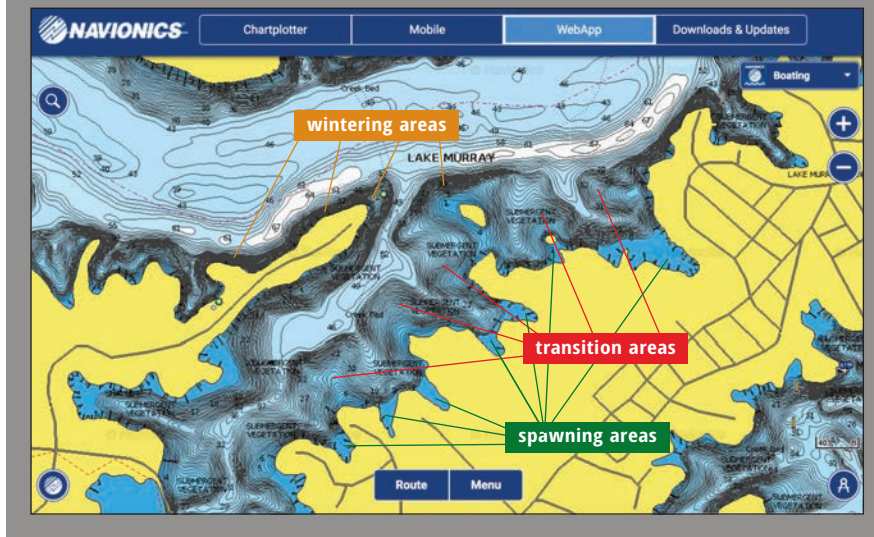
Meyer likes to view his lake charts and see three different features in close proximity when tracking bass in transition in early spring: wintering areas, prespawn locations and spawning areas.

"I like to find steep bluffs where fish spend the winter next to long points where they stage before they spawn," he says. "If you can find flats and pockets where they spawn nearby those areas, you have everything you need during this time of year."

Neal looks for the first structure in between shallow and deep water – relative to the lake – as a prime location for transitioning bass.

"It could be a point, hump in a pocket or anything with an irregularity," Neal says.

He feels that once they are in a transition area, water temperature will dictate their next move, so he keeps eyes on his water temperature gauge and heads shallower as the season progresses. ■



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ANGLER AILMENTS

HOW THREE VETERAN PROS HAVE OVERCOME INJURIES SUFFERED IN TOURNAMENT COMPETITION

By Colin Moore

Not counting the mental stress that stubborn fish inflict, tournament fishermen are likely to suffer various aches and pains that require medical treatment and perhaps surgery at some point in their careers. Typically, the pain is the result of joint issues such as in the arms or legs. Some anglers hit the trifecta, experiencing a variety of physical problems. We didn't have to go far to find examples from the FLW Tour ranks.



Angler: Larry Nixon

Ailment: *various arm injuries*

Cause and Effect: Several years ago, Nixon tore a tendon in his right arm while ripping a Rat-L-Trap through hydrilla at Lake Seminole. Worse yet, Nixon later developed carpal tunnel syndrome in his right hand from using his thumb thousands of times to push the spool release button on his bait-casters. It affected his grip on the rod and his ability to set hooks and to fish big crankbaits.

Treatment: A surgeon reattached Nixon's tendon. Cortisone shots and minor surgery were prescribed for the carpal tunnel syndrome.

Outcome and Prognosis: After the tendon operation, it took Nixon about a year to hit full stride again. Ditto for the carpal tunnel syndrome, and Nixon also made himself learn how to pitch and flip left-handed. He says his right thumb gets "numb and useless" when the air temperature hits 45 or below, but otherwise serves him well.

PHOTO BY ROB NEWELL

Angler: Dan Morehead

Ailment: *bad shoulder*

Cause and Effect: Morehead had been experiencing rotator cuff melt-down in his right shoulder for some time, but he hit the pain wall in 2011 while using a heavy umbrella rig to win the Costa FLW Series Championship at Kentucky Lake.

Treatment: After a couple of MRIs and a regimen of cortisone shots and anti-inflammatory prescription drugs, Morehead underwent surgery in 2013.

Outcome and Prognosis: Morehead, in his 40s, is A-OK and fishes an umbrella rig any time he sees fit.

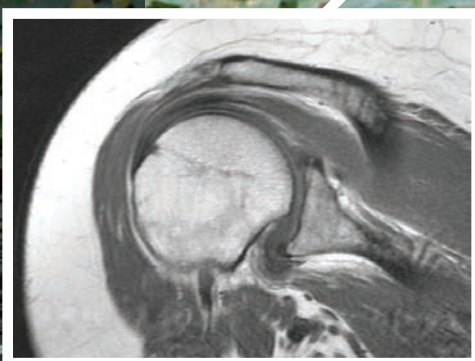


PHOTO BY JODY WHITE

Angler: Denny Brauer

Ailment: *bad shoulder, bad knee, bad back*

Cause and Effect: Brauer hurt his knee playing high school football and then reinjured it severely during practice for a Costa FLW Series event on Toledo Bend. After previous surgery on his back, he reinjured it in 1998 during a tournament on Lake St. Clair, and hurt his shoulder in a Costa tournament on Sam Rayburn in 2015 (even with only one good arm, he finished fifth).

Treatment: Surgery, and plenty of it, has been Brauer's lot. He's undergone knee and shoulder replacements, four lumbar operations and cervical fusion surgery.

Outcome and Prognosis: Says Brauer: "I've got so many titanium parts in me that it's a given I'm going to set off the security alarms in any airport I go through." Otherwise, he's still a regular in the Costa FLW Series and a formidable tournament opponent. ■



PHOTO BY JOE SILLIS

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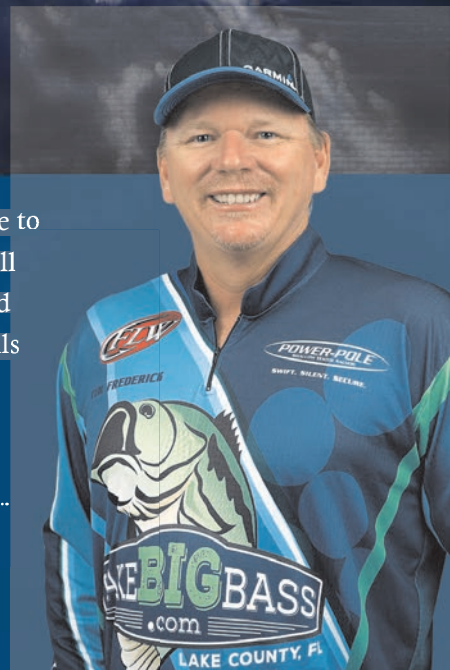
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RISING ABOVE

DESPITE SOME OBSTACLES, JEFF SPRAGUE HAS FOUND HIS PLACE ON TOUR

By Sean Ostruszka

PHOTOS BY TOSH BROWN

Without a doubt, last year was the best season of Jeff Sprague's career.

Prior to 2016, Sprague was just another young angler who'd worked his way up. He'd started as a co-angler, honing his skills locally back home in Point, Texas, against what he contends is some of the best local competition an angler can find. During that stint, Sprague won Co-angler of the Year in the Costa FLW Series Southwestern Division in 2010 – his first season competing at that level.

He eventually split his time between fishing as a boater in the FLW Series and as a co-angler on the FLW Tour, twice finishing in the top 10 in the Co-Angler of the Year rankings in the latter. In 2014, motivated by his previous success, Sprague went to the front of the boat for good and kicked off his pro career.

Clearly, the potential was there. Before the 2016 Tour season, Sprague had missed just one check in FLW Series competition and had earned 10 top-10 tournament finishes

as a co-angler in various FLW circuits.

Two seasons as a pro on the Tour had netted him plenty of checks as well. Yet, Sprague had made only two top 20s and gained little recognition.

By the third Tour stop of 2016 at Beaver Lake, his potential blossomed into something more. Sprague finished in the top 15 in the first two events, and made his first top 10 at Beaver, finishing third. In doing so, he took the lead in the Angler of the Year race.

Just three tournaments had catapulted him into an AOY battle with the likes of John Cox and Andy Morgan. He'd hold that lead with another top 20 at Pickwick Lake, completing a streak of five consecutive top-20 finishes dating back to the final Tour stop of 2015, before finally relenting and finishing an impressive sixth in the year-end standings.

During 2016, Sprague led the AOY point race for two months, notched his first top 10 and made more money than he had during the previous two seasons combined.



Then again, last season laid down plenty of challenges for Sprague.

Every angler is going to experience bad luck time and again. Lost fish, boat breakdowns, flat tires, a bad neighbor at a motel – things happen, and he hopes each is a one-time deal. Sprague wasn't so lucky. He battled a series of mechanical issues throughout the season that threatened to derail his AOY chances.

Because of the issues, he lost fishing time, inadvertently erased some important

waypoints and had to deal with enough hurdles to cause even an experienced angler to lose his cool.

But Sprague didn't. He showed poise that suggests a level of experience and confidence not often found from someone just a few years into a professional fishing career. As it turns out, those traits are exactly what have led the 35-year-old to this point in his career. He's established now, having earned plenty of respect last season. In February, Sprague heads into the 2017 FLW

Tour on the unofficial list of AOY favorites, with a track record that suggests he'll make a run at the title.

Rising Above It

Jason Reyes has seen a lot in more than a decade of professional fishing. What he saw happen to Sprague last season – the highs despite the lows – was a first.

"He rose up to it," says Reyes. "Most guys would use it [a mechanical issue] as an excuse, fold up or completely melt down. He simply battled through it."

The Hartwell tournament epitomized that to Reyes. Reyes and Sprague room together during the season, so both had seen the 3 1/2-pounder bedding beneath the dock of the house where they were staying at Hartwell. Since Sprague got the better boat draw the first day, he got dibs on it. Sure enough, he caught it, only to have to throw it back when a breakdown forced him to go through a restart.

"I've seen something like that ruin tournaments so many times," Reyes says. "You have to be in the right mental mindset to do what Sprague did – get a new boat, regroup, completely scrap your plan and crack 17 pounds."

Then again, after having watched Sprague come into his own as an angler these last few years, Reyes wasn't all that surprised.

The first time Reyes met Sprague was when Reyes drew him as a co-angler several years back. Almost immediately Reyes saw something different in him.

"You could see he was young and hungry, but it wasn't like he was trying to get anything from me," Reyes says. "Best way I can put it is he was mad at them [the fish]."

The two clicked as friends almost immediately, and since Sprague didn't know anyone else competing on Tour, Reyes invited Sprague to practice with him at the next tournament. They've been traveling together ever since.

Reyes was also the one who pushed Sprague to move to the front of the boat. He actually suggested that Sprague make the move a year earlier, in 2013, but the young pro held off for another season.

"That just shows his maturity," Reyes says. "He picked the right time."



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Chasing the "W"

Looking back, Sprague says his mental game wasn't as strong as it needed to be when he did take the helm on the pro side.

"I'll admit, my first year I was a bit intimidated and star-struck," says Sprague. "I'd give more than I should to some guys, out of respect, or I'd see one of my idols in an area and would leave, thinking he'd catch all the fish. I also made a lot of little errors. I just kept making mental errors."

By 2016, his third year competing on Tour, Sprague had learned to put the mental errors behind him, and he had a chance at winning AOY because of it.

"Even when things were going wrong, he made decisions that allowed him to still compete," adds Reyes.

With the trials of 2016 behind him, Sprague is imagining all of the possibilities,

and it makes him extremely excited about the future. He had a breakout year last season, finishing in the top 10 in the standings. Now, with a bit of good fortune, he feels the sky is the limit.

"It's all coming together," Sprague says. "The odds were really against me all last year, but things still came together. I never really got too stressed out. Now, I've put last year behind me – and it was a good year – but now I'm ready to take the next step. Top 20s are nice, but it's time for me to win one of these tournaments; put a 'W' on the board.

"You never really know when that's going to happen, but I know with how I'm fishing it's going to happen. I'm able to do what I want to do, when I want to do it. I've found my place in this game. It took a little bit, but I've figured out where I fit in." ■

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RIGGING ALUMINUM BOATS

WHAT IT TAKES TO TURN A "TIN" RIG INTO A BASSIN' MACHINE

By Joe Balog

PHOTOS BY JOE BALOG

Aluminum boats are hot. New manufacturers are entering the aluminum market, as veteran boat builders continue to expand their lines. The reason is simple: Modern manufacturing methods have resulted in aluminum rigs that are just as seaworthy as many fiberglass boats, but at a fraction of the cost. In addition, the bass fishing subculture has embraced aluminum boats due to their proven success on the tournament trails, most notably John Cox's recent Forrest Wood Cup win.

Aluminum boats offer many advantages over fiberglass in terms of access and fishability. However, they also present challenges when rigging for common bass fishing applications.

If you're considering an aluminum boat for your next rig, or already have one you'd like to turn into a bassin' machine, you've come to the right place. Tapping into the brain trust of the country's top aluminum-welding pros, combined with my personal experiences owning aluminum fishing boats, has resulted in a checklist you can trust.

Apples to Oranges

Aluminum is nothing like fiberglass. Fiberglass is a multi-layered material that's easily drilled, holds hardware well and prevents vibration. Aluminum is the opposite. Once holes have been drilled into aluminum and hardware installed, the holes can easily become "bored out," resulting in loose, rattling hardware and insecure mounts.

To safeguard against problems, everything mounted to an aluminum boat should be secured with stainless bolts and matching locknuts and washers. Some manufacturers now offer reinforced decking beneath trolling motor mounts for more secure fastening, but you should still include multiple large fender washers and nylon locknuts when mounting equipment. Be sure not to tighten bolts too quickly with screw guns, as the nylon in the locknuts can melt and bind.



Mounting Electronics

In addition to the challenges presented by rigging methods, choosing feasible rigging locations for some equipment can also be tricky. Many aluminum boats feature much smaller consoles than today's big glass rigs, so flush-mounting large depth finders isn't an option, and operators must rely on aftermarket mounts such as those from RAM.

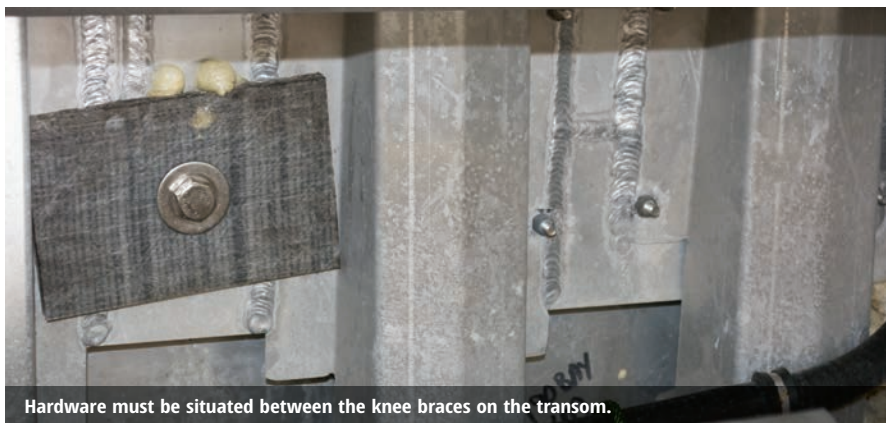
On my Ranger RT178, I added a rubber-coated metal strap (the kind often used for securing hoses and pipes) around my RAM mount's vertical post and secured it to the gunwale



to snug up my console unit. The strap keeps the mount from shifting and potentially wearing out the mounting holes in the aluminum, and the rubber provides a little cushion and shock absorption.

Transom Challenges

Another major difference between aluminum and glass is immediately evident when comparing transoms.



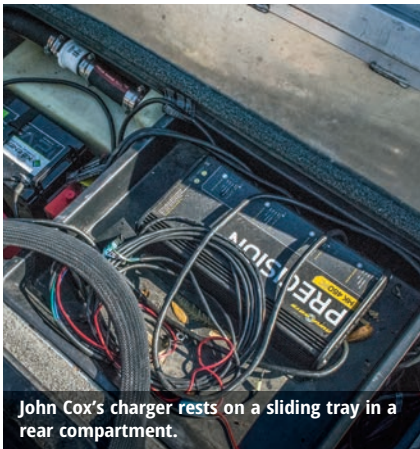
Aluminum boats require manufacturers to install large knee braces stretching from transom to hull. The braces clutter the rear of the boat and make it difficult to mount some accessory equipment.

Specifically, such braces present mounting challenges for two popular bass boat accessories: on-board chargers and shallow-water anchors.



Traditionally, chargers are mounted behind the batteries in a rear mechanical compartment. In some cases, aluminum boat manufacturers add a flat plate across transom braces to allow for this, as in the case of my RT178. However, as anglers try to include as many batteries as possible in limited space, sometimes the charger must be moved. Cox, affectionately known as "Tin Man" on Tour for his six-figure wins out of aluminum rigs, accomplishes this by placing his Minn Kota MK460 charger in an overhead tray in the rear compartment of his Crestliner PT 20.

Numerous considerations must be made prior to mounting shallow-water anchors on aluminum boats. Some aluminum manufacturers don't allow the option on their rigs, and void warranties if consumers add the equipment themselves, so be sure to start with a clear discussion on the subject with your boat dealer.



John Cox's charger rests on a sliding tray in a rear compartment.

As an alternative, aluminum rigs can easily be "staked out" with a fiberglass pole intended for use in kayaks and inshore rigs. These poles are nearly identical to those used in motorized shallow-water anchors, but require the user to push them in (usually quite easy to do in most bass fishing waters) and are held to the boat with a small bracket or rope.

If an angler decides to mount shallow-water anchors to an aluminum rig, the best bracket to use is likely a "sandwich" style that slides between the boat and motor. This bracket takes the majority of the strain off the transom and places it on the large engine bolts. Most importantly, it prevents the need for any additional holes in the boat's transom.



Transducer Installation

Without question, the greatest mounting concern regarding aluminum boats centers on transducers.

It's rumored that shoot-through-hull transducers are impossible to use on aluminum rigs, and that common external mounts with metal brackets might cause electrolysis and possibly lead to rust.

Speaking from experience, I can assure you that either mounting system can provide both great results and a handful of headaches. Bill Carson, field marketing manager for Johnson Outdoors (parent company of Minn Kota), puts in thousands of hours each year on the water tweaking electronics. He admits that shooting through aluminum with a transducer can be tricky, and in some cases if a stock transducer is causing issues he recommends a new aftermarket transducer by Airmar, a company that manufactures marine electronic components.

I've mounted standard transducers several times in the hull of aluminum boats without initial problems by securing them to the interior bottom of the boat with epoxy. Recently, however, I experienced a failure when the epoxy cracked (aluminum rigs are much more prone to this), and I had to bust out the 'ducer and remount. This time, per Carson's recommendation, I simply shot a glob of petroleum jelly in my bilge area, pressed in the transducer, wedged it flat to the boat's bottom with my bilge pump hose and secured it with a cable tie. It works great, albeit a bit crude. For a more permanent solution, epoxy ought to last a couple seasons, or an aftermarket external transducer would be a smart choice.

Regarding transom-mounted transducers, I have personally had a side-imaging transducer on a metal bracket installed on my RT178 for 15 months with absolutely no problems or signs of electrolysis.

It is worth mentioning that I've found the readings on my side-imaging unit to be far superior to those on most glass boats, at speeds previously unheard of in the bass boat market. Also, mount placement must be considered. The transducer must be directly in line with the bottom of the boat, and it must not be behind any rivets or other obstructions that cause bubbling or turbulence when the boat is moving.

When mounting transducers on the transom, standard procedures can be used, but be advised that screw-in

KEEP GEAR DRY

The top decking on most aluminum rigs is all one-piece, which makes it difficult for manufacturers to add raised lips beneath compartments – like those found on glass boats – to deflect water. For that reason, compartments in aluminum boats can get wet in heavy rain.

My answer is to store important gear in Plano waterproof boat boxes and polycarbonate cases. Tools, a spare hub kit, VHF radio – just about everything has a spot below deck. Several boxes have lasted me more than five seasons with absolutely no leaks or concerns.



SHALLOW DRAFT

It's no secret that aluminum rigs ride higher in the water, and allow access to the skinniest bass haunts. But just how much of a difference is there between fiberglass and metal? To find out, I went below the surface. Note: Each boat was rigged with "standard" tournament gear, about a half-tank of gas and one angler. If you're comparing other rigs, the results could vary based on how each boat is loaded.

John Cox's Crestliner PT 20

Angler at bow: 7 3/4-inch draft

Angler at helm: 10 1/2-inch draft

Joe Balog's Ranger RT178

Angler at bow: 5 1/2-inch draft

Angler at helm: 8 1/2-inch draft

Ranger Z520C

Angler at bow: 20-inch draft

Angler at helm: 21-inch draft

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side-imaging transducer

hardware can loosen and possibly allow water into the boat. If nothing else, be sure to use a silicon sealant around any screw holes. For best results, bolt on a 3/4-inch-thick StarBoard polyethylene mounting plate, which is available through most marine catalogs and big-box stores, often as a kit. A transducer can then be installed on the mounting plate, which accepts and holds screws, in a place that will ensure good readings, and it'll essentially be worry-free once installed. The only holes to drill in the boat are the initial bolt holes for the plate, and they can be situated to miss

internal knee braces and other hardware. If you later replace or upgrade the transducer, you won't leave any holes in the boat itself, just the StarBoard.

Wires and Wiring

Running wires within the gunwales of aluminum boats also differs from the same procedures with fiberglass rigs. Many aluminums don't have the wiring "tubes" installed within the hulls as in modern glass bass boats. If you're the owner of such a craft, add one if possible. T-H Marine makes the

industry standard for rigging tubes, and the addition of such will make further rigging dramatically easier. Unfortunately, in some cases adding a rigging tube after the boat has been built and equipped with a motor isn't possible.

Regardless, special consideration must be made for pulling wires due to the small accesses offered in aluminum rigs. Within the gunwales, space is limited, and often crowded with outboard controls. A wire-pulling device is a must for all aluminum rigging. Don't even attempt the process without one.

To prevent future headaches when installing wires, always pull a second rope or string, along with your wires, and leave it within the hull to act as a pull-through for future projects.

While wire rigging might sound intimidating with aluminum rigs, in some cases such boats offer very easy access below deck because they lack the walls and stringers found in glass boats. In fact, this access allowed me to install trolling motor wires throughout my saltwater center console in less than 10 minutes. It really depends on the build of the boat you're rigging.

MORE ALUMINUM ADVANTAGES

You know what the advantages of a fiberglass rig are: stability, more room for electronics and gear, a better ride in heavy seas. On some fisheries where long runs are typical, a traditional glass rig is the only way to go.

And yet aluminum setups have their place. If you're contemplating making the switch, consider some of aluminum's advantages:

Turn on a dime – One trait immediately noticeable when maneuvering an aluminum rig is the boat's ability to turn around in a very tight circle. With more of the boat riding high in the water, an aluminum boat feels as though it "corkscrews" around, allowing an angler to spin in a confined area. It's an advantage, too, for jumping on pad in an impossible spot for a glass boat.

Use smaller equipment – Aluminum boats require less power than glass to do the same job. My 24-volt Minn Kota Ultrex trolling motor powers my 17-foot aluminum rig at more than 3 mph – the same as a 36-volt motor on a lot of glass rigs. This saves space and weight by requiring one less deep cycle battery. A small 10-pound mushroom anchor holds me in current and a steady chop without any problem, and can be easily stowed when not in use.

Gain remote access – For fiberglass bass boat operators, it's tough to comprehend how easily an aluminum rig launches and loads on even the poorest ramps. This

comes in handy for anglers searching for remote trophy waters, but can be equally useful for tournament anglers hoping to access an isolated backwater during practice, saving valuable time and energy otherwise required from a long idle.

Tow it more easily – The lightweight design of an aluminum boat makes it a breeze to tow, a trait a few touring pros are beginning to realize. ■



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What's Inside:

LIVETARGET Gizzard
Shad swimbait review

How to master fall rates

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PHOTO BY MATT PAGE



LIVETARGET 5 1/2-INCH GIZZARD SHAD SWIMBAIT

By Matt Williams

If you're in the market for another swimbait with a tail-wagging, tail-thumping swagger that rattles the water column, this one isn't going to fit the bill. Like the rest of the family in LIVETARGET's all-new Swimbait Series, the 5 1/2-inch Gizzard Shad is a smooth operator that's been intricately designed so it looks and behaves exactly like the real deal.

First Impression

The first thing that grabbed my attention is how anatomically correct the swimbait is. With a barrel-chested body, raised gills, dorsal fin, textured scale pattern and authentic color scheme, it truly looks like a forage fish fresh out of the water.

Several other cool features that stood out are the unique tail design – a realistic tail cast inside clear plastic that's flared to create the

swimming action – a soft, yet durable, PVC plastic body molded around a beefy 9/0 Mustad hook, and an internal weighting system.

The top-hook bait comes pre-rigged with no fine-tuning required. Just tie it on and fish.

On the Water

Keeping with the belief that more isn't always better, the folks at LIVETARGET engineered the bait so it swims along with a smooth, fluid motion, rather than with a radical action that sends vibrations all the way up to the rod tip on the retrieve. Accordingly, I didn't feel much as it swam its way through the water, mainly because the oscillating tail is strategically crafted to provide a tighter, life-like swimming action compared to the harder-thumping paddle-tail swimbaits many of us are accustomed to using.

Visually, the bait looks killer in the water as the tail wag speeds up or slows down depending on how fast it is retrieved.

This isn't a swimbait you should toss into dense cover, but I found that it could be fished around scattered vegetation and light brush fairly well, thanks to a dorsal fin that acts as a weedguard to help reduce snagging.

Final Thoughts

A big bass is an opportunistic feeder, and this swimbait is sure to rate high on the hit list on lakes where good populations of gizzard shad and large bass are present, particularly in clear-water situations where you don't need a lot of vibration to help the fish home in on the lure.

Weighing 2 ounces, it casts extremely well and has a sink rate of about 12 to 18 inches per second,

making it a good candidate for counting down around ledges, humps and points away from the bank, or winding over grass closer to shore.

It's simple to fish, too. Just chunk it, wind it with a steady retrieve and hold on tight.

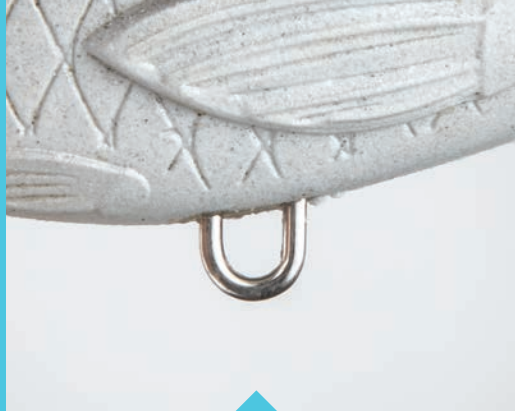


VIDEO AID

If you want more advice on using the Swimbait Series baits, FLW Tour pro Scott Martin, on behalf of LIVETARGET, recently prepared a 3 1/2-minute video that covers everything from rod, reel and line selection to tips and tactics for fishing with this family of lures. View the video presentation at livetargetlures.com.

DORSAL FIN

A semi-rigid soft-plastic dorsal fin sits in line with the point of the 9/0 Mustad hook to help reduce snagging on weeds and small brush.



TAIL DESIGN

The tail is molded with a unique "oscillator" that extends outward and creates resistance, causing the tail to move back and forth as the bait comes through the water.



ACCESSORY EYE

A built-in belly accessory eye can be used for hanging an additional treble hook, small spinner blade, weight or other tackle.



Performance Advice

The 5 1/2-inch Gizzard Shad is no different than most swimbaits its size; you need to be pretty specific when choosing a rod, reel and line in order to fish it properly. A heavy-action rod in the range of 7 feet, 6 inches to 7 feet, 11 inches long will handle the weight sufficiently while allowing for long casts. LIVE-TARGET recommends 17- to 25-pound-test fluorocarbon or monofilament in combination with a baitcasting reel having a medium retrieve ratio such as 6.3:1.

HITS & MISSES

- + Comes out of the package ready to fish
- + Anatomically correct from nose to tail
- + Easy to fish
- + Equipped with a high-quality, heavy-duty hook
- + Made from durable PVC plastic
- + Competitive price for the authentic look
- + Subtle, lifelike action
- Additional sink rates would be nice

>> IN ACTION



Like many of the popular jumbo soft-plastic swimbaits, the Gizzard Shad isn't intended to entice bass with tons of vibration. It's primarily a "visual bait" with a realistic tail-swimming action.

APPLICATIONS

As mentioned, this is a bait that can be equally effective around offshore structure and shallow cover, especially on lakes with sizeable populations of big fish. That's not to say 12-inch bass won't hit it. They will. But the sheer size of the bait is certain to help weed out those non-keepers and appeal more to bass in the "kicker" class.

The LIVETARGET Swimbait Series extends well beyond the Gizzard Shad model, too. The family actually includes seven freshwater models that mimic various baitfish species, ranging from trout and yellow perch to threadfin shad and golden shiner. There are saltwater variations as well. The swimbaits come in various sizes, so tackle requirements could change on the lighter baits.

DETAILS

Size Reviewed: 5 1/2 inches, 2 ounces

Other Sizes: 5 inches, 1 1/2 ounces; 4 1/2 inches, 1 ounce

Colors: two

Sink Rate: medium slow

MSRP: \$11.99

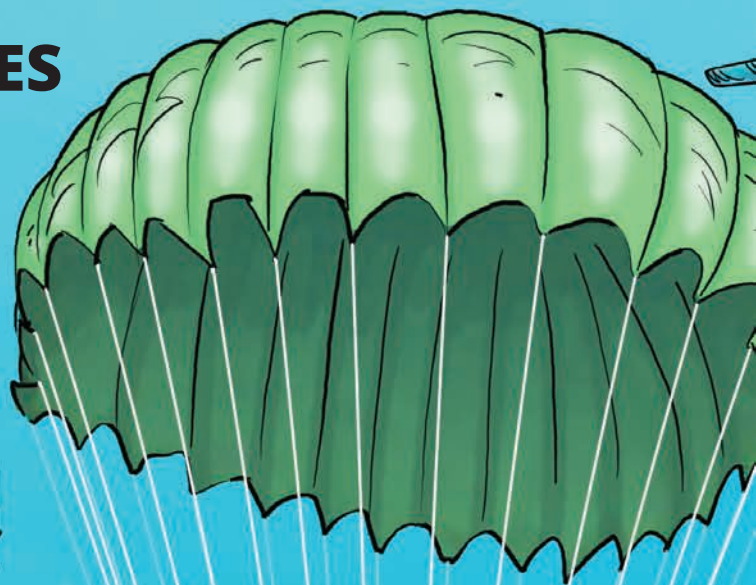
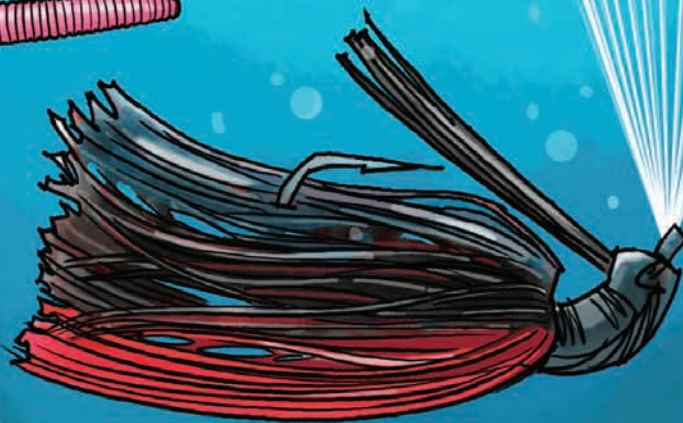
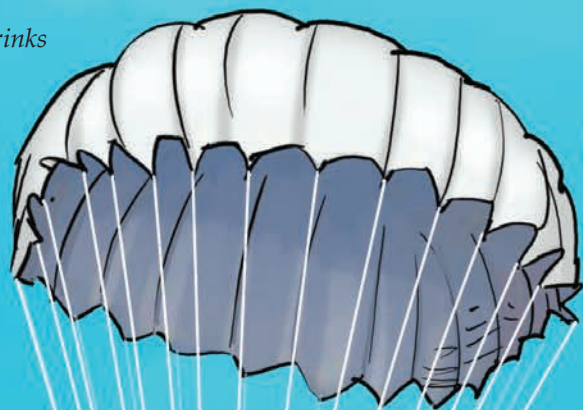
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MASTERING FALL RATES

HOW QUICKLY A LURE SINKS
CAN HAVE AN IMPACT ON A
PRESENTATION'S EFFECTIVENESS

By Tyler Brinks





Sometimes the simplest changes to your lures can affect how they perform, including the rate at which they sink – the fall rate. These basic modifications can be vital when faced with changing conditions, excessive fishing pressure or bass that are inactive. Beyond simply using a heavier weight, there are other adjustments that can help you master fall rates. The tricks outlined in the three categories included here can be applied to most fishing scenarios, regardless of depth and lure.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MAHLER
PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

Flipping and Punching Rigs — Shallow Water

When the fish are aggressive and willing to bite, your fall rate is not as important, according to Forrest Wood Cup champion John Cox. When they're not aggressive, he will adjust the fall rate based on weather conditions and fishing pressure.

During a cold front or other instances where fish are in a negative mood, Cox prefers a fast fall, accomplished by decreasing line size and/or increasing the weight.

"These are times when you want your bait to drop quickly underneath a mat or in a big tree," he says. "This will trigger a reaction from the fish, and that is often the only reason that they will bite it, because they are not thinking about feeding."

In situations when the fishing pressure increases and bass are seeing many soft-plastic lures, Cox prefers for his bait to have a slower fall.

"In this case you want a slower fall so the fish grab the bait as it is falling and you can set the hook before they feel the weight," he explains.

Heavier line and a lighter weight help slow it down.

The soft-plastic bait will also play a role in the fall rate. Cox categorizes baits as either having a controlled or erratic fall.

"Baits that fall and go straight to the bottom are the controlled baits, and this is what I prefer during cold fronts. These are baits with 'kicking' appendages or curly tails, and they will not spiral as they fall," he says. "The other group would be baits with an erratic fall. Beaver-style baits and those with a straight tail will 'glide' down before they hit the bottom no matter how heavy your weight is, and this is what I'll use when fishing pressure increases."



John Cox

"Kicking" appendages on creature baits help stabilize the fall so that they travel straight down. Cox likes this style during a cold front.



Beaver-style baits with flat tails and bodies tend to glide on the fall. Cox prefers this style when fishing pressure is high.



ADD A PUNCH SKIRT

A punch skirt can really slow down the fall rate of a Texas-rigged soft plastic. All the extra surface area of the skirt creates a lot more "drag." In some instances, adding a punch skirt is the best way to slow down a presentation. However, there's a trade-off. Punch skirts greatly increase the profile of a lure. If it's a small, compact profile you want, you'll need to consider the other options outlined here.



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Bryan Thrift

For jig fall rates, the strategy comes down to how the fish are biting that day.

“If I notice all of my bites are coming on the fall, I will change to a slower-falling jig,” says Bryan Thrift, winner of the 2016 FLW Tour Invitational at Lake Norman. “If they are biting it as I’m working it on the bottom I want it to get down quicker.”

Thrift is one of the best in the business at skipping jigs deep underneath docks. He nearly always uses a 1/2-ounce jig for this situation. To adjust his fall rate, he will either change his line size between 15- and 20-pound-test P-Line fluorocarbon – lighter for a faster fall, and vice versa – or change soft-plastic trailers.

“If I want my jig to fall slower I’ll use a bulkier trailer such as the Damiki Knockout. If I want it to fall faster, I switch to the Damiki Air Craw because it is much thinner in profile and falls much quicker,” he says.

Drop-Shot Rigs — Deep Water

When fishing for suspended bass he can see on his electronics, FLW Tour pro Braxton Setzer pays close attention to how the fish are acting.

“I have found that when bass get pressured on deep spots, your fall rate is very important,” says Setzer. “Sometimes they will only hit it on a fast drop, and other times you can watch them on your graph following a slowly falling drop-shot rig and eating it once it reaches the bottom.”

To adjust his fall rate on his drop-shot rig, Setzer will adjust three things: size of weight, type of soft plastic and line size.

The weight adjustment is pretty obvious. Setzer carries weights as light as 1/16 ounce. Line changes are straight-forward too, but be aware that lighter line often allows a supple soft plastic to have more action.

Soft plastic selection is about buoyancy.

“If I want it to fall slower I’ll go with a worm that is more buoyant,” says Setzer. “When I want it to drop quickly I will use a heavy bait such as a soft stick bait to get it to fall that much faster. Worms that have a lot of salt like your stick baits are heavier baits, so they’re going to fall faster. Then there are some baits out there such as the Z-Man ElaZtech baits that float.”

Though Setzer doesn’t often wacky rig a soft bait, he does advise that switching from a nose-hooked or Texas-rigged worm to a wacky-rigged worm can also alter the fall rate since the wacky-rigged worm catches more water as it sinks. ■



Some worms float, while worms with a lot of salt sink quickly. A worm’s shape and size also impact fall rate. The three shown here — Z-Man ElaZtech FattyZ (top), Yamamoto Thin Senko (middle) and Roboworm Fat Straight Tail Worm (bottom) — can all be used to create different fall rates.



How you rig a worm also affects the fall rate. A wacky rig (top) without weight will sink very slowly, but even with a weighted wacky head it’ll still flutter down due to the tails “catching” water. Texas-rigged (middle) and nose-hooked baits (bottom), when pulled down by a weight, will plummet faster because they’ll turn vertical as they sink and experience little resistance.



Braxton Setzer

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FINE-TUNING UMBRELLA RIGS

TAKE YOUR RIG GAME TO NEW HEIGHTS WITH
ADVICE FROM FLW SERIES PRO CASEY SMITH



By Curtis Niedermier

The luster has finally faded on the umbrella rig. It's still a good option in certain scenarios, but it seems as if the just-toss-it-and-catch-20-pounds effectiveness has worn off as bass have gotten wise to the five-wire rig.

Regardless, the key to success with an umbrella rig nowadays is in fine-tuning the rig for a specific scenario. No longer will just any rig do.

New York pro Casey Smith is an expert at umbrella rig adjustments. He finished runner-up at the 2016 Costa FLW Series Northern Division event on Lake Oneida with a rig, and he says he at least experiments with one at every lake he fishes. Often, Smith has as many as five slightly different umbrella rigs on the deck ready to go.

"I look at an umbrella rig like Jason Lambert probably looks at a crankbait, where the bill has its own purpose and there are different bills for different situations and different hooks, rattles and colors," says Smith. "To me, the umbrella rig is the same, where it's got all those different parts. Hook size, jighead size, the size of the blades you're using and the size of the wire all have an effect. I change in and out and tweak and adapt in each situation, just like someone would do with a crankbait on a ledge."

Smith's adjustments can help any angler dial in an umbrella rig for potential year-round success.

The Base Rig

Smith's favorite rig is the D&W Customs Schooler Rig (shown above), which is available at [Facebook.com/DandWCUSTOMS](https://www.facebook.com/DandWCUSTOMS) and costs \$12.99. It's also sold by Green Top Hunting and Fishing in Virginia (greentophuntfish.com). The rig's head is made of layers of acrylic so that it's light but durable, but that's not why Smith likes it. Dean Gibbs, owner of D&W, can custom build just about any type of rig Smith wants, and will do so for any consumer. Smith performs some customizations himself; others, he leaves up to Gibbs.

10 POSSIBLE ADJUSTMENTS

1. SNAPS

Snaps provide the key connection from the rig to the swimbaits, so the first thing Smith does is upgrade to heavy-duty size 3 duo-lock snaps that he buys from Barlow's Tackle.

2. JIGHEAD WEIGHT

Smith runs five jigheads where legal and generally starts with 1/8 or 1/4 ounce, going only as light as 1/16 ounce and never using weightless hooks. He adjusts depending on the target depth and speed of retrieve.

Pairing lighter heads on the top two wires (and sometimes the middle) with heavier on bottom can help prevent the rig from rolling or spinning during the retrieve, but Smith actually prefers for them to all weigh the same and makes other adjustments if his rig spins.

3. JIG-HOOKS

Some anglers prefer light-wire hooks on umbrella rigs because they believe they penetrate easier than heavy-wire hooks. Smith disagrees.

"You definitely want a fairly stout hook because those fish hit that bait so hard," he says. "It's beefy tackle, so they hook themselves when they eat it. There's no need for a fine hook. To me, it's important to have a stout hook that they're not going to straighten."

He's also particular about the angle of the hook's eye.

"I'm pouring my own 90-degree-eye Gamakatsu round-bend jigheads," he says. "I feel that a 1/4-ounce jighead with a 90-degree eye generally is going to stay down better than a 1/4-ounce jighead with a 60-degree eye."

Smith uses a 4/0 round-bend hook for swimbaits up to a 3.8-inch Keitech and a 5/0 for a 4.8-inch Keitech, which is about his maximum size.

4. KEEPERS

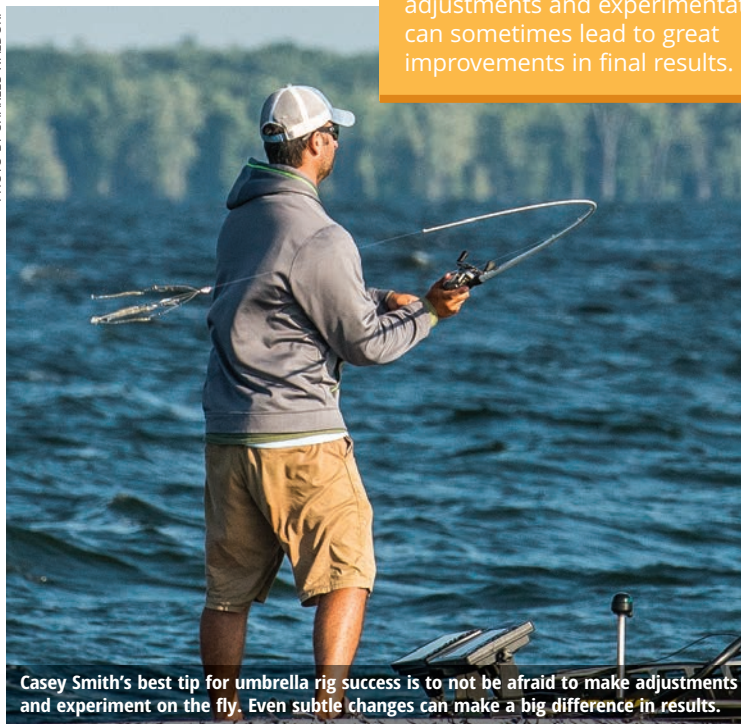
In the case of FLW tournaments that allow umbrella rigs but limit them to three hooks (they're banned on the FLW Tour) and in states with three-hook limits, Smith always rigs the middle bait and bottom two baits with hooks. For the top two, he experiments with spring-style keepers, weighted spring-style keepers and his own jigheads with the hooks cut off. He settles on whichever setup keeps the bait and the particular rig running true.



Situational Tweaks

Some tweaks that Smith makes are situational at best, perhaps only being necessary for a day. For instance, at Oneida, smallmouths kept striking his "dummy" baits – the swimbaits on the top two wires without hooks. In some cases, they'd pull the swimbaits off entirely. To get the fish to dial in on the hooked baits, he made two tweaks. First, he ran 2.8-inch Keitech Swing Impact Fat swimbaits as the dummies on top, on two wires bent way up and away from the other three. Second, he bent all three of the remaining wires down and rigged them with larger 3.3-inch Keitech Swing Impact Fat swimbaits. After the changes, he hooked up more consistently. Little adjustments and experimentation can sometimes lead to great improvements in final results.

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



5. WIRE ARM GAUGE

The Schooler Rig comes standard with .040-gauge wire arms. They work most of the time, but Smith often swaps to a rig with thinner wires. The change reduces the overall weight, which allows the rig to be fished higher in the water column, in shallower water or at a slower retrieve speed.

Since Smith prefers not to use jig-heads lighter than 1/16 ounce, adjusting wire size is a good way to lighten the rig further if his jigheads are already at the "minimum" size. The tradeoff is that, with thinner wires, the rig is less durable.

"At Oneida, as an example, I went to a very light wire, and the reason I did that was I wanted a bait I could keep up a little bit easier," Smith says, "but you definitely want the heaviest you can get away with."

"With a heavy wire, the arms are going to be straighter during the retrieve. When you start to get really thin wire, the arms want to clump close together and bend really easily. A fish can really tear a bait up with light wire. But there are situations that you're not going to get a bite with heavy wire."

6. WIRE ARM LENGTH

Adjusting wire arm length is similar to adjusting wire gauge. Shorter wires are lighter. Smith tends to stick with the Schooler Rig's standard wires unless he's fishing shallower than about 8 feet, in which case he'll consider a rig with shorter arms if he can't lighten the standard rig enough by other means.

7. BLADE SIZE

Blade size also impacts retrieve speed and depth, and achieving the perfect presentation is a balancing act between blade size, jighead size and wire selection. The Schooler Rig comes standard with a No. 2 willow-leaf blade on each of the four outer wires.

"The smaller the blade you have, the less the rig is going to drag or the less the rig is going to lift," Smith explains. "If you put big blades on there you're going to have to reel slower to keep your bait down. It's the same with double versus single blades on each wire."

"Every time I throw a rig, I use blades," he adds. "They create more flash and make it look like more bait in the school."

Also, if a rig is spinning during the retrieve, try experimenting with different blade sizes to balance it out.



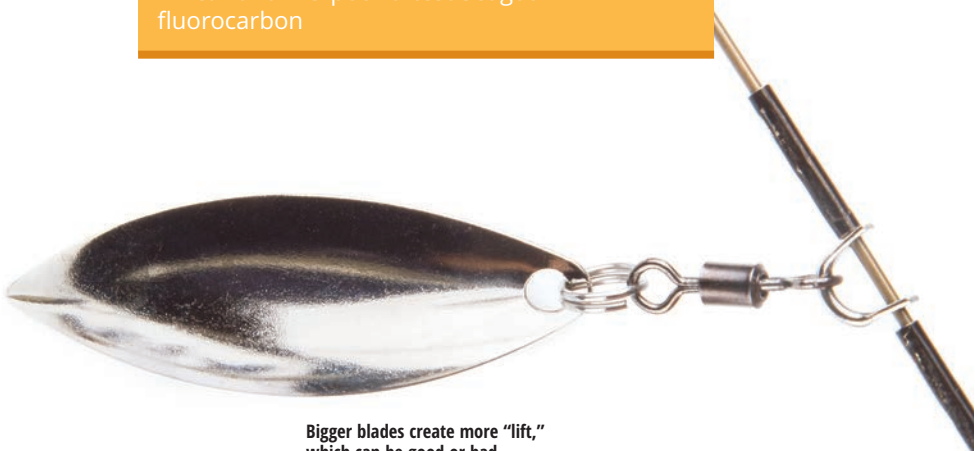
PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF

Casey Smith's Umbrella Rig Gear

Rod: 7-foot, 10-inch, extra-heavy Duckett Fishing Micro Magic Pro

Reel: 6.3:1 Shimano Curado

Line: 20- or 25-pound-test Seaguar InvizX fluorocarbon



Bigger blades create more "lift," which can be good or bad, depending on the situation.

8. ARM ANGLE

The middle wire should point straight back nearly all the time. The outside wires can be adjusted in certain circumstances, such as when using “dummy” swimbaits without hooks on the top wires.

“I want them all as close together as they can be without tangling up on the cast,” says Smith. “If I’m in an FLW tournament where I can have only three hooks, I want those three [bottom two and middle] close together and the top two bent way, way up to get as far away from those three as possible.”

Since most fish that eat the rig swim up to get it, bending the wires in that arrangement increases the odds of the fish striking the swimbaits with hooks (at the bottom), rather than the dummies (at the top).

9. SWIMBAITS

While there are a lot of swimbaits being used on umbrella rigs, the swimbaits made by Keitech have become the standard go-to for many pros.

“I always start with four Keitech Swing Impacts – the 4-inch regular, not the Fat – on the outside and one 3.8 Swing

Impact Fat on the inside,” says Smith. “The Fat has a little bit bigger profile and has a wider tail action, and the regular Swing Impact has more of a subtle kick. I probably run that 75 percent of the time, and that’s what I start with always.”

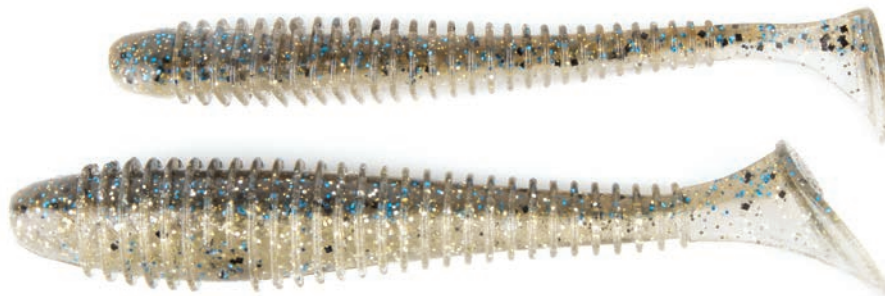
Smaller baits might work better in a lake with small forage, and the opposite is true where bass are foraging on large shad.

“It becomes really, really hard to keep big baits way down if fishing 30 to 35 feet of water,” Smith adds. “They create so much lift and are so heavy. And you can only put so much weight on it before it becomes too obnoxious to throw.”

10. SWIMBAIT COLORS

Smith’s theory on swimbait colors might vary from what others use. Some mix and match colors, usually to make the middle bait stand out. For Smith, all five swimbaits match.

“I let the bait in the lake I’m fishing dictate where I start, but I like [the color] bluegill flash. I haven’t been to a lake in this country where bluegill flash won’t work,” he says. “Ayu is always a good option, especially if perch are present. In darker water I might go to black shad. That’s one department where I keep it pretty simple.”

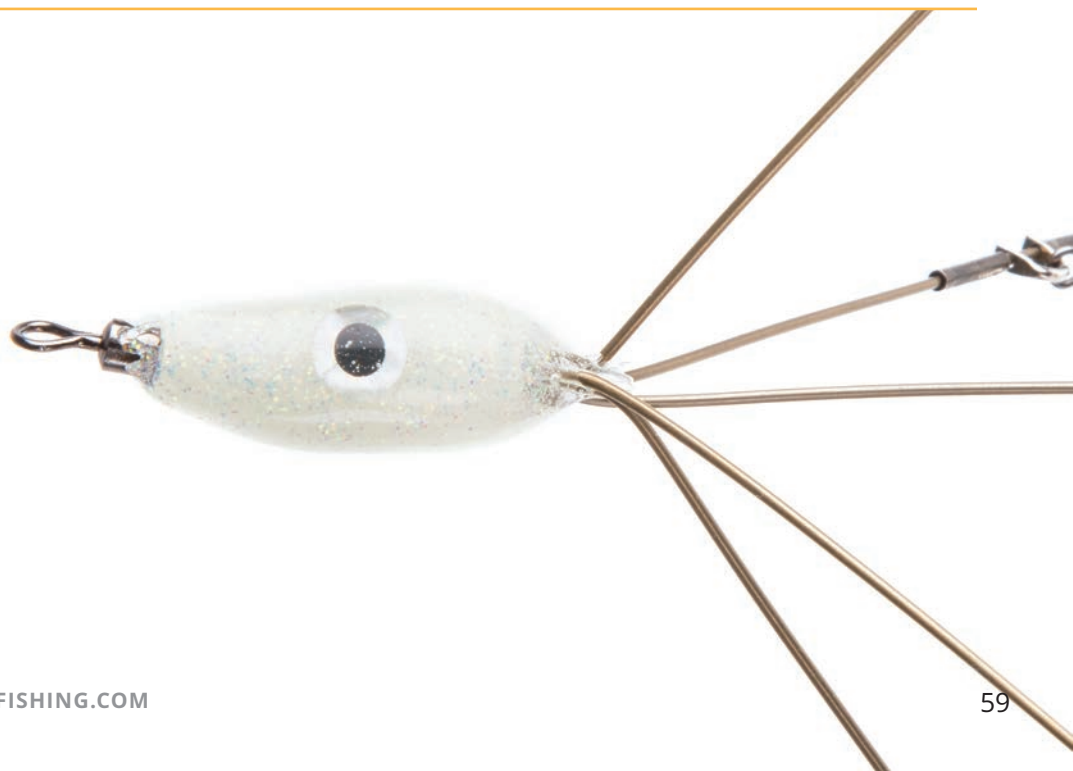


The 4-inch Keitech Swing Impact (top) and 3.8 Swing Impact Fat (bottom) in bluegill flash are Smith’s starter swimbaits.

The Nose Swivel

If you’re making a homemade rig, make sure you add a quality ball-bearing swivel to the rig’s nose. If you buy one from a retailer and it lacks a swivel, add one.

“The swivel helps if you don’t balance the weights or arms properly. It helps ensure that the thing is going to swim upright,” says Smith.

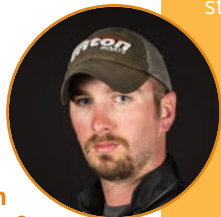


ANOTHER APPROACH

Mazur, Renfrew Share Their Refined, Do-it-All Umbrella Rig

Casey Smith likes to tweak his umbrella rig for any and every situation, but that's not the only strategy that works. Fellow Costa FLW Series Northern Division pros Ian Renfrew and Larry Mazur, who fish team tournaments together throughout New York, have done a lot of experimenting with umbrella rigs to come up with a homemade rig that works just about all the time. They each used the rig to make the top five at the FLW Series event on Oneida in 2016.

They'll occasionally change blade colors or baits, or make small adjustments, but this rig covers most Northern scenarios, particularly for smallmouths. For Southern waters, Mazur recommends upsizing swimbaits and hooks.



Ian Renfrew



Larry Mazur

Compact build – Mazur believes the compact profile of the rig makes it a great bait-ball imitator.

Wire – They prefer .040-gauge wire rather than the light stuff. This helps extend the life of the rig when targeting feisty smallmouths, which often double or triple up on a rig and can really do some damage to it. Mazur says that some anglers use light wire so that the rig will “pulse” when twitched, but he doesn't believe he misses out on any bites with this setup.

Staggered jigheads – Renfrew and Mazur use Revenge jigheads. The top two jigheads (the hooks are cut off when hooks are limited in competition) and the middle jighead are lighter than the bottom two to help “level” the rig. At Oneida, they used 3/16 ounce on top and 1/4 on bottom.

Blades – No. 3 blades are small and continue with the compact concept. They'll upsize to No. 3 1/2 blades on occasion.

Small swimbaits – Matching the hatch can be the key to success. At Oneida the fish were feeding on tiny baitfish, so they opted for 2-inch Optimum Baits Opti Shad swimbaits on the outer wires and a 3.3-inch Keitech Swing Impact Fat on the middle wire. Mazur says a bit of chartreuse dye on the middle bait's tail can help fish dial in on it.

Staggered wire lengths – The inner wire is 5 inches long. The outer wires are 4 inches long, and they're bent out a bit past what's considered the “normal” angle. This setup helps fish dial in on the bottom two baits and the middle bait, which are the three with hooks in FLW Series competition. ■





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NEW GEAR FOR BASS HEADS

By Colin Moore

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Play Again Now

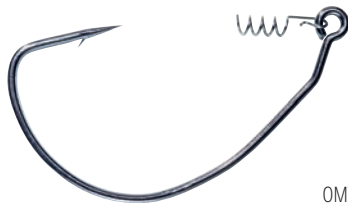
Practicing for a tournament and then fishing in it for a day or more is physically taxing on the muscles and joints. Play Again Now is an oral liquid gel that reduces the time it takes to get over the aches and pains associated with pounding boat rides as well as standing and casting all day. The two all-natural active ingredients in Play Again Now are said to support the body's anti-inflammatory properties and improve performance and stamina. A 24-ounce bottle will last a month and costs \$49.95.

playagainnow.com

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wsisports.com



OMTD SWIMBAIT HOOK

OMTD SwimBait Hooks

Italian company OMTD is producing some world-class fishing hooks. Its two latest models are wide-gap weighted and unweighted hooks for big swimbaits. The unweighted OH2400 comes in 7/0, 9/0 and 11/0, while the belly-weighted OH2400W in the same sizes is available in 3/8-, 1/2- and 3/4-ounce weights. A screw-in attachment holds the bait in place, and the eye is parallel with the point. Cost is \$3.50 to \$8.50, depending on size and number of hooks (two to four) in the package.

omtdhooks.com

BUDDHA BABY MOMMA



Buddha Baby Momma

The Baby Momma combines all the best features of a bait made for pitching and flipping in heavy grass: oversized claws, an angled head designed to be used with flipping hooks and keepers, reversed ribs on the thick body that allow it to fall through thick cover easier and garlic scent that helps bass home in. As a trailer or by itself, the Baby Momma is also a good choice for skipping under docks. The bait is available in eight colors, with more on the way. The price is \$4.99 for a package of eight.

buddhabaitco.com

BULL GILL GENERATION 2 SLOW SINKER

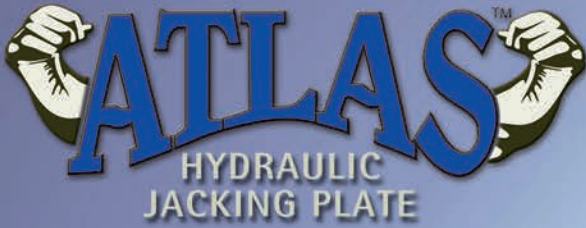


Bull Gill Generation 2 Slow Sinker

Mike Bucca's latest swimbait rendition is a slow-sinking Bull Gill whose four parts deliver an undulating wobble as it's retrieved slowly through the water in mid-depth areas where bass are staging before moving up. The Slow Sinker is 6 inches long and 2 1/2 ounces in weight, and available in two colors: blue gill and dirty bone. \$57

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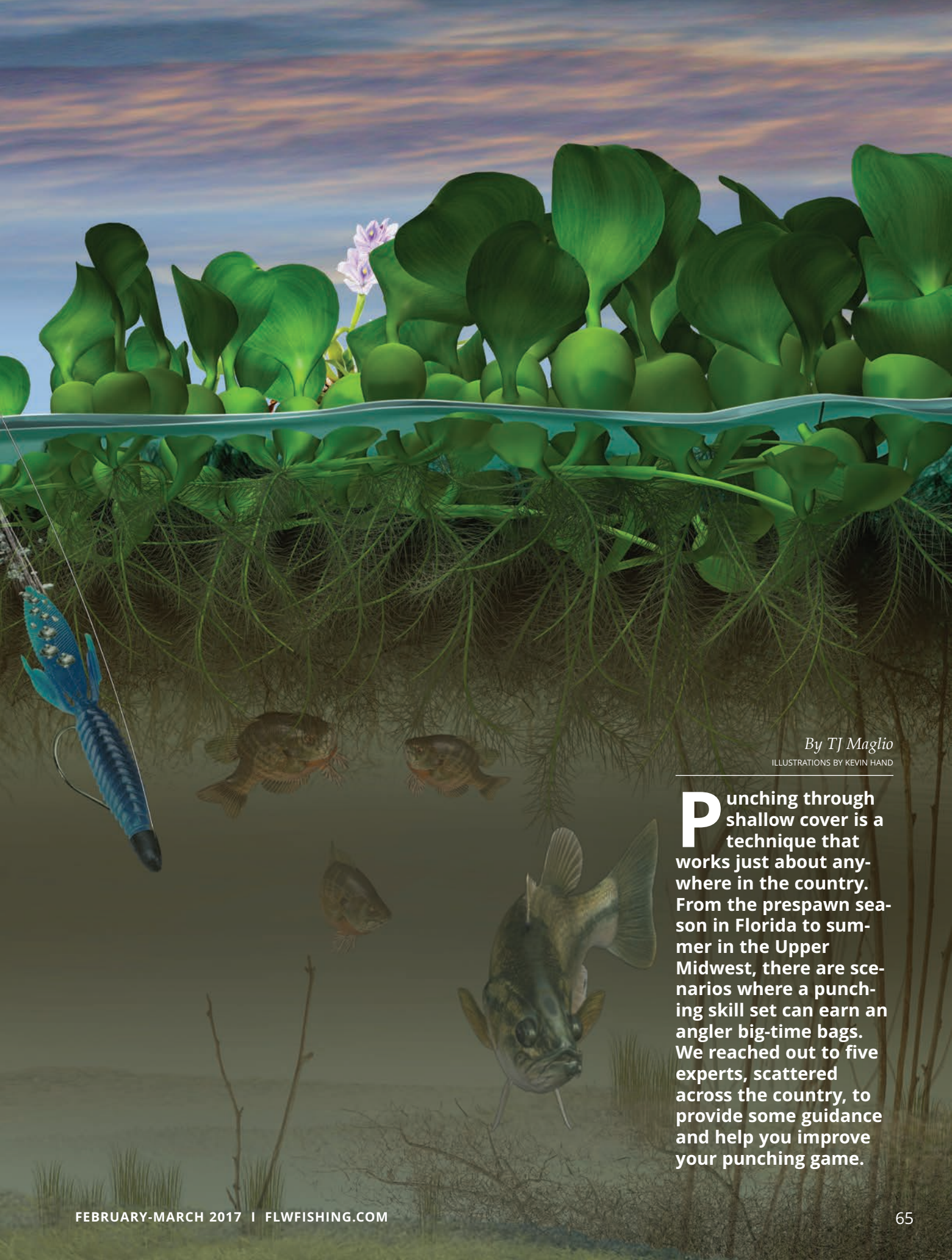




PUNCHING COAST TO COAST

5 experts explain how to be a heavy-cover hammer no matter where you call home





By TJ Maglio

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KEVIN HAND

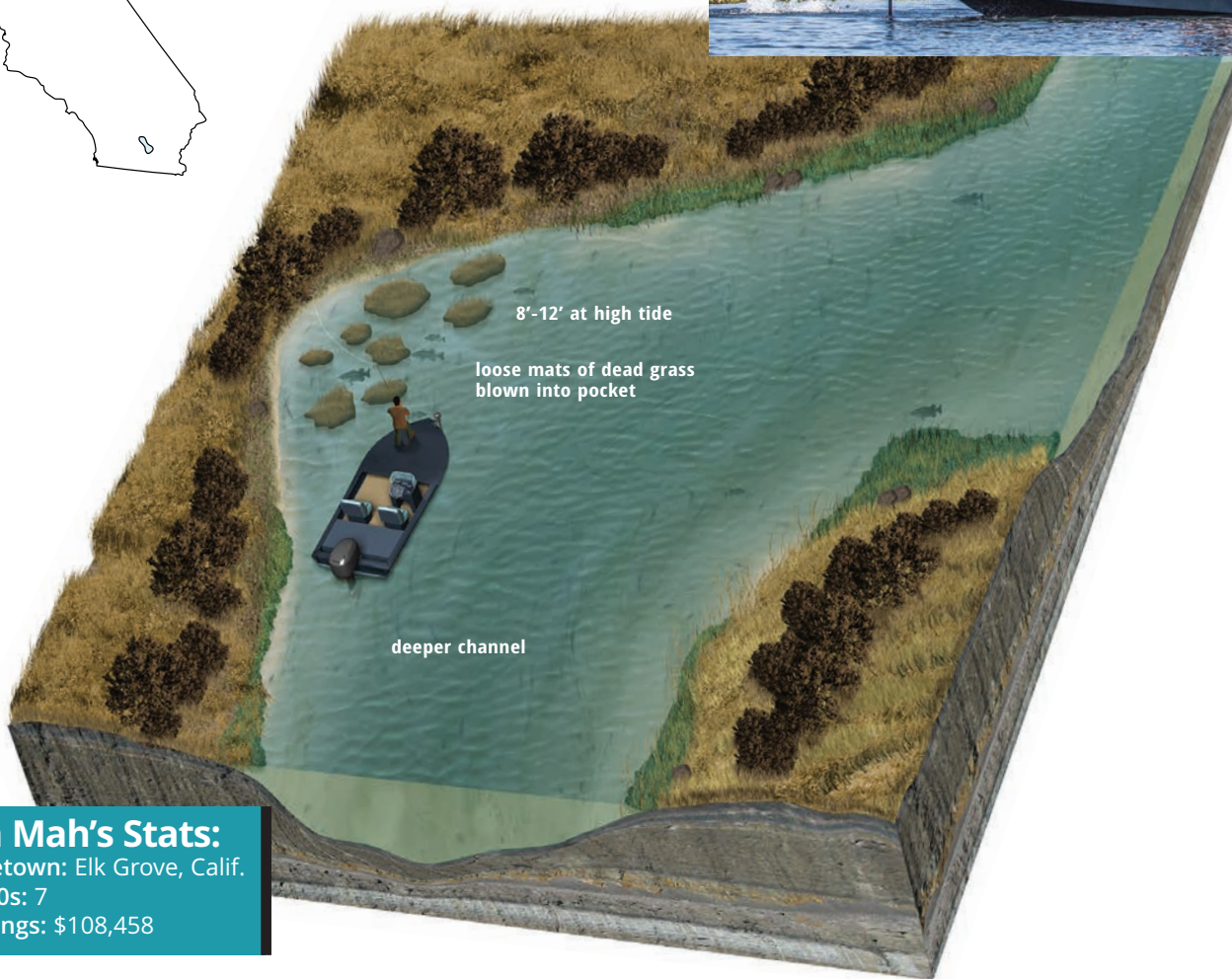
Punching through shallow cover is a technique that works just about anywhere in the country. From the prespawn season in Florida to summer in the Upper Midwest, there are scenarios where a punching skill set can earn an angler big-time bags. We reached out to five experts, scattered across the country, to provide some guidance and help you improve your punching game.



1. Mah's Dead Mat Delving

Where: California Delta

When: Late February through March



Ken Mah's Stats:
Hometown: Elk Grove, Calif.
Top 10s: 7
Winnings: \$108,458

Background

Costa FLW Series standout Ken Mah has made his name in the last few years flipping and pitching his way through the miles of canals, levees and sloughs found on his home waters of the California Delta. Mah's favorite time to do it is when the vast majority of his competition isn't.

"In that late-February-to-early-March period, lots of Delta rats are more likely to be throwing moving baits to prespawners grouped up on flats," Mah says. "That can be some good fishing, but I catch my biggest bags during that period by targeting prespawn giants underneath mats of dead vegetation."

This type of punching is not a numbers game. Mah is targeting fish that just happen to come up a little early to feed - stopping underneath dead mats that drift around and collect throughout the Delta's many sloughs and pockets.

"They're not thinking about spawning yet, and for that reason there aren't a lot that move up," Mah notes. "A good

day will be eight or 10 bites, but if you land five of them, you're going to be bringing back a mammoth bag."

Presentation

"The first prespawners are usually the biggest fish in the area," Mah says. "They pull out of deeper areas in late February and stage underneath thick mats of dead tules and vegetation. The best mats are deep enough that they have 3 to 5 feet of water on them at low tide, and close to 8 to 12 feet of water at other times."

One of the benefits of this pattern is that, because the mats are dead, they're loose and relatively clean underneath, which means an angler can effectively fish them with a heavy jig.

"I've found that punching with plastics results in far more lost fish than a jig," Mah says. "In the summer, you need a plastic bait to get through all the grass, but around dead mats, once you're through the bait is free to move."

Keys:

- Big females move up earlier than the smaller fish.
- Dead mats attract baitfish and provide cover for feeding giants.
- A jig has a higher hookup percentage than plastics.
- Stay focused. Subtle bites are commonplace.



Rig Specifics:

Mah uses a G. Loomis GLX 954C 7-foot, 11-inch XH flipping stick paired with a Shimano Chronarch (7.6:1 gear ratio). He spools the reel with 60-pound-test Sunline FX2 braid. His punching setup is a black and blue 1-ounce Medlock Double Guard Flipping Jig with lead nail weights added alongside the hook shank and tied in place with thread, then secured with glue. Total weight ends up at about 1 1/4 ounce. Mah adds a black and blue Reaction Innovations Smallie Beaver as a trailer.

Hook Setting 101

Mah says that, as hook-sets go, there are two styles of punchers: the “lifters” and the “crackers.” He’s definitely one of the latter.

“You’re dropping that jig into an elephant’s house. When they come and get it, you’ve got to hit them as hard as you can and as quickly as you can. Once a big fish gets turned away from the hole, you’re as good as done. Pay attention to your line, and if you see anything weird, give it all you’ve got.”

2. Ritter’s Summertime Slop Changeup

Where: Upper Mississippi River in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa

When: June and July



Background

When thinking about punching heavy cover, most anglers probably don’t conjure images of river systems, much less those that occur in the northern tier of the country. Yet Costa FLW Series stalwart Jeff Ritter has proven that anywhere heavy vegetation occurs, there’s always a punching bite.

“Up on here on the upper Mississippi, frogging is an art form,” Ritter says. “But what most guys miss is that there’s also an unbelievable punching bite, and there are only a few of us that actually do it.”

Once bass are done spawning they want to pull up in heavy cover and feed. On the upper Mississippi, this happens under matted milfoil, eelgrass and lily pads that are teeming with bluegills, shad and crawfish, creating a perfect scenario for anglers willing to dig them out.

“Once the bass up here get off the beds and into the grass, they are immediately bombarded by frogs hundreds of times a day all summer long,” Ritter says. “I’ve been relying more and more on punching those grass mats because it’s something they’ll still bite when they’re not coming up to get a frog.”

Presentation

Starting in June, Ritter begins focusing on grassy areas that feature a defined edge. The type of vegetation doesn’t matter as much as there being an edge to it.

“The bass use the vegetation for shade, and they’ll travel along those edges,” Ritter says. “The best punching is when the grass is topped off, but not matted so much that you have to work hard to get it through. That’s usually June and July up here.”

Punching a 100-acre grass bed is a needle-in-a-haystack proposition, so Ritter typically starts out with a frog to locate areas with active bass and then cleans up with his flipping stick.

“A lot of times they’ll just come up and roll on the frog, or ‘wake’ it a little bit, but not eat it,” Ritter says. “That’s when you need to pick up the punching rod. After I get a few blow-ups in a small area, I’ll pick it apart by flipping.”

Jeff Ritter's Stats:

Hometown: Prairie du Chien, Wis.

Top 10s: 32

Winnings: \$149,056

Keys:

- Use the frog to narrow down productive stretches of mats.
- The best mats will have clean, well-defined edges.
- Fish usually concentrate into precise parts of large grass beds.
- Thoroughly saturate an area that holds fish before moving on.



Rig Specifics:

Ritter uses a 7-foot, 7-inch iRod Air 775C XH flipping stick paired to a fast reel spooled with 50-pound-test braid. His primary punching rig is a 3/4- to 1 1/2-ounce pegged tungsten sinker, a 4/0 Gamakatsu Superline EWG hook and a Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver in black and red or green pumpkin – depending on water clarity.

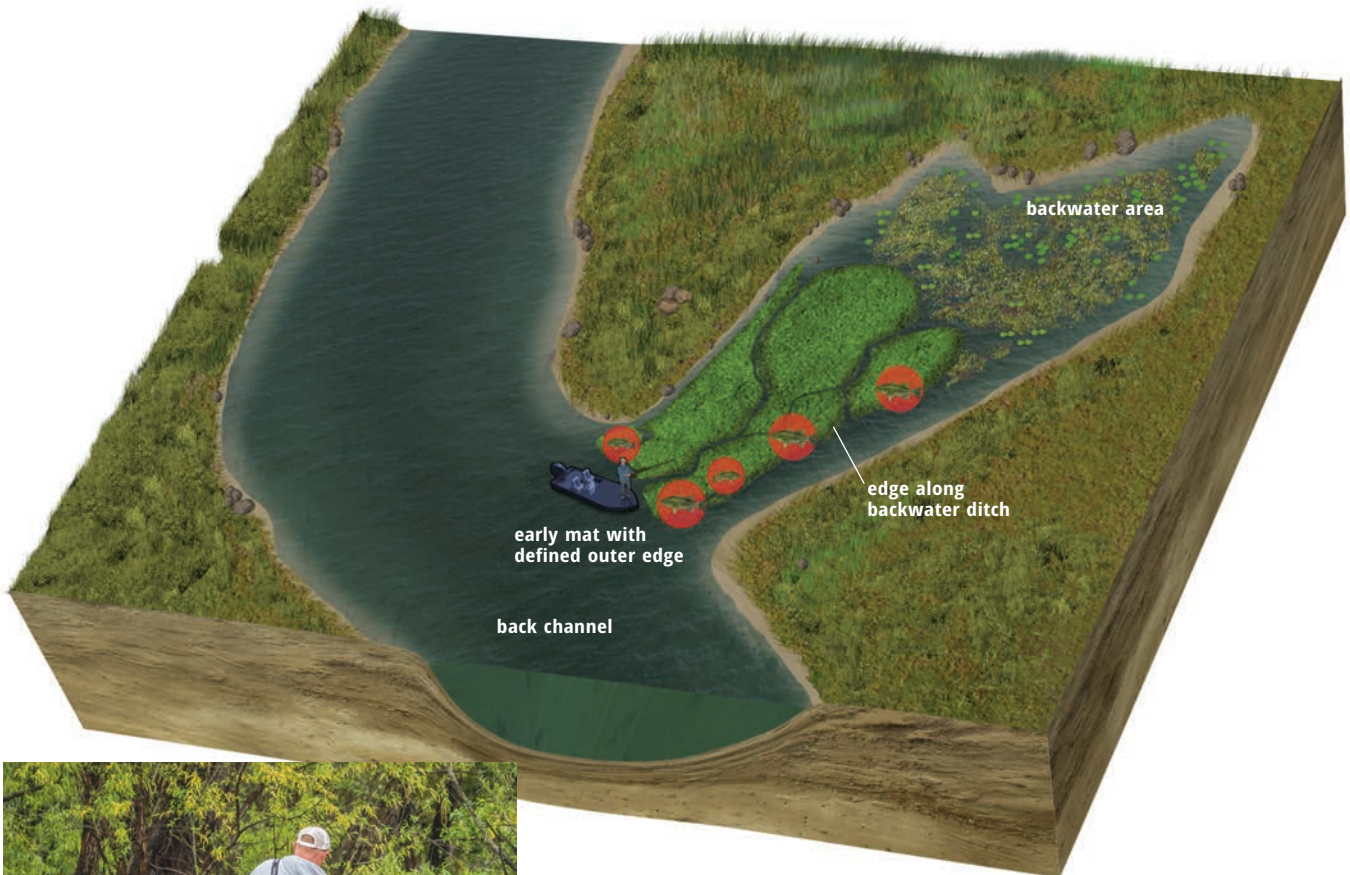


PHOTO BY DW. NEED II

Looking for Activity

As he's dissecting large grassy areas, Ritter focuses on those areas that exhibit lots of bird and fish activity.

"I'm not sure why, but it seems that when you find areas where there is activity from other animals, there will also be active bass. I look for any activity, whether it be birds such as herons or seagulls, pads popping, or bluegills dimpling the surface. If you pay attention to that stuff, you're much more likely to find productive areas."

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Todd Castledine's Stats:

Hometown:
Nacogdoches, Texas
Top 10s: 19
Winnings: \$179,767



3. Castledine's Bush-Punching Pattern

Where: Sam Rayburn Reservoir

When: Late February through May

Background

No grass, no punching, right? Not necessarily; Costa FLW Series stud Todd Castledine has honed a unique way to “punch” flooded bushes that works when there’s not a blade of grass around.

“In Texas, water levels fluctuate a lot,” Castledine says. “Because of that, grass can be really unpredictable. What is predictable is that there will always be some gnarly flooded bushes in the springtime, and I’ve had tons of success lately ‘punching’ right into their hearts with a big weight.”

Whether it’s buck brush, willows, sagebrush or even small cypress, flooded woody cover offers the ultimate habitat for big bass staging prior to the spawn. No matter what the water level is, though, the first bushes to hold fish will always be the ones that are on or near a contour line, ditch or point.

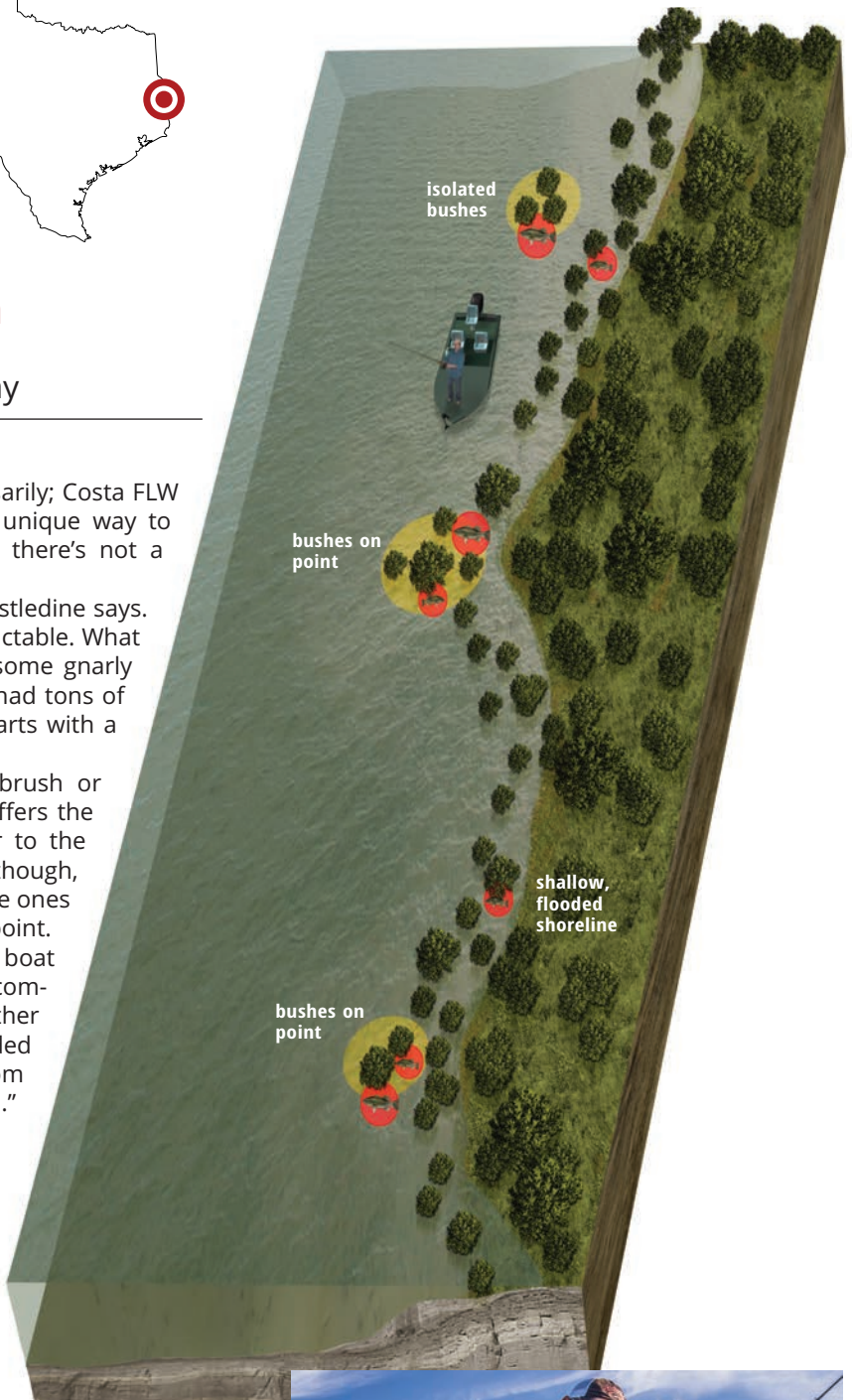
“I almost think of bushes like they were boat docks,” Castledine says. “It’s not really the composition of the bush that matters, but rather where it’s located. If you’ve got a row of flooded bushes and one of them sticks out 5 feet from the rest, that’s the one you need to focus on.”

Presentation

Lots of anglers flip bushes, and they catch fish doing it – mostly by targeting the perimeters. Castledine has taken that to the next level by treating them as if they are mats, and immediately targeting the heart with no concern for the branches.

“If you’re flipping a bush with a light weight, you can only really get at the edges,” Castledine says. “I’ve found that the biggest fish are almost always right in the thickest part of the bush by the trunk, and the big weight allows you to target those fish easily. You need to pretty much forget about all the other branches.”

“Another side benefit of punching the bushes is that you can work really fast,” he adds. “I’d rather flip the heart of 500 bushes than work all around 200. Those bigger fish are seldom on the outside edges anyway. We call the big ones ‘tree shakers’ because they’ll see that big bait fall quickly into their house and the bush will shake when they go and get it.”



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Keys:

- Treat the bushes just like mats of vegetation and go right at their centers.
- Look for “oddball” bushes that are unique.
- Fish as many as possible.
- Don't be afraid to re-fish bushes that hold fish.



Rig Specifics:

Castledine employs a 7-foot, 5-inch XH prototype Falcon flipping stick mated to a Lew's SuperDuty reel (8.1:1 gear ratio) spooled with 65-pound-test Sufix braid. His flipping rig is a pegged 1 1/4-ounce Strike King tungsten sinker, a 5/0 Hack Attack Heavy Cover Flipping Hook and a Strike King Space Monkey in either black and blue or big Texan, depending on the water color.

Re-fish Key Bushes

Because bushes offer so many nooks and crannies for a fish to hide, there are usually multiple bass holding in the best bushes. Make several flips to the best bushes, and don't be afraid to go back through a productive stretch after a few minutes.

“We [he and his team partner, Russell Cecil] had a tournament on Rayburn one year where we found the magic bush,” says Castledine. “Our first pass we caught, like, six out of it. Then an hour or two later we caught four more out of it. Then before weigh-in we stopped again and caught two more. It's crazy how many bass can hold in a big bush.”



4. Medlock's Post-Frontal Punching Pattern

Where: Lake Okeechobee

When: November through February

Brandon Medlock's Stats:

Hometown: Lake Placid, Fla.

Top 10s: 14

Winnings: \$147,673

Background

If punching has a motherland, without question it's Florida's Lake Okeechobee. With 730 grass-choked square miles, much of it shallow enough to stand up in, the lake is an absolute flipper's paradise. Florida stick Brandon Medlock has two Costa FLW Series wins on his ledger at the Big O, and they both came by way of punching the thick stuff.

“For Florida anglers, punching is a 365-day proposition, so we get particular about the specific conditions that are present when it's really ideal,” Medlock says. “In my opinion, the absolute best punching scenario is during the prespawn, which down here lasts from November all the way through February. Ideally it'd be a couple days after a cold front, and with some sun shining on the water.”

Post-frontal conditions force Florida bass to gravitate toward the thickest cover around, and the addition of

sunny conditions just locks them up underneath the mats, making them easily accessible for an astute flipper.

“After a front blows through, the bite can get really tough,” Medlock says. “But it's a great time to target the biggest fish by punching because you know exactly where they are going to be.”

Presentation

“The best mats for prespawners are all going to be located pretty close to spawning areas,” Medlock says. “They're also going to have a hard bottom and clean water. Those are keys, as there aren't nearly as many places like that as you'd think on a body of water as big as Okeechobee.”

While moving through likely areas, Medlock starts flipping the most isolated of the mats, and lets the fish clue him in on what they're doing that day.

“It can be a day-to-day proposition, so you've got to start out trying different things,” Medlock says.

“Some days they might be on hyacinth mats or buggy whips, and others they might be buried in hydrilla. Once you get a few bites, you can often dial it in to a much more efficient and specific pattern.”

The Hush-Hush Approach

Because post-frontal bass are already in a negative mood, it's important to minimize noise above and below the surface. Medlock does this by being as quiet as possible and running his trolling motor sparingly, and on low.

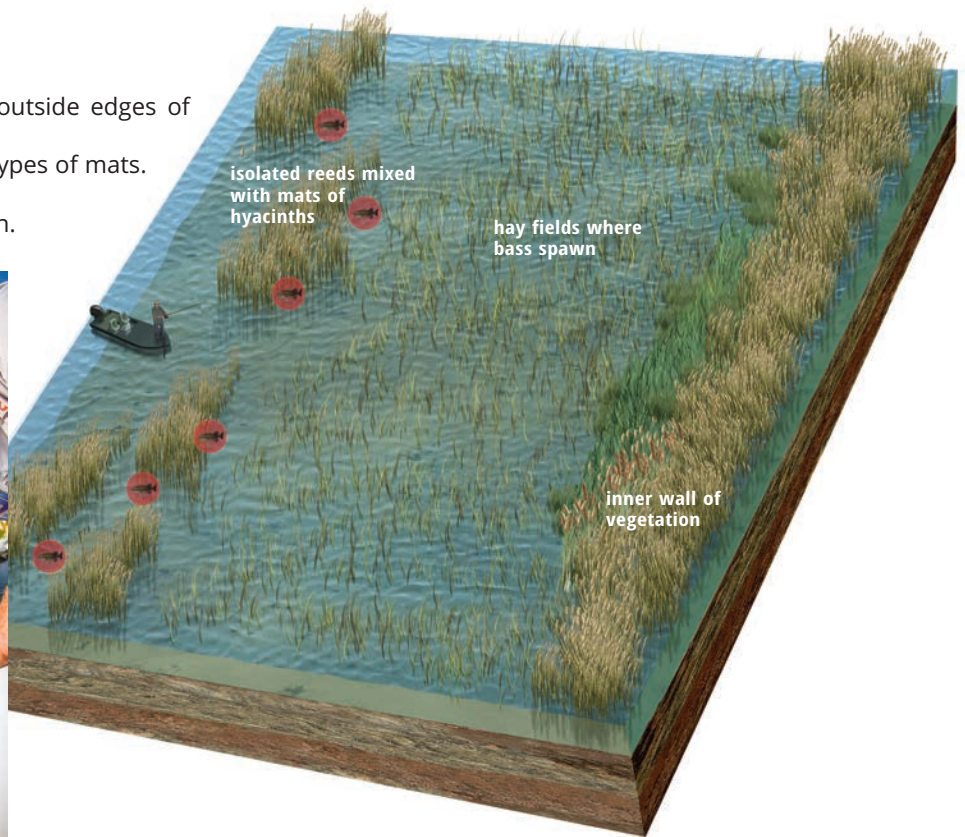
“On Okeechobee you're usually fishing around other anglers, and post-frontal bass can shut down in a hurry. I keep my trolling motor on the absolute lowest setting I can while still being able to get around,” he says. “I'm confident that although I may not cover as much water, I'm going to get more bites.”

Keys:

- Start by finding mats on the outside edges of spawning areas.
- Cover water, and try different types of mats.
- A hard bottom is key.
- Dirty water will shut them down.



PHOTO BY D.W. REED II



Rig Specifics:

Medlock's punching setup starts with an old 7-foot, 8-inch XXH Carrot Stix Gold flipping stick and high-speed reel spooled with 65- to 80-pound-test braid. He notes that there are many good braids, but it's important for it to be smooth and quiet through the guides. He then pegs a 1 1/2-ounce tungsten sinker above a snelled 3/0 or 4/0 Strike King Hack Attack Heavy Cover Flipping Hook and a Gambler Why Not in black and blue or green pumpkin.

5. Lavictoire's Yellow Slime Setup

Where: Lake Champlain

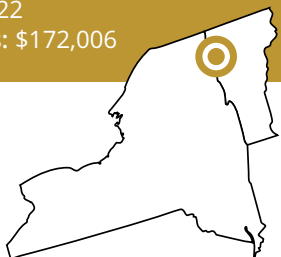
When: July and August

Thomas Lavictoire Jr.'s Stats:

Hometown: West Rutland, Vt.

Top 10s: 22

Winnings: \$172,006



Background

At first look, the deep, clear natural lakes of the Northeast might not seem to offer much to the die-hard puncher. Deep and clear, sure, but clear and stable water also allows for tremendous vegetation growth, which provides ample cover for thick-shouldered largemouths that want to bury up in it.

When it comes to digging them out, there aren't many with more experience than Thomas Lavictoire Jr., who's won a lot of money on Lake Champlain – much of it by punching through thick mats on Champlain's famed southern end.

"My favorite time to punch mats is when everyone else starts getting miserable," Lavictoire says. "That's when it's been 90 degrees for a week and the mats are thick and covered in that nasty yellow slime. When everyone else is out deep, I'm usually up in 3 feet of water absolutely knocking their lights out."

The "slime" or algae that Lavictoire is talking about is the stuff that bogs down a trolling motor, won't let a frog even make an impression and forces an angler to clean off his bait after every flip.

"I don't know why everybody thinks the bass leave when it gets like that," Lavictoire says. "If anything, once that algae starts growing, the mats provide even more shade and food for baitfish, which in turn draws in more bass."

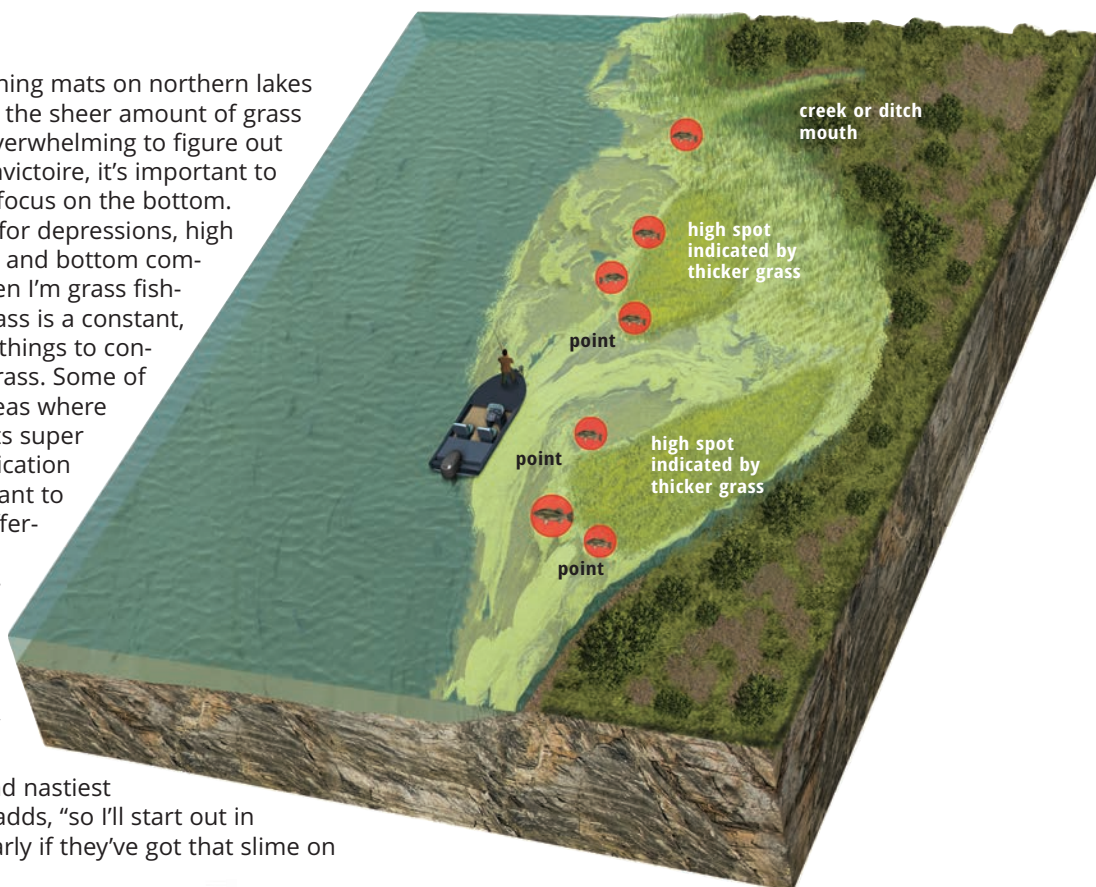
Presentation

One issue with fishing mats on northern lakes such as Champlain is the sheer amount of grass available. It can be overwhelming to figure out where to start. For Lavictoire, it's important to forget the grass and focus on the bottom.

"I'm going to look for depressions, high spots, ditches, points and bottom composition changes when I'm grass fishing," he says. "The grass is a constant, so you're looking for things to concentrate fish in the grass. Some of my best spots are areas where the mat suddenly gets super thick, which is an indication of a high spot. You want to focus on anything different on the bottom.

Sand and rock transitions are also excellent places to look.

"I've found that the biggest and highest concentrations of bass are usually up under the thickest and nastiest part of any mat," he adds, "so I'll start out in those areas, particularly if they've got that slime on them."



Keys:

- The thickest mats provide the most shade, and are preferred by bass.
- Yellow algae is a great indicator of a good, thick mat.
- Look for variability in bottom, depth or mat thickness to find the sweet spot.
- Don't be afraid to fish shallow – sometimes in less than a foot of water.

Rig Specifics:

Lavictoire relies on a 7-foot, 6-inch Shimano Crucial flipping stick and high-speed reel (8.1:1 gear ratio) filled with 50- to 65-pound-test PowerPro braided line. His most productive rig is a 3/4- or 1-ounce pegged tungsten sinker, a 5/0 Gamakatsu Superline EWG hook, and a green pumpkin or black and blue Venom flipping tube. He likes the tube because it slides through the mat better than baits with lots of appendages.



PHOTO BY DAVID A. BROWN

Keeping it Clean

Punching through yellow algae – more commonly known as “yellow snot” in Lavictoire’s neck of the woods – requires frequent cleaning and the most weedless presentations. Lavictoire has developed a system to help him clean off his bait and maintain his efficiency.

“When they pull the bait out and get ready to make the next flip, a lot of guys will actually let the bait swing back into their hands briefly,” he says. “I have taken that a step farther, and, instead of grabbing the bait, I just grab the ‘snot’ above it and pull it off in one motion as the bait goes into the next flip. You develop a rhythm after awhile and automatically clean your bait off after each flip.” ■

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PHOTO BY MATT PACE



B R A I N G A M E

CAN TOURNAMENT FISHING'S "INTANGIBLES" BE LEARNED,
OR ARE THEY INHERENT IN THE BEST PROS?

When it comes to performing better in bass fishing tournaments, you can learn just about any fishing technique you want, from skipping docks to cranking rocks. If you want to get better at a technique, pick up the tools and practice over and over to improve.

But can you learn how to win bass tournaments?

Can you learn how to close angler-of-the-year or team-of-the-year titles?

Some anglers fish for decades and don't win. Other anglers seem to make winning look easy. Why is that? Did they "learn" to win? Is that even possible?

These questions were asked of some of the FLW Tour's top money winners. Included in the discussion were Andy Morgan, Clark Wendlandt, John Cox and David Dudley. All of them have won their fair share of big events and titles in FLW competition, and they have the ability to "close" when the pressure is high.

Across the board, this collection of anglers believes that some of the basic components to winning can't be found in a tackle box. Instead, intangible concepts and traits such as confidence, mental toughness, focus, determination, resiliency and rhythm are more important. Some of these traits can be exercised, honed and ultimately improved upon. However, some are not taught or learned as easily. They are simply inherent in individuals.

PART 1: CONFIDENCE

It can be cultivated

Confidence is key, say the pros we queried. They all agree that some anglers are more confident than others by nature, but confidence is something that can be cultivated. Each pro offers his take.

John Cox:

Improve confidence by learning from mistakes

"Looking back on my career, I can now see a distinct difference in confidence levels," says Cox. "These days, before a tournament starts, I may have no idea how or where I'm going to catch a bass, but deep down I know that sometime during the day I'm going to get five to 10 hits on my lure. There is no doubt in my mind about it."

Cox believes he cultivated that confidence over time through experience on the FLW Tour.

"When I first started fishing tournaments, I can honestly say I did not feel that kind of confidence," he adds. "I took a lot of butt whippings out there, but I learned from them all, and it helped forge the confidence I have today."



PHOTO BY GARRECK DIXON

David Dudley:

Learn the "access code" to your confidence

Dudley sees confidence as being a big vault or bank account of experience and knowledge to which he is always making deposits.

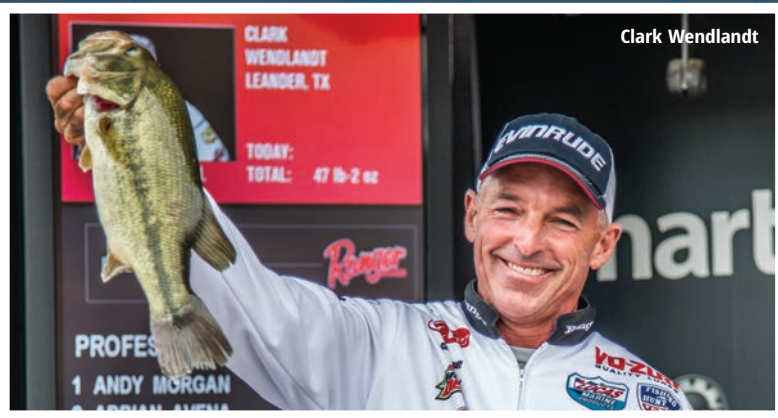
"The problem, though, is the password or access code to that vault is always changing," Dudley offers. "I know the information to win a particular tournament is in that vault, but I'm going to have to keep trying passwords until I can access it. So confidence is not just the knowledge and experience you store up, but it's also being able to quickly access it and apply it."

Clark Wendlandt:

Give confidence time to develop

For Wendlandt, confidence is defined by effortless and accurate decision-making on the water, which is something that can get better with time.

"There is no doubt that experience on the water bolsters confidence," he offers, "but only to a certain degree. I still maintain that confidence is a super fragile thing. Some tournaments you're brimming with it, and other tournaments it just sinks away. When that happens, I think those who inherently have more confidence can rise above that sinking feeling and keep themselves from cratering."



Clark Wendlandt

THE OBSESSIVE TRAIT

While cultivating confidence and quickly recovering from mistakes have a lot of latitude as far as being learned and applied, other prerequisites for closing out wins are more innate. The obsession to succeed at bass fishing is something that, according to three of our pros, you either have or you don't.

Clark Wendlandt: "When I think of pros who seem to have a unique ability to close, one word comes to mind: obsessive. Very talented fishermen usually have extremely obsessive personalities, and that's not something you can really learn. I know I'm that way. I'm obsessed with the outdoors. I'm obsessed with competition. I'm obsessed with being the best in the outdoors on any given day. And it's not something I can turn off. It's just who I am. Whether I'm hunting or fishing, it's like I have tunnel vision the entire time I'm out there. In my opinion, you have to have that trait to succeed in high levels of any professional sport, including fishing."

Andy Morgan: "In my outdoor pursuits, I am pretty obsessed with progress. I'm not saying I need to catch 10-pounders or kill big bucks every time I step foot in the outdoors - far from it. It's just that whatever my quarry is at the time, I want to feel like I got a little closer to it by the end of the day. If I dedicate a 10-hour day to the woods or water and don't have a better idea of what those critters are doing, I'm not very happy about it. And I'm not sure if that's something that can be taught."

John Cox: "Fishing is the only thing I've ever done where I feel a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Some guys get a sense of accomplishment from fixing cars or building things. Mine just happens to come from this need to figure fish out. I think I can build confidence and learn faster from mistakes, but the obsession to do this is something I was just born with."

Andy Morgan: Confidence comes one "play" at a time

Morgan believes his ways of obtaining confidence over the years have morphed and improved. Years ago, Morgan came close to winning the FLW Tour Angler of the Year title several times, but couldn't quite reach it. In the last four seasons, he has won it three times, making a remarkable feat look almost easy.

"Back then, if I was in the hunt for an AOY near the end of the season, I got to looking too far downfield at the end zone before I even crossed the 50-yard line," he says. "I wanted to long-bomb it for a touchdown when a field goal would have done it. In the final tournaments, I would lose focus of my game, my tempo and my rhythm. As a result, my confidence just evaporated."

These days Morgan has corrected his playbook to keep his confidence building through the season until the very last cast.

Despite the football references, Morgan is not a hard-core football fan. If asked to choose a favorite team, the University of Tennessee is it, but he admits that as a competitor he can't help but admire the University of Alabama's dominance of college football and Nick Saban's coaching style.

"His philosophy is pretty simple: This play, right now, is the most critical play of the game, so just focus only on executing it perfectly and nothing else," Morgan says. "And then he treats the next play the same way, and so on. If his team carries that strategy out - winning the little battles play-by-play - it wins the game. He doesn't focus on the end zone or how far they have to go to score. It's just one play at a time. Win those battles and you'll end up in the end zone."

Morgan says he has incorporated Saban's strategy into his own fishing.

"Make *this* next pitch the most perfect pitch," Morgan says. "One pitch at a time, one decision at a time, one move at a time. Every little thing is a tiny battle. Just win those mini battles one at a time and you'll win the war."

"I have said it time and time again," he concludes. "Slow and steady wins the race. That's the philosophy that I've learned and molded into my own game over time. Honestly, it's a rather conservative strategy, but that's how I build my confidence through a tournament and through a season."



Andy Morgan

PHOTO BY FLEW

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

PART 2: MISTAKES

Manage adversity and limit failure

Another cornerstone that can be developed is not allowing mistakes and failures to snowball out of control. This is a mental trait that Cox says he has improved upon greatly over the last two seasons.

"Stuff is going to happen, simple as that," Cox says. "Lines will break, fish will jump off, you will run aground, there will be other competitors on the places you want to fish. You name it, and it will happen, sometimes all in the same day. How you react to these disasters is crucial."

Step 1 is simply recognizing that bad things will happen. Then you can learn to deal with it.

"I used to be so shocked when these things would happen to me," Cox reveals. "I'd think, 'There is no way so many bad things could happen to one guy in one day.' I'd play the woe-is-me card a lot, letting it just derail my whole day."

These days Cox is much better at remedying mistakes and fending off failures. It helps to try and identify the cause of the problem, then either correct it or learn from it.

"This is a perfect example: At Hartwell this year, I broke a 2-pounder off," he recalls. "Several years ago, I would have pitched a fit, retied and probably broke the next bite off, too. But instead of freaking out, I immediately checked my line and found that it had been frayed down in the spool. I got out a new reel with fresh line, retied and caught a 5-pounder on my next cast. I took the failure of losing that 2-pounder and turned it into a positive. Making that a habit is huge.

"These days I don't get upset at mistakes and failures as long as I fix them quickly and don't let them pile up," Cox says. "That's something I have learned to do on my own, and I can see the results."

In the end, dealing with mistakes and failures is easiest for the resilient, yet resiliency can be improved upon and achieved with the right attitude.

"Adversity is just a fact of the fishing life," Morgan says. "All the guys mentioned in this article have a super-strong streak of dealing with adversity very efficiently and effectively. When things went wrong early in my career, I wanted to hack my boat to pieces with a pocket knife. But taking time to get upset is a waste. You have to control your emotions.

"I'm all about rhythm, staying smooth and keeping constant pressure applied during the day," he adds. "When something knocks me out of rhythm, my immediate response is to quickly pick that rhythm back up. I'm going to lose fish. Period. But so are others in the field. If five people lose a bass at the same time, who is the first to get back up and regain his rhythm and tempo to get the next bite? That's the guy I strive to be."

PART 3: DURESS

If you can't handle the pressure, you might not belong in the big leagues

From the obsessive trait (see sidebar) also comes the unique ability to perform under extreme duress. Financial debt, medical issues, sudden bad news – these are the hurdles that pros face in addition to what's going on out on the water.

Each of our pros has experienced some kind of severe challenge in his career and has still performed at a high level.

In the realm of bass fishing, being at a financial disadvantage relative to other competitors is usually one of the initial challenges anglers face.

Today, Dudley is FLW's all-time leading money winner with more than \$3.4 million in earnings, and Cox has earned nearly \$1 million – more than \$520,000 just in the last two seasons. Yet, neither had a padded bank account when he started, and both incurred considerable amounts of debt while pursuing their fishing careers. They got over the hurdle because both have been able to focus and close in big-money events when the financial strain was highest.

"I really don't know how to explain that one," Dudley says. "All I know is that when the chips are down and my back is up against the wall, I just become more determined than ever to find that password to unlock that 'vault of knowledge.' All this stuff is connected: Building confidence in that vault is something that can be gained, but my determination to keep trying passwords over and over is something that's just in my nature. I don't quit."

"I think that's something that you're either capable of or you're not," Morgan adds. "I'm not sure that one can be learned. When you look at the incredible performances Dudley turned in when he was at his lowest point financially, it's just amazing."

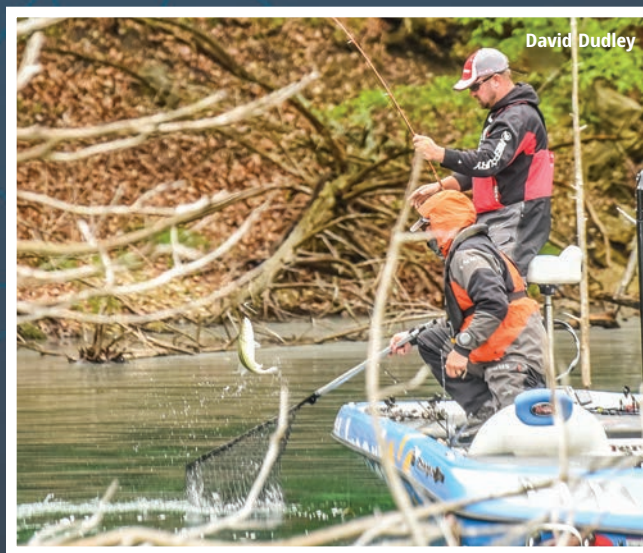


PHOTO BY ROB NEWELL

Learning to Win: Fact or Fiction?

So, the question remains, can an angler learn to win?

Cox says he is proof of the affirmative. Early in his career, he saw several prime chances to win evaporate because of poor decisions or the pressure of a major event. Now, with multiple major wins on his resume, he sees exactly where he went wrong.

"Some of it was lack of confidence," Cox concedes. "Some of it was repeating mistakes instead of doing something about them. But through it all I never gave up. I was determined to push on no matter what because figuring out bass is what drives me. And without that, I would have never stuck with it long enough to get better at it." ■



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PHOTO BY MILLS BROCK



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TBF



WHAT'S MAKING NEWS IN THE BASS FEDERATION

By Dan Johnson

FIELD ALMOST SET FOR 2017 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP AT TABLE ROCK

With all but one qualifier in the books at press time, the field for the prestigious 2017 The Bass Federation National Championship is nearly final.

The 2017 championship is scheduled for April 3-8 on Missouri's mighty Table Rock Lake out of Kimberling City and promises to be the largest, richest and most exciting title showdown in Federation history.

This year's championship comes during a transition period. With anglers qualifying via the old state team/divisional format and the new National Semi-Finals, every state has at least two boater and two co-angler qualifiers, while some have more.

To accommodate the field size, the event has been expanded and will feature a cut format in which all anglers compete for two days, when the top boater and co-angler from each state earn spots in new Evinrude-powered Ranger boats for a two-day semi-final round. The semi-final field is then "cut" to a final group of seven – the division boater and co-angler leaders – for the last day, when the champions will be crowned.

Fourteen finalists – seven boaters and seven co-anglers – will advance to the 2017 T-H Marine Bass Fishing League All-American. The boater champ advances to the world championship of bass fishing, the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup, for a shot at winning the \$300,000 top prize.

The winning boater will also receive the \$100,000 "Living the Dream" package that includes a cash prize, fully paid entry fees in the 2018 FLW Tour as a pro, a travel expense stipend for each event and use of a wrapped Ranger boat with Evinrude outboard for the year. The top co-angler will also receive a cash prize and fully paid co-angler entry fees into the Costa FLW Series division of choice.

TBF is proud "Partners in Fishing" with FLW, which helps support this annual event along with other industry-leading TBF sponsors, including Ranger Boats, Evinrude, Cabela's, Humminbird, Minn Kota, Berkley, Lowrance and Power-Pole.

Coverage of the TBF National Championship will be broadcast nationally on the Pursuit Channel and streamed live daily on bassfederation.com.

2017 TBF National Championship Qualifiers*

CENTRAL DIVISION

ARKANSAS

Boaters

Doug Thompson, Mabelvale, Ark.
Josh Ray, Alexander, Ark.

Co-anglers

Evan Barnes, Hot Springs, Ark.
Robert Scott, Little Rock, Ark.

KANSAS

Boaters

Jason Benjamin, Lawrence, Kan.
Craig Wolf, Hutchinson, Kan.

Co-anglers

Chad Dick, Baldwin City, Kan.
Ray Cates, Overland Park, Kan.

LOUISIANA

Boaters

Joshua Moore, Grand Cane, La.
Albert Rayborn, Hammond, La.

Co-anglers

Ross Cagle, Downsview, La.
David Sherrer, Elm Grove, La.

MISSOURI

Boaters

Trace Hannaford,
Mountain Home, Ark.
Roger Edwards, Tuscumbia, Mo.

Co-anglers

Don Heiser, Kearney, Mo.
David Lindner, Warrenton, Mo.

MISSISSIPPI

Boaters

Heath Willard, Brookhaven, Miss.
Wayne Parish, Aberdeen, Miss.

Co-anglers

Brad Jernigan, Nettleton, Miss.
Nikolas Beckstein, Vancleave, Miss.

NEBRASKA

Boaters

Pat Klausen, Lincoln, Neb.
Robert Walla, Ceresco, Neb.

Co-anglers

Billy Ray, Plattsmouth, Neb.
Nick Ash, Omaha, Neb.

OKLAHOMA

Boaters

Dean Matts, Yukon, Okla.
Jackie Husmann, Ponca City, Okla.

Co-anglers

Jody Linder, Ponca City, Okla.
Sanford Hooker, Wellston, Okla.

TEXAS

Boaters

Robert Hill, Fort Worth, Texas
James Biggs, Bedford, Texas

Co-anglers

Michael Briseno, Elgin, Texas
Jimmy Walls, Glen Rose, Texas

EASTERN DIVISION

CONNECTICUT

Boaters

Russell Phillips, Guilford, Conn.
Alex Wetherell, Middletown, Conn.

Co-anglers

Ken Bugden, Westbrook, Conn.
Steven Martins, Killingworth, Conn.

MASSACHUSETTS

Boaters

David McNary, Woburn, Mass.
Jim Gildea, Weston, Mass.

Co-anglers

Stephen O'Keefe, Shrewsbury, Mass.
Colleen McKay, Shrewsbury, Mass.

MAINE

Boaters

David Barnes Sr., China, Maine
Herb Meyer, W. Kennebunk, Maine

Co-anglers

Roger LaFlamme, Lyman, Maine
Lewis Mendall, Wrentham, Mass.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Boaters

Matt Thoin, Rindge, N.H.
David Tsao, Newburyport, Mass.

Co-anglers

Donald Gagnon, New Boston, N.H.
Henry Bobadilla, Methuen, Mass.

NEW YORK

Boaters

Cory Baright, Albany, N.Y.
Brad Brodnicki, Amherst, N.Y.
Carl Alexander, Hampton, N.Y.

Co-anglers

Brian Sanson, Chittenango, N.Y.
Kevin Grist, Wingdale, N.Y.
Frederick Chilluffo, Camden, N.Y.

ONTARIO

Boaters

Russell Watkins, Aurora, Ontario
Justin Fung, Toronto, Ontario

Co-anglers

Andrew Shufelt,
Peterborough, Ontario
Jayson Saliba, Etobicoke, Ontario

RHODE ISLAND

Boaters

Michael DiFilippo, Warwick, R.I.
Jacob Marcantonio,
North Smithfield, R.I.

Co-anglers

Gradie Beaulieu, Barrington, R.I.
Brittany Johnson,
North Smithfield, R.I.

VERMONT

Boaters

Chad Brousseau, Colchester, Vt.
Gene Bordon, Colchester, Vt.

Co-anglers

Mark Bilodeau, Burlington, Vt.
Scott McKay, Mendon, Vt.

MID-ATLANTIC DIVISION

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Boaters

Stephen Miller, Mechanicsville, Va.
Peter Yanni, Gaithersburg, Md.

Co-anglers

Ken Melton, Clinton, Md.
Russell Lohr, Monrovia, Md.

DELAWARE

Boaters

Craig Morris, Ocean City, Md.
Jeff Mandes, Smyrna, Del.

Co-anglers

Brian LaClair, Denton, Md.
Steve Redden, Middletown, Del.

MARYLAND

Boaters

Chris Huffman, Severn, Md.
Richard Martin Jr.,
Sparrows Point, Md.

Co-anglers

Floyd Dalton, Ruther Glen, Va.
Dean Young, Eldersburg, Md.

NEW JERSEY

Boaters

Mike Keller, Newton, N.J.
Richard Congero, Vernon, N.J.

Co-anglers

Rich Schneiderreit, Medford, N.J.
Joseph Casale, Nutley, N.J.

PENNSYLVANIA

Boaters

Daniel Gray, Butler, Pa.
Robert Davidson Jr., Pittston, Pa.

Co-anglers

Tom Prowant, Lewisburg, Pa.
Matthew Davis, Olyphant, Pa.

VIRGINIA

Boaters

Bobby Crisman, Bracey, Va.
Dylan Whitmore, Carrollton, Va.
Frank Harris, Beaverdam, Va.

Co-anglers

Erroll Hash, Radford, Va.
William Hoeffer, Newport News, Va.
Trey Gregg, Powhatan, Va.

WEST VIRGINIA

Boaters

Robert Harkness, Elizabeth, W.Va.
Wes Lester, Jane Lew, W.Va.

Co-anglers

Raymond Jackson, Paden City, W.Va.
Brandon Marks, Walton, W.Va.

NORTHERN DIVISION

ILLINOIS

Boaters

Bryan Partak, Marseilles, Ill.
Tim Rider, Maroa, Ill.

Co-anglers

Joe Snyder, Emden, Ill.
Sam Mackey, Monmouth, Ill.

INDIANA

Boaters

Dustin Burk, Brookville, Ind.
Allen Boyd, Salem, Ind.
Dale Fess, Greenville, Ind.

Co-anglers

Tom Stark, Angola, Ind.
Derick Pendleton, Seymour, Ind.
Jeremy Antrup, Fremont, Ind.

MICHIGAN

Boaters

David Reault, Livonia, Mich.
Tommy Robinson, Westland, Mich.

Co-anglers

Nathan Nichols, Shelby, Mich.
Dan O'Neil, Canton, Mich.

MINNESOTA

Boaters

Joseph Hall, Lake City, Minn.
Scott Bonnema, Zimmerman, Minn.

Co-anglers

Marty Wagner, Brainerd, Minn.
John Fairbanks, Hastings, Minn.

NORTH DAKOTA

Boaters

Shawn Keena, Bismarck, N.D.
Paul Reinbold, Gladstone, N.D.

Co-anglers

Robert Reinbold, Timber Lake, S.D.
Justin Enney, Dickinson, N.D.

OHIO

Boaters

Dan Devera, Parma, Ohio
Dave Fogle, Sidney, Ohio
Robert Cox Sr., Tippecanoe, Ohio

Co-anglers

Mark McQuate, Mansfield, Ohio
Jacob Cook, Delphos, Ohio
Phillip Rummel, Mt. Vernon, Ohio

SOUTH DAKOTA

Boaters

Shane Cowan, Pierre, S.D.
Terry Laverack, Martin, S.D.

Co-anglers

Eric Storms, Chamberlain, S.D.
Brock Belik, Orchard, Neb.

WISCONSIN

Boaters

Larry Hildebrandt, Cottage Grove, Wis.
Chris Truman, Lake Mills, Wis.

Co-anglers

Brian Saari, Madison, Wis.
Mike Wilmoth, Onalaska, Wis.

SOUTHERN DIVISION

ALABAMA

Boaters

Taylor Watkins, Oneonta, Ala.
Hunter Hayes, Rainbow City, Ala.

Co-anglers

Robert Pelt II, Montgomery, Ala.
John Perez, Wetumpka, Ala.

FLORIDA

Boaters

John Guttuso, Delray Beach, Fla.
John Mobley, Macclenny, Fla.

Co-anglers

Jesse Woodring, Tequesta, Fla.
Kenneth Hunnicutt, Jacksonville, Fla.

GEORGIA

Boaters

Justin Lanier, Macon, Ga.
Van Kennedy, Fort Valley, Ga.

Co-anglers

Kevin Black, Cumming, Ga.
Dale Rader, Grovetown, Ga.

KENTUCKY

Boaters

Greg Hoskinson, Louisville, Ky.
David Sullivan, Ghent, Ky.

Co-anglers

Steven Wormley, Lancaster, Ky.
Brian Bemis, Evansville, Ky.

NORTH CAROLINA

Boaters

Mark Seals, Laurinburg, N.C.
Jeff Hager, Alexis, N.C.

Co-anglers

David Ford, Creedmoor, N.C.
Larry Halsey, Pfafftown, N.C.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Boaters

Tracy Hewitt, Orangeburg, S.C.
Greg Rikard, Leesville, S.C.

Co-anglers

Herman Vining, Gilbert, S.C.
Jeff Rikard, Leesville, S.C.

TENNESSEE

Boaters

Bryan Dowdy, Florence, Ala.
Jerry Gibson, Norton, Va.

Co-anglers

Michael Wasden, Paris, Tenn.
Jim Nygard, Oak Ridge, Tenn.

SOUTHWEST DIVISION

ARIZONA

Boaters

Jon Griffith, Mesa, Ariz.

Co-anglers

Steven Miller, Payson, Ariz.

CALIFORNIA

Boaters

Timmy Wells, Fresno, Calif.

Co-anglers

Mike Alvarez, Clovis, Calif.

COLORADO

Boaters

Steve Barbee, Loveland, Colo.
Greg Gizzi, Widefield, Colo.

Co-anglers

James Choate, Pueblo West, Colo.
David Pauly, Falcon, Colo.

NEW MEXICO

Boaters

Ty Faber, Pagosa Springs, Colo.
Andy Cochran, Gunnison, Colo.

Co-anglers

Evan Buchanan, Durango, Colo.
Adam Campbell, Aztec, N.M.

NEVADA

Boaters

Tim Klinger, Boulder City, Nev.
David Hudson, Henderson, Nev.

Co-anglers

Stephen Tauriello, Las Vegas, Nev.
Paul Aznarez, Las Vegas, Nev.

UTAH

Boaters

Travis Graham, De Beque, Colo.
Justin Hicks, Gunnison, Colo.

Co-anglers

Don Allphin, Provo, Utah
Clif Gallagher, Eagle Mountain, Utah

NORTHWEST DIVISION

IDAHO

Boaters

Ben Warren, Cambridge, Idaho
Curtis McCown, Mtn. Home, Idaho

Co-anglers

Tony Shuyler, Eagle, Idaho
Chris Felty, Caldwell, Idaho

MONTANA

Boaters

James Wood, Trout Creek, Mt.
Tim Johnston, Kalispell, Mt.

Co-anglers

Rick Jeffries, Kalispell, Mt.
Josh Stratton, Somers, Mt.

OREGON

Boaters

Kory Ray, Lebanon, Ore.
Josh Marthaller, Salem, Ore.

Co-anglers

David Simmons, Beavercreek, Ore.
Todd Woolard, Salem, Ore.

WASHINGTON

Boaters

Peter Koshi, Seattle, Wash.
Matt Krumdiack, Ferndale, Wash.

Co-anglers

Ryan Gates, Yelm, Wash.
Kevin Higgins, Bonney Lake, Wash.

WYOMING

Boaters

Bill Golightly, Preston, Idaho
Bubba O'Neil, Evanston, Wyo.

Co-anglers

Kenney Oldham, Coalville, Utah
Lee Thomas, Green River, Wyo.

**The list is current as of press time in late December.*

TBF Members Eligible for Power-Pole Rebate

In recent years, shallow-water anchors have become must-have gear for positioning a bass boat in the perfect spot to ply fish-holding areas, and members of The Bass Federation qualify for a great deal on state-of-the-art systems.

TBF sponsor Power-Pole is extending an exclusive rebate program to TBF members who purchase its high-performance products in 2017.

The Power-Pole lineup includes powerful – yet whisper-quiet – models in the Blade, Pro II, Sportsman II and Signature Series lines. All feature innovative designs, rugged construction and tournament-proven features that ensure flawless performance every time an angler takes to the water.

Power-Pole also taps the latest technologies to make boat positioning easier than ever. For example, its popular C-Monster control system, built into all new Power-Pole shallow-water anchors, allows the operator to fine-tune deployment speed, bottom sensing and other functions straight from a smartphone.

TBF members are eligible for rebates on select Power-Pole anchoring systems, along with accessories and apparel purchased through power-pole.com. For details, contact a TBF state president or TBF national headquarters.

Sign Up Now to Reap the Rewards of TBF Membership

Registration is now open for grassroots bass anglers nationwide to join The Bass Federation for 2017. If you'd like to catch more bass, enjoy the thrill of competition, score great deals on fishing gear and give something back to the sport while you're at it, now's the time to join TBF.

With more than 20,000 members in the U.S. and Canada, TBF offers unique opportunities to feed your bass fishing fever.

Competition – TBF membership is your ticket to compete in countless local events and fish your way up to state, regional and national TBF contests. You could even earn an invitation to fish for bass fishing's richest payout in the Forrest Wood

Cup, compete in the T-H Marine Bass Fishing League All-American and claim TBF's \$100,000 Living the Dream package.

Conservation – Joining a local TBF chapter is a great way to meet fellow bass fanatics and work together on projects aimed at protecting and enhancing bass habitat, getting young people involved in fishing and supporting our military members.

Member Perks – TBF membership carries additional rewards, including access to the TBF Members Only Online Store and TBF Reverse Auctions, both of which offer great deals on top bass fishing gear. Perks also include a chance to compete for

contingencies, including the TBF Ranger Cup Program and Lowrance State Champion's Bonus, and enjoy TBF Federation Insurance coverage for official TBF events.

FLW Membership – TBF affiliation also includes an FLW membership, providing full member discounts and benefits, including a subscription to *FLW Bass Fishing* magazine (digital and print), full tournament eligibility and priority entry into FLW events nationwide.

Anyone can join TBF, but to fish home-state events you must belong to a local TBF-affiliated club. Find five friends and start your own TBF club, or join an existing group. For details, visit bassfederation.com.

GRASSROOTS BASS FISHING'S TOP GUNS FEATURED ON FEDERATION ANGLER TV

If you've ever dreamed of showcasing your mad bassin' skills on the national stage, The Bass Federation could be your ticket to the big time.

TBF members who qualify for the TBF National Championship earn their spot in the national limelight on *Federation Angler TV*, which airs in millions of homes on the Pursuit Channel.

Young bass fishing aces who battle for top honors in the High School Fishing World Finals are also featured in *Federation Angler TV* programming.

To see what the experience is like, tune in to the following upcoming episodes.

On Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2017 at 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. ET, and again on Saturday, Feb. 18 at 8 a.m. ET, the 2016 TBF National Championship takes center stage. Join the action as TBF anglers from across the continent clash on famed Table Rock Lake out of Kimberling City, Mo.

On Tuesday, March 21 at 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. ET, and on Saturday, March 25 at 8 a.m. ET, the spotlight focuses on legendary Pickwick and Wilson lakes, as more than 400 high school anglers compete in the 2016 High School Fishing World Finals out of Florence, Ala.

For complete listings and details, visit federationangler.com.



Federation Angler TV offers TBF members the chance to showcase their skills to millions of fellow anglers.

FLW AND TBF EXTEND PARTNERSHIP

FLW TO DEBUT 24-EVENT HIGH SCHOOL FISHING OPEN SERIES

FLW and The Bass Federation recently announced a multi-year extension to their strategic partnership, bolstering the relationship between the world's largest tournament-fishing organization and the nation's oldest broad-based grassroots fishing, youth and conservation organization.

teams in each State Championship, Challenge and Open will advance directly to the High School Fishing National Championship. Both members of the High School Fishing national champion team will receive a \$5,000 college scholarship to the school of his or her choice.

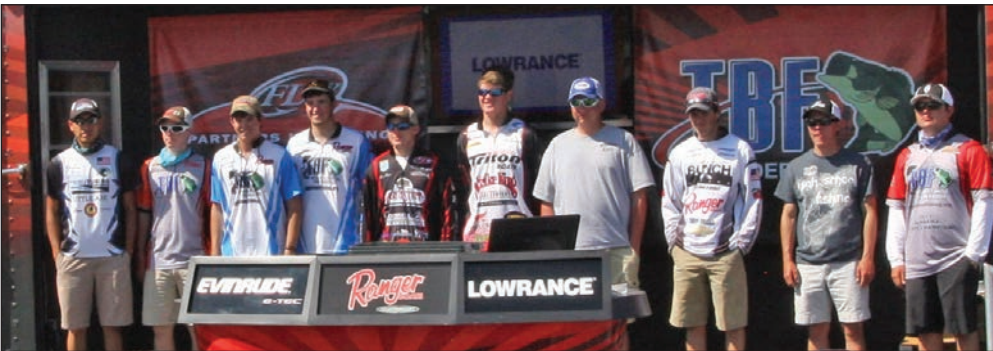
All participants must be Student Angler Federation (SAF) members to participate. SAF membership includes TBF and FLW membership plus a digital subscription to *FLW Bass Fishing* magazine, online training courses and more.

SAF members never pay an entry fee to participate in FLW or TBF High School Fishing tournaments, and all clubs are covered by SAF insurance, which means there is no added expense for any schools with sanctioned High School Fishing clubs.

No changes will be made to the existing program for adult TBF anglers. TBF members will also continue to

receive priority entry into all FLW tournaments.

"TBF is proud to partner with FLW in providing the nation's most extensive network of grassroots fishing opportunities from our TBF junior program through high school and college to the TBF National Semi-Finals for adult anglers and ultimately our 'Living the Dream' package on the FLW Tour," says TBF President Robert Cartlidge. "No two organizations work more closely to provide more fishing opportunities for more anglers nationwide than FLW and TBF. We are proud of that tradition and what it means for future generations." ■



High School Fishing opportunities will expand dramatically under the continuing partnership between FLW and The Bass Federation.

As part of the extended partnership, FLW will undertake the largest expansion of the co-managed High School Fishing program since launching the state championship series of High School Fishing events in partnership with TBF in 2011.

The expansion includes facilitating a new series of 24 High School Fishing Open tournaments to complement the existing state championships and High School Fishing World Finals coordinated by TBF.

TBF will also debut two High School Fishing Challenge events to meet growing demand from the more than 15,000 young anglers that participated in the program in 2016. All told, students will now have 76 FLW and TBF High School Fishing events in which to compete in 2017.

"High School Fishing is the foundation on which our sport will continue to grow," says FLW President of Operations Kathy Fennel. "With the continued erosion of traditional pathways into fishing, the industry is taking note of High School Fishing's recruitment, retention and reactivation potential. All it takes is one visit to a High School Fishing tournament to see that FLW and TBF have tapped into something special that unites generations in a way our sport has never seen before."

Going forward, High School Fishing will operate on a school calendar, with the National Championship being held in the summer in conjunction with the High School Fishing World Finals. The top 10 percent of

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JOE HOLLAND

Jefferson, Maine

By Sean Ostruszka

You know, it's really hard to get in touch with someone for an interview if he doesn't have a phone. How do you not have a phone?

My life is so simple, I don't need one. I really have no responsibilities. If I had a wife and kids, I'd probably have one, but right now, nah.

... seriously, no phone?

I have a work phone (he's a sales rep for Gambler Lures), but that's about it. I mean, I used to be a trapper. I'd go two or three months without seeing another person. So not having a cellphone is easy.

How'd you get into trapping?

After I graduated college (in 2001), I realized I'd lived my entire life in Maine, but I hadn't seen the whole state. So I loaded my car with a sleeping bag, a Coleman stove and a shotgun, and I drove around the state for three months. It was amazing. I'd shoot partridge (ruffed grouse) or rabbits; shot one deer.

That's when I got into trapping because I'd sell the pelts for money to buy more propane, gas or shells. I actually was a trapper until 2007.

What did you major in at college?

I pretty much majored in baseball. I was a catcher for Saint Joseph's College.

We actually led the entire nation my senior year with a 36-4 record. So, yeah, I majored in that. Technically, I got my degree in communications and minored in the classics, Greek and Latin.

Greek and Latin? I bet you're putting that to good use.

Not even in the slightest. I had a phenomenal teacher that I loved. I kept taking his classes, and I took enough to earn a minor.

Be honest, how many classes did you miss while "majoring" in baseball?

I probably did more hunting and fishing during my time in college than anyone in the history of Saint Joe's, but I never missed a class. I'd show up a lot of times in muddy boots or with my orange hunting vest, but I was always there.

So how does a guy with no phone, no boat and no permanent address become a professional angler on the FLW Tour?

I'm lucky. I'm truly blessed.

This guy I'd fish tournaments against here in Maine, Mark Osgood, had a boat. He felt I was good enough to fish [the Tour], and said I needed to take a shot. So he threw me the keys to his boat and said he'd help me try and fish the Tour.

So I started fishing the Costas and qualified my first year, but we both thought I needed more seasoning. So I fished them again the next year and didn't qualify. My third season I qualified for the Tour again, and this time he said I needed to take a shot while I had the chance. He was my major sponsor last year. It was a dream come true.

How do you think your rookie year went in 2016?

Fantastic. It may not look like it based on where I finished in the points (113th), but I cut checks in three of the events. I learned really quickly that I needed to cut checks to survive. I went to Beaver Lake knowing if I didn't cut a check I might not get home.

How did you afford the travel when you were that strapped for cash?

I slept in my truck. I probably sleep in my truck 150 nights a year.

And you park your truck and sleep where, exactly?

You'd be amazed where you can find places. I usually just park at the boat ramps. I have a little Honda generator to charge my boat batteries.

I'm literally the first person to the ramp every day because I never left. ■

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