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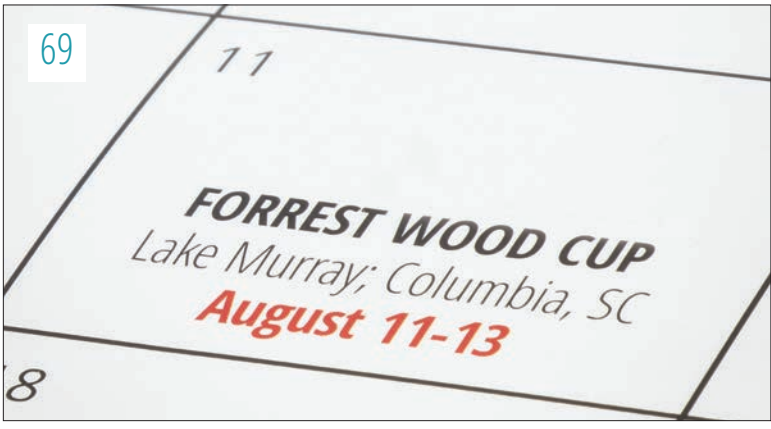
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COVER PHOTO BY JAY SIEMENS

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EDITOR'S NOTE



WILD WEATHER CAN'T STOP FLW'S BEST

Summer is here, but we've dedicated a healthy chunk of this issue's *On Tour* department to breaking down the winning tactics from tournaments held during a particularly soggy, stormy, crappy few weeks in late April and early May.

Unusually volatile weather during that stretch of time seemed better suited for testing rain gear than hosting bass tournaments, and it made life a little uncomfortable for anglers. It also created some serious headaches for FLW's tournament directors, who were left to rely on routinely inaccurate weather forecasts when trying to decide whether or not to send 'em out on tournament morning.

The eventual result was two weather-shortened Costa FLW Series tournaments, flooding that caused road closures and made it impossible to pass under a bridge into a major lake section during the FLW Tour event on Beaver Lake, a cancellation day for the FLW Expo in Rogers, Ark., many areas of the California Delta being placed off limits for the second stop of the Costa FLW Series Western Division, relocation for two High School Fishing derbies, and some shuffling of weigh-in equipment at lakeside venues.

FLW takes every precaution to keep anglers safe on the water, and cancellations occur when necessary. Stopping the tournament train once it's rolling, however, doesn't happen without a little whiplash. Changes affect everyone from sponsors and site hosts to local media to the hundreds of anglers and families who attend. They also have obvious impacts on tournament outcomes.

That's the interesting part for people like me who cover pro bass fishing. Unexpected changes such as a shortened tournament, coupled with extreme weather, lead to some creative fishing strategies that we get to write about.

Take the Costa FLW Series event on Grand Lake. Ohio pro Nick Prvonozac won the tournament by "blind bed-fishing," which isn't particularly unusual, but he did it by targeting areas where he'd seen bass on beds during the 2016 FLW Series event at Grand when, according to local sources, the water was as clear as it had ever been. This year, stained water and high winds made sight-fishing near impossible, but the fish were in the same places, and Prvonozac worked the bedding program for the win.

Then, at Beaver Lake we witnessed some of the most extreme flooding in the history of the FLW Tour. Yet the fishing wasn't awful, and pros in the top 10 worked four distinct high-water patterns, led by Johnny McCombs' buzzbait attack in flooded lakefront yards. Each pattern was unique and offered some lessons in dealing with rising water, but McCombs' was most interesting because it was incredibly consistent despite the most inconsistent weather. He also revealed that he caught bass by casting around spawning carp, which is probably the first time that pattern has been covered in FLW history.

Another week, another bout of thunderstorms, as the Costa FLW Series travelled to Lake Chickamauga. Anglers dealt with murky, rough water and post-frontal conditions, with a second storm moving in the final day. Yet the Southeastern Division finale was dominated by seemingly ordinary postspawn tactics, including targeting bass around bluegill beds with a swim jig. Everyone in the top third of the field pretty well smashed 'em, too. Bad weather, great fishing – go figure.

It just proves that, no matter how awful the conditions, someone always figures out how to get it done.

Detailed reports on the three tournaments I mentioned here, plus several others, can be found in the *On Tour* department beginning on page 79. It reads like a guide to countering extreme springtime weather conditions. If spring 2018 is anything like the latest installment, you'll want to keep this issue handy for when next year's tournament schedule cranks up.

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April 27, 2017

The White River at the upper end of Beaver Lake is one of the most consistent areas for catching big bags of largemouths. This year, however, muddy water and a field of floating debris caused by heavy rains and rising water levels blocked off many anglers from reaching what are traditionally the best areas. Here, Bryan Schmitt tries to pick his way slowly through the logs and limbs on the first morning of the Beaver Tour event.

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA



BEHIND A VEIL OF RAIN

April 29, 2017

He's tough to see, but Texas pro Jason Reyes is there, within a wall of pouring rain, chipping away at a day-three limit that would put him in second place going into the final day at Beaver Lake.

The Beaver tournament was one of the worst – in terms of weather conditions – in recent history on Tour, as this and the other photos included here showcase. Rain, floods, storms – Beaver Lake played every one of Mother Nature's springtime tricks.

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA



LIGHTNING AND AWE

April 28, 2017

Though FLW never sends anglers out into lightning, storms do occasionally pop up after takeoff and catch everyone a little bit off guard. At Beaver Lake, it happened twice: the morning of day two, shown here, and the afternoon of day three.

The impressive lightning display in this image cracked on the other side of the mountain in the background, but its presence was known across the lower end of the lake. Many anglers subsequently dropped the rods and took shelter from the storm.

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



THE SOGGY CHAMP

April 29, 2017

Not even Forrest Wood Cup champs could escape the misery of the rainy, stormy conditions that seemed to track the FLW Tour around this spring. Here, a thoroughly drenched John Cox pulls the trolling motor to leave the freshwater run-ins he was fishing and head on to other, equally drippy haunts on Beaver Lake.

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

BASS PRO SHOPS, FLW PARTNER TO PROMOTE HIGH SCHOOL FISHING

In early May, FLW and Bass Pro Shops announced that they'd reached an agreement for Bass Pro Shops to become the title sponsor of FLW's series of High School Fishing Opens. The series includes 24 tournaments held around the country, with top finishers qualifying for the High School Fishing National Championship.

"Bass Pro Shops is deeply committed to helping young people connect with nature through fishing and outdoor recreation," says Bass Pro Shops founder/CEO Johnny Morris. "We are very proud to support Fishing League Worldwide and their efforts to grow the sport of fishing with anglers of all ages."

In addition to receiving exposure at FLW tournaments and media outlets, the outdoor retail giant will also be the presenting sponsor for multiple YETI FLW College Fishing tournaments, and FLW will host registration meetings and/or weigh-ins for some events at Bass Pro Shops stores. Gift cards to Bass Pro Shops will also be included in FLW Monthly Member Giveaways.

For more information, visit FLWFishing.com or basspropshops.com.



ANNUAL CHARITY TOURNAMENT SURPASSES $1 MILLION IN DONATIONS



Elizabeth Sullivan from the Arkansas Children's Hospital with a check from this season's charity event.

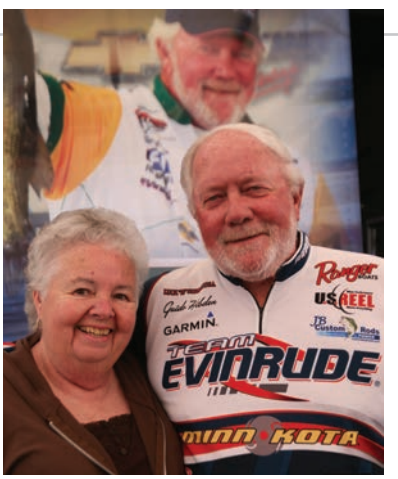
The annual FLW Will Fish for Kids Bill Kerr Memorial Charity Tournament reached a milestone on May 1 when it raised $60,703.44 for the Dental Clinic at the Arkansas Children's Hospital. That put the grand total for the annual event at more than $1 million raised since 2005. The tournament, which was presented by Quaker State, was held following the Beaver Lake FLW Tour stop.

Pro James Watson of Lampe, Mo., served as honorary chairperson for the WFFK event. Donations were derived from entry fees and corporate boat sponsorships, plus funds raised at a banquet and silent auction the evening before.

Former Forrest Wood Cup champ Scott Martin and David Hunter won the tournament with a limit weighing 14 pounds, 14 ounces.

For more information, visit WillFishForKids.com.

FISHING COMMUNITY RAISING FUNDS FOR HIBDON



A GoFundMe campaign was established in early May to raise funds to help alleviate expenses associated with Guido Hibdon's cancer treatment and recovery period. Hibdon underwent surgery for colon cancer in February 2016 and began chemotherapy treatments the following May. Since then, the 70-year-old has been unable to resume his guide business on Lake of the Ozarks, and his family is struggling with financial burdens.

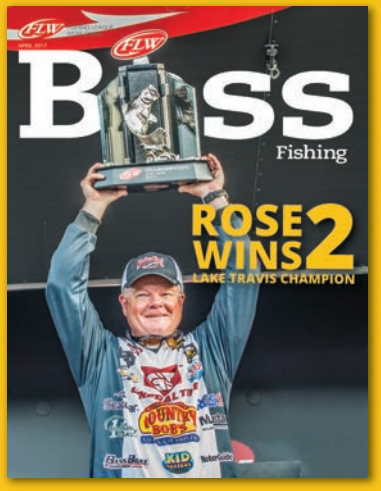
Tammy Cox, a family friend, along with Krista Heidgerken at Evinrude, set up the GoFundMe account, "Cast a Helping Hand to Guido Hibdon," whose goal is $100,000. By press time in early June, the fund had raised nearly $37,000. The money will be used to help Guido and his wife, Stella, through his long convalescent period, which is expected to extend well into the summer.

To make a donation, visit **gofundme.com/cast-a-helping-hand-for-guido-hibdo**.



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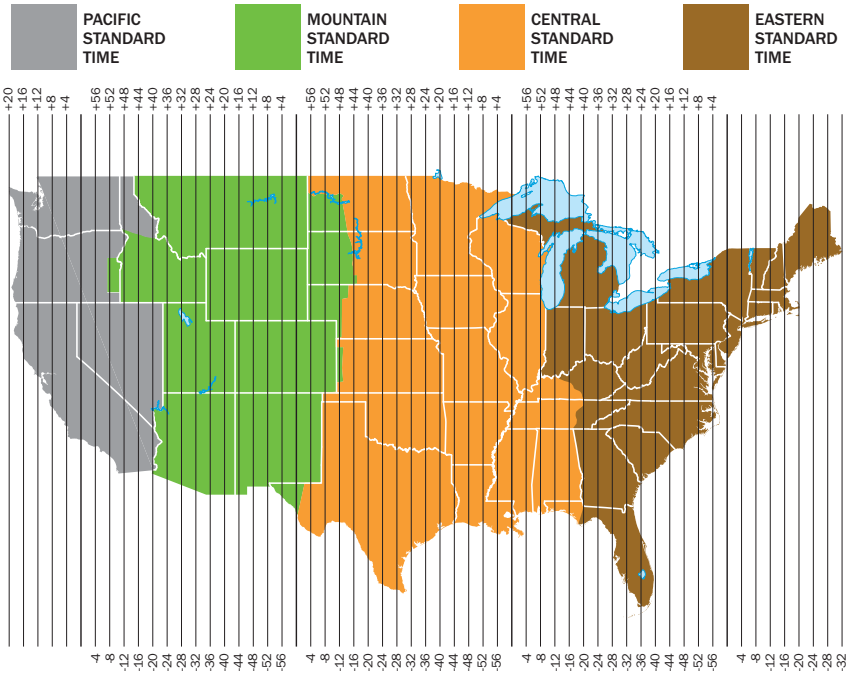
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SOLUNAR TABLE

JULY 2017



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

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The major periods last for approximately 2 to 3 1/2 hours, and the minor periods last for approximately 3/4 to 1 1/2 hours. To determine the start of major and minor times for your area, find the bold time-zone rule on the map. If you are located in the area left of the time-zone rule, add the number (in minutes) at the top to the corresponding time on the chart. If you are located in the area right of the time-zone rule, subtract the number (in minutes) at the bottom from the corresponding time on the chart. Add one hour to all times during daylight saving time.

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ROB NEWELL

We are LIVE ...

Ever since I covered my first tournament for the FLW website in 2003, I've dreamed of the day we could watch professional bass fishing tournaments live on the internet.

Back then we covered the tournament from the bank; with pen, paper and a point-and-click digital camera. "Coverage" consisted of two paragraphs about the leader with a photo of his fish.

Then FLW made it possible for reporters to go out on the water, shoot photos and send "updates" through Twitter, but it was still like using two cups and a string for coverage.

From there it became possible to send video snippets of tournament action back to shore to see some of the action from the water live – well, OK, sort of live.

For a while FLW experimented with different live stream technologies with point-of-view (POV) cams that required anglers to be casting underneath a cellular antenna to keep a constant stream.

Then GoPros hit the fishing scene to record up-close fish catches from a pro's boat. Pretty nice ... if you like fish catches and not much else.

All of these advancements constituted progress toward the ultimate goal: truly live video coverage. That finally happened for FLW back in February, when it launched its new *FLW Live* broadcast at Tour stop No. 2 at Lake Travis.

Now that live coverage is an integral part of both the Bassmaster Elites Series and the FLW Tour, I can honestly say it's everything I thought it would be.

It's good.

Really good.

Maybe too good.

Now that live coverage is for real, I've become acutely aware of the tradeoffs. The fact is, the live lens is changing the tournament game.

Gone are the days when pros could blast off and run 40 miles to the back end of a remote creek, pull out a secret lure



The author appeared as a guest host on *FLW Live* with Travis Moran during the Beaver Lake Tour event.

and catch 20 pounds without the world knowing how they did it. Back then, secrets were still secrets, and pros had large lead times with those secrets, allowing them to harness new lures, tackle, tactics and products to win prize money.

For instance, in 1993, Randy Dearman was credited with winning the first professional bass tournament using modern braided superline – "Lynch Line," I believe it was called. It took that news nearly eight months to filter out into the fishing public. Today, that would happen in eight seconds.

With live coverage, cameras are all up in pros' grills all day. Understandably, they don't want certain lures and locations to be revealed too soon. From some pros' perspective, there has been a "smothering" aspect that has come with live coverage.

So at what point is live coverage too much?

It's a tough question. I understand that pros spend hundreds of hours perfecting the way certain lures should be rigged and fished. I understand it takes days of graphing to find fish. And all of it is given up for the whole world to see in just a few fleeting seconds on the internet.

Trust me, I get it. But the fact of the matter is that's just the way the world is today. Information is instantaneous, and learning curves are crunched. What took me 10 years to learn in film photography can be learned in about two days spent watching digital photography videos online.

Everything from how to change an alternator in your truck to how to fish a drop-shot can be learned on YouTube. But here's the rub: It's usually not as easy as it looks.

I recently plumbed a shower, replaced a toilet and put in new faucets at my house thanks to YouTube. I watched dozens of online seminars about PVC, PEX tubing, wax rings and valve stems. I bought a bunch of plumbing tools, piping, fittings and hardware, but once I cut my walls and floor open to use it all, I realized it was a bit more complex than those videos let on. I had all the right stuff, but I didn't know what to do with it.

In the end, a professional plumber still has something I don't: years of experience. He knows exactly how to line up drains, tighten valve stems, run supply lines in tight spaces, throw a "T" in PVC, set flanges and put that dang purple glue on the pipes so it doesn't drip everywhere.

In the same way, I can watch Andy Morgan seine fish from bushes with a jig or watch Mark Rose throttle fish on a ledge with a swimbait. Then I can go get their same "tools," go to the very same spots they fished and barely manage to eek out a 12-inch keeper.

That's because fishing is such a dynamic process. Those guys have a better understanding of how to read cover, current, water colors, wind ripple, fish position, rate of lure fall, retrieve speed and the other 73 variables that are always in play.

And those are the realizations I'm hoping live coverage can bring to the viewer. Twenty-pound limits don't just jump in the livewell for these pros. Instead, they're earned, cast-by-cast, decision-by-decision, adjustment-by-adjustment.

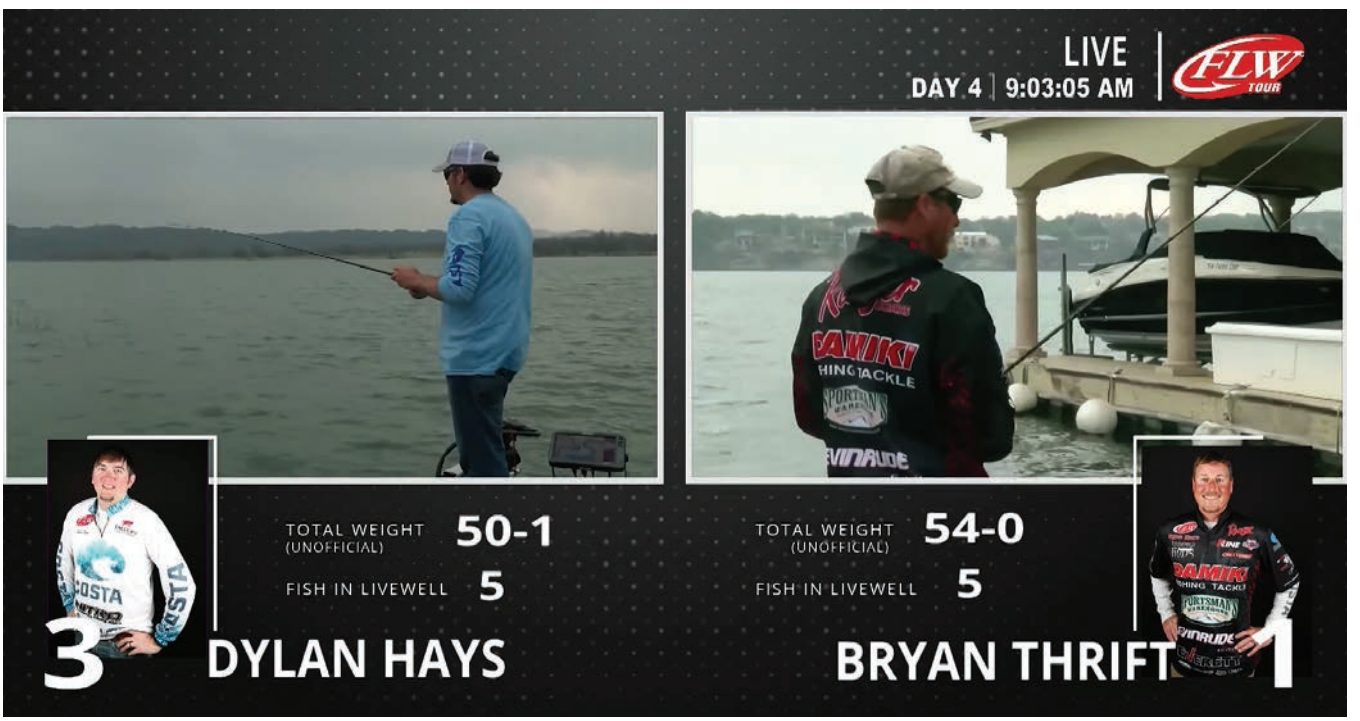
Each day pros ride an emotional roller coaster of extreme highs and lows, and how an angler reacts to those highs and lows determines his fate.

Lost fish, broken rods, gut moves, drastic condition changes, bad timing, good timing, momentum shifts, bite windows, miraculous flurries, fish management, emotion management, mental management – it all happens every hour in high-stakes tournament fishing. Live coverage will display it all as it goes down, and that's the exciting, dramatic part of the show that makes it so interesting.

People who watch golf want to see how Rory McIlroy is going to recover after landing in a sand trap, not the degree of his pitching wedge.

People who watch NASCAR want to see Joey Logano apply pressure to Kurt Busch's back bumper at 200 mph to see who will crack first, not what kind of brake pads they're using.

In the same way, I believe live coverage will turn tournament bass fishing into a spectator sport by proving there is more to this fishing game than throwing the newest lure at the spot where "the big tournament" was won last week. This sport is so much more dynamic than that, as the live lens will soon show. ■





Andy Poss Can't Catch a Break

Contrary to popular belief, not everyone who deserves it gets 15 minutes of fame. Relatively speaking, Andy Poss only got about 13 minutes' worth.

You remember him. He's the guy who introduced the Alabama Rig to the bass fishing world in 2011. Its acceptance among anglers was tentative at first, but then it exploded over the tournament landscape like a rocket. First, Paul Elias used one of Poss' contraptions in an FLW Tour stop at Guntersville to catch a four-day limit of 102 pounds, 8 ounces and win by more than 17 pounds over Robert Behrle. A month later, Dan Morehead tied on an Alabama Rig and caught a 61-4 four-day sack at Kentucky Lake to claim the Costa FLW Series Championship.

Morehead's win at Kentucky Lake was the capper, the event that turned interest in the Alabama Rig into a mad rush. Poss had a deal with Mann's Bait Company to market the rig, and for a while the money was rolling in. Then two things happened, though not at once. First, seemingly every tackle company that marketed bass baits began to knock off the rig, which is standard operating procedure in the lure business. Then, the two major tournament organizations, FLW and B.A.S.S., banned the rig from their pro circuits.

Poss couldn't do anything about the bans, and to a certain extent he couldn't do anything about the knockoffs. The latter is what really hurt, but uniqueness is a rare commodity in the fishing world. Though there are dozens of soft-plastic stick baits that more or less look like the Yamamoto Senko, out on the water they're not a Yamamoto Senko.

The real problem for the Alabama entrepreneur is that variations on his theme worked, even the rigs fabricated by guys hunkered down over their garage workbenches. Depending on where and when they were fished, the knockoffs caught bass – sometimes lots of them. There were rigs with all sorts of spinner blades and wire arms that were shorter, longer, thicker or thinner than the Alabama Rig's wire arms, and rigs with heads of different shapes and sizes. The name was trademarked, but even that wasn't bulletproof as fishermen still use the A-word to describe any version of a castable umbrella rig.

The design of the original Alabama Rig is patented, too, though it didn't seem to matter much, either. Poss is still hoping for a beefier utility patent, which would provide more protection for his castable umbrella rig, but it's been held up in Washington, D.C., where the wheels of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office turn exceedingly slow. Poss has spent tens of thousands of dollars trying to stop the bleeding through cease-and-desist orders. Though his deal with Mann's has gone away, he still sells the Alabama Rig through Tim Horton's profoundoutdoors.com website.

"The lawyers are still very optimistic," notes Poss. "We did what the lawyers and big-business people said, but everybody knocked it off so quickly. We notified companies in 2012 that we had a design patent, and if the utility patent is granted, every single one of them making rigs that copy the Alabama Rig will be infringing on it.

"We are on 6- and 12-month intervals now with reports from the patent office. Usually it takes no longer than 8 to 12 months to get a patent," Poss continues. "The process for us has been roughly 36 months. They want us to jump through hoops if we make any little change. I'm having a hard time choking this all down."

Poss' wife, Tammy, says her husband got the idea for the Alabama Rig from a TV mini-series called *The Blue Planet*. In one episode, predatory fish were shown chasing baitfish. Poss noticed that as long as the baitfish stayed in a massive school, they seemed to confuse and confound the tuna chasing them. Once a few baitfish broke away from the pack, however, tuna went after them and scooped them up.

Poss, who once gathered and sold mussels in the Tennessee River chain of lakes for a living, wondered if Pickwick Lake's bass would behave in the same fashion when a small school of shad raced away in front of them. Sure they would, and even if the umbrella rig was already in existence and widely used to troll for inshore saltwater fish and stripers, apparently nobody ever considered that it might be just as effective for bass.



The Alabama Rig's big break came in 2011 when Paul Elias used it to waylay more than 100 pounds in four days at a Lake Guntersville Tour event.

Poss did, and the result of his inspiration and tenacity was the Alabama Rig. Two big back-to-back wins, with more to come. For a while, guys lined up to buy the rigs wherever they could, at whatever price.

It wasn't that way at the beginning. "It's nothing special," the naysayers complained. Poss gave one to JT Kenney at a Walmart Pro Night prior to the Pickwick Tour stop in July 2011, and the Florida pro was so impressed that he chucked it into the nearest trash can a few minutes later.

"Being from Maryland originally, I grew up fishing umbrella rigs for stripers in Chesapeake Bay," recalls Kenney, who now resides in Florida. "That [Poss' sample] to me was an umbrella rig, and I thought 'what am I going to do with an umbrella rig fishing for largemouths?' Then Paul Elias showed us what to do with it."

And, before that, Poss showed Elias. Win, lose or draw with his attempts to protect his patent and put his Alabama Rig back on its own special pedestal, he'll still go down in fishing history as the guy who figured it all out. ■





A Road Map to Turning Pro

Every year there's a new crop of rookies on the FLW Tour. Some turn out to be instant successes. Others start slowly and steadily improve. And, unfortunately, some do poorly and never make it.

As I've seen time and again over the years, there are several factors that improve the odds of an aspiring angler having success at the pro level.

Be a Smarter Co-angler

Most people think of co-angling and marshaling in pro tourneys as the best ways to prepare for a tournament career. Fishing out of the back of the boat can be very informative and instructive. You'll observe how pros utilize their time, how they fish lakes that are dissimilar to the lakes back home and how they make adjustments during the day. However, pro fishing is more about finding fish than catching fish. Once they locate fish, most experienced anglers can catch them. Thus, catching a good bag of fish with a pro who has a big school located in a corner of a pad field isn't as valuable to the learning process as some anglers think.

The top pros regularly excel because they can locate bass quickly on large bodies of water. If you're thinking about fishing as a co-angler, try to practice with a pro before the event and pay attention to how he locates fish. Pay particular attention on days when your pro partner is struggling and has to scramble to relocate biting fish.

Try Guiding

Guiding is another great training regimen. Guiding is somewhat like tournament fishing in that no matter how well you caught them yesterday, you're expected to catch them again today. Not only does this give you a taste of what tournament pressure is like and help you develop ways to handle it, but being on the water every day allows you to track how bass respond to every variable Mother Nature throws your way.

Dealing with bad luck, mechanical problems and changing weather trains guides to keep cool when things don't go as planned. Most pros will tell you that mental toughness and a positive attitude are just as important as fishing skills. Guiding helps with that.

Fish New Water

Becoming "a stick" on their local lakes is actually a pitfall for many guides and aspiring pros. Combining angling skill with lots of time on a particular body of water means an angler often becomes one of the very best there. However, while hammering big fish daily and challenging for the win in every derby on your lake is good for self-confidence and the bank account, it impedes your progress as an angler.

If you're truly serious about becoming a national pro, force yourself to fish new water. Fish new lakes – especially lakes that are different than your own – every chance you can. Or, if you're on familiar waters, explore areas you don't normally fish, and try to figure out the bass that live there. If you get to the point where you feel like you can spend 10 hours on any new lake and have a good idea of how to catch a decent limit the next day, you're well on your way to becoming a pro.

At this point, it's all about working your way up the tourney ladder. Start at the club or T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League level and gradually move to the Costa FLW Series. Like a baseball prospect moving up through the minor leagues, your average results will let you know when it's time to take the next step.

Focus on Fishing

You might be wondering why I've made no mention of sponsorships. In my opinion, it's better to begin by focusing on fishing. Use the products you have confidence in and that work best for you. Once you start notching top finishes, contact those companies you believe in and want to work with and ask to start a partnership.

Results speak for themselves, and both you and potential sponsors will know when your time has arrived. ■



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TECHNIQUES | SCIENCE | PEOPLE | FACTS | ADVICE

TAKEOFF



PHOTO BY JEFF MCMICHAEL

WHAT'S INSIDE:

What to Throw On Summer Mats

HOW AN EXPERT RIVER RAT ACCURATELY DRAGS C-RIGS IN CURRENT

Caring for Deep-Caught Bass

Jeremy Lawyer's Advice For Finding and Fooling Summer Schoolers

Jim Moynagh has a Score To Settle

Rigging Bass Boats for Big Water

JULY

Seasonal tips and tricks + other odds and ends

By Paul Strege

BUZZER BEATER
HOW TO MOUNT A COMEBACK



PHOTO BY MATT PACE

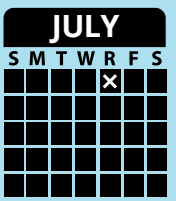
March Madness is a distant memory, but for tournament anglers vying for a berth in a year-end championship, July represents the final minutes of bass fishing's regular season, when last-cast lunkers or final-hour comebacks often make or break a season. FLW Tour veteran Andy Morgan knows this all too well.

"The best advice I can give for the final hour of a tournament is to fish what you do best – those patterns or techniques you are most comfortable with. Don't become distracted and move away from those," Morgan says. "It is likely working somewhere. You just need to figure out where.

"It's a frame of mind, really," he adds. "Early in my career, I tried to be proficient with every lure and technique available. What I found was that it was difficult for me to excel at everything and to believe that each would produce when I needed it to."

ON THIS DATE IN FISHING HISTORY: JULY 2, 2009

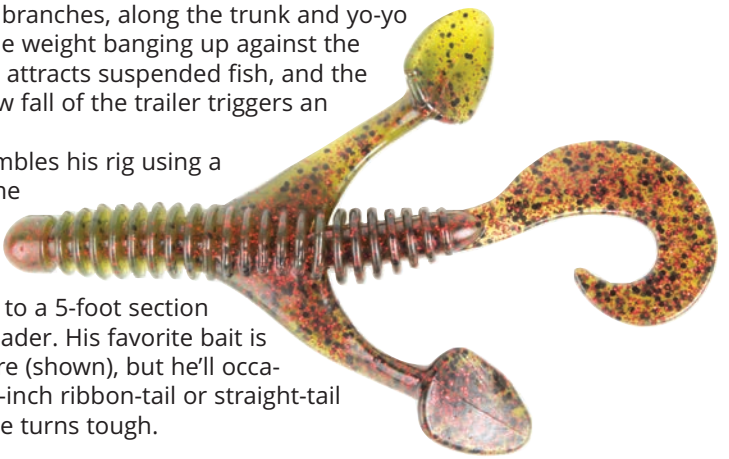
Japanese angler Manabu Kurita tied the largemouth bass all-tackle world record that George Perry held for 77 years. Kurita enticed a 22-pound, 4-ounce bass with a live bluegill that he pitched to a bridge piling on Japan's famed Lake Biwa.



TRY THIS NOW: CAROLINA RIGS FOR SUSPENDED FISH

Traditionally, Carolina rigging has proven most effective when bass relate to various forms of bottom structure. FLW Tour pro and Lake Fork guide Tom Redington has developed an unconventional application for the Carolina rig when targeting midsummer suspended bass.

"When fish suspend in standing timber, they are difficult to catch on a crankbait or drop-shot," he says. "With a Carolina rig, on the other hand, you can crawl a bait up the branches, along the trunk and yo-yo it up in the tree. The weight banging up against the branches definitely attracts suspended fish, and the erratic jerk and slow fall of the trailer triggers an aggressive strike."



Redington assembles his rig using a 20-pound-test P-Line fluorocarbon base line threaded through a 1-ounce weight, and joins it to a 5-foot section of 15-pound-test leader. His favorite bait is a Lake Fork Creature (shown), but he'll occasionally utilize a 10-inch ribbon-tail or straight-tail worm when the bite turns tough.

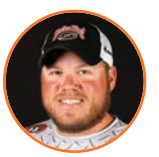
GO-TO LURES FOR SUMMER MATS:



1. Dan Morehead
SPRO Bronzeye Frog 65
"I always lean toward a frog when fishing slop. It is great for covering water fast, and for big fish. I can fish it through lily pads and hydrilla, or walk it in the open. It is surprisingly versatile."



2. Brad Knight
Strike King KVD Popping Perch
"It excels in sparse vegetation and dirtier water. The Popping Perch creates a true 'visual bite,' meaning the fish show themselves, which allows you to really work an area."



3. Michael Wooley
3/8-ounce Strike King Tour Grade Swimming Jig and Rage Twin Tail Menace Grub
"With a heavier jig, it is easier to control retrieve speed and depth on the outside edge of mats. The Twin Tail Menace Grub imitates a bluegill well. My favorite colors are sexy shad and bluegill." ■


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CAROLINA RIGGING IN CURRENT

TIPS FOR MAKING MORE ACCURATE PRESENTATIONS IN MOVING WATER

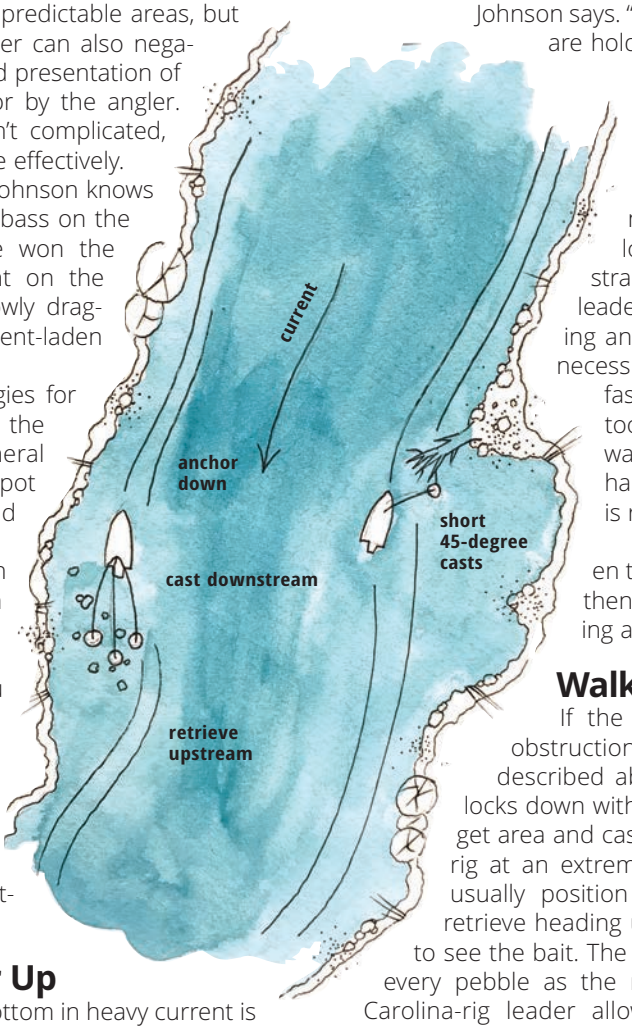
By TJ Maglio
ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN LINDBERG

Current positions bass in predictable areas, but the force of moving water can also negatively alter the action and presentation of a bait, if it's not accounted for by the angler. While dealing with current isn't complicated, there are ways to tackle it more effectively.

La Crosse, Wis., pro Jimmy Johnson knows a thing or two about catching bass on the bottom in heavy current. He won the 2014 Costa FLW Series event on the upper Mississippi River by slowly dragging a Carolina rig across current-laden points, wing dams and ledges.

He has two primary strategies for presenting a Carolina rig when the water's moving, but his general advice is to visualize the target spot and to position both the cast and the boat to get the rig there.

"Keeping good contact with the bait is imperative," Johnson adds. "Sometimes you need to get creative to get the bait in front of the fish in a way you can still hook them. It may take some time to get set up on the sweet spot, but I can promise you that some of the biggest fish are holding on the bottom, and they will jump all over a properly presented Carolina rig."



Shorten Up, Quarter Up

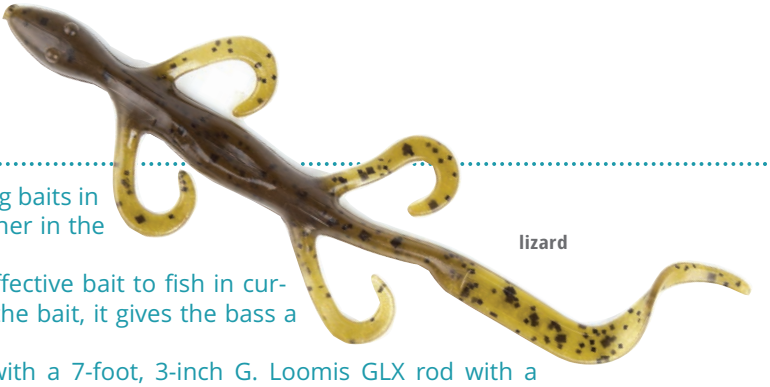
"The key to fishing on the bottom in heavy current is to make precise casts, and that usually means shorter casts," Johnson says. "You want to visualize where the fish are holding and make short casts quartering into the current so that when the bait washes through the area you think the fish are holding, there's no slack."

Slack line makes it difficult, if not impossible, to feel bites and follow up with solid hooksets. Casting straight upriver might cause the rig's leader to drift past the weight, preventing an angler from feeling a bite. Plus, it necessitates having to drag the rig along faster, which also robs sensitivity. Cast too far across the current, and the water will pull against the line too hard. About a 45-degree angle upriver is right.

If fishing a large area, don't lengthen the cast. Instead, make a short cast, then reposition to cast again – repeating as necessary to cover the area.

Walk it Up

If the current is strong enough or an obstruction prevents him from setting up as described above, Johnson actually anchors or locks down with Power-Poles upstream of the target area and casts back below it, then retrieves his rig at an extremely slow pace. Even though bass usually position facing into the current, a slow retrieve heading upstream gives them enough time to see the bait. The trick, says Johnson, is to try to feel every pebble as the rig crawls back to the boat. The Carolina-rig leader allows the bait to flutter enticingly through the strike zone. ■


lizard

WHY THE RIG?

A lot of anglers fish jigs, tubes and various moving baits in heavy current, but Johnson thinks he's found a winner in the Carolina rig.

"The Carolina rig may not seem like the most effective bait to fish in current," he says, "but by separating the weight from the bait, it gives the bass a really natural look, with the bait just drifting by."

His go-to soft plastic is a 7-inch lizard fished with a 7-foot, 3-inch G. Loomis GLX rod with a Shimano Metanium (7.4:1) reel and 20-pound-test fluorocarbon main line with a 16-pound-test leader.

In current, Johnson uses a shorter leader, usually 12 to 24 inches, so that the lizard doesn't get too far below the weight. In most current situations, a 1/2-ounce weight is sufficient for Johnson, as river fish are seldom deeper than about 8 feet. ■

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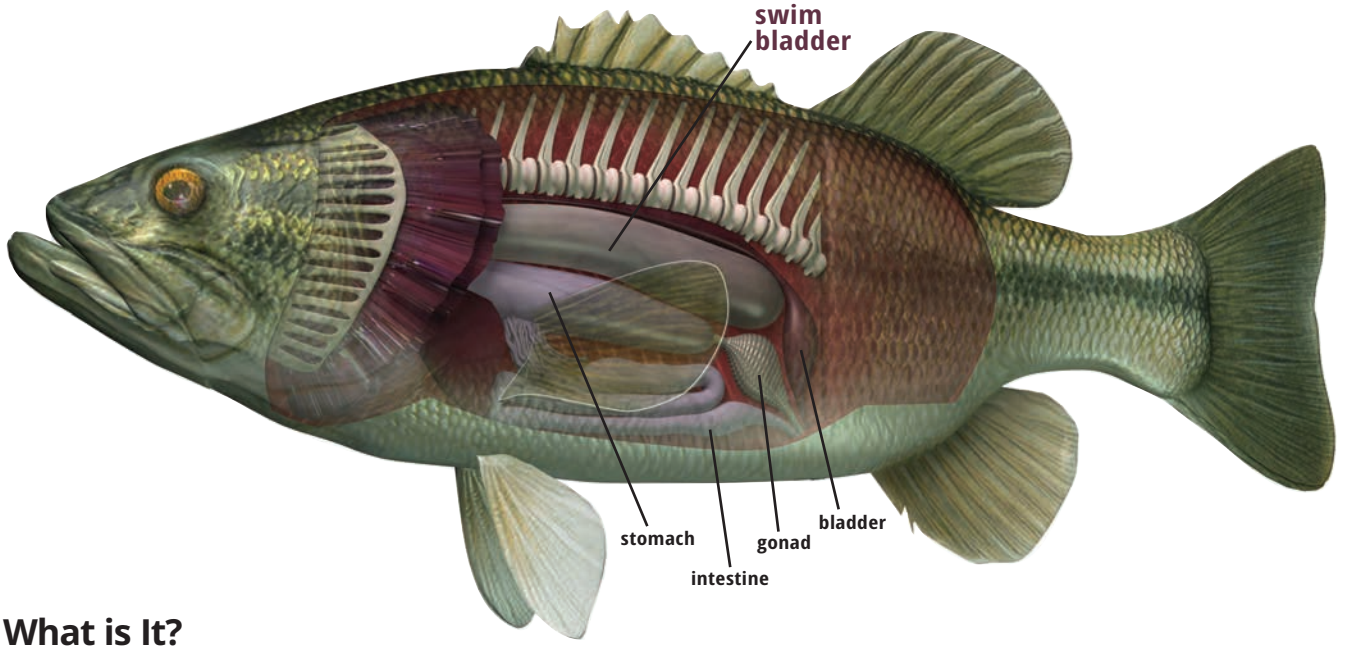
ALL ABOUT THE SWIM BLADDER

HOW IT WORKS, AND HOW TO DEAL WITH BAROTRAUMA IN DEEP-CAUGHT FISH

By TJ Maglio
ILLUSTRATIONS BY KEVIN HAND

If you go after bass holed up in deep water, you've likely seen one you've caught roll on its side or back in your livewell. Or perhaps you've released a bass only to watch it struggle in its vain efforts to retreat back into the depths. This phenomenon is caused by overinflation of the swim bladder, and if not dealt with properly can cause barotrauma, which is any damage – even fatal – resulting from rapid pressure change.

Although most anglers know that bass have swim bladders, the function of the swim bladder and how it relates to fish care are less understood. Further study of the swim bladder's role in bass biology can help anglers better care for their catch.



What is It?

The swim bladder is a gas-filled organ that allows fish to adjust their buoyancy so they can maintain their depth without expending energy. Think of the swim bladder as a small balloon, which inflates or deflates as the bass changes depth. As a bass moves up or down in the water column, the swim bladder automatically adjusts the volume of oxygen contained to create neutral buoyancy. In addition, the swim bladder is located in a dorsal position above the bass's center of gravity, which aids in stability.

Swim bladders are present in almost all species of bony fish and evolved from a lung-like organ present in early aquatic vertebrates. In some freshwater species such as gar and bowfin the swim bladder actually provides a secondary method of oxygen exchange in addition to the gills. This is why gar and bowfin can live in shallow backwaters with less oxygen, and why anglers sometimes see them gulping air at the surface.

How Does it Work?

To inflate their swim bladders, bass and many other fishes have evolved a small gas gland in the swim bladder's wall where blood vessels interface with the swim bladder. To inflate, the gas gland secretes lactic acid into the adjacent blood vessels, which builds up carbon dioxide and causes hemoglobin in the vessels to dump oxygen. The oxygen diffuses into the swim bladder to inflate it.

There is another structure in the swim bladder membrane called the "oval window." To deflate, oxygen diffuses through this portion of the wall and back into the bloodstream.

Barotrauma

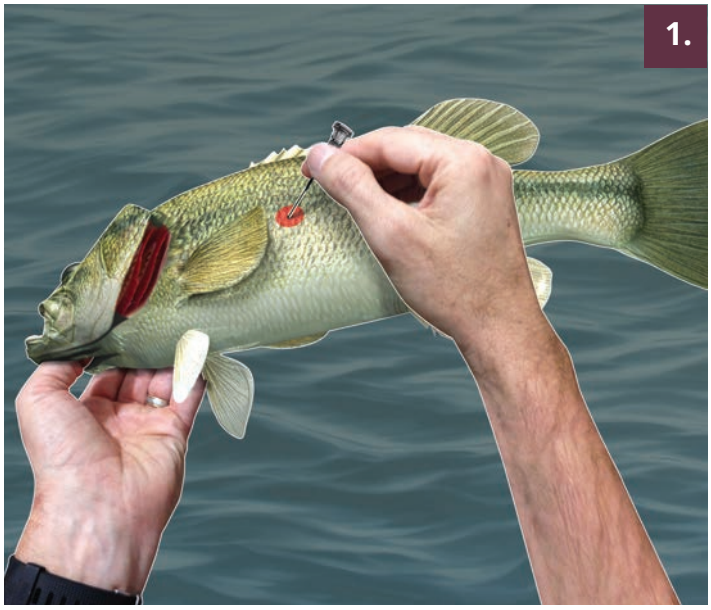
Pulling a bass from deep water too quickly causes the gasses in the swim bladder to expand too rapidly, which can cause physical damage (barotrauma) and even death. A recent study found that some bass began to show signs of clinical barotrauma when pulled to the surface from simulated depths of just 12 feet. When pulled from 30 feet, bass were unable to immediately resubmerge. At 35 feet, barotrauma was routinely severe, and in this case mortality rates of up to 78 percent were recorded when the water temperature was higher than 80 degrees.

Studies have also indicated that water temperature and species are key indicators in the likelihood that a deep-caught bass will experience barotrauma. In cold water, bass are much more resilient and less likely to exhibit symptoms, and smallmouth bass are more prone to exhibit barotrauma than largemouth bass and spotted bass.

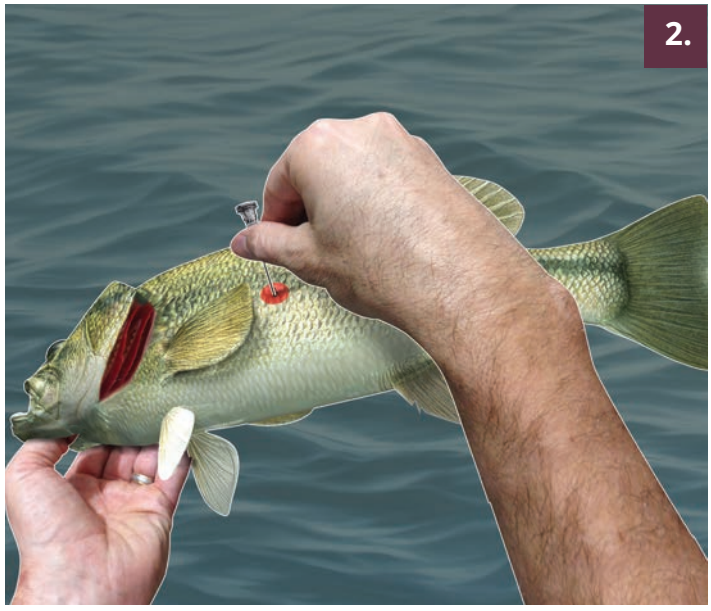
Anglers should either be prepared to deal with this situation (see next page) when fishing deep water, particularly in summer, or reconsider where and how they fish to avoid unnecessary stress on the bass.

KNOW HOW TO FIZZ

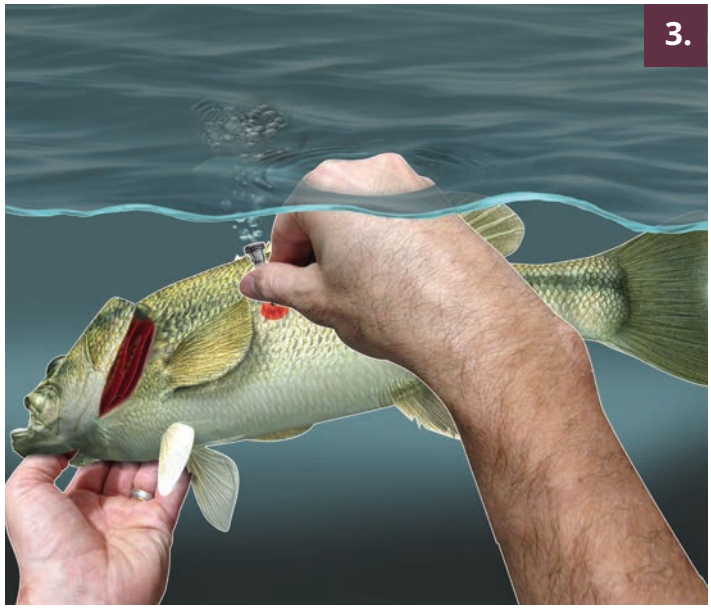
"Fizzing" is the term anglers use for the process of relieving pressure by puncturing a bass's swim bladder with a venting needle. The most effective method to fizz deep-caught bass is to insert the needle into the bass's side, just behind the laid-back pectoral fin, then submerge the bass and let the air vent. To determine whether a fish needs fizzing, place it in a livewell for a few minutes and monitor its behavior. If it floats on its side, upside down or can't seem to stay upright, it's probably time to get out the needle. ■



Insert a 16-gauge, 1 1/2-inch fizzing needle into the fish's side a couple of scales behind the pectoral fin at a shallow angle. Go under a scale, and insert the needle about halfway.



Raise the needle up to near vertical.



Now submerge the fish and push the needle all the way in. The air should vent out.

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SUMMER SCHOOL

HOW JEREMY LAWYER FINDS SCHOOLING BASS IN THE DOG DAYS OF SUMMER

By Chad Love

First-year FLW Tour pro (and 2016 T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League All-American champion) Jeremy Lawyer earned a fifth-place finish at the 2016 Forrest Wood Cup at Wheeler Lake by keying on schooling bass. Since then the Sarcoxie, Mo., pro has steadily gained a reputation as a master at finding schooling summer bass. Here's how he does it.



Lawyer used a 1/2-ounce spoon to finish fifth at the 2016 Forrest Wood Cup on Wheeler Lake.

PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

Consistency

According to Lawyer, summer bass schooling isn't a random occurrence that materializes wherever and whenever an angler happens to stumble across it. In fact, there's a pattern and consistency to when and where bass school up on a given lake.

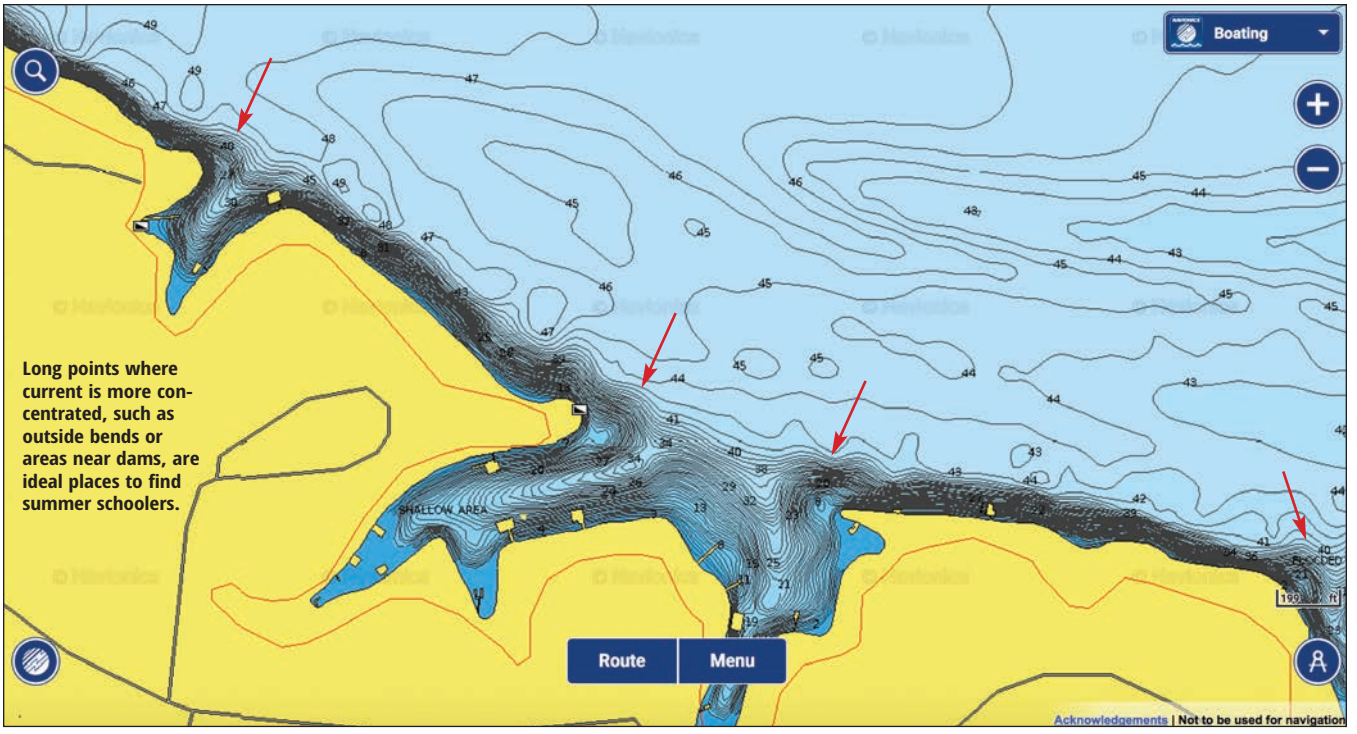
"Bass tend to school in the same places year after year," says Lawyer. "When you see lots of boats together on a ledge on, say, Kentucky Lake, it's not because everyone just happened to find that school that particular day. It's because schools have been congregating there for years. And they return year after year because everything at that spot sets up perfectly to attract schooling bass."

Characteristics

So what makes schooling bass come back to the same areas summer after summer? According to Lawyer, it's the same thing that sends us back to our favorite restaurants time after time: Because they're comfortable places to eat lots of food.

"I look for places where those bass don't have to expend a lot of energy to chase food," says Lawyer. "The tips of bars, or high spots in bars where water flows over behind them and makes eddies – somewhere bass can herd up shad coming over that bar and keep them there.

"Maybe there are some trees that come up close to the surface, or it's an outside bend where the river channel has a big flat. It's anywhere bass can hold and have food come to them."



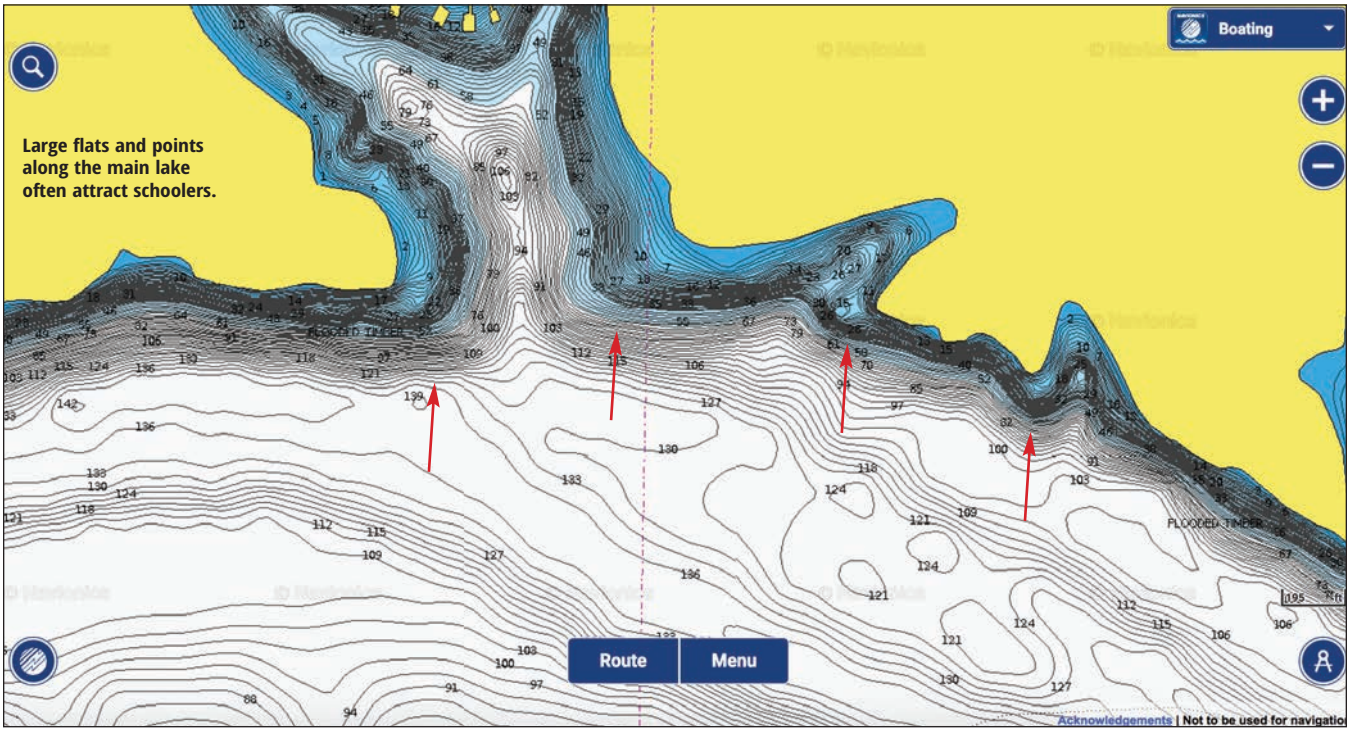
Lawyer says long, tapering points and current are the two things he homes in on when searching for schooling bass on a new lake.

"I try to find the longest points I can that fall out into the river channel; long, tapered ones, because at some area along that point there's probably going to be some timber or a flat on it, kind of like a staging area," says Lawyer. "They may be feeding there or just holding there, but they can move up shallower to feed or go out deeper. Bass like options, and long points give bass more options than short points."

According to Lawyer, where those points lie is just as important as their size.

"I always try to find points on a current-side turn," says Lawyer. "What I mean by that is when they're pulling water from the dam, however the water's running through the lake, it would have to go across this point. The way lakes are shaped, some points aren't going to get as much current across them as others. Of course we don't feel it, but the fish do, and when that water flows across that point those fish are waiting for stuff to come to them, just like on a major river. Those are the two things I look for when fishing a lake 'blind' for the first time."

What he looks with is another important factor. Lawyer leans heavily on his electronics when targeting summer schoolers.



"That's key," says Lawyer. "For deep schoolers, you've got to have a good set of Lowrance electronics, there's no two ways about it. There's simply no good way to find deep schooling bass without those Lowrance electronics. That's your eyes under the water, and the only way to find bass with them is to put your time in, idling and looking."

Timing

The time to start looking for summer schoolers, says Lawyer, is right after the spawn.

"As soon as the spawn's over those fish start migrating offshore onto these spots," he says. "They're strung out from spawning and running the banks, and now that it's over they start migrating into these groups that are going back to that summertime restaurant out there in the lake. They just want to hang out and eat, sort of like going to Florida for the winter."

And as long as the food stays there, the bass will stay there pretty much all summer until fall starts creeping in. As the water begins to cool, the bass will move back up shallow.

"That's when you get a lot of the surface schooling of aggressive fish that are putting on weight for winter," says Lawyer. "Catching summer schoolers tends to be more of a numbers game, and catching fall schoolers produces a little more quality, as those fish have had all summer to regain their strength and eat and grow."

Patterns and Baits

When bass are schooling near the surface, it's important to stay above them with baits.

"The best luck I've had is with a spoon," says Lawyer. "It's erratic, it darts around, and you can keep it deep or close to the surface. That's what I did at the Forrest Wood Cup last year on the schoolers – I tried to keep my spoon close to the surface with that darting action. Even if they aren't hungry they'll still hit it as a reaction bite."

Lawyer uses either a 1/2-ounce homemade spoon in white or a 1/4-ounce Freedom Lures Minnow Spoon.

"It's only a quarter-ounce, but it's such a good little flutter spoon," says Lawyer. "You don't have to work it so fast to keep it up there, and it's really erratic and darts around. It's an awesome schooling bait."

When bass aren't as aggressive, Lawyer likes a Zoom Super Fluke for its larger profile that tends to catch a bigger bass. For deep schools, he likes a drop-shot with a Zoom Finesse Worm.

"But the whole key to that [the drop-shot] is a 3/8-ounce weight or something heavy, so you can drop it down there fast when you see one right underneath the boat on your Lowrance electronics," he says.

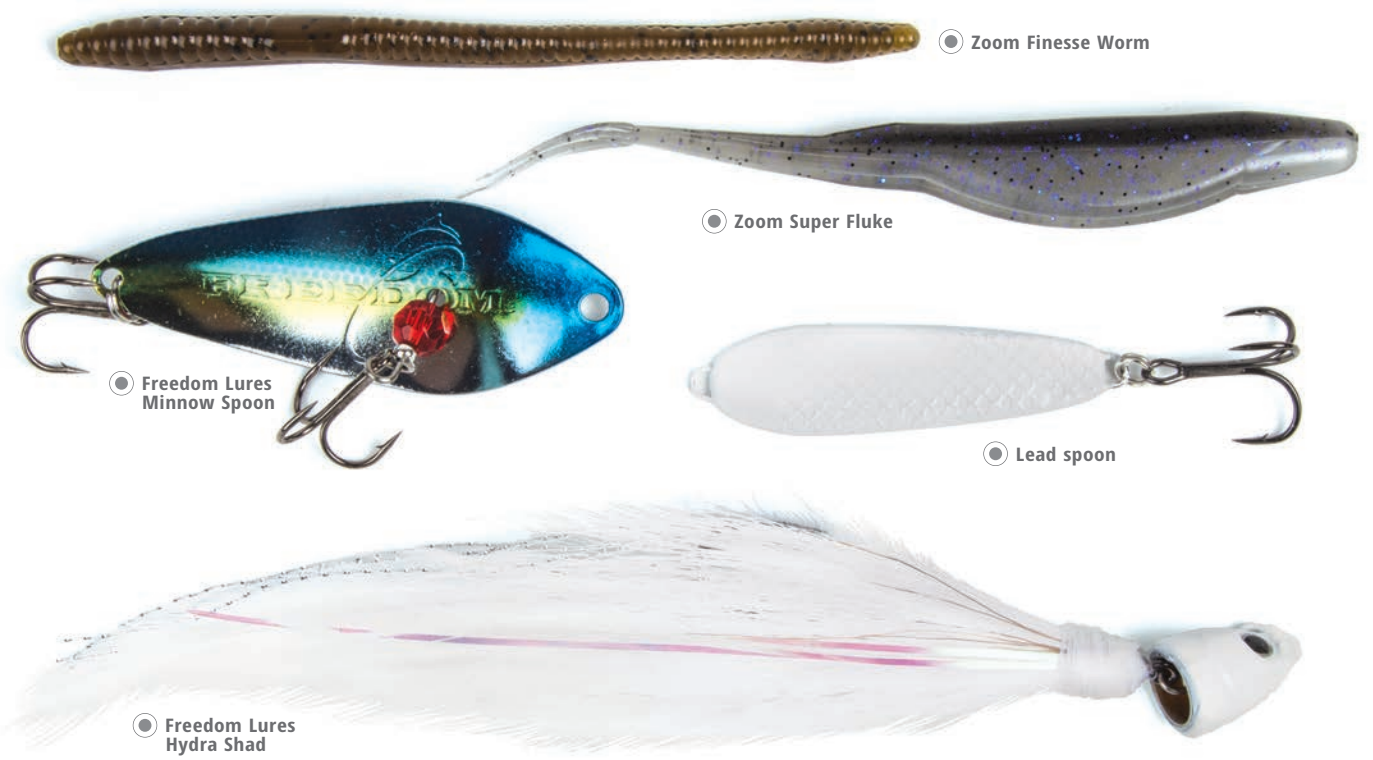
Perhaps the best overlooked bait for schooling bass, says Lawyer, is an old-school hair jig.

"Freedom makes a hair jig called the Hydra Shad that's a really nice bait. It has the appearance of a nice, big shad, and it's big enough that you can get it down there quickly and work it on the bottom or just above."

GO SMALL FOR DEEP SCHOOLERS

Lawyer believes one mistake people make is to throw baits that are too big. Instead, he says, take the stealthy, understated approach by throwing smaller baits that tend to disturb the school less.

"Everybody throws big baits," he says, "but it seems like once you've caught one you've busted the school up so bad they kind of get onto what you're doing and you have to go find another school. Sometimes you'll bust a school up throwing something noisy the first time. You'll catch one, but it seems like you catch more fish out of the school when you try to go with smaller baits that don't disrupt the school as quickly." ■



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THEN AND NOW

THE DOUBLE-SIDED CAREER OF JIM MOYNAGH

By Sean Ostruszka
PHOTOS BY PATTERSON LEETH

Then ...

Jim Moynagh was just another young angler; one begging for a phone call.

He had short hair, with bangs that would occasionally fall down his forehead beneath his Ranger Boats hat. His upper lip was adorned with a substantial mustache that pointed toward his slight dimples every time he smiled.

He'd "gone pro" in 1995, fishing the Bassmaster Invitationals. Two years later, he'd finally qualified for the Bassmaster Top 100. That same year, the FLW Tour had made headlines by offering a $100,000 prize to the winner at each tournament.

Moynagh signed up for every Tour event of the 1997 season, but he evidently didn't sign up nearly quick enough. Every other professional or aspiring professional angler put in a bid, too, and Moynagh was put on the waitlist for every event.

Still, he got a call for the second Tour stop on Ross Barnett. It was a 15-hour drive from his Carver, Minn., home to a lake he'd never fished, but he did it. He finished 12th and earned a check for $3,000. He got another call to fish the fifth event on Kentucky Lake, but he wasn't able to make it. That left one more regular-season tournament, and that was the one he wanted – no, needed – to get into: the Forrest Wood Open.

"It was on Minnetonka, which is my home lake," recalls Moynagh. "Back then, I was winning just about everything on that lake, and that particular Tour event was a 'super tournament,' so the prize money was $200,000.

"Back then, there was no official practice, you know. So you could practice as much as you wanted. So even though I wasn't in the tournament, I went out every day and practiced like I was. I did that for nine days straight. I've never been on so many fish in my life."

Every day Moynagh would get off the water – in a time before cellphones, remember – and call tournament director Charlie Evans, pleading his case to get into the event. And for the first eight days Evans told him he didn't have a spot. On the final day, however, Moynagh got off the water and got the call.

"I don't even remember how the conversation went," he says. "I just remember him saying I was in, and how relieved I was."

Moynagh was in 18th after day one with 12 pounds, 9 ounces, but he crushed 17-14 on day two to take the lead. Two days later, the 32-year-old Moynagh was handed a $200,000 check. He'd arrived, and at the time he felt that it would be the first of many successes to follow.

Now ...

Jim Moynagh is a true veteran; one scrapping to survive.

His hat doesn't come close to containing a flowing mane of long, stringy hair, which often requires a hair tie to keep it in a ponytail while he's fishing. He ditched the mustache long ago, and whether he's smiling or not his face shows the creases and crow's feet of a life spent on the water.

Twenty years have passed since he was handed that first check on the shores of Minnetonka, and by most measures his career has been a remarkable success. He's one of the elite few to have won more than $1 million on the FLW Tour. He's worn jerseys with corporate logos such as M&M'S, Snickers, BP and now Bridgford, with wrapped boats and trucks to match. He's challenged for the Angler of the Year title multiple times, finishing eighth in 1998, third in 2006 and fourth in 2012.

Still, despite acknowledging that 20 years in this sport is success in itself, Moynagh is not satisfied.


Bridgs
THE PREMI

"I've definitely fallen short of some goals," says Moynagh. "I've yet to win an Angler of the Year. I haven't won a tournament since that one on Minnetonka. I haven't quite hit the goals I set, you know. It really bugs me."

His angst doesn't stop with fishing success. Most would think that having won $1 million and been backed by top-end sponsors, he'd at least be set financially, living a lavish lifestyle and traveling often. Instead, Moynagh spends every night on the road sleeping in a 1994 truck bed camper, which he bought used for $3,000 a decade ago. He's "done a few good things," but he's never gone to Alaska to fish for salmon or gotten to travel the world. Heck, he had to get a part-time job at Gander Mountain this year to make ends meet, and he openly admits that had Bridgford not come along, it might've been the end of his career.

It's not as if he lived a life of comfort in the beginning, either. Moynagh had a station wagon he slept in when he first started, and then he had a full-size van until 2007. Even after his big win, Moynagh says his ex-wife's income was necessary to keep them afloat through much of his career, especially during the lean years.

So why does he keep doing it? Because all the ambition that originally drove his competitive spirit still lingers. On the inside, Moynagh is still the young man he once was, the one who still gets just as excited about fishing – and winning – the next tournament as he did back then.

"I still love the competition," says Moynagh. "I'm still nervous and wound up the first day of every tournament. I'm always excited, thinking I can win; thinking about the 20 rods I have rigged up and which one is going to be the one. I think 'holy smokes, I hope I get a good catch today' and what I have to do to do it."

Then there are the goals he hasn't reached; the ones always in the back of his mind, fueling that competitive fire even more.

"I still think I can reach them," says Moynagh. "At this point in my life, winning another tournament, or especially the Forrest Wood Cup, would help the most financially. But I'd rather have the Angler of the Year title. Lightning can always strike once and you can win, but to win Angler of the Year you did pretty good all year long. That's what still drives me."

And still keeps that old truck on the road, bound to the next tournament stop with a dream as a travel companion, pointing the way. ■






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PHOTO BY KYLE WOOD

RIGGING FOR BIG WATER

HOW TO STAY SAFE AND SECURE ON VAST, WINDSWEPT FISHERIES

By Joe Balog

Properly rigged boats are vital to tournament success and, in some instances, can offer a true competitive advantage. Nowhere is this more apparent than on expansive, rough waters.

While many tournament anglers are adept at the offshore game, they often fail at securing their boats for the massive waves of Northern fisheries, particularly the Great Lakes, ruining their chances for a successful day before ever making a cast.

As the major tournament trails expanded throughout the '90s to include premier big-water venues, I transformed my life to take on the challenge. In those days, bass boat manufacturers were relatively clueless in the ways of big-water rigging. My tournament cohorts and I in the Great Lakes region were navigating a bone-crushing test lab on their behalf.

What I learned through the process of real-world trial and error while working with boat and equipment manufacturers could fill several volumes on the subject of big-water rigging. However, let's cover the core principles and avoid confusion so you can refine and meet your specific needs.

The Bow

Before prepping a boat for big water, it's important to understand one fundamental concept: The bow of a bass boat undergoes significantly more stress than the stern (see sidebar on page 39 for more details). This isn't to say that safeguards aren't necessary for the rear, but the bow – particularly near the trolling motor – is prone to being damaged if not rigged correctly.

For this reason, it's important to start by moving all heavy and potentially dangerous items to the rear compartments of the boat. Anchors, spare props, hub kits, chargers, all batteries and even tackle boxes weighed down with heavy lead and tungsten weights should go to the back.

Back at an age when I didn't know any better, I experienced the consequences of not paying enough attention to what was up front. I rigged an extra battery in the bow of my hand-me-down bass boat. When I returned to weigh-in after a rough ride, I found the battery had broken through the floor of the compartment and slid to the rear of the hull, wedging in an inaccessible area. Things were seconds away from getting really ugly.

The Trolling Motor

When fishing big water with the trolling motor in use, it's imperative that its lower unit stay in the water at all times. Trolling motors work on the principles of inertia and momentum, and all momentum is lost each time the motor breaks the water's surface when the boat rises up on a wave. For that reason, a "long shaft" – typically in the 50-inch range – should be used for big-water bass boats.

The trolling motor should be mounted with a minimum of six heavy-duty bolts connected with large fender washers and locking nuts. Rigging two tie-down straps, rather than the standard single strap, cuts down on the trolling motor flopping when it's stowed.

PHOTO BY CURTIS NIEDERMIER

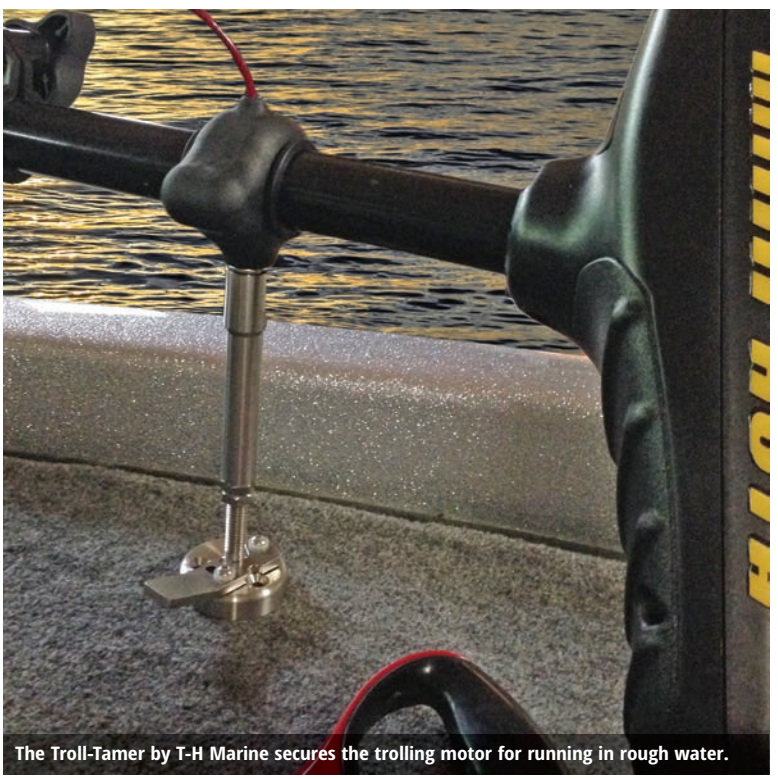


OUTFIT YOURSELF

Consider not just how you outfit your boat, but how you outfit yourself when fishing big water. Even on warm days, the open waters of the North are often cold, and an angler is subject to getting doused by rain or boat spray. Layer a light nylon rain suit under a more extreme outer layer for the best performance.

Also, a helmet is a valuable piece of big-water apparel. Good, waterproof headgear with a full facemask (a snowmobile version works great) allows a driver the ability to run in the heaviest seas without getting soaked to the core, or worrying about a hood and drawstring. ■

PHOTO COURTESY T-H MARINE



The Troll-Tamer by T-H Marine secures the trolling motor for running in rough water.

An additional safeguard should be used to reduce stress on the mount and secure the motor to the boat deck near the head. T-H Marine makes a unique product for this called the Troll-Tamer Trolling Motor Stabilizer Lock.

Another method for accomplishing the same thing is to screw a stainless-steel eyebolt into the boat's front deck directly beneath the top of the trolling motor shaft when it's in the stowed position. A drop of epoxy helps to hold the bolt permanently. Wrap a bungee around the upper shaft or motor mount, and secure it to the eyebolt. Problem solved for four dollars.

The Midsection

In the boat's midsection, items stored beneath the deck – specifically, rods and reels – are prone to take a pounding. Most rod lockers in modern bass boats feature rod tubes made from hard plastic that can damage rod guides significantly during rough rides. Protective rod sleeves help guard against damage.

Reels, particularly spinning reels, should also be covered as they often bang around when hung in yoke-style rod racks. While many padded cases are available, any simple drawstring pouch works just as well.



PHOTO BY MATT PACE

Sleeves help protect rods on rough boat rides.

The Console

At the boat's console, the biggest concern is securely mounting today's large-screen electronics. Due to the extra-heavy weight of 10-inch-plus units, most aftermarket mounts fail to hold big depth finders upright during extremely rough rides. If at all possible, flush-mount units in the dash. If flush-mounting is not an option, or when using multiple units, choose an aftermarket mount designed specifically for the bass trade, such as those from Bass Boat Technologies, rather than a ball-and-socket type.

In addition, consider a HotFoot when rigging for big water. The ability to adjust throttle continuously while keeping two hands on the wheel is a big plus.



PHOTO BY MATT PACE

Mounting electronics in the dash is the most durable option.

AVOIDING PITFALLS

Extensive real-world scenarios have led to a list of potential pitfalls when running big water in bass boats:

• **FIRES** It's said that nothing is deadlier on a boat than a fire, and I've seen two fires onboard. Both occurred in the rear mechanical area and could be attributed to items coming in contact with the battery terminals. Be sure all items in the rear are tightly secured and tied off, including hoses, wires and cables.

• **BROKEN JACK PLATES** Jack plates and outboards are only as stable as the bolts that secure them. All bolts and large locknuts should be checked after each day spent on rough water. No amount of "play" is acceptable in any mounting components. Where possible, use two sets of locknuts back-to-back on each bolt to help prevent the mounts from coming loose.

• **CRUSHED MOTOR MOUNTS** Sure, jumping waves looks cool on TV, but what's not shown is the damage done from driving too fast in rough water. Every time the lower unit of an outboard breaches the water's surface while running on plane and then re-enters, the motor mounts undergo tremendous stress. Just one bad run is enough to crush these mounts, setting up a potential catastrophic failure, including the possibility of the outboard separating from the boat. The best advice for running rough water: Allow more time, and slow down.

• **NO ANCHOR** Tournament anglers often skimp on anchors. But given a breakdown on the open waters of the Great Lakes, maintaining an anchored position can often be a matter of life and death. In case of such emergency situations, secure a large anchor with a 4-foot length of chain and 100 feet of rope in a rear compartment.

The Rear

Careful consideration must be made to the vital equipment located in the stern and bilge areas of the boat. For starters, there are the batteries. While many pros continue to experiment with alternatives to traditional systems, nothing is more dependable and longer-lasting than wet-cell lead batteries.

Anglers new to big water often fail to consider the demand placed on batteries in this style of fishing. In many Great Lakes events, I've found it necessary to run my trolling motor – the most powerful 36-volt system available – at 80 to 100 percent continuously, simply to hold my place on structure. Only the biggest, strongest batteries can meet such demands for periods extending six to eight hours.

I suggest 31-series deep-cycle batteries. They should be tightly secured within the bilge area. Avoid placing batteries on center trays intended for spare props, or other areas where they might interfere with access to the lower recesses of the bilge. In the event of a busted hose or inoperable livewell pump, moving a 60-pound battery out of the way to access the area is anything but convenient in 4-foot waves.

Batteries are only as good as the charger that maintains them. It's essential to have a charger that compensates for power surges, temperature fluctuations and different battery types. Select one with a minimum of 10 amps per bank, though 15 is better. And make absolutely certain that the charger and all components beneath deck are absolutely waterproof, as this area of the boat stays wet nearly constantly in big water.

TESTING G-FORCE IN ROUGH WATER

Through the years, I've worked closely with engineers at Johnson Outdoors to increase the durability of products coming to the bass market. With Lake Erie as a testing ground, one particular research project involved sensitive scientific probes to test the amount of G-force experienced on my Ranger Z520 while boating in rough water.

Each day that I ventured out on Lake Erie and Lake St. Clair, I kept a detailed log of weather and wave conditions, as well as any other relevant factors. Sensors kept track of impact forces in a dozen places throughout the boat, with the data all contained in a massive onboard hard drive that was then downloaded by engineers at the conclusion of the project.

The results were stunning. For instance, at times, the trolling motor mount experienced acceleration of more than 14 Gs during wave impact. That's two to three times the acceleration of the wildest roller coasters, or a Formula 1 car in a sharp turn. Using a scientific formula, this equates to the trolling motor (at about 60 pounds) exerting about 840 pounds of force on the bow of the boat. Conversely, sensors placed in the rear of the boat on the battery charger and jack plate saw much less acceleration – rarely above 1 G.

The moral of the story: Never skimp on rigging procedures in the bow. ■



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PHOTO BY MATT PACE

WHAT'S INSIDE:

Review: Shimano's New Zodius Deep-Diving Crankbait Rod

JOHN COX AND OTHERS WEIGH IN ON SWIM JIG SELECTION



SHIMANO ZODIAS 176MH-G CRANKIN' ROD

By Matt Williams

Chunking and winding big crankbaits is hard work, but it's made easier with the right rod in your hands.

Features to look for in a deep-cranking rod include enough length to facilitate longer, easier casts and maximize a plug's diving depth, plus a soft tip and midsection that absorb the resistance of a big crankbait and help "feed" the bait to the fish while keeping the hooks buried during the fight. A good crankbait rod should also have good sensitivity and be light enough to fish for extended periods without wearing you down.

Shimano's Zodias 176MH-G meets all those requirements with an innovative design specific to cranking and is put together with premium components at a moderate price point.

First Impression

At first glance the rod appears beefy enough to be a flipping stick, but closer inspection completely dispels that notion. The Zodias is light in the hand, with a soft tip and noticeable flex that extends two-thirds into the blank, which is a graphite/glass composite featuring Shimano's Hi-Power X construction. The company claims this blank design, which boasts carbon tape wrapped in an X pattern for the outer layer, improves accuracy and casting distance by eliminating blank twist.

The rod is equipped with an oversized handle that measures 12.7 inches for extra leverage, split EVA foam grips, a comfortable CI4+ reel seat and Fuji Alconite semi-micro guides. It also boasts an attractive red-on-black color scheme that's common to all 18 of the Zodias rods.

In Action

The Zodias 176MH-G is rated for 3/8- to 1 1/2-ounce baits, so the first thing I did was hunt down a school of bass on my home lake and test the rod's upper limit with a Strike King 10XD. The rod performed nicely, loading and launching the big bait 50 to 60 yards into stout southerly winds.

Retrieving the lure was more pleasure than work, and the soft tip combined with the forgiving midsection did a great job of letting the fish eat the bait without ripping the hooks free. I caught dozens of 2- to 4-pound bass during testing, and the cast-to-catch ratio was outstanding. Only a handful of fish pulled free from the trebles, and not a single one jumped off.

The Zodias cranking rod worked equally well in combination with smaller deep-diving crankbaits and square-bills, although a shorter rod such as the all-new Zodias 172MH-G (7 feet, 2 inches) might be a better choice in target situations where accuracy is a must.

I've heard of some anglers using the rod for throwing lipless crankbaits, but the tip seems a little soft for my liking for that tactic, especially in situations when you need to snatch or pop the bait out of grass.

Final Thoughts

While it can be used for performing lighter-duty tasks, this is a rod that is better suited well away from the bank and crawling medium- and deep-diving crankbaits around ledges, rocks, stumps and brush.

It's tailored for bombing casts and retrieving hard-pulling plugs while providing the extra mid-range cushion that a lot of crankbait junkies feel is imperative to better hookups and catch ratios when using deep divers.

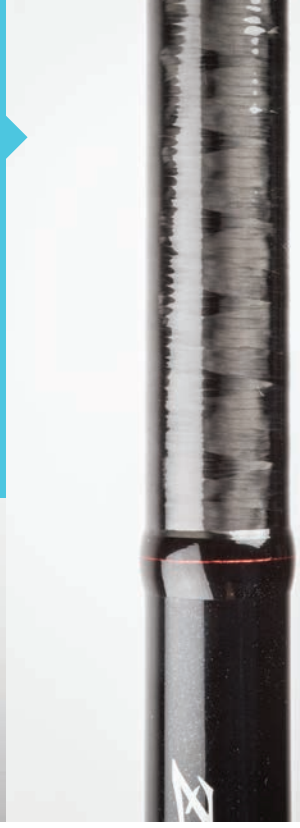
X WRAPPING

The blank is diagonally wrapped with carbon tape to improve accuracy and casting distance by eliminating twist during the cast. Shimano calls it Hi-Power X technology. It's tough to say how much the wrapping contributes to performance, but this rod certainly bombs crankbaits a long distance.



LONG HANDLE

An extra-long 12.7-inch handle increases leverage for launching long casts and fighting large fish.





CI4+ REEL SEAT

The reel seat is made of the same light, strong CI4+ carbon as Shimano uses in some of its most popular reels.

Performance Advice

To maximize the performance of a deep-cranking rod, it's important to pair it with a smooth-casting baitcaster with the proper gear ratio and a spool with sufficient line capacity. Some pros like a reel with a mid-range gear ratio such as 6.3:1, but most prefer a slower and more powerful 5.1:1 reel. I matched the rod with a Lew's BB1 Speed Spool with 5.1:1 gear ratio, and it was a fantastic combo. The all-new Shimano 300-series Tranx compact high-power reel would be a good match for this rod, too.

HITS & MISSES

+ Slow, tapering action feeds the bait to the fish,resulting in better hookups
+ Loads and launches well
+ Lightweight composite construction
+ Attractive finish
+ Good price point
– An 8-foot model would be nice

>> ON THE WATER



The Zodias crankin' rod's moderate bend helps with bombing long casts, heavy all-day cranking and fighting fish on treble hooks.

APPLICATIONS

1. It's a good choice for throwing crankbaits of assorted sizes and is ideal for large plugs with big bills.

2. Try it for fishing lipless crankbaits in open water or if you prefer a more moderate rod.

DETAILS

Length: 7 feet, 6 inches
Action: medium-heavy
Guides: 8 semi-micro Fuji Alconites
Blank: Hi-Power X/fiberglass composite
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BREAKING DOWN SWIM JIGS

THREE TOP PROS EXPLAIN HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT SWIMMIN' JIG FOR THE JOB

By Matt Williams
LURE PHOTOS BY MATT PACE



Simple and weedless, the swim jig is built to go places where a lot of other moving lures can't while imitating all sorts of big-bass forage.

Its range of uses is vast thanks to design and setup options, but choosing the right jig and trailer can make a big difference in results. FLW pros John Cox, Darrell Davis and Shane LeHew offer some insight into the differences among swim jigs and what they like to fish.



John Cox

Head Design

Cox prefers a swim jig that can be retrieved through grass and wood or flipped in shallow cover. His choice is the series of swim jigs from Dirty Jigs that includes the Finesse Swim Jig, Swim Jig (standard) and No-Jack Swim Jig. Each has what Cox calls a bullet or cylinder head design with the line tie angled up a bit, rather than straight in line with the hook shank.

"If I'm fishing down a bank and come across some brush or a bush that I want to flip in, I don't want to waste time picking up another rod rigged with a different bait to do it," Cox says. "You can't do that with a lot of swim jigs. A bunch of them have the bullet-style head, but they all work differently. Some [with an in-line eye] might be a little more weedless than the Dirty Jigs, but you can't flip them very well. The heads can be similar in shape, but the angle of the line tie makes a huge difference in what you can do with it."

Head Size

A 1/2-ounce jig is Cox's first choice since it's a good size for flipping, too, but he'll use swim jigs as light as 1/4 ounce. He bases the choice on cover density and how high or low he wants the bait to ride in the water column at a desired retrieve speed.

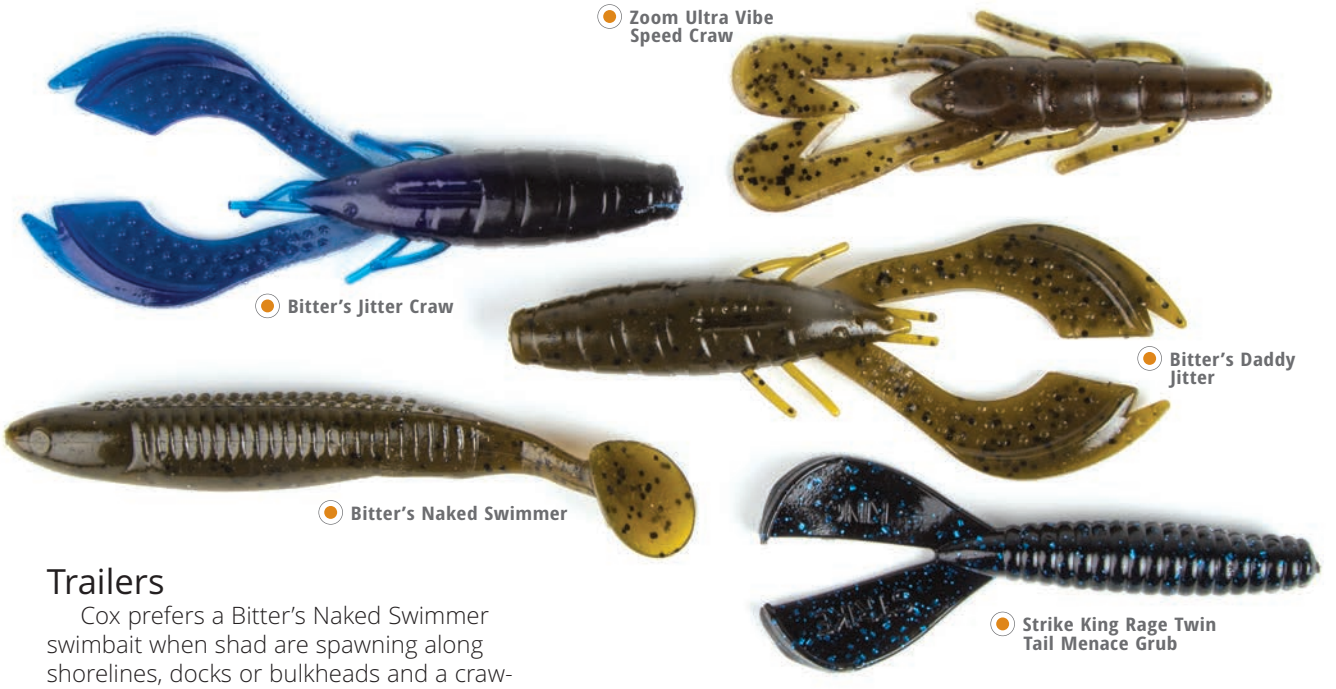


PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



Thin It

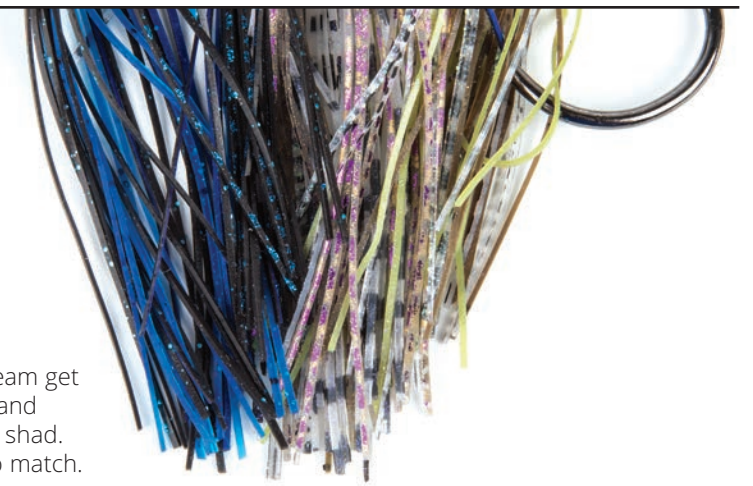
Cox says the fewer strands in the skirt, the more movement a trailer will have and the better the jig will stay down in the water column. He'll sometimes pull out strands or trim the skirt short to make a standard swim jig look more like a finesse model and to create what he thinks is better movement. Conversely, leaving it thick makes the jig ride higher with a larger profile.



Trailers

Cox prefers a Bitter's Naked Swimmer swimbait when shad are spawning along shorelines, docks or bulkheads and a craw-style trailer when bluegills are on the menu.

"It could be a Zoom Speed Craw, Strike King Twin Tail Menace Grub, Bitter's Jitter Craw or Daddy Jitter," he says. "I really like the 4 1/2-inch Daddy Jitter on a 1/2-ounce bait and the Jitter Craw for 3/8- and 1/4-ounce jigs. The smaller trailer [Jitter Craw] doesn't have as much drag, so the bait doesn't want to ride to the surface."



Colors

Black/blue or Alabama bream get the call to simulate bluegills, and chartreuse shad for imitating shad. Trailers are usually colored to match.



Jointed Swim Jigs

For a slightly different look, try a jointed/swinging swim jig such as Strike King's Swinging Swim Jig (shown here).

"The standard swim jig has more of a responsive, straight-forward action, whereas the swing jig flows a little more," says Cox. "The swing head seems to work better when you're dragging it over the grass or in open water, and the standard swim jig works better for triggering reaction strikes. It darts when you pop it out of the cover."

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Darrell Davis

Head Design

Davis prefers a narrow or bullet-shaped head, his first choice being a Revenge Baits Swim Jig.

"It'll come through hydrilla, pads or gator weed extremely well, and the head is so well balanced that it will run perfectly true at any speed," he says.



Revenge Baits Swim Jig

Head Size

Davis chooses head size based on how thick the cover is and how deep he wants the jig to run.

"If I'm fishing really skinny water, say 1 to 3 feet, I'll throw 1/4 ounce and never go any heavier," he says. "I can make the bait ride higher or lower in the water column by changing out the trailer. If I'm fishing deeper submerged vegetation I'll sometimes go up to 1/2 ounce so I can still make a slow presentation and keep the bait in the strike zone. That could be right over the top of grass or down in it."





Trim the Weedguard

Davis says he will occasionally modify the weedguard on his swim jig, depending on the thickness of the cover.

"Sometimes in really sparse vegetation I might trim the weedguard back a bit to get a little easier hook penetration," he says. "In open-water situations, like on Kentucky Lake, I might cut the weedguard completely off and fish a 1/2-ounce jig deep, say 15 to 18 feet, with a really slow presentation."



Trailers

Davis' primary trailer is a Reaction Innovations Skinny Dipper swimbait with about 3/4 inch whacked off the head.

"That makes it just the right size to imitate a bluegill," he says. "If they're feeding on really small bait I might switch to a Little Dipper, a plastic chunk or something like that. I'll occasionally go to a Reaction Innovations Twerk in really skinny water around river grass or pads. The wide claws give the bait a little more buoyancy, and it's easier to keep the bait up in the water column in really shallow situations."



Reaction Innovations Twerk



Reaction Innovations Skinny Dipper



Reaction Innovations Little Dipper



Colors

When the bass are feeding on bream, Davis likes a green pumpkin/orange or black/blue jig. He likes to pair it with a trailer of a contrasting hue.

"I'll occasionally throw something white, but only if it's out deep and I'm trying to imitate gizzard shad," he adds.

Keep Your Trailer in Place

Super Glue works as well as ever at keeping trailers in place, but the Hook-Pal is another nifty solution that's not as messy and that won't leave you hanging if your glue dries up. A special tool is used to slide a small disc over the hook behind the trailer to hold the trailer in place. If nose-hooking a chunk-style plastic, a disc in front and behind the hook will keep the trailer from sliding in either direction.







PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



E.R. Lures Flipping Jig

homemade bullet head made by Eric Self at E.R. Lures

Shane LeHew

Head Design

LeHew prefers a homemade bullet-head design any time there is vegetation in the game plan and an E.R. Lures jig with an Arkie-style flipping head for fishing around brush, bushes, docks, boat slips or more open banks.

"I work a swim jig differently depending on what I'm fishing it around," LeHew adds. "I like to retrieve the Arkie-style jig with my rod tip up using a short, quick hopping retrieve instead of a steady one like I use around grass. I think that Arkie-style head gives it more of a pronounced fall when you hop it."

Head Size

LeHew swims a 9/16-ounce Arkie-style head when targeting docks or floats in 10 to 20 feet, especially when a shad spawn is in play.

"I think the heavier bait triggers some strikes on the initial fall," he says. "If I want a little slower fall closer to the bank in shallower water, say 1 to 3 feet, I'll go to 7/16 ounce."

In grass situations where the water depth is 4 feet or shallower, he throws a 3/8-ounce jig. In deeper water, where the grass is submerged away from the bank, he'll switch to a 1/2-ounce jig so he can keep better contact with the grass.





Keitech 3.8 Swing Impact Fat



Bizz Baits Killer Craw



Bizz Baits Cutter Craw

Trailers

LeHew likes a Bizz Baits Cutter Craw, Bizz Baits Killer Craw or 3.8-inch Keitech swimbait for a trailer.

"I like a craw when the fish are wanting a little slower presentation. It helps hold the bait up a little better so you can really slow it down," he says. "The swimbait works better when I want to move the bait a little faster and draw those reaction strikes."

Colors

A shellcracker pattern is the North Carolina pro's choice anytime he is trying to imitate bluegills, and green pumpkin/burnt orange if he suspects bass are keyed on crawfish. He says white and pearl are best for shad spawns, or when bass are bedding or staging under dock floats. ■



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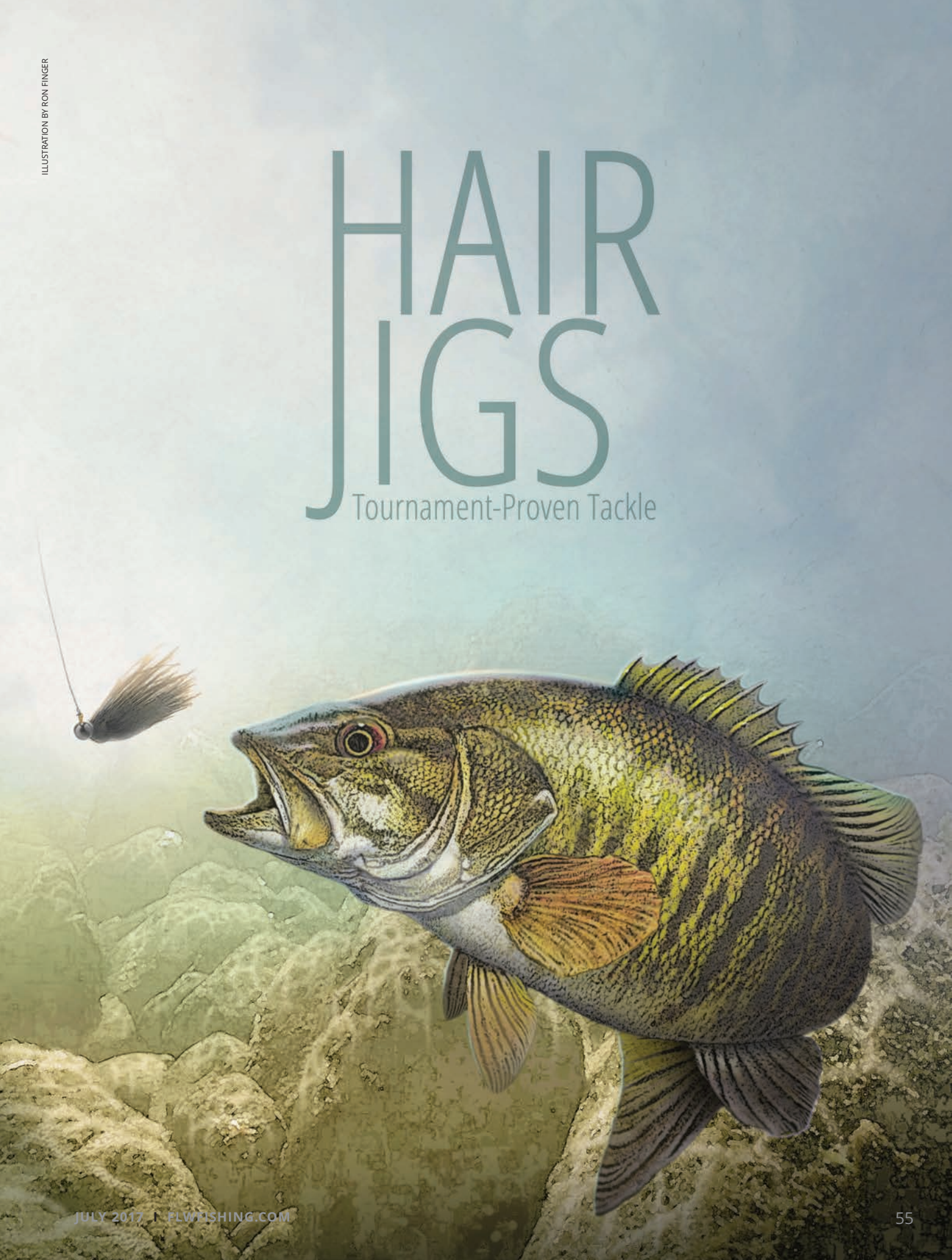

ILLUSTRATION BY RON FINGER
HAIR JIGS
Tournament-Proven Tackle



PHOTO BY GARRICK DIXON

All shapes, all sizes, all seasons: The effectiveness of hair jigs anywhere and anytime has won them new respect among bass fishermen.

By Curtis Niedermier

Like an old friend returning home after a long absence, the resurgence of the Preacher Jig as a Tour-level tournament lure a few seasons ago kicked off a lot of excitement in the bass fishing community. Young bucks raced to find the big bucktail hair jig, which was the hottest "new" lure for ledge fishing, while seasoned vets dug out their long-forgotten bucktails that they'd formerly replaced with newer tackle.

Sure, hair jigs have been used by some fishermen in various locales for decades. But until the resurrection of the Preacher Jig, coupled with Jacob Wheeler's win in the 2014 Bassfest event at Lake Chickamauga with a similar style of bucktail jig, many anglers considered hair jigs to be nothing more than winter-time lures. Still others considered them relics of a time before tackle was designed by computers, when people actually had to sit at a tying vise and piece together forage imposters out of bits of feather, fur and fiber.

What got overlooked, even as anglers rushed to eBay to snatch up what few remaining original Preacher Jigs they could find, was that a big bucktail is only one of many productive styles of hair jigs for bass anglers. Hair jigs aren't just ledge baits or cold-water baits; because they're tied together by hand, they're endlessly customizable, and can be fished successfully in all sorts of scenarios.

Hair or Fur?

Hair and fur are actually the same thing, but "hair" is often assigned to what grows on humans, and "fur" is the term used for what grows on other mammals ... usually. Depending on regional dialect and grasp of the English language, anglers tend to assign either one to the materials used on jigs. See: bear hair, deer hair, rabbit fur. Technically, the terms are interchangeable.

Feathers, Fleece, Fiber and Fur

So how much hair is really in a hair jig? Actually, it could be none at all.

These days, the term "hair jig" includes all types of jigs tied with basically anything other than silicone and round rubber. There are hair jigs made with Icelandic goat wool, imported European duck feathers, rabbit fur, bear hair, all types of synthetic materials and much more, though bucktail and various feathers are the most popular "ingredients."

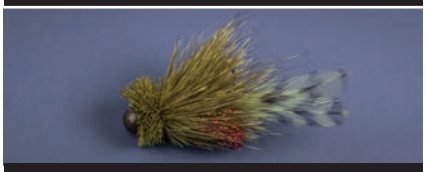
Some types of materials flare enticingly when the jig changes direction or wave when it's pulled in motion, while others stream straight behind. Some soak up water, while others shed it. Some are highly buoyant.

Every angler and jig tier has a preference – and a reason – for choosing each type of material and tying or trimming it in such a way to achieve the right balance of length, bulk, buoyancy, color and movement.

What follows is a rundown of some of the more common materials used to tie hair jigs:



Cumberland Pro Lures Prayer Jig



Jimmy D's River Bugs Scruffy

BUCKTAIL AND DEER HAIR – Bucktail is the predominant choice for ledge-fishing hair jigs and striper jigs, which are known by many anglers simply as bucktail jigs. It creates a good baitfish profile in the water, and swishes and flares when the jig changes direction.

Most people believe that all bucktail is hollow, yet buoyancy – and length and color – vary based on where on the deer's tail each hair grows. Hair on other parts of the body also varies, and the differences impact the way jigs moves in the water, how fast they sink and how flat the hair lies once it's tied to the hook.

Bass fishing bucktails are usually made with white hair taken from the deer's tail, and the longer the better. Pros crave bucktail jigs with hair that's 7 inches long or longer, though bucktail that long is hard to find.

Some body fur – usually a drab brown color – is more buoyant and flares wider when tied to the hook, which makes for an effective slow-falling finesse jig.



Custom bucktail jig with hackle accents by Jeff Bruyere

HACKLE FEATHERS – Hackle feathers are used to tie many types of artificial flies and jigs. According to Andrea Sanders, president of Talon Fishing Unlimited in Milam, Texas, which sells a modern version of the classic Preacher Jig, the feathers come from a type of chicken that's raised specifically for its hackle. It's one of the "ingredients" Talon uses in its jigs, and is what's used to tie the rear part of the skirt to the left.

"The hackle feathers are used because there's a curve to that feather shaft, and there's fairly strong webbing on that feather," says Sanders. "With that curve, the feather placement, when it's done correctly, actually adds action to the jig when it's pulled through the water. It'll kind of add vibration if it's placed right."



Custom duck feather jig by Derrick Snavely

Punisher Lures Float & Fly Duck Feather Jig

DUCK FEATHERS – The term "duck feather" isn't very specific, but in the fishing world a duck feather jig is usually made from feathers pulled from parts of the stomach or flank of a drake mallard. The feathers have a barred gray pattern that somewhat mimics fish scales, and when used as the lone ingredient or with only a little bit of fiber, they create a jig with very little movement. Duck feather jigs are popular for float-n-fly fishing or for tight-lining on light spinning tackle when imitating inactive baitfish in cold water.



Custom marabou jig by Jeff Gustafson

MARABOU – A soft, fine feather, marabou is easy to find and has been used for small, fluffy hair jigs for many years. Marabou is mostly relegated to the crappie jig market nowadays, but smallmouth anglers in the Upper Midwest have rediscovered it and made the marabou jig one of the hottest smallie baits in recent years. It has some action when the jig changes direction, but when put in steady motion marabou flattens into an accurate minnow profile.



Jimmy D's River Bugs Rabbit Swim Jig

RABBIT FUR – According to Jim DeZurik, who owns Jimmy D's River Bugs in Sartell, Minn., rabbit fur has several positive features.

"It's strong. It really takes a beating," says DeZurik, who's been tying and selling flies and hair jigs for more than 50 years. "I like to use it as a trailer. It wraps nicely on a hook, too, so it gives a nice body material."

The rabbit hide is similar to soft leather. It does dry out between uses, but DeZurik says it softens up again once it gets wet and makes a great jig trailer, like on the jig shown here.

"That rabbit strip just becomes alive," he says. "It's very attractive to the fish."

Finally, rabbit fur is dyed many colors, which provides a lot of options for jig makers.



Jimmy D's River Bugs Minnesota's Traditional Black Bear Jig

BEAR HAIR – Here's a traditional material used by Northern multi-species anglers to tie small, simple jigs. DeZurik says it feels softer than bucktail, but is much more durable – enough so that one jig can catch dozens of fish.

Bear hair also lies differently on the hook.

"They used to use horse hair. Horse hair is like human hair. When you put a thread on it, it doesn't spring out. It's flat," DeZurik says. "Bear is a little bit like that. Bucktail, because it's hollow, it springs out quite a bit. It's a different application."

Unlike bucktail, which is usually white and can be dyed, bear hair is whatever color nature creates.

"I use cinnamon and black, and there are all kinds of variations between them," DeZurik says. "I'm playing with spring bear. It's a bear that just came out of the den. In Canada they have some places you can hunt them, and the hair is about 4 inches long."



Jimmy D's River Bugs Furry Critter (fox)

FOX FUR – Still used to tie jigs these days, fox fur (and also coyote) makes a nice skirt but is somewhat fragile.

"You never can put a lot of material in it," says DeZurik. "You have to leave room for it to breathe. Because it's so fragile, it's like plastic almost.

"It has a nice glint in the water," he adds. "It has a natural shine that's lacking in bear and bucktail."

Anglers in DeZurik's region like to tip small fox jigs with live bait to fish for walleyes, but it probably has applications for bass as well.



Punisher Lures Float & Fly Hair Jig

CRAFT HAIR – This synthetic fiber is very soft and fluffy. It's commonly used on float-n-fly jigs and other small hair jigs. According to Stephen Headrick, owner of Punisher Lures in east Tennessee, craft hair has many applications in the cooler months, but he often transforms his craft hair jigs into more subtle minnow imitators for winter fishing by matting down the hair with his company's Fish Dope, a petroleum jelly product with other additives that he says help cover an angler's scent and make fish hold on longer. Mostly, Fish Dope slicks back the hair so it doesn't undulate in the water, causing it to look more like a stunned, still baitfish.



Hog Farmer Baits Hair Jig

OTHER SYNTHETICS – There are dozens of types of synthetic fibers used for tying jigs and flies. In the bass-fishing world, most anglers believe that synthetics aren't as effective as natural fibers, and that they tear and tangle too much. True or not, there's definitely a general lack of confidence in synthetics, so they're mostly used to add color or increase the length and profile of a hair jig. Flashabou is one of the most popular and is used to add reflective properties to a jig.

Much of the jig skirt shown at left is a synthetic bucktail replacement fiber.



Talon Pete's Preacher Hair Jig

OTHER TYPES OF NATURAL FIBERS – Ask the right old-timer, and you might hear stories about polar bear hair (it's illegal to sell), skunk and squirrel tail, Icelandic goat wool, and other exotic fibers being used to tie hair jigs. Anglers in search of an edge up on the competition have tried just about everything.

Icelandic goat wool was reportedly part of the original Preacher Jig, and FLW Tour pro Jeff Gustafson says a few folks in his region of Ontario are still using it to tie small jigs. Talon uses a secret type of natural hair in its jigs to increase length. The company says it grows longer than bucktail and tangles less than synthetics.

There are others, too, and the rarity of some fibers and the time it takes to tie up the jigs are partly to blame for most major tackle companies discontinuing hair jigs from mass production. That's why small companies and independent tiers are the ones churning out the best jigs nowadays.



The Hair Jig's Place

Many hair jigs are small – made with short skirts and light leadheads ranging from 1/16 ounce up to about 1/4 ounce. As such, before the resurgence of big bucktails that resembled the Preacher Jig, hair jigs for bass fishing were mostly reserved for smallmouths or, more commonly, cold-water finesse applications with light line and spinning tackle – boring fishing to many modern bass chasers.

That's probably why the bucktail jig reignited the category so quickly. Not only did it catch bass that wouldn't touch more in-your-face baits, but it had a big profile and could be fished with a medium-heavy baitcasting rod and 12- to 20-pound-test line. Anglers also quickly realized that they could be very successful with heads weighing more than an ounce. It allowed for a more aggressive type of "mid-finesse" fishing that fit with popular tackle and modern fishing approaches.

So are hair jigs finesse or not? That's tough to say because they can be fished all sorts of ways. Generally, however, hair jig tactics range from very subtle to the middle ground. They're usually fished without trailers, so they don't have a ton of built-in action. Yet they're very good "in-between" baits because they can be fished either with some angler-imposed movement to garner reaction strikes or very slowly to tempt bass with a visual offering.

"One of the common mistakes that people make on those hair jigs [the Preacher Jig style] is they think it's a solve-all," says Tour pro Pete Ponds. "It's not. It's a fill-in type of product, so whenever they quit biting a crankbait you can throw the hair jig and catch five or six more, and then switch back to the crankbait. But there have been some guys like Buddy Gross who've figured out some different ways to fish it. He caught them at Pickwick snapping it out of eelgrass, which is something I've never done."

Even Gross, who's won a Tour event with a hair jig, admits that it's part of a system. He likes to rotate between the hair jig and a swimbait.

"I mix them up. I have both on the deck when I'm ledge fishing," he says. "They'll hit the hair jig sometimes when they won't hit anything else. Usually it's because of fishing pressure."

Missouri pro Dion Hibdon comes from a family known for finesse tactics, including fishing hair jigs. To Hibdon, the hair jig is about like a Yamamoto Senko: It can work almost anywhere, and bass eat it when they won't eat anything else.

"We've caught them on it ever since I was a little kid," he says. "That was the original – before rubber [skirts] even.

"It's normally for cold water. I'm talking 30s up to the mid-40s. A 3/8-ounce jig was a giant one. We fished a lot that were 1/8 ounce and 1/4 ounce."

Hibdon says he and other members of his family, including his legendary father, Guido, have tied hair jigs to imitate just about every type of baitfish, but the "primary deal" for them was to fish a hair jig as a crawfish imitator in spring and winter.



Custom bucktail jig by Dion Hibdon



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Basic Presentations

Hibdon believes an angler can fish a hair jig just about any way he wants: dragging, hopping, stroking, crawling, free-falling, pitching, swimming. Here are some of the more common ways pros use it.



PHOTO BY JAY SIEMENS

Lift and Glide

FLW Tour pro Jeff Gustafson employs a more modest approach when targeting smallmouths in the fall in his native northwest Ontario. Using 1/4- to 3/8-ounce mid-sized (4 to 5 inches of hair) bucktail jigs, he plucks smallmouths off isolated rock piles, points and humps once the water drops below 50 degrees using soft "lifts," then letting the jig pendulum back down to the bottom.



Custom bucktail by Jeff Gustafson

Reel and Kill

Pickwick Lake guide and T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League veteran Roger Stegall uses a simple bucktail jig when bass are feeding on gizzard or threadfin shad, but won't touch any other lure.

His methods of fishing a hair jig are typical, similar to how Gross and Ponds fish it on ledges. He either reels it in a few cranks and then kills it, repeating the sequence several times, or he hops it on bottom.

"When it stops it does a 'fluff,'" Stegall says. "That really seems to be attractive to fish. The hair sort of blooms out."

Drag

This one's simple, but it's the preferred way to fish a crawfish-imitating hair jig. Either pull it along slowly, or work it down a rocky bank with subtle twitches and tugs – even a soft hop.

Swim

Minnesotan and Tour rookie Josh Douglas catches bruiser smallmouths by swimming a 1/16- to 1/8-ounce black, brown or green Outkast Tackle Feider Fly marabou jig. Twitching or shaking the rod sometimes helps get bites, but Douglas says the real key is to target fish where they're feeding: near bottom when eating crawfish and suspended up when eating minnows or hatched mayflies.

Jimmy Reese fished a 1/8-ounce SPRO Phat Fly in a similar way at the 2016 Forrest Wood Cup, swimming it on 6-pound-test line in the middle of the water column in 5 to 7 feet of water over a long point. He says the bass were schooling, but wouldn't bite more traditional open-water lures. He chose the hair jig because it matched the size of small young-of-the-year shad in the area.

Free-Fall

Reese also caught key fish by casting his jig to a bridge piling and letting it sink on slack line – feeding line as it fell. According to Hibdon, a similar method works around docks in slick-calm conditions. He casts the jig and lets it sink, which often does the trick. If nothing bites he slowly swims or hops it back.

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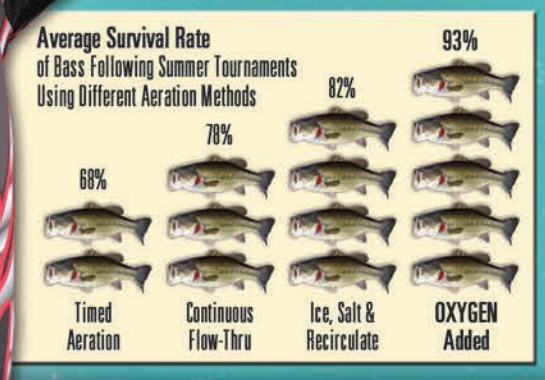
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Thoughts on Tackle

With the variety of hair jigs available, there's really no perfect rod, reel and line setup for fishing them. The choice depends on the jig and situation.

Most pros fish 1/16- to 1/4-ounce jigs on medium or medium-light spinning rods. Opinions vary on length, but a spinning rod 7 feet long or even longer with a moderate bend might help with making long casts and fighting down bass on light line. Baitcasting rods range from medium to medium-heavy.

"Light" is relative when it comes to line. On the Tennessee River, 12-pound-test fluorocarbon seems to be the most common choice for fishing 1/2-ounce bucktails, and that's lighter than what most anglers use for fishing football jigs and Carolina rigs. Heavier jigs can be fished on heavier line. Hibdon says he'll use line as light as 6-pound test with his finesse hair jigs on spinning tackle, and he adjusts to accomplish the right sink rate – lighter line for a faster sink, and vice versa.

3 Advanced Smallmouth Finesse Tactics

Hair jigs being good clear-water baits, they often make for killer smallmouth lures. Here are three advanced tactics that can put smallies in the boat.

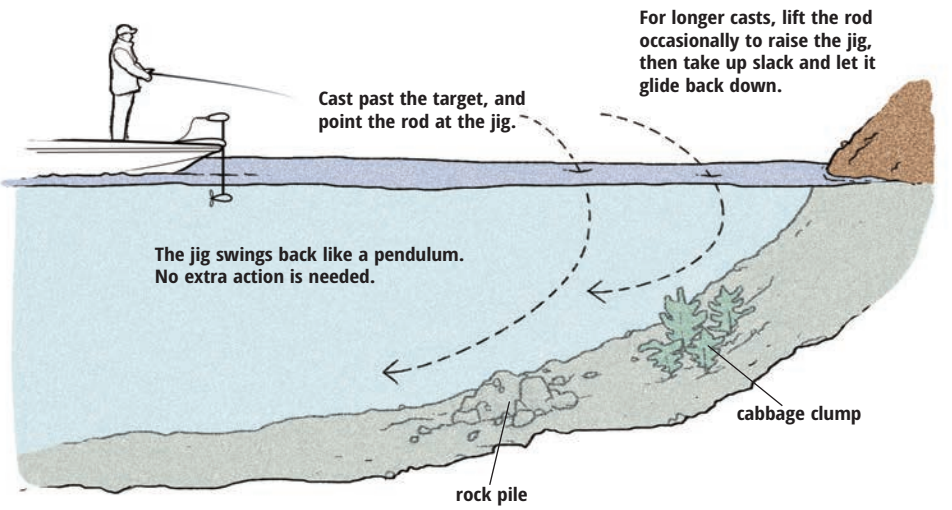
1. Gliding for Smallies

The Jig: 1/16- to 1/8-ounce BT Fishing Boo Jig or Northland Marabou Jig

Tackle: 7-6 G. Loomis NRX 901S spinning rod; Shimano Stradic CI4+ 2500 reel; 8-pound-test yellow PowerPro braided line; 8-pound-test fluorocarbon leader

Where: Northern natural lakes

Scenario: Smallmouths live in water less than 15 feet deep all summer in many lakes in Jeff Gustafson's native northwest Ontario region. He fishes isolated targets such as boulders and clumps of water cabbage, "gliding" the jig overhead through the middle part of the water column.



Hair Jig Trailers

Many hair jigs don't require a soft-plastic trailer because the color and forage-imitating characteristics are built into the skirt. Still, a trailer can be added to increase bulk or action.

Hibdon uses a trailer quite often on his hair jigs and always has.

"Most of the time we threw an Uncle Josh Eel on the back of it," he says. "Then Mister Twister came out with a thing called a SinSation, which had three legs. Nowadays it's what guys call a chicken foot. That changed everything. It came with a pair of arms and a little slinky tail behind it, like a Brush Hog has."

For finesse presentations, it's best to stick with subtle trailers. Hibdon suggests using the rear half of a Brush Hog, including the two thin soft-plastic tails that stick out the back. Small spade-tail worms, realistic craws such as the original Luck-E-Strike Guido Bug or Zoom Lil Critter Craw, chunks, and various other subtle trailers are good choices.

For ledge fishing, Gross prefers to not use a trailer if his jig has long, thick bucktail.

"But if it has thin hair or synthetic hair I put a 7-inch Zoom Fluke on it just to beef it up," he says. "Three-quarter ounce is usually what I run, but when I start putting those bodies on them I'll usually jump up to an ounce."

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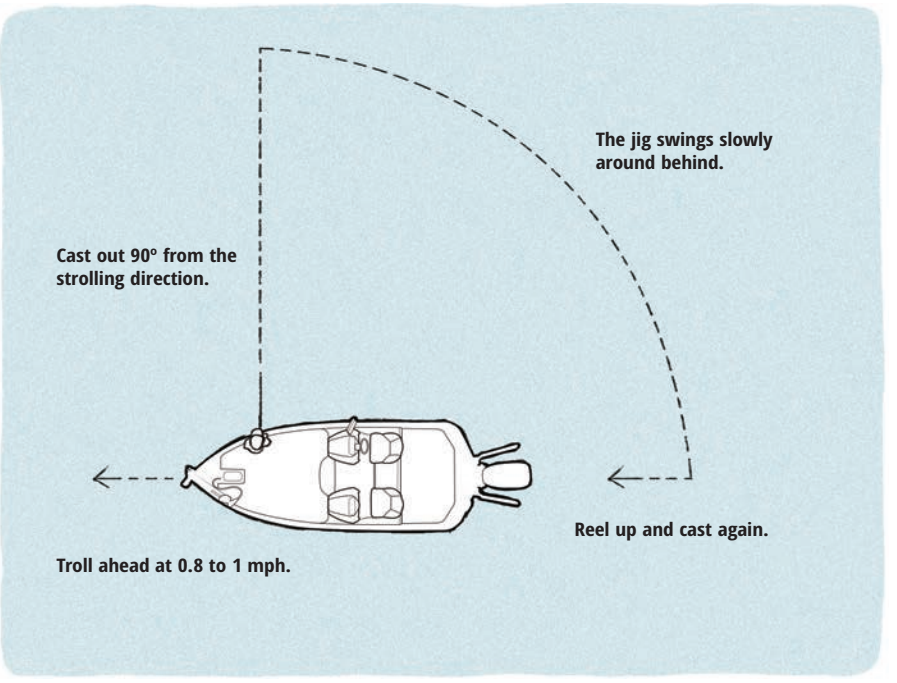
2. Strolling Big Water

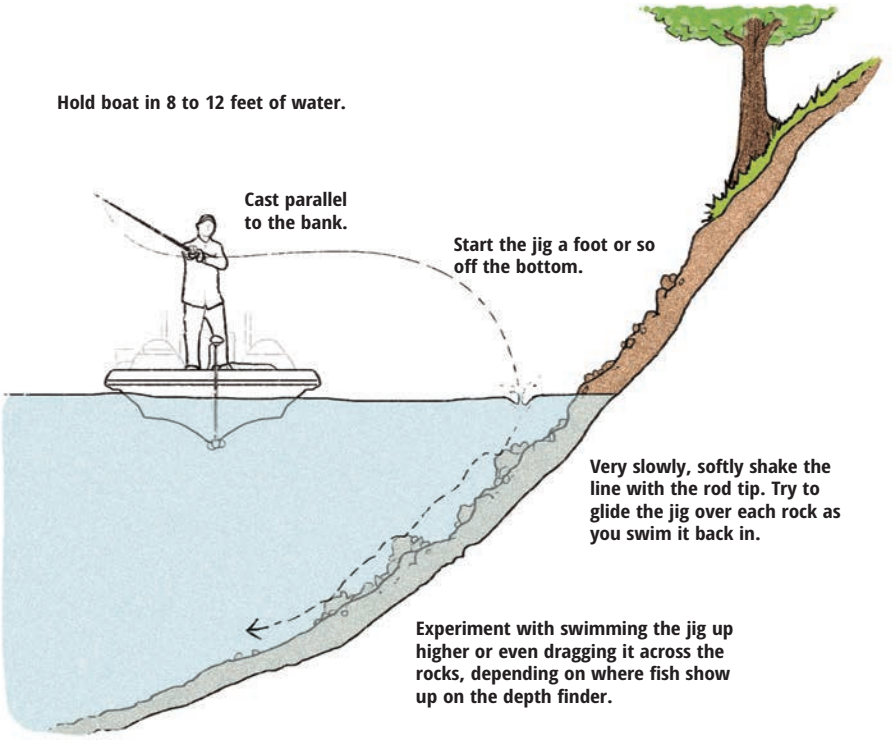
The Jig: 1/16- to 1/8-ounce BT Fishing Boo Jig or Northland Marabou Jig

Tackle: 7-6 G. Loomis NRX 901S spinning rod; Shimano Stradic CI4+ 2500 reel; 8-pound-test yellow PowerPro braided line; 8-pound-test fluorocarbon leader

Where: Great Lakes, particularly Sturgeon Bay

Scenario: In early spring, smallmouths relate to small patches on the bottom that are different from the rest on vast 8- to 14-foot-deep flats. They're skittish because of the clear water, so Jeff Gustafson targets them by fishing out to the side of the boat. Strolling allows for covering more water.





3. Tight-Lining Micro Jigs

The Jig: 1/8-ounce duck feather jig

Tackle: 6-foot, 10-inch G. Loomis GLX 820S DSR mag-light spinning rod; Shimano Stradic CI4+ 2500 reel; 4-pound-test Gamma copolymer or monofilament

Where: mountain reservoirs

Scenario: In winter, east Tennessee pro Derrick Snavely targets smallmouths (and occasionally spots and largemouths) in 8 to 12 feet of water along steep-sloping rocky banks and bluffs, similar to the types of places where anglers traditionally would fish a float-n-fly. Calm conditions make it easier to fish light jigs, and overcast skies keep the fish from pushing deeper.

Swap Gulp! for Feathers

A duck hair jig is a good imitator of 1 1/2- to 2-inch baitfish. If the bait is larger, Snavely says another good choice is a 3-inch Berkley Gulp! Minnow rigged on a 3/32-, 1/8- or 3/16-ounce jig. The technique is the same.





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1	2017 YETI FLW College Fishing National Champion
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2 EARLY STORY LINES



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

1. The New Grass

According to T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League stick Joey Sabbagha, who lives on Lake Murray, there's more grass on the lake this year than in 2014.

"You've got some gator grass [alligator weed], water willow and now there's some dollar pads coming up along the shore," he says. "That's something we haven't had in a long time. There's an abundance of shoreline grass, and that's going to be a major player in the Cup.

"When Michael Bennett won it down here [in 2008], that's when we had a lot of gator grass. Then the gator grass went away for whatever reason, and now it's back," Sabbagha adds.

Sabbagha suspects that the new grass will set up a strong frog bite, and in 2008 Mark Rose caught 20 pounds, 2 ounces on day one of the Cup by punching a heavy jig into thick emergent grass. The greenery will certainly get a lot of attention from the pros.

2. The Schedule Change

In a departure from the norm, the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup will be a three-day event with a four-day official practice period. An extra day to scout the lake could be tremendously valuable to some anglers, but it'll also put more pressure on fish that can be pretty cranky to begin with in late summer.

Tournament-wise, a three-day Cup at Murray might force some pros to reconsider the schooling pattern, which is a slow-and-steady approach that can outlast the shallow bite over a four-day period, but might not be able to keep up for just three days.

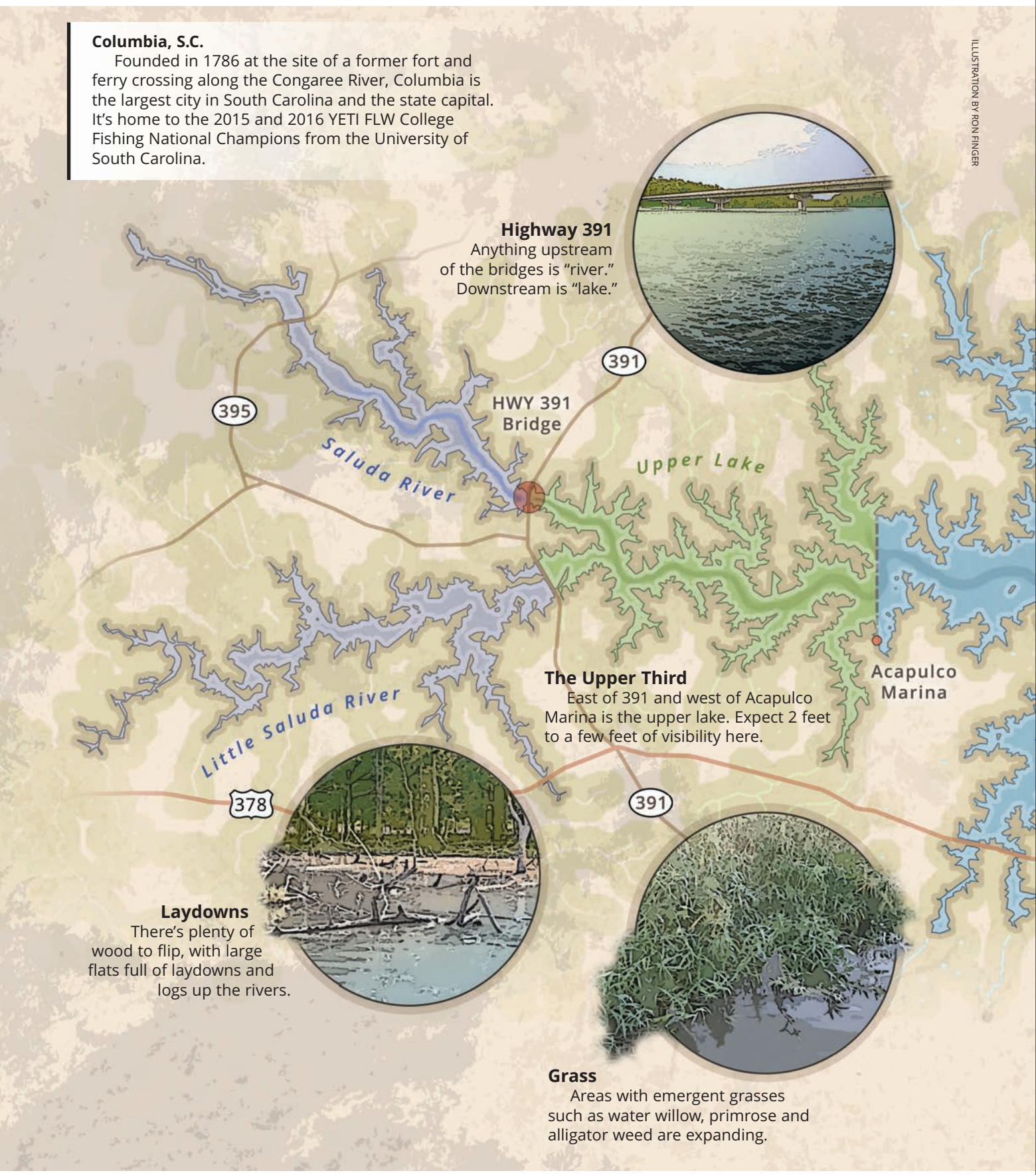
"Usually when you get on those schooling fish down there, it's a lot of 2 1/2-pounders, and you'll get some 3s, but it's hard to compete unless the tournament is stretched out because a guy could catch 17 or 18 pounds in a day in the shallows," says Sabbagha. "That's hard to do for several days, but someone could catch two big bags up shallow, with one decent bag – I'm talking a 10-pound bag – and win."



LAKE MURRAY

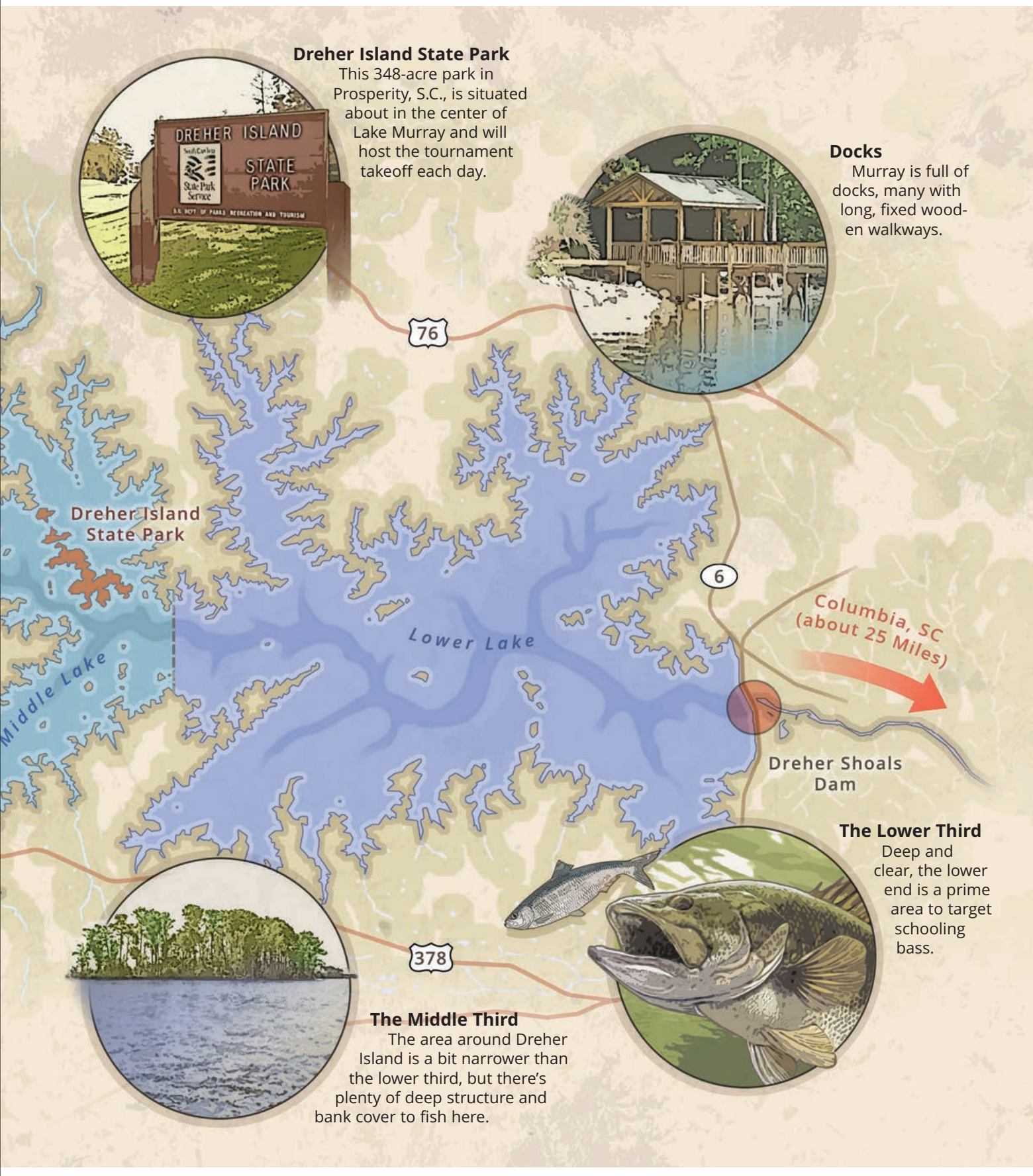
Columbia, S.C.
Founded in 1786 at the site of a former fort and ferry crossing along the Congaree River, Columbia is the largest city in South Carolina and the state capital. It's home to the 2015 and 2016 YETI FLW College Fishing National Champions from the University of South Carolina.

ILLUSTRATION BY RON FINGER



LAKE STATS:

41 miles long | **14** miles across at its widest point | **649** miles of shoreline | **49,900** surface acres



PROBABLE PATTERNS



TARGET: EMERGENT GRASS
BAIT: HOLLOW FROG
Working a frog along shade lines and grassy edges produces big bites, but not many of them in August.



TARGET: WOODEN DOCKS
BAIT: BUZZBAIT
Adding a toad trailer helps the buzzbait to be skipped under walkways.



TARGET: SEAWALL
BAIT: POPPER
Low-light periods of the morning are best for covering water with a popper.



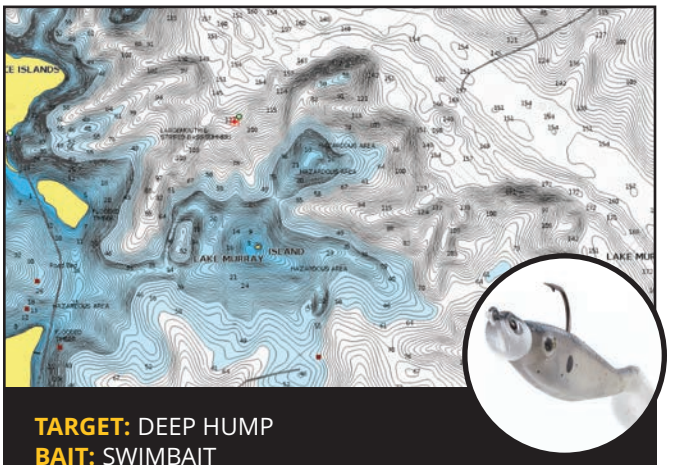
TARGET: LAYDOWN
BAIT: ZOOM HORNY TOAD
The toad comes through branches easily, and its steady-flapping, gurgling legs help bass track it in stained water.



TARGET: OPEN-WATER SCHOOLERS
BAIT: SOFT JERKBAIT
Fish it high, fish it fast when schooling bass are busting bait at the surface.



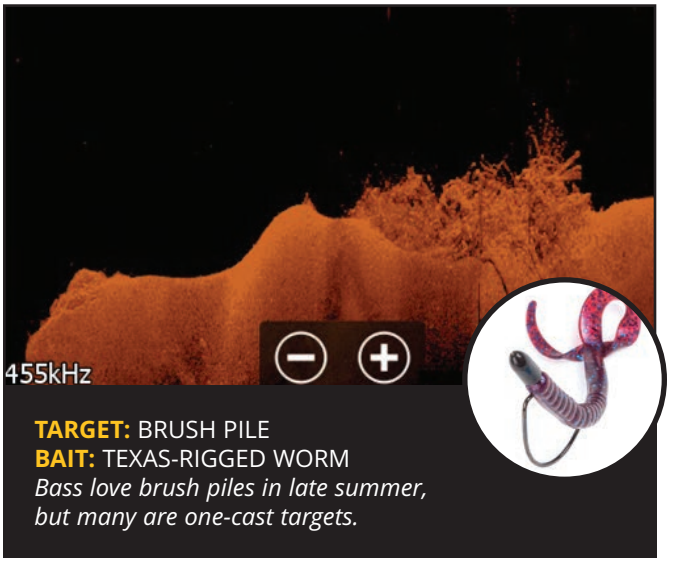
TARGET: LONG MAIN-LAKE POINT
BAIT: WALKING TOPWATER
Even when there's a chop, schooling fish can find a big walking bait up top.



TARGET: DEEP HUMP
BAIT: SWIMBAIT
Count it down to any depth, from the surface to the bottom, if fish are suspended.



TARGET: CREEK-CHANNEL EDGE
BAIT: CAROLINA RIG
Some bass will still relate to bottom in deep water, especially in the lower end. Get to them with a heavy rig.



TARGET: BRUSH PILE
BAIT: TEXAS-RIGGED WORM
Bass love brush piles in late summer, but many are one-cast targets.

PROVEN STRATEGIES



The Jig Bite

Tournaments can be won on Murray in late summer by junk-fishing all sorts of shallow cover, including docks, laydowns and emergent grass. While a frog and other topwaters will get a lot of work, a jig might be the most versatile option. Pitch, punch, swim or flip it, depending on the cover. A jig gets big bites and has won big money at Murray before.



Junk-Fishing New Water

A little of this, a little of that is the best way to approach Lake Murray in August. When Anthony Gagliardi won in 2014, he fished a milk run of brush piles, some shallow bank grass, two points where bass were attacking baitfish in just a few feet of water and offshore schooling spots. The mix gave him some measure of security should an extreme weather change occur. When Michael Bennett won in 2008, he had a more refined pattern of throwing a frog to shade lines, but he still had to fish new water every day. That's the nature of a Southern summertime tournament. Spots don't replenish, and patterns are flimsy. Options and adaptation win tournaments.

SUNDAY AT THE CUP

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEVEN P. HUGHES



THE PRO
THE FAN



5 a.m. – Rise and shine. Time to throw on the jersey, load the tackle, hitch up the boat and get to takeoff.

5 a.m. – Rise and shine. Takeoff starts in two hours. Check the weather, splash some water on the face, grab a hat for autographs and hustle out the door.

5:45 a.m. – The boat's in the water at Dreher Island State Park. Media swarms for interviews. There's coffee and donuts, but nerves are too frayed to eat.

6 a.m. – Arrive at Dreher Island State Park for takeoff. There's a full crowd. Maneuver down to the water's edge to see the pros.

6:30 a.m. – After a quick FLW morning show interview and some autographs for fans, it's time to ready for takeoff.

6:40 a.m. – Ask the leader for an autograph, then snap a selfie. #ForrestWoodCup #FLWFishing

6:55 a.m. – Join in the prayer and the anthem, then hustle for a better view of takeoff.

7 a.m. – Fire it up. FLW emcee Chris Jones calls the names. It's go time.

7 a.m. – They're off. Film a short clip of the pros racing out from the marina to share on Facebook. Now it's back to Columbia.



7 a.m.- 1 p.m. – Put on a fish-catching clinic in front of the *FLW Live* cameras.

7:30 a.m.- 10 a.m. – Watch *FLW Live* in the hotel until the Forrest Wood Cup Expo begins.

10:05 a.m. – Haul the kids to the Expo to be one of the first 500 to receive a voucher for a free rod-and-reel combo.

11 a.m. – Mow down a BBQ sandwich at the Bass and BBQ Festival, then drop another entry in the box to win a Ranger boat.

12 p.m. – Get autographs from Forrest Wood and Jimmy Houston, then jump into a Hank Parker fishing seminar.

1 p.m. – Finish a limit. Show off No. 5 to the tournament marshal, who shares the image with the world at FLWFishing.com.

1 p.m. – Hunt for deals on the Expo floor, and buy the same frog that the tournament leader is using.

2 p.m. – Join an FLW member VIP tour of Colonial Life Arena.



2:30 p.m. – Take advantage of FLW member early access in the arena and snag a stage-side seat. Follow the day three blog at FLWFishing.com until check-in time.

3 p.m. – Catch a last-minute kicker that could be worth thousands. Hold it up for photographers and spectators on the water, then box it. It's time to hustle back to Dreher Island for check-in.

3:45 p.m. – Count 'em and bag 'em. These could be the most important five fish of a career. A police escort waits to lead the top 10 to Columbia.

4 p.m. – Stand. Scream. Sing. Watch and listen when Easton Corbin blows the roof off Colonial Life Arena in the free concert.

4:30 p.m. – Arrive at Colonial Life Arena. Slip in the back door, grab a bottle of water and wait nervously at the tanks. A few media members and staff prod with questions, but there's too much anxiety to think clearly. Listen in on the final minutes of the Easton Corbin concert, trying not to think about what's at stake.

5 p.m. – Cheer for the top 10 pros as Chris Jones introduces the field.

5:02 p.m. – Listen for Chris Jones' introduction. Then walk through the curtains and into the bright lights as thousands cheer.

5:15 p.m. – The anthem plays again. Then it's time to sit in the Ranger by the stage and wait.

5:45 p.m. – Weigh 'em. The moment of truth …

5:47 p.m. – Chris Jones calls the weight. The crowd explodes. Confetti falls. Pyrotechnics ignite.

5:47 p.m. – Cheer and whistle for the champion as the confetti falls.

5:49 p.m. – Forrest L. Wood hands over the Cup. Hoist it high. You've earned this moment.

5:50 p.m. – Celebrate the new Forrest Wood Cup champion! ■



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FLW TOURNAMENT COVERAGE AND RESULTS

ON TOUR



WHAT'S INSIDE:

McCOMBS MAKES HIS RETURN ON FLOODED BEAVER LAKE

Potomac Grass Tactics On the Mississippi

Blind Bed-Fishing Wins At Grand

Cal Delta "Trough Fishing"

Busting Bream Bed Bass At the Chick

PHOTO BY CHAD LOVE

DETAILS
April 27-30, 2017
Presented by General Tire
Hosted by Visit Rogers

McCOMBS MASTERS THE FLOOD AT BEAVER LAKE

ANNUAL OZARK DERBY SERVES UP VALUABLE LESSONS IN RISING WATER

By Rob Newell



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

Johnny McCombs' strategy was to follow the fish toward flooded banks as the lake rose. It worked and earned the Alabama pro his first FLW Tour victory.

Quickly rising water is the professional angler's bane when trying to catch bass in competition. The scenario is perhaps even more perplexing than dealing with severe cold fronts in Florida or the late-summer period on clear highland impoundments.

FLW Tour pros got a true test of their rising-water savvy during the FLW Tour event on Beaver Lake presented by General Tire April 27-30. Never before in the Tour's nearly two-decade history of going to Beaver had pros dealt with such a meteoric rise in water level over the course of practice and the tournament.

When it was all said and done, Beaver Lake rose 12 feet in nine days. The most severe rises occurred just before practice started, when the lake came up 3 1/2 feet in a couple of days, and on the official off day on Wednesday before the tournament, when the water came up another 4 feet. It came up another 3 feet over the final two days.

In addition, anglers had to endure severe thunderstorms and downpours throughout the event. Each day the lake looked like a completely different fishery than the day before. Alabama pro Johnny McCombs, whose story of redemption following struggles with drug addiction went viral following the tournament, returned to the Tour this season for the first time since 2003 and proved that his skills are still sharp. McCombs mastered the changing conditions better than the rest of the field to pull off his first-ever FLW Tour win.

However, among the top 10, four patterns arose to counter the rising waters of Beaver Lake.

Pattern No. 1: Chasing Lawn Lunkers

McCombs won by fishing newly flooded flat areas, such as fields and yards behind bushes and tree lines. Every day, McCombs moved up with

CONDITIONS

Weather | extreme rising water throughout; sunny and mild on day one; rainy on days two through four; thunderstorms on day three; post-frontal, windy and cold on day four
Air Temperature | low 50s to upper 60s
Water Temperature | low to mid-60s and dropping
Moon Phase | new
Predominant Lake Features | flooded bushes and trees, rocky banks, waterfalls and other in-flows

the water, fishing new areas he couldn't get to on previous days.

"Get to the bank," McCombs says. "That was my goal. Get in behind bushes and trees and get to the bank. If there was a flooded yard or meadow back in behind the bushes, that was money.

"I think a lot of the little baitfish and maybe shad get right up there where the waterline meets that green grass," he adds. "I don't know if they're feeding on it or what, but it's like bass know to find food there."

The other thing McCombs kept an eye out for on the lawns was spawning carp. He says the boisterous activity of big carp spawning up in inches of water seems to attract bass as if it was some kind of feeding activity.

"When I was a kid we would try to snag spawning carp with lures," he recalls. "And every now and then a big bass would actually eat the lure. That's a little trick I've never forgotten."

McCombs was familiar with the yard pattern from fishing Smith Lake in Alabama, where bass also get in flooded yards and fields when the water shoots up 6 or 7 feet. In his experience, it's a go-to pattern for big fish, which he proved at Beaver Lake.

He caught 18 pounds, 15 ounces of lawn largemouths on day three, easily the biggest limit of the tournament, which carried him to the win with a four-day total of 47 pounds, 1 ounce.

McCombs' favorite lure for hunting down lawn lunkers is a buzzbait. In the case of Beaver Lake, he used a white 3/8-ounce War Eagle buzzbait teamed with a white 4-inch Zoom Horny Toad. He fished the buzzbait on 25-pound-test fluorocarbon.

Some of McCombs' catches were set up by his exceptional casting skills as he slipped and skipped the buzzbait under trees and bushes to the lawns with impressive underhand casts using a 7-foot, 3-inch Shimano Crucial rod.

McCombs' casting ability is legendary among his peers, several of whom claim McCombs can put baits, especially buzzbaits, in places where average anglers could never reach.

Pattern No. 2: Fishing the Old Shoreline

Fishing the old shoreline or fishing where the fish were positioned before the rise turned into a solid pattern for Jason Reyes of Huffman, Texas, who finished second, and Cody Meyer of Auburn, Calif., who finished fifth.

Reyes' key spot for at least half of the tournament was a small shoal connected to a main-lake island by a shallow saddle. On the first day of practice, the shoal and saddle were at the surface or just under the surface. As the week went on, they eventually became submerged by some 12 feet of water. Despite the rise, Reyes continued to fish the original shoreline, especially in the saddle, where he thinks bass were ambushing shad moving across the top of the structure.

"Sometimes when lakes rise fast like that, bass stay right along the old shoreline," Reyes says. "That was certainly the case on that spot, at least for the first three days of the tournament. I think by the final day the water had gotten so high above them they finally moved, because I could never reconnect with them again."

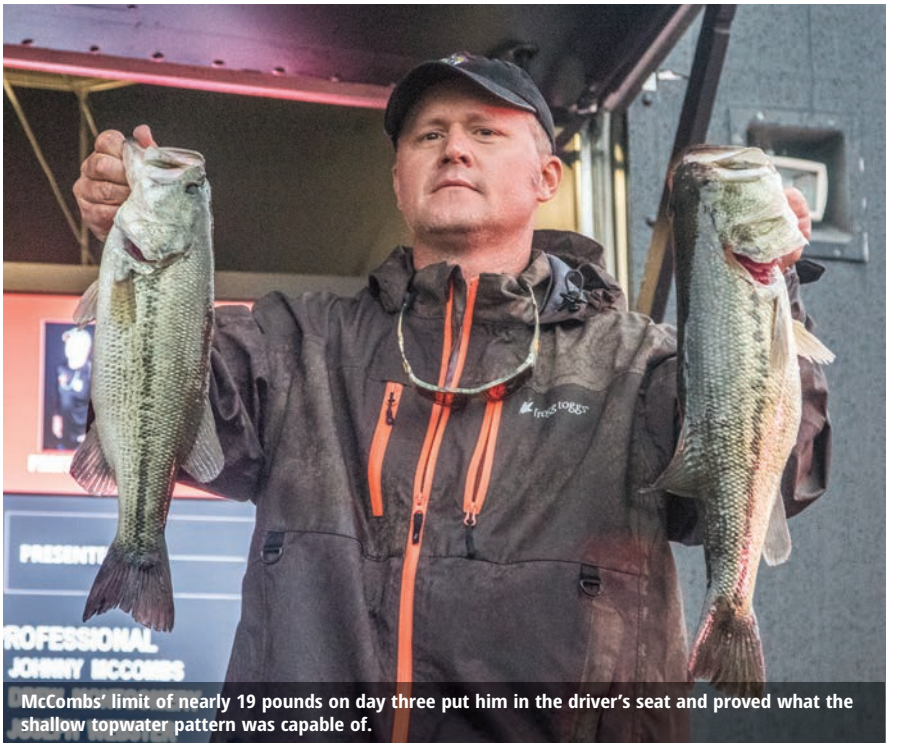
Reyes scored with 1/8-ounce shaky heads rigged with Zoom Finesse Worms and Trick Worms.

Cody Meyer found success in an old smallmouth haunt in the lower end that had been good to him over the years. The spot consisted of a deep gravel flat, which continued to hold smallmouths for the first two days of the tournament. Meyer found the smallies in about 25 feet during practice and continued to catch them even when the productive flat was submerged to 32 to 33 feet.

"One thing I've learned out West where lakes can rise as much as 10 feet in a day is that bass, especially smallmouths, will stay put even in that fast rise," Meyer says. "They're usually right in the same places where they were before it came up."

Meyer's hot spot, which helped give him the lead for the first two days, eventually played out. But he believes its failure to produce on the weekend was more a result of his own fishing pressure than rising water.

PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA



McCombs' limit of nearly 19 pounds on day three put him in the driver's seat and proved what the shallow topwater pattern was capable of.

Pattern No. 3: Flipping Debris Piles

Meyer caught good smallmouths down in the deep, clear water, but he also anchored his initial limits with largemouths flipped from "debris piles," also known as "trash pockets." No matter the terminology, the pattern is the same – targeting flotsam in the backs of pockets that rises with the water, creating a nice "bass hut." Meyer probed the newly formed cover by punching through with a Strike King Rage Bug.

Brandon McMillan of Clewiston, Fla., scored a ninth-place finish in the floating slop by punching it with a 1/2-ounce 4X4 jig and a Zoom Z Craw Jr. under a 3/8-ounce weight. He also teased a few off the surface of the debris with a SPRO frog.

Pattern No. 4: Targeting Run-ins

With so much rain falling in the Ozarks during tournament week, water was pouring into Beaver Lake from waterfalls and "run-ins," usually located in the back ends of the steepest pockets. This fresh run-off attracted bass looking for an opportunity to feed in the new currents. Pros targeting these areas fished jigs, finesse soft plastics, spinnerbaits and even crankbaits, depending on the cover and bank type.

Several pros, including Meyer, McMillan, fourth-place finisher Keith Bryan of Novato, Calif., and eighth-place pro Chris Brasher of Longview, Texas, put some of these current-driven areas in their rotations.

The hard rains and rising water changed Beaver Lake by the hour. Those who rose to the top cracked the high-water code by fishing flooded lawns, punching sawdust, targeting the old shoreline or catching fish in the current created by run-ins, proving there are several viable options for tackling rising water.



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

Though he tossed a jig and spinnerbait too, McCombs caught nearly every keeper he weighed in on a buzzbait.

TOP FIVE

NAME	HOMETOWN	WEIGHT	FISH	WINNINGS
1. JOHNNY McCOMBS	MORRIS, AL	47-01	17	$100,200
2. JASON REYES	HUFFMAN, TX	44-11	18	$30,000
3. BRYAN THRIFT	SHELBY, NC	43-03	20	$25,100
4. KEITH BRYAN	NOVATO, CA	42-14	20	$20,000
5. CODY MEYER	AUBURN, CA	40-10	18	$19,000

SLATON WINS CO-ANGLER TITLE

By Chad Love



PHOTO BY SEAN OSTRUSZKA

Beaver's rising waters vexed pros and co-anglers alike, but 38-year-old Charley Slaton of Valliant, Okla., eventually solved just enough of the puzzle to win the co-angler championship and a $20,200 check.

Slaton caught a two-day total of 17 pounds, 15 ounces by dragging a Carolina rig behind the boat in deeper water he suspected was holding bedding bass, but the winning pattern didn't come easily.

"It just wasn't happening for me at first," says Slaton, who fished on day one with Rockwood, Tenn., pro Derrick Blake. "Derrick was throwing a spinnerbait along the bank, and I was following him with a Senko and a Fluke, and nothing was really happening for me, so I got to thinking that with the banks coming up 7 to 9 feet, those fish are going to be out there in 10 to 12 feet of water."

Slaton started dragging a Carolina rig parallel to the bank, and the gamble paid off when his first fish turned out to be a 5-pounder.

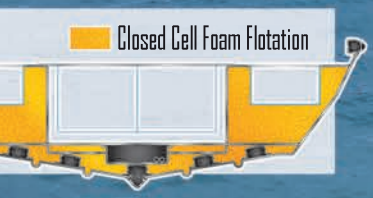
On day two, with the exception of one fish caught on a wacky rig, Slaton stayed with a Carolina rig all day.

"I didn't have near the weight that I did on day one, but I guess it was enough," he says. ■

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DETAILS
May 18-21, 2017
Presented by Evinrude
Hosted by Explore La Crosse

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SCHMITT MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME ON THE MISSISSIPPI

POTOMAC RIVER GRASS TACTICS SEAL WIN FOR MARYLAND PRO

By Rob Newell

Bryan Schmitt of Deale, Md., put on a veritable clinic on how to catch prespawn bass from submerged grass in rivers at the FLW Tour event on the Mississippi presented by Evinrude near La Crosse, Wis., May 18-21.

Over four days, Schmitt sacked up 61 pounds, 6 ounces of Mississippi River bass, dominating the event with a 2-pound, 11-ounce winning margin. Maybe 2-11 doesn't sound like a dominating performance on most fisheries, but on the Mississippi River in May, where pros were separated by mere ounces all week, pulling away from the rest of the pack by more than 2 pounds represents quite a feat.

The Maryland pro was able to compile such a margin of victory because his pattern was waxing during competition as others were waning. While rising, muddy waters and dropping temperatures proved to be a detriment to many of his competitors, such conditions were actually helpful to Schmitt.

His extensive experience on the Potomac River, his home waters, actually boosted Schmitt's confidence in fishing the Mighty Mississippi. In fact, his winning tactics on the Mississippi could easily be applied to the Potomac, since that's where he perfected the technique he used to win.

"It was like someone dropped me in Chicamuxen Creek on the Potomac River on a flood tide in April," he says. "Even though I had never fished there before, I clicked with the Mississippi from the moment I got there."

The Area

Schmitt's winning area was located on the lower end of Pool 8, opposite of the takeoff area on Pool 8's northern end. The spot featured a huge horseshoe-shaped riprap bulkhead planted by river authorities to block current and slow erosion. Behind the bulkhead was lush vegetation, creating prime spawning grounds right off the river.



PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON

Bryan Schmitt's mastery of grass-fishing tactics helped him claim his first FLW Tour victory.

Schmitt was initially drawn to the area in practice because of the large number of bass that were spawning in the shallow, matted grass tucked in behind the bulkhead. The area was actually a big draw for a lot of anglers during practice because the rocks cut off the main river flow, providing an obvious estuary for spawning.

However, when pros returned to the area on the first day of the tournament, they got an unwelcome surprise. Heavy rains on the official off day had the river flowing high enough to breach the bulkhead. As a result, cold, muddy water was pouring right through the once-protected spawning grounds. Many pros came in for a few casts, but then bolted upon seeing the water color. In fact, Schmitt was one of the anglers initially spooked away by the mud.

"I pulled in there the first morning, caught a couple of keepers, saw the mud and kept on moving down to Pool 9," he recalls.

Schmitt retreated to Pool 9 for a couple hours to finish his limit, but in the back of his mind a few thoughts started brewing about his first stop behind that U-shaped levee.

"I kept thinking about how many fish were in there spawning before the mud came in," Schmitt says. "There was no way they were going to leave that general area behind that levee because they had nowhere to go. They still had to be in there."

Schmitt also liked how the muddy water had intimidated so many other anglers.

"The main thing I was worried about was how many boats were going to fish in there," he says. "Well, the mud took care of that problem."

Finally, Schmitt kept thinking about how high flood tides on the Potomac River would ward off boats, but the fish were still there and could be caught when the tide turned and the water started dropping.

Playing his hunches, Schmitt decided to backtrack to Pool 8, return to the area he started in and attempt to reconnect with the fish that had presumably been blown out by the mud.

And with that, he made the winning move of the tournament.

"I went back and sort of started over, trying to figure out where those fish might have moved to," Schmitt says. "I knew they were not going to leave that area and swim across that muddy, cold river to the other side. The water color in there had changed, but it was not totally unfishable."

Instead of plying the bedding area just behind the rocks, he dropped down below it and sampled some of the water in the lower end of the protected area.

"The water was deeper down there, maybe 3 to 4 feet, and the grass was more sparse," he says. "I was thinking about how much it reminded me of some of my favorite staging areas on the Potomac when a good one nearly ripped the rod out of my hands. When I got the fish in, I could tell immediately it was a prespawn bass – it was so fat with no scars or marks."

In an ironic twist of fate, Schmitt had returned to the area in hopes of finding where postspawn fish were retreating due to the mud, but instead he found a new crop of prespawn fish waiting for the river to stabilize before committing to the beds in the matted grass. The more he fished the area, the more he defined the staging grass in which the bass were set up.

CONDITIONS

Weather | rising water throughout; partly cloudy on day one, cold and cloudy on day two, cold and steady rain on day three, post-frontal, cloudy and cool on day four
Air Temperature | low 50s to low 60s
Water Temperature | mid- to upper 60s and dropping
Moon Phase | third quarter to waning crescent
Predominant River Features | wing dams, various grasses, flooded trees, bushes, oxbow lakes, flats off the main river channel and lock-and-dam structures

PHOTO BY ANDY HAGEDON



Schmitt used a swim jig to do most of his damage at La Crosse.

The Lures

Once dialed in, Schmitt would go on to sack up four limits of 14-12, 16-4, 15-12 and 14-10 to win by a landslide. He caught most of his weigh fish on the same lure he uses to win so much money on the Potomac River: a 3/8-ounce black and blue swim jig with a swimming trailer fished on 15-pound-test P-Line fluorocarbon on a 7-foot Fitzgerald Stunner HD rod and an Ardent Apex Grand 7.3:1 reel. He also used a sexy shad-colored Riot Baits Recon vibrating jig.

Schmitt's unique retrieve technique was critical to his success. He would cast the swim jig, then reel the jig steadily with his rod tip down until it hit a clump of grass. Then he would twitch the rod hard two or three times to make the jig snap out of the grass for a reaction bite. In some ways, it almost looked like a jerkbait retrieve.

The Pattern

The fish often bit in flurries and he would catch four to eight at a time

before the action would slacken. During slow periods Schmitt would resort to a Riot Baits Riot Stick on a tiny 1/8-ounce Riot Baits T3 tungsten weight. He would dead-stick the Riot Stick around the sparser clumps, just letting the current naturally "drift" the bait into the clumps.

"The way the bass were relating to that grass is exactly how they set up in the grassy spawning bays and creeks in the Potomac," he says. "They spawn up in the shallower, matted grass, but they stage in the deeper, scattered stuff waiting for the right conditions. It was an almost identical deal. In my mind, that high water on the Mississippi was just like a big high tide on the Potomac. It doesn't move those fish to somewhere entirely different; they just hold up in that deeper, scattered grass until things return to normal."

Interestingly, Schmitt was the only angler in the top 10 that committed exclusively to grass the entire tournament. That dedication earned Schmitt his first FLW Tour victory.

"I've always wanted to win an FLW Tour event on the Potomac River," Schmitt says. "But this is the next best thing. I won on the Mississippi River, and I couldn't have done it without all the river expertise I've learned from my home waters. When it comes to grass fishing in rivers, that Potomac has taught me well."



Schmitt is considered the Potomac River's best stick, and his river expertise from the Potomac helped him dial in on the Mississippi.

TOP FIVE

NAME	HOMETOWN	WEIGHT	FISH	WINNINGS
1. BRYAN SCHMITT	DEALE, MD	61-06	20	$125,000*
2. JOSHUA WEAVER	MACON, GA	58-11	20	$30,700
3. ANDY MORGAN	DAYTON, TN	58-10	20	$25,100
4. TODD AUTEN	LAKE WYLIE, SC	58-00	20	$20,000
5. LARRY NIXON	BEE BRANCH, AR	57-09	20	$19,000

*Includes Ranger Cup

HERB WINS CO-ANGLER TITLE

By Chad Love

PHOTO BY CHARLES WALDORF



Twenty-five-year-old Cole Herb of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, won the co-angler crown and $20,000 at the FLW Tour event presented by Evinrude on the Mississippi River with a two-day bag weighing 24 pounds, 11 ounces. Herb's weight edged out second-place finisher Jeremiah Shaver's 23-11 bag by one pound.

It was Herb's first time fishing an FLW Tour event as a co-angler, and he won it by being versatile.

"I fished with [Madison, Miss., pro] Pete Ponds on day one down at Stoddard," says Herb. "I caught my first fish on a spinnerbait, my second and third on a swimbait, and my fourth and fifth on a shaky head."

On day two Herb was paired up with Bellevue, Ontario, pro Curtis Richardson. "We started out at the dam, where I caught some shorts on a Strike King KVD square-bill, but I caught my first keepers in the Black River on a Berkley Havoc ribbon-tail worm."

The key to finding fish, says Herb, was looking for areas of grass and current that had the clearest water. "That's what we were keying in on both days," he says. "All our bites came in weeds and current. It was all backwater, but had main-channel current flowing through it."

It was an especially sweet win for Herb, who is expecting his second daughter with his wife, Mackenzie, and their daughter, Emersyn.

"This is pretty amazing," says Herb, who, when he's not fishing, works for a lead and asbestos removal company. "We've got a baby girl due in September, so this is a big thing for us. She's 24. I'm 25. It's a big step for our family." ■



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April 20–22, 2017
Presented by Ranger Boats
Hosted by City of Grove
Costa FLW Series Division: Southwestern

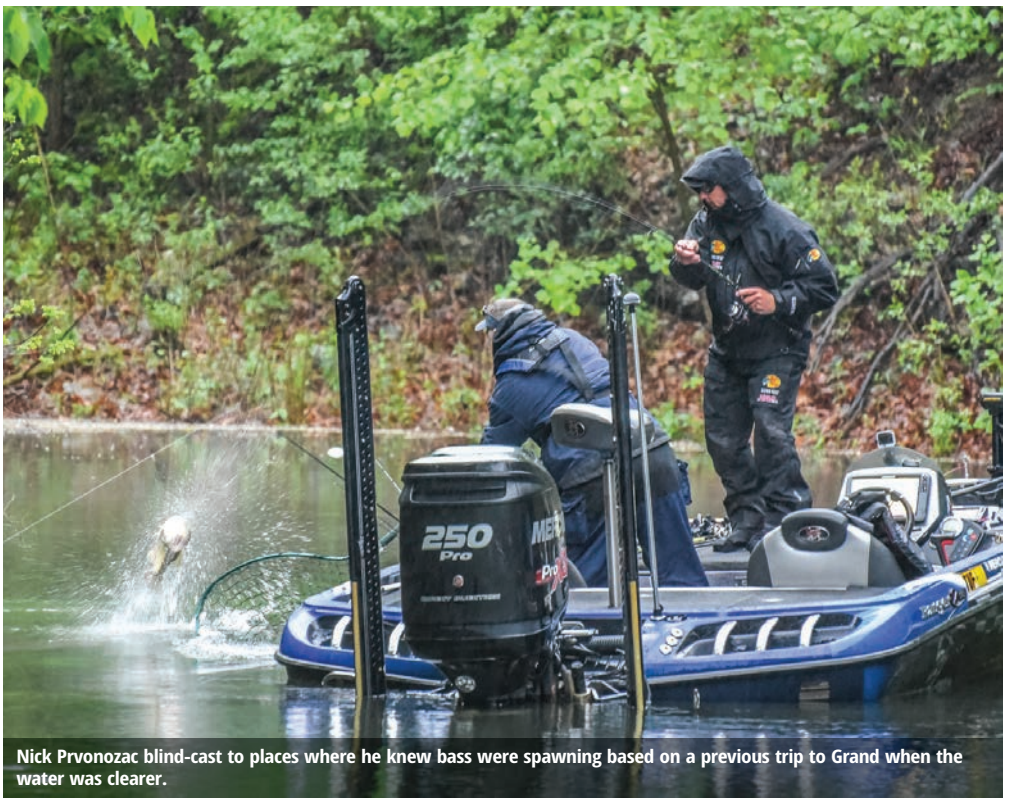
GRAND LAKE

GROVE, OKLA.

By Rob Newell

Winning Angler

Nick Prvonozac, Warren, Ohio
Winning Weight: 36-06 (10 fish)
Stat Line: Prvonozac has fished at nearly every level of FLW competition. In addition to his recent Grand Lake victory, he also has two T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League wins to his credit.



Nick Prvonozac blind-cast to places where he knew bass were spawning based on a previous trip to Grand when the water was clearer.

PHOTO BY ROB NEWELL

CONDITIONS

Weather | stormy (day two was cancelled due to thunderstorms), with heavy rainfall
Air Temperature | 64 degrees heading into the tournament; a high of 48 degrees on day three
Water Temperature | 60 to 65 degrees
Water Clarity | muddy in the rivers; stained down to about Honey Creek; clear on the lower end
Wind | SW to about 10 mph on day one; N on day three, reaching gusts of 20 mph
Moon Phase | waning crescent
Predominant Lake Features | deep and rocky offshore; willows, flooded bushes and docks on shore; creek channels and ledges
Fishery Type | lowland impoundment of the Neosho River; average depth of 36 feet

Winning Baits

Prvonozac, for the most part, used a 4 1/4-inch YUM Vibra King Tube (green pumpkin) with 3/16- and 1/4-ounce weights as well as a Smithwick Rattlin' Rogue (bream). He fished shoreline cover and spawning flats. He occasionally fished a jig.

Target Areas

Prvonozac focused on main-lake coves and pockets on Grand's lower end where bass were spawning. He had marked a few beds during the practice period, but sight-fishing was difficult due to the dark, cloudy, rainy conditions. Instead of relying totally on sight-fishing, Prvonozac began pitching the tube to places where he knew there were beds. Many of his targets were located in little nooks and crevices in the bank as well as behind floating docks and piers.

Presentation Keys

Prvonozac chose to alternate between two YUM Vibra King rigs. One was rigged on a flipping stick with a 1/4-ounce weight and 16-pound-test Silver Thread fluorocarbon. His second option was rigged on a spinning rod with a 3/16-ounce weight and 10-pound-test Silver Thread fluorocarbon. The flipping stick

PHOTO BY JESSE SCHULTZ



PLASTIC, PLEASE

Along with Nick Prvonozac's soft-plastic tubes, soft plastics in general dominated the Grand Lake event, taking up nine of the top 10 spots. Most of the top 10 pros used weightless plastics or lightly weighted plastics, with weights no heavier than 1/4 ounce. The most common plastic was some form of stick worm, which accounted for second through fourth positions. Other anglers used various creature baits and lizards. Also, some pros dyed the tails of their plastic offerings chartreuse, claiming it is a potent addition to getting bites in the spring of the year on Grand.

was used to make underhand pitches to heavier cover such as willows, laydowns and debris in along the bank. The spinning version was used to skip under cables, walkways and anything else hanging over the water. On a couple of occasions, Prvonozac saw fish he thought were guarding fry and was able to catch them twitching a Rattlin' Rogue.

Keys to Victory

Prvonozac learned a great deal about where Grand Lake bass bed when he fished a Costa FLW Series tournament there in 2015 (he finished 15th). During that event, Grand's waters were crystal-clear due to lack of rain and the filtering effects of zebra mussels. No one he spoke with had ever witnessed such transparent water in the lake's history, Prvonozac recalls.

"In that event, I could see everything on the bottom and every place where a fish made a bed," says the Ohio pro. "There were a lot of beds behind docks, under walkways and crossties, around cable tie-downs – under anything hanging off the bank or any piece of rock or rock transition behind a dock."

Prvonozac likened the experience to being presented with a blueprint of where fish bed on Grand year in and year out. With that knowledge, he simply revisited the places where he saw multiple beds behind docks during his last visit to Grand.

Another key to his victory was Prvonozac's willingness to wrestle his boat back in behind docks to get to premium bedding water where fish were most protected. At times he would have to grab cables and walkways and physically pull his boat behind the dock and under the walkway to reach untapped water. Sometimes Prvonozac would spend five or six minutes wrestling his way behind a dock just to make one or two presentations. However, a couple of those wrestling matches paid off with fish of better quality in the weather-abbreviated tournament.

PHOTO BY JESSE SCHULTZ



CO-ANGLER CHAMPION

Name: Mark Talley
Hometown: Grove, Okla.
Winning Weight: 25-11 (10 fish)
Winning Program: Talley pitched a Gene Larew HooDaddy and a 5-inch Yamamoto Senko – both with 3/16-ounce weights – to any little piece of cover he could find in the bedding coves and pockets where his pros took him. He fished both baits on 14-pound-test Lew's fluorocarbon line and dyed the tails of the HooDaddy chartreuse for a little extra attraction. ■



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DETAILS
May 4–6, 2017
Presented by Lowrance
Hosted by Rhea Economic & Tourism Council
Costa FLW Series Division: Southeastern

LAKE CHICKAMAUGA

DAYTON, TENN.

By Richard Simms
PHOTOS BY MATT PACE

Winning Angler

William Weidler, Bessemer, Ala.
Winning Weight: 45-02 (10 fish)
Stat Line: Weidler has fished only six FLW events since 2007. This is his first win. He also finished sixth at the Bassmaster Southern Open on Chickamauga just two weeks prior to the Costa FLW Series event.



Recent tournament experience on the lake helped Weidler dial in the winning pattern.

CONDITIONS

Weather | fishing cancelled on day one due to predicted high winds and heavy current; cool with drizzling rain on day two; post-frontal on day three
Air Temperature | morning temps in the upper 40s to low 50s; highs in the 50s and 60s
Water Temperature | low 70s
Water Clarity | 1 to 2 feet of visibility or less, with the exception of a few clearer creeks
Wind | south at 10 to 15 mph on day two; south at 5 to 10 mph on day three
Moon Phase | waxing gibbous
Predominant Lake Features | shallow grass, deep river ledges, flats, humps, flooded wood cover and creek channels
Fishery Type | Tennessee River impoundment of approximately 36,000 acres, including the confluence of the Tennessee and Hiwassee rivers

Winning Baits

Weidler says the lure that won it for him was a black and blue Dirty Jigs No-Jack Swim Jig with an H&H Lure Co. Swamp Frog trailer.

"The frog trailer comes in black with white feet, and I dye them [the feet] blue to match the bait [jig skirt]," he says.

He used the swim jig the entire tournament.

Tactics and Target Areas

Weidler concentrated on fishing areas with bedding bluegills. His sweet spot was barely five minutes from the takeoff point outside Dayton Boat Dock, near the lower end of Hiwassee Island where the Tennessee and Hiwassee rivers join.

"I know that shortly after the spawn the big female bass will feed heavily, and a lot of times they'll hang around bluegill beds," he says. "That's where I caught all my fish – either in transition areas leaving spawning bays or around bluegill beds. I had fished a 300-yard stretch and had several bites, but decided to go a little deeper into the spawning pocket. I could hear the sand on the bottom when I put my Power-Poles down, and I could see the bluegill beds. I knew they [bass] had to be in there."

Presentation Keys

Although Weidler had located a key pattern in fishing around bluegill beds, he says a couple of different presentation techniques helped trigger strikes.



Weidler needed only one lure – a swim jig – to target Chickamauga's shallow bluegill eaters.

MOST OF THE TOP 10 FISHED JIGS

At least eight of the top 10 professional anglers on Lake Chickamauga were fishing primarily with some variety of jig. However, very few focused on the deep river ledges that Lake Chickamauga is famous for in the postspawn. According to local reports, recent flooding rains and higher-than-normal current had prevented bass from setting up on the deeper traditional postspawn ledges. Most anglers focused on mid-depth ranges of 5 to 15 feet, and many caught fish in 1 to 2 feet of water where the lake was flooded into weedbeds and thick cover.

"First was swimming the jig 6 to 8 inches under the water and killing it beside key ambush areas," he says. "Second, I've watched bluegills that have been injured, and they tend to stay at the surface of the water. Most of my better bites came when I would keep the swim jig on the surface, twitching the rod to create a spitting action."

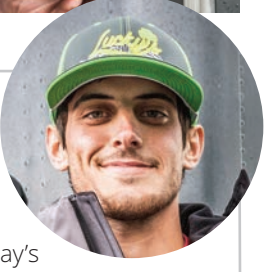
Keys to Victory

Though he's not a local, Weidler had some great recent experience on Lake Chickamauga that helped him find his way to the top. The Alabama angler fished the Bassmaster Southern Open on Lake Chickamauga two weeks prior to the Costa FLW Series event and came in sixth. Then, the next week he captained a high school team that took fifth place in a prep tournament on the lake. He says the confidence he gained from what he learned in those tournaments helped him.

"I feel staying focused and not giving up on the shallow bite made the difference," Weidler adds. "I knew there were still some big females shallow protecting fry or feeding on bluegills. The key for me was just having patience. [On the last day] I didn't have much weight in the livewell, and I started hearing the little voices in my head. But the sun came out and it warmed up, and then some clouds moved in and it got a little overcast. I just knew that they were going to start biting, and they did."



CO-ANGLER CHAMPION



Name: Chase Whisenhunt
Hometown: Trussville, Ala.
Winning Weight: 28-07 (8 fish)
Winning Program: On the first day of competition, Whisenhunt primarily fished jigs to catch a limit of five bass weighing 21 pounds, 14 ounces. However, in Saturday's final round he only managed three bass. He fished a jig all morning on the last day and had only two fish. But around noon he decided to switch to a crankbait and picked up his third fish on a Strike King 6XD (sexy shad).

"Without that fish I probably would have finished second or third," he says. "I'm a jig fisherman. I love flipping and throwing a jig, but sometimes you've just got to pick up something different." ■

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GET OUTSIDE – It's Important!

Do you remember as a child when the rain would ruin your plans for the day because you couldn't go outside to play with your friends? Unfortunately, these days children are more likely to stay in and play. According to a nationwide poll from The Nature Conservancy, most children watch TV, use a computer and/or play video games every day, but only 10 percent of kids spend time outdoors on a daily basis. If you think this isn't a big deal, think again! There are numerous negative effects on kids by staying indoors.

Poor Health

When children stay inside, they tend to spend their time doing sedentary things such as watching TV, sitting on the couch, exploring the Internet and playing video games. Children need at least an hour of moderate or vigorous exercise each day, and an indoor lifestyle makes this difficult to achieve. This inactivity can lead to weight gain, reduced bone strength and poor cardiovascular health.

Poor Social Skills

When young people play outdoors, they are more likely to play with others, and their social skills are influenced by these interactions. Children who stay indoors most of the time, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in solitary activities that don't allow them to stretch their social muscles. Technology is a poor substitute for social interaction in the "real world."

Dependency on Electronics

It starts at an early age, as parents hand their toddlers cellphones for entertainment and distraction. By the time they are 8-10 years old, most children spend nearly eight hours a day with various media. That statistic jumps to 11 hours of electronics a day for teenagers.

Lack of Creativity

Researchers have found that creativity is dwindling among children for the first time in history, especially among younger children. It is speculated that this is because active playtime fosters a child's imagination, original thinking and problem-solving skills.

Dissociation from Nature

When children spend most of their time indoors, they become disconnected from nature. Not only will these children lack an appreciotion and knowledge for the great outdoors and how humans interact with it, but they may also care less about preserving and protecting the environment.

Grab your kids and show them how fun, exciting, and beautiful the great outdoors can be. You could go for a hike, play basketball in the park, or (our personal favorite) go fishing! When you're ready to teach your child to fish, check out Kid Casters. Our unique, innovative fishing products are the perfect way to safely introduce your child to the sport of fishing. You might be interested in our (patent pending) no-tangle fishing rods or full fishing rod kits. You can find our products at popular retailers such as BassPro Shops, Walmart, Cabela's, Academy Sports &Outdoors, Dick's Sporting Goods, Kmart, Toys "R"Us and Sportsman's Warehouse.

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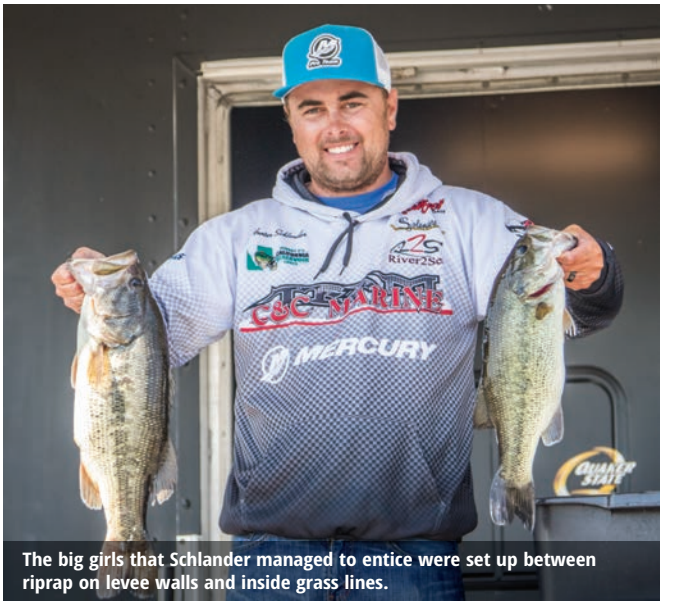
By David A. Brown
PHOTOS BY JESSE SCHULTZ



Schlander dialed in the perfect lure for a tough post-frontal reaction bite through a lot of trial and error during practice.

Winning Angler

Hunter Schlander, Modesto, Calif.
Winning Weight: 57-01 (15 fish)
Stat Line: Schlander has competed in the Western Division for nearly a decade. His FLW resume includes three other top-10 finishes: fifth at Clear Lake in 2016, sixth at Lake Havasu in 2015 and fifth at the Cal Delta in 2008. He has won $106,497.



The big girls that Schlander managed to entice were set up between riprap on levee walls and inside grass lines.

Winning Baits

Schlander caught most of his fish on a Lucky Craft Fat CB B.D.S. 4 square-bill crankbait (mad craw). Most notably, he replaced the crankbait's stock hooks with Trapper treble hooks, which feature a unique square gap behind the point. The design is intended to provide a more secure grip on hooked fish, and Schlander says he noticed a difference in his fish retention.

"With a round-bend treble, the hook can rock back and forth and come out. But the Trapper treble's square design keeps it stuck, and they can't flex the hook," he says.

This proved especially relevant during a tournament where a cold front had the fish biting less aggressively.

"I had a lot of strikes where they were just slapping at it. I don't know if they were just hitting the top of it or the side," Schlander says. "For some reason, they didn't grab the bait."

When his crankbait bite subsided, Schlander turned to presentations with wacky-rigged Yamamoto Senkos. Occasionally, he would use the Senko as a follow-up bait to catch one of the fish that nipped at his crankbait.

Target Areas

Schlander spent most of his time on riprap banks flanked by prominent grass lines. That's a common Cal Delta scenario, but Schlander found the particular setup he needed in the Central Delta and South Delta.

"The type of grass that was in there was hydrilla, and it seemed you could work your bait all the way back to the boat and snap it through the grass. A lot of the Delta has this mossy 'angel hair' grass, and it's hard to work your crankbait through that. If you found the clean grass, you could work your bait all the way back to the boat without it catching stuff."

When Schlander picked up a Senko during lower tide stages, he ran back to the North Delta and fished tule islands. Spots with sparse pencil tules were his particular preference.

Presentation Keys

It was all about working the trough between rocks and weeds, which is formed because of the rising and falling tides that don't allow grass to grow in the shallowest waters near the bank. Schlander got most of his bites in the 4- to 6-foot-deep range.

"The riprap was key, but you wanted to be as close to the grass as you could be," he says. "You didn't just want to be hitting the rocks on the bank; you wanted to be in the trough, close to the grass, but where there was still hard bottom."

Occasionally snagging and ripping is part of cranking, but because he was working a narrowly defined zone, Schlander upsized his line from his typical 15-pound-test fluorocarbon to 17-pound test to keep his crankbait running a little higher. The change allowed him to fish aggressively and hug the grass edge with less concern about snagging. He threw the crankbait on a 6-foot, 5-inch Daiwa rod. For his Senko work, Schlander used a 6-foot, 7-inch Daiwa Tatula rod and matching reel with 17-pound-test fluorocarbon.

Keys to Victory

Having seen in practice the types of scenarios and reluctant fish he might be confronting throughout the duration of the tournament, Schlander formulated a game plan that addressed not only location and tactics, but also the technical elements of hooks, line and rod. Through pre-tournament experimentation with various multiple baits and tackle setups, he finally settled on the winning combination for covering a lot of water and getting reaction strikes.

"The rod that I was using had a lot of flex to it so the fish could really get the bait," he adds. "When I'd get them to the boat, it seemed like the bait was completely in their mouth. When I set the hook, the rod had so much bend that it wasn't pulling the bait away from them."

CONDITIONS

Weather | mostly sunny; post-frontal, with no precipitation
Air Temperature | highs in the mid-70s on day one; upper 60s on days two and three
Water Temperature | 62 to 65 degrees
Water Clarity | 6 inches to 2 feet of visibility
Wind | calm on day one; WNW at 15 to 20 mph on day two; W at 10 to 15 mph on day three
Moon Phase | full
Predominant Lake Features | tule berms, hydrilla, hyacinth, pennywort, primrose, riprap and shallow wood
Fishery Type | tidal waterbody formed by the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and encompassing a massive network of Central Valley sloughs, canals and flooded farmlands

CO-ANGLER CHAMPION



Name: Jordan Pinasco
Hometown: Galt, Calif.
Winning Weight: 40-04 (15 fish)
Winning Program: Pinasco kept a diverse arsenal handy and caught his weight with a straight-up junk-fishing effort. His top performers were a Texas-rigged Damiki Stinger with a 1/4-ounce tungsten bullet weight fished along the primary grass line and a Zoom Horny Toad fished in sparse tules or over isolated grass clumps.

In the early morning hours, when the sun was low and the tide was high, he caught fish on a Damiki spinnerbait and a 1/2-ounce Blade-Runner Tackle Wobble Head Swim Jig with a Damiki Knockout trailer.

MANAGING THE WATER

Schlander fished three riprap banks, each a few hundred yards long, and his best bite was during high tide. With early mornings bringing the last of an incoming tide, he had about two and a half to three hours before his first spot expired. After that, he "ran the tide" to stay with his preferred stage.

"You had to catch your fish fast because once the tide would go out the weeds would suck up to the rocks and you wouldn't be able to fish it with your crankbait," Schlander says. "I'd start on the Central Delta, and as soon as it would switch, I'd run south and try to catch that high water.

"The only thing that was difficult was managing the boat traffic," he adds. "There were a lot of people fishing the banks I was fishing, and it just seemed that you had to be in fresh water. If you saw someone hitting the bank you were hitting and they got close, you had to pick up and run to another spot." ■



BFL WINNING TACTICS

Arkie – Arkansas River – April 22
Boater: Kyle Henderson, Sheridan, Ark. – 16-00
Winding a white spinnerbait, shad-colored Z-Man ChatterBait and sexy shad Strike King 2.5 square-bill crankbait through grass where shad were spawning in a Pool 5 backwater
Co-angler: Dusty Rhoades, Gravelly, Ark. – 14-13

Arkie – Lake Ouachita – May 13
Boater: Josh Ray, Alexander, Ark. – 15-01
Swimming a 3/8-ounce green pumpkin swim jig with a Zoom Z Craw trailer through water willow in 3 to 5 feet of water, and walking a Paycheck Baits Repo Man topwater
Co-angler: Kendal Norman, Benton, Ark. – 9-09

Bama – Lake Eufaula – April 29
Boater: Josh Bragg, Jacksonville, Ala. – 22-13
Cranking shallow ledges with spawning shad using sexy shad and citrus shad Strike King 5XD crankbaits or fishing brush piles on main-lake ledges with a Carolina-rigged green pumpkin Zoom Brush Hog and a Texas-rigged plum Zoom 'Ol Monster Worm
Co-angler: Emory Walden, Newnan, Ga. – 18-01

Buckeye – Grand Lake St. Mary's – May 6
Boater: Scott Manson, Covington, Ohio – 12-09
Dragging a D&L Tackle Advantage Jig with a Zoom Super Chunk Jr. trailer on rocky banks in 5 to 6 feet of water, focusing on areas with clean water and the river grass along the old flooded bank
Co-angler: Billy Crider Jr., Kettering, Ohio – 9-00

Bulldog – Lake Eufaula – May 13
Boater: Shane Powell, Midland City, Ala. – 25-02
Working bank grass with a BOOYAH Pad Crasher frog and a bream-colored swim jig with a Strike King Rage Craw trailer
Co-angler: Steve Hall, Mableton, Ga. – 14-04

Choo Choo – Lake Guntersville – May 20
Boater: Chris Mayfield, Phil Campbell, Ala. – 23-14
Ledge fishing in the mid-lake area with a Carolina-rigged Zoom Lizard and a jig
Co-angler: Johnny Pittman, Albertville, Ala. – 14-15

Cowboy – Toledo Bend – May 6
Boater: Andrew Upshaw, Tulsa, Okla. – 30-15
Targeting 20- to 24-foot-deep stump rows on a breakline near Three Mile Bridge with an 8-inch Gene Larew TattleTail Worm in green pumpkin or red bug lite on a 7/16-ounce Gene Larew Biffle HardHead
Co-angler: Michael Greer Jr., DeRidder, La. – 16-9

Gator – Lake Okeechobee – April 22
Boater: Jessie Mizell, Sarasota, Fla. – 30-04
Frogging lily pads and hydrilla in a protected cove on the North Shore using a SPRO Bronzeye Popping Frog
Co-angler: Christopher Jerdan, Cape Coral, Fla. – 26-00

Great Lakes – Mississippi River (La Crosse) – April 29
Boater: Cade Laufenberg, Winona, Minn. – 22-03
Fishing for smallmouths in Pool 8 on a current seam on a wing dam near a spawning area using a 5-inch pearly shad-colored Big Bite Baits Suicide Shad swimbait on a 1/8-ounce Gamakatsu Superline Swimbait Head, and fishing the mouth of a small spawning pocket
Co-angler: Shawn Overton, Coal Valley, Ill. – 15-01

Illini – Lake Shelbyville – April 22
Boater: Mike McGill, Findlay, Ill. – 17-12
Targeting rock on channel swings near spawning flats in about 3 feet of water using a 1/2-ounce Strike King Red Eye Shad lipless crankbait and a Luck-E-Strike square-bill
Co-angler: Scott McCleery, Winchester, Ill. – 14-12

Illini – Rend Lake – May 13
Boater: Marty Sisk, Evansville, Ind. – 10-12
Fishing flooded bushes and trees on points and in pockets in areas with the cleanest water on the lower end using a 3/4-ounce chartreuse and white Mann's Classic Spinnerbait and a green pumpkin Lunker Lure jig with a Zoom Super Chunk trailer treated with Strike Force fish attractant
Co-angler: Brandon Depew, Odin, Ill. – 4-03

LBL – Kentucky/Barkley – May 6
Boater: Freddy Adkins, East Bernstadt, Ky. – 22-12
Bumping bottom along the original shoreline (the lake was several feet high) along a 200-yard stretch in Little River using a chartreuse and white BOOYAH spinnerbait with No. 6 and No. 3 blades
Co-angler: Ryan Dowell, Brandenburg, Ky. – 15-08

Mississippi – Pickwick Lake – May 6
Boater: Charles Watts, Corinth, Miss. – 20-6
Fishing a jig along a bluff wall, and fishing 15- to 18-foot-deep humps and flats with a sexy blueback herring or sexy shad Strike King 6XD crankbait
Co-angler: Anthony Wilson, Greenville, Miss. – 18-12

Mountain – Lake Cumberland – May 6
Boater: Pat Eichmann, Nancy, Ky. – 19-03
Targeting spawning smallmouths 15 to 25 feet down near standing timber in a main-lake creek arm using a BassTrix swimbait for most of his fish, and also a watermelon red Zoom Magnum Finesse Worm on a 1/4-ounce shaky head
Co-angler: Shane Vickers, Tyner, Ky. – 11-05

Music City – Tims Ford – April 29
Boater: Greg Rollins, Monteagle, Tenn. – 15-15
Dragging a Carolina rig on pea gravel for postspawn smallmouths
Co-angler: John Davenport, Huntsville, Ala. – 12-00

Music City – Percy Priest – May 13
Boater: Adam Wagner, Cookeville, Tenn. – 20-03
Carolina rigging a green pumpkin Zoom Brush Hog on a point between an island and the main shoreline in 6 to 10 feet of water, and on shallow rock on an island in the Stones River
Co-angler: John Davenport, Huntsville, Ala. – 15-05

North Carolina – Kerr Lake – May 20
Boater: Travis Ruff, Connelly Springs, N.C. – 18-00
Keying on the shad spawn around flooded bushes in Nutbush Creek using a ghost minnow Lucky Craft Sammy topwater
Co-angler: Barry Burford, Charlotte, N.C. – 14-02

Northeast – Potomac River – April 22
Boater: Derek Brown, Charlottesville, Va. – 20-05
Slow-rolling a Z-Man ChatterBait or a white Strike King Tour Grade Swim Jig through grass in 5 feet of water in a spawning bay near the mouth of Aquia Creek
Co-angler: Andrew Heivley, Malvern, Pa. – 17-13

Northeast – Chesapeake Bay – May 13
Boater: Dan Rodriguez, Monkton, Md. – 19-11
Targeting wood and rock in 6 to 8 feet of water with a homemade jig and a black and blue Berkley Havoc Pit Boss trailer
Co-angler: Richard O'Brien, Stony Point, N.Y. – 10-01

Okie – Lake Eufaula – May 20
Boater: Phillip Lunceford, Stigler, Okla. – 16-00
Flipping bushes with three Texas-rigged soft plastics, including a Reaction Innovations Sweet Beaver, a Strike King Rodent and a Gene Larew Salt Craw
Co-angler: David Lansford, Muskogee, Okla. – 15-10

Piedmont – Lake Gaston – April 29
Boater: Raymond Jones III, Statesville, N.C. – 16-11
Fishing the mid-lake area in water that wasn't too clear or too muddy using a homemade spinnerbait and two soft-plastic lures
Co-angler: Michael Davis, New London, N.C. – 16-07

Savannah River – Lake Hartwell – May 6
Boater: Heath Pack, Ellijay, Ga. – 18-10
Targeting the shad spawn around boat docks and submerged grass in the Tugaloo River using a Z-Man ChatterBait with a 3.8-inch sight flash-colored Keitech Swing Impact swimbait and a chartreuse shad 5/8-ounce Lucky Craft SKT Spinnerbait, and flipping brush between docks with a 1/2-ounce Strike King Hack Attack Jig with a black and blue trailer
Co-angler: Tim Watson, Martin, Ga. – 13-12

Shenandoah – Potomac River – May 6
Boater: Aaron Dixon, Bel Alton, Md. – 21-09
Targeting spawning bass 4 feet down on pea gravel and prespawn and postspawn bass 6 to 10 feet deep in grass using a black and blue Yamamoto Senko
Co-angler: Craig Wright, Rustburg, Va. – 17-10

South Carolina – Clarks Hill Lake – April 22
Boater: Chris Marshall, Forest City, N.C. – 18-03
Targeting blueback herring-eating largemouths on main-lake and secondary points using a chrome Lucky Craft Gunfish topwater and a Katch-Her Lures jig
Co-angler: Brandon Jeffcoat, Columbia, S.C. – 16-03

South Carolina – Lake Wateree – May 13
Boater: Mel Long, Hampton, S.C. – 15-07
Targeting flat main-lake points with a 1/2-ounce swim jig with a Zoom Super Chunk Jr. trailer and a green pumpkin Zoom Magnum Trick Worm on a Texas rig or shaky head
Co-angler: Greg Atkinson, Ridgeway, S.C. – 17-04

Volunteer – South Holston – April 22
Boater: Josh Osborne, Bristol, Va. – 21-10
Targeting spawning smallmouths on a rough, rocky patch atop a single hump using a Texas-rigged 4-inch green pumpkin Berkley straight-tail worm
Co-angler: Steven Brady, Woodlawn, Va. – 17-07

Volunteer – Douglas Lake – May 13
Boater: Keith McDeerman, Jacksboro, Tenn. – 19-00
Fishing 20 to 25 feet deep on mid-lake points and humps next to deeper water using a Strike King 10XD
Co-angler: Justin McGaha, Knoxville, Tenn. – 16-08



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YETI FLW COLLEGE FISHING WINNING TACTICS

By Curtis Niedermier

NORTHERN CONFERENCE – SMITH MOUNTAIN LAKE – APRIL 29

In practice for the YETI FLW College Fishing Northern Conference tournament on Smith Mountain Lake in late April, Michael Duarte (left) and Matthew Iman of Community College of Baltimore County found plenty of cruising bass, but very few on beds. On tournament day, however, the team uncovered a pocket up the Roanoke River filled with spawning bass that were locked down and eager to defend their nests. Duarte landed a 6 1/2-pound kicker by chugging a popper past a dock corner in a secondary area, and then together they compiled the rest of a 17-pound, 13-ounce stringer in their primary pocket to take the win.

"One thing that I found that was kind of key about the pocket is that it was a lot shallower than the ones we were fishing in practice," says Duarte. "This one was so shallow that the boat was sitting in 5 to 6 feet of water. In the other pockets the boat was sitting in 12 to 15 feet."

Sunshine aided the anglers as they searched for beds around and between docks. That, combined with the consistent system they improvised, put the winning fish in the boat.

"I threw a wacky-rigged [Yamamoto] Senko in there to see if they'd eat that first," Duarte says. "If they didn't eat that I'd throw a drop-shot rig with a Strike King Dream Shot on it.

"If they didn't bite in two to five minutes, I would leave that fish alone and just move to another set of bedding fish. Then I'd come back to them and they'd bite right away. I'd just make sure and stay far away so they couldn't see my boat. I'd kind of hide behind the dock or something then let the drop-shot just sit on the bed."



WESTERN CONFERENCE – CALIFORNIA DELTA – MAY 13

Post-frontal weather and postspawn lockjaw stymied anglers' efforts at the YETI FLW College Fishing Western Conference event presented by Bass Pro Shops on the California Delta.

For tournament winners BJ Kendrick (right, facing page) and Josh Hanna of Sonoma State University, the conditions forced an extreme changeup from the buzzbait bite they'd tapped into a week prior, to a finesse approach.

"My whole game plan going into the tournament was basically let's get a bite and try to get one keeper in the boat," says Kendrick. "Let's just try to get one fish at a time, and whatever happens happens."

Topwater was ineffective while fishing in the Mildred Island area on tournament morning, but Hanna managed a couple of keepers on a wacky-rigged Strike King soft stick bait. It was high tide, and the anglers figured the Mildred area would be easier to fish with finesse baits at low tide, so they left it and ran to another spot that had produced for them in the past. Targeting riprap, tules and submerged grass, Kendrick landed a 5-pounder. The fish ate a Texas-rigged Yamamoto Senko with a 1/8-ounce weight dragged in 5 feet of water.

With a kicker in the boat and newfound confidence in finesse tactics, Kendrick and Hanna returned to Mildred and

proceeded to fill their limit by targeting a tule line along the bank and submerged grass clumps. When Kendrick added a 6-pounder on a weightless Zoom Trick Worm, they knew they had potential to win, but they needed to cull one small fish. A stop at the well-known Frank's Tract community hole near takeoff did the trick as they upgraded to the winning weight of 16 pounds, 1 ounce.

"Sticking to our guns," says Hanna, giving the reason for the key to the team's success. "We said 'we're going to catch them this way, and we have to be patient with it and work it as slow as possible and wait for the bite.' We didn't rush anything, so that was pretty solid." ■



CENTRAL CONFERENCE – KENTUCKY LAKE/LAKE BARKLEY – MAY 20

The YETI FLW College Fishing Central Conference tournament on Kentucky Lake landed right on "transition time" at the famed Tennessee River reservoir. Some fish were still hanging around flooded bushes in the shallows, and others were just starting to make their way to the lake's river ledges. The winning stringer of 19 pounds, 4 ounces, which was caught by Zach Baker (left) and Micah Chessor of Murray State University, wound up coming from a deep drop-off in the mouth of Pisgah Creek, a large arm on the north end of the lake. The spot is a postspawn staging area and a stopping-off point for fish on their way to the main lake.



"I scanned for probably three or four straight days, just idling, and there was nothing on that secondary channel where they usually are," says Chessor. "All I was seeing out there were white bass.

"At Pisgah, they get out there first, too. Everybody knows about it. It's a community hole. I scanned it Monday, and it was stacked. But I didn't think we'd get to fish it."

Chessor reports that several anglers fished the spot in the days leading up to the tournament – with modern electronics, none of the best holes stay secret long – and he kept close tabs on the pressure and the school. On tournament day, he and Baker lucked out and were able to get on the spot first. Knowing from practice that quality fish were in the school, the anglers committed to staying there most of the day, and didn't leave it until 1 p.m.

Throughout the day, several boats moved in and fished the same spot, but the Racer anglers had the drop on the fish. In practice, Chessor had good luck with a big Castaic flutter spoon. When the bass stopped biting the spoon, the fish would still eat a Roboworm (morning dawn) on a drop-shot. The finesse worm became the go-to option on tournament day.

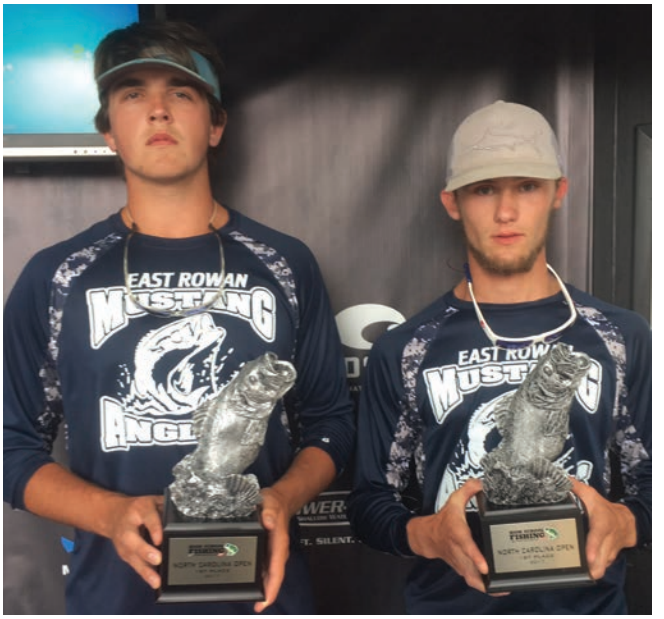
"We just couldn't get them fired Saturday. It was tough," says Chessor. "We had 19 pounds, but we worked our butts off for it."

Of course, a 6 1/2-pound kicker that ate a Keitech 5.8-inch Swing Impact Fat swimbait helped matters, as did a final cull fish caught from another community hole in front of Sledd Creek. ■

BASS PRO SHOPS HIGH SCHOOL FISHING OPEN CHAMPS



ALABAMA OPEN – LOGAN MARTIN LAKE – APRIL 22
Noah Coleman (left) and Laine Cooley – 12-00 (5 fish)
Oneonta High School – Oneonta, Alabama



NORTH CAROLINA OPEN – HIGH ROCK LAKE – APRIL 29
Paiton File (left) and Hunter Harwood – 13-00 (3 fish)
East Rowan High School – Salisbury, North Carolina



WISCONSIN OPEN – MISSISSIPPI RIVER – MAY 6
Trey Zagrzebski (left) and Cole Zagrzebski – 14-06 (5 fish)
Stevens Point Area Senior High – Stevens Point, Wisconsin



MISSOURI OPEN – STOCKTON LAKE – MAY 13
Caden Pennington (left) and John Miller – 9-00 (4 fish)
Charles Page High School – Sand Springs, Oklahoma



CALIFORNIA OPEN – CALIFORNIA DELTA – MAY 14

Johnathon Balbas (left) and Kyle Balbas – 20-03 (5 fish)

Madera, California



VIRGINIA OPEN – CLAYTOR LAKE – MAY 20

Connor Hughes (left) and Brian Canterbury – 9-00 (5 fish)

Madison County High School – Madison, Virginia



TBF

WHAT'S MAKING NEWS IN THE BASS FEDERATION

By Dan Johnson

BOYD MAKES HISTORY ON TABLE ROCK

DETERMINATION DRIVES HARD-CHARGING HOOSIER TO SECOND TBF CROWN

Allen Boyd's determination to win overcame Table Rock Lake's best attempts to shake his confidence at the 2017 The Bass Federation National Championship. The Salem, Ind., angler stuck to his guns in the face of a challenging bite, lost fish and fierce competition to win the coveted boater division crown.

It was Boyd's second TBF National Championship victory, having won the 2011 title at Nickajack Lake in Tennessee. TBF President Robert Cartlidge was quick to note the odds stacked against such an achievement.

"Hundreds of thousands of anglers have tried to earn a spot in the Federation championship in the past 49 years," Cartlidge explains. "Few have qualified, and only one other angler, the late Mike Holt of Lexington, Tenn., has won it twice."



PHOTO BY LAUREN RENEE' PAYNE

Square-billed crankbaits and Texas-rigged tubes fueled Boyd's championship run.

Holt won a Federation title on the Arkansas River in 1993 and another in 2001 on the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. His championship victories came before TBF launched the $100,000 Living the Dream program in 2005, meaning Boyd has the distinction of being the first TBF member to win the coveted prize package twice. It includes cash, fully paid entry fees on 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.

"It's an amazing experience living the dream," Boyd says. "I'm definitely fishing the FLW Tour, and I'm ready to get started."

Boyd also brought home a new Ranger Z518C bass boat for being the top finisher in the Ranger Cup program. And as the winning boater, he's qualified to compete in the 2017 Forrest Wood Cup at Lake Murray for a shot at winning the $300,000 prize that goes to the winner.

The Road to Victory

Boyd, a construction worker by trade, qualified for the 2017 championship via TBF's 2016 District 10 National Semi-Finals tournament on the Ohio River last October. There, he overcame a brutal bite to win the

PHOTO BY DAN JOHNSON



Boyd's 38-pound, 10-ounce total gave him a nearly 3-pound margin of victory over his closest rival, New York's Brad Brodnicki.

two-day event with seven fish for 9 pounds, 15 ounces.

"It was tough, but that's the Ohio River," he says. "It's my home water, and it's taught me a lot about competing in tough tournaments, and about picking an area apart without giving up on it."

Those lessons served him well on Table Rock.

A mix of cool, rainy and windy conditions challenged the field to find bass that surpassed the 15-inch minimum size limit during the first two days of the tournament, when qualifiers from around the country and Canada competed only against other anglers from their state and province for a shot at the three-day final round. New York's Brad Brodnicki paced the boater division on day one with 10 bass for 28 pounds, 10 ounces, followed by Wisconsin's Larry Hildebrandt and Arizona's Jon Griffith with 24-8.

After struggling on day one with three bass for 5-13, Boyd found himself in 44th place overall. He moved up to 25th on day two with a 10-pound, 15-ounce limit that gave him a 16-12 two-day total. Boyd advanced to the final three-day stretch of the championship as Indiana's representative, while more than half the 204-angler field left for home.

After an off-day to practice, weights were cleared for day three, which produced sunnier skies, and Boyd surged into first place on the strength of a 17-pound, 14-ounce limit.

"I made a long run and caught fish all day," he told the weigh-in crowd. Cautiously optimistic about his chances of claiming a second TBF crown, he added, "The fish have got to cooperate. But if we get more sun, it could definitely work out."

Boyd, however, was not immune to Table Rock's legendary ability to reshuffle a leaderboard. He weighed just three fish for 8-2 on day four.

"I started off the morning catching one of my big fish on the second cast, but it went downhill from there," he says. "A lot of local boat traffic running around didn't help anything, and it just wasn't my day."

Boyd's catch, although less than he'd hoped for, was still enough to top his Northern Division rivals and qualify him for the grand finale on day five.

Colorado's Ty Faber, representing the New Mexico Bass Federation, slipped past Boyd into first with a 15-15 limit that gave him 26-6 headed into the last day.

Despite the turn of events, Boyd professed no plans to change his strategy.

"I'm going back and doing the same thing," he said before the final round. "I think the fish are there to win this. They've just got to move up and eat."

TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP AT A GLANCE

The Bass Federation's 2017 National Championship was the largest and richest title showdown in Federation history, with more than $300,000 in winnings up for grabs. It ran April 3-8 out of Kimberling City, Mo., on Table Rock Lake.

The action began April 3-4, with 204 anglers from across the continent who qualified either through TBF's traditional divisional format or the organization's new National Semi-Finals system.

At the end of day two, the field narrowed to 49 boaters and 49 co-anglers – the finalists from each state and province. Anglers making the cut practiced on April 5 before heading into the championship's final three-day stretch Thursday through Saturday. Weights were also zeroed, giving all competitors a fresh shot at the championship.

Cumulative weights from the next two days, April 6-7, determined who made the cut for Saturday, when only the top boater and co-angler from each of TBF's seven divisions advanced. The angler with the heaviest cumulative three-day weight after the final round ended was the winner.

All five days, launches and weigh-ins were held at the Port of Kimberling Marina and Resort in Kimberling City. Coverage of the TBF National Championship was streamed live daily on bassfederation.com and will be broadcast nationally in high definition on the Pursuit Channel.

The Bass Federation is a proud partner in fishing with FLW, which helps support this annual event along with other industry-leading TBF sponsors, including Ranger Boats, Evinrude, Lowrance, Minn Kota, Power-Pole, Cabela's, Berkley and Humminbird.

Adding to the excitement headed into the tournament's championship round, Robert Harkness of West Virginia was also in the hunt for his second TBF national title. Harkness topped the Mid-Atlantic Division with a 22-pound, 10-ounce total.

Final Showdown

Sunny skies and air temperatures pushing into the 70s set the stage for the last day of competition. Boyd responded by putting together a 12-pound, 10-ounce limit for a three-day tally of 38-10.

It was enough to seal the victory and hold off a charge by Brodnicki, who'd been consistent throughout the event and finished second with 35-5. Harkness' deep-water pattern came up short at the end, and he finished third with 34-2.

Boyd's winning area was tucked away far up the lake and required a long run.

"I ran up into Arkansas near Crooked Creek Marina," he reports. "I knew the fish were there to win it, so I kept fishing it hard."

A crawfish pattern Strike King KVD 1.5 square-bill crankbait accounted for many of his fish.

"Keeping the boat in about 12 feet of water, I cast tight to the bank and ticked the rocky bottom," he says.

He also punched a Texas-rigged green pumpkin Hawgback Lures tube, made by a friend back in Indiana, through tangles of driftwood matted on the surface.

"Bass go under these mats for shade when stained water clears up," he notes. "The water had been getting progressively clearer every day, so I Texas-rigged the 3 1/2-inch tube with a pegged 1/2-ounce tungsten sinker and punched it through the mats.

"That last morning I got a real hard bite and a good hookset on about a 4-pound fish," he recalls. "I pulled it out of the mat, but it came unbuttoned and flopped on top of the driftwood until it finally got back into the water."

The incident got on Boyd's nerves.

"I was really rattled," he admits. "My co-angler [Brad Jernigan] kept reminding me to stay focused. It proves the importance of staying mentally strong and not giving up."

At 11 o'clock, he got his first bass on the tube rig.

"Then the wind picked up and started howling down a bank we'd had a few bites on earlier," he says. "So, we picked up our square-bills and started casting the bank again."

With the wind blowing, Boyd's reaction bite improved, and he was able to track down the winning bass with his combo approach.

EARN A TRIP TO THE 2018 TBF NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

To earn a shot at following in Allen Boyd's footsteps as the next TBF national champion, there's no time like the present for an angler to start fishing his way to the top.

Anglers can qualify through the TBF National Semi-Finals. Comprised of 22 district competitions, the new National Semi-Finals framework is designed to make it more cost-effective for TBF grassroots anglers to fish premier events by minimizing travel time and expenses while increasing payouts across the board.

The new system pits top grassroots anglers from each state in a close-to-home weekend event with neighboring states for significant cash prizes and advancements.

Anglers qualify for the National Semi-Finals in one of two ways: 1) Active state clubs in good standing can send their top two anglers directly to the Semi-Finals. 2) The top 10 percent of state event participation, or a minimum of 12 anglers per state, whichever is greater, qualify.

To learn more about the National Semi-Finals and other TBF opportunities in your area, visit **bassfederation.com**.



PHOTO BY DAN JOHNSON

Allen Boyd became the second angler in TBF history to win two national titles and the first to claim two $100,000 Living the Dream prize packages.

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Jernigan Paces Co-Anglers

Representing Mississippi and the Central Division, Brad Jernigan claimed the co-angler title with a final-round, three-day total of 29 pounds, 8 ounces.

As is so often the case for a non-boater, Jernigan's Table Rock experience was a study in diversity.

"The first day I was throwing drop-shots and swimbaits in 12 to 35 feet of water, and the next I was fishing a peanut-butter-and-jelly Ned rig on main-lake points in 7 to 20 feet," he says.

On the final day, Jernigan was paired with Boyd and fished square-bills and tubes.

As the top co-angler, Jernigan received a $20,000 prize package that includes $10,000 cash and fully paid entry fees into the Costa FLW Series division of choice, as well as other prizes.

Overall, boaters and co-anglers brought in 38 bass weighing 82 pounds, 15 ounces on day five. Just two of the 14 finalists landed limits. Regardless of his finish in the finals, each divisional winner advanced to the 2017 T-H Marine FLW Bass Fishing League All-American.

PHOTO BY DAN JOHNSON



Brad Jernigan was crowned co-angler champion.

TOP BOATERS

1. Allen Boyd, Indiana/Northern, 38-10 (13)
2. Brad Brodnicki, New York/Eastern, 35-05 (14)
3. Robert Harkness, West Virginia/Mid-Atlantic, 34-02 (15)
4. Ty Faber, New Mexico/Southwestern, 32-07 (13)
5. Ben Warren, Idaho/Northwestern, 28-10 (13)
6. Joshua Moore, Louisiana/Central, 28-03 (12)
7. Jeff Hager, North Carolina/Southern, 25-11 (9)

TOP CO-ANGLERS

1. Brad Jernigan, Mississippi/Central, 29-08 (14)
2. Brian LaClair, Delaware/Mid-Atlantic, 23-05 (11)
3. Sport Smith, Minnesota/Northern, 23-05 (11)
4. Steven Martins, Connecticut/Eastern, 23-00 (11)
5. Paul Aznarez, Nevada/Southwestern, 19-02 (9)
6. Kevin Higgins, Washington/Northwestern, 19-01 (10)
7. Kevin Black, Georgia/Southern, 14-04 (7)

FINALISTS PILOT RANGER-EVINRUDE DREAM MACHINES

Much to the delight of championship anglers, each of the boaters who qualified as a state representative was provided with a fully loaded Ranger Z520C with an Evinrude E-TEC G2 250-hp outboard for the final three days of competition.

Stretching 20 feet, 9 inches with an overall beam of 96 1/2 inches, the Z520C is among the most advanced fishing machines in Ranger's storied history. From the boat's legendary hull to a full suite of revolutionary interior features, it's the platform of choice for serious bass anglers everywhere.

Eventual winner Allen Boyd, who relied on the speed of the E-TEC G2 to make long runs each day to his preferred fishing grounds, was appreciative of the high-end motor and boat, especially when Table Rock's mood soured.

"The 520 is a great boat," says Boyd. "There's not a better boat on the market, for sure. There was one day where the wind really blew and the lake got pretty rough. I've been in many different boats over the years, and when you need to get back in rough water, this is the boat to be in."

For details on the Ranger Z520C, visit **rangerboats.com**. For more on the Evinrude E-TEC, visit **evinrude.com**. ■

PHOTO BY DAN JOHNSON

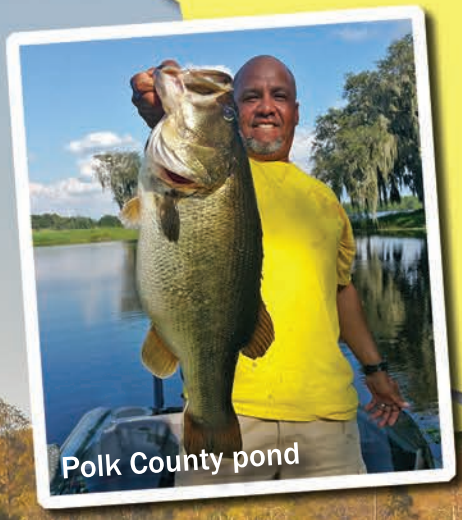






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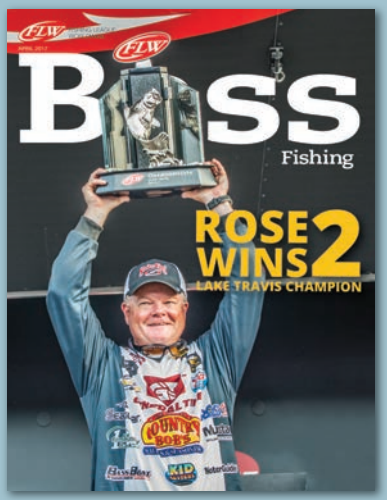
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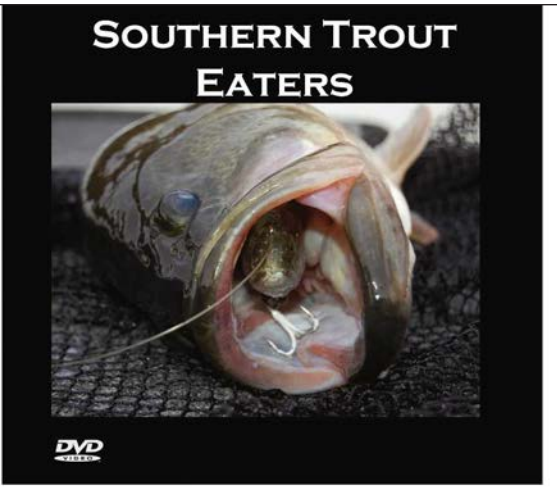
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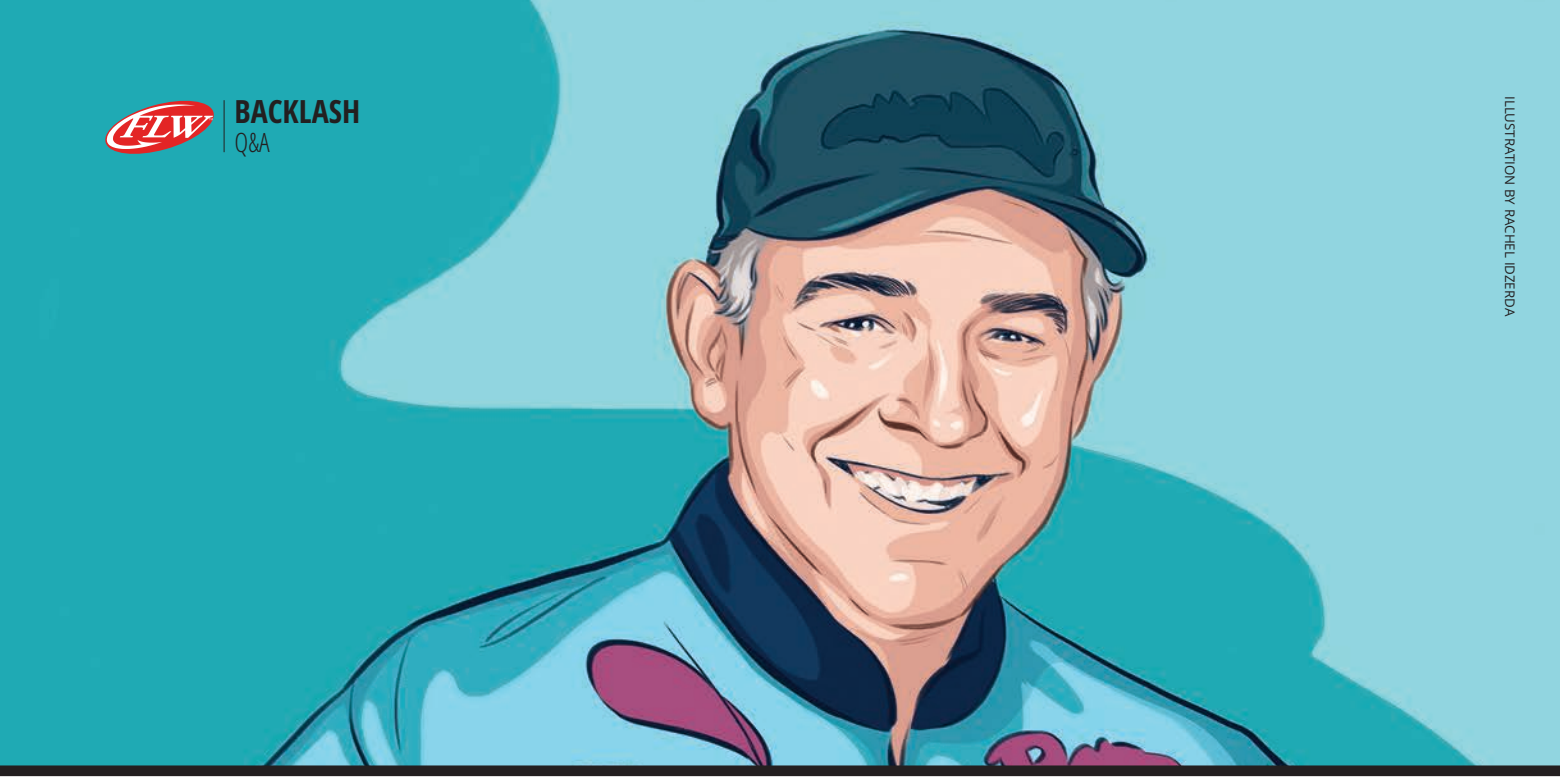


ILLUSTRATION BY RACHEL IDZERDA

TOM MONSOOR

La Crosse, Wis.

By Sean Ostruszka

How many times a year do you get asked about swim jigs? It's all that popped up when I Googled you.

Probably 200 days a year.

I hear even many of the pros on Tour come to you and ask about it.

Oh, sure. Every tournament I'll have guys say, "I need a dozen of this one or that one." It's unending because there are just so many different styles.

So you pour jigs for other pros, too? How many would you say you pour in a year?

Not that many. Maybe 300. It'd be a lot more if I offered it, but the only guys who ask are guys who know me really well.

It has to be pretty cool to have so many people asking your advice and throwing your jigs.

It is. You know what I get asked about even more? How to sharpen a hook the right way. I must get 30 guys at every registration who come up to me with a sharpening stone and ask me to show them.

Professional anglers don't know how to sharpen hooks ...?

Not the right way. There's a right way to sharpen a knife and sharpen an ice pick. There's a right way to sharpen a hook. If it doesn't stick in your thumbnail on its own at a 45-degree angle – not pushing it in; on its own – then it's not sharp.

I hear you're pretty good at catching more than just bass. Tell me about the Monsoor Fishing Co.

Oh, I've done that my whole life. We catch probably 1 to 2 million pounds of carp and sheepshead a year.

What do you do with them?

We sell them. The carp go everywhere. Europe, and a lot to New York. They want them alive, like lobsters in glass cases.

People eat carp?

People swear they're delicious. There's a restaurant in Omaha that's famous for its open-faced carp sandwiches.

I've tried them every way possible. They don't work for me.

I'm so glad other people like them, though. It's given me a great life.

How did you get into that business?

My dad, Edward, was a doctor. He knew everybody. One day when I was a little kid we were driving by the river, and he stopped to talk to some commercial fishermen. This guy held up a big carp, and my dad asked how much it was worth. He said "a buck and a half." I told my dad that day I was going to be a commercial fisherman.

So was your dad a big fisherman?

He liked to fish, but it was my mom, Lola, who loved to fish. Every chance she got she'd drag us out to go fishing. She lived to fish. In fact, to the day she died, she had a wooden, flat-bottom rowboat on Blue Lake in La Crosse.

Can you imagine if you grew up anywhere else and not on the Mississippi River?

No, I can't imagine it, and I don't want to.

I'm 67 years old ... 67? Maybe 68. As you get older you don't want to remember. But anyway, I have a dog named Jigs and a girlfriend, and all I do is fish. It's great, though the one is a very demanding woman.

Your girlfriend?

No. Jigs. She's a big yellow lab, and the most affectionate thing you've ever met. She also wants attention all the time. Oh, my gosh, is she high-maintenance. But she loves to fish as much as I do. ■


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